

The Erasmus experience: motivations, preparation, adaptation, difficulties and impact

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INTRODUCTION

Travelling has evolved during the 20th century. Whilst people started travelling as a means of getting to know different places, of relaxing and discovering the cultures of different countries, the creation and evolution of the now European Union has meant the conception of a new way of encompassing the traditional meaning of travelling and training, which allows us to talk about “training or educational tourism”. One of the main examples of this “training tourism” is the Erasmus programme, the impact of which has soared over the years. The recent source of this enthusiasm for studying abroad may be traced back to just before the Second World War, when it became an option for students of languages to spend some time abroad as part of their studies (Parker and Rouxville 1995: 9; see also a very interesting study by Castillo Pérez, 2002).

As we have already seen in chapter 2, the number of Erasmus students has progressively increased since the programme began in 1987. This chapter offers a brief overview of the experience and, in order to do so, is structured in the chronological order of an Erasmus stay abroad: motivation, expectations, preparations, the stay itself and evaluation or impact of the stay. Our starting point will be why students want to go abroad and study under the Erasmus scheme.

After analyzing frequent motivations, we will then focus on expectations and preparation, including some of the difficulties encountered during that stage. The stay itself is then discussed, from several different points of view, but paying particular attention to issues directly related to the actual academic experience. Finally, students' evaluations of their experience and the impact of the period abroad are examined.

As Tsokaktsidou and Kelly comment in chapter 1, the study abroad experience, although on the whole satisfactory for participants, is complex and demanding. The whole cycle as we will describe it here must inevitably be linked to the cycle or stages of culture shock as first described by Oberg (1960). Given the importance of this phenomenon in our context, it is appropriate to reproduce here the stages through which individuals coming into contact with other cultures usually go:

- **Honeymoon stage:** recent arrivals feel euphoria and are happy to be in the new country.
- **Crisis or shock stage:** the first problems arise leading to rejection of the new culture. Individuals feel frustrated.
- **Adjustment, reorientation, gradual recovery, or negotiation stage:** attempts are made to understand the new culture and to reach psychological balance.
- **Adaptation, resolution or acculturation stage:** the new culture is accepted and valued. Individuals feel they belong and integrate.
- **Re-entry stage:** during this stage individuals feel they no longer belong to their old culture because of the changes both they and their home culture have undergone in the interim.

MOTIVATION: WHY BECOME AN ERASMUS STUDENT?

It is generally believed that most students who take part in the Erasmus exchange programme share a common motivation, that of

getting to know a different culture and learning a different language. This motivation is further strengthened by the fact that their studies at a foreign university will be recognised at their home university.

Previous studies (Teichler 1991, Teichler and Maiworm 1998, Teichler *et al.* 2000) indicate that personal and/or academic motivation is usually high. The various reasons cited by students for deciding to take part in the Erasmus programme reflect on the whole a desire to learn and to discover new things: learning a foreign language, personal growth, learning in another country, achieving in-depth understanding of the host country, desire to travel, experiencing new teaching methods, desire to see the home country in a different light, taking new subjects/modules. Only occasionally do factors such as having a rest, which may be considered as negative motivation from an academic point of view, come into play (Tsokatsidou, 2005b). Our own study generally confirms these motivations.

It is perhaps interesting to point out here that some teaching staff and coordinators in interviews and focus groups had a less positive impression, adding negative motivations such as "getting away with taking easier modules", "getting higher marks because teaching staff abroad are over-generous with their marks for Erasmus students, and then recognition at home is too lax". Parents interviewed informally also objected to the less serious motivations they detect in their sons and daughters, which give rise to the social stereotype of the Erasmus student who does nothing but party continually whilst abroad (see *L'auberge espagnole* discussed in chapters 2 and 8).

It is further interesting to distinguish here between two different kinds of participants in the Erasmus programme: those students who have to go abroad as a compulsory part of their studies (in some countries there are university courses that require students to go abroad during a particular year of their studies, as happens mainly on language courses) and those students who decide, of their own free will, to take part in the Erasmus scheme. The former group clearly have a strong extrinsic motivation, as they are fulfilling a

course requirement, and may not in fact reflect in depth on their own personal intrinsic motivation for that reason. It is of course also likely that the period abroad played an important role in their initial choice of degree course. The second group often have little positive extrinsic motivation or may even have pressures contrary to their participating in the study abroad period, but certainly have a fairly strong level of conscious intrinsic motivation as detailed above.

