

Research Report

EMASI Enhancing Mobility of Access Students Ireland

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Context

The IUA are currently engaging in a research programme entitled EMASI, 'Enhancing Mobility of Access Students Ireland', A European Mobility Project funded by Erasmus +, KA3.

The project aims to investigate widening participation in mobility programmes amongst students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. The project will be delivered by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), working under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The project findings will be disseminated widely throughout Ireland and the EHEA upon completion in late 2017.

As part of this programme, a series of focus group sessions were conducted with with special interest groups. The aim of these focus groups were to investigate and gain a better understanding of the existing issues which relate to access to mobility for all students in higher education coming from disadvantaged and under – represented backgrounds.

These focus group sessions took place in two third level institutions, namely **University of Limerick** (22.03.17) and **Limerick Institute of Technology** (23.03.17)

This document presents the findings of these focus groups.

Methodology

Purpose of Focus Group:

- to gain an understanding of mobility (non) participation amongst target group in higher education
- to identify and gain insight into existing barriers/ challenges to participation that students are facing
- to develop a student response in how third level institutes can better support in over coming these barriers

Methodologies

- Moving Debate
- Pair & share discussions
- Round Table Consultation
- Personal Reflection
- Group Brainstorming
- Action Ranking

Data Collection Methods

- Audio Recording
- Scribed Harvesting of Discussions i.e. round table/ post -its
- Note Taking

Structure

Each session consisted of up to 6 participants

Each session lasted for 1.5 hours

Sessions were facilitated by moderator, Nora Furlong – external consultant and supported by Rose Fuller - IUA

Profile of Students

- 23 students in total were engaged in the consultation.
 - 17 from UL
 - 6 from LIT.

- They represented a diverse range of programme
 - fashion design
 - psychology
 - Humanities
 - Science
 - Law

- All students had previously taken part in either an Erasmus Workplace Placement or Study Programme.

- All students represented 'young people with fewer opportunities.

- All students were in their early 20's with the exception of one who was in her early 30's.

- Students were studying in Limerick. Approximately half were form Limerick and the rest from other parts of Ireland

Key Questions:

What challenges did you face before/during/ after the Erasmus Programme?

How did you overcome these challenges – i.e. what existing supports are in place?

What are the benefits of taking part in an Erasmus Programme?

Would you do it again?

COLLECTED RESPONSE

1. What challenges did you face before/during/after the Erasmus Programme?

BEFORE

- Fear of the unknown- will I like it, will I make friends, not sure if this is something for them
- Lack of choice – not getting the placement you want (first come/ first served basis)
- Deciding where to go
- Communications with Host University
- Stress
 - Administrative- filling in forms, booking flights, the application
 - Accommodation – finding safe, affordable short term accommodation
 - Finance – how will I afford it

DURING

Accommodation

- finding safe accommodation
- finding short term accommodation
- being kicked out,
- being scammed.
- lack of availability – students ending up in unsafe places
- Being kicked out of accommodation before last exam
- Living with 16 other people
- My oven did not work properly

Finance

- Cost of Living – not having enough money
- Grant does not stretch to cover accommodation
- Finding a part time job
- Depending on parents

Health

- Anxiety (resulting from all other challenges)
- Stress
- Finding doctors

Communications

- With both sending & hosting university/ placement
- Lack of support from Sending Institute when away *'I was told there was nothing they could do'*
- Confusion

Academic

- Keeping up with assignments
- Information around module selection/ assessment/ grading/ credits
- Harder to find time to do assignments as you want to experience everything's
- Too many hours of college required to meet 30 credits
- Info around modules/ grading/ assessment
- Different teaching methods
- I found it a hard year academically/ modules were a lot tougher

Finding your way around / Practical things

- Finding the right campus
- Getting to class was hassle
- Public/ local transport
- Finding supermarkets
- Finding the way around college/ city
- Setting up Mobile phone/ roaming charges
- Cant set up a phone without bank account – must live in county for 6 months before you can set up account
- Adaptors

Homesickness/ Culture Shock

- Never lived away from home for that long
- Didn't know anyone
- Feelings of Loneliness '*I felt on my own*'
- Local students do not want to interact with Erasmus students
- Getting to know local norms/ traditions/ laws

AFTER:

- Getting back in normal college routine
- Erasmus Blues
- Getting out of holiday mode
- Reverse Culture Shock
- Getting back into a normal college routine
- Lecturers expecting fluency on modules not used while away
- Missed new friends
- Missed the experience/city/routine
- Getting angry/ frustrated
- Employment
- Getting results
- Erasmus blues

Outcome 2: How did you overcome these challenges?

