

The Erasmus Implications in the European Higher Education System

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to present the policy pursued by the European Union for higher education, emphasizing the principles that underlie the Member States and the European institutions. At the same time, the article aims to analyze the Erasmus program, as an organization's instrument which seeks to enhance the cooperation between states, and between universities. Therefore, the program should be analyzed taking into account both advantages and limitations. Finally, there is a need to observe the European Union's plans for the next period and how institutions wish to put them into practice.

Keywords: Erasmus; universities; European Union; cooperation; limitations

European higher education has its specific features. Like in the case of other parts of the world, the old continent is characterized by certain elements that define and influence not only the educational process, but also the work culture itself and how it is being perceived. Although the internationalization of European higher system determines interaction with other continents and some scoring so their evolution, yet remain outstanding some of its features, probably due to the very diversity of national systems. National higher education systems in Europe are as numerous as diverse. However, with the creation of the European Communities and later the European Union (EU), education has become an important topic on the agenda of EU institutions.

The approximately 4,000 institutions of higher education that are found in the European Union have a different structure and different programs, and very often they do not resemble each other. Some of them are among the best universities in the world, while others fail to reach their full potential due to various reasons. Issues such as how to finance a university and the insufficient number of young students who manage to obtain a higher degree have led the European Union to be involved to improve the situation of higher education.

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The European Commission aims several objectives to improve the situation of European higher education. First, it supports the implementation of the Bologna system in all European universities. The role of the Bologna Declaration was to create an education system compatible between different European countries. At the same time, it wanted to improve the higher education system and to promote it worldwide (European Commission, p. Higher education in Europe). The process has been emphasized by adopting the Bucharest Communiqué in 2012. According to it, there are three key priorities on the agenda of European Ministers: mobility, employability and quality. The member states recognized that education plays an important role in the European Union being the one that can contribute to the economic growth of the Member States (European Commission, 2012, pp. The Bologna Process - Towards the European Higher Education Area).

A second objective promoted by the European Commission aimed to increase the collaboration between European states. By exchanging best practices between Member States institutions it aims sharing experiences and solutions that could be applied throughout the European Union leading to a modernization of the higher education system (European Commission, 2012, p. Higher education in Europe). The European institutions also consider a reform of curricula to reinforce mobility and increase the likelihood of employment. A wide reform funding for higher education institutions is required to increase the possibility of obtaining investment and strengthen cooperation between universities and enterprises. (EU Knowledge System for Lifelong Learning)

However, the concept that popularized best the European higher education to a global scale is Erasmus. Erasmus (European Community Action Scheme for the acronyms for the Mobility of University Students) was put into practice for the first time in 1987 (Ballatore, 2010, p. 1). Its main purpose is to enhance European mobility at university level, both in the academic and administrative staff, as well as what concerns the students. Academic mobility in the European space allows overcoming national barriers, both cultural and physical (Cowen, Robert, Kazamias & Andreas, 2009, p. 577). This allows the design of the European Union as a homogeneous space, a multicultural one.

The "Erasmus for students" Program enjoys high success. It was created for the European Union countries, at the beginning, and it was extended in the case of non EU countries such as Turkey, Croatia, Norway, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and

Iceland (European Commission, 2012). It has two dimensions: mobility for studies and mobility for placement. The legal basis of Erasmus mobilities is established by the agreements between universities. Usually this dimension is dealt by international offices of institutions of higher education. By forcing the development of such offices, Erasmus program achieved not only to open the universities toward the European area, but also the wider international space.

The Erasmus success is demonstrated by the large number of students who received scholarships and placements. Thus far, over 4,000 universities allowed the mobilization of more than 2.5 million students in the 33 partner countries (European Commission, 2012, pp. Erasmus for students – get a new perspective on Europe). Although Erasmus statistics illustrates a large appreciation of both the universities and students for the program, a more detailed analysis of the data discloses certain limitations.

