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Erasmus Language students in a British University – a case study.

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Students' assessment of their academic experience is actively sought by Higher Education institutions, as evidenced in the National Student Survey introduced in 2005. Erasmus students, despite their growing numbers, tend to be excluded from these satisfaction surveys, even though they, too, are primary customers of a University. This study aims to present results from bespoke questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with a sample of Erasmus students studying languages in a British University. These methods allow us insight into the experience of these students and their assessment as a primary customer, with a focus on language learning and teaching, university facilities and student support. It investigates to what extent these factors influence their levels of satisfaction and what costs of adaptation if any, they encounter. Although excellent levels of satisfaction were found, some costs affect their experience. They relate to difficulties in adapting to a learning methodology based on a low number of hours and independent learning and to a guidance and support system seen as too stifling. The results portray this cohort's British University as a well-equipped and well-meaning but ultimately overbearing institution, which may indicate that minimising costs can eliminate some sources of dissatisfaction.

Introduction

Student mobility in the European Union has become increasingly significant since the inception of the Erasmus scheme in 1987. The latest figures from the European Union show that the number of Erasmus students rose from 3,244 in 1987 to 198,523 in 2008/2009 (Europa 2010). Sometimes, this is unbalanced, for example in the United Kingdom, where the number of outgoing students in 2008-2009 was 10,826 whilst incoming students reached 20,850. The present study offers further empirical research into the experience of Erasmus students by focusing on how Erasmus language students perceive and assess being a language student in a British university. British students are considered "primary customers" of a

University (Crawford: 1991; Douglas, Douglas and Barnes 2006; Hill 1995), "the direct recipients of the service provided" by a University (Douglas et al., 2006, p.251), and this idea led the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to introduce the National Student Survey (NSS), aimed at final year students, to seek their views on various aspects of teaching, assessment and support provided by a course and a University, in order to ascertain students' levels of satisfaction. Erasmus students, however, have never been included in the NSS. If they follow the same course as British students their views should be sought as well, as they, too, are customers, albeit for a shorter period. This would contribute to an understanding of how they assess studying in a British University and what factors affect their level of satisfaction. As the drive towards internationalisation of Higher Education is becoming more and more pronounced, as illustrated by the frequent use of this word in the website of each British university, understanding the expectations, needs and experiences of students whose profiles can be extremely different from British students is of great value (De vita and Case 2003; Kingston 2008; Luxon and Peelo 2009; Van Damme 2001). With the caveat that this study is a small scale one, it aims to provide an insight into how Erasmus students adapt to a different institution and into potential costs of adaptation, by outlining the experience of an Erasmus language cohort, noting the positive and negative assessments they made and discussing possible answers to combat sources of dissatisfaction. It aims to contribute to the growing body of work on the presence and experience of Erasmus and international students in British Higher education.

Background

Research into the experience of Erasmus students is wide-ranging. It can be summarised under three broad aspects.

Motivation

First, extensive research from a psychological point of view has considered motivation theory. According to this research a student is motivated to embark on a year abroad for reasons from the following four categories: academic, cultural, linguistic and professional benefits (Coleman 1998; Teichler 2004). Motivations can be integrative (a positive interest in a country or a culture) or instrumental (the practical benefits of being abroad, such as better career prospects) (Allen and Heron 2003) or in some cases both. For language students, for

example, learning the language is a strong integrative motive but it is also instrumental if it leads to better job prospects. Many studies have shown a blend of integrative and instrumental motives (Coleman 1998; Singleton 1992; Weirs-Jenssen 2003), including desire to improve foreign language skills, experiencing and understanding the culture of another country, personal development, wish to travel, desire to live in a new cultural and social environment and wish to improve career prospects (Balaz and Williams 2004; Teichler 2004; Weirs-Jenssen 2003).

Benefits of studying abroad

Second, research has considered the benefits stemming from these integrative and instrumental motives. These are normally heightened linguistic competence, increased self-confidence, increased maturity and better academic performance once students are back in their home countries (Balaz and Williams 2004; Coleman 1998; Cushner and Mahon 2002; Teichler and Maiworm 1997). Overall, students themselves tend to rate their experience positively, commending above others the cultural experience, the foreign language learning, the personal experience and the expected professional value of their period of residence abroad (Button et al. 2005; King 2003; Teichler 2004).

The benefits linked more specifically to linguistic competence have been shown to be oral and aural proficiency followed by vocabulary development, whereas writing and grammar are the areas with the least progress recorded (Badstuner and Ecke 2009; Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg 1993; Coleman 1997; De Keyser 1991; Freed 1998; Meara 1994). The year abroad appears to favour fluency and naturalness of speech over grammatical accuracy and complex patterns of speech (Coleman 1997; Freed 1998; Tanaka and Ellis 2003).

Obstacles

Third, the obstacles facing Erasmus students include linguistic challenges due to inadequate language skills, difficulties to adapt to a different institution, difficulties to settle in the country leading to homesickness, administrative and financial issues (Okorocha 1996; Teichler 2004; Wiers-Jenssen 2003).

