

## **Erasmus Plus and the Bologna Process**

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### **Abstract**

The Erasmus+ Program has always been an essential part of the Bologna Process. Its objective is to enable European and International students in general to spend time abroad. The program is embedded within the Bologna Process which aims at greater comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications. For over 30 years now Erasmus has been sending millions of students in foreign countries and their universities. The aim of the paper is to evaluate the performance of the universities to host the foreign students and fulfil their tasks within the program. Data is based on student's reports on their experience during their Erasmus time. The paper results in policy recommendations for European universities regarding strategies to host Erasmus students more effectively. The findings show that first of all help regarding finding an accommodation is a crucial point. Secondly the proper support of exchange students demands a lot of human resources. Another important aspect is a broad offer in courses held in English.

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## Introduction

The Erasmus Program can be described as one of the most successful European projects. Nonetheless it does not seem to be of core interest within the higher education research field. The existing research focuses mostly on the connection and influence of this exchange program on European identity (see inter alia Jacobone et al. 2015; Feyen/Krzaklewska 2013; Oborune 2013; Otero 2008; Wilson 2011). This seems reasonable, since one of the main ideas behind establishing this program was the idea of creating a European identity among young European citizens (van Mol 2013:164).

For almost 20 years now, the European student's mobility is attached to the Bologna Process. In the Bologna Declaration of 1999 mobility is prominently mentioned as one of the core features of the process (European Ministers of Education 1999). But the institution of Europe-wide student exchanges within the European Community is older. It was first established 1987, thus even before the establishment of the European Union in 1992. The name is a backronym meaning "ERoUropean Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students" and is reminiscent of the Dutch philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam (Rodríguez et al. 2010).

Over the past 30 years the program has gone through some fundamental changes and experienced a substantial extension. The most recent reform was the launch of the so-called Erasmus+ Program. Erasmus+ does not only include mobility programs for students but promotes exchange possibilities for all types of individuals or even organisations. Furthermore, it is not only focused on higher education but education in a broader sense. It operates under the slogan of supporting "education, training, youth and sport in Europe" and is the merge of several prior programs (European Commission 2019a). One of its objectives underlined next to strengthening a European identity is to enhance the chances for young Europeans to entrench themselves on the international job-market (Erasmus+ 2019).

Erasmus+ is fixed for a period of 2014 to 2020 and has an overall budget of 14.7 billion Euro. It includes grants and funding possibilities for about 3 million individuals and several other projects. Among individual grants the biggest percentage is used for the student exchange program. The Erasmus+ grants for student mobility are scaled among three country categories so that students going into countries with higher average costs for living receive more money (European Commission 2018).

Due to its attachment to the Bologna Process the Erasmus+ Program is one of the strongest institutionalized exchange programs worldwide, which is also noticeable in the ECTS-System (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). This system standardizes student workload and determines one academic year with 60 ECTS points among which 1 point should be equivalent with 30 hours of work. ECTS is an important tool within the European exchange system. It harmonizes national higher education systems and thus renders exchanges more attractive to students, because they can more easily integrate the time abroad into their ordinary study-plan<sup>1</sup> (European Commission 2019b).

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<sup>1</sup> Within the course of the Erasmus mobility, the exchange students have to fill in a "Learning Agreement" before their semester abroad, where they already confirm with their sending and their receiving university

As mentioned before, the Erasmus Program does not seem to be of core interest within political science. Apart from studies concerning European identity research under this topic is rather the exception. The Erasmus Program works within the very specific context of the European Union. The EU context always renders political subjects in a certain way unique, which always makes political research in this area more complex, due to the lack of comparability. Thus, the Erasmus Program also is somehow unique. There can hardly be found a program, which has a comparable scale of institutionalization. Nonetheless, it seems to be reasonable regarding its success and growth over the past decades to evaluate it and test, if Erasmus could be taken as a role-model for other regions<sup>2</sup>. And if so, what needs to be done, to participate effectively in such a program as a university? Concerning this question, the paper focus on the tasks universities have to fulfil as a host when receiving Erasmus students from abroad.

