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Why we cannot afford losing Erasmus+

The Erasmus+ (formerly the Erasmus) programme supports student and staff mobility throughout the European academic community. Amongst many other things it provides students with the opportunity to study in another EU country for up to a year for free. It also funds students who opt for a work placement in industry or who choose to work as Language Assistants in schools. Not only do students studying Modern Languages Degrees participate in this scheme but it is also available to students from all other degree courses. (For more information see <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/after-the-brexit-referendum-possible-outcomes-for-horizon-2020-and-erasmus.pdf?sfvrsn=4>)

Since its launch in 1987 over 200.000 students have studied and worked abroad, mainly in France, Spain and Germany. This represents approximately 0.5% of the UK student population.

Although roughly twice as many European students come to the UK under the Erasmus scheme compared with UK students studying abroad (2012/13: 2100 UK students went to Germany and 4400 German students came to the UK) this trend has started to change. Currently, more and more students from Britain are choosing to study or work in Europe. During the academic year 2013/14 almost 15.600 students spent up to a year in another European country. This is an increase of 115% since 2007. (cf. The Guardian, 28.5.2015 and https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en)

For the years 2014 – 2020 almost one billion euros has been allocated to the UK alone and it was expected that about 250.000 people would benefit directly from the programme during this period. One must also not forget the advantages the UK economy alone derives from this exchange: EU students bring approximately £3.7bn annually to the country. (cf. Jo Johnson in The Guardian, 20 June 2016)

It is a well-established (and researched) fact that university students who spend a longer period of time abroad (i.e. 9 – 12 months) either on study or work placements have a real advantage over students who stay in the UK for the whole of their degree when it comes to the UK job market (see also “The value of Languages”, University of Cambridge, 2015: <http://www.languagesciences.cam.ac.uk/national-languages-policy/report-the-value-of-languages>). The skills acquired and developed during a Year Abroad are particularly sought after by UK employers. In a recent survey, more than half of British employers were unhappy with graduates’ language skills and nearly half were not satisfied with graduates’

cultural awareness (see 2013 report by the CBI, The Guardian, 28.5. 2015, also see BBC News 22 June 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27948049>). The European Commission's Impact Study from 2014 states:

The new study shows that 92% of employers are looking for personality traits boosted by the programme such as tolerance, confidence, problem-solving skills, curiosity, knowing one's strengths/weaknesses, and decisiveness when making a recruitment decision. (cf. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-1025_en.htm?locale=en)

See also a report by the British Council from 2015:

The UK needs graduates who have the skills and confidence to compete globally, and can compete against foreign talent that may speak more languages and have wider international experience. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/ihe/knowledge-centre/student-mobility/report-broadening-horizons-2015>

Additionally, the fruits of personal enrichment such as life-long friendships and relationships and links to new cultures among others (things which a period spent abroad particularly entails) are valued by all involved. As the Erasmus home page states: "The friends and memories last a life – time. The Erasmus exchange programme is one of the greatest culture and character building programs that you can have in your whole life." (For personal statements by (former) students see also "It helped me grow up: students on why the Erasmus scheme must stay", The Guardian, 19/09/2016, and also see <http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/>).

As University German teachers with over 40 years of experience between us, we have seen the benefits a Year Abroad offers at close range. One of our professional reactions to the outcome of the referendum on June 23rd was to take a snapshot of our returning students' views on their time spent abroad and to explore the issue through a survey.

For this study we conducted an online survey with our returning students (42 at the University of Warwick and 30 at the University of Cambridge) and received 51 responses for evaluation. There were 17 questions in total, of which the first four asked for factual information such as "Where did you stay in your YA and for how long", name and contact details and name of home university. Questions 5 to 17 asked about the specific value of the Year Abroad and the Erasmus+ programme. Questions 5 to 14 could be answered with a simple "strongly agree", "agree", "don't agree", "strongly disagree" or "N/A" with the option for further comments, whereas questions 15 – 17 were open questions. (For a complete list of questions see the Appendix.) The results have been unsurprising, on the contrary, they very much confirmed our own understanding of the benefits of the Year Abroad in general and Erasmus+ in particular. Although the survey we carried out might be small in sample number the responses were nevertheless telling and representative for a wider cohort of students at British universities and the current situation.

Question 5, “Intricacies and colloquial use of a language are best learned in the host country” was answered with “strongly agree” by 44 and with “agree” by 7 participants. This clearly indicates the belief and conviction that classroom learning is neither sufficient nor a substitute for the immersion into the foreign language in the country itself when it comes to an authentic mastery of the language in question.

Question 6, “I am now more culturally aware of my host country/ countries” has also been answered unambiguously: 41 students answered with “strongly agree” and 10 with “agree”. One student also linked cultural awareness with linguistic awareness, observing that as soon as they grasped the cultural norms of the host country they also understood the language better.

