



Values in Shock

The role of contrasting management, economic, and religious paradigms in the workplace

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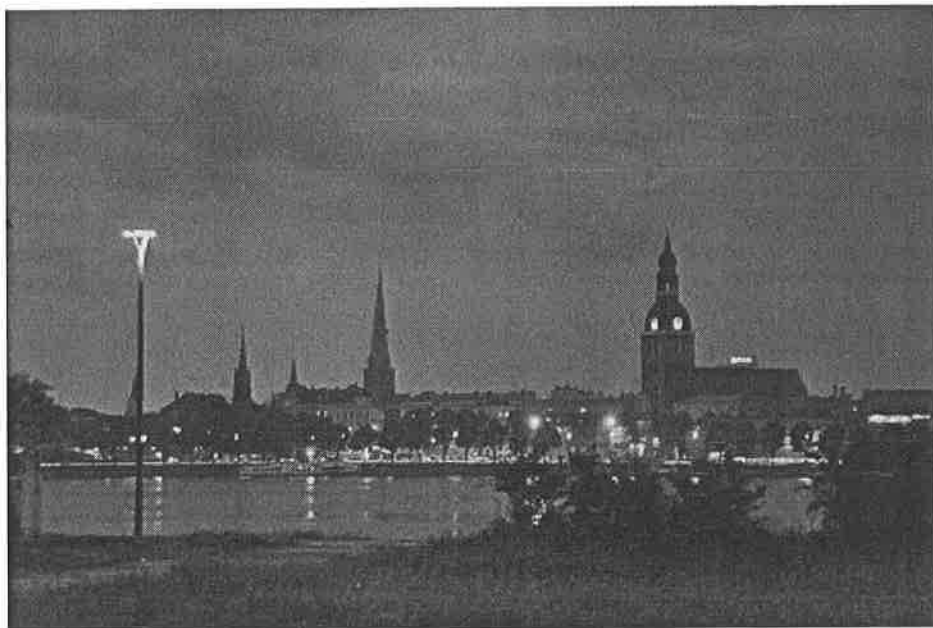
Edited by:

Jorge F. S. Gomes

School of Management and Economics – University of Lisbon &
Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIS-IUL
and

Joaquim P. Coelho

Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa &
Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIS-IUL



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Promoting training and skill development for international employability: The motivations of Erasmus' students in the field of management

Maria Amélia Marques, College of Business and Administration of the Polytechnic Institute of Setubal, Portugal

António José Almeida, College of Business and Administration of the Polytechnic Institute of Setubal, Portugal

Abstract

The main aims of our work were to analyse incoming Erasmus students' motivations for the programme and the competences they expect to develop. Using an open question questionnaire students were asked why they chose Portugal, the School and the subject and what experiences and competences they expected to develop. Our key findings were that Erasmus students chose Portugal mainly for cultural characteristics and weather and the school because it offers courses in English. The main expectations of students are to improve their English, have a culturally enriching experience and, also, become independent and self-confident. As to the subject, students expect to develop a set of competences related to understanding people and organisations in multi-cultural environments that enhances their potential as managers that aim to work in large companies.

Introduction

Founded in 1987 with the purpose to provide foreign exchange options for higher education students within the EU, Erasmus has become the most widespread and successful short-term students' mobility programme in Europe. Aimed at enhancing cooperation among the higher level education institutions of the different member states, Erasmus is also viewed as a means to foster the convergence and competitiveness of the European Higher Level Education System as recommended by the Bologna Declaration (1999). As to Erasmus students, on the overall most are highly satisfied with their participation in the programme. Though perceiving their academic achievement as essential, students' main motivations to study abroad are to gain a cultural experience, improve their language skills and/or proficiency and the opportunity, for some, to study in a high quality academic institution. Despite some differences between students from different regions of the EU, in their experience abroad students consider competences related to human and social interaction as more important and the ones that they develop in a higher level during their period abroad. Whereas, mathematical and competences related to science and technology are by comparison considered less important and less developed during their stay abroad. Communication in foreign languages and communication in mother tongue are the key competences of lifelong learning that students consider both the most important and the most developed during their stay abroad. Social and civic competences come second in order of importance but as to the level of development this "type" of competences comes third being preceded by sense of initiative and entrepreneurship competences. Students' motivation and experience abroad are also shaped by the academic environment and more specific by the degree of contrast between the home and the host country. Students have more valuable experiences when there are some contrasts, not too large and not too small, between the home and host country in what concerns courses, teaching methods, as well as cultural environment.

