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Diversity in ERASMUS-student mobility: Obstacles to a new ERASMUS mobility era and future perspectives

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Abstract

This study continues our reflection (Bauer and Kreuz: 2009) on the differences and similarities of international Teacher student courses and University concepts of ERASMUS-student mobility in Europe. Based on last year's research, we present a more distinct and detailed study concerning the outcomes with possible future elements for a new ERASMUS mobility, extended by an ERASMUS-students' sample of the PH Wien from thirteen different countries.

Introduction

Nowadays it has become important for students to gain study-experience in another European country or abroad. This paper continues our research with an analysis of ERASMUS-students' perceptions of their ERASMUS period. Therefore ERASMUS-students of the University of Teacher Education Vienna (PH Wien) from 13 different countries (e.g. Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Turkey etc) completed a questionnaire concerning their perceptions, their experiences and problems of being an international student.

The aim of the research is to verify the results of recent European studies and to render valid inputs for future discussion and further research for a new student mobility era and a call for some necessary improvements.

ERASMUS-student mobility in Europe – the current situation and about obstacles to successful mobility

Every year the ERASMUS programme moves more than 150.000 students (Sigalas, 2009). In addition to the 27 EU Member States, also Turkey, Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein participate in the ERASMUS Programme (Sigalas, 2009, p 7). So 'ERASMUS has been and remains a key factor in the internationalisation and somehow "Europeanisation" of the EU's higher education systems' argues Jan Figel (2007, p 1).

Despite the great opportunities and experiences mobility provided by the ERASMUS Programme, there are 'still various barriers and obstacles on their paths', comments the ERASMUS-student Network (2008, p 2). The authors focus on three major obstacles to successful mobility: recognition of courses, financial situation and information provision, pointing out important recommendations for overcoming each obstacle (2008, p 2-7).

At the ERASMUS Coordinators Conference 2008 in Lisbon, Castro e Brito & Palma (2008) pointed out obstacles to mobility such as insufficient financial support, difficulties

with academic recognition/accreditation of qualifications at many home universities; lack of learning agreements and/or inflexible curricula. In addition, different academic calendars/time sheets, language barriers and lack of information are mentioned as barriers as well. The authors therefore call for improvements concerning language and cultural preparation, information and support measures, academic recognition and 'windows of mobility' in the Bachelor and Master programmes.

Teichler (2007, p 143) states that altogether ERASMUS-students reported positive experiences concerning their study abroad, about 20% of them mentioned serious problems with accommodation, financial and administrative agenda, too many social contacts with students of their home-country and problems with the academic recognition of their studies abroad. He (2007, p 187) proposes e.g. better preparation of the students and better administrative and financial support of the students during their ERASMUS-stay. Moreover, a higher quality of the form/structure of study courses, a better embedding in the study process and specific curricula as well as better academic recognition are worth considering.

The ESN survey 2008 report (Bauwens, Bonifazi, Boomans, Krzaklewska, Lopez, Nikolic, Pederiv and Tokova, 2009) evaluated the experiences of many exchange and international students concerning living, studying and working in a foreign country, and conclude: 'Despite the fact the overall satisfaction of respondents was high, they were not satisfied with the information received before the departure and their financial support'. They recommend sufficient information provision to ensure that students feel comfortable in the host-country and suffer less from culture-shock. Besides, it is necessary that student organisations are more involved in supporting the international students during their stay. Concerning the integration of international students into the local community, the authors recommend mixed accommodation (international and local students together) and classes where local and international students are together to facilitate integration (Bauwens et al, 2009).

Seebauer (2009) analysed international students who stayed one semester at the University of Teacher Education, Vienna. Results show amongst others that

ERASMUS-students that can be classified as 'highly satisfied' with their semester abroad get prepared for the semester abroad beforehand; they mostly have good knowledge of the language of the host country; they have a more favourable image of the host country and its population already at the beginning of the semester; ... (p 168).

