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Introducing Erasmus

The freedom to move between different countries for work, study or other purposes is one of the definitional features of life in the European Union. This personal and professional liberty explains why, alongside ensuring the circulation of goods, capital and services, the European Commission has engaged in a sustained process of opening-up the internal borders of the EU. Free movement is expected to take place on a fairly regular basis among relatively large sections of the European population rather than being restricted to a small minority of privileged citizens, a practice helped by a removal of bureaucratic barriers and the building of social, economic and cultural ties between individuals from different societies. Added to this development is a concerted effort to educate young Europeans about the life possibilities created by mobility, including the provision of exchange platforms that enable circulation to take place within education and training systems.

Through such means it is hoped that intercultural understanding between people from different countries can be created, in addition to moving towards intensified forms of political unity and shared economic prosperity. In practice, this has involved the investment of billions of euros in programmes designed to create more, and better quality, intra-

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European mobility, with particular emphasis on the youth population. The impact to date has been considerable, with millions of young European citizens supported through the maintenance of mobility platforms and funding of projects. In this book, we will take a close look at the most high profile framework designed to support this nascent mobility culture, Erasmus, with a view to understanding how different forms of Erasmus mobility are practiced among difference sections of the European youth population.

Despite having attained a high level of visibility, building Europe through Erasmus mobility is not a straightforward task. The programme, especially in its current expanded format of Erasmus+, is in fact a complex initiative. While student exchanges may be the most well-known examples of intra-European circulation from the point of view of EU policymakers (Brooks and Waters 2011, pp. 69–76), the present iteration of Erasmus also seeks to support mobility in other sections of the youth population, including young people interested in civic engagement projects or voluntary work placements. Ensuring that all these actions work together and function effectively, and maintaining quality within exchanges, is a major challenge. There is also the controversial issue of who funds Erasmus. While the key actions of the programme are ostensibly financed by the Commission, resources are allocated to intermediaries rather than awarded directly to citizens. Any understanding of Erasmus must therefore consider what goes on within intermediary institutions as well as looking at what takes place in the lives of individual programme and project participants.

In identifying a rationale behind the Commission's approach to what is its flagship mobility programme, it can also be argued that there is basic multiplier principle underlying investment in Erasmus, with emphasis on stakeholders within tertiary education and the youth sector, who are required to include a sufficiently large and diverse range of young people in the various actions that comprise the programme. This position puts these stakeholders in a powerful position, as they effectively get to decide who become mobile and define what takes place during exchange visits. In the course of this book, we will meet some of these key figures, including a number of the of the people who manage incoming and outgoing exchanges within universities (Chap. 4), alongside examining perspec-

tives from participating students (Chaps. 3, 5 and 6). We also engage with young people involved in forms of exchange that contribute to another core youth policy objective at European level, namely active citizenship (Chap. 7), followed by an assessment of the management of 'quality' within Erasmus+ mobility projects (Chap. 8).

Learning and Mobility

A common feature of these different forms of Erasmus mobility is that they need to be appreciated as a platform for the learning of mobility, implying a strong link between education and intra-European circulation. This book is not, we should add, an orthodox account of how universities and training organisations work; we will not, for instance, focus on relationships between teachers and students, curriculum development or the acquisition of recognised credentials. Significant though these issues are, our discussion highlights the perhaps unique to Europe opportunities for learning that are created in the course of the international exchange visits Erasmus supports. But in keeping with the expanded scope of the current Erasmus+ initiative, we do consider learning within both formal and informal learning environments, with students and mobility project participants respectively.

Despite the diversity of Erasmus actions now in place, there are common programmatic elements. During a fixed period of time spent abroad, it is expected that the mover will engage in learning processes related to enhancement of their employability, linking learners with the labour market, and the strengthening of what is sometimes termed 'interculturality' in reference to interactions within a group of people from a diverse range of national backgrounds that lead to mutual respect for each other's differences. In simple terms, to become more employable and be more culturally aware of diverse aspects of citizenship in Europe are what all Erasmus participants should be learning.