Feedback here centered mostly around family support, The *Buddy System*, ESN Programme, (English Speaking) Course Coordinators in Host Country. Making friends locally helped students with local logistics and language issues, particularly around things like setting up mobile phone, finding a local English speaking doctor etc.

The Susi grant & Erasmus grant provided assistance in overcoming financial issues. One student contributed 'Time helped me to adjust to the way of life there'. Personality and personal resilience were mentioned as an important factor in this case. Being properly prepared before departure is a significant point to consider here also.

Detailed Response

➤ FAMILY/ FRIENDS SUPPORT NETWORK

- Skype with family/ friends
- Financial support from family
- New Friends I made on Erasmus
- Family visits – was struggling emotionally (course director offered help when there was nothing from the college international offices on either side)
- I had a friend who'd lived there before me
- I went with a friend
- I met other Irish people over there
- Made local friends who helped me with language barrier and setting up a phone

➤ PERSONAL RESILIENCE

- I'm good at talking to people
- I made plans and did research before I went
- I travelled around to get more from it
- I study hard
- Joined a gym- gained self confidence
- My own personal skills – I learned to cook etc.

➤ THE BUDDY SYSTEM

- Talked to past students

- ESN Erasmus Student Network Programme
- COLLEGE/ ERASMUS SUPPORTS
 - Irish guidance counselor in the college / family councilor
 - Websites for Erasmus accommodation
 - Host College was accommodating
 - English speaking coordinator in host university
 - UL changed the grading to have a system of grading that worked when on Erasmus
- FINANCE
 - Susi grant + access grant helped with funds challenge
 - Some people find part time jobs in Irish pubs
 - Family Support
- SOCIAL MEDIA
 - An app helped e find my way around the city
 - Facebook group/ college that helped people find accommodations
- TIME
 - Time helped me to get over the way of life there

What are the benefits of taking part in an Erasmus Programme?

This discussion was a very positive one and it was unanimous that there are benefits to the programme. All students had a number of points to contribute. It mainly centred around the opportunities the experience presents and life learning

MAKING FRIENDS/ NEW NETWORKS

- To make new friends
- Increase social skills

INDPENDENCE/ FREEDOM

- Learn to be independent
- Increased employability
- Independence – living on a budget, living away from family
- Learn to be self- sufficient

EMPLOYABILITY

- You develop adaptability, employers will see you are willing to/ capable of adapting to new environments
- Increased confidence
- Better prepared for next intercultural experience
- Make European Contacts/ Networks
- Learn the basics of another language- looks good on cv
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TRAVEL AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

- Inter- cultural learning – developing new perspectives, empathy
- Opportunity to travel around and see other parts of Europe
- Adapting to new scenarios/ cultures/ food/climate
- Learning how to live with strangers
- Experience living abroad for an extended amount of time
- Meeting new people from different cultures and learn more country specific knowledge

ACADEMIC

You discover new study/ learning strategies

- Allows students to determine if they would like to live abroad or not
- Opportunity to student different subjects and develop new interests
- Develop new perspectives
- You are learning in a European Context
- You experience more non formal methods in HE
- Gain insight into a skill based approach in HE

LIFE LEARNING

- It's an opportunity to step out of your comfort zone & challenge yourself.
- Financial learning – living in a new culture/ managing money
- It broadens your horizons

What are the barriers in place that make it difficult for students to participate in Erasmus Programmes?