It can be argued that Erasmus students are less likely to experience strong acculturative issues than International students due to the reduced cultural discrepancy. The less salient the contrast in cultural behaviour and value system is, the smoother the

adjustment seems to be (Furnham and Bochner 1982; Ryan 2000). However, their differences in educational background are likely to affect their experience. The ethos of Higher Education in Europe is extremely varied and leads to very different approaches to learning. Richardson (1994) highlighted the fact that some educational systems favoured transformative tasks (knowledge actively constructed by the learner in a reflective way), whereas others favoured reproductive tasks (reproduction of memorised knowledge). Thus, Taillefer (2005), in her study of how law students from Spain, France and the United Kingdom approach their studies, showed how the concept of "reading a subject" can be extremely different, depending on whether students come from a system based on a heavy schedule of lecture and memorising, such as Spain, or from a system based on fewer teaching hours and more time for independent learning, such as Britain. Wiestra et al. (1999), in their study on the experiences of EU students, showed that Southern European students preferred reproductive tasks over transformative tasks, whereas the opposite was true for British students. This research therefore suggests that in order for students to have an Erasmus experience they deem successful, they must adapt to the educational norms of the host country (Blue 1993, Novera 2004). Having to integrate these norms can present a severe cost, which can be referred to as a cost of adaptation or affiliation (Johns 1997).

In addition, Erasmus students also have to adapt to their peers in the destination university, the host students. The extensive literature on the subject (Bochner and Furnham 1985; Kraemer-Byrne 2002; Stroebe, Lenkert and Jonas 1988; Teichler 2004; Ward 2001) indicates that Erasmus students expect far more interaction with local students than is the case in reality. The Erasmus year has been shown to increase contact with either co-nationals or other Erasmus students (Ward 2001) but it does not tend to foster closer contact with host students (Furnham and Bochner 1982; Sigalas 2010), to such an extent that this lack of contact tends to be the main complaint in Erasmus student questionnaires (Dervin 2007).

Methodology

This study, based on Language Erasmus students in a post-1992 university, gives empirical evidence from the perspective of the students, which research has shown, "offer valuable insight into how students perceive their time abroad" (Freed 1998: 47). All students involved came from France, Germany or Spain. They all studied two languages as their main subjects, in addition to their own language, from a combination of English-French, English-German or English-Spanish. In the United Kingdom, they were either in their second or final year. In the

final year, they followed exactly the same syllabus as British students, were taught alongside them and were awarded a Bachelor of Arts. In the second year, some modules were taught alongside British students and some were for Erasmus students only. The second year also led to a qualification, either a Diploma in Higher Education or a Certificate in Higher Education.

This study refers to 30 separate students in case study (Keen and Packwood 2000) and is based on quantitative and qualitative data, with two bespoke questionnaires, formal interviews and an end-of-year University questionnaire. The first questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the first semester (week 3), in order to determine the students' goals and expectations and capture their first impressions of the University and their language classes. The second questionnaire was completed before Easter (week 10 of semester 2) in order to obtain their views after two thirds of their academic year. In order to enhance the reliability of quantitative data interpretation and to capture the participants' subjective experience (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Rossman and Rallis 1998), one-hour long interviews took place after Easter with a sample of participants (week 11 and 12) and the answers were analysed using the content analysis method (Krippendorf 2004; Neuendorf 2002). Finally, the University end-of-year questionnaire distributed to all students at the end of their academic year was analysed.

Findings and discussion

Motivation for going abroad

Before analysing the cohort's experience as students in a British institution it was necessary to determine their motivations for coming and studying in the United Kingdom. This would allow understanding of their expectations and aspirations – if any – for their residence abroad.

In line with the background literature, the students had a mix of integrative and instrumental factors, with a predominance of integrative ones. Their main motivations included a desire to improve their knowledge of English, followed by "visiting a foreign country", "enhancing their job opportunities", "learning a different culture" and "experiencing life in a different environment". In terms of the course itself, students did not have any expectations at all, did not really know what it actually entailed or had not tried to

find out more. Therefore, it seems they expected to reach their goals by being in the country, rather than by following a specific course. This trend has been noted in other studies (Keogh and Russell-Roberts 2009). This is confirmed by the fact that, considering they were all studying two languages, none of them mentioned improving their second language as one of their motivations. The fact of being in the country seemed to override any other considerations. This also means that, as primary customer in a British university, they started with no expectations or preconceptions, making their assessment that of the perfect "other" (Cohen and Gunz 2002).

Assessment of Language Learning in a British University

As a service provider, a University is seen to offer a number of goods and services (Sasser, Olsen and Wyckoff 1978). These fall into three categories: learning and teaching; physical facilities; support and guidance. The latter can range from lecturers' support to central support via services such as career advice or counselling. Assessment of these three aspects formed the structure of the questionnaires and the interviews in this study.

Learning and teaching

Language learning prior to arrival. The participants' assessment of language learning in a British University is set against their language experience prior to arriving at the UK University. The first questionnaire revealed that all of them started learning their languages in the secondary sector, where their experiences largely confirmed the literature on the different education ethos in Europe. Indeed, whereas in the United Kingdom language learning over the last thirty years has shifted away from the grammar-translation approach to a communicative and task-based approach (Cook 2001; Klapper 2003), the experience of these Erasmus language students, as far as language learning in the secondary sector is concerned, reveal the prominence, in Spain and France, of traditional grammar-based approaches in a very teacher-centred environment. The Spanish cohort was extremely critical, criticising the lack of oral or communicative work and the over-reliance on rote learning grammar. The French students also assessed their learning as overly passive, with the emphasis on grammar and written work. In Germany, even though the students agreed a good mix of all the relevant skills was achieved, the teaching was still presented as being based on grammar, taught mainly through drilling exercises.