The emergence of these faculties is accomplished through concurrently bringing together groups of international students, project participants and volunteers via Erasmus. While diverse, these modalities share a common approach in bringing together peers from different countries and

regions and encouraging them to educationally mingle. In doing so, each participant acquires an international point of reference, or range of different national points of reference, that enables a more spatially expansive view of future possibilities in life to emerge. This includes learning about the possibilities of working and studying in different European societies and meeting with people from a range of cultural backgrounds to learn more about their lives. The international learning habitus is hence a site in which a spatially reflexive form of learning can emerge; a locale that is both created by mobility and extols the virtues of intra-European circulation as a means to realize personal and professional development (see also Cairns 2014; Cairns et al. 2017).

In more prosaic terms it is anticipated that during an exchange visit by a student, trainee or volunteer, there will be not only be formal education within the classroom or laboratory but also informal or non-formal learning among peers, and perhaps also with members of the host community. Additionally, the possibility exists for knowhow in respect to how to live and work in another country being generated. It may be that through a study visit or work placement an Erasmus student acquires the skills and capacities that open up access to the next stage in an education or work trajectory, with their field of opportunities widened to encompass not only home-based jobs with an international dimension but also working and studying abroad. For this reason, we believe that participating in Erasmus involves thinking more expansively about future possibilities, whether this involves physical relocation to another European country or becoming aware of how to conduct business with people from other nations. It is through this means that Erasmus participants obtain a better understanding of the potentialities of life in a European community characterised by spatial openness, something we regard as the programme's greatest contribution to social, political and economic stability in the region.

With Erasmus+, we now have more explicit recognition of the potential value of non-formal learning, with particular emphasis on the use of mobility projects. In regard to application, we can detect a desire to address the social agenda of Erasmus, with emphasis on issues relating to active citizenship, extending to encouraging civic engagement and enhancing youth-appropriate political participation. These projects, as

we shall discover in Chap. 7, have at least one major limitation, in the participant base tending to consist of young people who are already civic-minded and politically engaged. Such individuals may strengthen and better focus their political conscientiousness through Erasmus, but we cannot say that joining a mobility project is a point of inception for participation. For this reason, the ability of Erasmus+ to reach a more diverse range of European young people is limited, ironically, by the lack of appeal of the values which the European institutions extol, such as respect for diversity and tolerance, and the strength of other European values noticeably absent from EC policy discourse: materialism, individualism and outright hedonism.

The Erasmus Ethos

While we do wish to stress its contribution to supporting ties between European citizens of different nations and the symbolic strengthening of the EU, one thing we will not do in this book is provide an extensive account of the history of the Erasmus programme. This is due to the fact that this task has already been undertaken with the help of one of the authors of this book in a previous publication (Feyen and Krzaklewska 2013; see also Corbett 2005; Pépin 2007). We do however advise readers interested in Erasmus history, and more recent developments, to consult this book. Suffice to say, the recent history of Erasmus and the emergence of student mobility programmes in Europe is, to say the least, an intriguing one, culminating in the current 'taken for granted' status of the programme. It is in fact remarkable that the initiative came into being in the first place considering the amount of hostility towards the idea of a large scale cross-border youth exchange scheme from countries such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom, all of whom at one subsequent point in time or another could arguably be termed major beneficiaries of the programme (Feyen 2013, p. 30). Nevertheless, a few basic facts do need to be brought to light in order to explain the underlying ethos of the programme. This is so that we might appreciate what Erasmus means for policymakers, stakeholders and participants, before outlining some of main features of the expanded Erasmus+ programme.

Named after the Dutch humanist and philosopher Erasmus Desiderius (1465–1536), better known as Erasmus of Rotterdam, the programme formally began in 1987, although antecedent initiatives have existed in the form of smaller scale intra-European exchange platforms since the 1970s, such as the Joint Study Programmes.[1] While it is important to appreciate the difficulties in reaching agreement on the format the student exchange platform would take at European political level and how it should be funded, we are more interested in the fact that Erasmus is a programme with an underlying philosophy: a core set of values that reflect the political motivation behind its creation, including the task of legitimising the European institutions (Feyen 2013, p. 22). Student mobility was seen by European policymakers at this time as a means to imaginatively stimulate interest in European cooperation and a way of putting a youthful face on organisations perceived as old, cold and aloof by the European public. This is, in short, an example of what would now be referred to as institutional branding, as well as demonstrating the desire of the EC to establish a specifically European 'demos' (Klose 2013, p. 41) within which its values, including the valorization of mobility, could prosper. Therefore even in its nascent stages, Erasmus had a geo-political significance not present in other forms of student or youth exchange.[2]

