



Mobility in Higher Education: New Needs to Improve it?

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Abstract

The aim of The Bologna Process is, amongst others, to improve the mobility of students in Higher Education. The Erasmus programme helps students to study in other European Universities, know other countries, live another culture (folklore, food, language, etc.), develop autonomy and mature as an adult person. In Cadiz, Spain, the international seminar “Improving mobility through collaborative exchange” took place in May 2015. The participants were universities of Glasgow (UK), Madeira (Portugal), Gazi (Turkey), Linz (Austria), Zielona Gora (Poland) and Cadiz (Spain). Representatives from those countries expressed concern about problems that students might suffer during mobility. The literature has pointed out that the economic, social and academic stresses they experience can, in some cases, generate or exacerbate mental disorders (Bradley, 2000) and generate depression and anxiety (Russell et al, 2010; Ying & Han, 2006) which can even manifest itself in somatic symptoms (Mori, 2000); this could involve classroom absences and drug taking as side effects. This study describes the positive experiences of five University of Cadiz Erasmus students under a collaborative exchange between the universities, detailing the measures taken by the host universities to address potential stressful issues.

Keywords: Erasmus mobility, Student’s needs, Higher Education

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Introduction

The 2020 strategy for the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) was established at the European Conference of Ministers of Higher Education held in Bucharest in 2012. The learning mobility is established as the main objective described as essential in order to achieve a better learning, quality assurance in higher education, employability and expand the cooperation and internationalization of higher education (CEMES, 2012). No one disputes the importance that a high level of mobility has for higher education institutions. A large number of incoming and outgoing students has become a sign of prestige and quality (Green, 2012).

Erasmus is the largest student exchange mobility programme for higher education in Europe. More than 4,000 institutions of higher education in more than 30 countries participate in the programme. The programme requires universities to sign a letter of agreement between European universities. The agreement means that institutions undertake to meet a number of conditions regarding exchange students taking place within the programme itself. Currently, undergraduate students who are interested in studying at a university in another country can choose a period of stay between 3 and 9 months and the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) are recognized in their home university. The stays at the Faculty of Education at the University of Cadiz usually last four months that is, a full academic term and can be expanded if the experience is positive to 9 months, the entire academic year. Very rarely a student chooses, from the beginning of the application process, to study at another university for a full academic year.

Currently, the conceptualization of integral formation of students in education includes life skills. From this viewpoint, training means shaping the personality of an individual as a result of the significant learning that has been achieved throughout his/her life up to the present date and integrates different forms of acting, thinking, expressing, working, studying, learning, interacting, living and being (Zarzar, 2003). We understand that stays at other universities are highly positive for student formation and for developing an autonomy that will help them mature into self-sufficient adults. Studying abroad helps a person to deal with his/her career with more success increasing the international dimension at work (Teichler, 2007) and increases the probability of working abroad in the future (Parey, Waldinger, 2007).

In particular, this international dimension is important for students in educational sciences, future teachers and trainers of European new generations. Due to the increasingly normal attendance of students from other nationalities in the classrooms, the Erasmus programme stays help students learn about other cultures in their native country, which makes the future teachers sensitized to the challenge of educating a diversity of students of different nationalities. Most researchers, including Deardorff (2004, in Pozo-Vicente y Aguaded-Gomez, 2012) and Straffon (2003), agree that intercultural experiences allow students to identify the behaviours and to progress in

the skills of intercultural communicative competence. They also state that there is a direct and positive proportional relationship between the time spent abroad and the degree of intercultural sensitivity acquired. Academic exchange can improve the quality of higher education, the professional and personal development of beneficiaries and it opens the way to intercultural understanding beyond the immediate exchange. It facilitates collaboration between the institutions themselves (Stockwell, 2011). For those students who will be future pre-school or early school teachers cultural immersion gives them flexibility and understanding of the cultural diversity of their students.

