

The Motivational Factor of Erasmus Students at the University

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Abstract

This study involved 377 ERASMUS students from the University of Oviedo in an academic year. An ad-hoc questionnaire was applied in on-line format to determine students' perceptions and opinions and to understand the motivations that impel them to participate in these activities and their degree of satisfaction. The study analyzes the process of Erasmus mobility, noting that, as a result of the stay, the students describe their mastery of the host country language as good or excellent in most cases. Academic and cultural factors, the desire to get to know a new environment and to have a European experience impel most of the students to travel abroad. Job prospects are another motivating factor, and the overall assessment of the planned stay is acceptable, good or excellent in most cases.

Keywords: motivation, ERASMUS, lifelong learning program, university

1. Introduction

1.1 State of Art

One of the characteristics of the new international university relations scenario is its increasing level of economic and cultural exchanges. This dynamic supports the proposal of a common Europe facing the challenge of its diversity. Ideas about internationalization and globalization do not always refer to the same goals; for instance, cooperation is based on mutual trust, whereas business strategies and interests focus on principles of competence and conquering markets (Teichler, 2009).

The Ministerial Conference of the Process of Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve of 2009 set the goal of 20% of European graduate students with studies or practicum abroad for the year 2020. This turns academic mobility into one of the most important aspects of the common European space. Students' international mobility in Europe favors a sense of fraternity, but it is also an investment in future development, resulting in the relocation of people with high research capacities (Rindoks, 2010). Various studies have revealed the relation between these stays in another country and the phenomenon of migration of academicians, stressing that its long-term results should be analyzed (Hoffman, 2009). In Europe, specific actions such as equating the studies carried out and their quantification in ECTS credits have facilitated academic acknowledgement of the training undertaken, also implying the validity of such training across Europe. This new framework of work exchanges is considered an opportunity and a priority for development in some countries, such as Latvia (Bluma, 2009; European Commission, 2010).

The European Parliament Decision (nr 1720/2006/CE) established the action Program in the field of Lifelong Learning (Lifelong Learning Programme – hereafter, LLP), which signalled the final stage of the Bologna process initiated in 1999, defining the European space of higher teaching for 2010. Its specific goals were: a) to develop quality and innovative PLL; b) to support the common Europe; c) to promote lifelong learning opportunities for social cohesion, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, equality of men and women; e) to help creativity, competitiveness, employment and entrepreneurial growth; f) to extend lifelong learning to all ages, to students with special needs and to disadvantaged students; g) to promote learning languages; h) to support the development of contents based on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); and i) to respect human rights and democracy.

The new European framework in the year 2020 is grounded on the institutions of higher education; they will be the impellers of the society of knowledge and will contribute to training the active population. For this purpose, higher teaching has been made uniform (Commission of the European Communities, 2006) and (Commission of the European Communities, 2009a and 2009b), with the following changes:

- Curricular: a system of three cycles (degree, master, doctorate), learning based on competence, flexible learning itineraries, acknowledgement of qualifications and competences, and mobility.
- Management reformation: autonomy and responsibility of the institutions.
- Funding reformation: diversification of income, enrolment fees, equitable assistance, and specific funding of the EU.

The goals of the LLP now focus on a new strategy for European development for 2020: sustainable growth, advanced knowledge, united citizenship in its society, and access to lifelong learning as a formula against unemployment. The strategic goals promote academic mobility and the increase of the quality and efficacy of education to improve levels of occupational insertion. In this sense, we underline the acknowledgement of the qualifications and flexible learning itineraries, as well as the acquisition of key transversal competences and the association with business and labour spheres (European Union Council, 2009).

Erasmus is the subprogram of Higher Teaching and Higher Professional Training. Its international cooperative actions have made it the most important program in the history of humanity, according to the Commissioner of Education and Culture of the European Union (Reding, 2004). In the EAC/49/10 of 2011 summons, a total of 1,065 million euros was granted, an increase of 4.6% over the previous year. Subsequently, specification of aids granted to each country has varied according to factors such as the type of project or the number of participant countries. Student mobility involved 213,266 people distributed among the twenty-seven states of the European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, Croatia, and Turkey.