The Erasmus program envisages close collaboration between universities across Europe to enable students to experience not only the specificities of higher education in another university, but also another culture. However, there are some limitations regarding the reciprocity. There are countries where the proportion of the incoming and outgoing students is too different. Thus, although initially the number of British students who went through Erasmus mobilities to study in other European countries was very high (top 3 European countries in 1987-1996), it decreased in time (European Commission, 2011, pp. Outgoing Erasmus student mobility for studies from 1987/88 - 2010/11). Nowadays, the UK ranks 6 (European Commission, 2011, pp. Outgoing Erasmus student mobility for studies from 1987/88 - 2010/11). The states leading the rankings for the number of students sent abroad through the Erasmus program are France, Spain and Germany. Spanish students Represent 14.5% of the Erasmus students in 2010-2011, French students represent 14.0% and German students - 13.9% (Teichler, Ulrich et alii, 2011). Although the same states are on top positions for the incoming students, outgoing and incoming numbers of students do not create a proportion. Thus, there are states “exporting” students, and states where the number of incoming students, in general, is higher than the outgoing. An example is provided by Italy in the 2003-2004 academic year, which sent 16,829 students, but received only a total of 12,743 students. In the United Kingdom, the situation is reversed, so in the same year, 7539 British students went through the Erasmus program to study abroad, although the number of European students hosted by the British state was 16,627 (Ballatore, 2010, p. 34)

This problem is determined also by linguistic differences. It could be seen a predilection for English, French, Spanish or German. Thus, there is an intense exchange between the member States speaking these mother languages. Thus, in 2009-2011, in the United Kingdom, major exchanges were made with France,

Germany, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands (in descending order) (European Commission, 2012, p. European Student Mobility in United Kingdom). The situation is confirmed by the mobility involving French universities. Thus, the countries that interested most the French students and from which came students to study in French universities are also Germany, Spain and the UK (European Commission, 2012, p. Erasmus Student Mobility in France).

An important aspect for the Erasmus mobility is the linguistic proximity between mother tongues. Thus, in the case of Italy, Spain is the favorite country for exchange students at a rate of approximately 30% of total realized mobilities (Ballatore, 2010, p. 36). The situation is caused by Latin inheritance, which is also probably influencing the high percentage of Italian students interested by the mobilities proposed by the French universities.

Not only between states with a large number of Erasmus students could be seen the language dependence, but as well in other states. Thus, in Romania, most students go for an Erasmus exchange in France, the country speaking a language of Latin origin like the Romanian population. Meanwhile, the situation is emphasized by close cultural ties between the two countries. The list is continued by Germany, situation caused by the German-speaking minority located in Romania. In addition, the Italy and Spain front positions are explained, as in the case of France, by the Latin linguistic heritage (European Commission, 2012, Erasmus Student Mobility in Romania).

Another variable influencing the Erasmus mobilities is represented by the financial vision of the Member States on student exchanges. Thus, in UK the higher education is very expensive. British students pay to study in English university centers, unlike the Erasmus students who do not pay taxes than in the origin country. From this point of view, accepting a large number of Erasmus students means for UK universities a large support of financial costs. To overcome these costs, it is preferable to accept international students (overseas students), who unlike Erasmus student, are paying university fees (Ballatore, 2010, p. 37). In the same time, the large number of options regarding Erasmus mobilities also represents an advantage for universities. For example, at Bristol University, students within certain specializations are required to complete a year of study in another country, which generally is an advantage that Bristol University has in competing with other universities, as an Erasmus coordinator of the center specifies (Ballatore, 2010, p. 38).

Another limitation of the Erasmus program is determined by the difference of the curricula. Thus, sometimes students are required to pass exams in both the host and home countries because some courses cannot be equated. The situation is caused by differences between higher education systems of European states, and the autonomy of universities. For this reason, some universities only make agreements

with universities that have similar programs, thus creating a limitation of the Erasmus experience. One can ask a question in this case: are not the students restricted when the only alternative offered is somehow identical with the one in his/her own country?