Question 7, “I am now more culturally aware of my home country” was answered slightly more ambiguously with 25 participants choosing “strongly agree”, 20 “agree”, five “don’t agree” and one “N/A”. Whilst we could interpret the 6 answers “don’t agree” and “N/A” as indicating either that the students were very culturally aware of their home country before they left for their Year Abroad or else that they failed to establish a link between the new culture and their own, 45 students were clearly aware of an enhanced conception of their own “world” on returning. One student writes that when asked by Austrian students about the conflict in Northern Ireland it forced them to think critically about the situation from the perspective of an outsider, something they normally would not have done. Another confirmed that he/she learned to challenge aspects of life that were hitherto taken for granted. Comments made by Mostafa Rajaai, International Officer for the National Union of Students, in an interview in *The Independent*, seem to echo this:

Erasmus has been extremely successful in creating academic, scientific and cultural exchanges across Europe. The many thousands who take part in the scheme every year are not the only ones benefiting from it. The program enriches the experiences of all students who have a much more diverse learning environment as a result of Erasmus. (The Independent, 24 July 2016)

Question 8, “I have gained in confidence and self-awareness and developed as a person” was answered by 36 students with “strongly agree” and 15 students with “agree”. This result confirms what we as language tutors have been able to witness for many years and it is instructive to see that our students themselves interpret their development in a similar manner. As one student put it: “I’ll be leaving university with a huge advantage over my fellow students who did not spend a year abroad as I have had not only experience of living abroad but also of working which has made me a more hard-working, focused and self-confident person when I left.”

Question 9, “I feel more employable both in the UK and foreign countries” received a “strongly agree” from 38 students and an “agree” from 13. It is worth emphasising here that although all students see an advantage in their employability anywhere by virtue of their

Year Abroad experience (one student even mentions that he/she had received a conditional job offer by their “dream firm” following an internship in Germany), they are also very much aware of impending political changes and threats to their working lives. As one student put it: “I do feel more employable currently but I worry that if or when the UK leaves the EU, I may find it difficult to find work...”

Question 10, “I have acquired skills in my YA a potential employer will be looking for” similarly received 37 “strongly agree” and 14 “agree” ticks. As one student put it: “Living and working abroad shows an employer that I can adapt to different situations in a versatile and confident manner.” Again, the claim that a university education alone cannot provide all the skills necessary to give an applicant an advantage over another candidate is clearly supported by the respondents.

Question 11, “I would have studied abroad even without Erasmus funding” is the first question/ statement that shows more variety in the spectrum of answers. Whereas four students chose “strongly agree” and 17 “agree”, twenty didn’t agree, six strongly disagreed, three chose N/A (because they were on work placements during their Year Abroad and were therefore probably not as reliant on their Erasmus funding as the other students were) and one person skipped the question. In the main, answers indicated that students would not have been able to afford a Year Abroad without funding and some even stressed that the Erasmus funding was pivotal in their decision to study languages.

Question 12, “I would have studied for a degree involving Modern Languages even without an integral Year Abroad” was answered by five students with “strongly agree”, by twenty with “agree” by 17 with “don’t agree” and by nine with “strongly disagree”. We can see here that just over 50% of the respondents would not have chosen a language degree without a Year Abroad, indicating that a degree in Modern Languages without an integral Year Abroad would not have such a great appeal for most students. Two students commented that the Year Abroad was one of the main attractions in choosing to study German in the first place. Another student commented on the difficulty on answering this statement since their decision was made when the Year Abroad was still guaranteed. One student was quite straightforward: “Studying a foreign language without the opportunity to have a year abroad in the target country can make studying a language an almost redundant activity.”

Question 13, “I feel equipped to live and work abroad after my degree” received 33 “strongly agree”, 16 “agree” one “N/A” and one student skipped the question. One student added that they “very much wanted to live and work abroad...without the YA I would have considered it impossible to look abroad for a job after graduating.” Another student added laconically “provided that this will still be possible after Britain leaves the EU.”

Question 14, “I strongly recommend going on a Year Abroad” was answered by a great majority of 47 students with “strongly agree”, by two with “agree”, by one student with

“don’t agree” and one person skipped the question. One respondent commented: “It was a life-changing experience which I want as many people as possible to be able to have.” Another comment reads: “The highlight of my time at university” and yet another one states: “...it is one of the most defining features of my life to date and has utterly changed me as a person (for the better)”. These answers imply and clearly illustrate that the provision of the Year Abroad is of the utmost importance for any university offering degree courses in Modern Foreign Languages.

Questions 15 – 17 as open questions are more difficult to summarize. However, there are recurrent keywords and themes and we have attempted to organize them into various topic areas.

