

Researching the impact of ERASMUS on European identification – the proposal of a conceptual framework

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The aim of this article is to reflect on the mechanism that might help to investigate the impact of the ERASMUS stay on identification with Europe. Using the approach of analytical sociology, the authors consider the ERASMUS stay abroad as a process, of which specific elements might determine the overall outcome of exchange. The article describes specific experiences before, during and after the stay that differentiate ERASMUS from other exchange programmes and that possibly have an impact on the identification with Europe. The article sketches the overall vision of ERASMUS experience indicating the actors involved in ERASMUS, the motivations of actors as well as the relations between different elements of experience. The description is grounded in the data of both quantitative (mostly from ESNSurvey research) and qualitative character.

Introduction

Strengthening the European integration by the personal meeting of citizens from different countries is one of the official aims of the ERASMUS Programme (cf. Feyen, this volume). While the answer to the question about the effectiveness of ERASMUS in achieving this aim is crucial from the point of view of the European Union, observing the actual impact is challenging. As an example, while former ERASMUS students feel more European than non-mobile students, some authors conclude that ERASMUS students are already more European when they decide to go abroad, so their increased identification with Europe is not an effect of the ERASMUS stay as such (van Mol 2011).

While European integration is a broad concept, this article focuses only on one of its aspects: the identification of ERASMUS students with Europe. Identification is one of the most important elements of integration. In this article, integration is understood as “the process of interaction between members of a group which results in reciprocal accommodation and an increased sense of identification with the group” (Fairchild 1970)¹. As the definition is related to ‘group’, it may also be used in reference to Europeans. In order to be integrated with Europe one has to feel European or to identify with other Europeans. It is hypothesized that through identification with other ERASMUS students (representing the group of Europeans), participants of the programme identify themselves with Europe itself and become more integrated.

By no doubts, the ERASMUS programme creates a unique opportunity for European students to encounter citizens of other countries. Still, one might question the actual impact of these meetings on the identification as such. Moreover, we should take into account that there might be different elements, besides encounters as such, that impact the identification with

¹ For the theoretical elaborations of concept of identity and identification see Ambrosi or de Mol in this volume.

Europe. Therefore, it is the aim of this article to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of ERASMUS stays' impact on students' identification with Europe using the tools of analytical sociology. Instead of answering the question about the actual impact of ERASMUS stays, the article proposes the conceptual framework which may be used as a background for further studies on the topic.

The proposed framework is supported by data collected within the survey projects realized by the *Erasmus Student Network* (ESN)², literature review and the authors' own experiences. Starting from 2005, ESN monitors the development of international exchange programmes through the European-wide research called ESNSurvey. Every year thousands of students from all over Europe reply to the online questionnaire³. Noteworthy, among the respondents there are also exchange students other than ERASMUS which allows one to compare the data of these two groups and indicate the features characteristic for the ERASMUS programme as such. The quantitative results are supported by results of qualitative studies, e.g. analysis of the ERASMUS students' stories collected by another ESN project – “*Share your experience*” – on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the programme in 2007.

This article is organized as follows. Firstly, we present and argue the conceptual framework for studying via the ERASMUS and its impact on identification with Europe. Secondly, we present a description of the most critical ERASMUS experiences before, during and after the stay abroad in order to provide readers with a wholesome vision of an ERASMUS experience and its unique characteristics. By describing very specific factors that differentiate ERASMUS from other exchange programmes, we want to sketch the overall picture of the experience and mark specific processes that might condition its outcomes. We concentrate also on pinpointing causal links between particular experiences. The article aims at allowing readers to have a wider view on the whole process of exchange and at stimulating further research in the area.

Theoretical basis of a conceptual framework

The analytical sociology (Boudon 1981; Bunge 2004; Swedberg, Hedström 1998) approach was used as a background perspective while building the conceptual framework for studying the impact of the ERASMUS experience on identification with Europe. The approach of analytical sociology postulates:

- a) treating the reality under study as a process i.e. social mechanism;
- b) identifying crucial elements of the process and mapping it onto the actors involved by describing the key characteristics of the actors;

² The *Erasmus Student Network* (ESN) is a student organisation founded for supporting and developing student exchange (www.esn.org).

³ Non random sampling is used in the ESNSurvey. The quoted data come from editions: 2008 (8,000 students replied), 2009 (6,800 students) and 2010 (8,500 students). The data collection process at the end of the academic year took each time 4 to 5 months.

c) analyzing causal relations between elements of the process.

The main reasons for why this perspective was introduced within social sciences was to help researchers explaining social phenomena by providing tools for conceptual framework formation. In order to design conceptual framework, Boudon (1981) proposes to treat social mechanism as consisting of three elements: set of actor's actions, environment (context) in which it takes place and its outcomes (effects). Thus, the analysis starts from an identification of main actors involved in the process, their actions, and the interactions between them. The main emphasis in the proposed framework is directed toward ERASMUS students, as they constitute the main actors in the process in focus. At the same time, other actors will be taken into account (e.g. policy makers, local students, universities). Then, the context and effects of the interactions are researched. In the case of ERASMUS students, the context is mostly defined by the home and host environment (universities and culture in both countries) and the design of the ERASMUS programme. Finally we study how the actors' action impact the ERASMUS students as such as well as how these action impact the environment.