Internationalization appears to be of growing importance for universities worldwide. First of all every university has an genuine interest in international knowledge exchange. But the degree of internationalization of a university measured in numbers of incoming students also is an important indicator of the performance of faculties. This again is an important factor for generating budget. Being a good host for international students thus should be an aim for every university.

To answer this research question a three-step analysis was carried out. In a first step, survey data was analysed. This data was gathered from Erasmus+ students after their stay at a foreign university. Every Erasmus+ student is obliged to fill in a questionnaire after his or her mobility. This survey contents questions about different aspects of their stay, including ratings of various issues and their overall satisfaction with their exchange. The data used here was conducted in 2016. The data refers to international incoming students to Germany in this period<sup>3</sup>.

The aim of this first step was to get insight which dimensions of their stay the students considered to be problematic and were seen in a rather negative way. These aspects were considered to picture starting points for improvement within the Erasmus+ program and for recommendations to the universities. Additionally, special attention was paid to the reasons why students chose a certain university. This part seems to be decisive when talking about what universities need to guarantee when they want to be chosen by exchange students.

In a second step, the statistical insights were mirrored in a qualitative way. This was done by interviews with former Erasmus students<sup>4</sup>. Within the selection of interview partners who could display their personal Erasmus experience, we aimed at a systematic variation of different fields of study and host countries. We use the country as a proxy for accommodation, as housing prices differ strongly within European countries<sup>5</sup>. Within the

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which classes they will attend. After the mobility these classes will then be acknowledged within their normal study plan with the exact amount of ECTS-points achieved (European Commission 2019b).

<sup>2</sup> This seems to be especially true regarding the fact that Erasmus+ will soon end and a reformed version of the program will be launched (European Commission 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Conducted 2016: n=21601. Sending countries: Belgium, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Bulgaria, Spain, Luxembourg, Romania, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Slovenia, Denmark, Croatia, Malta, Slovakia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Finland, Estonia, Austria, Sweden, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Conducted were 10 interviews with students from different study fields who reported their experience from Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Poland, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy and Turkey.

<sup>5</sup> The interviews confirmed this relationship.

interviews on the one hand the overall experience was investigated, and on the other hand special attention was paid to the crucial points prior detected by the statistical analysis. As a last step the administrative perspective was captured, also by interviews. Several administrative actors in different positions were interviewed to gain a vast perspective<sup>6</sup>. Concerning the selection of administrative actors to interview it was attempted to select persons responsible for different task of the organization of exchange programs within universities. These positions included on the one side the general administrative level, and on the other side the academic administrative part. Thereby it was possible to catch a broad perspective on the different tasks and levels within universities attached to exchange programs. To detect the specific advantages and disadvantages of the Erasmus+ Program, interviews were also conducted with actors being responsible for Erasmus and non-Erasmus exchanges.

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<sup>6</sup> In total 9 interviews at Technical University Darmstadt in three different departments were conducted.

## Statistical analysis

The first impression you gain looking at the statistical analysis, is that the overall conclusion of all the Erasmus students is very positive. A large majority of students reports mostly positive about their Erasmus experience and has only a few critical remarks. This insight can be drawn looking at all different surveys over time and at the interview data as well<sup>7</sup>. Thus, as a first general finding we can state is, that the Erasmus Program should be considered a success and a possible role model. As a consequence of this positive response behaviour, subsequently we will identify the most negative statements of the Erasmus+ students in order to generate suggestions of improvement. The following table shows the assessment of different aspects of mobility by the students.

