

IBS Report

"One million Erasmus celebration; weak and strong points"

IBS Lyon, France

Date: 10 - 15 December 2002

Author:

EduCo - Educational Committee

BEST – Board of European Students of Technology

People involved

Facilitators

Iulia Gherasim	-	Bucharest, Romania	-	iulia.gherasim@best.eu.org
Erika Rozenberg	-	Iasi, Romania	-	erika.rozenberg@BEST.eu.org

Group Members

Group 1:

Albert Cervello	-	Barcelona, Spain	-	acerve@yahoo.com
Elias Coniavitis	-	Uppsala, Sweden	-	elias.coniavitis@BEST.eu.org
Eleni Stergiou	-	Athens, Greece	-	el00096@mail.ntua.gr
Kim Hacklin	-	Helsinki, Finland	-	kim.hacklin@BEST.eu.org
Paul Diaconescu	-	Bucharest, Romania	-	delphi@go.ro

Group 2:

Juan Manuel Ortiz	-	Valladolid, Spain	-	juanma@BEST.eu.org
Anders Gustavsson	-	Göteborg, Sweden	-	anders.gustavsson@BEST.eu.org
Anes Sassi	-	Grenoble, France	-	anes.sassi@BEST.eu.org
Heidi Salmenniemi	-	Helsinki, Finland	-	heidi.salmenniemi@tky.hut.fi
Vasile Dumitrascu	-	Bucharest, Romania	-	va511e@yahoo.com
Dimitris Iakovakis	-	Athens, Greece	-	mykotsanes@yahoo.com
David Lindo	-	Barcelona, Spain	-	datichati@hotmail.com
Dima Kaschuck	-	Lviv, Ukraine	-	dkaschuck@yahoo.com

Abstract - Summary

An IBS is an educational BEST, Board of European students of Technology, event, where students take part in discussions and have the opportunity to express own ideas on educational matters. This is done by an opening introductory plenary session and then in smaller discussion groups with Professors from Technical Universities and in some cases representatives from

Industry. The IBS is mainly run by the Educational Committee (EduCo), and the hosting local-BEST group, in this case in Lyon. The topics vary on different educational issues: this IBS is organized together with the Educational Project, and Thematic Network connected to the European Commission, E4, Enhancing Engineering Education in Europe.

The title of this IBS, International BEST symposia, was "One million Erasmus celebration; weak and strong points". We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the Erasmus program; the problems you may encounter as an Erasmus student and what can be done to solve some of the problems and improve the Erasmus program. There were 15 participants at this IBS, where 8 were EduCo members. After the introduction we divided into 2 groups. For both groups the topic was the same and during the sharing session we confronted the results, and in this report are written the opinion of the participants from both groups.

Overview

INTRODUCTION.....	2
BACKGROUND OF THE PARTICIPANTS.....	3
Conclusions:.....	3
DISCUSSIONS DAY 1	4
Why do students want to study abroad?	4
Conclusions:.....	4
DISCUSSIONS DAY 2	5
What affects the decision where to go?	5
Advantages of Erasmus	6
Disadvantages of Erasmus	6
Conclusions:.....	7
DISCUSSIONS DAY 3	7
Solutions to the main problems from day 2.....	7
Presentations made by the two groups.....	12
Conclusions:.....	12
CONCLUSIONS	12

Introduction

After we got to know each others, we made a short presentation of the topic and we had a short discussion upon it. Then we split into 2 groups and we discussed the same topics in each group and during the sharing sessions we compared the results and we discussed them.

Mainly the discussions focused on what is good in the ERASMUS program and what is not so good and make suggestions on what would need to be improved and how we can do it. We structured all the discussion in three main parts: problems and advantages before going as an Erasmus student, problems that you may encounter during you stay in the foreign country and also after your return home when the program is ended.

Background of the participants

First an introduction of the participants with what experiences they have from the Erasmus program.

