

Speech Mobility Conference

Koen Geven, Lisbon, 4 October

Dear minister,
Dear commissioner,
Dear students,
Distinguished guests,

We are celebrating today that the Erasmus programme has been started by great political leadership twenty years ago.

That a programme that did not belong in the competence of the European Community has fundamentally changed the lives of more than a million citizens.

And that more students than ever before are able to find their way in the European Higher Education Area.

As a student, it is maybe hard to grasp the full twenty years history of the Erasmus programme. Indeed, I was only three years old when the programme started and only got into touch with it when I started studying four years ago.

Since that time, I have participated in numerous debates about the topic. Major events were ESU's student convention under the Greek presidency in 2003, the official Bologna seminar we jointly organised with Education International in February this year and two Ministerial Summits I attended on behalf of the student movement. It is interesting to see that everywhere I have debated the topic, no one has ever questioned the many benefits student mobility brings to our students and societies. This consensus is so strong that the topic has been successfully integrated into all major European political commitments towards higher education. Specifically, I can mention the Bologna Process, mentioning mobility as a 'core element' of the European Higher Education Area and the EU's Lisbon Strategy, which has put the Lifelong Learning Programme at the centre of its attention.

The topic of student mobility has been extensively surveyed by the Erasmus Student Network, and has been a priority in our own Bologna With Students' Eyes survey, of which the most recent edition has been published only a couple of months ago. Studies such as EUA's Trends survey, the official Bologna Stocktaking, the ECOTEC survey and Eurostudent are largely compatible with our own data.

As we are at the end of our celebrations, I wish to look into the future. My message is that the Erasmus programme is a success. And following this success, our ambitions have to grow.

Is the Erasmus programme a success?

To assess the Erasmus programme, we need to take a look at the facts. Here we get into some trouble – extensive data does not exist yet.

As far as statistics lead us anywhere in this field, we know that around 150.000 students are participating in the Erasmus programme each year, and that this number is continuously rising. Data from the Eurostudent survey shows that just a bit more students decide to study

abroad with their own travel plans; we call these students 'free movers'. In total, if we add the Erasmus students and free movers together, around five per cent of the student population finishes their degree including a study period abroad.

Within these numbers, we can see some problems as well. Students do not favour Eastern destinations, they are still committing large amounts of private funding and students from the United Kingdom and Ireland stay at home more than their friends elsewhere. Very recently, we can see an interesting gender aspect in the statistics as well – women tend to participate more in the programme than men as they are over-represented in humanities.

Looking at the initial controversy around the Erasmus programme and the aims that are currently set, we can however call the programme a great success. Indeed, we believe that with the current figures, reaching the goal of 3 million Erasmus students by 2013 might just become a reality.

But, why do we then continue to debate this topic so vividly?

Allow me to shortly repeat the many benefits of mobility from a student perspective. We go abroad to add something to our curriculum, to extend our chances on the labour market, to learn a foreign language, or more simply, to go on an adventure in a foreign culture. Unknowingly, we become Europeans, understanding the diversity and similarities of the continent. We go abroad despite the many obstacles that still exist.

The ambitions of the student population are much higher than the results we have achieved so far. The Eurostudent report shows that the demand for mobility is much higher than five percent. For example, in my own country, The Netherlands, more than fifty per cent of students have certain plans for a period of study abroad.

We cannot be so positive about student mobility in the light of the commitments in the Bologna Process. With ninety-five percent of students staying at home, the European Higher Education Area remains a dream, or a even a joke in the face of our deadline in 2010.

What are the main obstacles to student mobility?

Typical obstacles to participate in the Erasmus programme, as defined by our members, and confirmed by many surveys, such as the ESN survey or the ECOTEC survey are financial, administrative, qualitative or lingual.

Administratively, students suffer from a lack of information about the possibilities to go abroad. Although much has improved, not every institution has a central information centre where students can find out the possibilities and conditions of a stay abroad.

Lesson 1: we must set up better information centres, where students can inform themselves and take a rational choice to go abroad.

Qualitatively, it is hard for students to predict what they will learn when going abroad. Many students report that they have learned a lot, but not due to their studies.

Lesson 2: Quality Assurance must become a fundamental part of our mobility experiences. Mobile students should get the tools to improve their courses, while being abroad.