Figure 1: Negative Ratings of mobility aspects by incoming Erasmus students<sup>8</sup>

Category	Percentage
Help with problems	6.4 %
Quality of content of courses	5.2 %
Teaching methods	7.4 %
<b>Learning support</b>	<b>9.6 %</b>
<b>Administrative Support Arrangements</b>	<b>9.5 %</b>
<b>Academic Mentoring</b>	<b>10.3 %</b>
<b>Support from Student Organizations</b>	<b>8.3 %</b>
Classrooms	3.2 %
Study rooms, Labs etc.	5.4 %
Libraries	4.7 %
<b>Access to PCs</b>	<b>8.5 %</b>
Access to Internet	5.7 %
Cafeteria/Canteen	5.1 %
<b>Accommodation</b>	<b>17.8 %</b>

Source: *Questionnaire 2016 incoming students.*

The figure shows, that there are very few complaints the Erasmus students had to report after their mobility. The only remarkable point is “accommodation”. About 18 percent of the students answering the question about how satisfied they were with their accommodation and the help they received by finding it, were “rather” or “very dissatisfied” with it. The question of finding an accommodation seems to be a crucial issue within the Erasmus+ program.

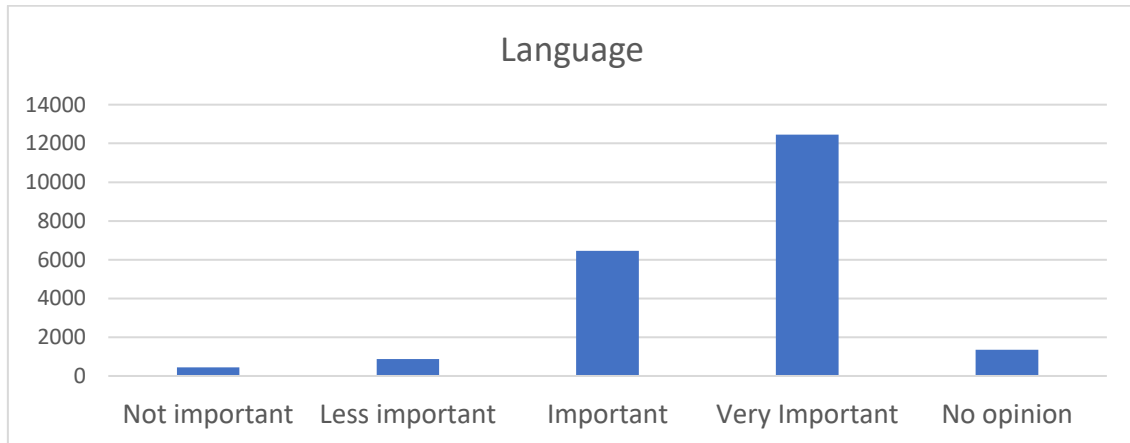
Even if other features do not show similar negative assessment the issues of learning support, academic mentoring, help with administrative questions, support of student organizations and some points of technical infrastructure seem to be mentionable as well.

<sup>7</sup> Which will be further displayed in a latter section.

<sup>8</sup> Table shows aggregated negative ratings (“very dissatisfied”, “rather dissatisfied”/ “poor”; “very poor”) of the students. Cleared out: “non applicables”.

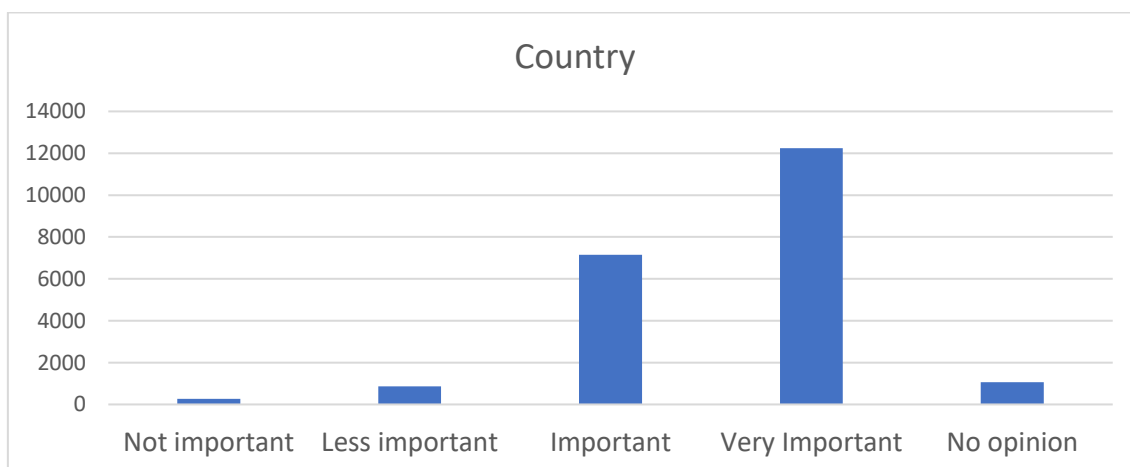
Another section interesting for this research concerns motives why students chose a certain university for exchange. Here, two factors showed a high significance: country and language.

