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# Erasmus - The European Experience (?)

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ERASMUS, the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, is part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Program, certainly its best known project and its favorite baby: Every year, about 200.000 European students are provided the opportunity of studying and living abroad for at least one semester. The main aims of the program are to broaden the academic and professional horizon of the participants, to improve language skills, and to deepen intercultural competences and self-esteem. Since the introduction of ERASMUS in 1987, more than 2 millions of students and 250.000 teachers have participated in the program that involves 33 European countries and spends a budget of 450.000 million Euros per year.

But does Erasmus fulfill the expectations? Isn't it the case that most of the students come for "everything but for studying"? And if this is the case- is it a bad thing?



"I am applying for an Erasmus semester because..." The reasons completing this sentence are as diverse as the students expressing them: enjoying yourself in a city that is worth living, getting to know a different culture, making international contacts, getting in touch with a different educational system, partying as hell. Erasmus means that you are paid money for going to a place of your choice, to study there and to be part of the European experience. Because at the end of the day, ERASMUS is the best known measurement of European integration. If you want to create a political and social community out of an economic one, where would you start? At the younger generations of course, where new experiences have the most impact on their personality, on their career- and, above all, on their political attitude towards the European Union.

But for most of the students, EU politics and their integration purposes are very far away when they go for Erasmus, and become part of the international Erasmus community or "bubble" how critics call it. The reason for this is that new contacts are being made but rather seldom to the host society and mostly within the group of international students at the university of choice. This might even lead to an isolation of the Erasmus students from ordinary students because apart from institutions such as the international club they get in touch with very few native students. Due to this, improving the language skills is only valid for English but in most of the cases not for the native language. Last but not least, broadening the academic and professional horizon is the most questionable of the main goals mentioned as "Erasmus is about everything but studying".

But does this mean the program has failed? I would say no.

Even if studying is on bottom of the list of Erasmus activities actually conducted, people DO improve their language skills- at least in English, and they DO develop more intercultural competences and self-esteem, especially because they do not only interact with people from the host society but with people from all over Europe. It is intended to be the European experience to go to e.g. Spain and meet Spanish people but as it is, it is the "even more European experience" because going to Spain does not only mean meeting Spanish people, it means meeting Spanish, French, German, Danish, Czech, British and many more people, and, therefore, integrates many cultures at the same time. So, even if the program does not work the way it probably was intended to, in some way it functions very well. The evaluation of success or failures basically depends on one's perspective.