



Student mobility and European identity

SUMMARY

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DAAD

Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst
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Preface

Since 1987, the European Union's Erasmus programme has enabled approximately three million students, including over 400,000 from Germany, to study, gain expertise, discover other cultures and languages, make friends from different backgrounds and build lifelong networks in other European countries. In these times of European crisis and increasing euroscepticism the question arises whether this investment by European taxpayers is really worthwhile, and what the programme actually achieves for students. Of particular interest in this context is the issue of whether Erasmus also contributes to forming a European identity among students.

The National Agency for EU Higher Education Cooperation at the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) therefore commissioned Friedhelm Maiworm and Albert Over of the *Gesellschaft für Empirische Studien* (GES) in Kassel to examine this issue by conducting a student survey, in which over 8,500 people ultimately took part.

The main results of this study, which is the first to explore this issue in Germany, are compiled in the following Executive Summary. The detailed study (only available in German) can be downloaded from the DAAD website at www.eu.daad.de/publikationen.

Dr Siegbert Wuttig
Director, National Agency for EU Higher Education Cooperation

Executive summary of the study

On behalf of DAAD, former and future German Erasmus students and interns were surveyed in the period between late August and late September 2013 in order to discover whether and to what extent they had developed or could develop a European identity as a result of their Erasmus-funded stay abroad.

At the request of DAAD, the International Offices of German universities wrote to the outlined target groups and informed them of the study. During the four-week field phase, a large number of addressees took part in the survey; we were ultimately able to include the responses of over 8,500 people in our analysis. 59 percent of respondents were Erasmus alumni, the remainder were future Erasmus participants.

Theoretical approaches on the genesis of a European identity emphasise the significance of communication and interaction between people of different national backgrounds, i.e. of spheres of communication in which an additional, complementary or new identity can be mutually negotiated. Most Erasmus students from Germany experienced favourable conditions in their host countries in this respect. They engaged in a wide range of contact with international students and local people not only at university or during their internships, but also as a result of living in shared accommodation or student halls of residence. Almost all surveyed Erasmus alumni reported frequent contact with other foreign students in their host country (86 %), and half of them had intensive contact with inhabitants of the host country.

From the participants' point of view, their Erasmus-funded period abroad was highly fruitful in several ways. Almost all emphasised its value for their own personal development (94 %), in forming contacts to people from other countries (92 %) and gaining an understanding of their respective host country (87 %). A further significant benefit lies in improved foreign language skills, which nine out of ten respondents claimed for themselves. It is on the other hand remarkable that only a minority considered its professional value, i.e. the opportunity to gain expertise unavailable in Germany, to be high.

Most Erasmus participants felt that being confronted with another culture and society had also allowed them to gain a new view of Germany (79 %). In relation to specific societal areas, their experiences abroad generally contributed to a higher opinion of their own country; this is true in particular regarding the quality of everyday life (transport infrastructure etc.), studying in Germany, and German environmental policy.

All in all, the former and future Erasmus participants identify fairly strongly with "Europe". However, there is a clear distinction between "Europe" as a geographic and cultural area on the one hand and the "European Union" as a federation of states and a political system on the other. While three in four respondents stated that they definitely considered themselves "Europeans", only half would similarly refer to themselves as "citizens of the European Union". Regarding the relationship between national and European identity, a majority feels either a similarly intense connection to both Europe and Germany, or even identifies more strongly with Europe. This sentiment is rarer with regard to the European Union, but still applies to fully half of all respondents.

According to the survey participants, major identification points of the European Union are in particular the single economic and monetary area, its shared currency, and freedom of establishment for EU citizens. Opinions differ when it comes to assessing the values and standards applied within the EU: adherence to democratic principles, human rights and legal certainty are considered core aspects of the EU, but only a minority also associates solidarity between countries, shared values and beliefs or a common culture and history with the European Union.