PREPARATION FOR THE STAY ABROAD: EXPECTATIONS AND SELECTION

The Erasmus experience does not start when the student is in a new country and at a different university, but long before. The first step of the whole adventure is usually a selection process, which varies considerably from institution to institution, from course to course and so on. But even courses where the stay abroad is compulsory usually have some form of selection process in place to decide who goes where. Criteria for selection cover a wide range of factors, the most common being the student's previous academic performance and the student's linguistic ability, although personal motivation, family circumstances, personal interest and aptitude do sometimes come into play. Students usually apply for a series of possible host institutions and courses in order of preference. In these applications, students take into account many different factors: previous students' experiences, the popularity of a particular institution, the academic reputation of an institution, the town or city, the language of the town, the language of instruction, personal and family circumstances or contacts, and so on. It is evident that the combination of the institutional selection criteria and the students' individual criteria for preferring one institution to another, and the consequent degree of success the student has in the process may have a strong influence on initial motivation and expectations. Students who manage to obtain a place at their first choice will commence the whole adventure with

a very positive attitude, whereas students who are offered a place at a seventh or eighth choice, at an institution working with a language they are not comfortable in, or in a country they are not particularly attracted to, tend to begin the experience with a more negative attitude. Indeed, in our experience, many students in this situation decide finally not to take up the place offered to them, causing not a little organizational difficulty on the way!

This is not to say that positive motivation and expectations are necessarily a guarantee of success. Indeed, overly high expectations may be a negative factor: it will be difficult for the host institution, staff, country and city to meet excessively high expectations, whereas modest expectations are easy to meet and indeed to exceed!

Once students know where they are going, they move on to preparing for the next months of their life as students, and that means not only personal and, in some cases, psychological, but also academic preparation. The support and social side of preparation is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4, so we will focus here more on the academic side of this stage. The "academic" side can of course be subdivided into several different aspects. There are all the administrative procedures to go through for registration; the selection of modules, class groups, timetables; language preparation for the academic environment; content preparation, including prior reading and so on; last but not least preparation for teaching and learning methods and traditions at the host institution.

From the information gathered on the project, we can conclude that up-to-date and pertinent information for students on some of these aspects comes best from previous Erasmus students who have spent their stay abroad at the same host institution, or at least in the same country and academic tradition. That is not, of course, to say that institutions do not have an important role to play, in particular with regard to module selection and preparation for teaching and learning methods and traditions.

On the administrative side, it is not always easy to carry out this preparation from the home country. Registration, finding language

courses, complying with all the administrative requirements, etc., can sometimes be done on the web or through application forms sent from the host universities, but this is not always the case. It may be extremely confusing for students unaccustomed to complex bureaucratic systems to have to wade through the enormous amount of paperwork required in some universities. On the other hand, those used to fulfilling numerous administrative requirements may feel insecure when asked only to fill in one simple form! Most students who have taken part in our study complain about the difficulties encountered in finding information; they usually agree that the information exists, but is not easily accessible for them.

As to choosing modules, class groups and timetables, there is a variety of systems in place across Europe, ranging from set study programmes pre-established by the institutions involved with little or no choice for the student, to situations in which students are simply advised at home to take the courses they find most interesting on arrival with no prior selection, or registration. The former option is the easiest for the student, the simplest way to ensure timetabling will not be a problem during the students' stay abroad and to guarantee recognition. It is also, of course the most rigid, and some students feel they miss out on the opportunity to have some freedom of choice in their curriculum. The latter allows for a great deal of free choice in principle, although often in practice incoming Erasmus students find that courses and groups are full, that host institutions limit the number of places on offer to Erasmus students, that there are timetable clashes, or simply that the courses they initially thought attractive are not in fact what they were looking for. The many intermediate solutions to course selection probably limit some of the risks involved in these two extreme versions. Students on the whole prefer to receive clear advice from tutors before departure and back-up to that advice from local tutors on arrival, providing them with a degree of freedom of choice within a clear curricular structure. In our study, there were frequent complaints about lack of coordination between home and host institutions in this respect.

As to preparation for actual teaching and learning methods and traditions, this would seem to be the kind of preparation which is least common for Erasmus students. Thus, 60.4% of the students who took part in our study stated that they had not received any information about what classes would be like at their host universities, and only 6.3% felt they had definitely received the preparation required, and yet 81.3% of them detected clear differences in methods and traditions once they joined classes. As will be discussed below in this chapter, and highlighted in later chapters, teaching and learning methods and traditions vary enormously from one country to another, from one institution to another, and students can experience considerable difficulty in adapting to them. It is our belief that this issue has not received the attention it deserves on preparation programmes for mobile students.