Bearing that Portugal is considered a good importer and exporter of Erasmus students (Breznik et al., 2013) and that in spite of the growing interest of academic in students'

mobility there are very few studies about Erasmus incoming students in Portugal, the main aims of this study were to understand Erasmus incoming students' motivations and their expectations as far as the competences they will develop during their stay. In order to achieve our aims we carried a qualitative type exploratory study using a five open question questionnaire that was applied in two subjects, taught in English, over a period of two years (four semesters), followed by content analysis.

We structure the paper as follows. First, we discuss briefly the Erasmus programme, focusing on the motivations and competences it enhances. Second, we describe and justify the methodology we use. Third, we present our results and, fourth, the main conclusions.

Brief overview of the Erasmus Programme: framework and perceptions

The Erasmus Programme is an EU student exchange programme. It was founded in 1987 with the purpose to provide foreign exchange options for higher education students within the European Union. Erasmus is funded by most EU member nations (37 countries), and, according to the European Commission (2014), it has become the most successful student exchange programme in the world. Since 1987 close to 3 million students have participated, as well as over 300 000 teachers and education staff since 1997 when the programme was extended to academic staff. In 2007 the Programme has become part of the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme covering new areas such as student placements in enterprises, university staff training and teaching for business staff.

Erasmus mobility has grown considerably in the last decades. Aimed at cross-border cooperation between states to aid the growth of international studying, Erasmus can be viewed not lonely as a means to enhance cooperation among the higher level education institutions of the different states, but also as a means to enhance the convergence and competitiveness of the European Higher Level Education System as recommended by the Bologna Declaration (1999). It has been stimulated for the purposes of academic enhancement, cultural enrichment and improvement of foreign language proficiency (Rivza and Teichler, 2007). According to available information, over 230 thousand students study abroad through Erasmus and over 4000 students can be involved at any one time in the programme. Students can choose the length of time they stay abroad with a minimum of three months recognised as the qualifying period (http://www.erasmusprogramme.com/the_erasmus.php). Embedded in the aims of the Declaration of Bologna (1999), that promotes the adoption of two main cycles, a system of easily readable and comparable degrees and a system of credits, Erasmus has become the most widespread short-term mobility programme in the EU. Considering that short-term mobility works best if the mobility is "horizontal", that is, if there is similarity between home and host country in what concerns quality of study programmes and level of students' competences (Rivza and Teichler, 2007), Erasmus has also become a strong promoter of this type of mobility.

Regardless of the criticism about the excessive bureaucratic procedures, most participating students showed that they were highly satisfied with the Erasmus experience (Rivza and Teichler, 2007). Students' motivation to study abroad corroborates what is quoted by experts, namely academic, cultural, linguistic and professional enhancement, combined with an interest for extracurricular activities during this period. To gain cultural experience comes up as the main reason to study abroad, as well as the improvement of foreign language skills, and the opportunity to study in high quality academic environments. The latter is particularly

important for students from new EU member states (Pietro and Page, 2008). And, last but not least it's also viewed as a means as to improve career prospects and good understanding of the host country (Teichler, 2004).

About a third of the Erasmus students studied abroad during their second year and more than two thirds take exclusively or predominantly classes in foreign languages while studying abroad (Teichler, 2004). Language proficiency is one of the factors that students take into consideration when they choose the host country, as most institutions participating in the programme expect incoming students to be acquainted with the language of the country, and in some cases incoming students study alongside home country students and not in specific courses designed for them (Teichler, 2004). Some countries, for example Portugal, offer courses in their mother tongue to give students the opportunity to develop their skills and to facilitate their inception. Apart from their language skills or proficiency, students take into consideration a number of factors when they choose their host country, such as (Teichler, 2004): the reputation of the institution in a specialised field; the attractiveness of the city or town, which can either be big well-known city or a small traditional university town; the vacation value of the host country, that is the climate (one of the reasons students prefer Southern European countries). It is noteworthy, that notwithstanding academic achievement being an important issue for students, what they want is to have culturally rich and valuable linguistic experiences (to meet people, to travel, etc.). Also noteworthy is the fact that although Erasmus implicitly assumes students "free choice" some students have to pass a selection process in order to be accepted for the programme. This selection is done on the basis of academic achievement, foreign language proficiency, motivation and personality (Teichler, 2004).

