

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE THROUGH STAFF MOBILITY PROGRAMMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

*Davian VLAD*

Assistant Professor, PhD, University of Craiova

### **Abstract**

Training and teaching staff mobility programmes represent an ideal opportunity for establishing contacts with the professors and students from foreign universities in order to make an experience exchange on learning and teaching methods. This exchange contributes to the academic process on both sides and creates international learning experience for everyone involved in this fruitful endeavour. The Erasmus+ mobility programmes lead to acquiring knowledge or specific know-how from the experiences and good practices abroad, as well as practical skills relevant for the professional development. As we will demonstrate in our presentation, this kind of experience also helps building up cooperation for research between higher education institutions and it consists in tuning with other methods of teaching, learning and assessment in an international environment.

**Keywords:** internationalization, mobility, experience, advantages, education

Mobility is both a physical and intellectual concept. Apart from the touristic aspect, travelling and meeting people from other countries can influence the range of perspectives, widening the horizon and leading to new ways of accumulating notions and ideas that can be put into practice in all the fields of activity, including higher education. A professor who observes and learns new modalities of teaching from foreign educational systems can only improve their activity when coming back home. Although there is the possibility of reading about the modern teaching methods implemented by foreign universities, the direct observation is essential for an accurate assimilation of knowledge. That is why staff mobility programmes represent a priceless opportunity for professors to refine their teaching skills and also to present their counterparts the methods used in the educational systems from their countries of origin. It is an outstanding exchange of ideas that can only lay the groundwork for a viable improvement of the higher education frameworks from all the countries involved. Learning from each other is the pivotal element of a more and more internationalized educational landscape and this is the paramount reason for establishing such staff mobility programmes as Erasmus+, the most representative and efficient of them all. It's a programme which gives the opportunity to talk to people from other cultures, and listening to what the others have to say is essential for a healthy personal development which enables the individual to embrace a tolerant, open-minded, unbiased perspective, as Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc emphasize: "Storytelling can create community at an even deeper level: the more one knows about another person's story, the less one is able to dislike or distrust, let alone despise, that person"<sup>24</sup>.

Launched in 1987 as a student mobility programme, Erasmus+ has continuously evolved and by now almost ten million persons have already benefited of the extraordinary advantages provided by this enormous programme

---

<sup>24</sup> Parker J. Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, with Megan Scribner, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal, Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations*, Jossey Bass, A Wiley Imprint, San Francisco, 2010, p.139

funded by the European Union. The generous goals of Erasmus+ are invariably fulfilled every year and this major accomplishment induces a sense of inclusion, contentment and pride for everyone involved in this admirable project, as the EU officials stressed with the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Erasmus+ Programme in 2017: “This platform for European and international mobility and cooperation brings people from different backgrounds together. It provides them with the competences needed to lead independent, fulfilling lives and helps them find their place in our societies and develop a sense of a European identity – an identity that complements our national, regional, local identities. (...) Widely recognised as the most successful EU programme, Erasmus+ provides us with a concrete example of the positive impact of European integration and international outreach, having enriched the lives of nearly 2 million people from Europe and beyond between 2014 and 2016 alone!”<sup>25</sup>.

Meeting new people and ideas is fundamental for everyone taking part in this successful project, both students and teachers or professors. Their unmediated experiences have set the framework for consolidating a sense of tolerance and togetherness, being a reliable tool for enhancing the feeling of being part of a community in which diversity is cherished and supported: “The Erasmus programme is one of the EU’s most iconic initiatives, and its latest incarnation is the most significant leap forward in more than a quarter of a century. Erasmus+ encompasses a range of new ideas that have the potential to drive European student mobility forward in terms of both quality and quantity, while embracing the use of digital solutions – just as its main beneficiaries are becoming the first truly connected generation. The European University Foundation (EUF) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) are wholly committed to making Erasmus+ a success, because student mobility is Europe’s best tool to bring future generations closer together. Enabling students to live abroad for several months, to forge friendships with peers from across the

---

<sup>25</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/anniversary/30th-anniversary-and-you\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/anniversary/30th-anniversary-and-you_en)

continent and to become acquainted with societies and traditions other than their own gives them an opportunity to benefit from an experience that should foster tolerance and have a direct positive impact on society at large<sup>26</sup>.

