The ERASMUS Phenomenon – Symbol of a New European Generation?
In 2012 the ERASMUS programme celebrated its 25th anniversary. During its quarter century of existence it has turned into one of the most visible and popular initiatives of the European Union (EU). The scale of the programme is doubtlessly impressive: Having started in 1987 with the small number of 3244 students from 11 countries, today ERASMUS enables around 230,000 students per year to spend three to twelve months abroad in order “to pursue enriching learning experiences in other countries”. By now, close to three million students from more than 4000 higher education institutions all over Europe have participated in ERASMUS, making the programme “the best-known and largest exchange programme in the world” (European Union 2012: 8), as the EU itself emphasises.

Despite the programme’s obvious success, however, it should not be overlooked that ERASMUS did not meet all its goals. Indeed there have been – and still are – certain issues that have rightly been criticised. Mainly due to a rather small budget, from the very beginning the number of students participating in the programme has been much lower than the European Commission had initially set as the target (see e.g. Feyen in this volume). In 2012, around 4% of all students in the 33 participating countries received an ERASMUS grant during their studies, while the total annual budget amounts to over 450 million euro. Neither can this number of 4% be considered as satisfying according to the EU’s own goals, nor is the budget sufficient in order to put the programme on a broader scale and make it open to all students regardless of their financial background. As Heger (this

---

5. Besides the EU Member States, these are the other countries belonging to the European Economic Area (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) as well as Switzerland and the EU candidate countries Croatia and Turkey. Furthermore, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is currently participating under the ‘preparatory measures phase’. See <http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/national_en.htm> (accessed 05.12.2012).
volume) states, ERASMUS is not “a programme for everyone”. And even the rather small current budget seems to be not too assured: In early October 2012 the media all over Europe came up with headlines saying that the EU budget was missing money for programmes such as ERASMUS. Financial issues as well as the programme’s accessibility – especially to students from socially disadvantaged groups – are among the challenges that remain for ERASMUS to face in the future. Further challenges often indicated are the recognition of academic achievements abroad, the rather low intensity of contacts of ERASMUS students with local students, and problems with information provision.

Nevertheless, taking the development of the past 25 years into account, there is no doubt that, so far, ERASMUS has had an increasing impact on the cooperation of higher education institutions all over Europe (even beyond the EU) and on the mobility of European students. Besides the impressive quantitative scale, it has to be mentioned that the programme’s success led to – or at least immensely supported – the Bologna Process, the establishment of the ‘European Credit Transfer System’ (ECTS), an internationalisation of education and a general improvement of the higher education system across Europe (cf. European Union 2012: 6). Originally established as an independent programme, ERASMUS was later incorporated into the Socrates programme (1995) and the Lifelong Learning programme (2007). From 2014 on, it will be part of the Erasmus for All programme for which its name was taken – a sign of the success of ERASMUS as a brand.

The ERASMUS programme is named after the Dutch humanist and philosopher Erasmus Desiderius (1465-1536), better known as Erasmus of Rotterdam, who “lived and worked in several parts of Europe, in quest of the knowledge, experience and insights which only such contacts with other countries could bring”7, as the European Commission puts it on its official website. At the same time, ERASMUS is an acronym and stands for ‘EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students’8. Referring to Erasmus’ life as an international scholar, the European Commission describes the main aims behind its flagship programme as follows:

Many studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students’ lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen. In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases the students’ employability and job prospects.9

---

Not only many employers, but also the European Union itself highly values an experience abroad as ERASMUS can provide, because it “contributes to enriching students’ academic knowledge and professional competences, supports their personal development, forges a European identity and helps to make the mobility of people during all their lifetime – which is a central part of the European project – a reality” (European Union 2012: 6). The EU stresses the importance of the possible impact of the ERASMUS programme on the young Europeans’ perceptions of the European Union and the integration process. As Jacques Delors, the former President of the European Commission who was in office when ERASMUS was prepared and launched in 1987, summarised in 2012:

The undeniable success of the Erasmus programme has made a crucial contribution to creating the ‘Europe of citizens’ we strive for – and for which so much remains to be done.