In what concerns the study experience abroad, as above mentioned, most students consider it a valuable, eye-opening and horizon-broadening experience (Teichler, 2004). The main contribution for these experiences appears to be the contrast in academic paradigms, teaching methods and learning communication styles combined with different daily challenges and cultural environment (Teichler, 2004). However, the best experiences occur when contrast between home and host country are not too substantial and not too small (Teichler, 2004). As far as competences, studies have shown that Erasmus students are better in what concerns "international competences" than non-mobile students and they are more likely to get jobs that involve international assignments (Bracht et al., 2006). Nevertheless, it worth mentioning, that the impact of short-term mobility leading to more international work is diminishing over the years (Bracht et al., 2006; Rivza and Teichler, 2007) this can be explained by two factors (Rivza and Teichler, 2007): short-term mobility has expanded more rapidly than competences demand in this field; international experiences and learning are widespread through globalization and internalization of the European society.

Studies also show that while Erasmus has a positive influence on the development of the eight key competences for lifelong learning¹ (Kumpikaittė and Duoba, 2013; Vaicekauskas et al., 2013), there appear to be some differences between what students consider as important competences and what they consider the level of development of these competences during their period of study abroad. Students consider more important and that they develop more

¹ The eight key competences for lifelong learning presented in the "Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union on 18 December 2006" (Official Journal of the European Union, 30.12.2006) are : 1) Communication in the mother tongue; 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social and civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and 8) Cultural awareness and expression.

“human and social interaction” competences than mathematical and basic competences in science and technology. Communication competences, both in foreign language and in mother tongue, are considered as the most important and most developed competences by Erasmus students (Vaicekauskas et al., 2013). Nevertheless, when comparing the importance with the perception of development of the other seven key competences, Vaicekauskas et al. (2013) found some significant differences. Whereas, students consider as second most important competence, with very low variation, social and civic competences and as third most important learning to learn, when asked about the level of development students consider that the second most developed competence is sense of initiative and entrepreneurship followed, in third place, by social and civic competences. The difference between importance and level of development, particularly in what concerns the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, might be explained by the challenges students face during their experience abroad, some of which are due to a certain lack of time in preparing their stay (Vaicekauskas et al., 2013; Teichler, 2004). It’s also worth mentioning that mathematical and basic competences in science and technology were considered, as a whole, the least important and least developed competences (Vaicekauskas et al., 2013). The authors also found differences when they compared the perceptions of students from different regions. Eastern European students consider social and civic competences to be more important. Whereas students of other regions consider communication in foreign languages to be more important, and in Western and Southern European students even consider communication in mother tongue to be more important than social and civic competences. Although they don’t rank it at the top, Western and Southern European students also rank entrepreneurship and sense of initiative better than students from other regions (fifth place). Still, according to Vaicekauskas et al. (2013) study, Southern European students rank better learning to learn than students from other regions, placing it in the third place whereas in other regions it comes in fourth and fifth place.

Methodology

The main aims of our work were to analyse incoming Erasmus students’ motivations and the competences they expected to develop during their studying period in Portugal. As teachers of mobility (incoming and outgoing) students, our aims stem from the need to have a better understanding of what stimulates students to study abroad and what they hope to achieve with their experience. Despite its growing interest as a field of study and a measure of “institutional quality”, studies about Erasmus students (incoming and outgoing) in Portugal are still scarce. Therefore, we decided to do a qualitative type exploratory study using a five open question questionnaire that also included the sociographic description of students. Students were asked the following: why they chose Portugal and the School, what they were expecting from their experience, as a whole, abroad, their personal and professional expectations as far as Erasmus, why they chose the subject and what competences they expected to develop in the subject. The questionnaire was applied at the beginning of each semester in two subjects, namely, People in Organisations and Managing People at Work over a period of two years. We received a total of 85 responses and content analysis was carried out. The above-mentioned subjects are aimed at the development of personal, managerial and cultural skills and are taught by two teachers that are present in class at the same time in order to create new teaching dynamics and enhance participation and discussion. These subjects are part of the plan of studies of the International Module that the School has created for Erasmus incoming students. The International Module consists of about 24 subjects, 12 for each semester, which include Portuguese Language and Culture (two semesters) and English for Professionals (two semesters). All the other subjects are taught in English. Most of the

subjects are part of the curricula of the school's courses and others, like the above-mentioned, were created specifically for Erasmus incoming students. People in Organisations and Managing People at Work are in each semester the second subject with the highest number of students enrolled (approximately an average of 25 students per semester).

