5

Erasmus Learning

This chapter, along with Chap. 6 which follows, looks at the lived experience of being an Erasmus student, with emphasis on undergraduates participating in exchanges between universities in different European countries. In engaging with this theme, we are acknowledging the importance of what has been the most prominent aspect of Erasmus in all its various iterations since the first programme in 1987. This explains why we refer to the undergraduate exchange programme as 'traditional Erasmus', as indeed did several of the interviewees encountered in the previous chapter. And while the Erasmus+ framework now engages with young people from non-academic backgrounds to a much greater extent than previously, the popular perception of Erasmus is still very much linked to the image of the undergraduate exchange student, with no sign of this changing.

The longevity of the undergraduate exchange programme may help account for the relatively high public profile of this form of movement, with sustained success also meeting with the approval of policymakers. In explaining why this is the case, we can point out that Erasmus is a major success in quantitative terms (as demonstrated in Chap. 1), making it a much needed good news story for the European Commission.

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This explains why Erasmus is symbolically significant, in providing a working example of intra-European cooperation. Another important aspect of this success is the positive impression of the programme held by many of those who have participated in it, something we shall bring to light in this and the following chapter, with the image of extremely friendly, upbeat and optimistic undergraduates also emphasised in official policy discourse and in research supported the EU.

While policymakers may be enjoying the reflected glow of success from Erasmus students, researchers tend to more cynical about the achievements of the programme, or at least more likely to highlight 'negative' issues such as the alleged over-representation of young people from privileged backgrounds and the high financial cost of participating in exchanges (e.g. Kuhn 2012; Souto-Otero et al. 2013). However, other researchers have consistently noted the satisfaction that participating students seem to experience, coupled with a curious ability to withstand the 'culture shock' normally associated with moving to another country (Krzaklewska and Skórska 2013). Self-evaluations of stays abroad thus tend to involve descriptions of a rather euphoric experience—'It was the best time of my life!' or 'It is a must for every university student'—albeit counter-balanced by some reported difficulties in making the shift from the host institution and then back to place of origin. This tendency was in fact reported in the first major survey conducted on Erasmus mobility by the Erasmus Student Network (Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005), and seems to have persisted.

In the most recently published ESN evaluation study, the rating of Erasmus remains very positive (Muñoz 2014), although we can also observe a more critical attitude towards studying abroad among those contemplating this possibility. This may be related to the fact that there now multiple opportunities for spending some time in another country or that students can participate in Erasmus more than once, modifying the expectations students have of their stays as well as their evaluations of the value of the experience. The 'wow' effect seems to somewhat dissipate for those who study abroad multiple times, with students also becoming more strategic in thinking about the experience, already having the background knowledge that enables them to plan their stays effectively. In

other words, they become instrumental and reflexive about mobility decision-making when stays abroad are imagined as part of a wider continuum that traverses education and training trajectories rather than being perceived as a one-off novelty event (see also Cairns 2014).

The Learning Dimension of Mobility

These opening remarks lead us to the main theme of this chapter: learning within Erasmus and what it is that happens, developmentally, to students during a stay abroad. In order to make this process clearer, we can isolate two critical dimensions to help us understand what it means to be an Erasmus student: the experience of *learning* and lived *relationships*. This deduction is based on the findings of our prior research on this topic and insights from related studies that have identified motivations for participating in Erasmus and areas in which the mobility experience provides students with most satisfaction (e.g. Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005; Alfranseder et al. 2012).

While we will explore Erasmus students' conviviality and group socialization in the next chapter of this book, in this part of our discussion we examine the lived experience of international learning. This is an aspect of the programme absolutely fundamental to the success of exchange visits, with 'I have learnt so much' becoming a motto of alumni from across Europe (Krzaklewska 2010). This feeling from Erasmus alumni also matches a relatively new concept within the study of youth geographical circulation, 'learning mobility', which stresses the educational and training dimension of international activities. We will therefore look at Erasmus students learning processes during their stays abroad, discuss certain learning outcomes and their contexts, and reflect on the potential for strengthening learning during exchanges.[1]

Life Is Learning—A Multi-Space Exploration

'Study-party-travel' is a slogan used by ESN volunteers to describe what Erasmus students actually do during an exchange, with all three of

these attributes tightly linked to the concept of learning.[2] While still in the sending country, students generally associate learning with the university campus and activities linked to it: courses, internships, training, etc. However, students who have participated in Erasmus broaden substantially their concept of where learning takes place during the exchange: it becomes associated not only with the foreign university but also dimensions of life adjacent to studying at an institution. What now counts as learning is not only, or even principally, the experience of studying in the classroom or laboratory but rather living in a new place, encountering the host country and its culture, having encounters with other students and local inhabitants, travelling and enjoying intercultural events, as well as the experience of everyday life (Krzaklewska 2010). Using European education jargon, we could say that Erasmus connects formal, non-formal and informal learning, and it is the fact that students *recognise* learning in all these different dimensions that is critical to their evaluation of value in their stays abroad that is important. Even negative emotions, including hardship and troubles undergone during the stay, are interpreted as valuable if, on reflection, these experiences lead to important lessons being learnt.