(European Union 2012: 5)

Although best known for providing university students the opportunity to spend one or two exchange semesters abroad at one of the universities participating in the programme, ERASMUS also offers other mobility activities such as university staff exchange, student mobility placements (internships in companies or organisations abroad) or teaching opportunities for business staff at higher education institutions. This is definitely worth mentioning, since a total of 300,000 staff exchanges have been supported during the past 15 years. Concerning the placements, a total number of 125,000 students did an internship abroad between 2007 and 2011.

However, ERASMUS is still most commonly regarded as a programme for student exchange, and as such – by now being older than the average ERASMUS student – it has meanwhile turned into much more than just a simple political initiative or educational opportunity: it’s a brand and a symbol. Phrases like “I am ERASMUS” have become a dictum all over Europe – as revealed by a simple search on the internet. Over the years, European student organisations like the Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l’Europe (AEGEE) or the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) have been growing alongside ERASMUS while in return supporting it and its students as well as contributing to the further development of the programme. ESN was actually founded in response to the existence of the programme when former ERASMUS students gathered for a European Commission’s evaluation meeting back in January 1989 and decided to “try to set up a European association of ERASMUS students” (as cited in Feyen 2008: 60). AEGEE, on the other hand, played a part in the establishment of ERASMUS in 1987 (see Feyen in this volume). At the cultural level, films like “L’Auberge

Espagnole”\(^{12}\) have achieved cult status among internationally-minded students, and have thus contributed to building up legends around the ERASMUS programme. Additionally, online communities and tools have made it much easier for ERASMUS students to get and stay in touch with each other (see Roguski in this volume).

Taking all this into account, it is no wonder that journalists, social scientists and political actors have coined the term ‘Generation ERASMUS’\(^{13}\). But, while the term itself can be regarded as already quite established in the public perception, it has hardly ever been specified and thus requires more reflection. Does such a ‘Generation ERASMUS’ exist at all? If so, who is part of it: only (former) ERASMUS students, or, beyond that, a larger group of young Europeans? What does the programme stand for? What impact does it have on young Europeans? What does ERASMUS mean to today’s students? Does it represent a new generation of Europeans, symbolising their specific experiences, values and common challenges?

It is the above mentioned developments and the interest in these questions that led us to compile this academic book. It initially started as a project of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in Germany under the supervision of Benjamin Feyen, then President of the German branch of this organisation. The project soon crossed Germany’s borders and turned into something multinational, with contributors from different countries like Poland, Belgium, Italy, the UK and Sweden, including co-editor Ewa Krzaklewska from Poland who was previously Vice President of ESN International.

This volume, entitled “The ERASMUS Phenomenon – Symbol of a New European Generation?” or, due to its origins, “Das ERASMUS-Phänomen – Symbol einer neuen europäischen Generation?” in German, consists of thirteen articles, written by students who personally experienced ERASMUS before approaching this topic from a scientific point of view. Some of the research has been done especially for this book, while other articles are based on papers or theses that their authors had originally written as part of their studies and later reworked for this publication. As its title suggests, this book seeks to understand the ERASMUS programme as such, the experiences of ERASMUS students, but it also aims to go a bit beyond, considering the meaning of ERASMUS for young European students and eventually the overall impact of the programme.

The featured articles are not only written in two different languages (English and German), but they also have their academic roots in different disciplines: Sociology, Psychology, Communication Science, History and Political Science.

---


\(^{13}\) See e.g. Picht 2004; DAAD 2007; Cappé 2010; Wilson 2011.
Thus, their authors have very diverging approaches to the subject of the research, as well as different methodologies (of both quantitative and qualitative character).

This book is divided into three sub-parts. The first part – ‘The ERASMUS Policy’ – deals with the political background and impact of the programme. The second part – ‘The ERASMUS Experience’ – takes a closer look at the exchange semester itself and the experiences of the students while living abroad. The third part – ‘The ERASMUS Identity’ – analyses the impact of these experiences on the identification of young students with Europe.

Part I: The ERASMUS Policy

In the first part of this book, we approach the political and societal background of the ERASMUS programme. Benjamin Feyen starts off with his article The Making of a Success Story: The Creation of the ERASMUS Programme in the Historical Context, providing a trip back into the 1980s when the programme was set up and launched. His historical approach gives an insight in the origins of ERASMUS and takes a closer look at several political challenges that were connected to the start of the programme in 1987.