The specific Erasmus goals (European Parliament, 2006) promote the attainment of a European Space for Higher Education by reinforcement of training and innovation. The operational goals are as follows:

- a) To improve students' and teachers' mobility in Europe qualitatively and quantitatively, achieving stays for three million people;
- b) To improve the quality and volume of multilateral cooperation among European institutions of higher education;
- c) To increase the transparency and compatibility of qualifications of higher education and higher professional training;
- d) To improve cooperation among educational institutions and businesses;
- e) To facilitate the development of tertiary level innovative educational practices, as well as their transfer, even between countries;
- f) To support the development of contents, services, pedagogies, and innovative lifelong learning practices based on ICTs.

Decision n° 1720/2006/CE has also set other priorities for Erasmus actions: the organization of Intensive Erasmus Language Courses in minority languages for mobile students, and short Intensive Programs focusing on specific study activities among various universities. In this sense, this activity should be multidisciplinary and oriented towards business studies, social sciences, arts, humanities, languages, law, and the development of business competences.

In this context, the Erasmus subprogram specifies these challenges through the following actions:

- Academic mobility
- Accomplishment of students' practicum and cooperation with businesses
- Courses of minority languages
- Compatibility of qualifications
- Inter-institutional cooperation
- Inclusion of ICTs
- Intensive training programs

1.2 Aim and Hypotheses

In view of the promotion of such mobility, it is suggested that we should observe students' responses and determine whether they accept the proposals of the Erasmus program (Makal, 2007). Thus, according to these guidelines, the goal of this study is to determine whether these directives are present in the perceptions and motivations that impel students from a Spanish university to participate in these LLP actions during their Erasmus stay.

2. Method

2.1 Participant Characteristics

The University of Oviedo is a higher public institution with 24.890 students enrolled. A total of 377 students went abroad with the Erasmus program during the academic year 2009/2010, of whom 157 were male and 220 were female (Table 1). Most of the students were from the region of Asturias, although a small percentage of students came from the bordering regions (Castilla-León, Galicia, and Cantabria).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample and requested destination

Age in years	% of the sample	Educational area of provenance	% of the sample	Destination (country)	% of the sample	Teaching language	% of the sample
22	10.8	Business administration	18.5	Italy	21.2	English	64.5
23	20.7	Biology and biochemistry	6.53	England	19.0	Italian	15.1
24	20.7	Education	6.25	Germany	11.2	German	12.7
25	16	Law	5.4	France	8.2	French	12.2
26	13.3	Electronics and automation	4.54	Bulgaria	6.0	Portuguese	1.86
27	7.4	Economics	3.4	Poland	4.7	Danish	1.33
28	6.3	History and archaeology	1.7	Norway	4.2	Finnish	1.06
29	2.2	Electricity and energy	0.56	Sweden	3.6	Turkish	1.06
30	1.1	Nursing, obstetrics and physiotherapy	0.56	Holland	3.0	Czech	0.8
31	0.5	Arts	0.29	Austria	2.7	Spanish	0.8
35	0.2	Odontology studies	0.29	Czech Republic	2.6	Greek	0.8
38	0.56	Languages and Philology	9.94	Denmark	2.5	Polish	0.53
46	0.20	Earth Sciences	4.82	Portugal	2.4	Russian	0.27
		Statistics	0.85	Belgium	2.0	Norwegian	0.27
				Greece	1.5		
				Ireland	1.2		
				Norway	1.2		
				Hungary	0.9		
				Turkey	0.9		
				Slovakia	0.8		
				Lithuania	0.3		
				Slovenia	0.3		

2.2 Assessment Instrument

The questionnaire we used was available through the institutional website of the University of Oviedo and it was completed after the students had returned. In the questionnaire, students were requested to reveal their

impressions and motivations about their Erasmus stay both through closed-ended and open-response questions. The questions were divided into 10 sections. For more information and questionnaire format is available in the website: <http://www.uniovi.net/zope/organosgobierno/unipersonales/vicerrectorados/vicd/encuestas/Erasmus>

The initial data referred to the identification of the surveyed student (name and surnames, ID, sex, city of origin, area of studies, and e-mail address). In this way, the data is linked to the specific person who did the student exchange, increasing response reliability.

