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9:45 to 10:30

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“Making higher education more European through mobility?
Questions on the institutional and individual rationales of mobility”

Discussant : Adela **Garcia-Aracil**

**Making higher education more European through mobility?
Questions on the political and individual rationales of student mobility**

1. Introduction

1.1. Student mobility in the context of the Bologna process

This paper seeks, firstly, to analyse the political and institutional rationales and assumptions for promoting students' mobility in Europe at the EC level, and at the level of a French region, and secondly, to discuss them in the light of individual experiences of mobile students. Since the onset of the ERASMUS programme in 1987, student mobility in Europe has been the subject of unusual political promotion. The goal of increasing student mobility remains an important political issue in the context of the Bologna process. As the Prague Communiqué announced "ministers reaffirmed that efforts to promote mobility must be continued to enable students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff to benefit from the richness of the European Higher Education Area including its democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages and the diversity of the higher education systems" (Prague communiqué, 2002). Beyond this political declaration, the results of a survey¹ conducted for the *Trends 2003* support that idea. Indeed, from the point of view of higher education institutions but also of ministries of Education, employers and students it was shown that "the promotion of mobility is clearly the most concrete, easily interpreted and uncontroversial aim of the Bologna process" (Reichert & Tauch, 2003).

Beyond this apparent widespread support for further promotion of student mobility (van der Wende, 2001), it is legitimate to question the reasons that have led to this consensus and the extent to which they are based on political wishes or proven benefits. Therefore, questions about the aim and the outcomes of student mobility have to be raised.

1.2. Student mobility and institutional/pedagogical change

Our starting point will be to consider the consensus for further promoting student mobility as an effect of more than fifteen years of EC action in the area of student mobility. Notwithstanding, the actual empirical-based knowledge of the impact of the EC action does not allow us to consider its effect as more than a change of collective representations related to the hoped-for benefits of studying and living abroad. Baumgratz-Gangl describes mobility both as "a means to produce certain intellectual and attitudinal effects on individuals" and, from a political standpoint, especially this of the EC, as "a means of inducing institutional change" (Baumgratz-Gangl, 1996). It was expected that student mobility within the European Union would play a key role in developing the European dimension of higher education. The implied assumption was that the Higher Education institutions confronted with the needs of mobile students would progressively harmonise their teaching objectives and structures.

A survey carried out by the Association of the European University (AEU, former CRE) provides useful information concerning the degree of importance of student mobility for European universities. The analysis of some 1600 'European policy statements' (EPS) revealed that European and International activity certainly did not represent the most central mission of universities' strategic development, although the actions for mobility prevailed

1 1,800 questionnaires were sent, with a 45% response rate.

within this 'policy' and often summarised it (CRE, 1998). It is rather difficult to identify single rationales behind the promotion of student mobility. One can observe different motives driving HE institutions for promoting student exchanges. It can be seen as a matter of easy to reach consensus among institutions shaped by national ideals; low risk activity for the stability of institutional structures; in line with the belief of promoting international understanding and peace; simple imitation of a present trend. It is worth mentioning that beyond student mobility, Europeanisation of Higher education institutions has been a kind of marginal preoccupation and "quick-fix" activity in the development of their higher education policy. Consequently, it is not surprising that in 2001, van der Wende was observing that a low level of convergence at the institutional and pedagogical level were attributed to the impact of Socrates/Erasmus programme (van der Wende, 2001). Two main reasons have been given to explain that.

The first one is that the programme never reached the target of 10% of mobile students. As an official text of the European Parliament states: "From the Commission's survey appears that only 1% of students have participated in the Erasmus programme, and thus, there is still a lot to do in order to achieve the objective of 10% set by the programme"². Therefore the critical mass of students that would eventually had motivated institutional and pedagogical change was never attained, even though the popularity of the programme increased across the years.

The second plausible explanation concerning the weak impact of Erasmus programme on institutional change has to do with the level of intervention, in other words with the fact that mobility concerns individual students. We have to add here that students' satisfaction as shown by various evaluations of the Erasmus programme (Gordon *et al.*, 2000; Mainworm, *et al.* 1993; Rosselle & Lentiez 1999) and valorisation of the personal dimension of mobility alongside with the small number of mobile students have given the ideal pretext for limited system-level change.

Although it has been argued that due to the limited competencies of the EU in education, the EC was not in position to initiate a process aiming at system-level reforms (van der Wende, 2001), I tend to be less affirmative on this point. Without disregarding the subsidiarity principal, it is worth highlighting that higher education and education at large, was "an issue of intense interest to EC decision-makers from Day 1 of the Community's history" (Corbett, 2003, 385). Therefore deciding to promote student mobility wasn't an act of limited ambition, but on the contrary, an initiative aiming at the foundation of a System of higher education institutions at a European level.

