

Understanding Erasmus Students' Motivation: What Directs Erasmus Students' Choice of Destination and Particular Course

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Abstract

This paper is a Central European contribution to the current knowledge of Erasmus students' motivations. It takes as its starting point the fact that one of the reasons for studying in a foreign country is learning about different cultures. 30 Erasmus students from 8 European countries, enrolled in Museum Education course in two academic years at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, participated in the research. The analysis of qualitative data, collected by individual interviews, a focus group and written personal reflections, revealed that, when making specific country and study decisions, students are driven by three motivational factors: discovery, change and curiosity. The research, done from the perspective of cultural heritage, additionally indicated how geography shapes the cultural experience of Erasmus students and what role museum and heritage site visiting play in it.

Keywords: *higher education, internationalisation, intra-European student mobility, motivation*

Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education is an important issue in the EU. The focus of this paper is intra-European student mobility, precisely incoming mobility of students within the *European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of*

University Students (Erasmus). It has been estimated that in Europe on average more than 10 percent of recent graduates spent a period of study of at least three months in another country during the course of their study (about a third with Erasmus support), and the target for the year 2020 is 20 percent (Teichler, 2013, pp. 70–71).

Despite the dramatic growth of incoming foreign students since 1999, when Slovenia joined Erasmus, no empirical data has been collected to understand the motivation of international students – why they choose Slovenia and what they expect to learn from a particular course. As van Ginkel (2011, p. 10) stressed, ‘the success of internationalisation is not simply the numbers involved in mobility programmes.’ This paper is a contribution to the field.

The research was conducted at the oldest public university in Slovenia, the University of Ljubljana. It involved 30 Erasmus students of Museum Education at the Faculty of Education. I wanted to understand certain students' decision-making processes: what makes Slovenia attractive to foreign students and to what extent cultural heritage – learning about history, identity – is part of Erasmus experience. In order to better understand students' motivation, qualitative methodology was used. Before I present it in more detail, let us look at the conceptual underpinnings of the research.

Theoretical Background

The definition to internationalisation used in this paper is that formulated by Knight (2004, p. 11), who sees it as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education.” While in the past, internationalisation was more or less equal to the study of foreign languages, today international higher education is regarded to be more complex and ambitious – student learning outcomes have to include intercultural knowledge, skills, and values.

Teichler (2013, p. 56) sees intra-European student mobility as one of the EU's political strategies of intercultural understanding: “Efforts to facilitate and actually increase student mobility have already played a role in Europe for many decades. Already since World War II, the hope that more detailed knowledge of other countries would dilute prejudices and increase sympathy for other ways of life and thinking gained momentum.” The EU has particularly put strong emphasis on short-term, temporary mobility. According to one of the leading researchers of intra-European student mobility, Ewa Krzaklewska from Poland, the objective

behind Erasmus and similar programmes is not to create a generation of highly educated young Europeans but rather to build their inter-cultural skills and foster identification with the EU (Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013).

Research on Erasmus students' motivation shows that students have various reasons, desires, objectives and expectations for studying in a foreign country. In a mixed method study, Krzaklewska (2008) identified four areas of motivation: academic, linguistic, cultural, and personal. She found out that students decide to do Erasmus exchange for academic purposes, to practice a foreign language, to live in a foreign country and at the same time learn about new culture and to gain new personal experience. A Spanish quantitative study, conducted among Erasmus students at a single university, similarly showed that academic and cultural factors, the wish to get to know a new environment and to have a European experience are the most important reasons for living and studying abroad (Fombona, Rodríguez & Pascual Sevillano, 2013). Gričar and Neary (2016) interviewed eight students who had studied or worked abroad. Their opinion was that the promotion of local cultures was one of the issues in which mobility requires support. Lesjak et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative survey among Erasmus students from 26 European countries. Their study revealed that students' choice of destination is not only driven by typical professional and personal reasons, already identified by previous researchers, but depends also on tourism attractiveness, location and features of a chosen destination, such as popularity, richness in culture, arts and history, event offer, safety and security, night life, etc. According to Rodríguez Gonzáles, Bustillo Mesanza and Mariel (2011), country size, cost of living, distance, educational background, university quality, the host country language and climate as well as a country's characteristics and time effects are all found to be significant factors influencing Erasmus students' mobility flows.