The main advantage of this approach is its ability to provide a framework which enables both analyzing causal relations between elements of the mechanism and taking into account the actors' motivations and perceptions.

In the case of the ERASMUS stay, chronological time constitutes another important dimension which is not sufficiently acknowledged within the categories presented above. It is important to differentiate between three periods: before, during and after the stay (cf. Murphy-Lejeune 2008). Introducing the time dimension helps to explain many outcomes relating to an ERASMUS stay. As an example, Sigalas (2008) noted that ERASMUS does not manage to strengthen the European identity of most students. Still, he pinpointed that there is a modest impact of intense socializing with other Europeans on European identity. According to Sigalas' research with UK outgoing students and European students who arrive to the UK on exchange, ERASMUS students tend to socialize more with local students at the beginning of their stay, and with time they compensate a decline in socialization with locals by increasing contacts with other European students.

Sigalas' perspective illustrates the approach that we propose in this article. We treat an ERASMUS stay not as a unit or particular event, but as process which encompasses different experiences in different life spheres, at different moments of exchange. Thus, it is not the ERASMUS stay as such which strengthens or does not strengthen European identity, but specific experiences before, during and after the stay that have an impact on the identification with Europe.

Taking into account the discussed categories and diverse data sources, the conceptual framework consisting of the following elements was proposed:

- **Before the stay:** characteristic of the programme and the students, students' expectations, background of students (family characteristics, country socio-economic situation);

- **During the stay:** social, academic and problem-solving aspects of stay;
- **After the stay:** effects for ERASMUS students.

The proposed conceptual framework is partially inspired by the storyline constructed by Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune (2008). On the basis of students' voices, Murphy-Lejeune draws a 'typical' storyline which arises from students' narratives, which involves the period before departure, adjustment to the new environment, and experiences after the stay. While Murphy-Lejeune stresses the importance of personal choices and involved factors at different stages of an exchange experience on the integration process within the local community, we believe that those multiple factors also influence the final outcome of an exchange – which is the stronger identification with Europe. Even if our conceptual framework draws on the described approach, it differs in: accenting the causal relations between the described aspects of stay/treating them as social mechanism, providing grounds for evaluative perspective and the use of both qualitative and quantitative data. Last but not least, we would like to emphasize the diversity of ERASMUS students' experiences which is sometimes blurred by statistical data. Whenever we say something general about 'ERASMUS students', it refers rather to general tendencies than to all ERASMUS students.

Elements of ERASMUS experience: Before the stay

At the first stage of the exchange timeline we indicate two main interrelated factors of the ERASMUS programme: its inclusive design and the motivations of students. Additionally, the short character of the stay (1 or 2 semesters) impacts the overall experience, as indicated in the article of Krzaklewska and Skórska (this volume), and the amount of time to be spent abroad might affect the decision to take part in an exchange as well as e.g. dedication to integration process with the local community.

Inclusive design of the ERASMUS programme

The ERASMUS has in time become one of the most inclusive exchange programmes for students. It is inclusive in two respects: scope (i.e. number of students who participate in it⁴) and social (openness for students from disadvantaged groups, e.g. students with disabilities). The first factor is well-documented by the statistics of ERASMUS: since its establishment 25 years ago, more than 2.2 million students took part in its exchanges. Every year about 200,000 students go to study and work abroad through the programme⁵. Important to mention is also the fact of its growing openness. Since the year 2007, the ERASMUS scholarship is granted not only to students who want to spend a semester (or two) at a university abroad, but also to those who want to spend a short period of time doing an internship abroad. The second aspect, its social inclusiveness, is measured taking into account the social background of the families of participating students. ERASMUS students more often than students from other

⁴ While achieving a high number of students participating in ERASMUS is one of the aims of the programme, the inclusive design of the ERASMUS programme seems to be a conscious choice of policy makers.

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm (04.06.2012)

exchange programmes come from social groups of average or lower standing: Taking the financial status as an example, within all ESNSurveys ERASMUS students are less likely than non-ERASMUS students to declare that their family's income is above the country's average (20% for ERASMUS students and 29% for non-ERASMUS in 2010). A study of ECOTEC (Otero, McCoshan 2006) shows that 62% of students declare their income as average or below average.

Motivations for going on ERASMUS

Based on the answers to the survey concerning relevant motivations for deciding to go abroad, we are able to differentiate two student groups⁶ students who are career-oriented and those experience-oriented. Among ERASMUS students in 2005, there were 53% of experience-oriented students and 47% of career-oriented students. We may hypothesize that while career-oriented motivations are typical for all exchange programmes, experience orientation is associated only with some of them. The ERASMUS programme is in this sparse group. Due to the programme's openness for numerous students coming from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, it is perceived also as a social experience rather than exclusively an academic one. ERASMUS students are less academically-oriented, but more engaged in non-formal skills development.