Methods

We designed a qualitative questionnaire for ERASMUS-students consisting of 20 questions regarding students' perceptions and experiences of their ERASMUS-period at PH Wien.

Participants

All respondents were incoming ERASMUS-students at the University of Teacher Education Vienna (PH Wien) of the academic year 2009/10. The sample consists of 42 students, 38 female and four male students, from the following 13 European countries:

Table 1: Description of the sample

Country	Number	Percent
Czech Republic	9	21.5
Poland	8	19
Lithuania	4	9.5
Turkey	4	9.5
Spain	3	7.1
Hungary	3	7.1
Finland	3	7.1
Luxembourg	2	4.8
Germany	2	4.8
Italy	1	2.4
Bulgaria	1	2.4
Greece	1	2.4
Netherlands	1	2.4
Total	42	100

The students' age is clustered in the following structure listed in table 2:

Table 2: Age-structure

Age-structure	Number	Percent
18-20	8	19.1
21-23	26	61.9
24-26	4	9.5
27 and older	4	9.5

Findings

In the following, the major findings gathered from the questionnaire are summarized.

Question 1: What were your reasons for an ERASMUS semester abroad?

We got 113 answers from 42 students, which can be assigned to five categories as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Intention to go for an ERASMUS semester abroad

Intention to go for an ERASMUS semester abroad		
Category	Percent	Number
Cultural & social aspects	43.4	49
Learn/improve German	29.2	33
Information about teaching methods & school-system	13.3	15
Important for future/career	8	9
Other reasons	6.2	7
Total	100	113

43% of the motives to go for an ERASMUS semester are cultural and social aspects e.g. get to know new people, find friends abroad and discover aspects of a different culture. 29.2% of the answers see the aspect of learning and improving foreign language skills, in this case German, as a reason for going to Vienna. 13.3% of the motives are related to the information on the Austrian teaching methodology and school-system.

Question 2: Why did you choose our country/city for your ERASMUS semester?

Table 4: Austria/Vienna as chosen country/city for an ERASMUS stay

Why did you choose Austria/Vienna?		
Category	Percent	Number
Austria/Vienna & its culture	51.9	42
Study reasons	33.3	27
Other answers	14.8	12
Total	100	81

51,9% of the answers point out the image of Vienna/Austria and its cultural aspects, e.g. 'Vienna is a cosmopolitan city' or 'I heard about that great city', 'Vienna is culturally famous'. 33.3% responses can be categorised as study reasons like 'Vienna has a high level of education', 'I am writing my bachelor thesis about Austrian Architects', etc.

Question 3: How were you informed and prepared for your stay abroad by your home university? (e.g. preparation course, language course, international office, etc.)

Table 5: Information and preparation provision for your stay abroad

How were you informed and prepared for your stay abroad?		
Category	Percent	Number
Not enough/no information from home university	42.4	25
By international office/coordinator	32.2	19
Preparation/orientation course	10.2	6
By other ERASMUS-students	8.5	5
Other answers	5.1	3
Language course	1.7	1
Total	100	59

As table 5 shows, 42.4 % of the answers fit the category 'not enough/no information' from the home universities. 32.2% of the statements belong to the category 'informed by the international office/coordinator'. 10.2% of the statements represent the category 'preparation/orientation course' which includes 3-day orientation courses, ERASMUS meetings and/or information meetings. 8.5% aspects describe information provision through other ERASMUS-students. Only one student was offered a language course in preparation of the stay abroad.

Question 4: How did you prepare yourself for your ERASMUS semester?

As shown in the table 6 below, 51.6% of the answers fit the category 'Informed myself about the country/city/university'. Students used the internet, read books and travel

guides or went to the international office to collect information. 17.7% statements belong to the category 'German language course/brush up German'. 12.9% of the statements fit the category 'didn't prepare myself', which means that 20% of the students didn't prepare themselves for their stay abroad. Talking to former ERASMUS-students amounted to 8.1% of the self-preparation methods.

