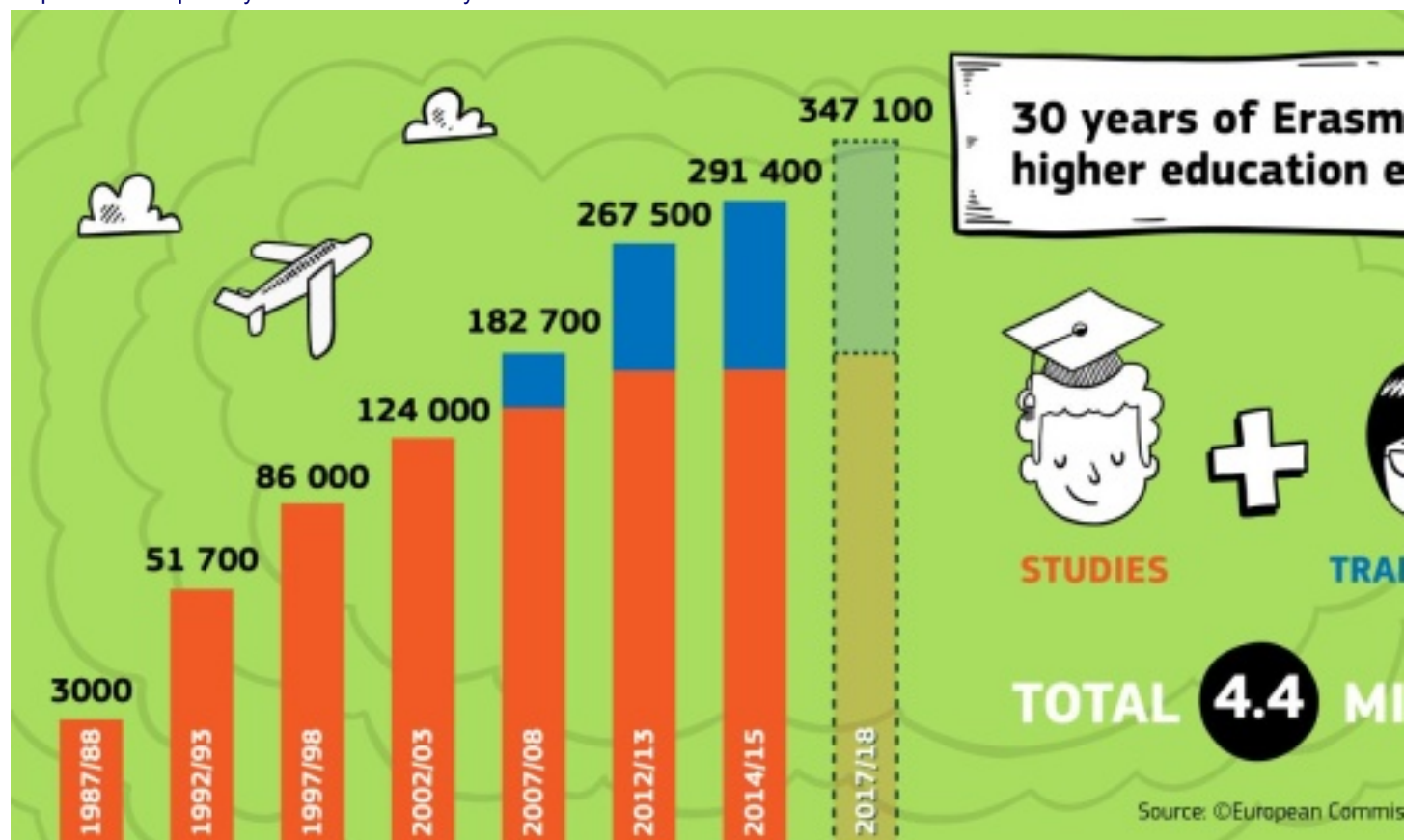

The first 30 years of the Erasmus Project

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The Erasmus Project celebrates its 30th year in 2017, and 2018 will be the 20th year of it operating in the Czech Republic. Ollie Heppenstall explores its history, impact and what the future might hold for this incredible organisation.

The Erasmus programme celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, and in that time it has enhanced the lives of thousands of Europeans by providing countless opportunities to train or to study across the European Union, the EFTA and EU candidate countries, and widening society's horizons in a way that, in 1987 when the project was founded, was but a pipedream.