But this problem is not only due to the limitation of academic selection. Magali Ballatore, Ph.D. in sociology observes in a study about the Erasmus program that prestigious universities tend to make agreements with prestigious universities in other countries. For example, foreign language departments of British universities, in general, choose exchanges with departments in the same area of prestigious foreign universities (Ballatore, 2010, pp. 40-41). The same situation is found in Italy. Polytechnic School of Turin, a very popular higher education institution, has in general agreement with major French engineering schools, while the Polytechnic University of Bari, which is not so popular, has only a few agreements with major engineering schools in France (Ballatore, 2010, p. 41).

Not only university centers are selective, but also the students. Often, they do not look like young bohemians who wish to go in the search of adventure in another country, but rather like future professionals who calculate their options strategically. Thus, Erasmus is often considered an asset in an attractive CV. In addition, the option of prestigious academic centers is still an advantage in career (Ballatore, 2010, p. 77). The situation is improved by the reduction of costs determined by the Erasmus financial scholarship and the liberation of administrative problems that may occur when a student wants to study at a foreign university. Magali Ballatore also identifies the desire of students to emotionally detach from a particular area, to obtain a certain independence and adulthood (Ballatore, 2010, p. 78). Although the advantage of meeting new people and travel is often appreciated by students, it is rarely the main reason why young people choose to choose Erasmus mobility.

Although many of these issues are highlighted within the Erasmus program, its popularity is supported by a multitude of advantages. First, the Erasmus program allows students with modest financial status to have an experience of study in another country. Although Erasmus scholarships are not very high and vary from country to country, they serve to cover the costs of differences that would involve mobility in another country.

In addition, studies have shown that students who participate in internships or who study in other countries have a greater ability to adapt to multicultural environments (Ballatore, 2010, p. 83). This aspect should not be neglected, especially when the European institutions want to promote multiculturalism in the European Union. At the same time, the globalization that characterizes the twenty-first century could be problematic for those having difficulties accepting other cultures and could support those who have the ability to adapt to them.

Stefan Wolff, professor of political science at the University of Bath, United Kingdom, says that the new generation has different values and appreciates differently the living space. The “Erasmus generation”, as he calls the young people studying since 1987, is no longer anchored in the national space (Bennhold, 2005). The European spirit is sustained by young people and a third of the European population between age 21 and 35 says that it feel more European than national (Bennhold, 2005). The European dimension is created not only by economic exchanges or through the elimination of physical boundaries, but also by cultural proximity and understanding of each other. Thus Erasmus is not only a new form of educating professionals to effectively cope with new changes professionally, but also a way to strengthen the European identity.

Under these conditions, Erasmus development is promoted very intense in order to deepen exchanges between Member States. Thus, Androulla Vassiliou, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, multilingualism, youth and sport, says that European Union wants to aggregate the existing educational programs into one called “Erasmus for All” (Jonathan, Gooch, 2011). This new program will have 70% more financial support as before, taking into account a budget of approximately \$ 25.2 million and would allow a total of 5,000,000 students to participate in learning mobility within Europe (Jonathan, Gooch, 2011). Although this has not yet been materialized, the European Commission supports intensively the educational programs that could enable an efficient support of a strong economy.

As we have seen, the European Union attaches great importance to higher education. This is demonstrated by the effort to create similar structures of study in the Member States through the Bologna Process. Erasmus program aims to strengthen cooperation between universities and between Member States giving young people the opportunity to study in another European country. Although this program has limitations, such as lack of proportionality between incoming and outgoing students or the difficulty equivalence of studies conducted abroad, its advantages have led its popularity. The role of the Erasmus program is not only seen on an academic level, but also within the labor market. In the same time, young Europeans educated in European universities promote the European spirit.

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