The learning dimension is very much linked to the adventure of moving abroad: gathering *new* experiences, living in a *foreign* country, seeing *another* university, entering *different* education systems, trying things you has *never* done, being in *new* places and meeting *new* people. Opportunities open up for students, who dedicate their stays abroad to following what Wiers-Jenssen (2003) describes as 'new impulses'. This is a theme that emerges in narratives gathered from former Erasmus students, and confirmed by those who participated in our focus groups. Richness, multi-dimensionality, playfulness, spontaneity, pleasure and novelty are just some of the different adjectives used by Erasmus alumni to illustrate the uniqueness of their learning experience, and this exceptionality 'hits' strongest those who participate in Erasmus for the first time. If youth learning can be stereotypically linked to 'hardship' connected to the demands of homework and exams or the boredom resulting from sitting at a school desk for long hours every day, the accounts of Erasmus students are filled with positive emotions and connotations, for example:

> Exchange is a real school of life. One learns everything with pleasure. I did not even notice when my English improved substantially. (Tomasz, Polish Erasmus student in Austria)

The geographical dimension of exchange is very important. The towns and cities which Erasmus students inhabit and the countries to which they move for several months at a time become important points on the map of Europe. Atmosphere of city and country where students had their exchange was one of the most important factors impacting on their evaluations of the stay (Alfranseder et al. 2012). Often these places become linked with future plans for further mobility, usually in the short-term but occasionally long-term, and some sentiment regarding the host location remains with Erasmus students after their visit.

In their narratives, Erasmus alumni pay a great deal of attention to describing their 'home' university location and travel destination. On analysing these descriptions, we were struck by the fact that most of these students spend a lot of time travelling, and the list of visited cities and countries is very long. Tourism in the eyes of Erasmus students appears not as an ephemeral activity but rather is an additional space of learning. This plays into the European discovery tale and getting to know not just the country but the continent. The truth is that travelling is part of the Erasmus narrative, embracing novelty, discovery, fun and play, as well as an internationalization of education and career paths.

All these aspects are embedded into the story of an Erasmus traveller. What is striking is the importance of *being on the move*: it seems that sometimes it is not important where you go, but the fact you are physically changing location that has significance. This plays into the specific identity shaped by the Erasmus experience, linked to a habitus of being mobile, indenting physical mobility into life. This may lead to consecutive exchanges or internships abroad taking place, participating in international projects and Erasmus alumni reunions, paired with an international mind-set and a network of friends from different cultures. A Polish female student has called this being 'addicted to travelling':

> When asked what my memories from Erasmus are, I replied, 'From which one?' My exchange in France was not the first or even the second Erasmus

> stay, and then counting a volunteer stay abroad, it was in fact the fourth long stay abroad. Anyone who had the experience of an exchange visit abroad as a student perfectly understands me. And a person who is deciding now to go on exchange will assure themselves after reading my post that it was a good decision. And soon, they will be joining the group of people who are addicted to travelling. (Anna, Polish Erasmus student in France)

What we have in these preceding paragraphs is a concise summation of everything that is potentially valuable and good about Erasmus exchanges, or even student mobility within Europe in general, emphasising the positive personal developmental impacts. We can also deduce that there is a strong endorsement of travelling, with physical movement between countries seen as inherently valuable in regard to making (positive) shifts in one's attitudes, something that might be extended to a closer identification with Europe itself. In this sense, we have an outline of the basic rationale behind undergraduate exchanges, albeit without considering the challenges of entering and sustaining a mobile learning habitus.

The Academic Dimension of Learning—Education with (a) Difference

While Erasmus is perceived as possessing a strong informal learning dimension, we should not forget that formal education, and the university, is still a core element of Erasmus life. In the previous chapter, we looked at how these exchanges are managed from the point of view of university staff. We should never forget that despite all the talk of fun and parties, Erasmus visitors have study obligations to fulfil. For these students, the university is the place where they take part in the obligatory courses needed to accumulate ECTS points. But at the same time, this is a place where they meet and mingle with other foreign and local students. Needless to say, studying is not an incidental part of the experience. It is in fact fundamental, embedded into the 'positive' narrative of learning during a mobility exercise and connected to the social dimension of Erasmus that will be explored in the next chapter.