To sum up, all studies, although various in scope and complexity, have generally identified the cultural dimension of student mobility. Integrated into concepts such as "intercultural learning" (Lauritzen, 1998), "living foreignness" (Murphy-Lejeune, as cited in: Krzaklewska, 2008) and "learning from contrast" (Teichler, 2013), living in a foreign country and learning about different culture is one of the most important Erasmus students' motivations. However, previous research is predominantly quantitative, so what it does is identify or pre-formulate this category, but it does not give any meaning to it. Moreover, the majority of studies on the motivation of Erasmus students are conducted after or at the end of their stay, which means that it might be more students' outcomes and less initial desires and expectations that are examined.

Research Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the complexity of Erasmus students' motivation. Every research has a special research context. This research was conducted from the perspective of museums, i.e. cultural heritage. Museum Education curriculum provides students with knowledge and skills related to the educational value of art and cultural heritage as well as the practice of museum pedagogy. Students learn that cultural heritage is not only about paintings, sculptures, historical monuments and other products, but also about processes and ideas, such as value, beauty and truth. Teaching methods include lectures, seminars and visits to various museums and heritage sites in Ljubljana.

Table 1. Museum Education Course: Schedule and Participants

	2014/2015 (1 st group)	2015/2016 (2 nd group)
Semester (Lecture Period)	Winter (1 st October – 23 rd January)	Summer (22 nd February – 10 th June)
Number of Students	15	15
Countries of Citizenship	Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Spain, Turkey	Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Turkey

The research involved in sum 30 Erasmus students of Museum Education (Table 1). In order to understand the students' motivations by not limiting their responses to preformed motivational categories, qualitative methodology was used. The research spanned over two academic years and involved several phases of complementary multi-methods of data gathering (Table 2). In the first year (2014/2015), 15 individual interviews were conducted at the beginning of the course; all the students participated. With rich data in hand, the research was continued in the second year (2015/2016), by starting with a focus group at the first session. This allowed for obtaining the students' immediate initial thoughts, not influenced by any of the course experiences yet. 13 students came to the first session. The group interview was followed by 8 individual interviews; at that point, data saturation occurred. The third, final source of data were personal reflections (1–2 pages), which the students wrote (in English) at the end of the course as part of their final work; I asked them to reflect on their decision for the course, overall experience and potential further wishes. This multimethodology allowed for a total understanding of the research problem.

Table 2. Research Design

	2014/2015 (1 st group: 15 students)	2015/2016 (2 nd group: 15 students)
Research phase 1	15 interviews (in the first weeks of the course)	Focus group with 13 participants (at the first course session)
Research phase 2	/	8 interviews (in the first weeks of the course)
Research phase 3	/	15 written personal reflections (at the last course session at the end of semester)

In order to analyse and interpret the data, I used a mixture of ideas from the grounded theory methodology and experience research methodology (interpretative analysis).

Results and Discussion

Three main motivational drivers were identified: discovery, change, and curiosity. Being driven by *discovery* means that students wish to learn about a new country and/or culture; they want to discover something new. Being driven by *change* means that students want to change the environment and learn about a different country and/or its culture. Being driven by *curiosity* means that students know nothing or very little about the host country and/or its culture and want to acquire knowledge; they are open to the unfamiliar. In the following paragraphs these three categories will be presented and illustrated with verbatim quotations.

Discovery

Although Erasmus students' list of countries for living and studying is limited, they still have to make a choice about where to go and what to study. They are driven by many factors, but it seems that the cultural motive is a pivotal one: *I had some countries where I could go and I looked: there were two in Switzerland, but I didn't want to go there because it's the same language – that was not that what I wanted. There was another offer in Spain, one in Finland and one here in Ljubljana (Int. 4, Germany).* When asked, why they chose Slovenia, the students answered that because this was a new country for them. They wanted to discover a new country: *It was the first time when the students of history from my home university*

would go to study in Slovenia. So it seemed something new, something unexplored to me (Int. 3, Lithuania). Even the students from geographically neighbouring or, from the historical point of view, culturally seemingly closer countries, for example Croatia, considered Slovenia as a new discovery.