Results

As to their sociographic profile, most respondents are female (71%), young (between 20 and 25 years) and have successful education trajectories. The differences in gender participating in this research appears to both the differences in gender in higher education as well as the differences in Erasmus students' mobility in general and in particular in Erasmus incoming students in Portugal (Cfr., <http://www.statisticsforall.eu/maps-erasmus-students.php>). As to their country of citizen (hip, or home country, most respondents are from Eastern Europe (51%) and Western Europe (26%). The rest are from Southern Europe (11%), Northern Europe (7%) and other countries, namely Turkey and Brazil (5%). The percentage of students from Southern Europe, in this specific case, Spain, seems not to support the tendency for students to study in neighbouring countries as referred by Rivza and Teichler (2007), which could lead us to hypothesise that it is due to the perception of small cultural contrast and language proficiency (the subjects are in English). Analysing the responses by country, we find that the respondents are mainly from Poland (28, 4%), Czech Republic (16,4%) and Spain (10,5%), followed by the Netherlands (9,4%) and Belgium (9,4%). The higher percentage of respondents from Eastern Europe appears to be supported by the strong formal relationship and signed agreements between the host institution and institutions in these countries (www.ips.pt).

The results show that 87% of respondents are 1st cycle students - Bachelor (3 years) or a Degree (4 years) – and about 13% are Master students. When analysing the 1st cycle students by school year, we find that 41, 9% are in their 3rd year, 33,8% in their 2nd year, followed by 24,3% in their 4th year (respondents from Eastern Europe and other countries). These results differ from what was found by Teichler (2004) and mentioned above that students usually go abroad in their 2nd year. As to the distribution of the respondents by course they are taking in their home institution, the results show a close relationship home and host institution courses. Most respondents are taking courses that are similar to the courses in the host country. The majority is taking courses in Business and Administration/ Economics (45,8%) and Finance and Accounting/ Management (15,2%), as well as Marketing/Tourism (12,9%), Logistics and Economics (8,2%) and HRM (2,3%), being the latter a Masters Course. All these courses cover the same scientific fields and have similar names to the courses of the host school. This similarity is expected and emerges as a consequence of the conditions of the learning agreement Erasmus students have to abide to in order to ensure that the subjects that they take in the host institution are recognised in their home institution. Even though the school offers an International module, specifically designed for the Erasmus students, this module reflects the scientific areas and the courses offered by the school to their home students. One the specificities showed by the distribution of respondents per course was the presence of 4,7% of respondents studying Engineering and 9,4% studying Management and Engineering. These students have enrolled in the International Module because the Engineering College, that is part of the same institution, doesn't offer similar courses in English, and some students decide to choose some subjects of the International Module.

As to one of the main aims of our study – why Erasmus incoming students choose Portugal and the school as host – the answers can be grouped into three main reasons, namely: reasons

connected with the characteristics of the Portuguese culture, reasons connected with the vacation characteristics of the country; and reasons connected to the role of the social influence during their decision making process about the choice of the host country. The first reason - characteristics of the Portuguese culture – described as the idea of exoticism of Portuguese culture, the beauty of the country and the friendly people appear as the main factors that influence the respondents choice, as quoted: “Because Portugal has a different culture/exotic / To know Portugal and the culture / I like Portugal because is an interesting/beautiful country / To know Portuguese language and culture / Friendly people / Discover a new country, new culture and new people”. The second reason – the vacation characteristics of the country –although it’s linked to the first reason, it is more connected with leisure, i.e., with the opportunity to travel, to enjoy good weather and the opportunities to enjoy the beaches, as mentioned by some respondents: “It’s an opportunity to travel / Because of the weather / Because is near the sea/ocean / Because of the beaches / Because is far from my country / Because is well located in Europe”. Considering most of the respondents are from Eastern European countries, this second reason appears to corroborate some of the reasons found by Teichler (2004) as to one of the reasons students have to choose Southern European countries. The third reason - the role of the social influence during their decision making process – is described as the influence of friends in their choice, quoting” “My friends recommended / I have friends from Portugal / It was my friends choice”.

If the reasons to choose the host country can in some way be related with the reason to choose the host institution, it is nevertheless possible to identify a set of reasons for specifically choosing the latter. For the respondents the main reason to choose the school was the fact that it had an International Module with subjects taught in English. The existence of an International Module where students of different countries attend the same class taught in English appears to create an enriching multicultural environment that enable the development of cultural awareness and competences, that is mentioned by some authors such as Vaicekauskas et al. (2013) and Teichler (2004), as some of the main purposes for students to join in the programme. One other reason, mentioned by respondents refers to the similarities between the home and the host academic institutions in what concerns the courses offered. This reason is presented by respondents to justify the subjects they have in the learning agreement and also as a way to guarantee the recognition of ECTS, as quoted by some respondents” “It’s a similar institution / Have similar subjects and course / Is part of my home course / My school recommended / Is the only choice”. But, not only the technical and administrative reasons are present in the respondents’ choice of institution but also the teaching methods used seem to be another reason for the choice of school, as mentioned by some respondents: “Because my friend has been here and said it was super / I heard from my friends that is a good school / My friends recommended”. The last reason or group of reasons, to choose the school mentioned by respondents is connected with its geographical location and the characteristics of the city in which it’s located, as some students mention: “It’s a nice city / It’s near Lisbon / It’s near my home”. The latter – the short distance from home – is mentioned by the Spanish students and it appears to reflect the neighbourhood “influence” mentioned before.