What the existence of an underlying philosophy designed to legitimate the European institutions means is that the outward image of Erasmus as a 'fun' and convivial activity with material and cultural benefits serves a very practical, and quite serious, political purpose for the EU (Krzaklewska 2008, p. 90). We can therefore answer the question as to what is it European policymakers get out of supporting an expensive programme like Erasmus: it provides a highly visible symbol of a youthful Europe working, or rather studying and training, together. And the greater the number of participants in the programme, the stronger the signal to the European public that the EU institutions are working effectively and responsibly.

Erasmus is designed to not only bring young people together but also integrate groups from across the diverse nations of the EU and external countries participating in various aspects of the programme, helping people to become more tolerant and have a better awareness of common European values, with some indicators sourced from official Erasmus statistics presented in the infographic slide reproduced below

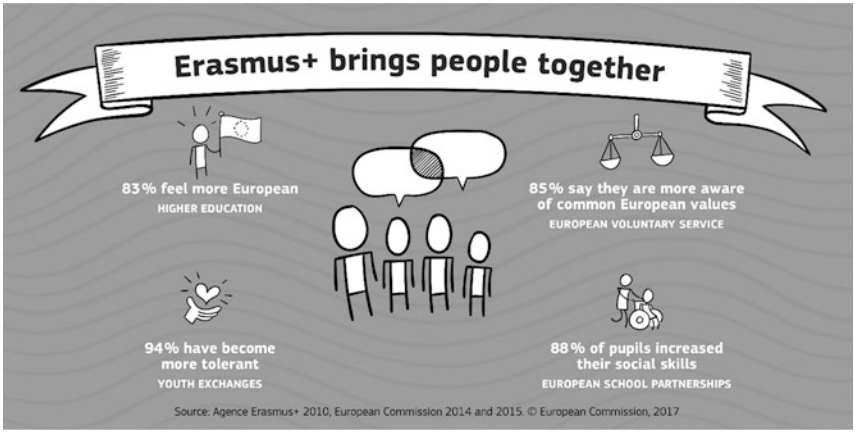

Fig. 1.1 Erasmus+ brings people together

(Fig. 1.1). It is however not always clear from reading Erasmus statistics just what is meant by 'common European values' or what constitutes 'tolerance' or an increase in social skills, although reference is made in official reports to promoting diversity, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue as well as respect for human rights (e.g. European Commission 2017, p. 76). These are potentially laudable aims, but issues that deserve to be explored though in-depth qualitative exploration rather than statistical soundbites. The extent to which these outward signs are being translated into deeper societal changes is therefore open to question due to the ambitious nature of this goal, the complexity of the process of identification with Europe and a lack of clarity in respect to key terms of reference.

Less ambiguously, the programme can be said to have been a major quantitative success until now, particularly among undergraduates, with numbers participating rising incrementally since the first exchanges in 1987. Even taking into account the fact that as the EU has grown, with the number of countries within the Erasmus fold expanding considerably from the initial 11 nations in 1987 (Brown et al. 2014), that in the region of nine million exchanges have taken place over a course of 30 years is extremely impressive, as is the wide range of actions now supported during the Erasmus+ phase. This includes volunteers, trainees, undergradu-