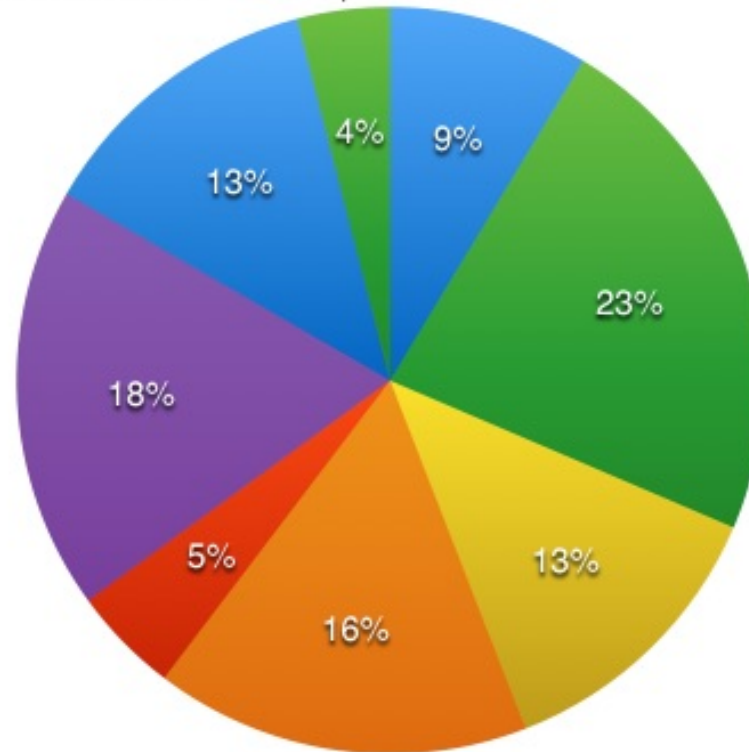
Barrier/ Challenge Identified	Potential response from the College from a students perspective
<p>Language This seems to be particularly an issue for basic needs such as finding a doctor/ using public transport/ getting hair cuts etc.</p>	<p>Compulsory language course The online language course is not practical – make it into an app Pre-departure language exchange on campus Facilitate voluntary language exchange on campus Offer extra credits for language exchange Support students to arrive earlier to take a language course Erasmus Society in English in HU More options of English speaking universities</p>
<p>Money It was unanimous that students would not be able to engage in the programme without the support of the Erasmus & Susi grants. However, it didn't cover accommodation costs in some cases.</p> <p>Students stressed that some of them found themselves living in a country that was far more expensive than anticipated. In some cases, students were able to find part time jobs. Family financial support was named as a key supporting factor also.</p> <p>Having grants paid on time was a priority issue for students as well as support with filling in forms</p>	<p>Better promotion of SUSI/ Erasmus/ student assistance grant Info on available funds in host county Support students to find part time jobs Pay out grants earlier/ on time Advise on where to find suitable, affordable accommodation Make Erasmus optional – not compulsory Support with setting up a bank account Support with filling in forms Knowledge of socio economic climate you are going to. “rich kid’s college/ privileged) Research – if money is an issue don’t go to an expensive country People have to give up their jobs to go Extra grants towards the end especially</p>
<p>Communications/ Lack of knowledge Confusion, lack of knowledge and no response to queries causes a lot of extra anxiety on top of the stress of adapting to a new culture. This is a key factor especially during first few weeks</p>	<p>People need to do their own research but could be directed by key questions Connect outgoing students to students who have gone before Make students aware that different in different places B Support a Buddy Programme that offers one to one support Check in on students while they are away</p>