Kim: has little first hand experience, but mainly from working at the international office of his University and the foreign students. He wants to go on an Erasmus exchange program.

David: he will go as an Erasmus student next semester in Germany.

Helen: she doesn't know so much, but she will like to know more about the Erasmus program.

Heidi: she has been on an Erasmus exchange in France, and she has also worked with Kim, helping the foreign students to orientate themselves.

Vasile: he doesn't know much about Erasmus.

Iulia: has heard of Erasmus mainly through BEST. She applied for an Erasmus grant, but didn't get the place where she wanted to go so she never went. She has seen the selection process.

Albert: he is studying now in Germany through Erasmus. Would like to go to an English-speaking country, but his home University doesn't have many possibilities for this.

Dimitris: he has tried to learn about Erasmus and would like to know more.

Anders: he has studied abroad many times, but not through Erasmus.

Pauli: he knows about Erasmus through his friends and he wants to go to study abroad.

Erika: she wants to go abroad, would need more information about the program.

Elias: he hasn't gone to study abroad but he wants to.

Anes: he has met a lot of Erasmus students in Grenoble.

JuanMa: he was on Erasmus exchange in Norway. His home University only had two choices, France and Norway. He did his final thesis during his exchange.

Kiki: she has never been in an Erasmus program and her home University doesn't have any agreements with other Universities of her specific fields, so it is difficult for her to study abroad. She is working at the international office so she knows many things about Erasmus.

Conclusions:

The group has students that have been in a foreign country as an ERASMUS student, students that are currently in such a program and students that want to go studying abroad. With such a wide range of background we can make a quite clear image of the Erasmus program, how it is seen from the outside and also from the inside.

Discussions day 1

General: the topics of the discussions were:

Why do students want to study abroad?

Group 1:

For some countries (especially for Nordic countries) the students are urged to study abroad and a lot of students are doing this. Other reasons for studying abroad are: finding new things, getting in contact with new cultures, learn things that you can not learn in your own country, improve language skills, be able to compare knowledge with other students, for some is just a reason to go abroad, to become more independent or to have new subjects that you can study

Group 2:

When going abroad you will see and explore a different way of learning when there are different teaching methods in different countries, for many students it is a big step to go away from home and very educative, you will improve your education, it is fun to go and explore new things in new countries and learn language, there could be the need to go away to a better school to learn things that you couldn't learn at your own University.

Conclusions:

The discussions were long and often we got a little bit away from the main question and we talk about more problems of the Erasmus program. The reasons differ with your origin country, and from student to student.

The mains reasons for going to study abroad are:

- finding and learning new things
- to study subjects that your home University doesn't offer
- improve language skills or learn a new language
- personal experience
- to become independent from parents
- to learn to be open-minded
- to improve your knowledge
- to take on new challenges
- to experience different ways and methods of teaching
- sometimes a possibility of having a double degree
- to travel
- to specialize
- to learn about new culture

Discussions day 2

General: the topics of the discussions were:

What affects the decision where to go?

Advantages of Erasmus

Disadvantages of Erasmus

What affects the decision where to go?

- What are the criteria of choosing the country?

Group 1

- language
- topic
- fun and travel
- culture and country
- money that would be needed
- geography
- information
- number of possibilities might limit choice

Group 2

- money; for the most of the student the scholarship is not enough
- fear of loosing top know-how
- learning about a new culture
- lack of choices and difficulties in finding information and support for the student ideas
- a language threshold
- recognition problems and contact between the schools
- fun and interesting culture
- influence from friends and other promotions

Advantages of Erasmus*Group 1*

- Improved personal skills
- Language skills
- Open-mindedness
- More attractive CV
- Experience in general
- Different or new courses
- Learning to face new problems
- Level of University might be easier
- New hobbies and friends

Group 2

- gain independence
- language
- culture
- fun
- different courses
- complementing your studies
- liberty
- budget, economy
- improving your CV
- encounter new problems
- action in your life
- feeling of being left alone
- find different aspect of life
- realize own culture
- pass exams easier
- learn new things
- find new hobbies
- meet new friends
- mature