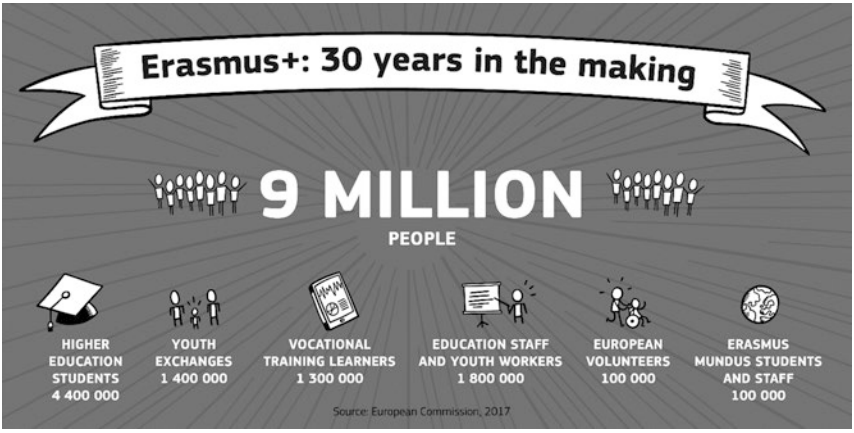

Fig. 1.2 Erasmus+: 30 years in the making

ates, postgraduates as part of Erasmus Mundus, academic members of staff, youth workers and other sections of the youth population with specific social needs (see Fig. 1.2).[3]

More recently, the goals of Erasmus have become more closely aligned with addressing societal challenges within the EU, such as the rise in youth unemployment that followed the 2008 economic crisis (European Commission 2016, p. 5) and providing language support for refugees from outside Europe (European Commission 2017, p. 9); issues that did not feature in the aims of the programme as set out in its original articles in 1987, which were largely focused on the academic development of students and the strengthening of cooperation between universities across the European community in a process of what Brown et al. (2014, pp. 12–13) term 'normalising mobility'. However, in respect to these original aims, it has to be said that they have been realized to a major extent considering the 'normality' of foreign exchange visits within tertiary education.

Extra-EU 'migrants,' as refugees and asylum seekers are euphemistically referred to in media discourse, are somewhat tangential to traditional Erasmus fields such as undergraduate exchanges. However, refugees and asylum seekers are now being explicitly targeted for policy interventions via mobility projects in Key Action 3 of the programme,

including structured dialogue between young people and stakeholders (European Commission 2017, p. 8). In regard to youth unemployment, considering that this is a situation threatening the future job prospects of millions of young Europeans, including skilled and qualified youth (Cairns et al. 2016), the scope for Erasmus interventions is more expansive, including the idea of making students more employable through participating in exchanges (see Chap. 2). Additionally, we might want to consider the EU's long-standing commitment to 'active citizenship' in sustaining European social and political cohesion (Wood 2013, p. 127), including voluntary placements as part of programmatic elements that formed part of the *Youth in Action* programme than preceded Erasmus+ (see Chap. 7).

At a more general level, the EU also wishes to address certain aspects of social inclusion via Erasmus, such as supporting students with fewer opportunities and providing online linguistic support for aforementioned incoming refugees (Fig. 1.3). This links with a desire to promote equality and inclusion through facilitating access to Erasmus for participants from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' and among those with 'fewer opportunities compared to their peers [and] whenever disadvantage limits or prevents participation in transnational activities,' with specific reference made to disability, young people with learning difficulties and those facing pov-

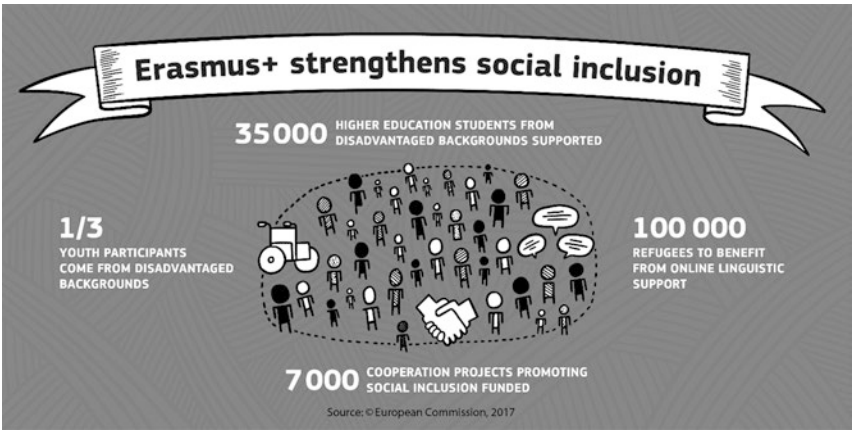

Fig. 1.3 Erasmus+ strengthens social inclusion

erty, cultural exclusion or social obstacles (European Commission 2017, p. 9). In other words, the EU seeks to address the needs of young people facing different forms of extreme hardship through various elements of Erasmus+ rather than those who simply lack social and economic resources.

