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Representing Erasmus: Approaches to Erasmus+ and consequences for researching the programme

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Introduction

The European Commission's Erasmus programme, entering its 32nd year of operation at the time of writing, supports a wide range of mobility-related projects across Europe, engages with thousands of academic staff members and facilitates international exchange visits for millions of students. The programme is of immense significance: politically, as a symbolic representation of the vitality of intra-European circulation, and instrumentally, in contributing to the personal and educational development of numerous citizens. With so much time, effort, political focus and financial resources invested in the programme, there is an obvious need to maintain quality within exchanges and to maximize the positive impact Erasmus is making in the lives of participants and broader European society. Additionally, we would argue that there is a need for the programme to be effectively evaluated and accurately represented in institutional discourse, so that it might remain engaged with a socially inclusive range of citizens. This extends to theoretical considerations that help us appreciate how Erasmus functions and methods used in conducting research on the programme, issues that will be explored in this discussion.

As researchers working in academic institutions, a specific concern we have about the success of Erasmus is that representations of the programme are not keeping up with its evolution, especially during the current expanded Erasmus+ phase. This reflection, we believe, applies to much academic research that continues to focus upon the programme's traditional strengths, in particular undergraduate exchanges, but may also apply to institutional branding emanating

from inside Erasmus itself. Putting this problem into simpler terms, there is much work taking place within the institutional framework of Erasmus+ that is receiving insufficient recognition due to a failure to effectively manage research and evaluation of Erasmus. Elsewhere in this book, readers can learn more about attempts to better represent a diverse range of activities and target groups within Erasmus+ from our colleagues in RAY network, while in this chapter, we hope to provide some reasons as to why a potential misrepresentation situation has arisen from the point of view of two academics.¹

While Erasmus remains a symbol of intra-European student mobility, due perhaps to its success in engaging with undergraduates, it is becoming much more than this, and the more expansive Erasmus+ needs an expanded research agenda in order to produce valid representations. Methodologically, researchers need to focus more effectively on a greater range of mobility actions, including non-student exchanges, and move beyond presenting a series of theoretically disconnected micro level case studies. How mobility is studied by institutions also needs to be re-evaluated, particularly given the limitations of statistically-driven evaluation exercises favoured by policymakers and stakeholders. In what follows in this discussion, we will explore these issues, starting with consideration of the study of Erasmus within the field of mobility research.

Studying Erasmus

Studying the Erasmus programme is a somewhat different proposition to being a student of Erasmus or an individual involved in programme implementation. As a high-profile European taxpayer funded initiative, Erasmus will inevitably attract a considerable amount of attention from researchers, particularly those in the field of human mobility. The traditional elements of the programme, especially undergraduate exchanges, have certainly proved to be a durable research topic (see, e.g. Mainworn and Teichler 1996; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013) and while researchers' motivations for engaging with Erasmus students may vary, it is worth noting that these exchanges attract attention for extra-curricular reasons. Crucially, it is not just an opportunity for participants to enhance their intercultural skills or employability but also a means to generate political capital for the European institutions; creating the impression that the European Union is explicitly youthful, dynamic and mobile, and addressing social challenges such as unemployment, skills shortages and a lack of foreign language fluency. This dual significance distinguishes these exchanges from other forms of

international student mobility, and helps explain why we as academic researchers wish to study the programme.

At this point in this discussion, we should declare our own interests in this debate as researchers in the field of sociology. In terms of our experience and, we hope, level of expertise, in regard to the study of various forms of youth mobility, we have over 20 years of combined experience, extending to dedicated empirical studies on Erasmus (see, e.g. Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2005; Krzaklewska 2013; Cairns, 2014). We are also directly connected to the European institutions via our membership of the European Commission/Council of Europe Youth Partnership Pool of European Youth Researchers, and various policymaking agencies in our respective countries through our everyday work.²

From our experiences of working with the programme, we are aware that collecting quantitative data and internal evaluations about Erasmus participants' experiences is important for funding and hosting institutions, especially as a source of monitoring and feedback. However, as sociologists our concern extends to the social, economic, political and cultural meaning of Erasmus. This explains why we might favour qualitative approaches, since we need to explore a more expansive range of issues rather than follow existing evaluation criterion so as to be able to inform other colleagues from our discipline. Academic research thus tends to be less structured, and perhaps more extrovert, than work applied to a specific context, with the aspiration of contributing to existing theoretical debates and establishing new lines of inquiry.