Discovery is connected to difference. Students want to experience a country which is “totally opposite” of theirs: *Slovenia is a country that I do not know, it is different, with different weather, different language, totally opposite of Spain* (Int. 11, Spain). Being driven by discovery actually means that a student wishes to learn about the country and/or culture that he or she does not have any experience of: *This was the most different country from mine. I could also go to Norway and to Germany, to England ... This is all north and I know it already. So I thought the south of Europe is more different* (Foc. Grp., Finland). Slovenia is an unknown country for these students. They are unfamiliar with Slovenia (and see Erasmus experience as a way of learning about it): *In Germany we do not learn a lot about Slovenia. It doesn't appear in our history lessons. We stop with the Second World War, so there's nothing about the war down here. [...] I now start to learn how the borders were set in this part of Europe* (Int. 23, Germany). Discovery, therefore, is about exploring something unknown, not experienced yet. The same pertains to the choice of Museum Education course: this course was something new, something “unusual” for them: *It was a new thing to me, so I liked it. In Lithuania we do not have subjects like this* (Int. 3, Lithuania).

To summarise, from the motivational point of view, students (when choosing a country or study course) are driven by *discovery* – they are attracted by something *new, different, unknown* or *not experienced*. This corresponds to Krzaklewska's findings (2008) about the notion of novelty, but gives them a little more meaning.

Change

Erasmus students are also driven by a wish to change country and/or culture. They want to change the environment and learn about another, different culture: *I am here and I want to learn about the country I am staying in* (Int. 19, Austria). Words such as “to be here”, “to live” and “to stay” indicate that we are talking about a physical change – Erasmus experience is very much about travelling and geography.

It seems that part of this change is learning about culture. When Erasmus students themselves become travellers, they visit museums or heritage sites: *In Zagreb we visited a cathedral. And we saw the statue in the middle of the square. And we visited Broken Relations Museum. It was an interesting museum. And we went to the national park* (Int. 2, Turkey). Visiting museums is not part of their

everyday life, but part of the change; they more often consider visiting museums when they travel than at home: *Usually I visit museums when I travel. For example, in spring I was in London and I visited the National Gallery, Tate Modern gallery and Victoria and Albert Museum* (Int. 22, Czech Republic). Visiting museums is part of Erasmus experience. Students are inexperienced (or, better to say, not yet experienced) museum visitors; they rarely visit museums in their home countries, but are motivated to see art and heritage when they study or travel abroad. They are driven by the popularity of the museum and just want to see major culture works.

Which culture do they want to learn about? On the one hand, students want to learn about Slovenia – its arts, history: *I want to see museums here. I want the history of Slovenia* (Foc. Grp.). They do this by comparison: *I just want to see how you understand arts in Slovenia [...] I think a lot of it is the same, just you have more colourful things and we like more black, white, grey colours. It is a bit different from you* (Int. 9, Lithuania). They learn this not only in the city of Ljubljana, but also by traveling around Slovenia: *I went to the coast, Piran, Izola, Koper, and I also went to lake Bled and Bohinj. When I went to Škocjanske jame, I visited there museums, small museums about the history of the caves and also biology, animals and this area* (Int. 6, Spain). On the other hand, students come to Slovenia to learn about Central Europe: *I have been to Italy, Austria, and Croatia. Pula was the most impressive city to me. Because this city is next to the sea, it is really old, also there are some old buildings like the amphitheater. Also I liked that warm weather and the influence of the Romans* (Int. 3, Lithuania). The students reported that a geographic location was a very strong point when deciding on Slovenia (Ljubljana). And they used words and ideas such as “art” “history and culture”, “Zagreb cathedral”, “old city”, “statue”, “see objects in real life”, “to be in front of the painting” when describing their learning activities related to heritage.

To summarise, from the motivational point of view, a wish to (physically) change the environment relates to learning about something *different, contrasting*. Change differs from discovery. Discovery is about ‘being far away’ from home culture, whereas change is about ‘knowing where I am now’. When learning about a new culture, students compare, look for dissimilarities but also similarities with their own culture. Learning about culture is geographically conditioned and multidimensional; in Slovenia (Ljubljana), a country in the middle of Europe, students learn not only about Slovenian culture but also about Central European culture (and the Balkans). They do this by exploring Ljubljana and travelling around Slovenia, as well as travelling to Austria, Croatia, Italy and Hungary and visiting capital and touristic cities. These research findings correspond to Krzaklewska’s

(2008) empirical data concerning the cultural dimension of Erasmus experience and Teichler's (2013) notion of learning by contrast. The size and strategic position of Slovenia, a "small country with a favourable geographical position in the middle of Europe," was already recognised by Altbach (2013, p. 98).