Table 1: Motivations for going abroad: career-oriented and experience-oriented students.

	Career-oriented students	Experience-oriented students
Reasons for going abroad indicated as important in survey	To improve academic knowledge To enhance future employment prospects To practice foreign language	To have new experiences To learn about different cultures To have fun To meet new people To be independent To live in a foreign country
Student groups who were more likely to belong to specific category	Non-ERASMUS exchange students Females With lower family income Coming from South (e.g. Spain), Central and East European Countries (e.g. Poland) Older	ERASMUS students Males With higher family income Coming from West and North European countries Younger
Quotes	<i>With my ERASMUS Program I had the opportunity to start an international work career (Bruno)</i>	<i>I always wanted to smell freedom and independence (Katerina)</i>

Source: own work based on ESNSurvey 2006 (Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2007).

The analysis of motivations indicates links between various aspects of exchange experience. Social background has a strong impact on students' motivations. As we may notice, career-oriented students more often came from socially disadvantaged groups (e.g. students with

⁶ The categorisation process was based on Principal Component analysis. Both components explained 45% of variance. The sentences on which categorization is based are presented in the table below as reasons for going abroad.

lower family income, females, Eastern Europe; see table 1). Gender and age also have an impact on the motivations. Most remarkably, motivations appear to have an impact on the rating of the overall experience, thus satisfaction with it. Those who went abroad to meet new people, as well as those wanting to have a semester/year away from the home country, generally had higher overall satisfaction with stay (Alfranseder et al. 2011). This would suggest that certain kinds of expectations are more probably fulfilled during the stay.

Elements of ERASMUS experience: During the stay

While analyzing the actual stay abroad of the ERASMUS students, the question appears of how students' expectations and exchange inclusive design are challenged by the reality. While from the institutional point of view the academic dimension of the stay and the studies at the host universities are the most important part of the ERASMUS exchange, what matters more for ERASMUS students is social life, especially networking with other foreign students.

Importance of social life

ERASMUS students' activities concentrate on exploration in different spheres of life (Krzaklewska, this volume). Exploration takes part in an academic sphere (e.g. learning new ways of studying), in culture (exploring host country culture, food, places), as well as in a social life dimension (meeting new people, creating relationships, partying, travelling). ERASMUS programme evaluations (Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006) as well as other qualitative studies (e.g. Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Tsoukalas 2008) clearly show the great importance of the social dimension for ERASMUS students. It is seen as strongly important in quantitative studies on satisfaction with the stay abroad. In general, ERASMUS students are more satisfied with their stay than with their studies (e.g. Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006; Alfranseder et al. 2011). Based on students answers about the twelve aspects of their stay, three more general dimensions of the stay are differentiated⁷: social (e.g. contact with local students, social life), academic (e.g. courses, professors) and the problem-solving dimension (e.g. information, finances) (Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006). ERASMUS students are the most satisfied with the social dimension and least satisfied with the problem-solving dimension of their stay. Moreover, the social dimension has the strongest influence on the overall satisfaction with the stay. Even if ERASMUS students may often be exposed to financial problems and be under-informed, the social dimension of their stay counterbalances these difficulties.

Finally, it cannot be denied that during the exchange most students actively take part in the academic life. According to the ESNSurvey 2010, more than 80% of students expected 'Widening academic knowledge' and 'Experiencing a different educational system'. 30% of students went abroad to 'Get support for the thesis' (Alfranseder et al. 2011). About 80% of students are satisfied with the quality of teaching, and most of them are rather satisfied with

⁷ Three dimensions were differentiated by the use of Principal Component Analysis. The three components accounted for 56% of the total variance.

their studies abroad (ibid.). Still, the qualitative data strongly indicates that the non-formal learning dimension and experiences of a non-academic character have a deep impact on the students' experience of ERASMUS. However, this should not allow us to consider ERASMUS as a non-academic experience. ERASMUS is a university exchange and it is filled with academic activities and duties. But besides them, the exchange creates new zones of learning which are maybe even more effective in providing students with the so called 'soft competences' (cf.. Krzaklewska 2010).

Networking with other ERASMUS students

Meeting new people is one of the most important experiences during a stay abroad. For ERASMUS students, meeting new people is the main motivation for taking part in ERASMUS. 93% of students consider 'Meeting new people' as a 'very important' or 'important' reason for going abroad (Alfranseder et al. 2011).