For those whose future careers will be connected with education, medicine and nursing learning in another country gives an opportunity to gain valuable experience by studying in new and different institutions with different methodologies, resources and materials. Button et al. (2005) did a literature review on the impact of international placements for nurses' professional lives. Students should be exposed to a variety of nursing experiences in the host country. This would give them a broad spectrum for comparisons between health care systems, nursing practice and health care delivery in those cultures. Therefore, educational institutions are strongly encouraged to provide opportunities for students to participate in nursing care and education in another country.

Another argument for student exchanges can be made by looking at Frisch's study (1990 in Keogh y Russel-Roberts, 2009) where it was found that an international experience enabled the students to "step out" of themselves and view all previous experiences of learning, and otherwise, from a new and often very critical vantage-point. In this article based on example of international activity a step on the way to excellence was presented.

Case Study: Material Presentation

We understand that there are some barriers, in general, that all the students who choose to study at a foreign university must face -economic considerations, foreign language and family separation, which can create stress (Väfors, Chin and Demarinis, 2008). On the one hand, families must support their children financially when they are studying in a foreign country. When a student begins to gather information about the costs of mobility, it becomes clear that the level of Erasmus funding may be insufficient. Then there is the language barrier: it is not easy to study in a foreign language.

When a student has reviewed these factors and decided to study at another university within the Erasmus programme, he or she faces situations that mobility itself carries. Most worrisome, in our opinion, is the risk, caused by the difficulties encountered in the Erasmus experience, of the student health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Nilsson et al, 2008) or somatic symptoms (Mori, 2000) or problems that have lain dormant, such as mental disorders (Bradley, 2000). These situations require the therapeutic help of a professional. However, most students do not apply for it (Mori,

2000) due to lack of service, or because of the difficulties in expressing themselves in another language or because they simply do not want to receive such aid. In that case the Erasmus programme becomes an experience that causes harm to mental and physical health and has a negative impact on the academic progress of the student.

We fully understand the necessity of providing support and counselling work to the student from the nearest figure within the receiving institution. The teacher coordinating the Erasmus mobility is responsible for the student who comes from a particular university. The coordinator teacher is the contact person at the host university and his or her functions are essentially reception, advising, guiding, counselling and managing the academic administrative procedures during the student's stay. The problem is the bureaucratization of the Erasmus programme, in which the academic coordinators only facilitate the paperwork and leave the incoming students without personal guidance. We agree with De Wit (2012) who, on the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus programme, mentioned lack of participation of Faculty staff and shift to a more bureaucratic and quantitative approach to Erasmus mobility over the last 15 years.as a barrier,

A group of university professors from the UK, Turkey, Portugal, Austria, Poland and Spain who are sensitized and committed to the Erasmus programme met at an international seminar *Improving Mobility Through Collaborative Exchange* held in Cadiz, Spain, from 6 to 12 May 2015. The aim was to discuss the difficulties and fears the Erasmus student must face and try to improve the mobility experience of Erasmus students between their countries. Here are the reflections from the workshop:

1. The analysis of the stressors for Erasmus students
2. The analysis of the failure and abandonment of the Erasmus programme and the scholarship just before the departure. What are the students' fears?
3. Reception and support
4. The information the student needs for mobility and keeping their emotional security safe, student interests, knowledge of the country, validation, mobility and learning agreements, selecting courses, languages, hosting, level of economic life ...
5. To combine our efforts to carry out a K2 Erasmus cooperation project between our universities during the academic year 2016-2017
6. To ensure that the action should be valid for different situational contexts, which is a priority value for European mobility

The central issue is the cooperation between European countries to support European Erasmus students in all aspects, not only in academic life but also in their daily lives (questions, problems, and concerns ...) in order to promote an emotional balance that all the students need in order to face their studies with positive results. The usefulness for the target community of an information campaign will be enhanced with the creation of an application for mobile phones and tablets, thus, facilitating access to information

adapted electronic gadgets that students use most often in order to help them address fears and uncertainties before the stay. The application will accompany the student and will support them in the process of acculturation. However, the most important action is the support and advice from the university member of staff who is responsible for coordinating the students.