While no doubt motivated by good political intentions and a desire to keep Erasmus relevant to the European public through addressing topical concerns such as the influx of refugees into countries such as Italy, Germany and Greece, particularly following the 2015 refugee crisis, broadening the scope of the programme inevitably has implications for its ethos, as well as potentially changing the meaning of the Erasmus brand. Suffice to say, in grouping together initiatives with an explicit social remit, defined by what may be a very high threshold of disadvantage, what the programme signifies for European policymakers, and Europeans, will start to change.

Rather than being a symbol of European unity and a pro-active means of fostering harmony within the EU, Erasmus may come to embody a political reaction to the challenges facing young people at the margins of society, greatly limiting the socio-demographic inclusivity of certain mobility actions. In other words, the programme loses its relevance to young people outside categories defined as priorities by politicians, possibly generating consternation among traditional Erasmus consumers. However, this change of emphasis can also be interpreted as a positive development, in overcoming the idea that Erasmus is a programme largely for students, most of whom are assumed to be from relatively privileged backgrounds, thus making mobility a means for reproducing rather than overcoming societal inequalities (Murphy-Lejeune 2002).[4]

At a political level the EU can therefore be said to be taking something of a gamble, but it may be a wager worth taking for policymakers if the programme acquires the ability to generate 'political capital' (Bourdieu 1986; see also French 2011) for the EU; in effect, a form of legitimation through being seen to be socially relevant. However, we have not, as yet, reached a position where refugees and asylum seekers have supplanted EU students within Erasmus: we can in fact confirm that participation rates in the undergraduate exchange programme seem to be as high as ever, even increasing slightly since the start of Erasmus+ in 2014 (Fig. 1.4).

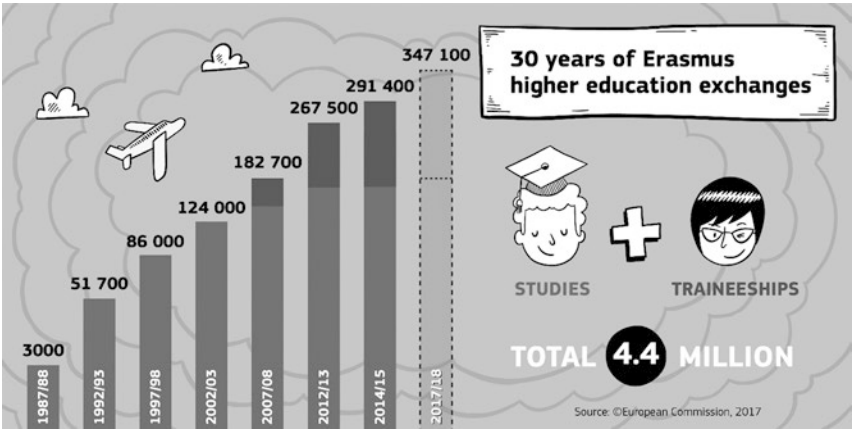

Fig. 1.4 30 years of Erasmus higher education exchanges

From this particular infographic, it might be argued that the popularity of Erasmus among undergraduate students and work placement trainees is set to continue along an upward trajectory, with in the region of 4.4 million exchanges now having taken place since 1987. And outwardly, Erasmus still represents a good news story for European policymakers. Later in this book, we will explore what lies beneath these participation trends, addressing the question as to what motivates students to participate (Chap. 3) and asking what is it that they gain from the Erasmus experience (Chaps. 5 and 6). Therefore, despite the fundamental changes initiated with Erasmus+, we will not neglect the traditional and still popular aspects of the programme.

Erasmus in Theory

Having considered some of the underlying principles behind the programme and how they are changing over time, we also wish to appreciate Erasmus with reference to its place within the broader framework of geographical mobility, extending to fields such as migration and its role in supporting intra-European free movement. This task involves discussing Erasmus at a theoretical level as opposed to simply describing its most prominent features or mapping flows of incoming and outgoing mobility.

