

# **Non-formal learning during an ERASMUS sojourn**

## **abroad**

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### **About Author**

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### **Key words**

The ERASMUS program, non-formal learning, sojourn impacts, policy development

### **Abstract**

An article builds on a qualitative research conducted in 2011. The research is focused on non-formal learning aspects and personality changes connected to the European mobility program ERASMUS.

An article discusses results of the study in the wider framework of the ERASMUS scheme structure and provides recommendations for further development of the scheme to provide more efficient learning outcomes.

## **Introduction**

Article focuses on impacts of the ERASMUS mobility program with a special emphasis on the non-formal learning and general concordance of pre-stated and real outcomes of the program. An original qualitative study was conducted to empirically describe process and impacts of the ERASMUS program on its own participants (Bárta 2011). Findings of this study are put together to critically assess non-formal and informal aspects of the ERASMUS mobility program as such.

In the first part, theoretical basics of the surveyed phenomena (non-formal learning and the ERASMUS stay abroad) is put forward, second section covers methodology and methods of analysis, whilst the third chapter presents the main findings and sets them into a wider framework. Last and most important section deals with assessing the ERASMUS program based on the previously mentioned findings with a special stress put on the non-formal learning; recommendations concerning the future development of the ERASMUS study scheme are put forward. All findings and recommendations are summarized in the closing chapter of the paper.

## **Theoretical foundations**

Many scholars occupy themselves with an international educational environment which is often perceived as highly important given certain educational goals, such as cultural sensitivity, various personal and interpersonal skills and also language competences (cf. Hillage, Pollard 1998; Cushner, Mahon 2002; Van Hoof, Verbeeten 2005; Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006; Bracht, et al. 2006; Kelo, Teichler, Wachter 2006; Zenkner 2007; Khan, Khan 2007; Teichler, Janson 2007; Wier-Jensen 2008; Sigalas 2010; Bárta 2011). Even though not many precise descriptions of the concrete processes taking place in the international education have been made so far, most of the scholars agree that an international sojourn abroad makes an immense benefit to those who undergo such a stay (cf. e.g. Nash 1976, Stronkhorst

2005, Teichler and Steube 1991). Since we seem to agree on the positive effects of such sojourns, it seems important enough to focus on the finer definition of the particular processes taking part in the overall success.

A debate concerning the non-formal learning, its outcomes, bright sides, and shortcomings, has been underway for more than a few decades now (cf. European Commission 2012b, Knight 2004). Certain findings indicate that many of the processes usually marked as non-formal learning processes also occur in the environment of international education (cf. Cushner, Mahon 2002; Van Hoof, Verbeeten 2005). Thus, since the overall individually perceived quality of an international educational sojourn does not seem to be strictly dependent on the quality of the formal education obtained hereby, our focus moves to the non-formal sphere in search for answers.

## **Methodology and data analysis**

Research question stated at the beginning of the study was *“How do Czech university students perceive their ERASMUS sojourn abroad?”*. This very wide research focus was intentional and allowed the data to bring forward rich variety of personal experience and describe the stay abroad in terms of students’ own core events and thus avoid researcher’s bias when analyzing and interpreting the data.

Research design used was a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. Given the design of the study, the selection of a sample was deliberate and based on certain conditions. Firstly, respondents needed to complete their ERASMUS study period abroad and return back to the Czech Republic (at least for some time) and secondly, the respondents needed to fall into a time period between three months and nine months after the return from their ERASMUS stay abroad (to eliminate immediate emotional bias and, on the other hand, also to prevent respondents from forgetting important information). The last condition was a Czech nationality: the study focused on impacts of the

ERASMUS sojourn abroad on Czech university students only, to reduce a potential influence of a varying cultural background of the respondents. Access to the respondents was acquired due to a snowball sampling technique: access to one respondent led inevitably to obtaining new contacts which were then used as a basis to broaden the search for other possible and suitable respondents. Using aforementioned techniques, eight respondents were successfully interviewed: two male and six female. In addition, five other interviews, conducted by a fellow author, were used. Out of those, four respondents were female and one male. Those latter interviews were focused on a phenomenon of a reverse cultural shock, nevertheless, its interview scheme was similar to the one used in the original eight interviews. All in all, thirteen interviews were at hand out of which three respondents were male and the rest female and all of the respondents were Czech.