Figure 2: Importance of “Language” for choosing a certain university



Source: *Questionnaire 2016 incoming.*

Figure 3: Importance of “Country” for choosing a certain university



Source: *Questionnaire 2016 incoming.*

Regarding the task of creating a manual for universities concerning what to do when receiving students from abroad, this seems at first sight rather neglectable. Especially the factor of “country” is nothing universities have influence on. But the factor of “language” needs to be treated carefully as it is not specified within the questionnaires, if it concerns the native language of the country or if it might include as well the idea of improving English.

The examination of the survey clearly depicted some issues that seem to be interesting for further investigation. Firstly, the question of accommodation seems to be crucial. Secondly, the issue of learning support, academic mentoring, help with administrative questions, support from student organizations and some issues of technical infrastructure should be verified within the interviews with students, to see whether universities should pay special attention to them in order to perform better. Accordingly, the motivations for

going abroad as well as the reasons why choosing a certain institution were also addressed within the interviews.

Furthermore, the students were asked to give a general impression on their Erasmus experience to mirror the overall positive impression the survey gives. and what they would recommend universities to guarantee, when accommodating foreign students. In a last step, students were given the possibilities to comment on factors that might not be covered within the official questionnaires.

## Issue of Accommodation

It was already mentioned that the issue of accommodation differs among countries. This could be displayed in the interviews with students and administrative actors. Those students going to Northern parts of Europe<sup>9</sup> reported that they were very satisfied with the quality and location of their accommodation. Plus, all these students gained sufficiently support from the receiving universities by finding it. In general, they filled in an application form for a student's dorm beforehand and were thereby guaranteed a spot there. The student residences mostly offered shared flats, where they lived with other Erasmus students. However, all of the interviewees underlined the high prizes of these accommodations as for them the Erasmus grant only covered a little percentage of their monthly rent. It is also important to mention that these interviewees also reported high costs of living in general apart from rent. They all confirmed that a private accommodation would not have been affordable, even if they had wished for that.

The picture looks different for students spending time abroad in Southern parts of Europe<sup>10</sup>. Students who spend a certain time in the South reported about affordable accommodation that were of a much lower standard compared to the experience of Erasmus students in Northern countries. Additionally, these students did not receive any support by finding an accommodation. They had to find private, shared apartments where they lived with students originally from the host city, not exclusively with other Erasmus students. This fact was mostly appreciated by the Erasmus students and regretted by those only living with other Erasmus students. Most of the students not sharing their apartments with locals experienced the so-called "Erasmus bubble", which means, that it can be difficult for exchange students to come into close contact to natives.

Nevertheless, it must be shortly noticed that despite the disadvantages of the "Erasmus-bubble" nearly all the students underlined as well, that the contact with other Erasmus students also was much appreciated among the students. Most of them valued the international atmosphere the Erasmus program and events offered, but some might have wished additionally for closer contact with native students.

