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Story (of) Experiencing: Erasmus, Spaces for Cultural Exchange

While the history and objectives of the most prestigious student mobility programme in Europe have been familiar to the academic community for quite some time, special attention is now being paid to the recently emerged genre of Erasmus writing, comprising texts that range from short and helpful guidelines meant for future Erasmus students to individual accounts of the time spent abroad. This paper aims to analyse such texts in an attempt to outline the most frequent reasons behind each candidate's decision to take part in this programme, the challenges faced by participants as well as the cultural and emotional aspects of any such experience, and to ultimately define the concept of 'Erasmus spirit'.

Key words: *cultural exchange, 'Erasmus spirit', multiculturalism, student mobility*

Erasmus, the most ample student mobility programme at European level, has shaped the university customs and the life of many generations of students. This EU funded programme has a triple objective: of increasing the mobility on the EU labour market, of increasing the quality of the European universities through cooperation and of building the "European citizenship". In the framework of the programme, in almost 20 years, more than 1,500,000 students have travelled to pursue a period of a maximum one year of study in another European country.

Regarding these 1,500,000 experiences of studying abroad, the statistics describing the programme and the formal transcript of records constitute the hard memory. One could add the photos enriching the albums of more and more families and, in exceptional cases, the written descriptions for the Erasmus experiences.

The new genre of "Erasmus writings" has often emerged from the need of informing the future Erasmus students on their destination. In those cases, they started as a completely altruistic service, offering descriptions meant to be short and helpful guides. In other cases, personal thoughts on the mobility period were made available to different categories of readers. Another important source of Erasmus writings, and also the source of the quotations this article will use, are the projects developed at European level in order to gather those descriptive indicators / student opinions with a view of improving the programme.

Having the correspondent in the high degree of satisfaction that the absolute majority of the Erasmus students have declared at their return, those Erasmus memories are both vibrant supporters of the inter-cultural approach through student mobility and reflections on the impact Erasmus had on their future life path.

Without doubt, writings serve to save these excellent Erasmus experiences from their ephemeral condition. They also help us in identifying some "classic Erasmus moments". Not least, they constitute authentic lessons of life in multicultural spaces.

“Why Erasmus?” is the first question the Erasmus memories try to answer to. Often, there is the need to improve the language competences: “when I applied to take part in the Erasmus mobility programme, I wanted to learn English” (Karine, Belgium); and often, there is the wish to improve the academic knowledge in general: “the reason for choosing Tübingen was from the beginning very clear: I wanted to go to a university with a stimulating intellectual environment” (Lars, Denmark).

Beyond these reasons, Erasmus is about having the courage of facing the new, about taking the decision to meet the unknown and about accepting these challenges. As Erasmus gives the European student the opportunity to assume as mature person the consequences of their choices helping them to gain independence and to grow up, the answer to the question “Why Erasmus?” could also be the natural curiosity and the spirit of adventure possessed by the human kind. In writings, the answer is never formulated as such, but it can be perceived under the anxiety of the beginning, usually at the first contact with the host town:

“When I arrived and saw the majestic Eiffel Tower through the bus window, my heart began to beat faster and my grip tightened on the piece of paper which stated that I was a student taking part in the European Socrates/Erasmus programme” (Jana, Slovakia);

“So I packed my bags in January 2001 and went to a country where I didn’t even understand the ads on the street. I was not able to say “hi” or ask for something” (Elisabeth, Austria);

“I was in Lyon exactly ten years ago, and I still have the memories of that time: [...] my worries during the car journey there...” (Daniele, Italy).

Erasmus is not only about facing the new, it is also about the wonder of discovering. After the initial inherent hesitation, the mobile students become familiar with a new academic environment, make new friends, fall in love and discover cultures, customs, countries:

“Although my studies were of great interest, I think that the highlight of my Greek year was getting to know people from almost every country in Europe. I became close friends with people from Ireland, Portugal, Sweden and Italy. I also began to realize how small Europe really is. Taking a bus or a train to another country was a new experience for me. I travelled to the countries next to Greece” (Sveinn, Iceland);

“I returned [...] full of good impressions about the organisation, quality of studies and amiability and accessibility of professors at the University of Kiel” (Tadas, Lithuania);

“Erasmus studies have naturally made me much more familiar with European ways of life. I have learned to understand Belgians in particular, but also dozens of other exchange students from all parts of Europe. Most importantly, many of my relationships during Erasmus studying have become long-lasting friendships” (Matti, Finland);

“However, the best thing about my stay, and certainly the most important, was meeting my future spouse, an Erasmus student from the UK” (Sveinn, Iceland);

“During this time I became familiar with Swedish customs. I learned to live on *knäckebröd* and *filmjök*, but also to jump naked into a lake at a temperature of 17 degrees after coming out of the sauna. After this close contact with nature, I lost my heart to Sweden” (Karine, Belgium);

“When I applied for an Erasmus scholarship I did not know much about the program and its possibilities. [...] I was expecting to directly experience the firmly established and almost legendary German legal system, to explore fresh ideas, improve my foreign language skills and establish new relations... I was anticipating much, but, to tell the truth, all the advantages that the Erasmus program has actually brought me, were really beyond my imagination...” (Tadas, Lithuania).

Given the richness of the programme and the generosity of its dimensions, trying to summarise what Erasmus means could appear as difficult. But not for the Erasmus students themselves:

“If all this can be summed up in one word, that word is “spirit”. The Erasmus spirit is not easy to explain to those who have not had this experience [...]. It is this spirit that makes us say “why not?” when faced with new experiences, that allows us to live in another country without feeling like a foreigner” (Daniele, Italy).

This “spirit” remains alive and prepares the Erasmus students for accepting new multicultural and international challenges, with the confidence given by the previous success:

“My positive experience in Lund encouraged me to try again. So I went to Finland to do my internship. The company I am working at is young, and the people who work there are also young. [...] Combining our different backgrounds and knowledge, I am sure we will succeed” (Lasse, Estonia);

“My Erasmus year [...] gave me a chance to develop in a cosmopolitan environment, where I was fortunate enough to meet my wife. She is French and also did an Erasmus year, but in Norway. [...] After five years in Africa, we are returning in Paris this summer for a few years before, we hope, leaving once again for new horizons. As a result of the multicultural and international environment in which we are evolving every day, we have developed an ability to adapt quickly and our curiosity for all things new has increased, and this is something which we want to pass on to our children...” (Hans, Norway);

“I became more interested in other ways of looking at life and understanding our surroundings. My exchange encouraged me to continue seeking for international experiences and contacts, a quest that I believe will be life long” (Mats, Sweden).

In order to explain what the “Erasmus spirit” means, there are so many fascinating possibilities, many of them offered by the written memories of the former Erasmus students. Together, these stories of experiencing form a huge treasure, invaluable for describing the Erasmus student mobility programme and for acknowledging the role it plays in creating the spaces for cultural exchange.

References

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