Semi-structured interviews used in the original data collection had a flexible scheme (more resembling a list of topics than a rigidly structured set of questions) which included themes such as an overall description of the stay abroad, naming and depicting the main events which occurred in the course of period abroad, getting back to the country of origin (the Czech Republic) and reflection on how and in which areas was a respondent affected. The themes outlined above were supported by a number of sub-questions which were only used in cases of sudden silence on respondent's part. All the interviews were conducted in a quiet environment, in a friendly atmosphere and each one of them took about fifty minutes. All in all, about 650 minutes of recordings were collected and transcribed into writing. After the transcription, an open coding was applied and invented codes were clustered into an analytical storyline which was presented in an original paper (Bárta 2011). Since the original study focused on the overall quality (and means of influencing the quality) of the stay, there are still some subtopics which may be further analyzed. One of these topics is non-formal learning which is being unfolded in this article.

## Main findings

The conducted qualitative research implies that the whole sojourn abroad is filled with gaining new experience: learning. As respondents themselves assert, the learning process takes place basically everywhere from the simple fact of “being there” (escaping the routine of a common everyday life as they knew it back in the country of origin; informal learning) to a more formalized, but still quite non-formal learning through various group activities they partook in. Following text stressed the most striking learning opportunities and their outcomes found in Czech students as a result of a sojourn abroad.

The respondents depict miscellaneous events, such as group trips, sporting events, cultural activities or just meetings with no other goal than to taste an international cuisine. These are all the, so precious, opportunities which allow an individual to gain new experience, skills, and knowledge. In this respect, both the role of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and self-organization is vital. The ESN (and other local, mostly student, organizations) organizes some of those events, on the other hand, the self-organization allows individuals to learn even more by actually setting the events themselves.

The gained experience consists of both skills and knowledge. Based on the statements made by the respondents, we were able to conclude, that the most developed areas are the so called soft skills and especially all of the interpersonal skills (such as negotiating joint solutions, accepting other and differing views, or team work in general). Another area which is also highly evolved in these students is the language ability (both in communication as such and in communication in foreign language in particular).

Aside from the aforementioned, there is also a considerable amount of knowledge students receive with not much of an effort. Most of the knowledge they gain is connected to the different

cultures, historical events and professional information, which is passed on from one to another during the abovementioned informal and non-formal learning opportunities.

Self-reflection is another extremely important asset identified by our research. Self-reflection is a process of critically evaluating oneself, one's past as well as present and future, and takes place during the whole sojourn abroad as the student has an opportunity to step out of the stereotype present in his everyday life up until leaving it behind and going abroad. Abovementioned non-formal learning might be regarded as, to a high extent, an unconscious process (respondents themselves did not regard the situations as learning activities), self-reflection, on the other hand, is an extremely conscious reaction to a cultural and stereotypical change an individual endures abroad (respondents offered a very detailed description of a thinking process they endured). This opportunity to critically assess one's actual life (in contrast to the life one had led so far) is a learning opportunity scarcely found in everyday life or formal education system.

All of the findings mentioned above and depicting the processes of non-formal and informal learning would not be complete without the outcomes these processes produce. Ignoring the already mentioned direct effects of learning, such as the skill development and knowledge acquisition, we can point to other, more global, changes which occur in those who have used the ERASMUS study period abroad. The biggest changes in the home-coming students are the personality changes including the open-mindedness, self-confidence and self-reliability. Apart from these, there seems to be less prejudice in those who lived in a different culture for some time. And lastly, there is also less fear of unknown when speaking about traveling or staying abroad.

## Study findings in the light of the ERASMUS study program objectives

A very clear case has been made in the previous chapter: there are wide learning opportunities, opening for the ERASMUS students due to their sojourn abroad itself, regardless of the level of university education provided in the respective countries. One can see a huge personality growth in persons who have returned from their sojourn abroad (*increased open-mindedness, self-confidence, self-reliability, and decrease in prejudice*), growth in skills (*soft skills and interpersonal skills* in particular) and *knowledge* as well as rising *language ability* in both general (the ability to make oneself understood) and particular (the ability to make oneself understood in a foreign language) aspect. A crucial asset, an opening of space for a conscious *self-reflection* on individual's own life, is also taking place.