As far as their experience of language learning at University is concerned, the first questionnaire showed that all the participants were used to a large number of taught hours, 22 hours per week being the average and to large group sizes, 35 people being the average. They all came from a system giving precedence to theory over practice, with lectures as the main delivery mode. The language teaching they received mirrored their experience in the secondary sector, with an emphasis on grammar, vocabulary activities and writing essays, with oral and aural activities counting for only 15.8% of the teaching. Group work was virtually unknown and independent learning, whereby students have to read for a course, not seen as a priority, as their main learning strategy was to learn by heart as many facts as possible. These findings are in line with the background literature on the different educational ethos in Europe (Taillefer 2005; Richardson 1994). As these students were faced with a very different system in their British University, with a 12 hour teaching week, a heavy bias towards seminars, group work, aural and oral work and independent learning, it can be argued that their costs of adaptation were bound to be high.

Language learning in their British University. The end-of-year questionnaire revealed that overall, 64% of Erasmus students surveyed agreed that the aims and objectives of their degree programme had been fully met and the rest agreed that it had been met. This overall satisfaction, however, hides a varied response to specific aspects of learning and teaching.

Criticisms. On the negative side, all students criticised the low number of teaching hours (questionnaire 2 and interviews). In addition, they felt that the duration of the classes (50 minutes) was too short. Thus, whereas 70% of British students ticked "excellent" or "good" for learning and teaching in the end-of-year questionnaire, only 55% Erasmus students did, with lack of contact hours the justification for their dissatisfaction. The second questionnaire and the interviews showed that Erasmus students agreed that whilst overall their workload was similar to their home institutions, with the same intellectual demands, British Universities put much more emphasis on independent learning. All the participants, irrespective of their nationality, perceived this as a money saving exercise on the part of the British University. Their complaint was two-fold. Firstly, they felt that the topics to cover were too vast and therefore the unguided learner was at a loss ("I would have preferred to have more hours. I spent a lot of time in the library but I lacked clear directions".) Secondly, they identified their own lack of discipline to read around a topic but they argued that this was due to not being used to this way of learning and not seeing its benefits, especially as their work was seldom discussed in class ("We are used to having 25-35 hours of lessons

every week. Here you are supposed to spend plenty of time in the library, building your learning by yourself with few lessons, which I don't like as the fee is high. I don't see how you can make progress"; "You are expected to learn everything by yourself and I don't like this method"). As a result, many admitted not doing very much outside the classes and criticised that aspect of their learning, to such an extent that they stated that they would resent paying British tuition fees for what they perceived as a low number of contact hours. If this illustrates the literature on the subject (Braine 2002; Ridgway 2003; Taillefer 2005), it also suggests a very high cost of adaptation, constituting a very large source of dissatisfaction, if left untackled.

Positive aspects. These criticisms were offset by various positive assessments. Firstly, both in the second questionnaire and the interviews, they praised the much smaller group sizes in Britain. Considering the debates over the past few years on student-staff ratio and group sizes, and the push towards larger group sizes, this view from students used to much larger classes adds to the growing demand from British students to restrict class sizes and mirrors research showing that satisfaction decreases when class sizes are larger (Coles 2002).

Secondly, the second questionnaire and the interviews also revealed that the participants felt that the teaching method used enabled them to engage more with their subjects than in their home institutions, with what they perceived as the greater emphasis, in Britain, on the ability to express their ideas. They lauded the fact that they were encouraged to express their thoughts and challenge others in a collaborative atmosphere, which they felt was an important aspect of learning that was missing in their home institutions. "Here we learn how to think on your own", "Here it's more about thinking by ourselves and not learning by heart", "It is less focused on memory and more on analysis, on giving your thoughts". The surveyed students perceived the teaching methodology prevalent in the United Kingdom as more centred on communicative tasks, as outlined in the following table:

Table 1. Type of activities in home and host institutions.

Activity	Home	UK
Grammar	**23%**	**13%**
Vocabulary acquisition	20%	27%
Writing	22%	30%
Oral	**16%**	**28%**
Aural	16%	18%
Other	3%	0%

(Data from questionnaire 2)

The high score for writing does not contradict this assessment because the participants highlighted the communicative nature of most writing tasks, for example reports and statistical commentaries, as opposed to memorising classes for a 3 hour written examination.

The teaching methods were deemed far more practical and relevant to future employment than the methods of their home institutions, with far less stress on theory and far more emphasis on real-life tasks. Typical comments from questionnaire 2 and the interviews were the following: "Here it's more about thinking by ourselves and not learning by heart. It's about practising the language when in France it's about grammar. Here it is much more focused on employability", "Most of the classes are really practical and interesting. You know why you have to do the classes, which unfortunately is not always the case in Germany or France." As a result, they felt that they were really *practising* their language whereas in their home institutions they were *learning about* the language. That explains why, in the second and third questionnaire, they rated applied translation, interpreting, presentation skills, essay writing, research skills and analytical skills, as most useful due to their relevance to the world of work. This can be seen as an endorsement of the employability agenda witnessed in all British Universities over the last decade (Fallows and Steven 2002; Rae 2007). This also suggests that dissatisfaction with the overall method of delivery, for example independent learning, can be compensated by the actual teaching received and the nature of the tasks to be undertaken, which confirms studies highlighting that the most important aspect of students' satisfaction remained the core service, i.e. the teaching received (Banwett and Datta 2003; Douglas, Douglas and Barnes 2006; Hill, Lomas and MacGregor 2003).

