

## EFFECTS OF THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME ON TURKISH UNIVERSITIES AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Uğur TEKİN\*  
Ayşen HİÇ GENCER\*\*

### ABSTRACT

Turkish university students' opportunities for studying abroad were quite restricted prior to the ERASMUS Student Exchange Programme. The implementation of the programme has rapidly changed this situation and significant numbers of students have had the chance to go overseas to live and to learn in universities outside of Turkey. As a result, Turkish universities have felt it necessary to incorporate the equivalent of the classes that students take abroad into their programmes. This situation, an important step in the internationalization of universities, is very new for Turkish universities and the students enrolled in them. This paper looks at the effects of the programme on 44 Turkish students in Germany via the ERASMUS Student Exchange Programme, the sample data being collected by qualitative methods at three stages. The study establishes what kind of changes have occurred in the students' perspectives, in their assessment of events, and in the long-term outlook of their education and professional future. In this frame, it also establishes their perspectives from before joining the programme and during the time they were abroad, which resources they used to access knowledge, the problems they faced and their solutions, how they assess the ERASMUS Programme as well as living abroad and the university in which they enrolled, as students for a certain time naturally assessed their European study by comparing the university and educational system with that in their home country. The study also investigates to what extent the aims of the ERASMUS Programme have been achieved, which could be summarised as increasing the quality of higher education and strengthening the European dimension in Turkish universities.

**Keywords:** ERASMUS Programme, internalization, Turkish university students.

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\* Prof.Dr., İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, İİBF Uluslararası Ticaret Bölümü,  
ugurtekin@aydin.edu.tr

\*\* Yrd.Doç.Dr., İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, İİBF Uluslararası Ticaret Bölümü,  
aysenhicgencer@gmail.com

## ERASMUS PROGRAMININ TÜRKİYE ÜNİVERSİTELERİ VE ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİ ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİLERİ

### ÖZET

Türk üniversite öğrencilerinin yurtdışında bulunma imkanları, ERASMUS öğrenci değişim programı uygulanana kadar oldukça sınırlı olmuştur. Programın uygulanması bu durumu hızla değiştirmiş ve oldukça önemli sayıda öğrenci Türkiye dışındaki üniversitelerle tanışma, eğitim alma ve başka bir ülkede yaşama imkanına sahip olmuştur. Türkiye Üniversiteleri, başka ülkelerde öğrencilerin aldıkları dersleri kendi programlarında karşılıklarını ve eşitliğini bulmak durumunda kalmıştır. Üniversitelerin uluslararasılaşmasında önemli bir adım olan bu durum Türkiye üniversiteleri ve üniversitelerinde kayıtlı öğrenciler için çok yeni bir durumdur. Bildiri ERASMUS öğrenci değişim Programıyla Almanya’da bulunan Türkiyeli öğrencilerde bu programın etkilerini ele almaktadır. Üç aşamada nitel yöntemlerle Almanya’da toplanan verilerin örneklemini Türkiye’den Almanya’ya ERASMUS Programıyla giden 44 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Programa katılımla öğrencilerin bakış açılarında, olayları değerlendirmelerinde, eğitim ve mesleki gelecek planlarında ne gibi değişikliklerin olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu çerçevede, öğrencilerin bu programa katılmadan önce ve yurtdışında buldukları sürede hangi kaynaklardan bilgi aldıkları, hangi sorunlarla karşılaştıkları, hangi çözüm yollarına yöneldikleri, ERASMUS Programını, yurtdışında yaşamı ve ERASMUS Programıyla buldukları üniversiteyi nasıl değerlendirdikleri de bu araştırmayla tespit edilmiştir. Avrupa’da belirli bir süre eğitim gören öğrencilerin, doğal olarak bu ülke üniversitesi ve eğitim sistemi ile kendi üniversitesini ve eğitim sistemini karşılaştırarak değerlendirme yapmaktadırlar. Avrupa’da yaşamı/öğrenci yaşamını Türkiye’deki yaşamla/öğrenci yaşamıyla karşılaştırmalar yapılması nedeniyle öğrencilerin bu programa katılım sonrasında kendi üniversitelerini, eğitim sistemlerini, öğrenci yaşamını nasıl değerlendirdikleri de araştırma içinde yer almaktadır.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* ERASMUS programı, içselleştirmek, Türk üniversite öğrencileri.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Programmes that aim to support the mobility of universities in the international field and particularly in EU countries are becoming increasingly common. One of the most successful among these is the ERASMUS Programme. Nearly 2 million students have participated in this programme since its foundation in 1987. In the frame of the ERASMUS Programme, university students continue a part of their education in another

country that is a member or a candidate member of the EU, and this period of their education is accepted in place of lessons in the education process in their home country. The ERASMUS student mobility, in which quite a high number of students have participated, is a short-term migration focused on transferring and sharing knowledge and is articulated to institutional constitutions. It is also possible to assess this migration within trans-border migration (Verwiebe 2008). Students who have participated in the ERASMUS Programme show a greater desire to engage in trans-border migration in the future compared to other students. Today, it is possible to talk about a common ERASMUS experience, which extends beyond the students' experience of the lifestyle and student culture of the country in which they study; bonding with students from other countries and the sharing of everyday life is also a part of the ERASMUS experience ([Dunkel & Teichler 2006](#); Corbett, 2005).