In order to develop this argument, Green's definition of what constitutes an educational System seems relevant. Green suggested that in order to understand the problems one encounters in reforming the educational system, one must attend to its general character as a System apart from its educational purposes. He identified the three following 'primary elements' a) schools, b) a medium of exchange between schools, and c) sequence (Green, 1980). As to the second primary element, it points to the fact that there is a system of credits and units that allows the student to move from one school to another without having to begin over again or to be randomly placed. Indeed "because we have a system, individuals can move from one school to another and pick up at the same level" (Covaleskie, 1994). In the light of this discussion, the EC mobility grants accompanied by the credit system known as ECTS aim to facilitate students' free movement from one establishment to another one and as such, student mobility relates to the second primary element of what constitutes a system according to Green's definition. Therefore EC' action on higher education can be interpreted as an intervention seeking for impact at the system level. Given the historical and political

2 Résolution du Parlement européen sur le rapport de la Commission *Enquête sur la situation socio-économique des étudiants Erasmus*, (Procès Verbal du 06/09/2000, basé sur le document A5-0199/2000).

context, promoting mobility was a possible EC action at one of the three components of the HE System. Thus, student mobility could definitely be seen as an initiative aiming at the foundation of a European Higher Education System. Yet, the extent to which this initiative has been successful in introducing this type of change does not impair its drive.

2. Institutional perceptions and rationales

2.1 Mobility competence

In this section, we will firstly seek to elucidate the rationales and aims of student mobility at a macro and political level through the analysis of official texts and other texts of political communication of the European Commission as well as the French Regional Council of the Rhone-Alps. Secondly we will confront these rationales and aims against the results of an in-depth analysis of French Erasmus students' reports of their mobility experiences (Papatsiba, 2001, 2003). Concerning the EC student mobility policy, the ERASMUS programme representing the most popular EC mobility programme was analysed. As far as the reasons for investigating the policy of the Region of the Rhone-Alps are concerned, two main arguments justify our selection. This regional (local) government was the first in France to set up, in 1987, an active policy for supporting studies and training abroad for HE students. The regional system of relatively generous student grants and the EC Erasmus grants appeared almost simultaneously, but the first one had an international scope. This policy which was rather largely followed by other regional councils, had a second characteristic of particular interest. During ten years (1987-97), a personal account on personal experiences of "studying and living abroad" [my experience abroad]³ was requested from those students who benefited from the regional financial support. We analysed a set of 80 personal reports, approximately ten pages each, written by students who participated in the Erasmus programme, and at the same time received the additional regional grant⁴. These texts enabled us to perceive explicit, but also latent dimensions of the student experience as presented in the third section of this paper.

The rationales underlying student mobility, in the pre-mentioned institutional contexts (EU and the Rhone-Alps French Region) can be grouped into four categories as presented below. Thus, student mobility appears like: -

- a means to promote the European labour market. Within this conception, student mobility would have positive impact in future professional mobility. It would predispose the individuals to cross the borders during their professional career more easily;
- a means to support the transfer of skills and technology of one country to the other, through individuals having acquired new qualifications, in order to contribute to the development and the improvement of the local technological performances;
- a means to reach international understanding and to create a European consciousness;
- an educational means allowing to acquire international competencies such as language mastery and intercultural competence as well as cross-cutting personal competencies (autonomy, initiative, resilience, and so on).

These rationales, presented here in an analytical way, are often combined together in various degrees in the different institutional texts. However, they are not convened with the same priority and are not treated with the same clarity and explicitness. In addition, the

3 The students who received the regional grant signed a contract with the Regional Council stipulating that they will provide a personal report at the end of their stay abroad. The instructions given for the requested reports were formulated as follows: "Personal report of ten typed pages, in French, recounting your experience abroad (Practical information: life in the institution, social life, knowledge of the county, advice for your "successors")."

4 Students have been able to receive both the European and the regional grant.

declared priorities do not necessarily correspond to those actually followed. As it is a matter of justifying the appropriate use of public money, it seems that certain types of rationales are more suitable to present than others. In addition, the objectives these denote can differ, according to whether they are being addressed to a certain type of 'audience' (e.g. university community or elected local representatives). All these institutional discourses convey political visions concerning the individual competencies that the period of mobility is supposed to develop. However, these competencies appear vaguely, evoking fuzzy cores of competencies without being substantially developed.

2.2. An economic and professional rational of student mobility

2.2.a. Building competencies for a competitive Europe

Let us approach the economic and professional dimension allotted to the student mobility from the point of view of the European decision-makers. The study of the objectives which accompanied the creation of the Erasmus programme in 1987⁵, makes it possible to raise some important points for our discussion. At first instance, the positions defended by the initiators of the Erasmus programme underlined the need for answering, with the contribution of education and training, to the economic and technological challenges launched by other important powers. These dominant global competitors obviously outclass the capacities of each European nation taken separately.

In this context of global competition seen as such, three of the five objectives⁶ (commented below) of the programme envisaged student mobility as 'human resource' training. The expected professional benefit of the intensification of student mobility would have a later noticeable impact at an economic level. Thus, to constitute a pool of "graduates with direct experience of intra-Community co-operation as a means of providing a broader basis for intensified economic and social co-operation in the Community"⁷ appears to be the priority of the programme. Although the quoted sentence corresponds to the fifth and last objective, it recalls and clarifies the first one. This avows the need for the Community for producing "personnel having first hand experience of the economic and social life in another Member States". Choosing the word "personnel" [translation from the French text] witnesses the adopted economic and professional prospect. As to the third objective, it refers to the role universities can play in the rise of the Community intellectual potential "in order to ensure the competitiveness of the Community on the world market". The two other objectives evoke the development of the co-operation between the European universities and the reinforcement of the "relations between citizens of the various Member States with a view to consolidating the concept of "People's Europe". This last point will be discussed later.