The third positive aspect highlighted was being taught with British native speakers and having to work with them on specific tasks. In questionnaires 2 and 3 and in the interviews, being paired for interpreting, translation tasks, or essay writing all in mixed nationality groups was applauded by all the participants. Second year Erasmus students, who did not have as many classes with native speakers, complained about that lack. Taking into account the fact that second year British students also complained in their end-of-year questionnaire, it is clear that both sets of students see this collaborative work as being mutually beneficial and as an asset. This suggests that to guarantee student satisfaction, integration of home and visiting students in the classroom is crucial (Carroll and Ryan 2005).

The fourth positive aspect was the use of Information Technology (IT) and multimedia facilities. In the second and third questionnaires as well as in the interviews,

Erasmus language students praised the use of the e-learning portal, with lecture notes and supplementary materials posted regularly, and the language dedicated zone with its multi-media facilities. They rated the integration of IT into the teaching as a very important aspect of their learning and deemed it far better in Britain than in their home institutions and as a specific asset of a British university, thus confirming the importance of IT for students' satisfaction levels (Douglas, Douglas and Barnes 2006; Price et al. 2003).

The final positive aspect was feedback. In the end-of-year questionnaire72% ticked feedback as being "very effective" or "effective" and 90% found the documentation helping them to reflect on their performance, such as marking schemes, extremely useful, as well as having each paper returned to them rather than simply getting a mark for it. As the vast majority had indicated in the first questionnaire that they did not receive much feedback in their home institutions, these figures suggest that good feedback mechanisms do contribute to students' levels of satisfaction.

Overall, they felt that all their skills in English had improved. In the second questionnaire, 90% noted improvements in listening and 70% in speaking and writing. Reading skills were slightly behind with 60%. For their other language 60% felt that all their skills had improved. The improvement in aural and oral proficiency is in line with the literature on the subject. The low score for reading could be explained by their reluctance to engage in independent learning. The score for writing, higher than in most research, can be explained by the amount of group work they had to do in collaboration with native speakers.

Discussion. The assessment of their language learning reveals that, on the one hand, they appreciated the small class sizes, the practical nature of the teaching, the analytical skills requiring students to think for themselves and the learning materials on support. On the other hand, they were critical about the low teaching hours and they perceived independent learning as a good way for a University to save money on teaching. This assessment highlights significant differences with their home institutions and portrays their British institution as being far more sensitive to the labour-market, practical, IT integrated, promoting collaborative opportunities and focusing on critical thinking and communicative tasks on the one hand but too keen on independent learning replacing taught hours on the other. This overall positive assessment of language learning suggests that, however different the education systems are, the cost of adaptation is high only in areas where students fail to see the usefulness or relevance. Having to adapt to a more practical teaching style was not

deemed negative or difficult, as the participants saw its usefulness for the world of work. Similarly, having more IT or feedback was enthusiastically embraced. However, spending time doing independent learning was criticised, as they failed to see the relevance and that led to a high level of dissatisfaction. This suggests that home and host Universities have to be more proactive to explain not just the differences in the systems but why and how they can be beneficial to the students, so that they can embrace and engage with them. It is worth bearing in mind that all the participants received specific induction meetings, where the differences in learning and teaching and in particular the reliance on independent learning were explained. However, they failed to see what it would bring to them and decided not to engage with this typically British way of studying. Home and host institutions have to find ways to make differences in learning and teaching relevant to Erasmus students, in order to combat potential sources of dissatisfaction.

Facilities

All the questionnaires and the interviews showed that all students were particularly impressed with the facilities and fabric of the university. The IT facilities were rated as outstanding ("Amazing and impressive facilities", "well developed facilities"). The library was also highly rated, with 92% expressing their satisfaction with the amount of resources for directed or independent learning and the 24 hour access ("24 hour library is amazing and very practical"). Sport facilities and student union were also all considered much better in Britain ("it is much better in the UK", "it is much better organised in the UK"). All the physical facilities reached a much higher level of satisfaction than in their home institutions. Thus, 67% of French students reported no easy access to IT in their home institutions and the vast majority of German and Spanish students reported that even though very good, the IT equipment and facilities in general were not developed enough in their home institutions. It can therefore be assumed that these figures confirm research showing that facilities are a key factor in student satisfaction (Price et al. 2003).

Support and guidance

Positive aspects. On the one hand, the participants were very impressed by the support on offer. In the interviews, the interaction with lecturers, whether in a class setting or in a

guidance tutorial, was particularly commented upon. They saw this as one of the main differences with their home institutions, where the relationship with their lecturers was described, in the second questionnaire and the interviews, as either non-existent or very formal. They felt that the atmosphere was very friendly and motivating and that lecturers were very helpful and made them feel at ease and part of a community. Student services were also judged very positively, as they were deemed to offer far more services than in their home institutions. Indeed, questionnaire 2 showed that all the participants thought "student services" simply meant the career centre and they were amazed when they realised the range of services offered in a British University. One can therefore posit that university support and guidance largely contributed to their levels of satisfaction.