As De Federico de la Rúa (2008) writes, "ERASMUS students make many friends in a short time, 16 friends on average, although individual differences are important; friendship networks range from 3 to 30 friends". Bauwens et al. (2009) indicate that most often ERASMUS students have about 6 to 20 friends among other foreigners or ERASMUS students (43%), but many even have 21-50 friends (26%). Contacts with students from the same country (co-nationals) as well as with local students are less frequent. In these cases, the networks consist most often of 1 to 5 friends (Boomans, 2008). Results of a semantic analysis (Krzaklewska 2008) indicate that when ERASMUS students use the word 'friend/s', they are not only describing intimate, affection-loaded relationships, but they rather describe people who "happened" to be in the same situation as them – simply: other ERASMUS students. 'ERASMUS friends' and 'ERASMUS people' are used interchangeably. It partially explains the unusually large width of ERASMUS networks, but also stresses the identification with a wider community ("ERASMUS community", see also Wood in this volume). The most often associated actions with 'ERASMUS friends' are 'socialization' and 'identification':

ERASMUS friends socialize. They share time, enjoy, drink, dance, talk, sing, study, go to the city centre, lunch, parties for 150 people from i-don't-know-how-many-countries, travelled (...) [Therefore] they feel: we are all the same, we were all one, together, we are all the same souls, we formed a very intensive group, because every problem, or the feeling alone that we have sometimes, was the same for everyone, no matter the nationalities. We were all so different, from different countries, but yet we had so much in common⁸.

Tsoukalas (2008) confirms the existence of the particularistic and immediate sense of community among ERASMUS students which is created, among others, by intense socialization. As far as the impact of ties on identification with Europe is concerned, the strong ties between ERASMUS students might allow one to foster this identification. On the

⁸ This quote was created by gathering all fragments of descriptions coded as 'socialisation' and 'identification'. For more information on methodology see Krzaklewska 2008.

other hand, the closure of the group and its exclusiveness might have contrary effects and hinder intercultural learning. Tsoukalas indicates other problems that might stop intercultural learning, including the superficial character of interactions between ERASMUS students, as well as poor language skills that hinder in-depth communication.

While the fact of intense socialization might impact the process of identification with Europe as such, it has also an impact on the ‘internationalization’ of the students’ self-image (Krzaklewska 2008). While friendship is a source of identification (De Federico de la Rúa 2001), in the case of ERASMUS students international networks are a source of identification with the wider idea of being an internationally-minded individual. A good illustration of this process is the following quote: “I understood internationality would become part of my daily life, I could not imagine living or working in a non-multicultural or non-multinational environment.” (Krzaklewska 2008). ERASMUS students describe their international identity by providing a long lists of friends from different countries with whom they socialized during ERASMUS. A similar process can be observed in the virtual space (see Roguski in this volume), where in some online communities not the interactions are of value, but a list of a virtual network of friends with whom one does not share neither affection nor actions (e.g. Facebook). In this sense, friends are not a source of affection, trust or solidarity, but a tool to describe one’s identity. And as this identity has a strongly international character, it might foster an identification with Europe.

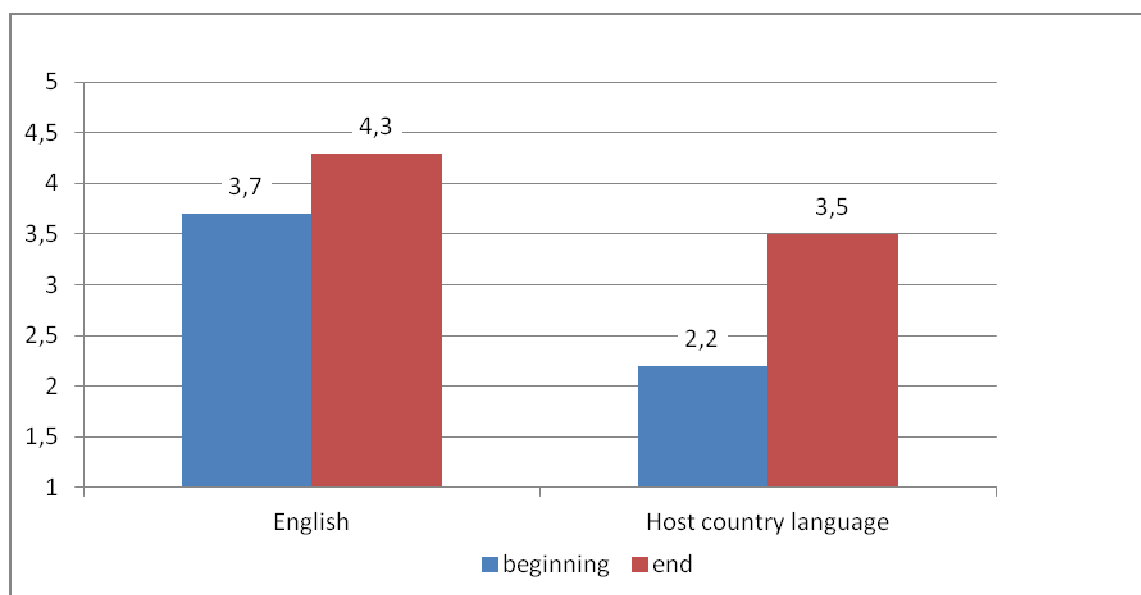
Elements of ERASMUS experience: After the stay

There are four important effects of a stay abroad: skills, lasting relations, mobility and identity. These effects are important for both ERASMUS students and the process of European integration.