To learn how much these findings agree with pre-stated aims of the ERASMUS study program itself, we must take into consideration official papers by European Commission (2012a). Since the ERASMUS program is part of a wider scheme, one needs to look into Life Long Learning Programme to see the aims. Objectives of a Life Long Learning Programme are expressly stated in Life Long Learning Programme Guide 2013 (European Commission 2012a, 4) and among specific objectives, one can also find following ones stated below; we believe underlined sections of the stated objectives are directly connected to the findings named in the brackets following the respective quotations:

- “To reinforce the contribution of Lifelong Learning to social cohesion, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, gender equality and personal fulfillment” (*decrease in prejudice; self-reflection*)
- “To promote creativity, competitiveness, employability and the growth of an entrepreneurial spirit” (*soft skills; self-confidence; self-reliability*)
- “To promote language learning and linguistic diversity” (*language ability*)

- “To reinforce the role of Lifelong Learning in creating a sense of European citizenship based on understanding and respect for human rights and democracy, and encouraging tolerance and respect for peoples and cultures” (*decreasing prejudice; open-mindedness*)

In our opinion, there is clear evidence that those four specific objectives are being achieved by students who partake in the ERASMUS study program. All of the outcomes discovered by the conducted qualitative research and stated above connect themselves to some degree to these specific objectives. Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy in a way. A discrepancy based on a fact that most of the skills, abilities and knowledge mentioned by our respondents were obtained as a result of informal and non-formal learning processes, not as a result of the formal schooling obtained in the respective countries. Therefore even though one might pronounce the ERASMUS study program as a successful one, since the objectives stated by policymakers are clearly being fulfilled, there is also a need to reconsider the program as such.

The focus and emphasis of the ERASMUS study program is on formal schooling (university cooperation) and it says nothing at all about all the other aspects of learning. And so it might happen, given that we stress the formal schooling only, that some evaluations of the program do not reveal the full potential of the program as it might have been if even the non-formal and informal aspects would be taken into account. It is not a purpose of this study to question the importance of formal education as an important and integral part of the European mobility program ERASMUS. On the contrary, we understand the importance of such learning opportunities. All the same, we would like to stress an immense significance of informal and namely non-formal learning for, and their contribution to, the desired outcomes.

In our opinion, it is vital for the future growth in objectives fulfillment to include also the non-formal learning and support other (informal) learning opportunities as well. Since we have seen that our



respondents learned efficiently in culturally diverse environment as well as while undergoing certain challenges, it is, from our viewpoint, crucial to foster such opportunities. This might be done in several ways. First, the ERASMUS program might incorporate certain structures on the European level which would assist students in this field (e.g. including agencies fostering non-formal learning opportunities). Secondly, another structure might be raised, on the European level again but independently on the ERASMUS program as such, to back up the non-formal learning in general with a particular aim to support the ERASMUS students as well (e.g. setting up a network of such agencies or alternatively to entwine some of the other, more non-formally focused programs with the ERASMUS scheme). Lastly, it might be taken into account by member countries and these structures might be raised separately in the respective countries (e.g. as a part of state or university body). Be it on the European, state, or university level, one point seems clear enough: there is a need for a continuous, structural and systematic support of non-formal learning during the student's sojourn abroad.

### **Final remarks: Efficient ERASMUS program development**

The article summarizes particular findings of a qualitative study focused on a perception of the ERASMUS study program. Among the findings, development of skills (*soft skills, interpersonal skills, and language ability*), acquisition of *knowledge* and an opening for *self-reflection* have been identified as vital assets. Moreover, other particular impacts on a personality of a student undergoing the ERASMUS stay abroad have been found as well, such as *open-mindedness, self-confidence, self-reliability, or decrease in the level of prejudice*.

Even though the aforementioned findings are obviously in concordance with explicitly stated goals of the ERASMUS program (as demonstrated by a simple comparison of the findings and officially stated objectives), mode of acquisition have also proved important: non-formal and informal learning seem to be the most significant in this respect. And since the emphasis lies on non-formal and informal

learning settings in achieving an uttermost personal development of an individual during their sojourn abroad, a recommendation has been voiced for a further development of the ERASMUS study program, as well as its evaluation schemes. Incorporation of a system of agencies focusing on non-formal learning and fostering the environment for informal learning as well seems to be a necessity as well as entwining this system with the already existing formally educational study scheme. Several levels of implementation of such a system are briefly outlined. A need for evaluating the non-formal and informal settings of the program itself has also been stressed out.

All in all, intentional inclusion and support of informal and non-formal learning settings into the ERASMUS study program might have profound positive effects on the students who undergo their sojourn abroad in such enriched learning environment and achieving objectives of the ERASMUS program might therefore reach significantly higher levels than as yet.

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