The mobility projects for higher education staff provide two kinds of experiences, both of them intending to increase the level of integration of educational skills and methods for all the sides involved:

- training periods: this activity supports the professional development of higher education institution (HEI) teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as the development of involved institutions. It may take the form of training events abroad (excluding conferences) and job shadowing/observation periods/training at a partner HEI, or at another relevant organisation abroad.
- teaching periods: this activity allows HEI teaching staff to teach at a partner HEI abroad. Staff mobility for teaching can be related to any subject area/academic discipline<sup>27</sup>.

A period abroad can combine teaching and training activities and the results of such an experience can only outline the essential intentions of a programme aiming for modernization and internationalization under the motto “In varietate concordia/ United in diversity”. And the academic staff carrying out mobility activities should expect the following desirable outcomes:

- improved competences, linked to professional profiles;
- broader understanding of practices, policies and systems in education, training or youth across countries;
- increased capacity to trigger changes in terms of modernisation and international opening within their educational organisations;
- greater understanding of interconnections between formal and non-formal education, vocational training and the labour market respectively;

---

<sup>26</sup> [https://uni-foundation.eu/uploads/2015\\_erasmus\\_1\\_year\\_review.pdf](https://uni-foundation.eu/uploads/2015_erasmus_1_year_review.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-1/mobility-higher-education-students-staff\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-1/mobility-higher-education-students-staff_en)

- better quality of their work and activities in favour of students, trainees, apprentices, pupils, adult learners, young people and volunteers;
- greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic and cultural diversity;
- increased ability to address the needs of the disadvantaged;
- increased support for and promotion of mobility activities for learners;
- increased opportunities for professional and career development;
- improved foreign language competences;
- increased motivation and satisfaction in their daily work<sup>28</sup>.

Teaching staff mobility programme gives the academic staff a clear opportunity to spend a teaching period of up to 6 weeks at a higher education institution in another participating country with certain objectives that can contribute to the permanent development of educational systems all over the continent. The staff mobility intends to:

- encourage higher education institutions to broaden and enrich the range and content of courses they offer;
- allow students who do not have the possibility to participate in a mobility scheme to benefit from the knowledge and expertise of academic staff from higher education institutions and from invited staff of enterprises in other European countries;
- promote exchange of expertise and experience on pedagogical methods;
- create links between higher education institutions and with enterprises;

---

<sup>28</sup> <https://acro.ceu.edu/erasmus-teaching-mobility-academic-staff> [accessed 27 January 2020]

- motivate students and staff to become mobile and to assist them in preparing a mobility period<sup>29</sup>.

And the feedback acquired demonstrates that these objectives can truly be achieved. Erasmus+ programme has a distinct and positive impact on students and academic staff, as all the surveys and analysis have indicated over the years. The Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study measures and analyses the ways in which the mobility programme influences students who undertake learning or training periods abroad, in particular the impact on individual skills enhancement, employability and a sense of shared European identity. The study also analyses the impact teaching and training mobility has on academic staff, in particular on their skills, attitudes and use of innovative methods, as well as the institutional impact on the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) themselves. The most recent study explored four main target groups and several subgroups: Erasmus+ students prior to their stay abroad and after their return, graduates with Erasmus+ experience, academic and non-academic staff with Erasmus+ experience, as well as Higher Education Institutions involved in Erasmus+ projects<sup>30</sup>. The latest Erasmus+ impact study released by The European Commission was conducted between January 2017 and April 2019, and was based on 77,000 survey responses from students, staff and higher education institutions. The results are as follows<sup>31</sup>:

### **Students in Higher Education**

72% of students who did study or training mobility said it had been highly beneficial to finding their first job. On top of that, 40% stated that they were offered jobs inside the companies/organisations where they did their traineeships. The results also showed that those students going abroad often

---

<sup>29</sup> <http://esci-paris.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/5-erasmus-staff-mobility>

<sup>30</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-impact-studies-factsheet\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-impact-studies-factsheet_en)

<sup>31</sup> <http://vubtoday.com/en/content/erasmus-programme-has-clear-impact-students-and-staff-after-their-stint-abroad-according-new> [accessed 11 March 2020]

changed their study plans, because after this experience they were able to have a much clearer idea of what they wanted to do in their future careers. The study showed that the Erasmus+ participants who are working were happier in their work than those who did not participate in this programme. 32% of students also felt more European after their mobility period compared to the time before they left (25%). Moreover, the study showed a strong association between participation in the Erasmus+ programme and the development of skills for employment and social cohesion. 9 in 10 said that adaptability, interactions with people from other cultures, communication skills and intercultural competences were significantly improved due to their experience abroad.

