

ERASMUS DIRECTOR RESPONDS

Dear Editor:

It is gratifying to see the effort undertaken by WENR to acquaint its readers with ERASMUS. Mr. Usnik's article ("Understanding ERASMUS," WENR, Winter 1991) provides a useful overview in this regard. Nonetheless, it also contains a number of misconceptions and errors of which your readers should be made aware. The most fundamental of these is the wholly misleading belief that the objective of ERASMUS is the "harmonization" of European higher education. Quite the contrary. For while we seek to achieve greater *cooperation*, increasing *understanding* and improved *recognition* of study carried out elsewhere, these goals are dictated precisely by the *diversity* of systems across Europe--a diversity which we regard as an asset.

Secondly, while it is true that most cooperation within ERASMUS is department- or discipline-based, it should be recognized that a substantial degree of "institutionalisation" is now emerging, as the numbers of programmes and students grow (we have upwards of 40,000 students in the ERASMUS system this year). One of the results of this process is the establishment on a far wider scale than hitherto of offices for the management of international links. Such offices, together with the general increase of experience of and interest in international exchanges resulting from ERASMUS, are also having a clearly beneficial effect on exchanges beyond ERASMUS (or Europe in general).

Thirdly, not all academic recognition of study performance abroad within ERASMUS is based on formal credit transfer. This is just one model, in a collection which also includes jointly awarded "double degrees," en bloc recognition of study years abroad and so on.

Fourthly, a sin of omission: the article fails to mention the existence of support within Action 3 of ERASMUS for the EC-wide network (from 1992 extended to the 7 EFTA countries) of "National Academic Recognition Information Centres" (NARIC). The NARICs are in many ways the "natural partners" for WES, being the national bodies responsible for providing advice, recommendations and in some cases decisions on the evaluation of foreign education creden-

tials. Information on the NARIC network is enclosed.

More minor points with which I would take issue include the following:

- the minimum period of study abroad within ERASMUS is 3 months, not 6;
- the student grants are normally channelled from NGAA's via the universities;
- free-mover grants are not available in all Member States;
- study visit grants for academics and administrators are part of Action 1, not Action 3 (except for NARIC visits);
- extension of ERASMUS to other countries is certainly not dictated by a "wait-and-see approach," but is far more formalised. It applies only to the EFTA countries (from 1992/93).

The discussions between EC and US government authorities relate to the possible creation of a separate programme for cooperation, not an extension of ERASMUS.

Finally, I am rather taken aback by the assertion that ERASMUS participants "tend to be from financially comfortable families, white, and Judeo-Christian." Surveying on ERASMUS does not contain questions on students' skin colour or religious affiliation, and Mr. Usnik's views are therefore purely his personal opinions and not based on any survey data of which I am aware. We are required by the terms of the ERASMUS Council Decision to provide for equality of opportunity, but it is probably true that we face many of the same problems in this regard as US institutions' study abroad programmes, to judge from the recommendations of the recent US Task Force on undergraduate study abroad. Avoidance of elitism is a constant concern, but one which, it must be recognized, it is not always easy to address when the demand for funds, as Mr. Usnik's article rightly points out, so markedly outstrips supply and when the amount of money awarded to grantees is therefore often less than we would ideally wish.

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