A case of different nature concerning accommodation and living seem to be Eastern European countries<sup>11</sup>. Costs of living there are generally much lower than in other parts of Europe which rendered it possible for students to afford and find private accommodation, sometimes shared and sometimes even individual. Students from other parts of Europe going to the East can often afford a very high living standard. Concerning the question of help finding an accommodation they reported that they did not need it, because private housing was easily affordable, easy to find and also of quite good quality. The interviews with the administrative actors confirmed these difficulties. As already outlined within the students report, not every university can guarantee a place within student residences or affordable accommodation at the private market for incoming students. This can become especially a problem when exchange students come to more expensive countries not knowing about the difficulties in finding an accommodation.

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<sup>9</sup> The students interviewed referenced to their experience in Scandinavia and the United Kingdom, although the cases of France and the Northern parts of Italy partly depicted comparable conclusions.

<sup>10</sup> Here the references were Spain, Sicily and Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> Which included Poland and Estonia.



Some of the administrative actors concerned with this problem reported about students arriving unprepared at a city overwhelmed by the high level of costs for living including housing and the low supply of accommodations in general. For a university to address this problem adequately a lot of human resources and staff is needed. The administrative actors reported just as the students that the problem of finding an accommodation demands information beforehand and support during the mobility.

The qualitative analysis about the issue of housing raises the question of inclusiveness of the program. Although the Erasmus+ grant is scaled in three different stages, it could only be seen as a little subsidy for students going to Northern Europe, while it covered at least large parts of the rent in Eastern parts or even all of it. It is not deniable, that the affordability of a semester abroad differs across European regions, like Eastern, Northern and Southern countries. This is also reflected by the fact that most of the students predominantly financed themselves via private means. This renders an exchange semester more difficult and comes with a regional selection bias for students depending on public subsidies.

### **Reasons to choose a certain university**

Regarding the reasons for going abroad, most of the interviewed student affirmed that they purposely chose a certain institution or rather city. Interestingly it was somehow connected to the factors of “country” and “language” but in a more indirect way: Most of the students explained, that they decided for a semester abroad because they were looking for a personal challenge and the possibility to grow personally. Very often it was mentioned that the objective was to “leave the comfort zone”. Thus, they mainly chose universities and cities, where they believed to gain that experience. Almost all of the students reported that they had never been in that country before and were interested in experiencing a whole new unknown culture. Some also underlined the teaching offer of the university they chose. Either because it had a special standing or a certain profile.

Concerning the factor of “language”, nearly all the students only attended English classes. In some cases, the Erasmus students were not even allowed to participate in other courses than those in English and at some universities, there were special classes exclusively for the Erasmus students. The majority of the students only had a basic knowledge of the native language<sup>12</sup>, thus passing a whole class in that language did not seem to be a real option.

Taking this fact serious, the interviews underlined, that the offer of an attractive and extended semester program in English language seems to be one important factor for a good performance of universities. Equally to the student responses the administrative staff also emphasized the importance of a broad offer of classes in English language. Furthermore, they also confirmed that the supply of information and the fix contact persons need to be established for the incoming students.

An interesting difference between the perspective of administrative actors and the students was the motivation for going abroad. The answer on the question why they would recommend students to do a semester abroad, most of the administrative actors prominently mentioned beside the personal development, the positive impacts for the

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<sup>12</sup> The exception is the United Kingdom.

students regarding the job market. Comparable to the official presentation of the Erasmus program, this was outlined by all the administrative actors and not even mentioned once by the students.

### **Permanent contact points and information supply**

Another crucial point regarding this question for the students was the existence of a competent contact person or contact point. Nearly all of them stressed the importance of a fix counterpart, who is able to inform the exchange students concerning academic life but also administrative questions. Most of them reported that teaching methods and the organizational structures of the universities differed strongly from their home university. The lack of a reliable contact creates frustration among Erasmus students. This contact should provide basic information beforehand as well as during the stay.

This experience was also reported by the administrative actors. It was often mentioned that incoming exchange students needed some time to get used to the structure and organisation of the university system. To counteract possible frustration among incoming students, sufficient information concerning the academic system, teaching methods and organisational structure should be secured.