The rest of the questionnaire includes 35 items, grouped into the following categories:

- Support and information
- Accommodation and infrastructures
- Academic aspects
- Language
- Economic aspects
- Personal experience.

2.3 Design and Data Analysis

An *ex post facto* design was used to determine the perceptions and motivations that impel students from a Spanish university to participate in these LLP actions during their Erasmus stay. The data obtained were analysed by means of individual descriptive and quantitative analysis

2.4 Variables

To determine the European directives of the LLP, this study was based on the European normative published to this effect, as well as on the annual reports and statistics published by the European Commission and other literature on international mobility from the European Union. Derived from content analysis of these legislative texts, we observe that this European program pursues the following main goals, LLP directives: *Academic and professional results of the mobility, Quality and universalization of Learning, Conception of community and European cohesion, language issues, and Flexibility and academic equivalences.*

For this purpose, these six aspects were selected as variables to be quantified in the perceptions and motivations of the students to go abroad on an Erasmus student exchange, in addition to the global impact of the experience.

3. Results

3.1 Global Impact of the Experience

The global actions of the Erasmus program were positively rated in 90.4% of the cases. Moreover, the duration of the stay was considered adequate or even short in 98% of the cases, and it was considered academically acceptable, good, or excellent (86.2%), with positive personal rating reaching 91.4% (Table 2).

Table 2. Global results and impact of the ERASMUS stay

Personal appraisal of the stay	Responses	%	Academic rating of the stay	Responses	%
Negative	1	0.27	Negative	6	1.59
Poor	1	0.27	Poor	16	4.24
Acceptable	88	23.3	Acceptable	88	23.3
Good	100	26.5	Good	125	33.2
Excellent	157	41.6	Excellent	112	29.7
Global assessment of the stay	Responses	%	Personal rating of the duration of the stay abroad	Responses	%
Negative	2	0.53	Adequate	305	81
Poor	4	1.06	Short	64	17
Acceptable	13	3.45	Long	7	2
Good	206	54.6			
Excellent	122	32.4			

3.2 Analysis of the Impact of the LLP Directives in the ERASMUS Students of the University of Oviedo Academic and Professional Results of the Exchange

The students' own motivation, which impels them to obtain academic and professional benefits, can be considered an intrinsic stimulus (Table 3). The open questions revealed the motivational factor of mastering a new language in 56% of the responses. To a lesser extent, students refer to knowledge of a new educational methodology (14.9%), achieving an independent life (10.2%), personal development (6.8%), and increased job options (4%).

Table 3. Motivational factors of the participants in the ERASMUS program

Factors that motivated the student to go abroad	Responses	%
European experience	203	53.8
Academic	195	51.7
Cultural	190	50.4
A new foreign environment	167	44.3
Career planning	102	27.1
Friendships	38	10.1

3.3 Quality and Universalization of Learning

To appraise the impact of this pattern on the students, we quantified two factors: the extrinsic positive reinforcement of the Informative Support and the influence of the Economic Support.

Informative Support. This is a sensitizing action for all students, which is carried out through informative meetings, and broadcast through the institutional website and systematic emailing of information. It presents the appeal of student exchange related to the advantages of the LLP. Moreover, personal issues such as generating an international dimension of one's CV, helping to find work, consolidating a second language, and getting to know another institution and culture, are also presented. This information is considered acceptable, good or excellent in 78.7% of the cases (Table 4).