Student mobility, that Erasmus aims at promoting at a first instance, appear to be an instrument of the economic European co-operation by contributing to the training of European-minded cadres. In other words, it has been assumed that by experiencing student mobility, the future cadres will be better prepared to take responsibilities and to work in multicultural contexts to the extent to which they have been confronted with various professional cultures at an earlier stage. During their 'mobility' they would have created networks exceeding the national framework. Mobility thus becomes, from the EC perspective,

5 Décision du Conseil du 15 juin 1987 (87/327/CEE) portant adoption du programme d'action communautaire en matière d

a training path as much as a predictor “for a professional career within the Single Market”⁸. More generally, the fact that student mobility was supported reflects an “investment” in the European higher education. To invest in Higher education appears essential to make it possible for each country to dovetail with the Single Market promising prosperity and competitiveness. Therefore, “failing to invest in the present and future human resource, in its competence, its capacity of adaptability and enterprise, Europe will face the decline of its capacity of innovation, its competitiveness, its faculty to create richness and prosperity”⁹, the European Commission alerts. According to this point of view, mobility is seen as a major instrument within the prospect of an economic construction of Europe. As a reminder, it can be mentioned that the method chosen to build the European Union was based on the economic co-operation. Starting from the economic co-operation and thanks to a ‘spill-over’ process, more areas of national sovereignty would enter into a co-operation process until common politics are adopted (Holland, 1991). Indeed, that construction is claimed to depend “on the existence of the people having capacities to operate beyond the national and cultural borders”.¹⁰

2.2.b Building professional qualifications for the regional economic progress

Through the study of the regional official texts, similar, but locally circumscribed concerns triggered the set up of the grants regional system for studies abroad. To give an international dimension in young people’s training (studying in the HE institutions located in the Rhone-Alps region) by acquiring professional competencies as well as an internationally-minded attitude that the local companies are interested in, is given as an argument to legitimate the collective investment. This is explicitly mentioned in the official text which presents the project for funding studies abroad at the Regional Assembly: “Young people sent for training/studies abroad must be encouraged in order to develop a favourable state of mind to, and a capacity of international communication, and to make it possible for the companies to find cadres and technicians of excellence at the world-wide level”¹¹. In order to prevent a feared brain-drain students were obliged to come back to work for a regional company after their stay abroad, in the early stage of the grants’ history. Thought later, this obligation was raised. Nevertheless, students were still given the moral obligation to mobilise their efforts for the ‘local public good’, in other words, for the rise of the technological and human regional potential. Thus, what could appear at a first instance as an individual benefit acquired a collective scope. By expecting the funded students to settle their professional future in the region, the Regional Council hoped for a ‘return on investment’.

The support of student mobility also became a significant expression of the wider regional commitment in the internationalisation of the Rhone-Alps Region. This can be seen in several declarations, as in the following one: “The openness to the world, in a large sense, integrating the exchanges of manufactured goods, but also those of technologies, knowledge and people, is from now on a principal key for our future”¹². Within this economical frame of exchanges, student mobility falls into one of the pre-mentioned categories as a means of transfer of skills ensuring the technological and economic local performances. More generally, one can observe the political willingness to give an economic orientation to the HE and Research.

8 Commission des Communautés européennes, 1991, *Mémorandum sur l’enseignement supérieur dans la Communauté européenne*. Communication de la Commission au Conseil du 5 novembre 1991. Bruxelles: COM(91) 349 final, p. 29.

9 Commission des Communautés européennes, 1988, *L’Education dans la Communauté européenne: Perspectives à moyen terme, 1988-1992*. Bruxelles, COM(88) 280 final, p. 2.

10 Commission des Communautés européennes, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. I.

11 Délibérations du Conseil Régional du 24 octobre 1986, n° 86.01.340, Affaires économiques et internationales-coopération. p. 54.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Indeed, the investment in the HE and research are directly associated with the economic development: “the economic development is a top priority of the regional policy”; “it is obvious that the effectiveness of our action will require a strong coherence between economic policy and, in particular, training and research policy”¹³.

2.3. *A political and civic rationale of student mobility*

2.3.a. Creating European citizens

Going back to the European level, despite the dominant utilitarian approach, the social and cultural aspects of student mobility were not neglected. Student mobility was also seen as having implications exceeding the economic sphere of the Common Market. These socio-cultural implications of mobility were acknowledged in the discourses which introduced the idea of ‘Europe of knowledge’ closely related to the notion of ‘People’s Europe’¹⁴. In fact, since 1988, the development of the ‘European dimension’¹⁵ in education, in order to reinforce the European identity / citizenship, to increase awareness of common socio-political issues, to enhance knowledge of the historical and cultural aspects of Europe, had become an EU leitmotiv. The educational communities particularly welcomed this approach. A few years later, the *White Paper* on the ‘Learning Society’, affirmed that “education and training will increasingly become the main vehicle for self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfilment”¹⁶. Education was considered to have the broadly conceived political mission of socialisation of youth. Indeed the EC asserted that: “education lays the foundations of awareness and of European citizenship”¹⁷.