We should always remember that the formal and non-formal learning dimensions of student mobility are strongly interconnected. In fact, according to Murphy-Lejeune (2002, p. 89), 'The verbs to live and to study are nearly interchangeable', and that students are learning in a new country gives the formal education dimension fresh value. Erasmus alumni stress the importance of exploring new curricula; the possibility of participating in courses that are different both thematically and also conducted in a different way, using a diverse range of pedagogical tools. This may explain why accounts of the Erasmus learning experience often compare education in the home country with the host university. For example, in many cases students needed to dedicate more time at the host university to preparing for classes, something that often resulted from the fact that courses are taught in a foreign language. Many also stressed that their experience was not a 'holiday' from studying since they needed to study harder than at home, and they underlined the value of this challenge in terms of the pleasure and the possibility of balancing their social life with studying. This process is explained by one Polish Erasmus student who visited France as follows:

> I evaluate the institution as very good, and I will definitely remember it positively. The level of teaching was definitely meeting our expectations and I need to dismantle the myth that students from the exchange are treated differently from local students, which of course benefitted us. Even if we needed to face different projects, tests and presentations during the semester, we did not miss out on time for entertainment, so that meant visiting, partying and exploring Lyon, and also other more distant towns. (Maria, Polish Erasmus student in France)

Here we have a very good illustration of the 'study-party-travel' nexus, linked to geographical exploration of the host city, Lyon, and neighbouring towns. It is important to note that these excursions do not detract from studying. Rather, they are complementary and may make a contribution to other aspects of the learning experience such as strengthening foreign language fluency through being able to meet with a broader range of people when moving outside the host university.

Personal and Professional Development

Throughout this book, and in line with a core tenet of the philosophy of the Erasmus programme, we have stressed the important of personal *and* professional development. The former is certainly highly visible within the accounts of Erasmus alumni we have examined—moving abroad, getting to know new people, having fun, enjoying life in a different country, seeing the countryside and visiting towns and city *and* spending time in the classroom—supporting the idea that Erasmus is a convivial learning experience. Furthermore, if there are some people who don't state that they are going abroad because of the quality of a particular university or eminence of a specific professor this does not mean that professional concerns are absent, only that they are somewhat taken for granted. As one former Erasmus student remarked:

> To me, I have to say it was a mixture [of personal and professional concerns], as I already said, those different aspects from my motivation, and I had really good seminars at the university, where I learnt new things and also can just review some aspects from my Masters and Bachelor programmes which obviously are important, for a researcher, so this is something I want to underline or point out, that I learnt something for my professional development and it was not only the personal one. I think that's important to say because I think the Erasmus programme is also interested in having professional development of the students. (Hans, German Erasmus student in Hungary)

We can thus confirm that there *is* a link between the personal and the professional, at least in the case of Hans cited above, and that Erasmus learning does not neglect the latter. It may however be the case that the educational dimension of exchanges is less prominent in Erasmus discourse, which tends to place emphasis on the 'fun' aspects of the experience to a disproportionate extent, creating a slightly misleading impression in regard to what to expect from an exchange visit (see also Cairns 2014, pp. 117–118).

Looking closely at the accounts of former Erasmus students, we can see that professional development is quite prominent. In particular, stu-

dents stress the importance of choosing a university that fits in well with their existing curricula and academic interests. Another important aspect is the ability to accumulate professional development through successive Erasmus exchanges. We have discovered that some students undertake as many as five Erasmus visits. One Polish student stated that his motivation for doing so was due to the ability to take advantage of the different possibilities offered by different foreign universities. His decision-making processes involved taking detailed note of what was available in each institution and how this related to his on-going educational development, taking into account consistency in curricula between the host and the sending institutions. Moreover, he also stressed that he had been searching for alternative modes of spending time outside his studies via engaging with a regular association for foreign students. This one account shows that there is the possibility to explore the potential of an Erasmus exchange through modifying the scheme of motivations and expectations towards it, and that it is possible to have very specific aims and 'serious' expectations.

Another example is a Polish student, Ewa, who has been engaged for several years in ESN activities for incoming students. She describes her strategic planning towards Erasmus not in term of 'the entertainment side' but rather in relation to the quality of education on offer and possibilities for travelling.