The pre-eminence of academic priorities may explain why policymakers in particular complain about the use of theoretical language or a lack of robust statistics in published work. Researchers do generally want to inform policymakers and engage with stakeholders, just not at the expense of neglecting their core responsibilities through making their work too descriptive to be published. This position of course points the finger of 'blame' at peer reviewers and journal editors, who demand the complexity and originality that is seemingly an anathema to non-academic audiences. But the 'problem' as it stands is of two different rather than complementary sets of demands, from academic 'gatekeepers' and the broader non-academic audience, impeding effective knowledge transfer from researchers.

So how welcoming then is the European Commission towards academic researchers? Not only does the European research agenda tend to be insular and socially exclusive (in relation to youth policy, focusing on politically prioritized groups rather than general populations),

budgets tend to be limited with calls for proposals aimed at external research agencies not universities, which in turn often subcontract freelance researchers employed on short-term precarious contracts. Such a situation hardly would lead to a more overall and long-term research strategy that could potentially be conducive to producing quality outputs useful for the programme evaluation nor to enhancing dialogue with mobility researchers in academia.

This situation creates more questions than answers. How are academic researchers to engage with Erasmus when they are kept at arms-length by reluctant funding agencies? Why won't these researchers make themselves more accessible to policymakers and stakeholders? And should we, as European citizens, be concerned by the fact that a multi-billion Euro programme like Erasmus is being informed by low cost, and perhaps low quality, research and evaluation? Of course, as researchers we will argue in favour of substantial long-term investment in 'serious' academic activities, but then it is in our interest to do so. But at the same time, we are aware of the folly of this position given the reality of the policy/research dynamic in Europe, leaving us at a position of impasse.

Methodological approaches in Erasmus research

So how then do academic researchers approach the task of conducting research on Erasmus? In a previous publication, one of us highlighted two basic approaches to Erasmus prevalent in prior studies, which we will summarize in the following paragraphs (see Cairns, 2018). The first approach engages with what might be termed the macro level of Erasmus mobility, concerned with quantifying levels of incoming and outgoing movement and cross-national trends in participation. Such work is aimed at (and usually funded by) policymaking agencies and practitioners for evaluation and monitoring purposes; trying to establish how many people participate and what has been learnt during time spent abroad. Such work is hence retrospective in focus and with a top down view of Erasmus in regard to research questions. That such work tends to be based on descriptive statistics means that much analysis is published in grey area reports or specialist academic articles.

A second strand of Erasmus research is more closely concerned with micro level issues, in particular, on students' perspectives on their own mobility. Emphasis also tends to be upon specific issues, often in a research field of personal interest to the author, rather than reflecting institutional goals or policy aims. Many of these studies can be found in peer reviewed journals, derived from PhD theses. It is however notable that few authors develop subsequent careers

researching Erasmus, the implication being that research topic is abandoned soon after graduation or is relegated to becoming a side issue. Given the personal motivation behind much of this work, including many works by former Erasmus students (such as ourselves), outcomes are not taken very seriously by policymakers, who may feel more secure making inferences from macro level studies, even if there are doubts regarding the robustness of samples or the quality of the analysis.

In addition, a third approach has been developed focusing on what has been termed the meso level of Erasmus, directed towards studying the institutional management of exchanges rather than students or statistics (Cairns, 2017; Cairns et al., 2018). Moving away from macro and micro levels is in some ways logical considering that political interventions tend to be indirect; in Erasmus, policymakers use educational institutions and civil society agencies who they believe will fulfil a multiplier function. The European Commission does not directly interact with students or Erasmus project participants, but believes these intermediary parties can reach groups such as students or target people for project-based interventions. It therefore makes sense to look at the work of the individuals involved in this meditative process rather than the end users, and use their reflections as a means of assessing the efficacy of the programme.

There is also an as yet unexplored potential to develop studies that relate to the impact of Erasmus on meso level institutions, focusing on issues such as the role internationalization within universities in areas such as developing student migration as an income stream. And while there are many studies of the development of intercultural skills among incoming students at host institutions (see, e.g. Cuzzocrea et al., 2019), another matter relates to what might be termed ‘internationalization at home,’ referring to the impact of international encounters on local students and host communities and participation of former programme participations in organisations such as the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). While these issues have not featured heavily in studies, researchers are now beginning to consider the idea of incoming students as transnational urban consumers, including their role as de facto tourists and impact on local housing markets (see especially, Melo, 2018).