Notwithstanding, one has to make the distinction between what applies to education in general and what to Higher Education in particular. The role of HE is specifically developed in an EC text released in the early 1990¹⁸. This document reveals the tensions and disagreements about the HE mission and future between the European decision-makers and the university actors. The European Commission gave account of these reactions and positions: “The importance given in the Memorandum to the priorities of an economic and technological nature and to “human resource” considered as a factor of production, caused much criticisms, in spite of the multiple references which appear in this text about the cultural, human and social issues [...]. Without intending to neglect the technological and economic urgencies, these answers, emanating especially from the academic and professional environments, suggested to ‘reverse the priorities’, and therefore to dovetail them with the more general cultural purposes”¹⁹.

In this context, the European authorities gradually developed a discourse on mobility by explicitly underlining its anticipated contribution to the formation of European citizenship. Within this rationale, the EC assumed that “with this increasing freedom of movement should come a growing European consciousness instilled through greater awareness of others as a result of exposure to new cultures and societies. Mobility within the Community ought to contribute to the development of solidarity between all Europeans at all levels and in all areas,

13 *Ibid.*, p. 51 et 53.

14 Conclusions du Conseil et des ministres de l’Education, réunis au sein du Conseil du 6 octobre 1989 sur la coopération et la politique en matière d’éducation dans la perspective de 1993, *JOCE*, n° C 277/5 du 31/10/89.

15 Résolution du Conseil et des ministres de l’éducation réunis au sein du Conseil sur la dimension européenne dans l’éducation, du 24 mai 1988, *JOCE*, n° C 177 du 06/07/1988.

16 European Commission, 1995, *White Paper on Education and Training. Towards the Learning Society*. Luxembourg: Office des publications officielles des communautés européennes, COM (95) 590 final, p. 2.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

18 Commission des Communautés européennes, 1991, *op. cit.*

19 Commission des Communautés européennes, 1993, *Quel avenir pour l’enseignement supérieur dans la Communauté européenne? Réponses au Mémoire*, Etudes n°2. Luxembourg: Office des publications officielles des communautés européennes, p. 13 (our translation).

helping to raise standards throughout Europe and providing opportunities for all both at present and in the future”²⁰.

Adopting this outlook evokes that student mobility, and in general supportive actions in regard to HE, could accelerate the European integration. The latent idea is that of the formation of new future elites advocating the economic and the political project of the EU. Provided with scientific and cultural competencies, they would contribute to the creation of a Europe, strong and open to the world.

2.3.b. Young Ambassadors of their region

The European and International orientation of the Rhone-Alps region also represents a means of promoting its brand. The ambition of having a better visibility abroad and reinforcing its ties with other countries, is clearly expressed in the texts. It is also in line with its policies with regard to internationalisation. The promotion of “Rhone-Alps” as an entity became a mission entrusted to those funded students. For this reason, a part of the total annual grant budget (at the beginning of the grant system) aimed to provide students with a minimum of means supporting their ‘mission’, which was nevertheless vaguely defined. Indeed, it was planned to support students’ one to two weeks of preparation about the culture and the economy of the country in which they planned to go, and “especially about the potential and the economic assets of the Rhone-Alps, so that they are the best possible ambassadors of our Region”²¹. Thus, the role of representing, promoting the Region and strengthening of ties with foreign countries corresponded to the mission of an ambassador²² entrusted to the mobile students. It is worth mentioning that one finds traces of this mission in the students’ personal reports. That indicates the positive reception of this idea by the students.

This preoccupation concerning the ways of promoting the identity of the Region continues across the years although the specific budget was suppressed. We can find evidence of this concern in the first questionnaire sent to the students, after the suppression of the obligation of a personal report on their experience abroad, in 1998. Some questions are of particular interest relating to the mission of ambassador and the ambiguous underlying political rationale. For example one can read the following question: “if you had had material to present the Region, what would you have highlighted?”. This type of question is possibly a sign of a double institutional intention. On the one hand, the intention could simply be to make students reflect on the regional characteristics deserving to be disseminated abroad. On the other hand, it could be a way of observing student sensitivity relating to their feeling of regional belonging. Thus, a question arises: was the idea of mobile students as ambassadors a truly believed idea or was it a kind of political rhetoric/means intended to reinforce their awareness of regional belonging? From the Regional perspective, the risk was that life abroad seduces these young people and makes them deviate from their return. We are inclined to believe that the idea of being an ambassador had the intention to reinforce student regional identity because of the lack of any concrete action aimed at helping students to embrace their role as ambassadors. In fact, the regional Council, because of criticism, had to give up imposing the obligation of return to the mobile students. Consequently, the risk of not receiving the “counterpart” of the collective investment was felt and raised worries. Thus, other strategies had to be set up. One

20 Commission européenne, 1996, *The obstacles to transnational mobility. Green paper*. Luxembourg: Office des publications officielles des communautés européennes, COM/96/426, p. 1.