> After four years of activities in ESN and constant contact with Erasmus students, I had an impression that I had already lived through my Erasmus exchange, at least when talking about its entertainment part. So I came to the conclusion, that if I go, I need to spend this time productively and actively. So I searched first for a good university, and second, a good location for travelling as much as possible. (Ewa, Polish Erasmus student in Belgium)

Having established the importance of educational value in Erasmus for dedicated students, what then of the more personal aspects of the mobility experience? This is an area where students' expectations appear to be generally fulfilled. They are, for example, able to confirm that skills, such as intercultural awareness, adaptability, flexibility, tolerance and problem-solving

develop substantially during exchanges (Alfranseder et al. 2012; see also Brandenburg et al. 2014). Looking back at earlier evidence, research supported by ESN in 2005 collated more than 5000 narratives, summarizing five areas of importance in learning: (1) acquiring cultural skills and knowledge, (2) maturity and self-development, (3) social networks, (4) academic enrichment and (5) value of discovery and exploring new possibilities (Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005). These ideas are illustrated in Table 5.1.

Significantly, these are attributes in which the personal cannot necessarily be disentangled from the professional in regard to the development process taking place. Especially prominent is recognition of acquired skills linked to the intercultural elements of the stay, for example, foreign language fluency, international networking and learning how to live in other societies. On the one hand, this is linked to the fact that one is living in a foreign country and in theory gaining the knowledge and competences required to live in this other society, but on the other, we have the process of enhancing skills linked to being embedded

Table 5.1 Five areas of importance in learning through Erasmus

Acquiring cultural skills and knowledge	Maturity and self-development	Social networks	Academic enrichment	Value of discovery and exploring new possibilities
Communication and work in international groups	Becoming independent	Establishment of international friendships	Adaptation to different academic system	Openness to what is new
Knowledge about the host country	Determination in solving problems	Integration	Reflection on career paths	Taking advantage of opportunities
How to survive in the foreign country	Self confidence	Knowing how to live together		
Open-mindedness	Flexibility	Communication skills		
Tolerance	Personal growth	Outgoingness		
Foreign language fluency				

Source: Krzaklewska and Krupnik (2005)

within a circle of international students. This internal universe, in which students work and socialize together, allows them to gain confidence about their ability to communicate and become more outgoing with people from a diverse range of national and cultural backgrounds, enabling the emergence of enhanced personal and professional capacities. Students are aware that personal development is also critical for professional careers, and that so-called 'soft skills' may be appreciated by their future employers as much as educational credentials, even if this was not an immediate motivation in their plan for going abroad:

> *Do you think this is going to be helpful in terms of job opportunities?*
> I hope so but I don't know.
> *You have the hope but it's not the reason why you went there?*
> It was not the reason at all, but I could imagine that people looked at my CV and thought like, oh, ok, she is ready to discover something new and to learn new languages, make new experiences. I could imagine that it helps, but it was not the reason why I went there. (Marine, Luxemburg Erasmus student in Poland)

Research showing that Erasmus students can gain multiple competences during a stay abroad is sometimes counter-acted, or even undermined, by the argument that they fail to learn anything new while abroad due to the fact that they are already 'superior' to those not choosing Erasmus as an option. For instance, the Erasmus Impact study (Brandenburg et al. 2014, p. 79) argues that Erasmus students score higher that non-mobile students when it comes to personal traits associated with employability measured *before* the exchange has actually taken place, with qualitative data indicating that they are more open towards change and the idea of immersing themselves in a new environment (see also Chap. 2). This position suggests that there is a re-enforcement rather than a replacement of values taking place among those who are already in possession of traits associated with employability. Nevertheless, the Erasmus Impact Study did still confirm that exchange students substantially improved their personal competences after their stays.

It should also be noted that our own investigations show that former Erasmus students tend to express a high degree of optimism about their

future prospects, something that might be regarded as an overestimation of their learning outcomes.

> After my Erasmus in Lille, I want to do an Erasmus internship in the Côte d'Azur, and later I will settle in France. Maybe I will stay here forever, or maybe move to a totally new place. I am open to new challenges. I think after this exchange, I am not afraid to go forwards. If you want to be a master of your destiny, and not just passively look around, choose Erasmus. (Magda, Polish student in France)

In this particular case, Magda demonstrates both a positive, extremely positive in fact, outlook on the future, and the possible limitations of being fuelled by passion. While her plans may come to pass, it might also be that a degree of over-confidence is on display. We therefore need to temper the enthusiasm of former Erasmus students with a degree of realism. For example, does this person know how difficult, and expensive, undertaking an internship can be or that opportunities in the Côte d'Azur may be highly prized and therefore fought over?

