

Training, education: Socrates programme, socio-economic background of ERASMUS students.

Report 1997-1998

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PURPOSE : to indicate the results of a survey into the socio-economic background of ERASMUS students. **CONTENT :** this survey was conducted at the end of 1998 and concerned more than 20,000 students or nearly one-quarter of those who took part in the ERASMUS Student Mobility scheme in the 1997/98 academic year were invited to take part in the survey which covered more than 300 institutions of Higher Education in 15 countries. Replies were received from nearly 9,500 students. The ERASMUS mobility scheme, which has grown from about 3,000 students when it first began in 1987/88 to over 100,000 today is extending into many of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Many of the findings of the survey support widespread views about the strengths of the study period abroad within the framework of ERASMUS and about the impact of the programme on student mobility in Europe. This confirms that the Community programmes in the field of education, training and youth play an important role. The main findings highlighted in this survey include: 1) the lack of harmonised and European statistics relating to the socio-economic situation of students; 2) a very high degree of satisfaction with the outcome of the study period abroad both academically and socially/culturally : 98% of students who took part in the socio-economic survey considered their ERASMUS experience to have been positive or very positive from a social and cultural point of view and 91% felt that it was positive academically. Furthermore, differences between the educational systems in the Member States as regards organisation and the level of funding (which in turn have an influence on the material conditions) may be a handicapping factor of the good working of the programme; 3) rate of participation : despite the number of places offered (181,000 places in the 18 countries) only about 50% are actually used. The discrepancy between places offered and places used can be related to a number of different factors, which vary in importance from country to country, including linguistic problems (students choose countries with more widely taught and spoken languages), and financial problems (the high grants policy is a high grant which is given to a small number of students, rather than smaller grants to many students) may be another reason why the full capacity of outgoing student places is not used; 4) the socio-economic situation of the student : although there is a lack of comparative data, the survey shows that the family economic background (in terms of parents' income status) does not have a significant effect on the personal income of ERASMUS students (the difference in income between students from the highest and the lowest family income levels is only 70 euros/month. However, the findings seem to indicate that the economic background of students is taken into account either by the national student support schemes (direct or indirect) or in the process of allocating the ERASMUS grant or both. It is concluded that any bias of ERASMUS students towards higher income levels to a large degree reflects the situation amongst the Higher Education students in general in the Member States. Despite the efforts that have been made to provide opportunities for all social groups, access to Higher Education is still somewhat biased towards higher economic groups. The question of how to decrease the bias towards students from the advantaged socio-cultural groups is in fact very problematic precisely because it is not based on economic grounds, but cultural ones. Therefore, there is a need for an open discussion about how to ensure that the ERASMUS programme is available to young people from a wider variety of cultural backgrounds than seems to be the case at present. As far as gender equality is concerned, the findings seem to show that participation in ERASMUS is not, in general, influenced by gender (59% of ERASMUS students are female, against 49% male). Other issues related to equal opportunities including students with physical disabilities, certain social groups like the immigrant population and other minority peoples, were not investigated in the framework of this survey. Finally, it is extremely interesting to note that around 80% of the students who answered the survey are the first in their family to study abroad; 5) economic and financial issues : 57% of the students reported financial problems abroad (especially students who lived with their parents in their home country and also students who come

from countries with low direct public support for students). The differences in the modes of living and the national student financial support systems seems to be the main factors explaining the financial difficulties of ERASMUS students. Additional accommodation costs are a substantial proportion. In general, the survey confirms that the ERASMUS grant is a necessary financial supplement for mobility and that it does to some extent cover the extra costs of studying abroad. In certain countries, it can be observed that the ERASMUS grant is used to compensate for the lack of public funding for studies abroad. It is also worth noting that it is the group of students which receives the largest ERASMUS grants which reports the highest degree of financial problems. The findings also indicate that although an increase in the Community funding for ERASMUS grants would be welcomed by the students it would not solve all the problems in so far as they are structural and related to national policy.