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## **Part 3**

### **Institutionalized mobility inside and outside Erasmus**

*David Cairns*

*Thais França*

*Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal*

Having looked at various aspects of free movement in tertiary education in the previous section of this book, we now direct our attention towards young people's participation in student mobility programmes, the most prominent example being the European Commission supported Erasmus programme. The popularity of Erasmus as a research topic is equally evident, to the point where the study of student mobility is largely equated with Erasmus, although many other less well documented institutionally hosted platforms can be found throughout the globalized world of tertiary education. Given that Erasmus is so familiar, this section of the book will try to move beyond describing the programme and try to consider what other exchange mechanisms contribute to our understanding of youth migration.

The first five chapters consider different aspects of Erasmus, beginning with an account of the 30 year history of the programme by Alexandra Ribeiro. This chapter helps contextualize the place of Erasmus within the development of systemic student mobility at tertiary education level and, more questionably, as an instrument of European integration. As various studies have made clear, Erasmus can be seen as a symbolic success for the European institutions, as a sign of an integrating Europe, linked with internationalization processes at tertiary education level, especially in the highly commercialized universities of the Global North. However, this apparent success is tempered by a failure to integrate socio-demographic and geo-demographic inclusivity of the programme remains questionable, challenging the idea of Erasmus as an

unqualified success story. Ironically, in a programme that is explicitly international, it is a failure to take into account differences at national and regional levels undermines aspirations towards equality of access, with the price of entry highest for those in receipt of least support. Taking a ‘one size fits all’ approach to student participation simply does not work, suggesting that symbol success was not matched by actual achievement (see, e.g., Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013; Cairns, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Less contentiously, the idea of internationalization via Erasmus is explored by Sahizer Samuk and colleagues in Chapter 14. Using evidence from a European Commission funded study entitled *MOVE*, they look at how Erasmus has diversified the learning of mobility among young people. Rather than being a migration incubator, the idea seems to be that Erasmus should make a contribution to future employment aspirations, facilitating the adoption of new lifestyles and what these authors term an ‘Erasmus-ization’ of life experience (Samuk et al., 2021). In practice, this entails enculturation to European values and global citizenship (Deardorff, 2006), experiential learning (Kolb, 2014), and a broadening of opportunity structures in relation to a future transition to the labour market. This work is a reminder that Erasmus, as well as being a platform that offers mobility experience, is also a programme with an ethos, and that while student participants will want to enhance their present educational and future occupational profiles, they ought to be doing so in manner that demonstrates some form of loyalty to the European Union.

This ‘Erasmus-ization’ practice is of significance, particularly since 2014, when the programme was rebranded as Erasmus+, with a €14.7 billion budget to provide a broader range of opportunities for millions of Europeans to study, train, and gain work experience abroad up until the year 2020, also embracing learners outside the EU via initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus. While complex, this expansion basically involved using geographical mobility as a pedagogical tool, especially within the field of youth work, thus integrating initiatives nested

under the preceding *Youth in Action* programme, such as interventions aimed at socially disadvantaged youth, centred not only around education and training but also sporting activities. In principle, we might say that the idea was that they should accumulate mobility capital to enhance their employability (Cairns, 2021b). Mobility also becomes a project, or perhaps a series of projects, to be hosted by civil society agencies rather than universities, disconnected further from the idea of spatial circulation as permanent migration but consistent with the idea of mobility as fluid and fragmented (Cairns, 2021a).

In more concrete terms, an area of interest among authors exploring institutionalized exchanges has been examining the process of diffusing the Erasmus brand, especially this exporting of a mobility-centric programmatic ethos to civil society organizations. In this book, the analysis of Airi-Alina Allaste and Raili Nugin looks at agency mediated mobility in Estonia, bringing into play another antecedent theoretical framework, namely the new mobility paradigm of Sheller and Urry (2006). This is a familiar idea within the study of human mobility, especially in Anglophone societies, recognizing the importance of a generalized spatial dimension of life, moving us even further away from the idea of ‘mobility as migration’ in a definitive sense. Significantly, Allaste and Nugin (2021) contend that mobility is not only about mappable physical movement but also the movement of ideas and capitals, reflecting the idea that mobility can be seen as a form of capital in itself (Cairns, 2021b). Erasmus+ supported short duration exchanges within projects hence become a means of generating mobility capital, designed presumably to enhance the life chances of the participants, albeit without this approach having taken into account the potential for mobility to alienate and create resentment in host communities.<sup>2</sup>

Erasmus has also gained a foothold in postgraduate level education, what has previously described as ‘post-diploma’ mobility (Cairns, 2014). A prominent example concerns internationalized Master’s degree programmes that provide opportunities for circulation and

cooperation among students and between universities from different countries. In Chapter 16, Karolina Czerska-Shaw and Ewa Krzaklewska look at the Erasmus Mundus programme, and how it has attempted to create what they term the ‘super-mobile student,’ enabling small numbers of learners to study in up to four countries during a period of two years. Significantly, their analysis takes into account the costs and benefits of this form of learning. On the one hand, there is a suggestion of a new form of de-nationalized belonging being sought by the funders of the programme, which students experience as a kind of reflexive, cosmopolitan identity. On the other, for individual participants, there are high levels of stress and anxiety, various logistical and legal hurdles, and a sense of social dis-embeddedness, including a feeling of exclusion from the host universities (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska, 2021). This position highlights the ambivalent relationship between institutionalized mobility and belonging, with new forms of conviviality created at the cost of older, most established, identifications. Belonging to an abstract, even idealized, Europe may therefore come at a cost of detachment from national and regional structures that offer a more solidified idea of ‘home.’ Chapter 17 moves the discussion of Erasmus Mundus outside Europe, looking at students in South Africa. Author Samia Chasi also introduces a socio-demographic dimension into the discussion, highlighting the fact that as most South African young people cannot afford to study in South Africa, let alone abroad, Erasmus scholarships are an important mechanism in enabling them to benefit from educational mobility. The chapter reflects on the conditions for successful mobility partnerships, specifically referring to the high levels of inequality at institutional and individual levels that are a legacy of apartheid South Africa (Chasi, 2021).