Only a minority (41 %) of surveyed Erasmus alumni acknowledge that participating in an Erasmus-funded stay abroad changed their attitude to Europe. It is however notable that changes in attitude, where they did take place, were almost entirely described as positive (80 %).

The advantage of the chosen survey design is that it allows a comparison between the attitudes of future and former Erasmus participants towards Europe, enabling us to analyse whether the Erasmus-funded stay abroad actually failed to effect changes in attitude among the majority of Erasmus alumni, or whether the corresponding effects arose "behind their backs" without the respondents being consciously aware of them.

Applying the level of identification with Europe/the European Union compared to Germany as a measure of European identity, the percentage of pro-Europe/EU advocates is greatest in the group of Erasmus alumni who claim to have arrived at new views of Europe through their participation in the programme (34 % pro-Europe and 21 % pro-EU). Among the other former participants and among future Erasmus students the corresponding percentages are significantly lower (24 % pro-Europe and 14 % pro-EU). This would seem to indicate that an Erasmus stay abroad fundamentally has the potential to change European identity; in numerous participants from Germany however this potential failed to take effect.

Another example may also serve to demonstrate the fundamental importance of international mobility regarding attitudes towards Europe: future Erasmus students who had already spent a significant amount of time abroad before their Erasmus

phase were more likely to have a pro-European attitude than their fellow students who had not yet gained any experience abroad.

One explanation as to why attitudes towards Europe and the European Union sometimes remained unmodified could be that Erasmus students already had a more or less distinctive European identity beforehand – an identity that may itself have informed their motivation to study abroad. Accordingly, changes in their affinity to Europe may not always be apparent after their time abroad, or appear to be only minor. Our analysis of open-ended questions on this subject suggests that this is the case. Comparable conclusions were also drawn by the authors of similar surveys, e.g. Sigalas (2009), Wilson (2011) and Van Mol (2011). Based on the present data however this hypothesis cannot be definitively examined. In order to arrive at robust results in this respect it would be necessary to also survey a group of non-mobile students on the existence and degree of their sense of European identity for comparison.

Those Erasmus alumni who reported that their attitudes to Europe had changed believed this to be due mainly to intensive contact with fellow students from other European countries and their host country, the cultural scene at their place of study, and everyday interaction with people in their host country outside the university. It is notable that replies to an open-ended question frequently emphasised that contact with international students from non-European countries in particular had led to new views.

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, a statistical analysis identified further potentially influencing factors:

– *Length of period spent abroad*: respondents more frequently reported new attitudes towards Europe the longer their Erasmus phase had lasted.

– *Host country*: Erasmus alumni who spent time in Central and Eastern Europe and in Southern Europe more frequently reported changes in attitude than their fellow students in other host regions.

– *Living situation*: living in a student hall of residence or in shared accommodation with foreign students of different nationalities leads more frequently to the development of a European identity than sharing a flat with other German students.

– *Gaining new views of Germany*: critical reflection on the respondents' own country and culture correlates with changes in attitude towards Europe. This does not necessarily mean that their opinion of their home country decreases. On the contrary, Erasmus students who reported that their attitude towards Europe had changed frequently developed a more positive image of Germany through their stay abroad than their fellow students.

– *Gender*: while half of all male participants reported that their Erasmus phase abroad had led to a different view of Europe, the same was true of only approximately a third of female Erasmus students. No explanation for this rather significant gender difference can however be derived from the available data.

Overall, the survey showed that participating in Erasmus in almost all cases promotes personal development and the forming of international competencies, and can also contribute to developing a European identity. From a methodological point of view it would be desirable to now examine whether the present results for Erasmus students and interns from Germany also apply to Erasmus participants from other European countries. The question whether students interested in the Erasmus programme really have a stronger European identity than their non-mobile fellow students also remains unanswered. Ultimately, it cannot be ruled out that a different choice of survey design, i.e. a longitudinal or panel study, would have allowed the effects of the Erasmus phase abroad on attitudes to Europe to be more precisely determined.

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