From a more constructive point of view, Erasmus presents many students, especially those who still live in the parental home, the opportunity to gain independence skills while living abroad (Krzaklewska 2013). Discussing this subject, ESN volunteers describe such Erasmus students as courageous in taking such a step but also acknowledged that a lack of confidence, and perhaps a lack of personal capabilities, can be a problem. It is easy to start feeling lost, particularly with insufficient preparation or an inability to deal with fairly routine matters in independent living, such as cooking, doing laundry and managing a household budget. Having to accompany visiting students to medical institutions was also mentioned as a very frequent task of ESN volunteers. It is therefore possible to see the additional challenge in managing the mobility of young people with limited independent living skills prior to Erasmus. Nevertheless, the stay abroad can be a huge life lesson, especially if this takes place before having the experience of living outside the family home. Some of these aspects are described by two ESN volunteers as follows:

> They learn life skills, self-reliance, autonomy, organisation, how to do laundry—these small things, that normally you have no problem doing in your home country. At first they are a bit lost, but they get it all sorted.
>
> They escape from the protection of their parents. They leave their city, family home, and for the first time they live on their own. They need to cook, learn to do basic shopping. So beyond culture and language, they learn autonomy, or even about life, and they come back as new people. (Focus group with Polish ESN volunteers)

Returning to the 'reflexivity' theme introduced in Chap. 2 (see also Cairns 2014), the Erasmus learning environment is a site within which a reflexive process can be triggered, leading to enhanced capabilities. While this can be related to professional competencies, and employability, there is also the opportunity to upgrade other skills either in the form of better communication and intercultural competency or opening up a previously undiscovered future direction in life. However, that there are strengths *and* weaknesses, and that not everyone will develop the same capabilities needs to be acknowledged, with prior experience of mobility and independent living two factors that might determine success. What we can argue more definitively is that Erasmus is a space in which to reflect: about the host society, other societies and even oneself. It can be a kind of moratorium period within an existing educational trajectory; a much needed breathing space particularly when people are unsure about their future direction. This is explained by one former Erasmus student as being caught somewhere in between two different cultures or realities:

> Going on Erasmus is like throwing someone from one reality to another. In the first one, there are habits and everything has its own rhythm, in the other one, you need to create everything from the beginning and you need to find your way in a different world. (Aleksandra, Polish Erasmus student in France)

Such a situation allows a confrontation with 'otherness' to take place, which can trigger a process of self-reflection. This particular feeling is elaborated upon by another former Erasmus student:

> If you just confront other cultures, with other people or people from other cultures, and how they study, how they live next to the university, this is something which brings you to the point that you totally ask yourself if you're doing [the] right [thing]. Many students of my Erasmus group were just hanging out in Budapest, enjoying the flavour of the city and the possibilities, and this was maybe the confrontation that led me to reflect on my own way of living, and this is to me the most important experience from my stay abroad, that you have to reflect on your way of living, because you're just confronted with another concept which is really different. (Hans, German student in Hungary)

The process referred to here seems to involve a mental journey, as well as a spatial one, undertaken during Erasmus. And it is engaging in this reflexive process that distinguishes an individual who is successful, in learning from others who are more interested in travel as a means of 'just hanging out', although ironically, it is the juxtaposition with the less learning orientated students that produces the epiphany. Being in another place, surrounded by people behaving in a manner obviously not conducive to learning hence has a value as something that can help move an Erasmus experience beyond purely touristic involvement in the host society.

Supporting New Spaces of Learning

In the previous chapter, we looked at the work of university staff members in managing incoming and outgoing mobility at their institutions. This provided an impression of the range of tasks undertaken and some of the challenges that arise in maintaining mobility platforms. The work of these individuals, while multi-faceted, does not generally extend into helping incoming students settle within the host society. Rather, their concern is with the academic dimension of exchanges, especially placing students in appropriate courses, rather than finding suitable accommodation and organizing social events.

The task of providing support to new spaces of learning tends to lie with other organisations, most notably the Erasmus Student Network

(ESN), making this agency a significant voice in the management of exchanges. It is also an institution that has increased in prominence in recent years, with the growth of ESN and other organisations that support incoming students mirroring the expansion of the Erasmus programme: in 2006, the ESN network consisted of 207 sections in 28 countries, while in 2017, ESN had expanded into 40 countries with 532 local sections. These figures demonstrate that ESN is now an integral element of the Erasmus experience for incoming students and a partner valued by universities. During the course of our research, we were frequently informed about the useful work undertaken by ESN volunteers. This can start during the first days of a student's visit when he or she is accompanied by a mentor or buddy, usually be a local student, who can guide a new arrival through the settlement process: picking them up from the airport, showing them the city, getting a mobile phone and a bank account, taking care of administrative matters, helping in arranging accommodation or just keeping them company so they do not feel alone.