### **Higher Education Staff**

Improvement of social skills, intercultural and social competencies was mentioned by members of staff who went abroad through the Erasmus+ programme. 60% of staff reported to be more innovative and make more use of information and communications technology (ICT) after having gone abroad. The main drivers given for going on staff mobility were to enhance professional and institutional advancements - networking (93%), field knowledge development (93%), experience different learning and teaching methods (89%)<sup>32</sup>. The impact study reveals that Erasmus+ mobility of academics improves teaching and learning practices, staff skills and competencies:

- 43% of academic staff who went to teach or train abroad with Erasmus+ started to use at least one new innovative teaching method during their stay abroad.
- They connect more with the labour market, with 60% involving staff from enterprises in their courses, compared to 40% of non-mobile academics.
- The impact of Erasmus+ on innovative curriculum development and modern teaching practices spreads beyond participants. More than 80% of

---

<sup>32</sup> <http://vubtoday.com/en/content/erasmus-programme-has-clear-impact-students-and-staff-after-their-stint-abroad-according-new> [accessed 11 March 2020]

academics report that participating in the programme has led to improvements in these areas in their faculty<sup>33</sup>.

### **Higher Education Institutions**

Erasmus+ proved to be very important to 9 in 10 institutions' strategies to international competitiveness and programme quality. Lots of institutions reported a constant over-demand for student and staff mobility programme, while students and staff generally reported an improvement in the support available to them for going on Erasmus+ programmes. An imbalance was noted between demand for mobility (very high) from students and staff and supply for places in the Erasmus+ programme, but institutional support for participating had improved markedly since 2014. Another important consequence of the mobility is that Erasmus+ cooperation projects strengthen innovation and entrepreneurship: "Cooperation projects contribute to entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurship, and one in three leads to or contributes to the creation of spin-offs and start-ups, directly contributing to emerging entrepreneurs"<sup>34</sup>. There is an academic environment in constant movement and expansion, this blend of ideas and experiences leading to a certain widening of academic, social and economic perspectives, a predictable, natural evolution of the universities, as Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring notice: "Responding to the risks facing traditional universities requires understanding not only their current competitive environment but also their evolutionary behavior. Like most organizations, universities resemble living organisms in an important way: they seek not just to survive, but to grow and improve in scale, scope, and prestige. Once the typical organization has more than a few employees and has experienced a degree of success, predictable genetic tendencies switch on. These tendencies start to

---

<sup>33</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-impact-studies-factsheet\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-impact-studies-factsheet_en)

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem



dominate planning and investment processes, driving the organization to make things bigger, better, or both”<sup>35</sup>.

The testimonials of students and professors who have taken part in Erasmus+ mobility activities are a clear indicator of the feasibility of this programme. Erasmus+ produced many success stories as a survey taken with the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the programme proved beyond any doubt. The participants stated they improved their chances of finding a job, developed fresh perspectives on sustainable development, learned a new language, gained a clearer idea of European citizenship, or found the passion for volunteering<sup>36</sup>:

Malgorzata Walentynowicz (Poland): “People who are able to travel can discover other cultures for themselves and appreciate diversity. This is something that you cannot learn just from television”. Malgorzata appreciates the opportunity to learn how other countries function, explore different cultures and embrace diversity. Erasmus was the programme that enabled her to follow her unique path of self-discovery. “I now feel European”, she says.

Félix González Ardanaz (Spain): “The Erasmus experience made me feel like a global citizen. I’m at home in any place in the world”. Looking to the future, Félix is confident that European education systems will teach more about diversity to foster openness to other cultures: “Europe is a marvelous mixture of cultures and we need to know how to deal with that”.