Disadvantages of Erasmus*Group 1*

- Financial problems
- Recognition of studies and credits
- Lack of information
- Initial difficulties / no "official" reception program
- Travel reports are not compulsory
- Too much paperwork before and after
- Home-sickness, feeling lonely
- Wasting time or money if studies are not recognized

Group 2

- wasting time/money
- being late with studies
- loose girlfriend/boyfriend
- losing primary targets for your studies
- bureaucracy, paper work
- missing home
- stress

Conclusions:

In the end the two groups came up with very similar outcomes. It means that these are the ones needed to be taken in consideration by those that are in charge with running the project.

We can also notice that the reasons for going abroad are almost the same for all categories. So when a student is thinking to study abroad, he is taking in consideration: what the new school can offer him, the economical situation, the social problems that may occur and language issues, since there are a many countries in which you can not study in English and you have to learn the country's language in order to be able to study there.

Also we listed the advantages and disadvantages of going to study abroad through the Erasmus program. The main advantages are improved language skills, experience new culture, learn new skills and meet new friends. The main disadvantages are: money, language, recognition and integration of the students.

Discussions day 3

General: the topics of the discussions were:

Solutions to the main problems from day 2
Presentations made by the two groups

Solutions to the main problems from day 2**Group 1**

Before, disadvantages (in order of importance):

1. Financial problems
2. Lack of information about the University and Erasmus program
3. Not all Universities or subjects are represented
4. Varying level of service for Erasmus in Universities
5. Too much paperwork
6. Criteria for selection vary by University
7. There is no minimum limit for studying, there should be
8. Erasmus is only for Europe
9. Change all of one's current activities.

Solutions:

1. Financial problems:
 - Grants should be based on the price-level of the country where student is going to, not where student is coming from.
 - The grant is nearly not enough, even if we take into account the price-level
 - The grades of the student should be taken into account when selecting the students.

- The grant should be received on time and optimally before leaving for the exchange.
2. Lack of information about the University and Erasmus program
 - Central database from every single University with someone keeping it up-to-date all the time. Should include all the necessary information about the University. Must be available as a web-page that is easily available.
 - Student's travel reports should also be available online
 - Marketing and promoting Erasmus in general, making students aware of the benefits of exchange.
 - Contact person at the University.
 3. Not all Universities or subjects are represented
 - Give all the possibilities, even if they are given in the native language
 - More Universities should be encouraged to take part in the program
 - Co-ordinators should help the students in finding the right place
 4. Varying level of service for Erasmus in Universities
 - Stricter rules for Universities
 - Rules must be made public for all students and staff of Universities
 - Students should be able to affect the rules
 - The rules must be the same for whole Europe, but there must be some room for movement to take into account the different backgrounds of countries and Universities.
 5. Too much paperwork
 - All documents should be in electronic form
 - Less bureaucracy, more help from the University
 6. Criteria for selection vary by University
 - The rules for selection must be public
 - The selection itself must be semi-public, the reasons must be given but not i.e. the exact grades.
 - Selection procedure must be absolutely objective
 7. There is no minimum limit for studying, there should be
 - Make a limit, but we must be careful not to set it too high. If a person doesn't study a single credit while being abroad then there could be an option of taking back the grant. However there must be a possibility to handle each case separately since the reason for not studying could be sickness etc.
 8. Change all of one's current activities
 - This is a consequence not a disadvantage and it should be accepted as such.
 9. Erasmus is only for Europe
 - If students want to learn English or see the world outside Europe then they should be given the chance for it. Since Erasmus was only for Europe there should be created another program for a larger field.