Criticisms. The interviews reveal that although they were extremely happy with the support facilities overall, they perceive a British University as an institution that "mothers" students too much, to the extent that they are in danger of never being able to become autonomous ("students need more independence, here everything is given to us"; "Going to University should be a step towards independence; It will be hard for British students to let go afterwards; They can't really develop their personalities because everything is done for them."). This image of a well-meaning but ultimately overbearing institution was based on various factors. Firstly, attendance monitoring, whereby letters are sent to students if they miss two consecutive classes, was deemed too patronising and too school-like. In line with the system in their home Universities, they felt that it should be up to the students whether they choose to attend or not ("it's our decision that we are here, we should decide by ourselves".). Secondly, support facilities, whether guidance tutorial, career talks, employability events or study skills, were seen as preventing students from developing their personality because everything was done for them. Thus, very few Erasmus students availed themselves of guidance tutoring because they did not feel the need to be guided all the time and felt able to assess their performance and develop learning and examination strategies on their own. In the interviews, they wondered how British students would cope in the real world, as the University would not be there for them all the time. Aspects that are taken for granted by British students and seen by this British institution and others as a way to nurture and guide students (as illustrated by specific sections on student support on University websites) were therefore seen as stifling and counterproductive. Employability is a good illustration of their criticisms. Even though they appreciated the effort put into organising career meetings, sending emails about job opportunities or having an employability week,

they still felt that it was too much, as the initiative was removed from students, and that because everything was "served to them on a plate" students were not independent enough, which, according to them, should be a crucial part of the total university experience.

All in all, even though they appreciated the help given and felt that support would always be available, unlike in their home institutions, where the culture, both in the second questionnaire and the interviews, was described as "sink or swim", they thought that British Universities pushed the pastoral care too far, as illustrated by induction week, which they perceived as having too many meetings trying to cater for needs that did not need to be catered for. Indeed, they stated that they would have preferred just one meeting outlining their programme rather than a full week of induction with meetings that tried to cover everything, from examination regulations to chaplaincy, sport to extenuating circumstances, career services to student support services ("Too much information was given. The general induction meeting would have been enough"; "One meeting would have been enough")

Even though the culture in their home institutions was assessed in negative terms, because support mechanisms were deemed minimal, they all felt that such a culture forces students to become autonomous and responsible for themselves whereas a British University, for all its good intentions, prevented their students from developing their independence.

These criticisms link to wider criticisms of British society. Many students expressed in the interviews their dismay at the huge amount of security cameras on the one hand and signs for everything on the other hand, down to how people should wash their hands. The University is therefore seen as part of a society widely controlling its citizens, which ultimately leads to people being forever in need of support.

This assessment leads to a portrayal of a British University as being overprotective, a well-meaning but ultimately flawed institution that stifles its students' autonomy. If this can be explained by the very different culture in their home institutions it also suggests that host institutions have to be aware of the greater need for independence from Erasmus students, in order to avoid high level of dissatisfaction.

A new breed of Erasmus students? A final aspect of support and guidance, specific to Erasmus students, is the perceived need to foster their social integration with host students as much as possible, in order to minimise their difficulties in developing personal contacts with host students, an area of concern highlighted by research (Bochner and Furnham 1985;

Butcher 2002; Kraemer-Byrne 2002; Stroebe, Lenkert and Jonas 1988; Teichler 2004; Ward 2001). The way the participants in this study assessed this aspect, in questionnaire 2 and the interviews, is noteworthy. They argue that a University should not try to facilitate their integration with British students by, for example, organising social events, as they felt that it should be up to the students to take the first steps. They did not find integrating with host students difficult at all, as, in the second questionnaire, 90% of them found British students very approachable. They worked with them, went out with them and felt that it was very easy to get to know them. This can easily be explained by the specific nature of the course, with its emphasis on mixed nationality collaborative work in relatively small groups. It can be argued that Erasmus students studying a language are at an advantage, compared with other Erasmus students enrolled on different courses with large lectures, few seminars, and fewer opportunities to work with native speakers. This suggests that classroom integration may play a key role in wider integration.

However, all the participants reported, in the interviews, that their relationship with British students was very superficial and that it was difficult to make real friends, that as long as they liked partying they were able to have as many British friends as they wanted but that was where the relationship ended, so in a nutshell that it was easy to have "acquaintances" but very difficult to have "friends"; as a result the second questionnaire showed that 70% spent most of their time with other Erasmus students. If this seems in line with the literature on the subject, the interviews refined these results, as most students reported that they were very happy with having acquaintances and were not looking for anything else, as they were only staying in the country for one year anyway. All of this points to the hypermodern individual (Urry 2000), and his/her "bricolage-biography" (Beck and Back-Gernsheim 2002; Lash 2002) made up of peg or cloakroom communities, "patched together for the duration of the spectacle and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from the hook in their cloakroom" (Bauman 2004). The participants' experience of co-national communities, Erasmus, international students and British students is an excellent illustration of these cloakroom communities, as these students hopped from one community to the other. They did not only accept the transient state of their relationship with host students but went one step further by integrating this fact into their mindset. This seems to indicate that Dervin's warning in 2007 that soon-to-be Erasmus students need to be made aware that they will become "liquid strangers", i.e. transient individuals who are just passing in a country and who, therefore, will not build long-lasting relationships in the host country, as this takes time,

but will hop from one peg community to another, might not be needed anymore, as students themselves do not wish to have deep integration but are happy to hop between different communities. It could be argued that these students reproduce, in real life, what they are used to doing online, with virtual communities such as Facebook.