Skills gained abroad

The most important educational effect of ERASMUS are the skills which are gained by students during their stay abroad. Among them, language and social skills are the most important. As figure 1 illustrates, during their stay abroad students improve both their knowledge of English and of the host country’s language. Noteworthy, the progress is on average bigger in case of the host country’s language because the level of competence is lower at the beginning of the stay. The progress in learning the host country’s language is positively correlated with informal contacts with people from the host country (close relationships, spending most time or much time with local students, sharing the flat or having classes with other host country people) (Bauwens et al. 2009).

Figure 1. Knowledge of the host language and English at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad for different groups of respondents (1-not at all to 5-very well, N=5283).



Source: own work based on the ESNSurvey 2008 (Bauwens et al. 2009).

Additionally to language skills, there are many social skills being gained by students. In the ESNSurvey 2005 (Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006: 20-22) students were asked an open-ended question: *What is the most important thing you learned as an exchange student?* Their answers were classified into 5 categories which are presented in the table 2. The main learning outcomes included: acquiring cultural skills and knowledge, maturity and self-development, creation of social networks, academic enrichment and value of discovery and exploring new possibilities.

Table 2. Non-formal learning dimension of ERASMUS students. Categories of the most important things ERASMUS students learned while being on exchange.

Dimension	Description	Exemplary pronouncements of respondents
acquiring cultural skills and knowledge	1.1 communication and work in international environment ➤ knowledge about host country ➤ how to survive in the foreign country ➤ open-mindedness, tolerance ➤ language	<i>I learned to work in a group with people of different skills and culture. that the French live in a totally other rhythm, they work different, and it was sometimes hard to accept</i> <i>I learn to be able to study in a foreign country in a foreign language and to do everything on my own</i> <i>different countries; different costumes! but respect is the key word. that aiming to understand different cultures and habits helps you understand and develop yourself.</i>
maturity and self development	➤ being independent ➤ determination in solving problems ➤ self confidence ➤ flexibility	<i>to be independent and take responsibility for my own learning</i> <i>to overcome all obstacles no matter the circumstances and to be patient</i> <i>to take decisions and stay firm in all situations</i> <i>the importance of being flexible and being open-minded to new systems</i>

	➤ personal growth	<i>to test my limits as a human being when I am alone in some difficult situation in a foreign country</i>
[building] social networks	creation of friendships ➤ communication skills	build a network around the world to integrate in a group of international of foreign students with different backgrounds to speak with all people more easily
academic enrichment	adaptation to different academic system ➤ planning career path due to exchange	a view into a very different educational system what I'd like to be my main field of activity in the future
value of discovery and exploring new possibilities	openness to new grabbing opportunities	<i>to live your life at the moment & not worry to much about the future because the people in Spain don't care to much about their cars; houses but live. To try everything new; and not to be afraid about new experiences.</i> <i>to avail oneself of the opportunity.</i>

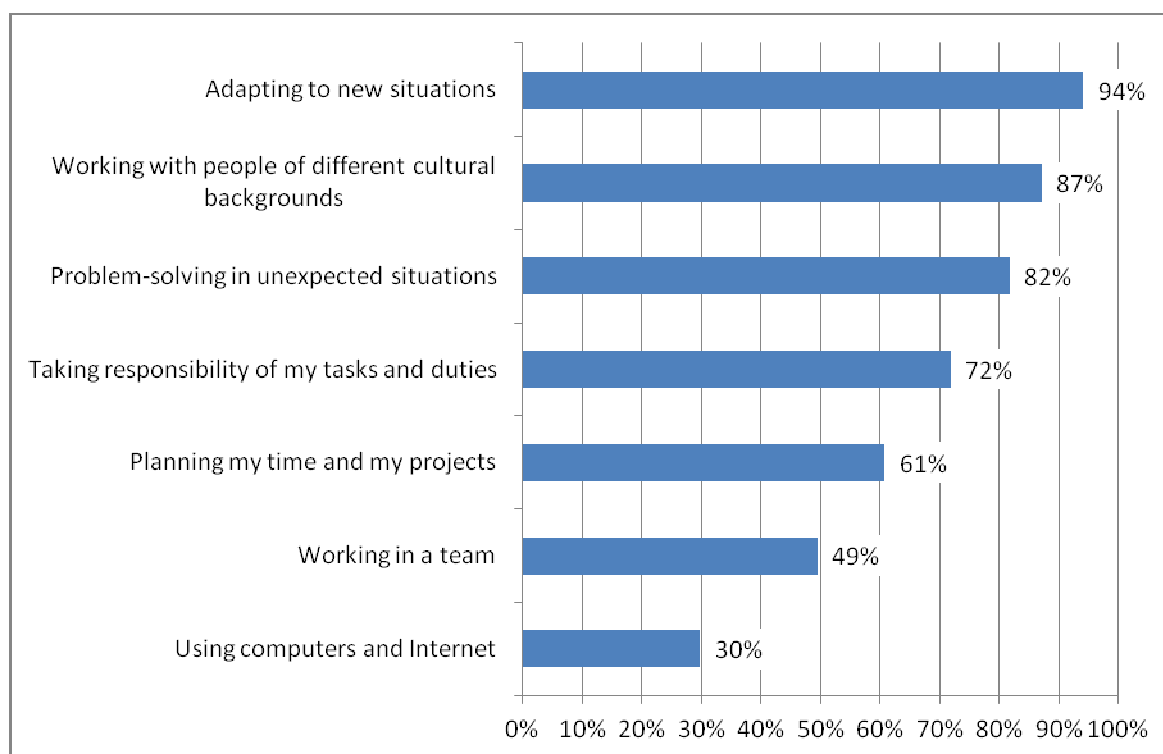
Source: Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006.