During, disadvantages (in order of importance):

1. Difficulties in the beginning of the exchange
2. Difficulties with getting services from the University
3. Adapting to the new environment, social life
4. Language problems
5. Financial problems related to working
6. Contact with home
7. Racism and nationalism

8. Different semesters in different countries

Solutions:

1. Difficulties in the beginning of the exchange
 - Accommodation is one of the biggest problems. It should be arranged well before the student even comes to the country by the host University.
 - Taking care of the practical arrangements: computers, finding classrooms. There should be a survivor kit given to everyone with all the basic information about the University and the city, maps, contact information
 - Social activities. The first days/weeks should have social events to meet local people and also other exchange students.
2. Difficulties with getting services from the University
 - How to solve problems with teachers? There should be clear guidelines for this
 - Getting results from exams. If this takes too long then it might be difficult to get the courses recognized back home
3. Adapting to the new environment, social life
 - There should be possibilities to take part in activities with local students and other Erasmus students. This includes sports and various events.
 - A personal tutor should be assigned who can answer practical questions
4. Language problems
 - Free language courses in the local language must be available
 - There should be a possibility to do the exams and homework in English
5. Financial problems related to working
 - There should be no restrictions for working in another country during the exchange
6. Racism and nationalism
 - Using the Erasmus program itself to fight racism
 - The program should also encourage mixing with local students and local people to increase cross-cultural understanding
7. Contact with home
 - Keep the students abroad informed of important events in their home University, especially concerned with studies.
8. Different semesters in different countries
 - More opportunities to take exams in other times than the official exam periods. This is way students might not lose an entire semester back home.

After, disadvantages (in order of importance):

1. Recognition
2. Report

Solutions:

1. Recognition
 - The problem is with different curricula
 - Know what courses are recognised before leaving
 - When the professor is the one accepting or rejecting the courses then there is a lot of inconsistency

- More work should be done before the student goes out to agree on what will be recognised and what the student should study.
- We need more transparency, more communication between Universities.
- Less bureaucracy, less paperwork.

2. Report

- Idea is to have a travel report of the most important things that the student encountered during his stay. These reports can help other students when going abroad.
- Shouldn't be too general, should contain concrete information about the country, the culture, the University.
- Could be made compulsory.
- There should be clear guidelines of all the things that have to be included on the report.
- Reports must be made available public and online for all students to read easily.

Group 2

Solutions; before, during and after

1. Paperwork:

To make a database where to share information, not to fill in the same papers many times, unify the paperwork, you have to do the work twice in home country and in the country you are going to. Each University has its own papers to be filled in; it would be better if there were the same papers for all Erasmus schools (organized centrally)

2. Budget, loneliness, stress, loosing boy/girlfriend.

Reduce stress, putting less pressure before going and ease preparation with proper help and help. Introductory parties, but after that there is no information and meetings with other in same situation, you feel more alone. Have some organization for you! Sharing school information to local students translated into English and distributed to a mailing list to all foreign students, like what is happening at the campus, where to buy tickets etc. Have a group that organizes trips and excursions during weekends, just foreigners cause locals are not that interested in these kinds of things. To have alumni families as contacts, and visit them a few times.

3. Fun

If you go on Erasmus and have too fun, you don't go to your lectures. Meet new people, friends for life. Do you have enough fun? This happens mostly with other Erasmus students not with the local students.

4. Recognition, courses

You have to adjust to the courses given at the school going to with the one from our own University. More courses offered in English can be a solution to the problem of finding easily courses that are in your home University?

In discussion of this group a very important question was raised: How do you plan the budget before going? They also gave some solutions and put more questions that are more for the students to answer.

Gather info from other students that have gone to that country before. Do you plan to work abroad? The money EU gives you is not enough. What are their intentions? What should the grant cover? The extra costs with trips, etc. You should support yourself in the same way as you do in your home country. How do you finance your study at home? EU should not pay for your food; you have to pay this at home anyway. Should cover the extra cost of living in the country you are going to.

Also in this group there was some discussion upon the procedure of getting the scholarship and how going abroad to study can influence you as a student.