21 Assemblée plénière du Conseil Régional de Rhône-Alpes, des 23 et 24 juin 1988, Rapport n° 88.110.279, p. 308.

22 Other local authorities had adopted the idea of students abroad as ambassadors of their region had been adopted. Yet, in early '90, the press gives an evidence of the expected political benefits: « the enterprise is proven to be beneficial to the Region for more than one reason. ‘Students abroad are a kind of ambassadors for us’ Gérard Majewski, from the Regional Council of Limousin attests. Regions consider positively the idea of contributing to the formation of a possible ‘elite’, educated abroad ». In S. Tramhel « Les régions au secours d’Erasmus », *Le Monde*, 12 septembre 1990, p. VII. [our translation]

can assume that by trying to promote one's country and region can have the effect of reinforcement his/her national or regional identity. This makes the attachment to the country stronger and increases the probability of returning back home. "During your stay did you feel 'Rhônalpin'?" is another question in the questionnaire, expressing the same concern of probing the regional identity of mobile students.

2.4. *Mobility as an instrument for personal development*

From the European decision makers' perspective, mobility represents a form of secondary socialisation which relies on the individual. It enfoldes the view of an individual relieved from deterministic constraints and thus responsible for building his/her life-span. While moving, this individual can change environments and sense of belongingness and multiply his/her possibilities for benefiting from these. Mobility would imply confrontation with various situations requesting a large repertory of individual adaptive responses, and also encouraging their renewal. Consequently, mobility would maintain the individual in a state of awakening which would support the acquisition of new competencies and new knowledge. In other words, it would be an incentive for learning. The EC White Paper on the Learning Society insists on the importance to develop all forms of incentives to learn. 'The advent of the Learning Society' certainly depends on the acquisition of new knowledge, but above all on that 'precious' capacity to learn how to learn. Indeed, "support for mobility also plays a part in encouraging the enhancement of knowledge. Geographical mobility broadens the individual's horizon, stimulates intellectual agility and raises the general level of learning. It can only reinforce the ability to learn, which is so necessary to develop"²³.

As for the Rhone-Alps Region, few explicit traces were found in the official texts concerning the period of studies abroad as a means of personal development. These traces evoked an expectation to create world-oriented open-minded cadres with a capacity of international communication. Although this capacity is an individual one, it was presented as of particular interest to the local companies. Thus, it was supposed to have a positive impact on the graduates' entrance to the professional market. Notwithstanding, the strongest sign of the importance that the initiators of this grant system had attached to the personal dimension of the studies abroad is given by the type of report they asked students to produce. This report, expected as a personal account of one's experience abroad, pointed towards the vision of this stay as a means of global education and an opportunity of personal development. This approach of mobility created tensions²⁴ and conflicts that led to the suppression of these personal accounts. These texts undoubtedly constituted the evidence of a rationale that was difficult to legitimate in the political local arena. They gave room to express self-fulfilment or personal difficulties. Their request was associated with the birth of a system which had not been proven reliable yet. To know then "how the young people behaved abroad", "how they supported this exile", "what they really thought about that", etc, were the reasons given during the interviews we conducted at the Regional Council to explain the validity of requesting these personal reports, and by extrapolation the 'value' of the stay abroad.

Moreover, these documents were supposed to be accessible to other students, the future candidates to studies abroad. The initiators of the regional grant system were personally

23 Commission européenne, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

24 A dissertation on the topic of Rhone-Alps' Internationalisation, supervised by J.C. Martin, one of the initiators of the regional grant system and Director of a large directory in which the strand of grants was integrated, gives some evidences of the hesitations, even oppositions to the grant policy for studies abroad: «This investment considered as too heavy and useless contributes although to internationalise the region in an effective way. Concerning the grants for studies and training abroad in particular, the present material and human expenses will be proven fruitful in the future». In C. Haasis, 1991, *La politique internationale des trois cercles. Bilan et analyse des relations internationales de la Région de Rhône-Alpes depuis 1986*. Université de KONSTANZ, RFA unpublished dissertation.

convinced of the value of the stay abroad. They considered it as a real challenge and a 'lesson of life' for the young adults, even a sign of bravery. Nevertheless, they supported the idea of studies abroad accessible to a large number of students, thus, they had to ensure the success of this initiative. In order to help future students having a smooth transition abroad, they thought that the experience of those who succeeded in their 'enterprise' and overcame the various difficulties could be beneficial to new mobile students. They saw personal reports as source of useful advice and experiential lessons that could make the 'adventure' less perilous and decrease the risk of failure.

3. Individual experiences and rationales

As to the individual level, results of an analysis of 80 texts giving accounts of Erasmus periods abroad allows to discuss in-depth the 'value' of these initiatives. In other words by confronting students' perceptions after their stay against the precedent institutional views, it is possible to observe to what extent these policies have produced the desired effects. These texts of approximately 10 pages each were written by French Erasmus students who reported on their year abroad to the Regional Council of the Rhone-Alps. This administration had insisted on the personal character of the account. Thus, the instructions given for the requested reports were formulated as following: "Personal report, in French, recounting your experience and life abroad (Practical information: life in the institution, social life, knowledge of the county, advice for your "successors").