ADAPTATION AND STAY

Once the students have arrived in their host country and host university we have to differentiate two stages: during a period ranging approximately between the first two to six weeks, depending on the length of the exchange, students go through an adaptation process where everything is new to them, not only the culture and the university but also everything else: they must get used to a new culture; very often, to a language they don't know very well or, at least have not (yet) mastered; they must meet new people; they have to get around in a new city, they have to get used to different habits, different food, etc. After that adaptation period we can say that what could be called the rest of the stay, or the stay itself, starts. And the student's experience at this later stage can be totally different from that "suffered" during the first weeks. It is also important to note that the experience of this adaptation period will influence the rest of the stay; if students have serious problems early on, they may

get frustrated and have a negative experience, or, as happens in a few cases, they may even go back home.

Culture shock: from the honeymoon stage to the crisis stage and on to adaptation

As has been said, the first weeks constitute a period of adaptation where everything is totally new to the student. At the beginning of this period students are usually in a state of euphoria due to the new world of opportunities opening up to them, but after this initial euphoria, a feeling of depression and distress may set in as life during these days is on many occasions fraught with difficulties.

Culture shock manifests itself as a reaction to a "cultural shift in terms of language, values, customs, philosophies and ideology, as well as other factors such as diet, climate and geography" (Ryan 2000: 77). And this shift may mean that the student will experience difficulties and distress. This may be one of the reasons why most Erasmus students tend to stick together at the beginning no matter what their nationality is; they just share being "foreign" to the new environment. Authors such as Furnham and Bochner (1986) or Ryan (*ibid*) give great importance to friendship in helping international students to cope with the demands of living in a new culture and in a new academic environment. Thus, Furnham and Bochner (1986) identify three types of friendship networks important for international students, asserting that they need the three types of networks if they are to be successful in their studies. These three networks are monocultural groups, bicultural networks, and multicultural ones. The three of them act as follows:

"Monocultural groups comprising other international students provide support for coping with loneliness, homesickness and adjustment problems; bicultural networks with home students provide advice on how to navigate the university and outside environments; and multicultural networks provide companionship for recreational and non-academic activities". (Furnham and Bochner 1986)

This tendency is confirmed in our study, where 78.7% of students say they sit with other Erasmus students in class, and 56.7% believe that this helps them to adapt to the new environment. Fortunately, these initial difficulties encountered are normally overcome during the rest of the stay and are usually easily forgotten, or looked back on with humour. Chapter 4 looks in some detail at how host universities offer support to students to help them through this stage.

Language barrier

Language difficulties are dealt with in some depth in chapters 7 and 8. Suffice it to note here that although language issues are clearly a major problem encountered by students particularly during the early stage of their stay, they are perhaps less of a problem than is often thought. Thus, only 33.3% of the students in our study believe that their level of language was insufficient when they started their classes at the host institution. That said, 81.7% agree that it is positive for host institutions to offer special language courses for incoming Erasmus students.

Perhaps because this is the most visible of the problems Erasmus students have to face (together with accommodation), most universities who participate in the Erasmus programme offer language courses to incoming students. Some of these courses take place during the first weeks of the stay and in other cases language courses are offered all year long. Sometimes, students complain that language courses do not take place in the same place as the normal courses do and this means clashes with the courses they must follow as part of their curriculum, but on the whole they express their satisfaction with this service.

One of the responses to language difficulties which has been embraced by many universities across Europe has been to offer courses in English, either for incoming exchange students or for all students, both local and international. This has been a very popular

solution in countries where the official language is one of the less-spoken languages in the EU, and is particularly frequent in Scandinavian countries. Yet, when asked about this possibility, firstly only for incoming Erasmus students at non-English speaking institutions, 59.2% of students are against the idea. Similarly, when asked whether it was a good idea to have subjects in English for all students, both local and international, at non-English speaking institutions, a significant percentage (42.1%) were still against this. Therefore, one can infer that, even though students may experience language difficulties at the beginning, they prefer to be taught in the language of the host country, linking in with developing their language skills as a major motivation for taking part in Erasmus. We were able to confirm this tendency in our study: on offering students the possibility of using English instead of Spanish in our survey at the University of Granada, students consistently rejected the offer and preferred to work with the Spanish version of the questionnaire, even when they required some help to understand some of the items.