Table 6: Self-preparation for the ERASMUS semester

How did you prepare yourself for your ERASMUS stay?		
Category	Percent	Number
Informed myself about the country/city/university	51.6	32
German language course/bush up German	17.7	11
Didn't prepare myself	12.9	8
Other answers	9.7	6
Talked to former ERASMUS-students who were in Vienna	8.1	5
Total	100	62

Question 5: What do/did you expect from your stay abroad?

Table 7: Expectations

Expectations concerning your stay abroad		
Category	Percent	Number
Cultural & Social Aspects	37.8	31
Improve communication & language skills	34.1	28
New input/experiences for study-field	23.2	19
Other answers	4.9	4
Total	100	82

Cultural and social expectations make up 37.8% of the statements, whereas 34.1% of the answers mention the improvement of communication and language skills. Expectations concerning the study-field such as new input, practical and teaching experience add up to 23.2% of all statements (cf. table 7).

Question 6: Who takes care of the ERASMUS-students?

Table 8: Contact persons for the ERASMUS-students

Who takes care of the ERASMUS-students?		
Category	Percent	Number
International office/coordinator of PH Wien	63.2	43
Tutors of PH Wien	17.6	12
Home institution	11.8	8
Other ERASMUS-students	5.9	4
International ERASMUS-student network	1.5	1
Total	100	68

Most statements, namely 63.2%, - as shown in table 8 - belong to the category 'international office/coordinator of PH Wien'. 17.6% of all answers name the tutors of PH Wien as contact person and 11.8% the home institution of the international students. The category 'other ERASMUS-students' is represented by 5.9% of the statements and the international ERASMUS-student network by 1.5%.

Question 7: Where do/did you get support at the beginning of and during your stay?

Table 9 shows that 43.4% of all statements belong to the category 'international office/coordinator of PH Wien'. 28.9% of the answers name other ERASMUS-students as supporters and 23.7% the tutors of PH Wien. The category 'parents/family/friends' is represented with 2.6%, the international ERASMUS-student network with 1.3%.

Table 9: Support for ERASMUS-students

Support at the beginning/during your stay		
Category	Percent	Number
International office/coordinator of PH Wien	43.4	33
Other ERASMUS-students	28.9	22
Tutors of PH Wien	23.7	18
Parents/friends/family	2.6	2
International ERASMUS-student network	1.3	1
Total	100	76

Question 8: Do/did you have problems concerning your language skills?

As shown in table 10, 65.3% statements relate to language problems with German, this means problems with understanding, writing and speaking the foreign language. 28.6% of the statements belong to the category 'no problems'.

Table 10: Problems with language

Problems with language		
Category	Percent	Number
Problems with German language	65.3	32
No problems		14
Not enough possibilities to speak English in Vienna		2
Other answers		1
Total		49

Question 9: How would you describe the integration of ERASMUS-students into university life?

Table 11: Integration

Integration into university life		
Category	Percent	Number
Integration is good	52.9	27
Integration is difficult	31.4	16
Only ERASMUS-students form groups of their own	15.7	8
Total	100	51

Table 11 shows that more than half of the answers (52.9%) give a positive description/image of integration. 31.4% of the statements describe difficult aspects of integration, such as unfriendly Austrians, no socializing of ERASMUS-students and Austrian students or no integration between ERASMUS-students. 15.7% answers represent the category that ERASMUS-students form groups of their own.

Question 10: Was it easy or difficult to choose your courses?

63.8% of the statements describe the difficulties with selecting courses, e.g. ‘it was difficult because there were a lot of courses’, ‘I didn’t know what to choose’, ‘I didn’t know the contents of the courses’, ‘many courses were at the same time’, ‘the courses I would need, don’t fit my studies’, ‘I didn’t know PH-Online’ etc.

36.2% of the students’ statements mentioned that it was easy to select the courses when they got the help of tutors and/or the international coordinator (cf. table 12).

Table 12: Selection of the courses

Description of the courses-selection		
Category	Percent	Number
It was difficult	63.8	30
It was easy	36.2	17
Total	100	47

Question 13: If you had teaching experience, how would you describe your teaching practice in another country?