Curiosity

This last category, which I call curiosity, means that students are open to the unfamiliar. Let us look at an example. Students know nothing or very little about the host country (as the "discovery" category showed) and get actively involved in the experience of the country ("change"). Now they want to acquire knowledge. One student described this process as a kind of excitement: [...] *And then I chose Slovenia. And when I arrived home I looked in google maps where Slovenia exactly is. Yeah, I knew more or less, but then I started reading some things about this country and the culture and everything and I really liked it and I was really excited about coming here* (Int. 10, Spain). Curiosity is about interest, a wish to learn. For example, the students did not know about museum education and were curious about it: *Museum education was an unfamiliar topic to me. I chose it because I was curious about it, because I thought it would be interesting* (Int. 2, Turkey). Curiosity is about challenge: *I think it was not in my original learning agreement. Then I take a lot of changes in my learning agreement. And I thought about museum education, it is something like: "What is that?" It was intriguing, something I did not know and I wanted to know more about* (Int. 12, Finland).

Curiosity relates to uncertainty. For example, this student is curious about museum education and wants to go to museums because she wants to understand art (she clearly admits that she does not know art): *I am visiting museums and I am just looking at pictures or something, and I could not understand anything and I wanted to learn about it. I thought this lecture would be beneficent for me, what they mean* (Int. 2, Turkey). The students also talked about not having any clear idea what they wanted to learn: *I do not know, I just want to see. We went to the Contemporary Art Museum and I did not have any expectations about it, it made me really astonished. I found it very different* (Int. 2, Turkey). As already indicated by a student from Turkey, curiosity is about not having expectations: *When I chose Museum Education course, I was not sure what to expect from the course. I had never come across with the concept of museum education during my studies so I was rather curious about the subject* (Pers. Refl. 5, Finland). After three weeks of study, one student said: *I have already gained more than I expected* (Int. 23, Germany).

To summarise, from the motivational point of view, students are also driven by *curiosity* – a wish to know the unknown, the different. Students are curious

to learn about Slovenia, museums, culture that they do not have any knowledge of. To put it differently: it is because they have little or no knowledge about the country and/or culture and find it so different to theirs, they are curious about it. Openness to the unfamiliar or unknown, identified in this study, is a new research finding.

Conclusions

One of the greatest benefits of studying abroad is a greater understanding of other cultures. “Discovery”, “change” and “curiosity” are not cultural concepts per se, but are involved in the cultural dimension of Erasmus experience.

Erasmus students are motivated to learn about new, different, unknown or not experienced cultures (discovery); they want to change the environment or culture in order to live in a different one (change); they know nothing or very little about the host country and are open to the unfamiliar (curiosity). The research, done from the perspective of cultural heritage, additionally indicated how geography shapes the cultural experience of Erasmus students and what role museums and heritage site visiting play in it.

Some critical consideration of the findings needs to be made. Firstly, as already pointed by Krzaklewska (2008), students’ statements of motivation sometimes fit into more than one of the main categories. Secondly, also pointed by the same researcher, the respondents can manipulate their answers and redefine the value of the experience every time depending on the research context, personal situation or even interviewer.

There are further limitations to the claims this study can make. The qualitative research does not allow for identifying how many or what proportion of students would fit into each of the categories in this study. Repetition of this study in a different context, like Erasmus students of other programmes, may provide other perspectives of their motivation. Further comparative studies in different countries may create a more comprehensive platform concerning what directs Erasmus students’ choice of destinations and particular courses.

The value of this research is that it involved students from 8 European countries (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Spain, Turkey), that the categories are based on the respondents’ experience, and that the data was gathered also at the beginning of their stay and with the use of different techniques. The findings of this research can be used in two ways. They are informative for the realisation of culture-related policy objectives, introduced at the beginning

of the paper. The findings can also be used strategically for the “capacity-building” of Central European countries.

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