Discussion. The participants' assessment of support and guidance casts a very different light on what many British Universities take for granted. The whole ethos, in terms of nurturing students through the agenda on student experience, employability or pastoral care, perplexed these students who found these mechanisms too stifling and counterproductive. Their level of satisfaction is directly affected when they are forced to engage with some aspects of support and guidance, such as attendance monitoring and indirectly by being made to feel like a school pupil. A British University portraying itself as a supportive institution is seen as an overprotective body controlling students' every move and ultimately their autonomy, in a Foucaldian way (Foucault 1975), which these hyper-modern students find very hard to accept. Explaining the very different ethos of what being a student in a British University is, prior to departure and on arrival, is therefore crucial to prevent Erasmus students from developing the feeling of being cast back to a school environment.

Conclusion

The participants' assessment of studying languages in a UK university can be summarised as follows:

Table 2. Summary of participants'assessment.

Positive	Negative
• Analytical skills • Thinking on their own • Communicative approach • Practical teaching linked to the world of work • Teaching leading to expression of ideas • Being taught along with native	• Insufficient contact time • Independent learning • Overbearing institution • Reduced personal autonomy • An environment too reminiscent of school settings • Patronising pastoral care

speakers • Facilities • Interaction with lecturers • Class size • Ease of social integration with native students	

From this table, it is possible to highlight the factors contributing to the participants' levels of satisfaction as being the core teaching, facilities, feedback mechanisms, IT and class sizes, whilst the factors affecting their satisfaction are the number of hours, differences in the learning methodology and differences in the support and guidance system.

It is worth noting that there were no marked differences in terms of nationality. Whereas the assessment of the participants' perceptions of language learning in their home countries showed clear differences, with Spanish students the most critical followed by the French and the German students the most content with their experiences, their perceptions of their studies in their British universities were the same.

From these findings, it is possible to draw the following implications: firstly, their assessment of language learning in Britain is extremely positive, but work needs to be done to make students realise what studying in this country truly involves, in order to minimise frustration and dissatisfaction. These findings corroborate many previous studies (Johns 1997; Ridgeway 2003; Taillefer 2005) which have argued that the differences between educational systems have to be made explicit to the students. This study would suggest that it is more than just making them explicit but that it also requires finding ways of making students understand their relevance for them and then equip them with the relevant skills to engage with a different learning and teaching or support and guidance environment. Explaining that, for example, in the United Kingdom, far more stress is put on independent learning is good but not enough, explaining why this is the case is better but making them understand how they can benefit from it is crucial. Once the barrier is broken down, it is then much easier to equip them with skills to embrace these educational differences. If they understand the rationale but fail to see what it can bring them they will not engage with them.

Secondly, classroom integration of Erasmus and host students is a key to wider social integration and, when it comes to language teaching, enhances level of satisfaction for both sets of students.

Thirdly, British Universities have to be aware that Erasmus students will not all react well to their very developed pastoral care. This is also an aspect that should be explained explicitly in the home institutions prior to departure and by the host institution on arrival, to avoid these students feeling patronised.

Fourthly, the participants' assessment of guidance and support is seemingly at odds with their assessment of learning and teaching. They do not like being cosseted by the University, but reject the teaching methodology in Britain even though it promotes autonomy. It can be argued that home students have the same contradiction in reverse and that students replicate the ethos of the educational system they come from. The participants of this study were used to a much higher number of taught hours and much more directed learning on the one hand but had to fend for themselves for any non-academic aspects on the other hand and, as a result, found it difficult to adapt to a system where the opposite was true.

Finally, in terms of social integration, bearing in mind that this study is on a very small scale, worries about the superficiality of integration with host students can be allayed by the possible appearance of a new breed of Erasmus students, the hyper-modern individual, happy to hop from one transient community to another. It looks therefore as if Universities should focus on creating an environment which enables Erasmus and home students to meet through being integrated in a seminar group, and should then leave it up to the students to create their various communities.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire one

1 – <u>Personal details</u>

- Gender :

- Age :

- Nationality :

- What is your native language?

- Which languages were spoken in your home as a child?

- Number and name of languages studied at Northumbria University :

- How long have you been studying it/them?

- Name your qualifications for each language (Baccalauréat…)

- Why did you choose to learn the language(s)?

2 – <u>Your experience of language learning in your own country before going to university/Higher education</u>

- How would you describe language learning in your country?

- Describe the following:

  - o Number of hours taught :

  - o Group size :

  - o Nationality of your language teacher :

  - o Use of IT :

  - o Use of a language assistant (did you have one? What did you do with him/her?) :

  - o Access to language resources (did you have one? What type of materials did you have?) :

- Did your teachers speak in the foreign language most of the time?

- Give an estimate of how much time was spent on the following :

Grammar	Vocabulary acquisition	Writing tasks	Oral activities	Listening activities	Other (please specify)

- Did you have to speak a lot yourself or did you mainly read and/or translate?

- How was grammar taught? (tick the relevant bullet point)
  - o Formal and extensive presentation of the grammar point + exercises

  - o Brief explanation via other activities

  - o Other (describe)

- Do you remember what kind of homework you had to do?

- Did you have any contact outside the classroom/your home with speakers of that language?
- What motivated you to learn?

- What kind of activities to do with the language(s) did you do outside the classroom?

- What were the best methods and activities to learn a language you have had?

- What were the worst methods and activities to learn a language you have had?

3 – Language learning in Higher Education in your country

- Where did you study? (University, IUT…)

- How many hours did you have?

- What was the group size?

- What kind of teaching was it? (lecture ? seminars ? theory ?)

