

ERASMUS students want more recognition

by Ewa Krzaklewska

The ERASMUS Programme was formally established on 15 June 1987. To date, almost 1.4 million students have spent a semester or two at a foreign university.

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The ERASMUS Student Network (ESN), a not-for-profit association supporting ERASMUS students, wants 2007 to be the real ERASMUS year. By every means at our disposal we would like to promote the ERASMUS programme and show the importance of academic mobility to different audiences. On 18 and 19 January 2007, ESN opened the celebrations of the 20 years of the ERASMUS Programme with a two-day conference evaluating the development of the programme. The conference was organised entirely by volunteers from ESN, and received support from several sources. The main partner of the conference was Universita' Bocconi. Around 150 enthusiastic former ERASMUS students of the three phases of the programme, from 30 countries, came to Brussels at their own expense to share experiences of studying abroad. The pioneer ERASMUS student from 1987, Desiree Majoor, first president of ESN, also attended the event. Margot Wallström, Vice President of the European Commission, gave an opening speech during which she acknowledged the work of student volunteers supporting exchange at local universities. She encouraged ERASMUS students to act as the ambassadors of Europe and collaborate more with the European institutions and their local representatives.

Improve recognition

During the day and especially during the panel discussion, students raised several issues. One of the main recommendations was to improve the recognition of studies abroad (in 2006, about 50% of the ERASMUS students received full recognition¹) and transparency in the credit systems.

Better financial support

Secondly, the financial support issue was discussed. Everybody agreed that better financial support for students, especially from disadvantaged groups and Eastern and Central Europe, is needed. Right now, students come mostly from the more well-off families, and most of the

students (about 60%) cover exchange costs with money from their parents. National governments should participate in the grant and add some money to the main ERASMUS scholarship (Spain has already decided on this). One of the ways for a student to ensure a better financial situation is to work while abroad, and for that reason the procedures to gain resident permits should be shortened – otherwise the permit is being issued after the exchange period. A large part of the scholarship should be paid at the beginning of the stay – at the moment it often happens that the scholarship arrives two to three months later, or even after the stay.

Learning agreement

Another issue discussed was the learning agreement, which seems to be treated with ambivalence. Sometimes the rules applied to it are really strict, sometimes it is treated as just a worthless piece of paper. Instead of paper learning agreements and mailing letters, which might get lost and take time to arrive, it was suggested that a digital solution for the problem could be created. The communication between institutions could be improved in this way, as both parties would be able to check in real time the state of the agreement.

Recognise skills

Finally, the European Commission and National Agencies should work together with employers and their associations in order to recognise skills learned during the ERASMUS period. Kirsten Williamson, from Petrus Communications, suggested to students that they should reflect more on their skills after their ERASMUS stay in order to be able to present these more effectively to employers.

Enhancement

The ERASMUS Unit of the European Commission and ESN decided to work together, with the support of other international student organisations, on the enhancement of the ERASMUS pro-

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programme. ESN will prepare the document with suggestions and comments from ERASMUS students to programme managers, as well as present the results of the ESNsurvey2006 on exchange students' rights. The issue of the recognition of volunteer activities was also discussed. One of the solutions is to grant ECTS points or other forms of recognition to the students from the not-for-profit organisations.

Party!

In the evening, there was a huge birthday party. Commissioner Jan Figel' made a toast to the future of the ERASMUS programme and cut the 20th anniversary cake.

ERASMUS Days

On 19 January, Commissioner Jan Figel' participated in the discussion with ESN volunteers on the practical issues of exchange. Then ESNers took part in the workshop on the preparation of the ERASMUS Days – local events for university and high school students, such as conferences, fairs and parades. These will be visited by an ERASMUS Van with ESN volunteers on board. It will visit the ERASMUS Days, while gathering opinions of students and local citizens about the ERASMUS programme, as well as distributing CDs promoting student exchange. All universities are invited to collaborate on the project. If you are interested, just write to secretariat@20erasmus.eu. 

¹ Results of the ESNsurvey2006
www.esn.org/survey

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