In the classroom

As we have mentioned above, unlike language difficulties, the difficulty in adapting to new teaching and learning methods has not received a great deal of attention. And yet, there are huge differences from system to system, country to country, even institution to institution. In this section, a brief overview is given of some of the issues most likely to affect students.

Class groups: there is an enormous difference in the size of the standard class group from one system to another. Lectures with well over 200 students may be common in some institutions, while in others classes with over 20 students are rare. In many, a combination exists, although the function of the different kinds of class may vary.

Teaching methods: some systems are based almost entirely on large lectures, with little or no interaction between teaching staff and

students or indeed among students. Other systems work almost entirely on the basis of independent study and individual follow up. Others use techniques such as problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and other small group methods. Students accustomed to the anonymity (and safety!) of the large lecture theatre may have great difficulty adapting to the degree of active participation required in small group activity. Those accustomed to very active methods may take badly to the passivity of lectures, or may not have the note-taking skills required. Those accustomed to working in teams may find extensive individual assignments hard to carry out without peer support.

Assessment methods: assessment is of course closely linked to teaching and learning methods. Lecture-based systems often use written or oral examinations in which the key skill is that of memorizing large amounts of information, whereas small-group participative teaching and learning will often require independent project work, team projects, and where examinations are used, the questions and activities will be applied in nature. Students coming from systems where they are normally required to analyze and give personal interpretations find memorizing difficult and also pointless. Students coming from strong rote-learning traditions are at a loss when asked to analyze or give personal opinions.

Issues of what is considered legitimate in assessment are also important here, and differ considerably from one system to another. In our experience it is not infrequent for Erasmus students to complain about local students "cheating" in examinations and how unfair this is for them! Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are also interpreted in very different ways in the different traditions. How does one explain to a student accustomed to literal reproduction of what they have been required to learn by heart, that literal reproduction of someone else's ideas is simply not acceptable?

Timetables: there are two major issues here. The first may gradually disappear with the introduction of the EHEA. That is the number of face-to-face class hours per week. Currently, differences here are

enormous, going from as few as 8 or 9 hours per week to as many as 28 to 30. Classes may also last for anything from one to four hours. Clearly the kind of activity involved in class contact hours is very different, but the change in either direction between systems based on considerable student autonomy in time management and systems based on extreme control of student activity and time can be extremely difficult for students.

The second issue is unlikely to change in that it is linked to each culture's understanding of time and the organization of the day. There are differences in the times for first lectures in the morning, the times for last lectures in the evening, for breaks during the day and so on. Changing rising, sleeping and eating patterns is a particularly complicated thing to do, and students' concentration may easily suffer!

All of these differences in the educational systems may give rise to culture shock, or education shock as some authors have called it (a term first coined by Hoff, 1979 cited in Paige, 1990:167), in incoming students. As learning styles are also individual, it may of course be the case that the new methods are seen as preferable to those of the home institution, thus encouraging adaptation and acculturation in the new system. In these cases, problems may arise on returning home: the re-entry stage of culture shock.

Another aspect underlying differences between educational systems is that of mentoring and staff guidance and help for students in general. This is closely linked to the extent to which students have access to staff to ask questions, resolve doubts and so on. Where this opportunity exists, it is seen as very positive by Erasmus students, whether or not they are accustomed to this kind of attention from staff at their home institution.

Integration in class

Integration in class with both their peers and with the teachers is another aspect to be taken into account. More than half of the stu-

dents (57.5%) stated that they did not have a feeling they were well accepted initially by the rest of the class, by the permanent or local students. They tend to say that integration is easier if there is a larger number of Erasmus students in the class. As has been mentioned above, 78.7% say they sit with other incoming Erasmus students, and 56.7% believe that this helps them to adapt. Interestingly, teaching staff do not share these perceptions: only 21.1% state that they perceive reticence on the part of the rest of the class. Only 58% have noticed that the Erasmus students tend to sit together, and of these only 24.6% believe that this may help them to adapt to the new environment. It would certainly be useful for the two groups to be aware of this difference in perception, and to analyze exactly what it implies in each teaching and learning situation!

On the other hand, in in-depth interviews, students also say that this lack of integration or, what some of them have even called "discrimination", is in some cases initiated by the Erasmus students themselves for several reasons. It may be that they are somehow "afraid" to face the rest of the class or that they feel that their level of the language is not enough to become part of an established group of permanent students.