- Give an estimate of how much time was spent on the following :

Grammar	Vocabulary acquisition	Writing tasks	Oral activities	Listening activities	Other (please specify)

- Describe the facilities
  - IT

  - Language resource centre

  - Did you have a guidance tutor?

  - Were lecturers easy to approach/talk to?

- How were you assessed? (tick the relevant box)

Formal exams	Continuous assessment	Oral presentations	Group work	Other

- What kind of feedback did you receive?

- Was independent learning encouraged ?

- Was employability a key concept in the course you studied?

- How did you find the transition between secondary school and Higher Education?

    Very difficult   difficult   fairly difficult   fairly easy   Easy

- Were there some mechanisms in your institution to make this transition easier?

- Did you follow a study skills module? (a module to teach you how to study)

- Did you have access to a range of student services? (career, counselling…)?

- What was it like to be a student there?

4 – Language learning in another country

If you have studied in Higher education outside your own country before coming to the UK please answer the following questions:

- Name of the country :

- Where did you study? (university? Grande école?)

- How many hours did you have?

- What was the group size?

- What kind of teaching was it? (lecture? seminars ? theory ?)

- Give an estimate of how much time was spent on the following :

Grammar	Vocabulary acquisition	Writing tasks	Oral activities	Listening activities	Other (please specify)

- Describe the facilities (see comments in section 3)
    - IT

    - Language resource centre

    - Did you have a guidance tutor?

    - Were lecturers easy to approach/talk to?

- How were you assessed ?

Formal exams	Continuous assessment	Oral presentations	Group work	Other

- What kind of feedback did you receive?

- Was independent learning encouraged ?

- Was employability a key concept in your course of study?

- Did you follow a study skills module? (a module to teach you how to study)

- Did you have access to a range of student services? (career, counselling…)?

- What was it like to be a student there?

5 – <u>Being a student in the UK</u>

A – <u>Before arrival</u>

a. To which extent did each of the following motives influence your decision to study in the UK? Please give a score from 1 to 5 (1 for the least important, 5 for the most).

	1	2	3	4	5
To improve your knowledge of languages					
To visit a foreign country					
To live independently					
To improve your CV					
To enhance your job opportunity after graduation					
To learn about another culture					
To make friends in another country					
To experience a feeling of adventure					
To experience life as a foreigner					
For personal development					
To experience life in a new environment					

Other: ---------------

b. **To what extent did you fear any of the following before coming to Northumbria?**

	1	2	3	4	5
Not to have enough money					
Not to find suitable accommodation					
To feel alone/lonely					
Not to be able to adapt to the customs of the country					
To have problems with the language					
Not to adapt to the British system of Higher Education					
To obtain a lower result than in your					

country					
Not to be able to make friends with British students					

Other: ---------

c. How did you prepare yourself for your year in Britain?

	1	2	3	4	5
By working on your English					
By brushing up your knowledge of Britain and British life					
By obtaining information about Northumbria					
By obtaining information about the course					
By contacting former Erasmus students from your own University					
By contacting Erasmus student network					
By doing nothing in particular					

Other: ---------------

B – <u>First impressions on arrival</u>

a. Were you satisfied with the information received upon arrival in terms of:

	Yes very	Yes quite	Not really	Not at all
Academic issues				
Cultural issues				
Daily life (doctor, bank…)				
The University (campus, library,IT…)				

b. What kind of topics would you have liked to have been talked about?

c. Were you satisfied with the organisational aspects of the course in terms of:

	Yes very	Yes quite	Not really	Not at all
The type of accommodation				
The cost of accommodation				
The library provision				
The IT provision				
The facilities for students (sport…)				

The welcome received by the staff at the arrival to the University				

    d. What were your first impressions about the following points? Please jot down keywords/adjectives for each.

Your accommodation	
Newcastle as a town	
Your daily life	
British people in your daily life	
Your fellow British students	
The University	
The facilities	
Your social life	

Did you have any special problems during your first few weeks at Northumbria University?
                Yes   No

If you answered YES to the previous question, please tick the problem areas:

Registration and formalities
Housing
Banking services
Finding your way around the campus
Using the library
Computing centre services
Health care services

Other (please specify) ....

Appendix 2

Questionnaire two

A – <u>After 6 months at Northumbria</u>

a. <u>Your language classes</u>

With reference to the various aspects of language competence listed below, please state in what respect your language competence has improved (or not!). On a scale from 1 to 5, 5 being the highest.

<u>English</u>:

	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking skills					
Reading skills					
Writing skills					
Listening skills					

<u>Your other language</u>

	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking skills					
Reading skills					
Writing skills					
Listening skills					

- Did the classes come up to your expectations?   Y es   No
  Please comment on your answer

- Do you feel the intellectual demands made on you were appropriate for the level of the course?

  Yes   No

  Please comment on your answer

- Which aspect of the course did you find most helpful?

- Which aspects of the course (if any) did you find least helpful?

- Which teaching methods did you find most helpful to you?
- What skills do you feel you have learnt from the course?

b. **Language learning in the UK compared with your home University**
- Give an estimate of how much time is spent on the following at Northumbria :

Grammar	Vocabulary acquisition	Writing tasks	Oral activities	Listening activities	Other (please specify)

- How would you compare the following? You can give keywords or expand!

The way classes are taught	
The way you are assessed	
The way lecturers interact with students	

- What do you feel is the best aspect of language learning in a British University? Why?

- What do you feel is the worst aspect (if any!)? Why?