Table 13: Teaching practice experience

Teaching Practice		
Category	Percent	Number
Positive	55	22
Different from home	42.5	17
Difficult	2.5	1
Total	100	40

The category ‘positive aspects’ concerning teaching practice comprises 55% of the statements such as to learn a lot, helpful teachers, friendly and communicative atmosphere, enjoying working with children.

42.5% of the statements belong to the category ‘different from home’, which describes the different teaching methodology, school-system and pedagogical thoughts. One student describes teaching practice as difficult because of language problems (cf. table 13).

Question 16: Did you get in contact with our resident students and/or ERASMUS-students? Did you make friends?

Table 14: Contact and/or friends

Teaching Practice		
Category	Percent	Number
Contact with ERASMUS-students	50.6	41
Friends with ERASMUS-students	35.8	29
No contact with local students	8.6	7
Contact with local students	4.9	4
Total	100	81

50.6% of the answers – as listed in table 14 - belong to the category ‘contact with ERASMUS-students’ and 35.8% to the category ‘friends with ERASMUS-students’. 8.6% of the statements describe the category ‘no contact with resident students’ and only 4.9% describe contact with resident student.

Question 17: Describe the most important insights you could gain during your stay abroad.

Table 15: The most important insights

Insights concerning...		
Category	Percent	Number
Lifestyle/culture/people	63.5	47
Improvement of language & communication skills	21.6	16
Studies & teaching skills	14.9	11
Total	100	74

63.5% of the statements were about experiences concerning Austrian/Viennese lifestyle, culture and people, such as getting to know habits, getting into contact with other nationalities, etc.

21.6% of the statements describe improvements of language and communication skills. 14.9% of the answers belong to the category ‘new experiences concerning studies and teachings skills’ which means e.g. international learning, get to know the Austrian education system or new teaching practice methods (cf. table 15).

Question 18: In which areas do/did you have difficulties/problems during your stay?

Table 16 shows that 42.6% of the statements belong to the category ‘no problems/difficulties’. 19.1% answers describe language problems and 12.8% problems concerning administrative and accommodation matters. 8.5% of the statements are part of problems concerning study things such as selecting courses and seminars. 8.5% of the answers belong to problems with cultural and social aspects.

Table 16: Problems/difficulties

Problems/difficulties		
Category	Percent	Number
No problems/difficulties	42.6	20
Languages skills	19.1	9
Administrative & accommodation matters	12.8	6
Study things	8.5	4
Cultural and social aspects	8.5	4
Other answers	8.5	4
Total	100	47

Question 19: Would you like to stay here for another semester? Please explain why yes or no.

71.4% of the statements belong to the answer 'yes' whereof 46.9% of the answers explain their wish to stay here another semester because of the city, culture, people and lifestyle and 24.5% because of positive effects on their study and language skills.

28.6% of the statements belong to the answer 'no' whereof 18.4% belong to the category 'have to finish my studies at home', 8.2% 'miss my family/home/friends' and 2.0% 'want to get to know another country' (cf. table 17).

Table 17: Wish of staying here another semester

Stay here another semester?		
Category	Percent	Number
Yes, because of city/culture/people/lifestyle	46.9	23
Yes, good for my study/language skills	24.5	12
No, have to finish my studies at home	18.4	9
No, miss my family/home/friends	8.2	4
No, want to get to know another country	2	1
Total	100	49

Question 20: Can you suggest some improvement concerning ERASMUS-student mobility? If yes, which one(s)?

Table 18: Improvement

Improvements		
Category	Percent	Number
More integration/contact to Austrian students	36.8	7
No improvement	31.6	6
Better study conditions for international students	21.1	4
Better financial conditions	10.5	2

Total	100	19
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36.8 % of all statements suggest more integration and contact to Austrian students. 31.6% belong to the category 'no improvement'. 21.1% of the statements suggest better study conditions such as easier selection of the courses, the German course should start earlier, or PH-online should be in English. 10.5% of the suggestions for improvement refer to financial matters.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to take a closer look at the perceptions, experiences and problems of ERASMUS-students at the University of Teacher Education Vienna (PH Wien).