A technique positively seen by students as favouring integration is that of working in multinational groups because in this way they get to know local students as they work together both inside and often outside the classroom. Careful planning of group composition and tasks will help all students involved to see what they as individuals can offer the whole group, thus boosting their self-esteem. (Gibbs, 1995a, Mayoral Asensio and Kelly 1997, Kiraly 2000, Tsokaktsidou 2002, Morón Martín 2003)

As far as acceptance from teachers is concerned, 78.8% of the students felt they had had a warm welcome from them. Most students also believe that teaching staff are aware of their presence in the classroom (68.3%), although one should notice that this means that 31.7% of students think that teachers are not aware of their presence! As to whether or not they consider teaching staff to have suf-

ficient preparation for the multicultural classroom, 57.6% answer affirmatively. Notice again that this means 42.4% of students are dissatisfied with the degree to which staff are trained for this new classroom situation. This dissatisfaction is expressed in quite graphic terms by some students in the interviews: "They just don't know what to do with us!"

Students and staff agree broadly that teaching staff do not adapt their teaching methods when they have Erasmus students in class (67.9% of students and 71% of teaching staff). Closer examination may, however, indicate that some teaching staff do actually adopt strategies to help incoming exchange students, which in fact do constitute adaptation of teaching and learning activities, even though the majority do not recognize this as such. For example, 61.8% of teaching staff provide extra material for these students; in focus group discussions individual teachers mentioned providing extra handouts, additional reading lists, often in the students' own language. Some mentioned special tutorials exclusively for incoming exchange students, although this would seem to be a minority practice (26.3%).

When describing the factors which influence their integration in the classroom, students establish the following order of importance: their own personal effort, effort on the part of teachers; their fellow students; and finally institutional support.

Lastly, it is encouraging to see that, despite the various difficulties and grievances that come to light, the vast majority of incoming students (81.5%) maintain a very clear preference for being in "real" classes, that is, with local students and not segregated into special courses.

Assessment

In some systems right from day one, and in others only towards the end of their stay, Erasmus students have to deal with a rather

distressing aspect of their academic experience: assessment. An outline is given above of how assessment methods, systems, criteria and expectations vary from system to system. Here it is student and staff perceptions regarding assessment that we will comment on.

Although it may seem self-evident that students attempting to perform according to methods, criteria and expectations which are entirely new to them are at a clear disadvantage in assessment processes, this perception does not seem to be shared by teaching staff. 78% of teaching staff believe that incoming exchange and local students should all be assessed in the same way, and do not understand that this could constitute a disadvantage for exchange students (68.2%) or for local students (71.8%). This is entirely coherent with teaching staff attitudes to adapting their assessment methods or criteria: 40.2% adapt their assessment methods, and 38.3% their assessment criteria when teaching mixed groups. Incoming exchange students, on the other hand, believe that assessing all students in the same way is unfair to them, although the percentage is not as high as the data obtained in interviews and focus groups would have led us to expect: 56.8%.

We believe that to a great extent these attitudes are linked to the lack of awareness on the part of teaching staff in particular with regard to differences in teaching and learning styles. Compared to the very clear 81.3% of students who are aware of different learning styles in the classroom, less than half of the teaching staff surveyed said that they had detected these, and only 35% recognized that incoming students had different preferences regarding assessment methods. See chapter 9 and 10 for further discussion of these issues.

GOING BACK HOME

This stage does not strictly coincide in time with the actual return journey of the student but usually starts a few weeks before going back home, when students realise that their stay is coming to an end.

The factors affecting students at this point are mainly affective or emotional ones, typical of the re-entry stage of culture shock. Students have to detach from their new circle of friends, and going back to their home culture can sometimes be upsetting as they feel foreign to it, having adapted to their "new life". This rejection of their home culture, or preference for the host society may be the reason why many students say they would like to, or indeed do, later return to the host country, to work, for another stay or simply on holiday. All of these subsequent mobility experiences are also strongly coloured by previous stays abroad, at different times and sometimes in different places, on occasion making for a succession of re-entries, each complex in its own way.

IMPACT: OUTCOMES

There have been a large number of evaluation studies of mobility programmes which analyze the impact they have on, for example, language ability (Sanz and Roldán 2005) or employability. The leading exponent of the latter kind of survey is undoubtedly Teichler who, interestingly, has detected a correlation between the Erasmus experience and employability: ex Erasmus students are more likely to find work quickly; and between the Erasmus experience and the kind of post occupied: ex Erasmus students are more likely to work in posts with an international profile; but not between mobility and success in terms of higher salaries or higher level posts (Teichler and Maiworm, 1994: 92-94).