As to our second aim – what expectations and competences students expect to develop during their stay abroad - the results show that the respondents aim to develop communication competences, corroborating in part the study done by Vaicekauskas et al. (2013). The respondents aim to improve their “English language skills”, “learn the Portuguese language” and “learn other languages”. The improvement of their English proficiency and to learn Portuguese appear to be related with their enrolment in the International Module, which as

mentioned before includes English for Professionals as well as Portuguese Language and Culture. The aim to learn other languages appears to stem more from their relationship with students from different countries and/or the multicultural environment in and out of class. Another noteworthy expectation is connected with the importance of the “international experience” as a whole, which can be read in the following quotations: “Meet new people / It’s a good experience for my life / Meet people from other countries and cultures / Have an experience in other culture / Share experiences / Have an opened mind vision”. The sharing of experiences and contact with different and new people seem to reflect the “core principles” of the international experience, which is to be able to develop a new vision of the world and a new way to think life. These results as well the comments about the opportunity to enrich their CV and increase their professional opportunities corroborate studies mentioned before done by Brancht et al. (2006) and Rivza and Teichler (2007), amongst others. The respondents also show some expectations that can be connected with what we hereby will call “psychological characteristics”, and that can be described as a sense of confidence, independence, thus also initiative. These are mentioned as “I want to prove my independency... to learn more about my personality / Learn to be independent / To be more self-confident”. The vacation value of their stay also comes up as an expectation of the respondents, mentioned as “expect to travel / to have fun / (and) adventure”.

Analysis of the competences respondents expect to develop in the subject, namely in People in Organisations and/or Managing People at Work show that the responses can be categorized in three groups, namely: competences related to the content of this two subjects; competences related to the instrumental value of the subjects; and what can be related to the degree of familiarity or novelty of the subjects. The first category or type of expectation can be found when respondents mention they expect to “Learn more about persons in the organizations / I want to know the importance and role of each person in organizations / I want to know how to improve better cooperation at work / Understand people in organizations / How to work together in an organization / Learn about people”. These quotes appear to be a literal translation of the subjects syllabus. The second group of expectations is found in respondents answers where they mention the opportunity to “learn about management practices in different countries” and the usefulness for the students professional future “as a manager” or “for the working life” as a whole, as well as the expectation to improve their English. The third group of expectations - the degree of familiarity or novelty of the subject – refers to the fact that some students will choose the subject for its familiarity or similarity with other subjects they’ve had, as mentioned “it’s similar to (my) home courses”, while others will do it for the opposite reasons: “because is new for me”. Meaning that if the students have a positive expectation about the subjects the reasons why they choose the subjects can be very different from one student to another.

Conclusions

Our exploratory study on Erasmus incoming students’ motivations and the competences they expect to develop during their stay in Portugal reinforces that Erasmus is viewed by students as a means to enhance cultural, academic, linguistic and professional competences, corroborating what is emphasized by some recent studies in this field.

The reasons referred by students for choosing Portugal appear to be very similar to those mentioned in other studies for students to choose Southern European, and are associated with the exoticism of its culture and it’s vacation value due to the weather and the opportunity to enjoy the beaches. The other reason is the social influence, particular of friends, during their

decision making process when choosing a host country. As to the choice of school, even though the similarity between courses in home and host institution being important to guarantees them the recognition of their studies abroad, the main reason of choice appears to be the existence of an International Module with subjects taught in English. The International Module enables students to develop competences that they consider key during their stay abroad, namely communication competences, and more specifically the opportunity to improve their English, to learn Portuguese and other languages, as well as to enhance their knowledge of the Portuguese culture, as well as to interact in a multi-cultural environment in class. The choice of subject also reflects to a certain extent the competences students expect to develop during their Erasmus experience, namely their ability to understand people and organizations, specifically in multi-cultural environments, develop managerial skills that will contribute to enhance their CV and career opportunities, as well as improve their language proficiency.

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Chapter 3: Individual Performance