While we might think that this is a relatively straightforward task, Erasmus and the student mobility field in general is not well integrated into a broader theoretical context. That most studies of the programme rely on statistical analysis of administrative data rather than conceptually guided exploration leaves much research disconnected from existing knowledge fields. As Botas and Huisman (2013, p. 742) note, in consequence, studies of Erasmus lack a theoretical foundation. Attempts to place the programme within recognisable 'Migration Studies' precedents also flounder due to doubts as to whether student circulation actually contributes to migration processes. We cannot, for example, view exchanges as peripatetic sabbaticals akin to that of a gap year or what King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) term the 'European year abroad' since Erasmus has a geopolitical significance such forms of mobility lack. This is just one reason why in another recent publication, the relationship between student mobility and migration has been defined as tenuous (Cairns 2017a).

Another issue relates to the relatively short duration of most exchanges, less than a year for undergraduates and even shorter in regard to work placements. And that there is a guaranteed return to the sending society moves Erasmus further away from migration paradigms. The circulatory character of Erasmus is in fact a defining feature and serves a crucial educational purpose through reducing the risk of disruption to educational progress, with exchanges being integrated into existing degree courses. While it is not inconceivable that an Erasmus student could 'over-stay' in the host country, this would effectively mean an abandonment of studies to date as well as risking losing out on financial support due to not having met the conditions of their scholarship. This is an important political consideration in the present climate of anti-migration sentiment in some European countries, as this arrangement provides a very effective deterrent against settlement.

We should also acknowledge that the programme is unambiguously marketed as a mobility exercise rather than a form of migration or even a proto-migration stage. To view Erasmus as migratory is therefore without basis in fact and out of step in regard to policy discussion. Going even further, we can argue that Erasmus constitutes a means of doing mobility differently, or a kind of anti-migration, a situation enabled by the relative openness of the EU's borders. This is in fact a massive achievement on the

part of Erasmus and the people who work within the programme, and one that receives surprisingly little publicity despite the potential for making political capital. But perhaps it is simply taken for granted that Erasmus is not a generator of intra-European migration and there is no need to remind the European public or national governments of this fact. We can therefore argue that it is more credible to view Erasmus as an alternative or even a deterrent to migration rather than an incipient example of such a form of population circulation.

Quantifying and Qualifying Erasmus

In looking at how prior studies are able to advance our understanding of Erasmus, various authors have illustrated the growing popularity of the programme and other forms of learning exchange, especially through the mapping of student mobility trends (e.g., Teichler et al. 2011). This work serves an important political purpose, providing policymakers with an indication of quantitative success, as do other studies drawing on data from Eurostat, OECD and the European Labour Force Survey (e.g. Kelo et al. 2006; de Wit et al. 2008; Souto-Otero et al. 2013).

Leaving aside the work of independent scholars, and the significant number of postgraduate theses conducted on themes relating to student mobility, dedicated studies at European level include the Erasmus Impact Study (Brandenburg et al. 2014), employing a cross-national web-survey approach combined with focus group evidence in selected countries. Significantly, the study also acknowledges the significance of exchanges for tertiary education level institutions in contributing towards internationalization as well as the role played by mobility in supporting employability among individual movers (see Chap. 2). Looking at other research, perhaps the most influential text remains Murphy-Lejeune's *Student Mobility and Narrative* (2002). This work differs from many subsequent studies in including exploration of the meaning of mobility for participants and societies, viewing the student traveller as a new form of European 'stranger.' This visitor occupies a liminal space between the sending and the host societies, representing a break with the idea of intra-European mobility as oriented around settlement.