Methodological issues and theoretical deficiencies

Two particularly pressing issues that need to be addressed in regard to representations of Erasmus are the methodological shortcomings in studying the programme and a lack of theoretical engagement.

Looking at this first issue, methodology, from the point of view of research practitioners it is particularly difficult to conduct research on human mobility that produces representative evidence. Part of the problem relates to the subject matter itself. Groups such as mobile students are 'naturally' transient, meaning that it is near impossible to achieve a representative sample using quantitative approaches (i.e. surveys) due to this being a hard-to-reach population in motion. And while internet might have become a remedy to the issue, allowing us to spread surveys across borders, online technology have very rapidly become stale due to massive over-use, as well as raising new challenges linked to sample quality control. On the other hand, qualitative research has its own problems. While detailed case study approaches do potentially provide depth, there is an inevitably eclecticism that limits generalizability. The difficulty of reaching the population may also result in convenience sampling, including the practice of academics surveying their own students, or incoming students in their institutions or city, thus producing work of limited scope.

Cost effectiveness obviously has a bearing on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The high expense of wide-scale quantitative research will inevitably mean dependence on a funding agency, which may have its own ideas as to which questions should be asked, and what shouldn't be explored. Retrospective approaches (i.e. surveys of former programme participants) are vulnerable to positive and negative self-selectiveness, with those who have particularly good or bad memories of their stays more eager to participate. To the sampling troubles we may add a difficulty of measuring the impact of a mobility experience, which is hard to isolate. The value of a stay abroad may only emerge at a much later point in the life course (if at all) and/or in conjunction with other experiences. This is especially relevant if some participants undertake several programme initiatives, the impact of which then becomes entangled. Qualitative research meanwhile requires sustained effort as well as financial backing; work may take years to complete in the case of longitudinal studies by which time research agendas might have moved on.

While most of these methodological shortcomings are quite obvious and not rare is other research fields/themes, the lack of theoretical development on youth mobility is more curious. One problem is that human mobility is not neatly situated within one specific academic discipline or research field. Sociologists, geographers, economists, psychologists, political scientists and no doubt many others all have a stake in this issue, as do migration scholars, educationalists and youth researchers. Each group, and perhaps each individual, has their own specific background and set of preferences when it comes to constructing or locating a

theoretical framework for their research. Among stakeholders and policymakers, what is more evident is the lack of engagement with the conceptual side of mobility, due perhaps to an over-reliance upon descriptive statistics, extending to what is basically an a-theoretical approach to Erasmus. Even worse, academic jargon is frequently used without reference to actual meaning or becomes politicized. For example, academic terminology such as ‘employability,’ ‘interculturality’ and ‘social inclusion’ has been employed out of context to the extent of becoming brutalized into buzzwords, losing any coherent meaning.

In research on Erasmus+, theory should be used as a means to clarify the meaning of mobility and to provide points of connection between different studies; not strategically inserted keywords designed to make generic project proposal appear relevant to the policy goals set out in the call for funding. Concepts should be grounded in evidence, adapted to real life contexts and updated to reflect social, economic and political change. Ideas should also tell us something about the different dynamics of mobility; not only how many people are engaging in Erasmus but why they are participating and what their time spent abroad means in their lives and communities in which they live in order to show societal impact.

From our point of view as sociologists, we freely admit that we have our own ways and means of explaining research subjects. This explains why in our work we have been particularly concerned with issues relating to social inclusion in Erasmus mobility and marginalization from participating in the programme. Our work as youth researchers also tells us that mobility can contribute to educational development and a subsequent career trajectory, meaning that we want to see more young people and a more diverse range of young people participating in Erasmus+, with this inclusivity adding value to the symbolic and actual relevance of the programme.