One of the conclusions of our study is that both staff and students are in general very positive about the benefits of mobility programmes. The two groups agree that mobility programmes are culturally enriching, promote interaction among students, promote multicultural learning, promote language learning, project favourable images of the host institution and the host country, promote further student mobility, and contribute to new approaches to teaching,

learning and tutorial support. There does, however, seem to be some lack of clarity regarding exactly what is meant by all of this. Students show strong support for mobility programmes: "*une année d'échange universitaire devrait être obligatoire dans un cursus*", as one French student interviewed in Spain put it. And yet, they seem to have difficulty pinpointing exactly what it is they have learnt from the experience. This is confirmed by other similar research projects currently underway and involving members of the Temcu team (Calvo Encinas, Morón Martín in progress). Similarly, teaching staff seem to have difficulty detaching themselves from their own environment and the requirements of their own courses, and establishing sufficient distance to describe in educational terms the added value earned from the exchange experience. As a summary of this chapter, we would like to put forward a proposal which attempts to systematize the learning outcomes of the Erasmus experience, linking it to the concept of transferable or generic competences as applied to the EHEA (González and Wagenaar, 2003: 72-73).

It is almost commonplace amongst those of us who are supporters of international mobility programmes to emphasize the benefits students may draw from them. Within their own discipline, students progress by having access to different approaches to the same subject area, by having access to specializations they do not have at their home institutions, sometimes by using materials and equipment that they do not have at home, and so on. But the essential benefits of mobility lie undoubtedly in non-subject specific knowledge or skills, which can be defined as generic competences. This term is the most commonly accepted term in current literature on higher education and is used to refer to competences characteristic of all graduates at a particular level, this based on the understanding that competence is a broader concept than skills, covering knowledge (declarative), skills (procedural) and attitudes.

If we analyze the list of generic competences used as the basis for the Tuning project survey of graduates, academics and employ-

ers, we will find many which we can easily identify with the benefits we usually associate with mobility:

- Ability to communicate with experts in other fields
- Ability to work autonomously
- Ability to work in an interdisciplinary team
- Ability to work in an international context
- Appreciation of diversity and multiculturality
- Basic general knowledge
- Capacity for organisation and planning
- Capacity to adapt to new situations
- Capacity to learn
- Critical and self-critical abilities
- Decision making
- Initiative and entrepreneurial spirit
- Interpersonal skills
- Knowledge of a second language
- Oral and written communication in your native language
- Problem solving
- Project design and management
- Research skills
- Teamwork
- Understanding of cultures and customs of other countries
- Will to succeed (González & Wagenaar, 2003: 72-73).

Due to lack of space here, we will not go into detail on how we believe each of these competences is developed during mobility programmes, but we are sure that readers will have little difficulty in establishing their own opinions on this. This systematization of the learning outcomes of mobility is useful for several reasons, which we would like to put forward here.

Firstly, we believe that the establishment of clear learning outcomes is an essential part of any curricular planning process, and that mobility programmes, as part of students' curricula, also require explicit planning. Secondly, the EHEA highlights the need for transparency in the European higher education system, and indeed insists

on the importance of establishing clear learning outcomes precisely for that reason. Thirdly, explicit application of these outcomes to mobility programmes will allow greater clarity regarding the benefits of mobility for all those involved: students, teaching staff at home and host institutions, administrators and decision-makers, employers and other stakeholders. In particular, it is important for those working directly with mobility programmes to have clear and explicit guidelines on this point.

And last, but not least, we believe that the establishment of transparent learning outcomes, which can be verified in different ways, would allow assessment of learning while abroad to be more complete, and to avoid the pitfalls of assessment in an unfamiliar context and system. Thus, home institutions could assess the achievement of the generic competences aimed at as a complement to the assessment of subject-specific competences assessed on modules abroad. It would be relatively simple to incorporate these intended outcomes into the learning agreement which should be signed between student and home institution when embarking on an Erasmus period abroad. Indeed, credit could be awarded for achieving these outcomes. This is already an accepted practice to some extent on some language courses in the UK, where students receive credit simply for taking a year abroad, sometimes with further requirements such as the submission of extended essays and so on.

Initiatives of this kind allow for fuller institutional implication in mobility programmes and for deeper student understanding of the impact of programmes on their learning.