Then, in her article Learning For Life? The New Role of the ERASMUS Programme in the Knowledge Society, Ulrike Klose aims to elaborate on the meaning of the ERASMUS programme for educational policy after having been implemented in the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission in 2007. She shows that, from that moment on, ERASMUS has been caught between two discourses: the culture-based concept of ‘Europeanising’ education and thus helping the emergence of a European identity and ‘demos’, and, on the other side, the ‘knowledge-based society’ and ‘lifelong learning’.

Putting it on the policy level, Hannah-Kristin Elenschneider then presents Das ERASMUS-Programm: Symbol einer europäisch geprägten Auswärtigen Kultur- und Bildungspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland? [The ERASMUS Programme: Symbol of a European-shaped Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy of the Federal Republic of Germany?]. She analyses the role that ERASMUS plays (or rather: does not play) for the German federal government as an academic exchange programme with impact on political and economic relations.

Afterwards, Friedrich Heger in his article ERASMUS – for All? Structural Challenges of the EU’s Exchange Programme looks at the structural organisation of ERASMUS. He identifies two reasons why some groups might find it difficult to participate in the programme: intra- and international differences regarding selection criteria and funding of mobility. He suggests that these inequalities may
reduce the likelihood of participation in ERASMUS for certain groups of students.

**Part II: The ERASMUS Experience**

The second part of the book analyses specific student experiences abroad. In her article *ERASMUS Students between Youth and Adulthood: Analysis of the Biographical Experience*, Ewa Krzaklewska explains why an ERASMUS stay abroad fulfils the expectations of young people so well. She shows how ERASMUS fits into contemporary discourses around youth and adulthood: it creates an opportunity for students to ‘be young’ – to have fun, entertain and explore, and it ‘proves that they are adults’ – able to live independently, solving problems on their own, and getting prepared for future employment.

Johanna Damerau in her article *Mit Händen und Füßen durch das Leben: ERASMUS-Studenten und ihre (nonverbale) interkulturelle Kommunikation* [With Hands and Feet through Life: ERASMUS Students and their (non-verbal) Intercultural Communication] deals with culture as an orientation frame for communication competence. Focusing on greeting sequences that contain so-called ‘intercultural hot spots’, she explains ERASMUS students’ behaviour behind. She notes that being able to question own behaviours and communicative politeness is becoming a future key economic competence – being internationally competent in communication.

Ewa Krzaklewska and Paulina Skórska continue the analysis of the intercultural encounters in their article *Culture Shock during ERASMUS Exchange – Determinants, Processes, Prevention*. They look at the culture shock from the cognitive perspective and analytically distinguish three dimensions of culture shock: psychological, socio-cultural and physical. They indicate that securing easy access to information about the procedures and ways of doing things in a foreign country is the best way to moderate the stress level of the exchange students in all three dimensions.

Social ERASMUS? Active Citizenship among Exchange Students by Larissa Wood is the last article in this section. The author touches upon the relatively new topic as far as studies of ERASMUS are concerned: active citizenship. She indicates that active citizenship decreases during the exchange and analyses the barriers that may hinder the manifestation of active citizenship of the ERASMUS students.
Part III: The ERASMUS Identity

The last part of the book tackles questions of identity. Doubtlessly, a stay abroad has a strong impact on a young student. But does he or she turn into a member of a ‘Generation ERASMUS’ (if there is such a thing) and become a supporter of the European Union? Gioia Ambrosi seeks to find out more about *The Influence of the ERASMUS Programme on Strengthening a European Identity*. Therefore she presents case studies of Spanish and British ERASMUS students and indicates the potential of ERASMUS for fostering identification with Europe. Her respondents represent multiple and fluid identities, and stress the impact of personal ties created with other peers and the recognition of common values in their identification with Europe.

Following the same track, Christof Van Mol presents his qualitative research results in the article entitled *ERASMUS Student Mobility and the Discovery of New European Horizons*. He indicates that, after their stay abroad, students start to perceive Europe not only as a political entity (as the European Union) but as a community of citizens. Still, he indicates some regional differences, especially as far as the creation of supranational identification is concerned.