Method

This paper reflects the experience of 5 university students from the Faculty of Education of the University of Cadiz who experienced mobility stays under the Erasmus programme with special monitoring as a result of the understanding and cooperation between the three institutions participating in the seminar: Glasgow, Scotland (UK), Linz, Austria and Cadiz, Spain. All were undergraduate students in the 4th year of the Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. Three of them made their stays in the 2013-14 academic year the other two in the academic year 2014-2015. All of them stayed only for the first half of the course since they were interested in performing teacher-training practices in Spanish schools, which took place in the second half of the year. Nonetheless, it is still important to have the opportunity to learn how teachers carry out their work in another country: methodology, resources, classroom climate, relationship with parents or guardians, micro and macro educational policy, etc.

Steps of Analysis

Qualitative data analysis must be systematic and follow a sequence and order (Alvarez-Gayou, 2005). The model used for analysing the data from the interviews has been developed over a process that can be realized in the following phases (Alvarez-Gayou, 2005; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Rubin and Rubin, 1995):

1. Getting information
2. Capturing, transcribing and ordering information
3. Coding information
4. Integrating information

The information was collected through in-depth interviews with the students participating in the study and by recording various interviews. The instrument used for recordings was the application included in the mobile phone. These audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in a perfectly readable file. The information was organized in a questions-and-answers format. Then we proceeded to encode the information. Coding is the process by which the information is gathered in categories that concentrate the ideas, concepts or similar themes discovered by the researcher (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). We made a number of categories and typological data encodings. Two main coding processes were employed: thematic coding - addressing major topics of interest, and interpretive and explanatory coding - developing issues, explaining and interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language and chronological coding. The main categories were: *overall assessment of the experience*, the ability to

acquire new learning academically, to know if they had the opportunity to do *internships in foreign schools* and the *work of the coordinators*: welcome, help, support and counselling by the Erasmus coordinator professor at the universities where they studied. To ensure anonymity the respondents were identified as Respondent 1–5 (R1–R5).

Results

In response to the question concerning an overall assessment of the experience, the five students highly valued the academic and cultural development which they had obtained from their Erasmus experience (knowledge of other cultures, new learning, and improvements in the field of foreign language ...). It is relevant that all of them without exception introduced in their replies their growth as a person that they had experienced. For them it was the first time they had left the family home to live alone. This is because there are universities in Spain in almost all provinces and students continue living in the family home and the time of independence has moved to the time of starting a career and economic independence. Therefore, for the Spanish student being out of the family home appeared to support the development of autonomy, maturity and personal growth. All this helped to increase self-confidence and gave them security in life. "In my opinion, in addition to academics, the experience is oriented to provide more benefits in the social and cultural field, in improving as a person and generally to mature". In addition, it appeared to be such a positive experience that all of them encouraged and recommend other students to study in universities outside Spain: to apply for the Erasmus programme. "It was a great experience for me, I would repeat it a thousand times and I recommend it to everyone who can go to live and study as an Erasmus a few months to a foreign country" (R4).

"Overall it was very good, without a doubt some of the best experiences of my life I would advise everyone" (R1).

"[...] Moreover, I met a new culture and I learned to adapt to it because it is different from ours, eg. The issue of timetables" (R2).

New way of learning

This question was intended to know their evaluation of the academic learning achieved during their stays through the programme at other universities. We wanted to know if they perceived whether some aspects of academic training during the stay at another university would have been impossible to acquire at the University of Cadiz. "Yes, language, thanks to the Erasmus experience I could increase my level of spoken and written English. In addition, I got information on what education and teaching I like in another country" (R1). "Yes, in my case, someone who is studying education, I observed how they understand education in Scotland and the curriculum in which they are based. It is very important to see that different countries may see different forms of education and it is good to be enriched by it. If I had not gone, I would not have broadened my view of education" (R3).

