

**THE ERASMUS PHENOMENON. SYMBOL OF A NEW
EUROPEAN GENERATION?
[Benjamin Feyen, and Ewa Krzaklewska (eds.), Frankfurt Am Main,
Peter Lang]**

David Cairns

Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE-IUL), CIES-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal

The study of youth mobility, and in particular the circulation of students between the Member States of the European Union, has been one of the main growth areas within the field of Migration Studies in the last decade. Taking the lead from geographers such as Professor Russell King at the University of Sussex in the UK, a new generation of scholars has recently emerged to chart the spatial movement of the tertiary educated. This focus represents a move away from the traditional areas of interests of migration scholars not only in terms of the younger age profiles of those under scrutiny but also in regard to the meanings ascribed to the moves being made. Gone are the “adult” assumptions that leaving one’s present place of residence is motivated by a need to escape economic hardship or political repression; neither is there any serious expectation that stays in other countries will be more or less permanent. Today’s tertiary youth circulation is essentially ephemeral, at least in terms of the generally short duration of stays abroad, and pragmatic in respect to its instrumental value: mobility capital is accrued with a view toward re-investment in the sending society. The accounts in this book, most prominently the contributions of co-editor Ewa Krzaklewska, also confirm that leisure and personal development are as important as enhancing future career prospects for those moving while still studying. The defining feature of contemporary student mobility is therefore its circulatory character as opposed to being a form of unidirectional movement; in fact, Erasmus exchanges and other schemes such as the Marie Curie programme are deliberately structured to ensure an immediate return to the sending country so as to avoid stimulating brain drain processes. The objective behind such programmes is therefore not to create a generation of highly educated European youth migrants but rather to build their inter-cultural skills and foster identification with the European Union (see especially the chapters of Ambrosi, Van Mol and Streibeck). For agencies such as the European Commission the aim, as explained in the contribution of Ulrike Klose to this book, is the creation of a European demos, linked to the idea of freedom of movement across national boundaries in the EU; something that has been, until now, a fundamental but incompletely realised part of the European project.

Youth mobility, or at least the one specific form of institutional movement covered in this book, is hence more symbolic than substantive. This makes the main question posed — is the Erasmus student the symbol of a New European Generation? — redundant since the answer will inevitably be a resounding “no”. The Erasmus mover may represent a particular ideal type of young European in the minds of European policymakers, kind of a temporary EC-funded ambassador, but the fact

that Erasmus lacks the capacity to become a generalized youth cohort experience means there is no possibility that he or she can symbolize the European youth generation. The reason why is actually contained in this book. According to the chapter of Feyen and Krzaklewska, Erasmus exchanges are engaged in by less than five per cent of the European student population, at a cost of almost half a billion Euros to European taxpayers. In other words, there is no realistic chance of Erasmus becoming a widespread experience due to the enormous cost of the programme. Therefore, the fact that one has “done Erasmus” is a symbol of exceptionality from the generational “norm” not a trait associated with generalised youth cohort experience. This is not a new insight. In fact, the Erasmus badge of distinction has long been regarded by youth mobility scholars such as Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune (author of what is still the most insightful text on Erasmus: *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe: The New Strangers* [Routledge, 2002]) as a sign of EC-sponsored elitism rather than egalitarianism. This basic fact seems to have escaped the various contributors to this book, a fact that might be explained by their status as beneficiaries and in some cases stakeholders in the scheme, as noted in their biographies, or a basic unwillingness to acknowledge their own exceptionally good fortune in being chosen to be Erasmus participants to the exclusion of many others.

That participating in Erasmus is as much a result of luck as it is of hard work or good judgement is confirmed in the pivotal chapter of this book, by Friedrich Heger, which hammers home the basic point that access to Erasmus is more dependent on choices of educational subject and third level educational institution than any capacity to embody European values; in other words, your chances of doing Erasmus depends on where you live and what you study. An additional structural deficit in the programme revealed by Heger is that Erasmus is dependent upon the financial contributions of national governments, subsidies which as those of us living in the austerity-hit European countries know only too well are vulnerable to cuts. That the negative impact of the economic crisis may be affecting certain students capacity to engage with Erasmus is not acknowledge in this book, although this can perhaps be attributed to its relatively narrow geographical focus: out of a total of 13 authors, no less than nine have either worked or studied in Germany, with other contributors limited to Italy, Poland and Belgium. This lack of scope is unfortunate, since it means that we are provided with no opportunity to learn of how the Erasmus programme is adapting to changes in social and economic conditions; a state of being which is rapidly becoming symbolic of the present European youth generation outside the core EU nations. As it stands, the book is still a valuable resource for youth mobility scholars exploring the meaning of the Erasmus programme, but it is certainly hoped that further, more expansive, research on this theme will emerge from the various contributors and no doubt many others.

David Cairns (corresponding author). Senior Researcher, CIES-IUL, Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE-IUL), Avenida das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa.
Email: david.cairns@iscte.pt