Enrica Sciandrone (Italy): “I became more mature and confident as a result of the [Erasmus] experience. I am definitely more open to other cultures”.

Gary Diderich (Luxembourg): “The Erasmus+ experience has deepened my understanding of all kinds of people from different backgrounds. This has continued to help me in my work, as I deal with lots of people every day”.

---

<sup>35</sup> Clayton M. Christensen, Henry J. Eyring, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, Jossey Bass, A Wiley Imprint, San Francisco, 2011, p.8

<sup>36</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/anniversary/all-stories\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/anniversary/all-stories_en)

Stasele Riškienė (Lithuania): “Each project pushed me forward, giving me tools, ideas, inspirations and new contacts so that I could become a better teacher and work to improve the quality of education in my school. (...) Improving the language skills of educational staff and pupils, gaining intercultural competences and broadening the scope of teaching techniques and methodologies are just some of the benefits”.

Grațian Mihăilescu (Romania): “I always wanted to make a change in the world, even if on a very small scale. The Erasmus Mundus experience gave me new perspectives and a sense of belonging to a global community. In global projects, we gain a true cultural understanding, broaden our perspectives and create personal bonds with people. By this kind of cooperation, we can make the world a better place”.

Rosemarie Albrecht (Germany): “Speaking languages makes me feel European because it enables me to communicate with people, to create bonds with them. We deal with similar problems, we dream about similar things, even if our daily realities are very different”.

Aykut Subaşı (Turkey): “Partnership is vital because sustainability means that different areas function together in harmony”. Before discovering Erasmus+, Aykut was struggling to find a clear career direction but he “finally realised that [he] could fulfil [his] dreams” and his self-confidence grew.

Irene Gómez Arnáiz (Spain): “Erasmus+ has not only opened my mind but allowed me to take responsibility of my capacity and build trusting relationships across nations with my hard work and dedication. (...) Through different encounters, I got to learn about various cultures, places and people, all of which contributed to an increased feeling of belonging to the exceptional European community”<sup>37</sup>.

I couldn't agree more with the opinions afore shared as I can testify from my personal experience that Erasmus+ programme has proven to be an

---

<sup>37</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/anniversary/all-stories\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/anniversary/all-stories_en)

invaluable experience to me, too. During my four mobility periods – Opole (Poland) in 2016, Madrid (Spain) in 2017 and 2019, and Tarragona (Spain) in 2018, I had the opportunity to get acquainted with people with different cultural backgrounds, to learn new methods of learning and teaching, to refine my professional skills and improve my teaching techniques. The internationalized environment made me understand that the academic community can only get better in such a diverse and complex context. I met professors and students from numerous countries who carried out excellent cooperating activities, conducting different projects and fulfilling certain tasks together. We set up interdisciplinary collaborations which concretized in scientific studies and articles published in reviews issued by the higher education institutions involved in the programme. For instance, professors from Poland and Spain attended our scientific conferences and delivered studies for the reviews of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Craiova and the other way around. A desirable outcome that can only emphasize the feasibility of a mobility programme that connects people and communities, shares principles and ideas, and aims to be a remarkable cultural exchange platform for people all over Europe and beyond. In conclusion, Erasmus+ indisputably contributes to the development and modernization of the academic systems and provides international learning and teaching expertise to everyone involved in this fascinating social and intellectual experience.

## REFERENCES

Christensen, Clayton M.; Eyring, Henry J., *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, Jossey Bass, A Wiley Imprint, San Francisco, 2011

Palmer, Parker J.; Zajonc, Arthur; with Megan Scribner, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal, Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations*, Jossey Bass, A Wiley Imprint, San Francisco, 2010

[www.acro.ceu.edu](http://www.acro.ceu.edu)

[www.ec.europa.eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu)

[www.erasmusintern.org](http://www.erasmusintern.org)

[www.erasmusplus.ro](http://www.erasmusplus.ro)

[www.erasmusprogramme.com](http://www.erasmusprogramme.com)

[www.esci-paris.eu](http://www.esci-paris.eu)

[www.uni-foundation.eu](http://www.uni-foundation.eu)

[www.vubtoday.com](http://www.vubtoday.com)