

Understanding ERASMUS by Will Usnik

The European Economic Community (EC) created in 1957 to improve economic cooperation in Western Europe today includes Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. As the EC has grown in membership, so has it grown in influence, reaching beyond its initial economic realm to assume more political and social responsibilities. One newer area of concern has been education, the rubric under which the ERASMUS program falls.

ERASMUS, the European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, takes its name from the peripatetic 15th century scholar who studied at several different European universities. The program's objective is the "harmonization" of European higher education: increasing academic cooperation, mutual understanding, and mutual recognition of academic qualifications.

While study abroad is a major component of the program, ERASMUS also promotes faculty and staff exchanges, and the development of a European University Network, curriculum, and a credit transfer system.

ERASMUS has developed along faculty instead of institutional lines. This is chiefly due to the strength and autonomy of faculties in European higher education. European students typically complete their general studies at the secondary level and enter university to study just one discipline. It is their department which determines their curriculum and general graduation requirements.

ERASMUS is revolutionary in guaranteeing automatic credit recognition for successfully completed study abroad. It should be noted, however,

that the concept of course credits is new to European higher education, was established for administrative purposes, and does not have the same meaning as in the U.S.

The tuition fees of hosting institutions are also waived for participants, although students are often obliged to continue paying their home institutions' tuition. In theory, if not practice, institutions send and receive similar numbers of students so that there is a balance. Finally, ERASMUS is unique in that a supranational body (the EC) provides financial support to eligible students.

Initially, EC officials hoped for ten percent of all higher education students to study abroad by 1992—the target year for a "barrier-free" Europe (meaning goods, services and people would move as freely within Europe as they do within the U.S.). Since the number of students studying abroad increased to just two percent in 1990 this deadline was renegotiated for 1995.

The EC has pursued the ten percent goal through several programs, ERASMUS being one of the most ambitious. The EC expects student exchanges to snowball with its programs, thereby quickening the development of a European citizenry. Proponents say the program enhances alumni skills, education and employability. Judging by surveys, this "value added" concept has appealed to many students and helped make ERASMUS popular.

Structure and Funding

ERASMUS provides seed money to participating universities and individuals through four categories of funding, called "Actions." Action I monies,

earmarked for universities, are used to encourage the establishment of Inter-university Cooperation Programs (ICPs).

ICPs are at the heart of ERASMUS, and are developed by faculties from different countries who share the same discipline. Typically, students who participate in ERASMUS do so through an ICP in which their institution participates. ERASMUS has taken an informal set of relationships and developed them into an extensive university network of 1,700 ICPs involving 1,100 institutions.

An average ICP in 1988-1989 received 8,000 European Currency Units (ECU), roughly U.S. \$10,000, and involved three universities.

The independent exchange student (i.e., not participating through an ICP) is referred to as a "free-mover," and is typically a student who wants to study abroad but whose home department is not involved in an ICP or who wants to attend a university or go to a country other than those available in the existing ICP. This becomes a less-likely scenario each year as the university network expands and as ICP participants are given preference for grants.

Through contractual arrangements with the EC, National Grant-Awarding Authorities (NGAA) award mobility grants to students of universities in their country. The EC geographically balances ICPs by allocating lump sum funds for mobility grants to each NGAA which, in turn, makes awards to eligible students as it deems appropriate. Once awarded, the grants are administered through the NGAA or, more typically, through the recipient's home institution. Each member state determines its own approach. Supplemental Action II monies are also earmarked

for additional promotion of ERASMUS in under-represented countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal.

Mobility grants are used to supplement the financial resources of students involved in study abroad. These mobility grants are only intended to help a student meet the additional costs incurred by studying abroad—not to cover costs that students would normally incur at the home institution. An average grant for 1988-1989 supplemented a student's income by approximately 158 ECU/month (grants cannot exceed 5,000 ECU per year).

The average period of study for 1988-89 was seven months. Students must participate for a minimum of six months and typically participate in their third year of study (with few exceptions, first-year students are not eligible for participation). The most highly represented disciplines have included language and literature, engineering, and business administration. Minimally represented disciplines have been teacher education, fine arts, music and medicine. The French, Germans and British undertake the most exchanges, but the Community is attempting to balance the flows by providing additional funds to under-represented countries.

Action III monies are budgeted for visit grants for higher education staff. The visits may be for program preparation, and study or teaching, are limited to four weeks' duration, and awarded to small groups of staff or individual staff members, not exceeding 1,500 ECU per person. These funds are also used for academic recognition which includes development of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Action IV monies are earmarked for all other financial support, including financial assistance to associations and university consortia, for publications and information dissemination, funding ad hoc programs in mobility and for ERASMUS prizes for outstanding contributions.

