

Building on Achievements of Erasmus Intensive Programmes – European Valorisation Conference

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Bonn – Bad Godesberg

Workshop A – 10 December 2007

Panel discussion: **Intensive programmes as experimental ground for intercultural learning?**

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Background:

In this workshop we had the presentation of two Erasmus Intensive Programmes (IP's) organized from different perspectives and different teaching levels but both of them very illustrative of the opportunity offered by the IP's as a training ground for intercultural learning. Contributions to the intercultural learning are not only observed at the theoretical level, but also through the methodologies adopted.

The first IP presented was “Intercultural Training for Business Students”, coordinated by Hogeschool Gent (Belgium) and with partner institutions from northern, central, eastern and southern Europe. The first aim of this IP is for students to achieve a thorough knowledge of cross-cultural aspects of communication and management in business at both cognitive and behavioral-affective levels.

The second IP presented was “Performance, Personal Growth and Communal Learning”, coordinated by Lund University (Sweden) and with an equally broad partner base as the first IP. This programme is taught as a core element of a European Master's Programme in Exercise and Sport Psychology and specifically aims to establish a common language for sports scientists and psychologists to be used in the multidisciplinary areas of public health and sport in an effort to aid in achieving an in-depth understanding of the most important topics in sport psychology, exercise and health. The Bonn conference provided a forum to consider and discuss the learning results from these very different programmes.

Results:

First of all, a deliberately intercultural design of the IP's leads to a greater increase in participants' intercultural awareness (e.g.: cultural self-awareness; tolerance towards different cultures; recognition of degrees of acculturation and assimilation of migrant culture groups in a host country).

Next, it was clear that different higher institutions recognise IP programmes differently. While stand-alone IP's may provide satisfactory, or even excellent results, it was generally agreed that institutions providing strong support through full academic recognition/accreditation by integrating the IP into in their regular curricula guarantee greater programme sustainability. IP coordinators are well advised, therefore, to take care that their programmes are not seen as marginal

events or an accidental activity. Academic recognition is also important to encourage students to take part in programmes and/or to be motivated to renew their participation in later initiatives (e.g.: student long-term mobility; continued studies in higher academic degrees; creation of new organizations, alumni associations or European programmes).

Another important consensus that was reached in the workshop concerned methodologies. As the 2 IP's being discussed were very different in terms of goals, but also in methods deployed to reach these goals, it was clear that IP's can be organised differently, that there is a lot of flexibility in this matter, and that "best practice" here depends the goals and the aims. For example, the option to set up the programme as an "isolated laboratory", as was presented by Gent IP, permitted facilitators to better control the aspects of isolation and immersion in the learning results, while accepting the necessary limitations of and opportunities, such as the ability to precisely focus the learners' attention, of this more artificial situation.

Challenges:

From the presentations and discussions in this workshop, we also can point out some challenges that we must have in mind for future proposals.

The Lund programme leads us to reflect on the challenge of how to develop a common intra-disciplinary scientific language among specialists that is useful for research and teaching, but at the same time brings to light rather than masks different cultural perspectives. We feel that IP proposal writers would do well to consider and address this difficulty to help us draft clearer proposals in intercultural communication learning. Indeed, does intercultural communication have the same meaning (and value) in different cultural groups?

Another challenge is how to respect the students' and teachers' expectations in relation with their participation on the program. These expectations are related with the link between theory and practice; with what they really have learnt as compared with what they, the students, may have expected to learn (cognitively, behaviourally and affectively) , which in some measure reflects the suitability of the teaching methods and, in the final analysis, the pertinence and sustainability of the IP.

A final challenge, not restricted to IP's, is how to improve the dissemination of the results and good practices, namely inside of the participant institutions. The IP's must be part of the institutional strategies and each institution must also promote "internationalization at home", not only to give more visibility to these programmes but also to give an opportunity to those who wouldn't otherwise have the chance to take part in an international-intercultural experience during their studies.

Recommendations:

As final recommendations to project promoters, we feel that the success of the variety of the methodologies suggests that we need to be innovative in our intercultural learning approaches, to reinforce the multidisciplinary as well as intra-disciplinary learning and, above all, to strongly support deliberate intercultural programme design.