We can see that the first most commonly mentioned learning outcome was the acquisition of cultural skills and knowledge. Also, Otero and McCoshan (2006) indicate that most of the students reported large changes or changes to some extent in their understanding of people from other cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Similar opinions were shared by students, e.g. by Stela who studied in 2006 in Bergen:

It was the best thing that happened to me in my entire life. (...) It meant a lot more than just studying in another country and meeting new friends. It was also learning about different nations' habits and breaking stereotypes.

In the ESNSurvey 2008 (Bauwens at al. 2009), students responded to the close-ended question concerning the skills they improved as a results of the stay abroad (see Figure 2). As we may see, the most often indicated competence is the ability to adapt to new situations, the ability to work with people of different backgrounds as well as problem-solving skills. Students also relatively often declare having learnt to take responsibility for their time and duties. Moreover, concerning non-academic experiences, 93% of students agree or strongly agree that they learned to communicate with people from different countries.

Figure 2. Skills students improved as a results of the stay abroad (N=5260).



Source: Bauwens et al. 2009: 37 with modifications.

A very interesting effect of ERASMUS is a maturation effect. Students describe their stay from one side as a time of exploration, availing to new opportunities and space for experimentation. On the other hand, they describe it as a time to grow and mature, in other words: to become a grown up, an adult (cf. Krzaklewska 2006). Most striking is though the fact that their definition of an adult contains in itself not only features such as independence, responsibility for one's actions and personal growth, but also a set of intercultural competences and skills. As Krzaklewska (2006) writes, this will be “an adult that will be able to act freely in the globalized world. S/he should be equipped with the skills to interact smoothly with people of various cultures as well as to ‘survive’ in any intercultural environment.”

Lasting relations

Networking, which was already discussed, leads to longer lasting relations with people from many – mostly European – countries. Friendships built up during the exchange last longer than the actual period abroad. In fact, 91% of the students stay in touch with their friends from exchange (Boomans et al. 2008). More than half of them they stay in touch with 5 or more friends (which links to the fact that their friend networks during ERASMUS are very wide). Moreover, one third of the respondents visit their friends after the exchange period finished. Keeping in touch with exchange friends is also confirmed by De Federico de la Rúa (2008): students, one year after their return to the home country, keep in touch with 2/3 of the friends from their exchange.

Furthermore, according to the research of Tsoukalas (2008), the character of ties between ERASMUS students changes with time. The community, once so closed and touchable, becomes more abstract. As Tsoukalas writes, “The weak ties between former ERASMUS students [after the return to the home country] function as a kind of connective tissue which binds them together into a more encompassing form of a community, a cross-national and inclusive one this time”. According to him, this change in the quality of relationships between students can set a ground for a modern and more inclusive form of community, which could be the basis for building a transnational, potentially European, consciousness. As the ESNSurvey 2007 (Boomans et al. 2008) revealed, those students who kept in contact with their exchange friends or visited them after the exchange was over, were also more keen on describing themselves as ‘European’ or ‘Global’.

Mobility capital

In the ESNSurvey 2005 (Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006), two indicators measured prospective mobility of the ERASMUS alumni: willingness to move to a foreign country (destination and period of stay) and considering a serious relationship with a person from a foreign country. When asked whether they would consider moving to another country, 78% of ERASMUS students answered positively and only 7% negatively (15% were undecided). Most of the students indicated the desired period of staying abroad as being ‘Long but not permanently’ (69%), which also shows that they do not see a problem in changing the place of residence many times within their lifetime. Moreover, the results allow for drawing the conclusion that the mobility of ERASMUS students is mostly associated with Europe. Most students (66%) indicated Europe as a desired place of living, much rarer than they answered ‘All over the world’ (12%) or ‘Other places’ (11%) – 10% were undecided. 69% of the students would consider having serious relationship with a person from another country, and only 13% would not. Students coming from Western countries were more likely than those from Central and Eastern European countries to consider a serious relationship with a person from another country.

The mobility capital of former ERASMUS students is also visible in aspects such as very good communication skills (ability to use technologies for cross-border communication), the ability to communicate in many foreign languages, and wide contacts abroad (also through online communities) (Boomans et al. 2008).

