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Are we ready for international students? Our university as window and mirror

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Abstract

The sharp increase related to the number of students learning outside the borders of their home countries in recent years, challenges constantly and simultaneously both sending and hosting institutions. Being prepared for improving learning opportunities and enhancing career options for such an increasing diversity of exchange-program students represents a serious challenge for the universities. The present paper explores students and faculty's perceptions on experiences provided by international exchange programs. For the last years, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences from the University of Bucharest developed several programs: mobility exchange for undergraduate and graduate students (master degree and PhD) developed in partnership with over ten countries from Europe or United States of America. Additionally, a Double Degree program was developed together with VIA UC Denmark. Experienced gained with the first group of the Double Degree students raised issues like expressing expectations, the importance of student perceptions and the interpersonal teacher behaviour in international education. At one hand, we investigate international students' willingness and readiness for international education programs. More specifically, we explore perceptions on academic opportunities, learning environment (resources, facilities, timeframe), approach to relationships, learning outcomes, accommodation and quality of life in host country, overall satisfaction etc. At the other hand, besides the shared understanding on teaching, pedagogy and curriculum that enhance multiple perspectives and students development, faculty working with international students face challenges (communication, discrepancies on how learners manage and direct their learning, cultural influences on learning). Data have been collected by individual and focus group interviews, questionnaires, document analysis (e.g. narratives, students' portfolio). We use Brok and Koopman model for international teacher behaviour (2007) for the interpretation of data provided by faculty members. It highlights two dimensions: influence (the degree to which the teacher is in control in the teacher students relationship) and proximity (the degree of cooperation between teacher and student). Conclusions of the study represents a common ground for improving own institutional practices and cooperation with partner universities.

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1. Introduction

Studying in another country represents a more and more frequent option of nowadays students. Gaining international knowledge and experience, challenging and enlarging their intercultural competences, improving their language proficiency are just a few advantages students have by taking part of such learning journey.

Their academic mobility is of crucial importance both at individual and community level, both for hosting and sending institutions and cultures. It enables the wider spread of relevant knowledge and good practices across different cultures, scientific area or disciplines. Metaphorically described, as Puukari (2012) mentions, studying abroad is an academic, intellectual, cultural, and emotional journey, which offers opportunities for international interaction and personal growth – enriching experiences, gaining knowledge, and developing skills that benefit a student both professionally and personally.

Due to such realities, an increasing number of students took the advantage of the opportunity to study abroad. Concomitantly, universities intensified their efforts to expose students to other cultures and to attract more and more culturally diverse international applicants.

Students' mobility is not just a significant opportunity but it represents also a challenge. Being convinced that cross countries dynamics represents a high valuable experience both academically and culturally, it is not enough for the short and long term efficiency of the process. Both mobile students and their universities have to be prepared for such a challenging intercultural adventure. It requires not only solid institutional arrangements but also an open attitude to interact with people who have different cultural background and willingness to learn and develop one's cultural sensitivity (*idem*). Therefore, a legitimate question is still to be answered: how prepared are students and universities for international mobility?

2. European Erasmus program for Erasmus mobile generation

The mobile students are considered those who study at an educational institution outside their home country (Arthur, 2005, p. 485); they have as a main characteristic the fact that they are in cross-cultural transition (Arthur, 2003). Of course, such broad definition puts a homogenous perspective over this category of students; in fact, as Puukari (2012) describes them, mobile students can be divided into subgroups depending on:

- the duration of study abroad: exchange students (generally remain abroad for one semester to one year) and degree students (remain abroad generally for 2-4 years)
- returning home option: students who return to their home country on completion of their studies and those who intend to remain in the host country either to enter doctoral studies or working life.

No matter which category they belong, it is a proven fact that mobile students do share a complex of advantages comparative with their peers not involved in day-to-day interactions experienced in a foreign country. Mobile students are considered superior to non-mobile students almost consistently with regard to foreign language proficiency, intercultural understanding and knowledge of other countries, i.e. areas directly linked to international experience (Bracht, Engel, Janson, Over, Schomburg and Teichler, 2006). Comparative with non-mobile young graduates, the mobile ones are sent abroad for work assignments (45% mobile graduates vs. 14% non-mobile), they do business trips to other countries (61% vs. 30%), use information about other countries (64% vs. 28%), work with colleagues/clients from other countries (75% vs. 36%), use foreign languages in professional situations (86% vs. 42%) (Engel, 2010).

Due to such figures, it is obvious why the outgoing and incoming mobility of students has been so actively and constantly encouraged during recent years. Within the European Union context, students mobility flows was

highly supported and stimulated by ERASMUS programme. The programme targets institutions, teachers and students by providing funding for studies, placements abroad, as well as intensive language courses.