> […] there are always people to help you out, because they know that you will come there and know nothing, […] every one of the Erasmus students had one Polish student to guide them, to help them, to get used to the system. (Herwig, German Erasmus student in Poland)

ESN is seen most of all as an organiser of social events; activities that can make a major contribution to fostering integration among a group of international students. The organisation provides multiple opportunities for international students and ESN volunteers to hang out together, and also introduces Erasmus students to the culture of the host country though organising cultural events. For example, during a visit to the local ESN office in Lisbon during the course of the research discussed in the previous chapter, volunteers were busy organising a beach party for the latest batch of incoming students.

The fact that ESN has gained so much visibility in the student mobility world can be measured from the fact that Erasmus students who have gone to a university without ESN feel its absence, knowing about its activities from fellow students who have gone elsewhere. When this important space of learning is missing, as explained by one student, there

are no equivalent events that support integration. The alternative is basically to manage by yourself. Another student stressed the importance of the activities that support integration between students:

> A huge disappointment was for me the lack of Erasmus Student Network—the organisation that is occupied with scheduling the Erasmus students' days. We did not have mentors, there was no orientation week or an integration camp. (Inga, Polish Erasmus student in Scotland)

Such a position illustrates the fact that ESN has established a standard model of practicing an Erasmus exchange for undergraduates. This extends beyond social activities into working in volunteer groups in local communities, an activity that while still exceptional, has been growing in popularity.[3]

Looking at recent developments it is worth noting the engagement of ESN with the civic dimension of stays, encouraging Erasmus students to contribute more actively to their new local community. Exemplifying this trend is *SocialErasmus*, an ESN project which aims to involve Erasmus students in volunteering during their mobility experiences. Through this project ESN hope that the international experience of young people abroad will be enriched with a better appreciation of other societies' problems, through being given an opportunity to work on the solutions.[4] Organized activities include picking up garbage, planting trees, walking dogs from a local shelter, visiting schools and kindergartens to give talks about their country, meeting with senior citizens, blood donations and participating in a diverse range of charity events. Preliminary analysis of outcomes from this project shows that certain students really value this new experience as it allows them to enter new zones in the local culture and do things they would never have been able to organize themselves:

> The local ESN organised a meeting with the elderly in the elderly home—this I would normally not do […]. I would not go to such institution and say 'Hello, I came to talk with you'. Different activities—walking dogs in the shelter, some charity collections. (Ewelina, Polish Erasmus student in Spain)

Focus groups conducted as part of the research for this book suggest that integrating volunteer work and civic initiative participation into

an Erasmus fellowship is not easy and turnout is often rather low. The ESN volunteers are clear that these events need to be 'promoted' among Erasmus students and advertised almost as a form of entertainment. This can be a difficult thing to do given the less than attractive nature of tasks such as collecting garbage, leading some ESN members to question the suitability of this new form of participation for Erasmus students. Some other events though, directed more towards promoting home cultures have a much stronger adherence: one volunteer described how Greek students spent an entire day cooking their country's specialities in order to share them during an event. Nevertheless, while it may appear challenging to engage Erasmus students as volunteers, the motivation of ESN volunteers at the host university does not pass unnoticed, and this acts as a source of encouragement to participate. In fact, one study has shown that 11 per cent of past Erasmus students became involved in ESN activities on return to their home university, and seven per cent volunteered in different organisations (Alfranseder et al. 2012), activities that also provided a means of dealing with return-culture shock, or 'after-Erasmus depression', after the end of a mobility episode.

Learning to Be Young in Europe

One self-evident aspect of Erasmus we have not mentioned so far in the course of this book is the fact that it is a programme designed for European young people. With a few exceptions, such as academic staff exchanges, the various elements of Erasmus+ are all youth oriented. In addition to developing employability and intercultural skills, exchanges are about learning about how to be a young person with particular emphasis, as we have seen above, on deeper involvement in the civic sphere of society of European societies.

The Erasmus undergraduate exchange programme is in many ways designed to be consistent with the needs of young people (Krzaklewska 2013). In practice, this involves recognition of the fact that at this stage in the life course, much energy is expected to be invested in the domain of free time and leisure. At the same time, there is concern at policy level that time spent during an Erasmus visit is constructive in terms of gathering competences and experiences that will help people

enter and progress within the labour market (see Chap. 2). The aim thus becomes one of seeking to integrate these two not always complementary dimensions, encouraging students to become autonomous and expressive yet strategic in their future life planning, loosely corresponding to the reflexive ideal outlined in our discussion of 'employability'. An Erasmus visit there by becomes a site for life construction and career orientation, with the additional demand of engaging with civil society.