	Always have a consistent person who can be available to respond to queries while students are away
<p>Accommodation Concerns around safety It is really difficult to get short term lets on private property market Sometimes your accommodation contract is different to your module dates in private accommodation</p>	<p>Support us to find accommodation well in advance Ring-fence college accommodation just for Erasmus students University partner to make appropriate accommodation available to students Be made aware of property scams and how to avoid them</p>
<p>Personality/ loneliness Students agreed that this was down to the individual and that some people were just more resilient than others. The response indicates that is family that offer the most support in response to this issue. However, the college has a role to play in helping overcome this challenge. Going with a friend was also a massive factor in overcoming this challenge</p>	<p>Facilitate Social networking i.e. Groups chats/ Facebook groups Ensure ESN is on all Erasmus participating campuses Support the development of an effective Buddy System Make sure that students can access the home guidance counselor while away Ensure there is always someone consistent who will respond to students queries whilst away</p>
<p>Health/ Disability Anxiety issues was named as the biggest health issue affecting students on Erasmus. Accessing an English speaking doctor also features. There was little insight in terms of other health difficulties due to profile of participating students</p>	<p>Provide information on Health care center info/ supports in Host University/ city Reassurance that colleges are accessible Have information on English speaking doctors and What to do if you get sick? Health insurance – not all doctors accept it More support from home college – lack of contact increases anxiety Erasmus counselling service / network Peer buddy system</p>
<p>Relationships/ Commitments One student referred to this as being ‘stuck in limerick bubble’. It depends on personal circumstance.</p>	<p>Students agreed that there is little the college can do to address this other than stronger promotional campaigns Also Make exception to compulsory rule if you have a family</p>
<p>Promotion. There is an assumption that Erasmus is just for language students that needs challenging</p>	<p>Better & more effective promotion Present case studies to non Language More information and promotion on English speaking Campus</p>

<p>Homesickness/ culture shock Although students reflect that this is part of the journey of living in a new culture, it was insinuated that the college can play a supportive role in addressing it.</p> <p>Reverse Culture Shock was named as an issue quiet a number of times also upon returning. NB the provision of both pre-departure training and a debriefing/ reflective session upon return are high priority in response to this challenge.</p>	<p>Free Wi-Fi Info night/ pre departure training Arrange meet ups with people before who can tell you about customs/ traditions etc. Facilitate debriefing sessions on return Pre-departure training Buddy system Info on how to connect to erasmus groups Free sim card</p>
<p>Preparation required Again pre-departure training is named as a priority in this case</p>	<p>A checklist – what to bring and what not to bring Practical’s – phones/ adaptors etc. Administration/ forms Find accommodation before you go</p>
<p>Limited choice of university</p>	<p>Expand partnerships Don’t force people to go More Networking with English speaking Campuses Make more opportunities for people who want to</p>
<p>Modules / Academic This issue created extra anxiety and stress for students.</p>	<p>More information regarding academic requirements and obtaining results/ academic transcript/ Information regarding modules and what they entail Stress around understanding new systems Lack of options, not interested in the ones available What happens if you fail?</p>
<p>Crime/ Safety This issue is directly linked to the accommodation issue. And also due to the fact that a lot of students are very naïve.</p>	<p>Ring-fenced student accommodation Everyone should have an E buddy Good info before you go Share stories with former students Pre- departure training</p>

Ranking of Challenges

- Language 9%
- Accommodation 16%
- Culture Shock 13%
- Money 23%
- Personality 5%
- Perperation 4%
- Communications 13%
- Health 18%



Please note that where students name *'health'* as a barrier, it is very closely link to stress and anxiety related illness.

Would you do it again?

The feedback from this discussion is very similar to what was captured in the feedback on the benefits of the programme. It was further developed by the idea that the experience allows you the space to mature. It is exiting, you develop connections all over the world by making friends with other Erasmus students. One student said they had a renewed determination and focus when they returned home. It allows you to grow as a person.

YES (20/23)

- You make so many new friends/ meet awesome people
- Its so different and change is good
- Experience so many new things i.e. food
- You develop an openness to new things
- Learn new languages
- Develop communications skills
- You learn to adjust to a new climate/ culture (become more understanding of the other/ culturally aware etc.)
- The experience of living in a beautiful city
- The freedom (of picking your own modules)
- Independence
- Gained many valuable skills / invaluable experience
- See things from a different angel/ develop new perspectives
- Developed new ways of studying and digesting information's
- Renewed determination when I return home
- Gained life experience/ adaptability
- Its exciting to discover new things
- I am better prepared for future intercultural experiences
- Broadened my horizons
- Increased empathy – you are a foreigner/ stereotyped and it makes you think about the reverse
- Allowed me to mature
- It is easier to visit other parts of Europe
- Increased chances of employability
- You grow as a person (i.e. first time living away from home)
- Character building
- Connections all over the world

The reasons for not doing it again were listed as follows:

NO (3/23) (all from the same programme where Erasmus was Compulsory)