Defining the Erasmus ‘student’

Despite the advent of Erasmus+, in 2014, researchers still tend to have a rather limited view of the programme, with insufficient emphasis upon non-student mobility practices (as exceptions see RAY network publications; Devlin et al., 2017). In considering why this is the case, we have already noted some of the operational difficulties in engaging with student populations characterized by spatial complexity, and this problem is multiplied when we look at projects supported by Erasmus+ due to the sheer number and diverse character of initiatives undertaken. It may also be the case that academic researchers are more comfortable with familiar and

convenient research subjects, linked to higher education milieu, and are unwilling or unable to engage with what may be hard-to-reach groups and individuals.

The contingent nature of much non-student mobility may explain why some projects funded by Erasmus+ are being perceived as Erasmus by researchers, particularly those who are working within what might be termed a 'migration' framework; that is, they are only interested in mobility that is undertaken for substantial periods rather than short exchanges of a few weeks in duration, or less, where there is no prospect of settlement in a foreign country. Non-student or short-term movement in Erasmus+ thus poses a challenge to canonicity within the youth mobility research field. It might also be argued that even where research and policy aims are interlinked there is room for improvement. For instance, it has been argued that the academic aspects of Erasmus tertiary students' lives are not researched thoroughly enough due to the concentration on the social and cultural aspects of mobility experiences (Courtois, 2018). This may be a result of the impact made by policymakers on programme evaluation studies; the Erasmus programme was not designed to improve the quality of students' academic outputs, explaining why this theme remains at the margins.

Adding the non-student population to the agenda might also bring into light different themes for the research agenda. The concentration on undergraduate students in particular has resulted in specific interests in relation to the programme impact becoming emphasised, e.g. employability effects or language dimension of the stay abroad. Extending this agenda to other target groups of the programme would inevitably bring into the discussion other aspects, such as citizenship and social inclusion. And studies on youth workers mobility (within capacity building actions in Erasmus+ and Youth in Action) point to a need to look at the importance of the programme for their organisations' development (Bammer and Karsten, 2018).

More curious is the fact that publicity materials produced by Erasmus authorities fail to adequately represent a wide range of outcomes from participating in various aspects of the programme. Bias relates not so much to socio-demographic background or nationality but rather the fact that Erasmus mobility is uncritically presented as a path to individualized success. Vignettes illustrating epiphanies during an Erasmus exchange may be appealing to policymakers wishing to present a positive image of the programme, but the lack of counterbalancing tales of overcoming challenges while abroad undermines credibility and creates an impression that one is looking at a façade rather than an in-depth account. In reality, it may be that outstanding success is a minority experience, and mobility project participants

in particular should not be led to think that they can overcome feelings of exclusion from society through spending two weeks abroad at a training course.³

Future challenges in Erasmus+

In moving this discussion to a close, we can see that there are challenges for researchers in representing Erasmus. Long overdue is adaptation to the expanded scope of mobility in Erasmus+, including non-student exchanges for work, training and volunteering. Making this adaptation is necessary due to the need to support the ‘evidence-based’ dimension of the programme, producing work that is relevant to policymakers and stakeholders, as well as other members of the research community.

A less prominent issue concerns the place of Erasmus mobility within the broader framework of youth mobility, especially in regard to developing an understanding of how work and study trajectories unfold. It is a fallacy to assume that Erasmus exchanges take place in isolation. This includes exchanges being adjunct to and precursors of other forms of circulation, ranging from relatively short duration leisure-oriented travel to long-term migration. Just as Erasmus can stimulate an interest in other forms of mobility, participating in the programme can be an outcome of prior mobility experience. We cannot therefore study or evaluate the impact of Erasmus without taking into account these considerations.

Finally, we are somewhat perturbed by the lack of recognition given to large scale societal challenges in current discussion of Erasmus+, especially the potential impact of Brexit upon the programme and the wider field of intra-European circulation. This development poses a significant threat to participation, through potentially eliminating or downgrading a significant destination country and almost certainly limiting the capacity of British people to take part. Clearly these issues need to be addressed at European policy level and also integrated into research agendas.

Notes

1. For more information, see Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme <https://www.researchyouth.eu>

2. It is also worth mentioning that Ewa Krzaklewska, while working as vice president of the ESN International Office in Brussels, was engaged in launching a wide-ranging study of Erasmus alumni (see Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2005).
3. The exploration of negative experiences and difficulties in the Erasmus programme is rare, with the exception of Krzaklewska and Skorska (2013) on culture shock and Kapela (2014) on loneliness.

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