- How would you compare the following facilities with your home institution? You can give keywords or expand!

IT	
Language zone	
Guidance tutorial	
Employability	
Student services	
Sport facilities	

Student union	

- Compared with your own University how would you rate the total amount of time and effort required in the BA you are doing at Northumbria?

- How do you consider your degree of integration with local students in the host institution? On a scale from 1 to 5, 5 being the highest.
  1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

c. **What are now your impressions about the following points? Please jot down keywords/adjectives for each.**

Your accommodation	
Newcastle as a town	
Your daily life	
British people in your daily life	
Your fellow British students	
The University	
The facilities	
Your social life	

d. **Do you agree or disagree with the following ?**

	Yes	No
British students are approachable		
I've found it hard to get used to being in a British University		
I've found it hard to adapt to life in the UK		
I've found it hard to get used to the teaching methods		
British Universities focuses too much on independent learning		
British Universities focuses too much on employability		

I spend most of my time with other Erasmus students		

B – <u>Overall comments</u>

    a. **<u>Briefly describe your feelings about the following</u>:**

- Your academic experience at Northumbria

- Your life in the UK

- Your overall experience

    b. **Which aspects of your year in the UK did you particularly appreciate?**

Academic ☐   Acquiring new vocational knowledge and skills ☐   Cultural ☐

Living in a foreign country ☐ Career plans/enhance future employment prospects ☐

European experience ☐   Being independent/self-reliant ☐

Other (please specify): _____

    c. **What is the most positive and negative aspect of your year in the UK?**

- Positive:

- Negative:

Appendix 3

Interview questions

1. Preparation for year abroad
   a. How did you prepare yourself for the year abroad?
   b. What were your expectations of the following?
      i. Newcastle
      ii. The course
   c. What were your aims for the year?
   d. What were your fears?
   e. Before arrival did you get enough info from the University?

2. On arrival
   a. What were your first impressions?
   b. How was the following:
      i. Banking
      ii. Accommodation
      iii. Health
   c. How did you find induction week?
   d. What surprised you about
      i. The University
      ii. The course
      iii. Your fellow students

   e. What was your daily routine in the first week?

3. The course
   a. How languages are taught at Northumbria
      i. What did you think of the teaching methods?
      ii. What do you think is good about it
      iii. What do you think is not so good
      iv. How does it compare with your own university?
      v. How do you find interaction with lecturers?

   b. The overall shape of the course
      i. 12 hours a week what did you think?
      ii. Independent learning what did you think?
      iii. Group work what did you think?
      iv. Guidance tutorial, attendance monitoring, meetings, employability what did you think?

      c.   The facilities
- i. What did you think?
- ii. How does that compare with your own university?

4. Your life
   a. Did you travel? Where? Why not?
   b. How do you find life in Britain?
      - i. In general
      - ii. Food
      - iii. Party culture
      - iv. Best aspect?
      - v. Worst aspect?

   c. Do you feel integrated?
      - i. Is it easy to make friends with British students? Why/why not?
      - ii. Should the University do more to facilitate this integration? How?
      - iii. Have you experienced rejection because you were foreign?
      - iv. How did fellow students or ordinary citizens behave towards you?
      - v. Do you think there are some cultural barriers that prevent deep relationships? Which ones?

5. Overall comments
   a. Did this year match your expectations? Why/why not?
   b. What would you have liked to do but couldn't?
   c. What would be your advice to future Erasmus students?

Questionnaire three

BA (Hons) Modern Foreign Languages Programme Area:

Programme Questionnaire

❑ Subject combination (Please state whether the language is post A/ post GCSE/ ab initio)

❑ Level: 4 / 5 / 6: (Please circle as appropriate):

❑ Please indicate how well organised you consider the induction procedures to have been for your level of study at the beginning of this year: (4 = High; 1 = Low):

> 4   3   2   1

❑ Please comment on the quantity and quality of the programme information and University documentation you have received. Are there any suggestions you would like to make?

❑ To what extent do you think the aims and objectives of your programme at your level of study have been met this year: (Please indicate as appropriate):

> *Fully met*   *Generally met*   *Partly met*   *Not met*

❑ Please comment on the LTA (Learning, Teaching & Assessment) methods:

❑ Please comment on the Guidance and Support system made available to you:

❑ Did you use your Personal Development Plan to prepare for scheduled guidance tutorials?

> Yes   No

❑ How helpful did you find the documentation in reflecting on your performance and planning your learning?

> Essential   Very useful   Useful   Not Useful

- What changes would you suggest, if any?
- How effective are the mechanisms for student feedback? (Please indicate as appropriate):

Very effective   Effective   Quite effective   Ineffective

- Please comment on the above mechanisms. Do you have any suggestions to make?

- How would you assess your own progress this year?: (4=High; 1=Low):

4   3   2   1

- What aspects of your learning have led you to this assessment?

- How would you rate your attendance in general?: (4 = High; 1 = Low):

4   3   2   1

- If low, please state what has prevented you attending regularly:

- Please comment on the resources for directed and independent learning available to you at this level of the programme: (LRC; computer labs, Library):

- What use did you make of them?: (4=High; 1=Low):

Language Resources Centre	4	3	2	1
Computer Labs	4	3	2	1
Library & Learning Resources	4	3	2	1

- Are there any other comments you would like to make about the programme this year? (Final Year students may wish to reflect on their 3 or 4 year programme of study):

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.