- Cost of living too high
- My location was extremely posh – felt isolated, I stuck out
- No support from H/S university
- Lack of information given before going
- I didn't want to go in the first place and felt pushed into it
- Difficulties in readjusting coming home
- Cost of living too high
- My location was extremely posh – felt isolated, I stuck out
- No support from H/S university
- Lack of information given before going
- Difficulties in readjusting coming home

Conclusion

In general, students engaged in the consultation process very well. The methodologies were effective and the students contributed a large volume of feedback. It is worth noting that they very much valued the opportunity to give feedback, which in turn validates their proposal for the opportunity to engage in a debriefing session upon return from Erasmus.

Over all students gave extremely positive feedback when talking about the programme. They used various phrases to describe their experience such as '*as broadening my horizons*', '*life experience*' & '*new opportunities*'. They cited a number of programme strengths, including opportunities for personal development, increased employability and opportunity to travel. In terms of areas to improve, accommodation and communications were ranked as key areas to address.

It is worth noting that there is work to be done further on the response to the question *What could the college do support students in overcoming these barriers?*

It is necessary to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of both the sending institute, the hosting institute and the students themselves. In reflection, a lot of students realised that they should have taken more responsibility in research before they went, especially in terms of cost of living and practical areas such as suitable adaptors, etc. They gave feedback that they did remember past students coming in to them and sharing experience/ tips but at the time they did not engage with the information.

There is always wisdom in hindsight, though some of these issues could be addressed in a well planned, structured and facilitated pre-departure training. Other Erasmus programmes have established excellent resources that inform Pre-departure training such as the KA1 EVS – European Voluntary Service. (See attached Resources: Mentoring & Pre-departure Training Guide, Working & Living in Europe)

Critical feedback on the overall Erasmus experience all came from students for whom Erasmus was compulsory as part of their study programme.

Lack of representation and diversity in the representation of students that engaged in this process, i.e. mature students/ Students with physical disability, highlights significant barriers faced by these students in accessing Erasmus programmes. There is a need for more investment in supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access the programme if 'inclusion' is to be fully embraced. E.g. An advanced planning visit that would allow the student and support person to visit the new campus/ city for a couple of days in advance of the placement. The APV would allow for the student to map out their way around the city, meet their new mentor/ support person, explore accommodation options and put some plans in place. Other Erasmus + programmes have an already well established APV option that is promoted as good practice in supporting students with few opportunities to engage. Perhaps there is opportunity for cross – sectoral sharing of practice and resources in this case.

The feedback from an academic experience was mixed. Some students really enjoyed the discovery of new teaching strategies, opportunities to study new subject choices and returned motivated and determined to continue with their studies. While others found it academically challenging, were stressed over assessments and found it difficult to readjust to *normal* routine upon return.

A sense of *Global Citizenship* emerged from the focus groups suggesting that the impact goes far beyond the student and is extending to the entire college campus and into society at large. Students reflections on the development of 'increased empathy', 'new perspectives' implied that they were more willing to support visiting students on campus in Limerick and less likely to stereotype others as a result of the experience.

In Conclusion, there are clear links to the outcomes of this report and the 4 common EU objectives outlined in the ET 2020:

- Making lifelong learning and **mobility** a reality
 - Improving the **quality and efficiency** of education and training
 - Promoting **equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship**
 - Enhancing creativity and innovation, including **entrepreneurship**, at all levels of education and training
- (EU Strategic Framework – Education & Training 2020)

It is clear that the programme is operating in line with the policy framework of the ET 2020 with the following areas recommended for development:

1. A structured pre- departure training
2. Structured space for reflection and feedback upon return to campus (with a focus on themes of Citizenship, social cohesion etc.)
3. The introduction of an APV that would allow students to visit the host city/ campus to have a look at the infrastructure and find solutions to some potential problems.
4. Cross Sectoral Sharing of practice and resources is recommended. Ie. KA1 E + Mobility of Youth / EVS programme
5. Anxiety and stress emerged strongly as an issue affecting students particularly in the first few weeks of placement. Sending agencies are strongly recommended to have a contact person available to students to support during this time and to '*check in*' with students later on in the placement also.