A summary of the findings, as listed above, shows that the main motives to go for an ERASMUS semester are cultural and social aspects and the aspect of learning a language and improving foreign language skills. The motives, why ERASMUS-students choose Austria/Vienna as their favourite international destination, are in about half of all answers the image of Austria/Vienna and its cultural aspects. One third of the motives are study reasons.

Information provision and preparation for the period abroad shows a high rate of non-satisfaction with the information provided by the home universities, which means not enough or no information. When information was given, then students got it primarily from the international office and/or the international coordinator. Preparation/orientation courses, which include 3-day orientation courses, ERASMUS meetings and/or information meetings, constitute still only a small percentage of preparation provision for the students.

Students prepared themselves for their stay abroad primarily by searching information about the country, city and university through the internet, books and travel guides or by going to the international office to collect information and information sheets. However a considerable 20% of the students didn't prepare themselves in any way for their stay abroad.

Students expect from their stay in a foreign country new cultural and social aspects, the enrichment of communication and language skills as well as new input for their study-field and for teaching practice.

The main contact persons for international students are the international coordinators and/or staff from the international office of PH Wien. Besides, tutors of PH Wien are welcome and helpful contact persons for incoming students.

If students need support, they mainly receive it from the international office or the coordinator of PH Wien. Other ERASMUS-students and the tutors of PH Wien are also named as supporting people.

The integration of the incoming students into university life shows in more than half of the answers a positive description/image. However, one third of the statements describe also the difficult aspects of integration, such as unfriendly Austrians, no socializing of ERASMUS-students and Austrian students, or no integration into the ERASMUS-student group/s.

Contact and friends with others were primarily experienced between ERASMUS-students. Contact with resident student was only described by a very small number of ERASMUS-students.

Experiences concerning teaching practice were in more than 50% positive, such as positive learning and practice experiences, supportive teachers and a friendly and communicative working-atmosphere. Differences compared to the home-university have been quite evident such as the different teaching methodology, school-system and pedagogical concepts.

The majority of experiences ERASMUS-students could gain during their stay abroad were experiences with Austrian/Viennese lifestyle and culture but also improvements of language and communication skills.

The wish to stay another semester in Vienna results from positive experiences of the city, culture, people, lifestyle and positive effects on students' study and language skills. Students leave after one semester because they have to finish their studies at home, miss their families, home and friends or would like to get to know another country.

Considerable problems occurred on the one hand concerning the German language, which means problems with understanding, writing and speaking the foreign language; on the other hand difficulties occurred when selecting courses because of having insufficient information about course contents or the PH-online system. Also because many courses were at the same time, didn't fit to ERASMUS-students' studies or did not fit to individual learning agreements, which can cause problems of academic recognition. With the help of tutors and/or the international coordinator it was easier for them to find suitable courses. Furthermore problems were evident concerning administrative and accommodation matters.

ERASMUS-students suggested improvement concerning social integration, as e.g. better contacts with Austrian students as well as better study conditions and financial conditions.

To sum up, based on our research we would recommend minimal information provision by the home-institution as well as a better preparation of the ERASMUS-students of what to expect from the host-institution. Moreover, specific language skills and proficiency in the language of instruction at the host institution or at least preparation for. The initiation and development of minimal standards concerning the recognition of the academic workload as well as better financial support are also prerequisites for a successful stay abroad.

Last year's emphasis was on comparing the experiences of international office staff concerning ERASMUS-student mobility. The aim of this year's study was to verify the results of recent European studies concerning the topic and to render valid inputs for future discussion. We are thinking of developing a kind of check-list for student mobility which differentiates the tasks of home-institution, host-institution and student before starting the ERASMUS semester/year to diminish the obstacles for successful student mobility. This could be a good opportunity to use the CiCe network with its intercultural experience and expertise.

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