Procedure

The participants of this group were from: Finland, Greece, Spain, Romania, Sweden and Ukraine.

Finland

Fill in form and they will select you, on base of how many years you have studied, your grades and language skills. They have more exchange places than student that wants to go. Find out how much scholarship you will receive. The school will organize a flat for you to stay after your wishes, after going there how you do get the key and find the way to get there. How are you received in the new country? Fill in paperwork. For selecting the courses you needed different signatures from home country University and this was a problem. If one of the persons doesn't except the signatures, or has been filled in an incorrect way, you have to fill in the form again and send it home again and wait for another period of time.

Spain

You apply, after finding out which schools there is an agreement with and then rank the different countries.

Accepted after a selection of grades, only the grades didn't look at language skills at all. The selection is made by personal from own University and can also don't accept students coming from abroad.

Greece

Selection by in which year you are in, then grades, also they check up crime record, you have to apply 7-8 months before. References from teachers are very good to have.

Romania

Erasmus is not advertised at all; but it exists, there are two periods of application and the application has to be made with a semester in advance. Each faculty has signed a bilateral agreement with equal faculties in other countries. You have to go to the contact person in your own faculty and find out about the options. Make a file with CV, grades and an interview with a commission formed by teachers from the different subjects that you studied. You have to answer

questions about why you want to go and how this exchange will fit in your education. They are also interested in your extra curricular activities. Also a language test is needed. They only want to send the top students, so you need to have very good grades. You can not get a scholarship from the government if you don't fulfil the grade requirements.

Sweden

You need to fulfil grade point average and then apply. Selection is made after your grades. The person with the highest grade will be offered the exchange place, called to an interview and asked by his intentions of going abroad, and then he needs to pass a language test, written and oral conversation to see if the language level is good enough. This is mainly to make sure that you will manage to live in that country.

How do you think life will be influenced after you have been Erasmus student? In which fields of your life will your new experience benefit you?

You know a lot about culture of other people, social intelligence, understanding, you realize what is typical for your own country. You are a stronger person, have stronger personality, you have encountered many new problems. Companies want new employees to be experienced from other countries, languages, etc.

Presentations made by the two groups

The two groups prepared digital presentations which are amended to this document.

Conclusions:

As we noticed there are quite some problems of the Erasmus program and the students who participated at this IBS tried to find some solutions. It is quite interesting to see that the admission procedure and the problems differ from one country to another.

Conclusions

After a three day discussion about the Erasmus program we discussed the good parts and also the bad parts of the program and gave some solution to the problems. Also the participants found out more about Erasmus program; some had been on an Erasmus program, some were doing one and some were going to do one. Of the others maybe after knowing more they will try to go to study abroad through this program.

The reasons behind choosing an Erasmus program differ with your origin country, and from student to student. The main reasons are: finding and learning new things, to study subjects that your home University doesn't offer, improve language skills and or learn a new language, for the personal experience, to become independent from your parents, to learn to be open-minded, to improve your knowledge, to take on new challenges, to experience different ways and methods of teaching, sometimes a possibility of having an extended degree, to specialize, to travel and explore and to learn about a new culture.

When a student is considering to study abroad, he or she is taking in consideration: what the new school can offer him, the economical situation in that country, the social problems that may occur and language issues; since there are a many countries in which you can not study in English and you have to learn the country's language in order to be able to encounter your studies.

We listed the advantages and disadvantages of going to study abroad trough the Erasmus program. The main advantages are improved language skills, experience new culture, learn new skills and meet new friends. The main disadvantages are: money, language, recognition and integration of the students.

We have found issues with the Erasmus program and the students who participated at this IBS located some problems and tried to find solutions. It is also interesting that the admission procedure for the program differs from country to country and also the problems that you may face differ from one country to another. In the end the two groups separately came up with similar outcomes. This means that we found the most important problems, gave some solutions to these from a students point of view and hope that these will be taken in consideration by those who are in charge with running the project.