Introduced as the EUs' flagship education and training programme for mobility and cooperation in higher education, ERASMUS has always targeted very ambitious aims: to help students to become internationally competent and well-prepared for job requirements in a closely interrelated European economy. It is expected that this international experience has a positive impact on the personal development of the students and in particular on intercultural understanding and foreign language proficiency, but also on their academic development (Engel, 2010). In the same time, the programme goals include the enhancement of quality and volume of student, teacher staff mobility and multilateral cooperation throughout Europe; to foster the cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises as well as to increase the compatibility between higher education and advanced vocational education qualifications in Europe. Moreover, the programme prioritizes the development of innovative practices in education and training at tertiary level and the development of innovative ICT-based content for lifelong learning (Gajdusek& Cikikyan, 2012).

Certainly such goals are very ambitions. But, due to its contribution of developing European Erasmus generation, the program is considered a European success story. The figures easily support this view. Within over 20 years of its existence, the programme has supported mobility of more than 2 million Erasmus students and contributed significantly to the European dimension of higher education by supporting student, teacher mobility and multilateral cooperation among European higher education institutions. In 2010, around 90% of the European universities from 31 countries took part in the programme. Student mobility remains the most significant part of the Erasmus programme with around 213,000 supported student mobilities annually (Gajdusek& Cikikyan, 2012).

More facts which prove Erasmus mobility program impact are synthesised by VALERA (The Professional Value of ERASMUS) study in which 4,600 former Erasmus students from the academic year 2000/01 were surveyed in 2005, that is about five years after their participation in the Erasmus programme. According to former Erasmus students' responses, their international experience played an important role when entering the labour market (Engel, 2010). Also, the VALERA survey showed that Erasmus graduates often report an international focus of their work tasks and their employment situation. Many of them have considered working or actually worked abroad, are employed in an internationally oriented organisation and take over work tasks with an international dimension (Engel, 2010). Bracht et al. (2006) comments such findings: "Competences, transition to employment, career and professional assignment of former ERASMUS students cannot be attributed predominantly to the temporary study experience in another European country. One has to bear in mind that a substantial proportion of them were internationally mobile prior to their course, and also many of them were mobile during the course of study beyond the ERASMUS-supported period. Moreover, they are a select group of students in various respects. ERASMUS has a mobilizing and reinforcing value, and often it has some value added as regards graduate career and notably international mobility and international work assignments, but certainly ERASMUS has not such a strong impact on the careers of graduates as their more favourable careers and the stronger international components of their careers per se might suggest" (pg. XIX).

3. Prepared for academic mobility? Benefits, difficulties and challenges for students and universities

In order to describe different issues accompanying the ERASMUS mobility processes, several studies have been developed during recent years. They refer to a wide range of aspects like: functional partnership between higher education institutions (Maiworm & Teichler, 1995), intercultural interactions (Clarke, 2005), employment (Teichler & Janson, 2007), recognition issues in relation to the ERASMUS program in Europe (Teichler, 1990), professional integration, cultural adaptation issues and others.

The present micro study is mainly focused on identifying main benefits and difficulties faced by students and their hosting faculties during exchange programs.

3.1. Research methodology

The data collection instruments for the above mentioned small-scale, qualitative study consisted of:

- two focus groups involving 10 incoming ERASMUS students (9 Danish students, attending the Double degree program developed by Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest and Via College Denmark and one French student); the focus groups were organized in May 2013, respectively in April 2014;
- interview with outgoing Romanian students enrolled at Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, who have been involved in Erasmus mobility program within last two academic years
- questionnaires and interviews with professors from different faculties of University of Bucharest, in charge with Erasmus mobility program.

3.2. Findings

Overall, both incoming and outgoing Erasmus students assessed studying abroad in a positive way, as a very productive learning period. They declared that they would recommend their friends to be involved in an exchange program; and they highlighted their major achievements: *“I have grown stronger and I have developed a lot from the perspective of my professional aspect, which is my greatest purpose of being here”* (student); *“I learned a lot, it was an incredible challenging process”* (student), *“I gain a lot from the cognitive point of view, new information, methods”* (Romanian student learning in France), *“All of my expectations have been fulfilled. I had a great year here, very rich”* (French student learning in Romania).