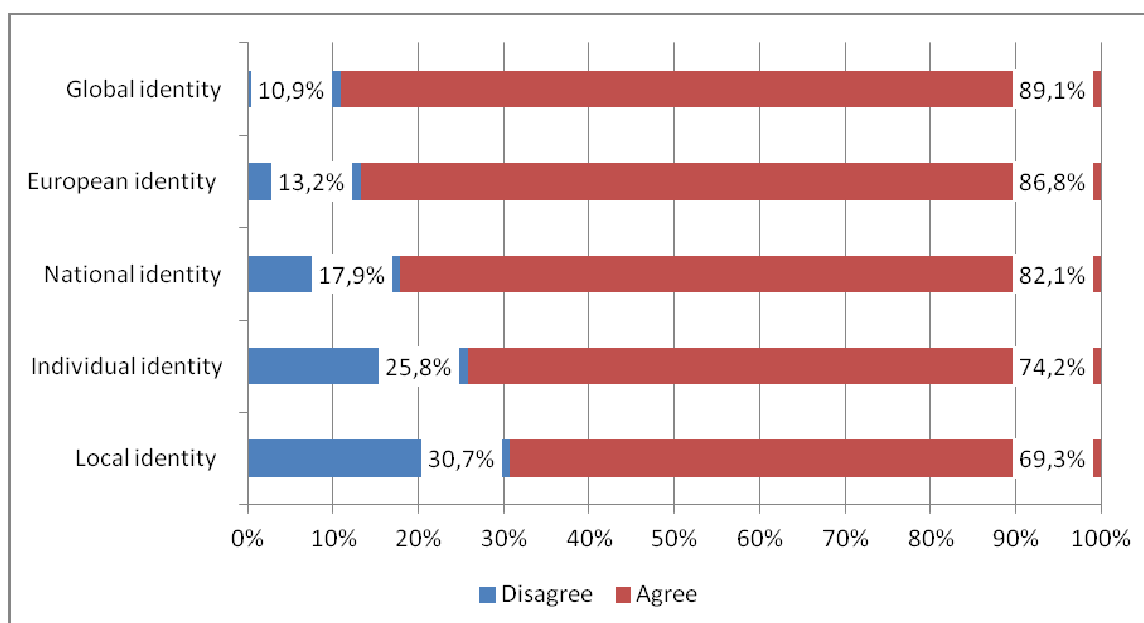
Noteworthy, the future mobility indicators were influenced by the students’ satisfaction with their stay. Students who were more satisfied were more likely to declare that they would consider moving abroad and that they would consider a serious relationship with a person from a foreign country (Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2006).

Identification with Europe

When asked about their identity, students had to indicate whether they identify themselves with the world, the European community, their nation, local community, or see themselves as

autonomous individuals (the statement was: *I see myself as a citizen of...*)⁹. As figure 3 demonstrates, students declare their identity most of all as global (89,2%) or European (86,8%). National identity is less important for them. Individual and local identities were the rarest choices (Boomans et al. 2008). The identification with the world or European community is higher for ERASMUS students than generally for young people in the countries participating in ERASMUS¹⁰. As the World Value Survey indicates, around the year 2006 in the population of people 15 to 29 years old, 75% agree or rather agree that they are global citizens, and 68,5% that they are European Union citizens. The strongest identity among the group is the national one (92,5%). Contrastingly, for the ERASMUS students, the results suggest that the global and the European identity is becoming as important as the national one. Further research is needed to investigate the durability of the effect and its further impact on other people back in the home country.

Figure 3. ERASMUS students' identity (N=6 145).



Source: Bauwens et al. (2008: 26) with modifications.

Presentation of the model and conclusions

This article treats the ERASMUS experience as a mechanism which might lead to a higher identification with Europe. Particular elements of the mechanism were described in order to map the mechanism and to provide a conceptual framework for describing the ERASMUS experience. The discussed elements of a social mechanism that leads to identification with Europe are summarized in figure 4. The presented model indicates the causal relations