Question 15 reads “Tell us in your own words: What do you think were the major benefits of the Year Abroad to you?” Apart from the obvious enhancement of language skills (mentioned by 34 respondents), 28 students stated that cultural understanding/ awareness and adapting to another culture and the interaction with German native speakers was an important factor. Eighteen mentioned self-confidence and their development as a person. Other important benefits noted included the chance to meet people from all over Europe (and indeed the world), independence, work-experience and the improved prospects of employability both in the UK and abroad. Also mentioned were an increased awareness of one’s own culture, the ability to travel, resilience, becoming more self-aware, open-minded and organized as well as learning about oneself. Also noted were the financial support received via Erasmus funding, the chance to study a variety of topics, gaining a global perspective as well as a determination to succeed. This clearly shows that the benefits of a considerable period of time spent abroad are much greater and more manifold than the linguistic improvement alone.

Question 16 asked the respondents: “What would future students lose should the Erasmus+ Programme be abolished?” and the responses we received were even more detailed and varied than the answers to the previous question. To summarize, most students mentioned “an amazing opportunity” whilst not having to worry about the financial side of things, the opportunity to improve language skills to a very high standard, to experience and immerse oneself in another culture, to develop a high sense of self-confidence, the whole ethos around Erasmus as togetherness and collaboration, being open-minded and not ignorant, and the acquisition of skills that improve employability. Some respondents also mentioned the ability and confidence to live and work abroad, a complete experience of Europe, a chance to graduate with the kind of knowledge and experience a textbook cannot teach, a life-enriching experience, and a sense of achievement. Other students raised concerns about the value of learning a foreign language without being able to visit the country/ countries where the language is spoken, stressing that the language would never become innate to the student. They also pointed to the dangers of relying on stereotypes of other countries rather than having the opportunity to bring societies closer together. One short

and poignant statement read: “Students would lose one of the best years of their lives” while another one just says “everything”!

Question 17 asked the students “Tell us anything else about studying abroad you would like us to consider” and we received a variety of answers. More general statements such as gaining an awareness at what is happening beyond one’s own country, a fantastic experience which everyone should have access to, gaining an understanding of differences as key to building lasting relationships and a peaceful existence complemented claims such as that this was truly the best way to learn a language, and that linguistic skills are limited in value unless coupled with a cultural understanding. Two statements were very personal and got to the point of the matter. One reads: “It pains me to think that, because of a decision made by a fraction of our country, future students will not receive the same opportunity that I received on my Year Abroad”. The second one says: “When I left Berlin, I felt really uprooted because I was leaving a place that had truly been my home for 12 months.”

Drawing from the survey it can clearly be seen how very much students of Modern Foreign languages value the Year Abroad in the context of Erasmus+. It is clear that the Year Abroad is a vital part of the degree course, one which shapes and develops a student in a way which should not be underestimated and which cannot be replaced by anything the home university can offer. Its loss would be of immense detriment to Modern Foreign languages and to our future students in general.

We firmly believe it is absolutely vital for Erasmus+ to survive, even after Britain has left the EU. In order to safeguard competitiveness and to ensure the best opportunities for young educated people we need to guarantee Erasmus+ for future generations. The UK’s exclusion from Erasmus+ would be a calamity for the academic exchange between Britain and the rest of the EU as well as for future cultural bonds.

It is now in the hands of the British government to prevent this from happening and to guarantee the continuation of the possibilities offered by the Year Abroad in the context of Erasmus+ to future generations of students.

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Further reading and Bibliography

We would like to support a statement made by the president of the German Academic Exchange Service, Margarete Wintermantel:

“Of the academics teaching and researching at British universities, about 55,000, or 30%, are from outside the UK – and 32,000 are from the European Union, of whom 5,250 are German. As the president of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), representing 239 institutions of higher education and 105 student bodies, I therefore call on the British government to guarantee that our students do not in the future have to pay higher fees than their British counterparts.” (cf. The Guardian, 25. Sept 2016)

For further information we also find the “Checklist for Government negotiators and officials” published on 17 October 2016 by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages very helpful (cf. <http://brexitlanguagesappgmfl.weebly.com/>)

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The Value of Languages, Cambridge, 2015

<http://www.languagesciences.cam.ac.uk/national-languages-policy/report-the-value-of-languages>

European Commissions Impact Study, 2014

http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-1025_en.htm?locale=en

British Council report: Broadening horizons, 2015

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/ihe/knowledge-centre/student-mobility/report-broadening-horizons-2015>

Article from Universities UK from 8 April 2016

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/eu-students-vital-to-regional-economies.aspx>

Many articles on the topic can be found in the Guardian’s Education section

<https://www.theguardian.com/education>

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