The detailed description of benefits and the difficulties faced is highly consonant with the findings of other studies. Like their peers investigated in other researches (Bracht et al., 2006), students indicated the following improvements areas as being fruitful achievements of their ERASMUS mobility:

Improving foreign language proficiency - almost all surveyed students rate the foreign language proficiency as much better when returning home;

Improving intercultural understanding and competences - almost all surveyed students declared that their knowledge of the host country's culture and society increased substantially:

“living in another culture, getting along with different people makes you more open and flexible” (ERASMUS student learning in Romania)

the following dialogue between an ERASMUS Double Degree student and the teacher-researcher is considered illustrative as well:

researcher: “In which way are you changed by your experience as a student in University of Bucharest?”

student: There are many good changes, actually my friends at home realized that I have improved. I am more relaxed about time and life. At home (in Denmark) I was really structured in what I do. I always use my plans. Everything at home it is about plans and time. I knew in advance what I am going to do on Saturdays at 9 am. Here it is not about plans, it is about time. In Denmark I know exactly at what time I am doing what. Now in Romania I am not using the same strict time frame anymore. I am more relaxed and I like that. I say to my friends: I will be there... I will no longer say I will be there in 10 minutes. I just say I will be there, I never will say I will be there in 10 minutes. I will be there.

researcher: Sometimes it is difficult to be sharp in time. We do not have a clear bus schedule like in Denmark.

student: We take these things in consideration. The bus will be delayed most of the time, in 90% of the cases. Instead of arriving late I leave earlier. I would never would at home. This experience changed me a lot. And I know I will bring these changes with me at home, in Denmark”.

Maximise career chances

Improving academic knowledge and skills; learning new methods, ways of learning and teaching

“I feel Romanians courses more “open” in terms of communication and participation than in France. In Romania, students had workshops, expositions, presentations etc. And I participate a lot. In France is very different and teacher do majority of the course, and students listen. Romanians and particularly Romanian students are very curious and open minded with strangers (internationals students), and they speak much better English than French people” (French student learning in Romania).

When talking about challenges and difficulties, students involved in the present investigation pointed to the same vulnerable points: mental stress of adjustment, need for reflexivity in studying, challenges posed by a foreign

language, different motivational factors, and in a more general sense, aspects related to constructing one's own identity in a new environment (Puukari, 2012).

The most frequent vulnerable points mentioned by ERASMUS students studying in Romania are the ones related to language difficulties; improving foreign language proficiency refers mainly to a lingua franca and not language of the host country; the last one seems to be a major problem:

“Romanian language class is a huge problem. Nobody can learn Romanian that quick. We were put in a Romanian class and at the same time we were supposed to see what's going to be practical placements, visit different institutions, to make social bounds with Erasmus people... We did not have time for all of these... we had no time for this, to socialize. Socialize or do your homework? We had to do our homework for three hours, every day. We were so busy. We were very busy, then looking for an apartment took us a lot of time”.

student: The language is an issue. It is hard to express yourself. And also the culture, I say something maybe it was a joke and later I am not sure if I was understood. We never know if we understand our jokes. Why is she saying so? You are laughing at our jokes. Sarcasm does not work (Danish student, enrolled in Double Degree programme). Researcher: Humour can be problematic. You speak Danish, I speak Romanian and together we speak a kind of English”.

The organizational, administrative difficulties, the difficult approach to the enrolment and credits recognition represent the second major issue to complain about; interviewed students were not satisfied with provision of information at home university, logistic support from receiving University, help of International Relations Office, financial situation, contact with local students:

“It was very difficult...My arrival at the faculty at the beginning of the year – when my learning agreement was not correctly, and when I did not find my teachers and courses in faculty” (Erasmus student learning in Romania).

“We need to bring our passports to have a pass for the library”.

“We mostly needed tour guides. It would be very useful this kind of nice service to students: to welcome them in the airport or to help them a bit not to get lost in the city. We have got a long email about how to get to Grozavesti. I think it would have been much easier and nicer to have somebody to help us, to join us in the bus and help finding our place in August. Nobody really speaks English that good in the airport, it was really difficult. Nobody from the university picked up. We felt completely lost. In Grozavesti we did not know what the building was, we walked under the bridge three, four times... it is not an obvious campus. We get out there and we get looking around, we did not know which one is the building, not the clear address, no indication. Actually the building was right in front of it” (Erasmus student learning in Romania).

“We miss gathering places. Teachers and students miss places to gather and to relax. We do not have cafeteria and other places for social connections. Communication and knowing each other better. We had cakes like every day in Denmark. Cake on Fridays and Monday. You know, everybody hates Monday morning, therefore you need something sweet to deal with life” (Erasmus student learning in Romania).

The academic area offered some complaining reasons as well; students (both incoming and outgoing students) feel under stimulated, the assignments are not enough or, on contrary are too many:

About the practical placement... People in institutions should be more educated about what it this practical is training for us. They saw us as volunteers but we were students. We want to learn, that's why we are here, in practice. It was an experience, but theoretically it was not so good. They (people in practical placements) did not know what to do. You need to teach ME that. They asked us what to do, they are not prepared to work with us as students. Therefore we didn't know what to do or what to ask, because we are not able to educate ourselves, we are not experienced for that. We need some guidelines, as students. I've got more from my practical placement in 3 months in Denmark than from this practical placement in 6 months in Romania. And I feel fear of the third practical placement in Denmark... I know that I need to learn much more.