In evaluating this work in terms of its theoretical value, we can deduce that with the main focus in research being on issues relating to outcomes from the student mobility experience, including the Erasmus Impact Study, there is less recognition of what shapes participation, especially in regard to vital issues such as gender, social class and personal/familial migration history. While we are made aware of gender imbalances in mobility take-up in some studies (e.g. Böttcher et al. 2016), such themes are not generally followed-up by researchers due to an emphasis on the personal growth dimension of exchange visits. In other words, an individualized rather than a socially-connected view of mobility predominates. For this reason, the fact that Erasmus visits typically take place as part of a group of international peers, and involve informal and non-formal forms of learning within such groups, is neglected as is recognition of internal learning processes that are, in sociological terms, inherently reflexive. This explains why in prior work on student mobility, we have emphasised the developmental qualities of student and graduate circulation using terms such as 'spatial reflexivity' as opposed to locating Erasmus within a more traditional individualization-inspired youth transitions framework (Cairns et al. 2012, 2017; Cairns 2014).

That academics have struggled to understand Erasmus is therefore partly due to the limited focus of student mobility research and a relatively weak evidence base, with quantitative data analysis lacking sufficient socio-demographic depth. These failings are particularly obvious when looking at Erasmus data published by the EC which does little more than provide basic indicators of recent trends in participation over time and between countries. That such statistics in their publically published form are denuded of socio-demographic variables is therefore frustrating, and perhaps a bit suspicious, leaving us to speculate about factors such as the impact of social class on Erasmus participation and the gender dimension of educational exchanges (see also Finn 2015).

Erasmus and Free Movement?

Returning briefly to the issue of 'free movement', identifying the contribution to Erasmus to the intrinsically European form of this practice is also difficult. We cannot, for instance, codify Erasmus mobility in itself

as free movement for some quite obvious reasons. As we shall learn in later chapters of this book, undergraduate exchanges are not 'free' in the sense of being organised on a laissez faire basis by individual movers. Rather they are regulated by the existence of learning agreements between host and sending institutions (see Chap. 4). They also come at a substantial financial cost to the mover and their family. The low level of Erasmus scholarships means that there is a de facto contribution required from the participant, partially privatising the cost of this form of circulation (Cairns 2017a, b). Crucial tasks such as managing how the transition between countries takes place are also delegated to institutions; for example, as we shall discover in Chap. 5, the Erasmus Student Network greatly assist in the process of finding accommodation and integrating movers into local communities and peer networks. Erasmus exchanges are therefore to be codified as institutional mobility, not free movement.

There is however still a relationship between Erasmus and free movement, albeit a somewhat tenuous one. The programme effectively promotes the idea of visiting other EU and neighbouring countries for work, study and even leisure purposes, but without providing ideas as to how to settle there. Emphasis is rather on the idea that circulation is possible, with a suggestion that it may even be profitable in the long term should paths to new opportunities be established. In this sense, a significant contribution to a culture of free movement can be made, but indirectly and deferred into an indistinct future. For this reason, Erasmus in its many forms can be regarded as constituting a preliminary stage in a globalized, or at least Europeanized, career, but that is all.

As a final word in this introductory chapter, and to finish on a more positive note, we do want to stress the importance of Erasmus in stimulating the imaginations of young Europeans to become free movers, and living exemplars of one of the defining aspects of being an EU citizen. While the idea that everyone should freely move is a somewhat idealized not to say unrealistic proposition due to the high cost of circulation and its uncertain outcomes, people are at least being given the freedom to dream about what is possible. This in itself should be regarded as a significant development, and the imaginative power of Erasmus should not be under-estimated.

Notes

1. Feyen (2013, p. 21) provides an alternate explanation of the programme's title, explaining that the term was coined by the coordinator of the Joint Study Programmes, Adam Smith, from the phrase 'European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students'.
2. Other notable early achievements include the establishment of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Bologna process, which have helped ensure a degree of harmonization between tertiary educational level institutions in different countries, and accounts for the codification of Erasmus mobility by the EC as 'credit mobility' (European Commission 2015).
3. All EU member states fully participate in all the actions of the Erasmus+ programme, along with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey. Other partner countries can participate in specific actions such as the Erasmus Mundus postgraduate degree programme, subject to specific criteria or conditions, including nations in the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, South-Mediterranean and the Russian Federation.
4. Another area of interest for Erasmus+ is sport (see, e.g. European Commission 2017, p. 12), however discussion of this issue did not feature in any of our research projects on various aspects of the programme.

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