



*Good Practices*

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## CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE ERASMUS EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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### ABSTRACT

The present report deals with the problems and positive aspects of the Erasmus exchange programme, as experienced by students of higher education. A questionnaire aimed at studying the opinion of the students has been created and on its basis a survey was performed measuring the scope of the initiative and identifying the current situation with the programme as it works in the circumstances of our academic environment. The accent and the main point of interest are the linguistic barriers which the foreign exchange students confront, as well as the cultural and social aspects of their stay within their study programme. A short review is also made of the existing practices in the European framework, summing up the skills and competences that the students acquire going to live and attend courses in different subjects in another country.

**Key words:** encountering a new culture, communicating in another language, social skills, academic experience

### INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus programme was started as a subprogramme of the Socrates initiative for collaboration in education whose aim was to develop the European integration and to increase the quality of education through partnership that goes beyond the national borders. The purpose of the programme is to support the European students and lecturers so that the European dimensions can be spread within all the involved parties in the process. The educational value of the exchange is equally important as the cultural and linguistic benefits to the recipients. The very physical movement from one place to another, from one academic environment to another, presupposes a wide range of encounters, meeting new people, being put in different

situations, having to deal with unusual circumstances, reaching new levels of tolerance to the ambiguous, to the unknown. All these issues present a great interest from the point of view of the foreign-language teaching academic world.

The Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament claims to be responsible for:

1. The cultural aspects of the European Union, and in particular:
  - (a) improving the knowledge and dissemination of culture,
  - (b) the protection and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity,
  - (c) the conservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage, cultural exchanges and artistic creation;
2. The Union's education policy, including the European higher education area, the promotion of the system of European schools and lifelong learning;

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3. Audiovisual policy and the cultural and educational aspects of the information society;
4. Youth policy and the development of a sports and leisure policy;
5. Information and media policy;
6. Cooperation with third countries in the areas of culture and education and relations with the relevant international organizations and institutions.

The main body of the present study is occupied with the influences of the Erasmus experiences on exchange students attending a foreign university and being submerged in the other lifestyle and academic world. The structural departments of the universities make the selection of the students, organize their linguistic preparation, provide information about the receiving university, sign an individual contract with each of them, defining their rights and obligations; observe and support them through contacts with the hosting universities.

#### **REVIEW OF EXISTING PRACTICE**

A short review of the Erasmus exchange practice throughout Europe shows that the issues of communication and exposure to a different academic and linguistic environment are relevant for all the participants. Thus, for example, the languages used for the exchange students in the research project in Zurich are German or English. A free course in German is provided in the three levels of proficiency in the two weeks before the beginning of the semester. Moving to Switzerland for the period of the exchange, students have to be informed and deal with problems like health, insurance, accommodation, living costs, visas, money issues, etc. They get a course catalogue and search for courses according to different criteria, for example, level of study, department, study program and language of instruction.

The advertising brochure also includes a final section, entitled "See Switzerland through different eyes", emphasizing the emotional and social component of the Erasmus visit.

The exchange semester is viewed as a special period during which the student nurtures the beauties of the country, experiences new

encounters, faces new opportunities, attends interesting events and parties, makes friends and communicates with other people who are his or her age and come from different countries.

Students who have been on an Erasmus exchange at Vytautas Magnus University, Italy, were asked to give feedback after the end of the course and here is what two of them say:

- "Study in the department of anthropology of VMU was a very good experience! The main reasons were that the studies level is very good and teachers are great! Secondly, professors are really attentive to foreign students and they are interested in our approach. Therefore, you become actor of your formation because you should defend your opinion! It's a very good exercise! And everyone learnt a lot from the others." (Alice, France)

- "It was perfect experience to study as Erasmus student at Vytautas Magnus University, and not only life but mainly study experience. I had a great possibility to improve my knowledge in there. I improved my English, I learnt some of the local language, too, and I studied subjects which I liked. Moreover, I could consult my subjects of study with people from different countries with different points of view and in this way to enrich my scope of learning. This experience was also intensified by the fact that many other foreign teachers came to the university during a study period to have their own lectures. The new people then could bring new contacts and new possibilities into the future." (Rostislav, Czech Republic).

