Higher education: co-operation with third countries, Erasmus Mundus programme 2004-2008

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This report from the Commission is presented under Article 12 of the Decision 2317/2003/EC establishing the Erasmus Mundus Programme, which requires an interim evaluation of the programme. The conclusions and recommendations made by the Commission are based on extensive surveys of Erasmus Mundus participants and key stakeholders. An external evaluator was used and the scope of the interim evaluation was the period 2004- 2006, during which a number of calls for proposals have taken place to implement the programme. While Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses, scholarships and "attractiveness projects" (Actions 1, 2 and 4) commenced in the academic year 2004-2005, Partnerships

(Action 3) began one year later in 2005-2006.

Overall, the Erasmus Mundus programme 2004-2008 appears to have made a very positive start, generating enthusiasm amongst students and higher education institutions ("HEIs") alike. The Commission shares the overall assessment of the evaluator that the Programme has provided an important contribution to the internationalisation of European higher education. Erasmus Mundus has been a relevant and efficient tool for European HEIs in helping them to find a response to globalisation. The results of the interim evaluation show that the programme is meeting its political and operational objectives. Indeed, 323 HEIs in Europe and third countries and 2,325 third-country students participated in the programme from 2004 to 2006, underlining their overall satisfaction for the programme. The main criticism voiced is that the Programme has been less successful with European students.

With regard to **programme design**, the **main recommendations** of the evaluator are as follows:

- Scholarships should be awarded to EU students to participate in the Erasmus Mundus programme on a competitive basis. There is a need to ensure that EU students participate on a more equal footing with their counterparts from third countries. The Commission agrees with this recommendation, as a way of facilitating intra-EU mobility for EU students and will examine possible measures to improve the position of EU students, while also striving to ensure complementarity with the Erasmus programme.

- The Erasmus Mundus programme should - finance permitting - be extended to the PhD level both at the level of courses and in respect of scholarships. Issues around quality assurance in respect of PhD programmes will need to be carefully thought through. The French *co-tutelle* model should serve as a model in this regard. Particular care should be taken to avoid duplication with Marie Curie research scholarships.

- Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses should be encouraged not only to develop cooperation with higher education institutions in third countries but to enable these institutions to become fully fledged partners in the course itself. This could be achieved by bringing Masters Courses and Partnerships (Actions 1 and 3) together under a single umbrella. The Commission agrees in principle with this recommendation but feels that quality assurance is a complex exercise when it comes to HEIs located in third countries.

- The Atlantis and the EU-Canada Cooperation Programme (and pilot projects with Japan, Australia and New Zealand) should be combined with the Erasmus Mundus programme so as to improve the coherence of the Commission's approach to strengthening co-operation in the field of higher education between the

EU and third countries.The Commission considers this recommendation interesting. However, the EU-US Cooperation Programme (Atlantis), which was recently renewed, has a wider remit than Erasmus Mundus, with joint masters courses being only one part of the programme.

Combining all Community higher education activities with an external dimension into a single integrated programme could, however, be an option after 2013.

- Consideration should be given to providing Erasmus Mundus students with placement opportunities on a more systematic basis. This would also contribute significantly to raising the profile of the programme among employers and wider stakeholders. However, undertaking a placement should not be made compulsory since this would not necessarily be appropriate in the case of all Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses. The Commission welcomes this recommendation.

With regard to **programme management,** the main recommendations were as follows:

- The National Structures should continue to be financed largely by the Member States in order to avoid a full EU Agency structure at national level. Nevertheless, some EU financing should be made available to help co-finance promotional activities by the National Structures since their workload is likely to increase significantly in the next programming period due to the projected increase in the programme budget. The Commission should make provision for restricted calls for proposals on a thematic basis to enable the National Structures to finance specific initiatives they wish to support, such as marketing and promotional activities. Consideration could be given in the new programming period to giving the National Structures a formal role in contributing to the monitoring of Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses. The Commission agrees with this recommendation.

- There is a need for the European Commission to turn its attention to quality assurance once Erasmus Mundus-branded Masters Courses are actually up and running. Self-evaluation should remain the fundamental starting point for ensuring continuous course quality. In addition, a representative sample of Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses should, over the lifetime of each programming period, be subject to external quality assessment. The Commission agrees with the need to ensure the quality of Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses and is already tackling this issue under the current programme.

- The comitology principle for Erasmus Mundus scholarships (Action 2) should be discontinued in order to speed up the finalisation of the selection process. This could accelerate the scholarship award decision by as much as 6-8 weeks. The Commission shares the concern of the evaluators about the current comitology procedure for selection decisions on scholarships, since these decisions are taken purely by universities according to criteria based on academic merit. The Commission will examine this issue when suggesting the design for a future programme.

With regard to **programme funding,** the main recommendations were as follows:

- Looking to the next programming period, the scholarship level for third-country students should not be reduced from the current level of EUR 21,000 per year. However, the Commission should also continue to monitor the scholarship level of other renowned scholarship schemes, such as the Fulbright. A universal scholarship amount should continue to be given with no differentiation either on the basis of where a given student decides to study or on the grounds of their country of origin. This is the only equitable approach and other approaches do not seem workable. Common tuition fees determined by individual Masters consortia should be retained in respect of Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses. The Commission agrees with this recommendation in order to maintain globally competitive levels of funding for Erasmus Mundus scholarships.

- In the next programming period, the amount of finance allocated to each Erasmus Mundus Master consortium should be increased to reflect the true cost of administering an integrated Masters Course on a

cross-border basis. The Commission has noted that the current annual grant of EUR 15,000 given to universities generally underestimates the costs of joint programmes. It will take this recommendation into account when planning for the next phase.

In its concluding remarks, the Commission states that it will take the results of the interim evaluation into account when proposing the new Erasmus Mundus programme for beyond its current programming period of 2004-2008.