Agnieszka Roguski deals with ERASMUS as an online phenomenon: „Ich bin ERASMUS“ – *Identitätsschöpfung durch die virtuelle Konstanz einer visuellen Gemeinschaft?* [“I am ERASMUS” – *The Creation of an Identity through the Virtual Constancy of a Visual Community*]. Her article sets the exchange programme into context with the social network Facebook. She shows how the so-called ‘ERASMUS experience’ continues to thrive in a virtual environment after ERASMUS students have returned home.

Then, Jennifer Striebeck deals with future developments of ERASMUS and European Union policies in her article *A Matter of Belonging and Trust: The Creation of a European Identity through the ERASMUS Programme*?. She examines the EU’s strategies to construct a European identity among its citizens and provides insight into the complexity and difficulties of this intention. The article answers the question as to whether the aim of the ERASMUS programme has shifted from merely education policy towards identity policy.

Finally, Seweryn Krupnik and Ewa Krzaklewska in *Researching the Impact of ERASMUS on European Identification – Proposal for a Conceptual Framework* describe specific experiences before, during and after the stay that differentiate ERASMUS from other exchange programmes and that possibly have an impact on identification with Europe. They propose a conceptual framework for analysing how ERASMUS stays impact students’ identification with Europe using analytical sociology tools.
In our conclusion ‘Generation ERASMUS’ – The New Europeans? A Reflection, we then analyse the major findings of the previous articles. Our aim is to stimulate the debate on the meaning of ERASMUS for young Europeans and its role in dealing with new challenges that Europe is facing today. We believe that this volume can provide an inspiring background for future discussions on the ERASMUS programme and its possible developments. Observed from different academic perspectives, ERASMUS can be considered as a mirror of educational, economic, political and societal processes. We hope that the debates initiated or taken up by the authors of the following articles will inspire the readers to see a place and role of ERASMUS in the future of a Europe that is facing new and often dramatic challenges. The fact that the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2012 can also be taken as a signal for the ERASMUS programme and its broad potentials.

The editors wish to thank the authors who have contributed their very interesting articles and a lot of patience to this volume, and all other students who handed in an abstract. We thank everybody at Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) who was involved in supporting our project, especially Siegbert Wuttig, Markus Symmank, Barbara Ramírez Jaimes and Bettina Morhard. We thank Fred Dervin for inviting us to contribute to his book series “Education beyond Borders” and for his overall support. We thank the reviewers for their valuable work. We thank Ute Winkelkötter from Peter Lang Verlag for guiding us through the long and not always easy process of successfully publishing a book, as well as everybody involved in the production process, especially Anja Müller. We thank Wendy Jane Jones for checking the English. Furthermore we thank the following people who were all concerned with our project in some way: Dörthe Behnke, Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Natascha Sander, Kristin Simon, Ulrich Teichler, and our families.

References


In our conclusion ‘Generation ERASMUS’ – The New Europeans? A Reflection, we then analyse the major findings of the previous articles. Our aim is to stimulate the debate on the meaning of ERASMUS for young Europeans and its role in dealing with new challenges that Europe is facing today. We believe that this volume can provide an inspiring background for future discussions on the ERASMUS programme and its possible developments. Observed from different academic perspectives, ERASMUS can be considered as a mirror of educational, economic, political and societal processes. We hope that the debates initiated or taken up by the authors of the following articles will inspire the readers to see a place and role of ERASMUS in the future of a Europe that is facing new and often dramatic challenges. The fact that the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2012 can also be taken as a signal for the ERASMUS programme and its broad potentials.

The editors wish to thank the authors who have contributed their very interesting articles and a lot of patience to this volume, and all other students who handed in an abstract. We thank everybody at Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) who was involved in supporting our project, especially Siegbert Wuttig, Markus Symmank, Barbara Ramírez Jaimes and Bettina Morhard. We thank Fred Dervin for inviting us to contribute to his book series "Education beyond Borders" and for his overall support. We thank the reviewers for their valuable work. We thank Ute Winkelkötter from Peter Lang Verlag for guiding us through the long and not always easy process of successfully publishing a book, as well as everybody involved in the production process, especially Anja Müller. We thank Wendy Jane Jones for checking the English. Furthermore we thank the following people who were all concerned with our project in some way: Dörthe Behnke, Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Natascha Sander, Kristin Simon, Ulrich Teichler, and our families.

References