Table 4. Results detected for the extrinsic factor informative support

Your source of general information and of the study program at your destination was...	Responses	%	When you arrived at your destination institution, you were offered...	Responses	%
Institution of origin	210	55.7	Welcome act	158	41.9
Destination Institution	141	37.4	Informative session	155	41.1
Internet	188	49.9	Orientation program	94	24.9
Other	34	9.02	During your stay, reception acts were organized...	Responses	%
The utility of this information was...	Responses	%	Yes	310	82
Negative	4	1.06	No	68	18
Poor	46	12.2	You received adequate support from the institution of origin or the destination institution...	Responses	%
Acceptable	138	36.6	Negative	4	1.06
Good	140	37.1	Poor	40	10.6
Excellent	19	5.04	Acceptable	109	28.9
Did not reply	21	5.57	Good	169	44.8
			Excellent	25	6.63

Economic support Financial aid can be considered, a priori, an indeterminate factor of influence because it can be a stimulus in the case of a comfortable economic situation or a difficulty in more disadvantaged situations, as economic support is variable and is only received after completing the stay.

In these student exchanges, Thorn (2009) differentiated motivation resulting from external and extrinsic reinforcement from intrinsic motivation, considered as the manifestation of the outcome of a personal choice. He also mentions other sources of accidental influence on certain interests that can have positive or negative impact.

The results show that this support partially or totally covers expenses in 63.6% of the cases. Therefore, this aid is complemented by economic support from the family (57% of the cases). The mean expense is between 500 and 700€ for 67.9% of the students, and it mainly involves non-academic goods and services, except for 21% of the cases, who also had to pay for some other type of fees at the host institution. Another motivator is that student of this program do not have to pay registration or enrolment fees at the destination.

3.4 Conception of Community and European Cohesion

The impact of this pattern was appraised by analysis of the level of integration with the host society. Erasmus students find a high level of acceptance in foreign settings. For instance, the students were accommodated in specific university establishments, and in a similar proportion, in homes or with families from the community (Table 5). It is noteworthy that, initially, only 10.1% considered friendship as a motivational goal, but subsequently, 73.8% of the surveyed stated they found the relationship with their local classmates to be acceptable, good, or excellent.

Table 5. Results of the intrinsic stimulus factor immersion in the community

Type of accommodation during the stay	Responses	%
University	163	43,2
Apartment	110	29,2
Private home	19	5,04
Families and other	25	6,63
...provided accommodation	Responses	%
University office	156	41,4
Friends/family	28	7,43
Private offer	85	22,5
Other ads and Internet	78	20,7
Degree of integration with the local student community	Responses	%
Negative	8	2.12
Poor	54	14.3
Acceptable	107	28.4
Good	128	34
Excellent	43	11.4

In this sense, in an open question about the most positive aspects of the stay, 34% referred to forging personal links of friendship, and 42.8% mentioned the cultural enrichment of living in another human environment.

3.5 Language Issue

The language factor can either be a motivator in cases in which the person feels stimulated and able to deal with relationships in another language, or it can be a barrier due to lack of knowledge and fear of not being able to communicate in the destination language. Thus, in the study of Fernández Olmos (2010, p. 118), it is considered a demotivator in 77.8% of the cases, and a stimulator in 68.8%. The process of Erasmus applicant selection hinders the mobility of people with a low language level. The test questions are progressively more difficult, in order to determine the student's level.

The results show that 61% of the students received linguistic training before and/or during their stay abroad. The institution of origin was responsible for these courses in 5% of the cases, the destination institution in 38%, and in 52% of the cases, it was not clear who was responsible for this training.

The open questions show that the language factor is noteworthy in 56% of the cases as one of the most important motivational elements. There is a significant increase in the mastery of the new language after the student exchange. Of the surveyed, 22% stated that their mastery of the language before the stay was poor, but this percentage sank to 1% after the stay. Likewise, before the stay, 25% considered their language level to be good, and this increased to 50% after the stay. The exchange had a positive impact on language, as 7% stated that their mastery was excellent before the stay, and this percentage reached 36% after the stay.