In outlining this process, we may be inadvertently defining the present state of the youth condition in Europe, at least for those young people who wish to pursue tertiary education trajectories, with entry into a professional career the envisaged exit point from the youth phase. Erasmus explicates and underlines the qualities that must be refined during the youth phase, and anticipates certain aspects of adulthood. We therefore have an endorsement of qualities that exemplify being young but also acknowledge protean demands from the labour market directed towards young people. Young people are therefore put in a position where they can see what is expected of them, and what kind of transformations they need to undergo in their lives in order to be able to reach their personal and professional goals.

Given this status, we can anticipate the lifestyles of young people during exchanges conforming to the social expectations that characterize the threshold to adulthood; making an investment in free-time activities that are not only entertaining but also have an element of exploration so that they can try new things. This can be a source of aggravation to those outside the Erasmus universe, particularly where a feeling of 'not-being-invited-to-the-party' is generated, but the emphasis on leisure has a practical purpose, acting as a means of engendering optimism and a lack of worry about the future. This idea of youth helps explains why ESN volunteers use terms such as 'energetic', 'motivated', 'fascinated' and 'active' to describe the attributes Erasmus students should embody. Interestingly, these are also values that employers seeking enthusiastic new recruits are thought to value, closely corresponding to some of the ideas on 'employability' embedded in the Erasmus Impact Study we discussed in Chap. 2. These students therefore come to embody a kind of

idealized youth, centred on totemic attitudes and activities relating to employability and interculturality.

The liminal nature of this life stage can sometimes be described in terms of its non-reality, and looked at retrospectively it can be difficult to reconcile with subsequent life phases, which start to feel mundane in comparison. Such a position is illustrated by the following account of someone who participated in an Erasmus exchange ten years previously:

> Defending your Master thesis is a moment that you feel you finish your youth. […] the environment at work does not motivate you in any way as it did between young people—during your studies, during Erasmus or in student associations. There, there was more passion and support, or maybe […] how to say that […] love? […] At your work, you do not feel this energy, exuberant, young, youthful. (Agnieszka, Polish alumni of Erasmus programme from 2005, interviewed in 2011)

While completing tertiary education can be regarded as denoting the end of the youth phase, before this happens, an Erasmus exchange seems to be perceived as one means of having a last hurrah. It can be utilized strategically as a means to 'live your youth' for an interregnum period prior to entering the professional labour market, although this may not apply to the many undergraduate students who have already worked in jobs during their degree programmes, albeit not generally full-time or permanent. Erasmus can hence be used to provide a moratorium period to escape the imminent demands of the workplace. While for younger students it may be a break from an existing work-study routine, for those who participate in Erasmus during the final year of their university course, it can be more of a last chance to have some fun. As one Polish student describes it:

> Year 2016. Last, fourth term of MA course. Instead of writing my Master thesis, I decided to leave. I am departing to feel the student climate for the 'last' time. (Ola, Polish student in Italy)

We can see in this account that Erasmus may also mark a point of departure and a goodbye to youthfulness rather than its continuance,

providing one explanation as to why stays can be looked back upon with fondness and nostalgia. It may therefore be that the end of the exchange visit marks the closure of the youth phase and the arrival at the next point in the life course.

A Comfortable Place of Learning

Prior research on the adaptation of Erasmus students to their new environment has suggested that a comfortable situation for learning incorporates a degree of challenge, but remaining a space that is perceived as safe and free from high levels of stress (Krzaklewska and Skórska 2013). Erasmus is in fact designed to be such an environment for the young traveller, tailored to meet the needs of this age group and allowing them to experiment as youth while exploring learning possibilities and considering professional pathways. In regard to the element of challenge, the act of leaving the sending country in itself is viewed as an act of bravery, with such students viewed as courageous by ESN due to taking the chance to move abroad. Such bravery can however be questioned by students themselves. This may be due to the European educational system having become somewhat homogenized, with travel between different institutions now routine. For this reason, while students stress there are different habits and ways of doing things in each institution, an exchange visit does not necessarily bring about a dramatic shift in academic culture.

Another reason for a lack of dislocation relates to prior experience of mobility. While it may be that an Erasmus exchange is the first time a student has spent an extended period in another country or travelled abroad for reasons other than holidays or meeting with relatives, it may also be the case that a significant amount of mobility capital is possessed prior to departure. This may be inherited from family members with prior experience of living in other countries, something gained from insights offered by friends who have travelled abroad or personal experience. International travel for many starts at a young age, even prior to

going to university, and has become a regular feature of life by the time a first Erasmus exchange comes along. The magnitude of the dislocation may also be relatively small in terms of distance. Many Erasmus visits are made to relatively close at hand destinations; for example, movement between Spain and Portugal (Cairns 2017). That most Erasmus movement among undergraduates takes place within Europe provides an additional layer of comfort. Life may be different abroad, but it is not necessarily unfamiliar.