All of them admitted managing to undertake some of the academic learning which would have been impossible in Spain. Thanks to the immersion, they were provided with foreign language learning in English, in the case of the University of Glasgow, and for those who had studied at the University of Linz, in English and German. "Yes, especially the language. However much progress is made in any language course in your home country, until you make the jump abroad and start practicing it and (face) the need to communicate with people from other countries, you do not realize the importance of learning new languages" (R5).

"I made learnings that I would not make at the UCA, because education there is totally different from here, but, I want to say that some things I've learned in the Faculty of Cadiz I would not learn there" (R2).

Finally, we agree with Zarzar (2003) interpreting that student training sets their personality, forming their acting, thinking, expressing themselves, working, studying, learning, interacting and living, the result of all their learning. The reflection of R4 is on this topic "The learning I got was not just academic. I learned a lot in the classroom but also in day to day. I can say that I have changed and now look at the world differently. "

Access to practice in an educational centre

In the bachelor's degrees of Early Childhood and Primary Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Cadiz, a very important part of the training of students is teaching internship carried out in schools. Our students participate in internship in Spanish schools for a term during the third year and then during the fourth year. What they learn during student internship in different schools is crucial for their future professional performance. Therefore, it was interesting to know whether they had been given a chance to practise in schools outside Spain. According to Button (2005) and Frisch (1990) Erasmus mobility provides an opportunity to compare different systems, in this case, the educational systems and helps them to review their learning from a very critical vantage point.

All students interviewed had the opportunity to visit nursery schools during the six months Erasmus stay, both in Glasgow and Linz. Some of them for several weeks and others for one day a week during the six-month stay. These practices provided an opportunity to learn, observe and participate in a real context outside their country of origin that without such programs would have been impossible. One of the respondents evaluated the internship at a school in Glasgow: "As a student of education I observed how they understood education in Scotland and the curriculum in which they were based. It is very important to see that different countries may see different forms of education and it is good to be enriched by it. If I had not gone, I would not broadened my view of education "R3

"Yes, I was lucky to have access to school and different classes, with different methodologies, with different teachers, who provided me each with new experiences and learnings during our stay there. Practices in Erasmus seem vital to me" (R1).

The work of the coordinating teacher

The teacher coordinator is the contact person for the student in the destination university. They are responsible for guiding, counselling, academic advising and managing administrative procedures during the student's stay. It is important to give incoming students all the necessary information about their university courses, schedules, student support and psychological services (if any), the city where they will live and the customs of the country as well as manage the paperwork related to their studies at the host university. It is true that the Erasmus programme is not new and it is starting to be bureaucratized (a fact already denounced in 2012 by De Witt). This can have a negative side effect on the students being displaced, disoriented and with lack of support. These circumstances can make the student reject the Erasmus scholarship before leaving as so often happens. This entails an additional administrative burden and the loss of the scholarship, which cannot be transferred to another student because of lack of time to make a new contract.

There is close collaboration among the Erasmus coordinating teachers of the destination universities of this study, constant communication and a keen interest and dedication to the Erasmus programme. They participated in the First International Seminar for Improving Mobility through Collaborative Exchange held in Cadiz, motivated by a desire to improve mobility between their respective institutions. They are teachers who believe in the Erasmus programme and do coordination work beyond pure bureaucracy.

Regarding the work of the coordinating teachers, the students highly appreciated it, recognizing the extensive assistance, monitoring and the interest shown in academic and personal matters (reception, accommodation, adaptation to class group, acculturation, student companions ...). In almost all universities, host activities are performed for Erasmus students in order to give general information and to get to know each other. In others, they are assigned a student to support them in specific questions that may arise.

Regarding the welcome and support received in academic matters, they responded -"We had a great reception and we had an induction week specifically to solve our doubts. They would help you whenever you asked and having an assigned coordinator helps a lot "(R3)". "Yes, and I was very happy because she was always interested in me" (R5)". "Very good. Our coordinator was always available and helped us in everything we needed. In addition, the university itself held Erasmus welcome sessions, which was fine. We got a lot of information and met a lot of people "(R4).