Even less well documented in prior studies is the experience of student mobility in Kyrgyzstan. The chapter of H el ene Syed Zwick provides a reminder that student mobility outside Erasmus exists, in this case, via the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. While looking towards ‘the West’ remains popular for Central Asian students, intra-regional exchange has been

growing in scale. This discussion looks at some of these experiences and the extent to which they fulfil the aim of promoting regional cooperation, preventing conflict and ensuring good governance of tertiary education level mobility in Central Asia (Zwick, 2021). Thais França and Beatriz Padilla meanwhile focusing on recent developments in the Global South, looking at student mobility between Portuguese-speaking Africa and Brazil. This example of South-South exchange further contributes to the debate on the meaning of student mobility, integrating discussion of issues such as colonialism, and the difficult relationships that exist between metropole and colony, as well as challenges that are less evident in the Global North (França and Padilla, 2021).

Finally, we have some additional ramifications of institutionalized student mobility to consider. Eva Maria Vögtle looks at participation in mobility across the European context (not only via Erasmus), including consideration of gender disparities, while Louise Kaktiņš looks at some of the pathways for non-English speaking students in Australia, and the difficulties they experience due to a lack of fluency in the language of the host institution; in this case, English. Both these chapters emphasise the importance of recognizing socio-demographic barriers to participation in institutional mobility and the frequent lack of inclusivity facing many students due to their gender or socio-demographic origins.

One of the key impressions emerging from this work concerns the ramifications of the expansion of institutionalized mobility, particularly in the EU via Erasmus but also in other global regions, where there may have been insufficient foresight as to the viability and sustainability of expanded flows of incoming and outgoing students. Furthermore, there is the quality of the mobile learning experience to consider, for students and institutions, which in itself can be compromised by commercialism and de-intellectualization (see Kaktiņš, 2021). These processes can result in a compromised academic culture, focused on processing rather than educating students, with needless pressure being put upon staff to sustain an unsustainable

level of student circulation. In attempting to appreciate why this has happened, there may have been an element of political fantasy regarding the use of mobility as a social integration mechanism, and a somewhat fanciful belief that the acquisition of mobility capital unlocks employability. Universities may also be focusing on the potential revenue without considering the actual costs required to sustain mobility systems, especially in non-English language speaking learning environments. It may also be that ‘mobility’ became something of a political fetish, acquiring a perverse value in and of itself for certain politicians, divorced from the economic and emotional consequences for programme participants.

In regard to this distancing of mobility from reality, just the idea of there being a large population of free floating students, especially in the EU, seems to have been enough for some policymakers to justify putting their faith, and European taxpayers money, into an expanded Erasmus. More cynically, we might argue that institutionalized mobility was a means of, if not exactly controlling, then attaching certain practical and even ideological limits upon spatial circulation; in particular, giving platforms such as Erasmus a (geo)political significance. This obviously relates to the symbolic value of programmes like Erasmus but also to the values which participants were expected to embody as Erasmus students. This is, of course, was always highly questionable considering that they may have identified with ‘European values’ irrespective of their involvement with the programme, making the Erasmus ‘effect’ a potential false positive (Mitchell, 2013). And they may even reject what they are presented with, perhaps due to the non-conformity of youth, suggesting possible over-reach in Erasmus+. Furthermore, if project-based mobility is restricted to certain interest groups, such as single-issue civil society organizations, this limits greatly the impact of the programme through focusing on small groups of young people at the margins of society rather than the much larger centre-ground. The easy to foresee implications of this approach should have been considered at the time of the programme’s reformulation, and in not doing so, the European Commission may

have driven its own programme into the ditch for no great purpose. Erasmus+ may have been an attempt to give European institutions what *they* wanted, but it was not what many students required at the time. The neo-liberal underpinnings of Erasmus are also painfully exposed in Erasmus+, especially the distasteful bun-fight for funding to which agencies were subject and the privatization of costs for student participants who effectively suffered a drop in levels of financial support, all of whom nevertheless carry the Erasmus brand regardless of how unhappy they became with the experience.

Even stranger in existing studies of institutional mobility is the lack of representation given to what are extremely obvious failings in the governance of student exchange systems. A lack of recognition of the different nature of the problems facing institutions in the Global North and Global is made clear by in various chapters in this section, especially where there are nasty colonial legacies and deeply embedded socio-demographic inequalities that are reproduced not eliminated by existing structing of opportunities especially in regard to gender and social class. Utterly bizarre is the lack of discussion in student mobility literature of the linguistic challenge facing students, including many learners who lack adequate levels of social and economic capital (see Kaktiņš, 2021, in this volume). Assuming all students speak perfect English is an absurd notion and the impact of a lack of common language fluency on learning should be taking into account in all internationalized learning environments.

## **Notes**

1. This topic, of social inclusivity, is also a theme several contributors to this section of the book have collectively explored in Cairns et al. (2018).
2. For further exploration of this theme, see Murphy-Lejeune (2002) and, for a more recent discussion, Cuzzocrea et al. (2021).



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