When founded, the Erasmus programme was a voluntary cooperation between 11 European Union member states: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK. Despite requiring a decision in the European Court of Justice after opposition from member states with existing exchange programmes of their own, the programme became official and by the end of its first year 3,244 students had taken part. The Czech Republic's entry to the Erasmus programme followed a 1998 invitation to join the EU, which was confirmed in May 2004. In that first year 879 of Czech university students departed thanks to the programme while 243 foreign students arrived. By 2006 the numbers of outgoing students at Charles University had passed 1,000, and by 2008 the numbers of incoming students had reached the same number. Since then, despite a slight stagnation in numbers due to the banking crisis of the previous decade, it has been onwards and upwards for the Erasmus programme in the Czech Republic and especially at Charles University.



Charles University's Erasmus intake for 2016/2017 has been the highest on record so far, with the majority of the almost 1,800 arriving students spread across the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, Law, First Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Science; all disciplines that are of paramount importance in the society we, as citizens of the EU, share. Similarly, more than 260 students of Charles University's Faculty of Arts, 215 students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and a little more than 160 students of the Faculty of Law found themselves whisked away by Erasmus to experience the best of Europe's academia. Charles University's prowess as an academic institute was confirmed in 2014, coming fifth in the top 10 of the list of the best 500 universities receiving Erasmus students, alongside the universities of Granada, Madrid (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Valencia (Universitat de Valencia), Bologna, Sevilla, Valencia (Universitat Politècnica de Valencia), Sevilla, Ljubljana and Leuven and tenth in the top 500 universities sending Erasmus students, alongside Granada, Bologna, Madrid (Complutense), Valencia (Universitat de Valencia), Padova, Barcelona (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya), Valencia (Universitat Politècnica de Valencia), Warsaw and Vienna.

The growth of the Erasmus programme is not likely to stop any time soon either; in its new format of Erasmus+ (2014-2020) it reaches also beyond European borders with 17 per cent of the 16.5 billion Euros Erasmus+ budget going into moving 130,000 students and teachers between Europe and the rest of the world (International Credit Mobility), another 1,000 construction projects for higher education (Capacity Building Scheme) and a further 30,000 scholarships worldwide enabling students and staff to take part in Joint Master Degree programmes. The future looks brighter than ever for the premier scheme for students looking to study abroad. It is not just education where Erasmus' presence is crucial; the contact that Erasmus provides is a crucial part of EU foreign and diplomatic policy, such as in the EU-Africa strategy, which relies on higher education and youth cooperation playing a key role.

Over the last 30 years, Erasmus has revolutionised the opportunities available to EU students and teachers regarding studying abroad in a way that was never envisaged by even the project's most fervent supporters. It shall continue to do so for many years more, and ranks as one of – if not the best way – of being able to study abroad. The opportunities open to this generation are unlike any others throughout modern history, and it has opened the eyes of that generation in a fantastic way. It is one of the European Union's greatest success stories; bringing all four corners of the continent together through education on a grand scale.

It's a testament to the strength of the European community amid unsettling and challenging times of late that such a project has lasted for so long. 30 years is a long time by anybody's standards, almost half a century of education and cooperation have come and gone and with every passing year the commitment to the project remains as strong as ever across all member states.

It is impossible to say that Erasmus has not had a positive influence on a new generation of Europeans. Opportunities such as this were unheard of 50 years ago in a Europe recovering from a cataclysmic conflict that devastated the world, and even 30 years ago the programme's growth and expansion into what it is today could not have been envisioned. Now, in an age where connectivity and cooperation are easier than ever, Erasmus plays its not insignificant role in giving students some sort of common grounding through shared opportunities to travel and enhance their studies, and shaping worldviews in a way that until now was impossible. It plays this role by not only making an individual a citizen of Britain, or France, or Germany, or of the Czech Republic, but a citizen of Europe, a Europe that while divided along certain lines is united in its pursuit of giving potentially life changing opportunities to those who live and want to study within it.

Ollie Heppenstall is a journalism student at De Montfort University, England. He is passionate about history, football and Italian food, and takes an interest in current affairs. He believes projects such as Erasmus and #DMUglobal are crucial to gaining an understanding of the wider world and experiencing other cultures, regardless of their similarities and differences.

When did the first ERASMUS student go abroad?

1987 Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom

1988 Luxembourg

1993 Austria, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden

1994 Liechtenstein

1996 Cyprus, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia

1999 Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia

2000 Malta

2004 Turkey

2009 Croatia

2014 The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Erasmus+ open to the world

Source: © European Commission, 2017