Language-wise, we can see that many students who go abroad already have the necessary language-competences. Often, they have not learned this language in their home institution. Too few options to learn a foreign language exist at universities.

Lesson 3: Language courses must be freely available at the home institution. Especially Eastern languages should be better promoted.

And financially, the Erasmus grant does not compensate the difference between the costs of studying at home and abroad. Increased living expenses, because of a temporary stay in a student dormitory, transportation costs, insurances, food prices, or sometimes study materials are amongst those that keep students at home. The fact that many students are not able to take their grant abroad contributes heavily to the bad financial position that students find themselves in while studying abroad.

Lessons four, five and six: Money, Money, Money.

Student loans and grants must be made portable in all European countries. Where national loans and grants systems are not available for the individual student, other mobility grants need to be developed.

Mobility grants must be available to a larger number of students. Students who want to go abroad, should get the means to do so.

And Europe's biggest challenge is to increase the Erasmus grant. It must at least cover the difference between studying at home and studying in a foreign country.

The social dimension of the Erasmus programme:

A good approach to the problem of why many students do not go abroad can be found in the discussion on the social dimension of higher education. In a nutshell, this covers all parts of student life, which are not academic. The surveys mentioned earlier strongly state that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are deterred from a study period abroad. I strongly believe that improving the social dimension will lead to large improvements in participation rates in higher education generally, but also to larger numbers of mobile students.

In this light, the Bologna Process has already made a major commitment to increase the participation of non-traditional groups in higher education. It has concluded that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. It would be an interesting question to ask why we don't have a similar goal for student mobility.

Indeed, looking at the background of students who are mobile, a similar commitment should be made towards student mobility. Efforts to improve the social dimension of mobility should be stepped up to make mobility a reality for all students.

Why aren't the obstacles removed?

From a student perspective, there seems to be a large discrepancy between political commitments and actions. To most of us here, this story should not come as a surprise, on the contrary, it reflects what we know since a very long time. The consensus on the benefits of student mobility seems strong on the surface, but below it, we can find problems in our dream.

The larger problem surfaces in our national discussions on mobility: On the far end of the political spectrum, xenophobia has become a real challenge to mobility, as shown in stricter visa procedures. On all positions of the political spectrum, parties seem to be more interested in attracting the best students from abroad than in sending their own students away. They fear a brain drain, a surge of talents who favour better employment opportunities abroad. And finally, as finances of higher education are constantly under pressure, increasing student mobility does not become a national priority.

Politics still does not see increasing mobility in general as a core goal for higher education. We lack a dream, or a vision for student mobility, which truly contributes to the development of a European Higher Education Area and Europe more generally. Concluding from the success of the Erasmus programme, we believe that we need a more ambitious commitment for student mobility. By 2020, we see at least twenty per cent of the student population enjoying part of their studies abroad – That is a dream we should pursue.

To achieve this goal, we must do more than find common action lines – we must mobilise politicians who want to commit to a large increase in student mobility. This is one of the reasons why ESU, together with Education International, is planning a campaign to increase momentum for student and staff mobility throughout 2008. Jointly, we believe that we can convince politicians that they need to move on mobility. This conference, organised by the Portuguese Presidency, is a strong sign for us that we are on the right track. And I am more than happy to announce that our campaign has received full support from the Bologna Process only three days ago.

Concluding

We have celebrated the 20th anniversary of Erasmus programme in multiple events this year. I would like to congratulate all of you here on our achievements so far. The programme has proven to be important for more than a million students' lives and will show in the positive attitude towards the European labour market more generally. But we must remain more ambitious if we wish to build a Europe where mobility of citizens, not of goods, is our fundamental building block.

The goal of creating a European Higher Education Area remains a dream if our ambitions do not increase.

We need a tangible goal: twenty per cent of all students should be mobile by 2020.

We need major efforts, especially regarding the social dimension of mobility to achieve this goal.

Students have seen many debates about the topic of student mobility and are now willing to go abroad. After twenty years of Erasmus, we provoke you to take real action to make our ambitions a reality.

Our ambition may seem unrealistic in the light of current political debates, but then again, they also seemed unrealistic twenty years ago.

Thank you for your attention.