3.1 Sample

A large variety of subjects (e.g. Sciences, Medical studies, Business, Human sciences, Language studies, Vocational training, etc.) and types of Higher education institutions (University, selective HE sector, Technological Institutes) were represented in the sample of 80 reports of approximately 800 pages in total. 37 students were male and 43 female. The students studied in their 3rd 4th and 5th year. A majority studying in their 3rd year.

3.2 Brief description of methods and major findings

These reports of French Erasmus-students' year abroad to the regional authority were analysed at four levels (1) content analysis (e.g. L'Ecuyer, 1987) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) (2) lexico-analysis (e.g., Pécheux, 1969; Benezecri *et coll.* 1981), (3) discourse analysis (e.g., Benveniste, 1966; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1970; Kerbrat-Orrechioni, 1999; Magri, 1995), and (4) in-depth qualitative analysis based on concepts drawn from Social Psychology and Intercultural Studies (e.g., Kaës *et coll.* 1998; Todorov, 1986, 1989; Simmel, 1979; Schutz, 1987; Wagner & Magistrale, 1997; Boesch, 1995). Very briefly, the major findings are the following: At the first level of analysis by using an inductive method based on themes and categories used by the students, the findings showed how students described and perceived their Erasmus experience. The majority described their stay as academic experience, every day life, tourism and leisure. Approximately one third of the students emphasised categories related to relationships and self-discovery, while another third provided spatial markers of the new environment and reported "school knowledge" about the host culture. At the second level of analyses the findings indicated that, students' involvement in writing (measured by the use of the first person "I") was linked to their involvement in the context: The more expressive and personal essays focused on the subtleties of relationships/encounters and self-discovery. The more impersonal and formal texts draw a picture of spatial landmarks and encyclopaedic knowledge about the host culture. Finally, the in-depth analysis showed the difficulties students had when handling cultural otherness which was characterised by spatial, linguistic, social and cultural change. For some students the

effects of the cultural immersion remained benign and superficial, but for others they were deeper, redefining their personal and social identity.

3.3 Students motivations, learning outcomes and benefits

For the purpose of this paper I will focus on some findings from the content analysis. To make these results more intelligible it is necessary to place them in the frame of the grid of the thematic analysis which is provided below. In particular, I will comment on two sub-categories included in the category that condenses the most personal information given by students (see E – Images and traces of the subject in the grid of analysis). These subcategories refer to the declared motivations (see E.1.a) and to the self-assessment of the various outcomes (see E.1.d). Given the small number of extracts classified in these sub-categories, the presentation will focus on the qualitative aspects of these statements.

3.3.a. Grid of content analysis

A – Background context

A.1 – Country, Area, City

A.1 a – Geopolitical, economic and historical information

A.2 – Patrimony (Cultural Inheritance)

A.2.a – Monuments and churches

A.2.b – Urbanisation and architecture

A.2.c – Nature and climate

A. 3 – Cultural characteristics of people

A.3.a – Cultural personality

A.3.b – Collective celebrations and customs

A.3.c – Life Styles and rhythms

B – First landmarks and their functionality

B.1 – The university site

B.1.a – Buildings

B.1.b – Infrastructures and number of students

B.1.c – Administrative formalities

B.2 – Housing

B.2.a – House market and prices

B.2.b – Private vs. collective space

B.2.c – Comfort

C – The sphere of the individual action

C.1 – The practical environment of the everyday life

C.1.a – Practical environment of everyday life

C.1.b – Transport, distances

C.1.c – Shops

C.1.d – Cost of living

C.1.e – Medical system and health care

C.1.f – Safety

C.1 g – Administrative procedures

C.2 Studies

- C.2.a – Teaching and educational purposes
- C.2.b – Student personal work/workload/ Evaluation (credits)
- C.2. c – Pedagogy
- C.2. d – Teachers Authority
- C.2.e – Student behaviour in the classroom

C.3 Leisure

- C.3.a – Student societies, evenings and events
- C.3.b – Sports
- C.3.c – Trips and cultural visits
- C.3.d – Leisure provision in the city

D – Sociability and Interpersonal relations

D.1 – Communication

- D.1.a – Linguistic aspects
- D.1.b – Socio-cultural aspects

D.2 – Encounters

- D.2.a – Solidarity and proximity
- D.2.b – Distance and lack of understanding
- D.2.c – The student seen by others

E – Images and traces of the subject

E.1 – The subject writing about his/her experience

- E.1.a – Introducing oneself and motivations
- E.1.b – The student – traveler: affective aspects of the transition
- E.1.c – Success of a test/challenge
- E.1.d – Learning outcomes and benefits
- E.1.e – Expression of awareness
- E.1.f – Back to France/ future projects

E.2 – Personal positions in the «commissioned» writing

- E.2.a – Advice to the successors: between instruction and subjective experience
- E.2.b – Meta-level comments
- E.2.c – Thanks/Acknowledgements

3.3.b. Added professional value of studies abroad

Students had assimilated the various discourses about the future benefits of studies and residence abroad in terms of career. They frequently give the professional motivation as an important reason for participating in the Erasmus programme.