#### **TECHNOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH PERFORMED**

The purpose of the research was to find out what were the positive and negative aspects (if any) of the experience through which the exchange students to Trakia University went. The opinions of six students were taken, all visiting courses at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Trakia University and coming from universities from the Republic of Turkey. The received empirical data were analyzed according to the following criteria:

- expectations which the students had about the exchange before coming to Bulgaria;
- the main language of communication and the new knowledge gained;
- possibilities of applying the new skills and linguistic competence in the future studies of the students;
- problems and difficulties the students meeting a new environment and a new culture;

Here is what the survey that was performed with students coming to Trakia University involved (only the answers that are of interest to our study have been cited):

STARA ZAGORA UNIVERSITY  
INCOMING ERASMUS STUDENTS'  
SURVEY:

General Information

Name- Surname :  
Home University/Faculty/Department :  
Trakia University, Veterinary Faculty, Stara Zagora

Academic Year- Term of the exchange :  
2011-2012 (Summer)

Year of Study :

Personal Information:

Date&Place of Birth :  
Nationality

(all of the interviewed students were from the republic of Turkey) :

Contact information at home (address, phone):  
Contact information at Stara Zagora (address, phone):

Accommodation Information:

Have you arranged your accommodation before your arrival? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Did your coordinator assist you to find a suitable accommodation? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Have you stayed at the University's students dormitory? YES  NO

If yes,

Did you find it comfortable and adequate for your needs? YES  NO

Did you stay in a private house? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Did you share your accommodation with other students? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Would you like to leave comments for better service in future?  
(all of the interviewed students recommended that they were not informed in advance that have to register in the police station if they stay in a private house and about how to find the lecture halls)

Economic Information:

Did you find your Erasmus scholarship adequate for your needs in Stara Zagora? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

How did you find the living costs in Stara Zagora compared to your home?  
 More expensive  Cheaper  Same  
(2 thirds of the interviewed students said they were cheaper and one third – that they were the same)

Language Competence:

Did you take Bulgarian language courses before your arrival? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Did you take your courses at Trakia University in Bulgarian or in English? Both?  
(all of the interviewed students answered that they took them in Bulgarian)

Education Information:

Have you adapted to the education system at Trakia University easily? YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

If no, what kind of difficulties did you have  
(all of the interviewed students said they had a language problem)

Did you attend your courses regularly? YES  NO

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Are you taking the courses with Bulgarian students or having special classes or both?  
Both?

Were you directed to proper sources like books, internet sites, etc. about your courses?  
YES  NO

(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Did you ask and get extra courses from the professors?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Were the academicians (professors, assistants, etc.) helpful enough and guiding properly?  
YES  NO

(2 thirds of the interviewed students did not answer this question and one third gave a negative answer)

Did you have a problem with the examination system?  
YES  NO   
(2 thirds of the interviewed students did not answer this question and one third gave a negative answer)

If yes, what was the problem about?  
Did you learn new techniques/approaches?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

#### Health

Did you get a health insurance before you leave your country?  
YES  NO   
(2 thirds of the interviewed students gave a positive answer and one third gave a negative answer)

Did you have a health problem in Stara Zagora?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Were you properly guided in the hospital?  
YES  NO

#### Daily Life:

Did you have personal/not personal problems in Bulgaria?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

If yes, can you please define the problem?  
Did you have any problems in terms of relationships?  
YES  NO

Did you find this experience was beneficial overall?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Did you find Trakia University a good choice for Erasmus exchange?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Would you recommend to your friends to make their Erasmus exchange in Ankara?  
YES  NO

Did you attend any activities that the university organized?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

What would you like to add to the activities?  
Did you visit other cities than Stara Zagora?  
YES  NO

Did you see any historical or touristic places in Stara Zagora?  
YES  NO   
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

#### Comments:

##### FINAL NOTES:

How would you describe the period for the exchange:  
Too short – Too long – Exactly as necessary  
Which were the factors that motivated you to go abroad?

Academic (obligatory part of my curriculum)  
Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Acquiring professional experience  
Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Acquiring new professional knowledge and skills Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Cultural

Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Living in another country

Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Practicing a foreign language

Yes / No

Friends living abroad

Yes / No

Career plans/improving future perspectives for employment Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

European experience

Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Independence

Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Other (please, specify): .....

Where did you get the information for the hosting institution from:

The sending institution Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

The hosting institution Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

A mediator organization Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

The Internet Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Please give the internet addresses: .....

Other (please, specify): .....

Do you think it is difficult to find a hosting institution? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)

Did the hosting institution meet your expectations for getting practice? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)

How would you define your integration with the hosting institution? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)

Will you get any academic benefits for the period of your stay abroad? Yes – No – Partially

If yes, what kind?

(all of the interviewed students gave an average evaluation to the last 3 questions)

For my diploma – As a Europass mobility – Other – Don't know

Expenses:

How much was your monthly allowance from Erasmus:

(the allowance which was pointed out was 300 Euro and 180 TL)

What were your monthly expenses on the average?

(the allowance which was pointed out was 250 Euro average)

How much did the allowance cover your expenses? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)

(all of the interviewed students gave an average evaluation of 3 or 4)

When did you receive your financing from Erasmus?

Before my stay – At the beginning of my stay – In the middle of my stay – At the end of my stay – After of my stay

(all of the interviewed students said they received it at the beginning)

Did you get any financial support from the hosting institution? Yes / No

If yes, how much? < 500 Euro; 500-800; 800-1200; >1200

Did the hosting institution offer any other support?