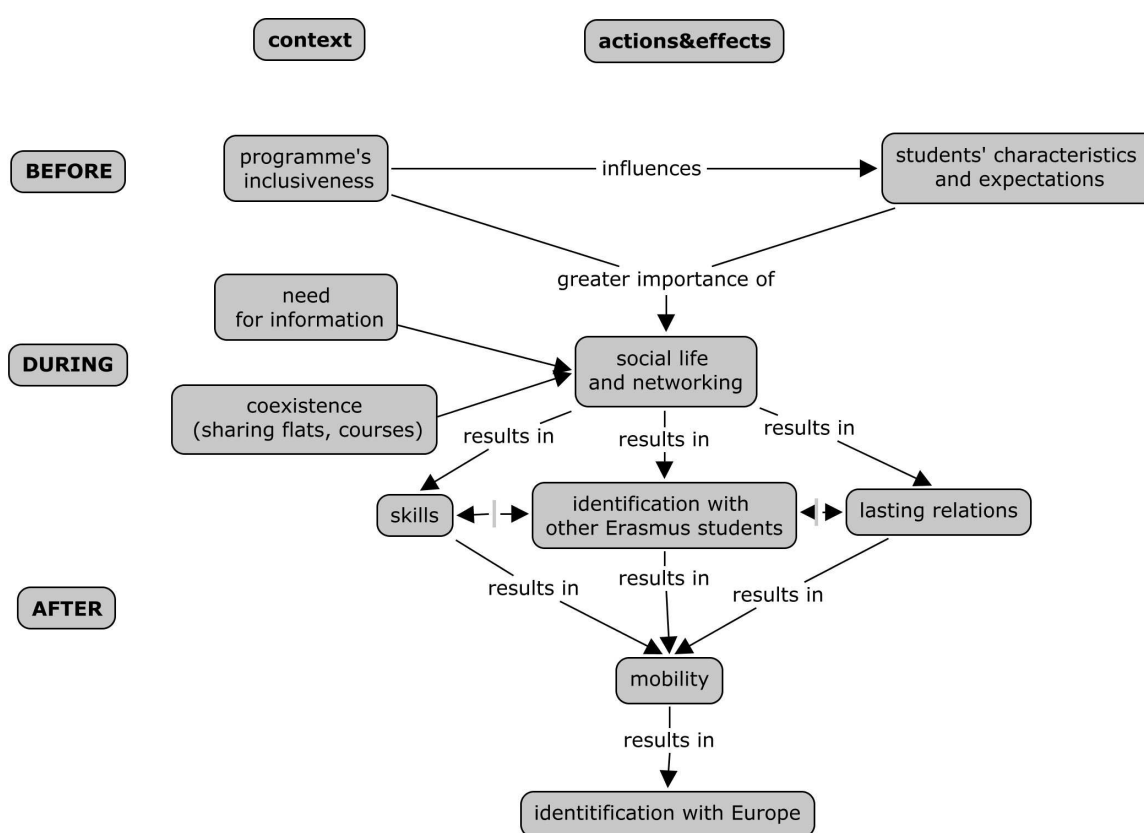
⁹ The researchers used the slightly modified question from the World Value Survey. The question in WVS measured identification with European Union, while ESNSurvey measured identification with European community.

¹⁰ As World Value Survey does not cover all the ERASMUS countries, the analysis included: Italy, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Switzerland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Cyprus, Germany.

between the mechanism's elements as well as important contextual elements. The model is divided into three stages: before, during and after stay abroad, and to these stages particular elements of model are assigned.

Let us summarize the model. Starting with the period before stay, the ERASMUS programme is designed by policy makers as inclusive rather than being targeted to those with the best academic achievements. As a result, students with diverse characteristics and expectations (academic as well as experience-oriented) may take part in it. Those expectations condition an importance of social life and networking during the stay. The high importance of those elements is further enhanced by the contextual factors (such as a need for information, sharing flats and participation in academic life, e.g. often in courses specially designed for ERASMUS students). Noteworthy, students interact most often not with co-nationals or host country students, but with students from other countries, mostly other ERASMUS students, which results in and a very strong identification with the 'ERASMUS community'. Further on, social activities lead to after stay effects: improved social and language skills as well as lasting relations. This builds up to a higher mobility capital for the group of ERASMUS students which might also results in physical mobility. Identification with Europe is an ultimate result of the preceding elements of mechanism.

Figure 4. Social mechanism leading to identification with Europe¹¹.



¹¹ While arrows indicate only direct relations, all preceding factors influence subsequent ones.

While this article focused mostly on one main group of actors (ERASMUS students as such), there are many other actors involved in the described process. Before the stay, policy makers determine the design of the programme, while former ERASMUS students and the home university provide information on the programme.

During the stay, the host university (sometimes together with student organizations), local and other foreign students have an impact on the ERASMUS students' experiences. As an example, weak provision of information makes students more dependent on other ERASMUS students, or providing accommodation for all ERASMUS students in one dormitory tightens the relations between them. On the other hand, sharing a flat with local students or working together on a project influences their integration in the local community.

Similarly, interaction with ERASMUS students leads also to the effects for the described actors (this article did not treat these outcomes as central, though they are important to sketch the wider context of the programme functioning):

- Policy makers are likely to achieve their political aims (e.g. European integration, increase in mobility, internationalization of education, multilingualism);
- Universities become more international and enrich their academic offer (e.g. support for Bologna Process tools implementation, such as ECTS, internationalisation of teaching and learning (European Commission DG Education and Culture, 2008);
- Local students may observe some of the effects similar to the ones gained during ERASMUS stay (e.g. language and social skills) by having contacts with foreign counterparts ('internationalization at home'), as well as being encouraged to go on ERASMUS themselves.

The presented framework should not be treated as final. Further research may validate the proposed description, as well as identify other important factors for the model. As an example, the actual net effect evaluation of the ERASMUS programme with panel data would definitely provide more robust results. As most research (ESNSurvey included) gathers data only *after* the exchange experience, conducting international research studying students before, during *and* after their ERASMUS exchange period would provide more in-depth results. At the same time, there are many more specific issues which could be further investigated, e.g. reasons for insufficient contact with local students or effects of ERASMUS stay on relations with friends from home country.

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