

Radical plan to cut Erasmus study time

By Ian Mundell

05.03.2009 / 00:00 CET

A new report suggests that less could mean more if student stays were shorter.

A positive assessment of the Erasmus student mobility scheme was released last month, much to the satisfaction of the European Commission. But tucked away in the report's recommendations for improving the scheme was the radical suggestion that shorter Erasmus study periods should be considered, so that more students can participate.

"A reduction of the average duration of Erasmus stays abroad - from around six months on average to three months or, if necessary, an academic term - would free up resources for more mobility grants without making the periods too short to benefit from a true international experience," the report said.

The suggestion originated in a survey of university managers and Erasmus co-ordinators, with a substantial number of respondents making the suggestion.

"If we combine that with the general ambition of most stakeholders to increase mobility, then such a measure could be one of the important areas of improvement without too much budgetary consequence," said study leader Hans Vossensteyn, of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

A shorter stay abroad would change the Erasmus experience but not necessarily diminish it, Vossensteyn said.

"Of course one could gain more internationalisation experience in a six- or nine-month period, but Europeanisation is about exposing as many young people as possible to international experiences," Vossensteyn said.

The Erasmus Student Network, which represents those participating in the scheme, is not keen on reducing the amount of time that students spend abroad.

"Cutting down the average duration should not be the way to make more resources available, as three months is too short for real integration in the local community," said Marketa Tokova, the network's vice president. "In the beginning, exchange students tend to rather be with other students of their nationality, and only later start to discover the local culture and traditions and integrate with local students."

For the European Students' Union (ESU), the suggestion goes against the idea of student-centred learning.

"The length of the mobility period should be entirely up to the student," said Ligia Deca, chairperson of the ESU. "For some people, three months might be too much, for someone else it might be too little. It's a matter of how the student integrates the mobility period into his or her academic path. It's also a matter of how the exchange is designed by the partner universities and the environment the student goes into, and if integration can happen quickly," Deca said.

She thinks that a systematic reduction in the length of visit might discourage those students who do not see the benefit of going abroad for a short period. "The solution, to my mind, would be more flexibility in financing the mobility period, not pre-defining it and much less reducing it from the average we have now," she said.

The Commission says that it will reflect on the recommendation, but suggests that it may be more appropriately handled at a national level.

"As a general rule, the duration of a student mobility stay has to be between three and 12 months.

"The Commission does not intend to modify this rule at this stage," said a spokesman for Ján Figel', the European commissioner for education.

"However, within this broad range, flexibility is given to the national agencies and the higher education institutions. [They] may reduce the average mobility duration if they see this as a viable option to increase mobility flows without at the same time jeopardising the usefulness and benefits of a stay abroad."

Ian Mundell is a freelance journalist based in Brussels

© 2009 European Voice. All rights reserved.