3.6 Flexibility and Academic Equivalences

The degree of flexibility and acknowledgement of the proposed academic studies abroad are considered an influential factor of extrinsic positive reinforcement.

The students decide which subjects they want to study at the destination institution, and they are equated with other subjects from the university of origin, equating the total number of credits and the typology. Changes in the choice of materials at the destination are also accepted after the exchange has begun.

In the study carried out, we verified that, in 91% of the cases, the studies are agreed on before the stay. After returning, the academic equivalence of this period of studies was obtained in 89% of the cases, and in 38%, supplementary credits were obtained upon completing language courses.

4. Discussion

Informative support is a positive stimulus in 78.7% of the cases, and this element is repeated in other countries, as noted by Kirsch and Beernaert (2011) in his analysis of student exchanges in the French community of Belgium, where it also reaches 88%.

In our analysis, it is concluded that the economic support is sufficient (63.6%), which is coherent with that of the study of Kirsch and Beernaert (2011, p. 73). Also, the degree of student integration with the classmates reaches an acceptable, good, or excellent level in 73.8% of the cases, the same amount as that obtained by Kirsch and Beernaert (2011, p. 60) in Belgium. Likewise, the high levels of study equivalence and academic flexibility also coincide.

Some of our results are similar to the work of Fernández Olmos (2010, p. 117), in which the positive motivational factors of these actions are rated: international experience (73.3%) and personal development (66.6%), although, in addition to the factors of Fernández Olmos, job opportunities are considered to a greater extent (66.6%). This author also underlines the following demotivators for mobility: lack of knowledge of the language (77.8%), funding difficulties (75.6%), and difficulties to find adequate accommodation (57.8%).

The climate of personal satisfaction with these programs is high, reaching 91.4% of positive ratings, and, at the academic level, 86.2% of the opinions were satisfactory. These data rise to 97 and 96%, respectively, in the study of Kirsch and Beernaert (2011, p. 101).

Students who participate in these programs have a profile with high academic performance, and this suggests more independence and autonomy over their training context (Arias, et al., 2010, p. 810). This circumstance promotes stimulus and motivation to achieve good academic and professional outcomes from the exchange, and this is confirmed by the results of the initial motivation in the analyzed directive of academic and global outcomes of the stay.

Thorn (2009) described a series of motivators in international student exchange options, such as cultural opportunity, academic development, and economic and professional motivations, interest in human relations, the appeal of the mere fact of travelling and lust for adventure. These factors vary as a function of gender, location, and socioeconomic level. Our data are in accordance with Kirsch and Beernaert (2011) for the case of Belgium, in which the following motivators are noteworthy: practicing a language, foreign adventure, cultural factors, being independent, academic factors, European experience, and professional development. But we coincide with Findlay et al. (2012) in stating that, currently, the theories that explain mobility should address more profound concepts related to individual life plans and the reputation associated with certain destinations. This traces a differential geography of students' interests.

Erasmus involves more than two million people, suggesting the existence of a micro-culture that is positively considered and tends to increase. The noteworthy factors that motivate people to participate in these actions are:

learning a language, getting to know a new culture, new people, other ways of teaching, the experience of travelling, forging new friendships, and developing the academic field.

The prior informative activity about the exchanges generates positive expectations. The economic issue is also a decisive element in the initial decisions.

The growing need to develop valid competences for students' professional future is an element that stimulates the creation of a syllabus with European dimensions, especially in the consolidation of a language, mainly English, as well as the creation of opportunities in other academic and professional settings.

Two variables that impel the Erasmus program so it is positively considered are the degree of integration with the local students and the level of acceptance in the host society. This is particularly important in the resulting trinomial: exchange, friendship, and favourable context for development. These circumstances can be a response to the efforts of the administrations to promote the Erasmus actions and to the high levels of economic investment it receives. And it can be the way towards a Europe of solidary citizens, whose development is based on links of cooperation and the creation of a common awareness.

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