### **Transcript of records**

A last point the interviewed students outlined was the recognition of accomplishments. They underlined that for the motivation to study abroad it is essential to know, that the ECTS points accomplished would be credited after the mobility. Even though the Erasmus program is supposed to guarantee this mechanism, some students reported problems concerning their transcript of records.

This again means a certain amount of coordination for the administrative level. This topic is particularly crucial for the academic parts of the administrative level. They need to secure structures and information for the incoming and outgoing students to keep this mechanism functioning and counter frustration among the students.

### **Remaining Keywords**

Concerning the issues of learning support, academic mentoring, help with administrative questions, support of student organizations and technical infrastructure the qualitative research overall matches the statistical findings. In general, the students either were satisfied with these factors. In cases where they were not, it was stated that they did not really feel these issues having a strongly negative influence on their Erasmus experience in general. None of the students mentioned the keywords on their own.

## Conclusion

The first conclusion to be drawn can clearly be that the Erasmus+ Program can be seen as a success and can work as a role model. The statistical analysis as well as the interviews with students and administrative actors confirmed this picture.

All the students strongly recommended a semester abroad. All of them felt to have succeeded to have grown personally and reported that it was all in all a great experience. This is also reflected by the fact that it was quite difficult for most of the interviewees to report something concerning “very negative experiences”.

Regarding the administrative actors, the biggest advantage and at the same time disadvantage of the Erasmus+ program was seen in its tight structure. On the one hand, the high level of institutionalization was regarded as providing security for the participating students, because they would know what to expect and what to do. On the other hand, most of the administrative actors complained about the “paper-warfare”, and some students mentioned that as well. The participation in the Erasmus program demands a lot of bureaucracy from students, at the receiving and at the sending university and most of it has to be done in printed version and in addition then send via mail across the continent. Thus, at least the attempt of changing this process into a strictly digital one, was mentioned several times<sup>13</sup>.

Another problem the program still has to face is the issue of accommodation. Obviously, the living standard and level of rents in a city is nothing controllable by universities. However, the provision of flats as well as the support structure for Erasmus students in this respect are crucial issues to have a look at. Students as well as administrative recommended in general, that universities should provide student residence places for incoming students. Even those students who decided voluntarily for a private accommodation supported that there should be at least some kind of “stopgap”-possibility. And especially those administrative actors from university within in regions or cities with high pressured housing market, outlined the importance of university accommodation possibility, exclusive for incoming exchange students. It was outlined clearly that the Erasmus grants cannot equalize the different levels of average living costs across Europe, even though they are differentiated in three categories.

A further point that was outlined by administrative actors as well as students was the offer in classes taught in English. For a university to be attractive for incoming students an extended and attractive program in English language seems to be decisive.

Another important factor that needs to be secured by universities is the existence of a permanent counterpart for the students to address their needs beforehand and during the mobility. This means first and foremost staff. The support of incoming international students from different cultural backgrounds demands a lot of staff at the general level as well as at the academic level within faculties and departments. Universities should provide as much information as possible for incoming students beforehand to give them the possibility to prepare themselves but also during their stay. This includes help with questions of accommodation but also academic problems. Especially, the interviews with administrative actors clearly displayed that the participation in an exchange program

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<sup>13</sup> It was also mentioned that this might be one of the changes indicated within the reform period from ongoing 2020.

demands a lot of human resources. Securing information and support for the incoming students on an academic as well as an administrative level can only be achieved with a high number of staff. In addition, they underscored the need of steady communication between the overall administrative level and the academic sections. Both levels are needed to successfully establish exchange programs but also have to be in close contact with each other.

Despite all of these difficulties of the program the concluding remark should be that the Erasmus Program is a successful European project. This is also due to its degree of institutionalization within the European context. Taking the Erasmus program as a role-model needs to bear this fact in mind. In addition, it could be shown, that even within this very structured context some divergences exist. But the overall conclusion clearly is that the Erasmus program is successful part of the European Bologna Process.

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