Administration

The administrative body of the EC, referred to as the European Commission, contracted the administration of the ERASMUS program to the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) in Amsterdam. The EFC then set up the ERASMUS bureau in Brussels to directly administer action monies, with the exception of NGAAs.

Programs

All disciplines are represented under the aegis of ERASMUS. The bureau annually publishes a directory listing the ICPs by discipline and country. The 1989-1990 academic year included 1,700 programs ranging from architecture to veterinary medicine. A prospective participant may simply page through the directory and select the program(s) of interest to him. If the student does not find a pertinent program, he/she might consider the free-mover option.

Credit Recognition

A fundamental aspect of ERASMUS is that studies successfully completed at a host institution are guaranteed recognition by the home institution. This is particularly challenging to European universities because, unlike US institutions, they do not have a tradition of using a credit system. The categorizing of courses into credit units and hours is being done more arbitrarily than scientifically at this point. Because study requirements go to the heart of the institution's right to establish curricula, credit transfer is a highly sensitive and subjective issue.

The credit system is being introduced gradually to allow time to test and fine-tune it. The initial phase (1989-1995) of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) includes an "inner circle" of 84 institutions of higher edu-

cation and involves five disciplines (business administration, chemistry, engineering, history, and medicine). All institutions volunteer to break down courses into hours and credit units, to issue transcripts as modeled by the Bureau and to fully recognize their own students' study abroad within the framework of an ICP.

Still, credits constitute an alien concept to most Europeans. Typically, students complete a prescribed course of study with final examinations as their only test of preparation. Consequently, examinations matter more than contact hours or preparatory work—the two factors used for determining credits in the U.S. Regardless of the student's study abroad, he/she will ultimately have to pass muster with the home institution. During the early phases of ECTS students have often opted to take their final exams in their own country or even repeat a course taken abroad. So while the student is guaranteed credit, the usefulness of the credit is often dubious.

In effect, ECTS acts as a common language for academic exchanges by putting courses into mutual terms and equivalencies, but it does not exempt students from the academic requirements of the home institution.

Outreach

ERASMUS has been cautious in its outreach to non-EC countries. In general, the Commission has adopted a wait-and-see approach to participation requests from other countries. There are, however, a few exceptions to this policy.

As of the 1992-1993 academic year, ERASMUS will be opened to students from the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Iceland, Austria, and Liechtenstein). Preliminary discussions on EC/US cooperation in

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higher education were also held in the fall of 1990. In addition to these outreach steps by the EC, European universities have independently and collectively reached out to non-European universities. For example, 30 universities of the "Coimbra Group" agreed this year to strengthen ties with Latin American universities, even though the EC will not subsidize the effort directly or through pre-existing programs like ERASMUS. Its emphasis has been on strengthening the existing network.

Evaluation/Problems

ERASMUS encounters many of the difficulties of U.S. study abroad programs such as housing shortages, inadequate language preparation, bureaucratic red-tape, financial difficulties, and questions of access. With the exception of the U.K. and Ireland, the collegiate system, in which campus housing, dining, recreation and study facilities are centralized and made available at fixed costs, is rare in Europe. Consequently,

ERASMUS coordinators generally arrange housing with considerable difficulty.

Language preparation remains a problem. Students often do not have the funds for adequate pre-departure preparation or they do not fully understand the importance of language proficiency. English often acts as a lingua franca, to the chagrin of many Europeans, but even it does not solve all linguistic problems. As a result, the EC created the LINGUA program to fund language study in conjunction with programs such as ERASMUS and COMETT.

To cut down on bureaucracy the Bureau has tried to reduce paperwork by switching to multiannual funding instead of annual funding for ICPs. It has also abbreviated the evaluation process for students returning from study abroad. Many institutions have created new positions for institutional coordinators to be responsible for EC programs.

On finances, the EC continues to remind its constituents that funding is

to act as seed money, the intention being for their program to become self-maintaining. The Bureau also continues to advocate local, regional and national grant schemes to supplement ERASMUS monies.

Finally, access remains a concern. Participants tend to be from financially comfortable families, white, and Judeo-Christian. Statistically, the representation of students from southern Europe is low. The Bureau is trying to balance the flows by providing extra funding for students from under-represented countries and allowing institutional coordinators and NGAAs free reign in allocating their grant monies. In time, perhaps access will be broader and the representation of students, more diverse. ■

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