

EUROPE

## Erasmus faces demand and management problems – LERU

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One of the world's most successful student exchange programmes found itself under fire at a recent conference on international curricula in Brussels. Erasmus, which is responsible for placing some 230,000 students abroad each year, was said to be reaching its limits and the supply of applicants has stopped growing.

Presenting a paper on “International Curricula and Student Mobility” for the League of European Research Universities, LERU, Professor Bart De Moor – vice-rector for international policy at Belgian's *Katholieke Universiteit* Leuven – said that although Erasmus was much envied in the United States and China, it was blighted by huge administrative costs and a lack of personnel to assure proper management.

Speaking at the Brussels launch of his paper, he said it was vital that Erasmus was flexible not only in design, but also in its implementation – much more flexible than currently.

There was no excuse, he noted, as exchange collaboration and mobility have almost no impact on course design and so can be flexibly organised in nearly all subjects.

The mobility of students, teachers and researchers has become a touchstone for innovation in European universities, which are increasingly dependent on the professionalisation of international recruitment and selection efforts.

Although he conceded that the revised Erasmus for All programme planned for 2014-20 has been designed to correct some of these deficiencies, De Moor stressed:

“Staff and curriculum management are currently not always supportive of student mobility since mobility is often not considered to be an integral part of the curriculum, but rather an accommodation to individual students”.

Meanwhile, he noted that the budget allocated to Erasmus, by both the European Union (EU) and national agencies, had not increased in proportion to the number of participants. “This implies that the individual Erasmus grant on average has been decreasing over the years.”

### **The student perspective**

His remarks were supported at the event by Karina Ufert, chair of the European Students' Union, who said: “Certainly Erasmus needs a more structured approach and an acknowledgement that the infrastructure in host countries is lacking.

“In future there needs to be much more collaboration between the institutions involved.”

While it is the EU's ambition that by 2020, 20% of all students should have some form of international experience during tertiary education, De Moor admitted at the seminar after the launch that in addition to the cost factors, “student tourism is fading fast”, with students opting to study closer to home.

Of his Flemish students he reminded the audience that “the majority of them are linked to their church towers” – as a Belgian saying has it.

But this was not the experience of everyone. Dorothy Kelly, vice-rector of Granada University in Spain, said she had no lack of recruits for study abroad – but often the problem of language skills limited their ambitions.

### **Mobility challenges**

The De Moor paper found that while the participation of students in mobility schemes is rising, it is too low overall and for several reasons: financial, in the first place; a lack of awareness of the programme; recognition issues regarding diplomas and credits; and the risk of delays to studies given the economic crisis spanning the continent.

He warned that the quality control Erasmus needed was also weeding out poorer students. In addition to a shortage of financial means for study abroad, there were familiar logistical problems of finding appropriate housing.

De Moor also noted that “a large number (often hundreds) and the geographically wide scattering of institutional arrangements over many partner universities impede in many cases a coherent, centralised, quality-orientated policy with respect to student mobility”.

His presentation started by listing three types of mobility: exchange mobility (typically an Erasmus programme); networked mobility in which a department or university forms a network of several partners; and what he called “embedded mobility”, with a limited number of partners in which the students rotate in different venues on the basis of a fully synchronised curriculum.

Allowing Erasmus partnerships with only two partners, rather than a minimum of three as at present, is one of the LERU report’s key recommendations along with – unsurprisingly – cutting down on the required levels of administrative reports. This should be replaced by reporting on achieved deliverables and academic output, said the paper.

Furthermore, national governments should do more to remove existing barriers to degree recognition plus other rules that hamper international curricula, as was stated by EU education ministers when they met in Bucharest last year.

More funding for logistical support was needed, De Moor stressed: “This is particularly the case for structured mobility schemes. Managing schemes such as Erasmus places a large administrative burden on many universities, which need increased financial support.”

Several among the audience asked the panel if students who had been through a mobility scheme tended to be later offered better jobs than those who had not. Kelly replied: “To the extent that students have been through the system, they appear to get jobs earlier than their peers – though not necessarily better jobs.”

De Moor believes that not having international experience on a CV puts job-seekers at a disadvantage: “A lot of employers these days take it for granted that such graduates can list such an experience on their CVs.”

But that is related to language, an issue for staff as well as for students. Jordi Curell-Gotor, director for higher education and international affairs in the European Commission, said: “English is the international language. That is the reality, good or bad, whether you like it or not.”

As if to underline the point, not a word in French was spoken during the seminar’s three-hour session.