Another important source of familiarity made reference to in the previous chapter, and a theme that will be expanded in the next chapter, is the ability to move abroad with friends or other students from similar backgrounds. While exchanges are generally thought of as being individual experiences, this is not always the case. Moving abroad with existing friends can help lower the cost of stay abroad through having shared accommodation and provide more practical reassurance.

> *Do you think it was brave, if you think about it now?*
>
> I think it would have been braver if we didn't do it like the two of us together. […] It was not brave […]. I mean, it's still Europe, but at any moment we could back home. If it was a complete disaster, we could back home. Of course, we would have to give the money back, but, so what? […] I think I never felt terrified because at any moment I could have gone home, it's ok. (Hannah, German student in Poland)

This position of seeking a challenge does not mean that students do not want to be supported by their host institutions or an organisation such as ESN. On the contrary, when hardship and difficulties are encountered, they wish to have these matters resolved, particularly when they get sick and are in need of medical assistance. What this implies is that the host institution provides a basic safety net function but with a considerable degree of leeway in regard to letting people solve their own problems, in some way taking the place of parents who may fulfil such a role in the home country.

Conclusion

Learning for Erasmus students is a multi-spatial experience that incorporates formal education at the host university and, ideally, informal intercultural encounters within the host country, predominantly with other foreign exchange students, and a supportive role played by academic staff and agencies such as ESN. The learning process is also linked to wider developments taking place during the youth phase of the life course, stressing not only interculturality but also preparation for the graduate labour market. The learning that takes place during Erasmus is also appreciated by students as a break from their normal routines within tertiary education, offering a brief moratorium period prior to the onset of full adulthood as well as opportunities to make a positive contribution to society via civic engagement. That this experience is voluntary also means that we can expect Erasmus exchange students to be open to new experiences and highly motivated to make their stays abroad a success. The non-mandatory nature of Erasmus participation is therefore one of its hidden strengths and this status needs to be maintained (see Alfranseder et al. 2012).

We might still want to ask how the learning experience of students might be improved. Some students have suggested to us that they should have made more preparation before actually leaving. It is therefore important that prospective exchangees learn from the experience of former Erasmus students, both in regard to the educational aspect of the exchange and extracurricular activities.

> It's a good thing to think about Erasmus, the adventure and to be able to relax, but before going, make some plans. Try to make use of that time the best you can. Because for me I cannot go to any other Erasmus, I mean, I finished my Masters, I don't think I will go to PhD, at least not yet, so try to make a plan that will help you make the best out of your experience. (Mira, Serbian Erasmus student in Germany)

While this is one way to utilize the exchange in order to achieve diverse aims, this philosophy is not one most students necessarily agree with. There is in fact a strong emphasis on spontaneity in a stay abroad: being

open towards new opportunities, exploring, catching up with new people and realising emerging ideas. While the first perspective plays strongly into the agenda of seeing youth as a time for preparation for adulthood, with emphasis on professional life, the second is more attuned with the 'youthfulness' agenda of Erasmus. As we have shown in this chapter, both these dimensions co-exist in the Erasmus programme and it seems that balancing these twin aims is the critical task facing exchange students today.

Notes

1. The term 'learning mobility' is typically used among European youth policymakers and stakeholders to describe non-formal learning experiences abroad (Devlin et al. 2018). Nevertheless, it was designed to describe both formal and non-formal experiences, as defined by the European Platform for Learning Mobility (see Chap. 8).
2. The data for this chapter includes two focus groups conducted with ESN volunteers that take pastoral care of Erasmus students (1 international group of 10 members, and a second Polish group of 16 members), alongside content analysis of 45 narrative accounts from Polish students who participated in exchanges on Erasmusblog.pl, and nine interviews with Erasmus alumni conducted in Germany and in Poland, with data collected in 2017.
3. In the 2005 evaluation study (Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005), it was found that only seven per cent of Erasmus students did volunteer work abroad, with this low level of involvement in civic initiatives characteristic of an Erasmus stay at this time. It has also been suggested in subsequent research that Erasmus students are traditionally even less active during their Erasmus stays than in their home countries (Wood 2013).
4. For more information on SocialErasmus, see: https://socialerasmus.esn.org

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