The level of demands or stimulation from teachers and practical placement was too low during the first semester. But the academic semester is fine.

I expected a lot of psychology, much more psychology. I miss that very much.

Teachers' opinions completed the picture of students' mobility to and from Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science from University of Bucharest. The interpretation of data provided by faculty members has

been guided by Brok and Koopman model for international teacher behavior (MITB) (2007). The model describes teacher behaviour according to two dimensions:

Influence (the degree to which the teacher is in control in the teacher–student relationship), characterized by teacher dominance (D) on one end of the spectrum and teacher submission (S) on the other end

Proximity (the degree of cooperation between teacher and students) characterized by teacher cooperation (C) on one end and by teacher opposition (O) on the other.

These two dimensions of influence and proximity are particularly relevant because of their strong connection to aspects of intercultural communication. The relevance of the model in the context of intercultural environment is that analysis provides support for interpreting not only teacher–student interaction from an interpersonal viewpoint but also the effects that culture may have on these perceptions and the resulting classroom climate (Brok & Koopman, 2007).

Taking into account the MITB framework, it can be underlined that professors' opinions collected within the present study suggest a significant academic distance towards ERASMUS students hosted by different faculties. Thus, even if all interviewed teachers highlighted the tremendous importance of international exchange programs for their faculty, many professors perceive their presence as external, *"something added to our day to day academic life"* (teacher). *"We learn a lot from these experiences, but it is difficult"* (teacher in charge with ERASMUS program). Dealing with mobile students is *"challenging, interesting and refreshing"*, but in the same time it is considered a difficult and time-consuming venture for faculty members. They have to *"talk to them in a foreign language as a supplementary task, with no financial support"* (teacher in charge with ERASMUS program). *"You need time to adjust to each other. They (international students) are a bit lost in the very beginning. Takes time to find information, people, buildings. Would be better to have an internal system for orientation of international students"* (teacher in Double Degree program). Sometimes the academic distance is explained through students' difficulty of speaking a common foreign language (*"there are some ERASMUS students who do not speak a foreign language, just their mother tongue... Once, I used all my Spanish words I knew from movies to understand each other"*).

Socialization represents another topic of discussion. Even if in the beginning of the Double Degree program there are meetings organized for both Romanian and Danish students, international students have higher expectations in regard to participation to social events together with other students. *"We hoped that after our practical placement period we will have the academic semester... then ... we will meet our Romanian colleagues, we will have parties together, we will have trips together and so on. This really did not happen at all. I was on my own all the time. I was happy that my friends from Denmark and family were able to visit me in Bucharest"* (Danish student).

Others have mentioned difficulties in organising exchanges programs include of the inexistence of courses taught in international languages in different faculties' curriculum, uncertain recognition of credits, difficulties of acclimating the students to their new environment, unexpected logistical problems.

Conclusions

From a metaphorical perspective, the international programs can be seen both as a window and a mirror. Overall, most students and faculty expressed the excitement of being involved in international programs. Such an experience is reported as being formative at both institutional and personal level, from different points of view.

As a mobility window, the Double Degree program and other international programs provided by the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences ground on closer cooperation with partner institutions, aim at enhancing the quality of the study programs in partner countries. It provides more possibilities to share expertise and knowledge between similar types of programs and institutions in different countries, which is expected to result in enhancing the quality of the educational offer of the home program.

As a mirror, the international programs provide better chances to reflect at institutional practices and types of experiences provided to own or external students. It gives the chance to look at its own study plans, curriculum, teaching and assessment practices, as well as recognition procedures and learning agreements.

From a broader perspective, student-focused points of view highlight that international programs open better education possibilities and enhance students' employability. These expected positive effects are connected to

enhanced communication skills, autonomy, intercultural experiences exposure and reality-based challenges. Main impact was perceived at the individual level, as personal development of the participating students. Besides the positive effects or added value of the international exchange experience, students reported general mobility-related challenges (different language and context), practical challenges (accommodation, transportation) and personal challenges (long distance relationships, missing favourite foods and socializing activities).

Briefly, our university is ready to welcome and accommodate international students in a coherent institutional structure. Experiences gained year after year facilitate better institutional and administrative arrangements for own students and international students. Improvements are needed on more personal and social perspective: international students need more articulated guidance, better opportunities to learn Romanian language and practical information. They also expressed the wish and need to be involved in socialization events and activities together with local students and faculty.

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