"I received enough information about the city and faculty, since each Erasmus student had one or two students who helped us with all the questions we had. Moreover, I would emphasize that we were picked

up from the railway station the first day we arrived in the city and they took us to the faculty and I consider this a very positive aspect because at first you feel a little frightened, disoriented" (R2).

"There was a coordinator for Erasmus students, I think that sometimes he looked a little overwhelmed, it would not hurt to assess that the Erasmus coordinator should not be in turn, a teacher, etc." (R1).

"Yes, I had a teacher who was in charge of monitoring me and all Erasmus students to know about my academic development and adaptation" (R2).

Regarding their interest in more personal aspects all students replied that their respective coordinators were interested personally in them, concerned about their integration into the group, whether they went to class regularly, how they felt, etc. The respondents recalled:

"At all times he was concerned about my welfare, and how I was doing in my new country." (R1) "Yes, both teachers and students were interested in all these aspects to make us Erasmus students be very comfortable and adapt ourselves the fastest way." (R2)

"Yes, in everything. In fact, they gave us a welcome party where we had a talk and eat together and organised several cultural tours around the country and the city." (R5)

In the overall assessment of the aid received, all of them showed great satisfaction: *"We received all the help we needed" (R3). "Whenever I had some problems I received help to solve them" (R2).*

One student said -*"They were interested in everything except housing" (R3).* This student had to seek a rented apartment to share and had difficulties. Universities that lack dormitory accommodation should facilitate contacts of those who rent flats to in-coming students and provide information to students arriving from outside. This is done at the University of Cadiz. Lacking college accommodation, the university itself makes a link between individuals who rent their homes and students who have this need in order to facilitate the search. In this study, we have detected that this is an aspect that could improve with our collaboration: provide information on renting accommodation to students, and even, it would be advisable to contact in-coming students attending the same university to share the same apartment for rent. Since living alone is not advisable and very expensive.

Conclusion

No one doubts there are plenty of very positive aspects in being an Erasmus student at a foreign university. The benefits in both academic education and personal development are widely demonstrated. Regarding academic training, participating in the Erasmus programme helps students develop a more critical outlook and compare different systems (Button, 2005; Frisch, 1990), for example the educational system. As for personality, it favours the development of independence and autonomy and helps students to mature as persons (Zarzar, 2003). It also improves their career prospects (Teichler, 2007) and increases their chance of working abroad in the future (Parey, Waldinger 2007).

Specifically, for students in the sciences of education, future teachers and trainers of European new generations, it is highly positive because they develop communication skills and their intercultural sensitivity level (Deardorff, 2004, in Pozo-Vincent and Aguaded -Gomez, 2012; Straffon, 2003), as well as intercultural understanding (Stockwell, 2011). These skills are becoming increasingly necessary to educate in diversity to the range of nationalities that we currently have in our classrooms of early childhood and primary education.

According to De Wit (2012), the Erasmus programme needs to lower the level of bureaucracy that has been loaded in recent years at the level of faculties and especially coordinators, the people who have direct contact with students undertaking stays in their host universities. This is to be expected because receiving foreign students is a regular part of university life.

Students need the support and counselling of their coordinators in many areas during their stay. They are young people for whom, in most cases, this is the first time that they are separated from home, from their families, to live alone in another country and study in other universities in another language and with different customs that are mostly unknown. We understand that the figure of the Erasmus academic coordinator is essential to alleviate and prevent the negative effects in both their academic performance and in their mental and physical health. Social isolation prevents them from knowing the culture in which they have to live a period of their lives, so it is convenient to put in-coming students in contact with volunteer students of the Faculty itself in which they will study.

The excellent levels of communication among us, the coordinators who have carried out the coordination of the students in this study, shows that supervision, advice and counselling of the coordinator, both in academic and personal issues, leads to a successful Erasmus experience. We understand that the Erasmus stay is a unique rich experience in academic and personal learning and it promotes the international projection of the students' career scope, when considering the possibility of working in other countries of the European Union.

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