Accommodation Yes / No

Food Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Tickets for transportation Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Other Yes / No  
(please, specify):

Did you have any other financial support?  
From the state Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

State loan Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Private Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Private loan Yes / No  
(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Family Yes / No

Family savings Yes / No

Other Yes / No

(please, specify):

Personal experience

Evaluation of the professional results of the exchange: (| from 1-5 : 1 - poor, 5 – excellent)

Evaluation of the personal results of the exchange: (| from 1-5 : 1 - poor, 5 – excellent)

(all of the interviewed students gave an average evaluation to the last 2 questions)

Did you have any serious problems during the exchange? Yes / No (please, specify):

(all of the interviewed students gave a negative answer)

Which aspects of the exchange do you evaluate the most?

Academic (obligatory part of my curriculum) Yes / No

Acquiring the professional experience Yes / No

(one third of all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Acquiring new professional knowledge and skills Yes / No

Do you think you would be more willing to work in another European country after the exchange?

Yes / No

(two thirds of all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

Do you think the practice will be useful in your future career? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)

(all of the interviewed students gave an average evaluation to the question)

Do you think the practice will be useful for finding a job? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)  
(all of the interviewed students gave an average evaluation to the last 2 questions)

What is your total evaluation of the exchange? (from 1-5 : 1=not at all, 5=a lot)

(all of the interviewed students gave an average evaluation to the last 2 questions)

Would you like to help other Erasmus exchange students using your experience?

Yes / No

(all of the interviewed students gave a positive answer)

What recommendations would you give to other students in terms of information procedures for application, etc.:

(The recurrent answer to this question was that Trakia University should introduce teaching in English)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When studying and analyzing the answers given by the students who took part in the survey, some key issues stuck out as important from the point of view of the

problematic field which is of interest to the author – some of them outline the Erasmus exchange as a very positive experience and some were rather critical of the organization

and implementation of the programme. The following two tables show the positive and negative issues, respectively:

**Table 1.** *Questions referring to cultural issues*

	Questions	Positive answer	Negative answer
A	Did you find this experience was beneficial overall?	100 %	0 %
B	Have you adapted to the education system at Trakia University easily?	100 %	0 %
C	Did you see any historical or touristic places in Stara Zagora?	100 %	0 %
D	Friends living abroad	33 %	%

**Table 2.** *Questions referring to linguistic issues and barriers*

	Questions	Positive answer	Negative answer
A	Practicing a foreign language	33 %	67 %
B	Did you take Bulgarian language courses before your arrival??	0 %	100 %
C	Did you take your courses at Trakia University in Bulgarian?	100 %	0 %
D	Did you attend any activities that the university organized	0%	100 %

The opinions and answers of the students draw a very mixed picture that can be explained to an extent with the cultural shock of coming to live and study in a foreign country. Although the overall impression is that they do gain a lot from this international experience (**Table 1**), there are some striking inadequacies which do not present the hosting institution in a very bright light – especially the striking fact that the lectures were delivered in Bulgarian (**Table 1**) while none of the Erasmus students has confirmed to have any preliminary knowledge of Bulgarian (**Table 2**). The other conclusion that can be drawn is that not enough is being done in terms of cultural opportunities that the exchange programme could make use of – like taking the students to other towns or places of ethnographic or cultural interest or inviting them to attend some of the activities organized by the University where they could make new acquaintances and friends and deepen their communication with the hosting country (**Table 2**).

## CONCLUSION

In the concluding comments of the Directorate General for Internal Policies

(Structural and cohesion policies of the Culture and Education Department) for ERASMUS FOR ALL (2014-2020) it is said that the goals and ambitions of the Erasmus for All proposal for the years 2014-2020 are in line with Europe's vital and urgent need to invest much more and more efficiently in education, training and youth. The proposal acknowledges the implications of the broader strategic priorities set out in Europe 2020 and its flagship initiatives. It is also based on a sound analysis of the success and limitations of the current generation of programmes, which will come to an end in 2013. The regrouping and streamlining of various intra-European and external programmes and actions in the higher education sector is a response to a long overdue need – to evaluate the needs for, and assess the results of the modernization agenda for European higher education in view of the deep and rapid change in this area as a result of the growth of new knowledge powers in various regions of the world.

The Parliament also wants to make certain that the programme committee is in a position to discuss substance, not just administrative procedures and financial management. A

single committee dealing with education, training, youth and sports would need to have the option of tasking thematic or sector-specific groups to help it deepen the analysis of relevant topics and enhance its contribution to the programme's orientation over time. This is all the more important for a programme which will leave more room for the adjustment of priorities and allocation of funds over time, through the adoption of annual work plans.

#### REFERENCES

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