I have chosen England for my year abroad for different reasons. First of all because speaking English became indispensable if one wants to improve his/her chances for finding a job that I eventually envisage to get abroad. [Report 73]

On the other hand, as the end of the studies approaches, we've started having more contacts with the industries: placements, exhibitions, interviews... Among the different particularities of my future profession there is one that is of particular relevance for studying abroad: the gap between the companies at the European level is becoming

narrower. As a consequence of that, these companies seek for personnel at the level of Europe and not anymore at the national one. [Report 40]

The improvement of his/her linguistic abilities and capacity of communication in a foreign context represents an additional qualification to put forward on the labour market. Already, a small number of students take advantage of their stay to become familiar with the conditions and the mechanisms of functioning of the labour market of the host country. Especially for the students at the end of the studies, the question of professional career arises with more acuity, thus professional projects are often mentioned in a more precise form. Some evoke the prospect for working abroad: either to work in another country, or to work in a company which operates on a European or international scale.

From a professional point of view, the mastery of English language and my adaptation to the British culture have allowed me to seek for a job in Great Britain and to get familiarised with the job market mechanisms, the interviews and so on. I hope that I will be recruited in some months, bearing in mind that the British market is more dynamic than the French is. [Report 49]

From the students point of view, the European economic context modifies the professional ‘map’ by offering a larger space, but also, by requiring new qualifications.

In the European era, studying and working abroad became a compulsory path in order to discover other mentalities, other ways of working and acquiring a kind of open-mindedness. [Report 25]

At the end of their stay, the expected outcomes at the professional level are less directly mentioned than in the parts where the students evoke their motivations. It seems that the students approach this topic differently. Thus, the experience appears to be beneficial in terms of broadening one’s intellectual scope, in other words acquiring of new ways of thinking enriched and diversified by other points of view.

Students also report outcomes on the psychological level evoking the increased adaptability, meant as flexibility and resistance useful for professional purposes.

Especially what the stay abroad has brought me is what the schools can not teach. That is to say a personal development, a faculty of adaptation useful in both personal and professional life. [Report 29]

This double benefit becomes, from their point of view, essential for an individual having to take active part in the current economic context.

3.3.c Marginal place of the political and civic issues

Students generally do not appear aware of the Erasmus programme objectives, except for those who study Law, Political sciences or Economy. In addition they rarely expressed themselves about the European construction and the chosen means for going forward. For those few students who mention anything related to the political and civic rationales of the mobility, approach the European construction not only as the union of markets and companies but also of the citizens. What does that mean to them? They mainly evoke peace and political stability on one hand, and mutual knowledge of countries and people on the other hand.

The reasons for choosing Germany are various. Since several years, European construction has been a widely debated topic. From my point of view, I feel relatively seduced by the idea, because I conceive it as a connection among European people. It is true that this connection will allow sustainable peace in Europe. Unfortunately during

these crisis years, this noble idea is not popular enough but instead we have a lot of negative and opposing reactions. [Report 75]

Nowadays, when the united Europe and the opening of the borders are discussed, it appears to me as necessary to take advantage of all possible opportunities given to us and go beyond the French boundaries, in order to get to know this big continent better which we take more and more part of. [Report 43]

A small number of students remain sensitive to the issue of broadening the feeling of belonging. This is seen as a sign of adoption of the idea of Europe as geopolitical unit by its citizens. Some exceptional cases confirm their support to the European political project and affirm their willingness to play an active part in this political process.

Like a lot of young people of my generation, I am an enthusiastic supporter of the European construction. Developing exchanges among countries of the Community can contribute to the realisation of this European project. It is us, the young Europeans who will build the Europe of tomorrow. The Erasmus programme contributes to achieve this objective. This is one of the reasons that motivated my departure abroad. [Report 77]

However, if the topic of the European construction constitutes a politically correct motivation, it seldom constitutes the object of an explicit awareness at the end of the stay. Indeed, the comments made at the end of the stay hardly show an outlined European identity. Another disappointment perhaps, for those who would expect signs of the formation of a European identity, only three students refer to that. One of them tackles the complexity of the political union process.

Having lived for nine months in another country of Europe allows to better identifying the present problems faced by politicians who try to build the Europe of tomorrow. [Report 64]

Another student explicitly evokes the impact of the Erasmus stay which does not a priori constitute the indispensable condition for developing a certain European identity,

but confronts the student against a reality perceived as the opening of the borders and its consequences on the labour market [Report 66].

Lastly, only one student evokes the birth of an European identity by underlining the possibility of coexisting for several identities (national, European, international).

The fact to immerse myself in the English culture, to encounter several foreign students and foreigners make me at the same time feel very French, very European and very International. [Report 78]

3.3.d. An initiatory experience perceived in its personal dimension

In their conclusions, students express themselves in an enthusiastic way. Their excitement is perceptible even when they criticise or acknowledge the difficulties they had. In other words, students express a great satisfaction at the end of a course, which is not free of problems and disappointments.

This year spent in Germany has tough me a lot from an academic and a personal point of view. Nevertheless, I insist on highlighting that, during the stay, some phases are difficult to cope with and to overcome and the temptation to go back to France is big. [Rapport 74]

Attesting simultaneously satisfaction and difficulties can be seen as the sign of recognition of the educational potentialities of the stay. This period thus seems driven by a specific rationale, which makes any situation, positive or negative, potentially educational: test, effort, distress, disillusionment or accomplishment and achievement, everything becomes a lesson learned. If one focuses more on the parts of the texts in which the stay becomes object of evaluation, one observes again that these sections are marked by the presence of words associated with the register of the test and challenge.

Going abroad is landing in a new world that completely or partially differs from what we had known up to this moment. The transition can be harsh but the challenge is worth living because it is a rich experience from both an intellectual and a personal point of view. [Rapport 57]

My stay in Germany is one year of studies, one year of another culture and other people. I can not stop myself from thinking about it as a successful experience. Am I simply satisfied? No, I am very pleased to have responded to the challenge. [Report 79].

One can then deduce that the stay abroad has an initiatory value for these young people who by challenging obstacles but also by discovering and being taken by surprise forge and learn themselves.

At the personal level, I acquired an even larger mind-openness, another way of perceiving others and myself. [Report 26]

I think that the experience, as I lived it this year, has given me a lot from a personal point of view. In France, the studies would have been the same or almost the same. So, I've learnt a lot about myself and in general about other people by studying abroad during this year. [Report 20]

For them, the stay thus becomes a beneficial period at the personal level and in their eyes constitutes tangible proof of their capacities to be adaptable to the changing environment of our times. The stay abroad, under the conditions that the Erasmus creates, is at the origin of a personal development. That has to do with the self-perception and the change of personal identity. In particular, the way in which Erasmus programme contributes to reinforcing a positive image of oneself is to be underlined. Yet this advantage, however important it may be, often sums up the different outcomes of a mobility period. The Erasmus stay, while it is potentially a powerful tool for a broader and multi-faceted experience, is primarily formulated like a personal experience. Considering all the potential outcomes through the lense of personal experience raises some questions about the way students interpret awareness of the benefits of the Erasmus mobility, which is also a political and a cultural experience. As to cultural benefits, we noted that the cultural context is treated less like a set of shared values and knowledge, but more as an access towards a new individual potential, as a new sphere of individual activity. In other words, the new socio-cultural context offers additional opportunities to the individual to see what s/he is able to undertake, to surmount and to solve. Indeed, the students discovered the cultural difference, which was less treated as a situation enabling them to learn how to understand a foreign symbolic system and how to position themselves in it, but more like a new situation stretching the individual limits and the potential of adaptability. By this type of operation, cultural outcomes of the stay are transformed into a personal asset. This conclusion is valid for other dimensions of the stay as well.

4. Conclusion

To forge the European citizen through mobility: Realistic objective or rhetoric belief?

Having drawn this parallel between the institutional rationales of mobility and the student experiences, incites us to focus on the political aspect of student mobility, conveyed by the channel of Erasmus. An observation is essential: the political approach of mobility appears secondary in the various discourses of the institutional actors. In addition, as for the means of its concretization, not a lot of actions have been initiated in order to enable students to increase their awareness of the civic stakes. This gap is reflected in the discourses of the students who expressed a representation of mobility like an intense personal experience. Yet this advantage, however important it may be, cannot justify alone the importance of the collective effort. Thus, to apprehend student mobility like a means for international comprehension and as an act enabling young Europeans to internalise a feeling of belonging rather than the economic interest or other utilitarian arguments, represents a fragile objective. Consequently, acquiring a feeling of belonging in an enlarged Europe, enriching national identities with the desired European dimension remain the result of an experiential learning. This type of learning depends on situations, on encounters as well as on the individual psychological base. Through the analysed reports, its potentialities but especially its limited effects for a great number of individuals were observed.

The analysis of the institutional rationales of the Erasmus mobility shows the prevalence of a professional and economic vision, like this of an overall educational experience for the individual based rather on assumptions. Moreover, the Erasmus programme reflects an approach of the higher education that various analyses stressed. Those analyses support the idea that the changes which operate on the level of the higher education are more shaped by the pressures coming from the market and its interests than by political planning (Neave, 1988). Therefore, and after the analysis of the EC discourse, one of the rare analyses of the Erasmus programme made by Wielemans appears as most relevant to our discussion. The author stresses that the programme easily reflects the market mechanisms and the increasing spirit of utilitarianism and concludes on the dissonance that creates the parallel reading of the programme and the historical figure of Erasmus. Here is his verdict: "The EC ERASMUS programme is discordant with the content as well as with the humanistic and cultural mission implied by using the portrait of Erasmus" (Wielemans, 1991, 177). Thus, the extent and the depth of the civic and cultural effects of the Erasmus programme reflect the priority that they had received in the formulation and pursuit of these policies. Even if they are not ignored, they only seem to take a secondary place, welcomed, but as we saw, fragile: "It is a fortunate event that the actions intended to support the training of the graduates for mobility and for a successful career within the single market, also contribute to the process of cultural transmission and development of the European identity"²⁵.

25 Commission des Communautés européennes, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

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