While student mobility plays an important role in communication and sharing knowledge, it also intervenes in national education structures. From this aspect, trans-nationalization becomes a dynamic force in this process (Teichler 2007; Keeling 2006). Specialization is a normal condition in the production of knowledge between universities. Education programmes are constituted in depth only in the fields of specialization of departments. This specialization ensures that students go to universities orientated to their field of interest and thus becomes an important factor for student mobility. This condition is not new. In European universities before the nation-state, student preferences for universities orientated to their field of interest were much more evident. As Stichweh (2000) rightly identified, there is an incompatibility between the university and the 'national state'. Universities are cosmopolitan institutions that construct themselves in communication with international education and by opening institutional structures to students and scientists from other countries. Every country heeds the internationalization of education due to the importance of the knowledge economy and the experience of internationalization of education. Today, internationalization is accepted as a criteria of success for universities. Programmes aiming to attract foreign students, common education between universities, double diploma programmes and distance learning structures have also become common in the international field (Teichler 2007).

## 2. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Contrary to students in Europe, the opportunities for university students in Turkey to go abroad has been very limited prior to the ERASMUS Student Exchange Programme due to strict visa conditions implemented by other countries on Turkish citizens. The introduction of the programme has rapidly changed this situation and significant numbers of students have found the chance to go abroad, to learn about universities outside of Turkey, and to study and live in another country, a very new situation for students enrolled in Turkish universities.

This study looks at the effect of this programme on Turkish students who were in Germany via the ERASMUS Student Exchange Programme. It seeks to establish what changes occurred in students' perspectives, in their assessment of events, and in their educational and professional outlook. Students, educated in Europe for a certain time, naturally compare that country's university and educational system with their own. This study also covers how students assess their own universities and educational systems, and their student life after participating in the programme. The study also investigates to what extent the aims that the ERASMUS Programme put forwards have been achieved, which can be summarised as increasing the quality of higher education in Europe and strengthening the European dimension in Turkish universities.

## 3. SCOPE AND METHOD OF STUDY

In the study carried out in Germany, a qualitative research method was used. Data was collected by observation, survey and a focus group interview. This method was preferred because it aims to study the phenomenon including the behaviour of the students participating in the program to analyse it in depth. The study's aims were to explain and comment in depth and detail the change in perspectives of the students who have been in Germany via the ERASMUS Student Exchange Programme. Therefore, interviews were carried out with certain persons at certain intervals. Due to the research method's structure, it was not the aim to generalize this study's results. The sample was formed by 44 Turkish students—16 male and 28 female—who went to Germany in the first semester of the 2008-09 educational year from the following departments: nine from Philosophy, six from Law, four from Public Administration, three from Educational Sciences, three from Fine Arts, three from Sociology, three from

International Relationships, three from Business, two from Economics, two from Archaeology, two from Political Science, two from Psychology, one from Construction, one from Pharmacy and one master in German. The distribution of the 35 graduates, ten post-graduates and three doctorate students in the German cities was: 33 in Cologne, 3 in Bochum, 2 in Berlin, 1 in Leipzig, 1 in Hildesheim, 1 in Siegen, 1 in Bonn, 1 in Mainz, and 1 in Göttingen.

Data was collected at three stages. At the first stage, students participated in a survey when they first came to Germany carried out between 15 September to 15 October 2008. At the second stage, a semi-structured conversation including open end question was carried out at the end of the first education period with students who participated in the surveys at the first stage. The conversations took place between 15 December 2008 and January 2009 and were recorded and transcribed. At the third stage, a focus group interview was carried out. Nine people who were in Cologne in the second semester of the 2008-09 educational year participated in two focus group interviews in June 2009. The anonymous quotations given have been taken from these student conversations, with the features of the quoted student given at the end in brackets using the following abbreviations:

G - graduate, PG - postgraduate, D - Doctorate student  
 Philosophy, Sociology etc., the department to which the student was enrolled  
 M - male, F - Female student  
 Cologne, Berlin, etc., the city in which the student was staying  
 1, 2, ... 44 – The numbers given to the students in conversation  
 Group - the quotation from focus group interview

25 students who enrolled in Cologne University from Turkey in the 2008-09 educational year also participated at certain stages of the study. The major part of the study was prepared together with Mehmet Mutlu who was a trainee of The Research Centre for Intercultural Studies in 2009 via the ERASMUS Placement Programme.

#### **4. BENEFITS OF THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME**

*“To be together with people who come from other places ... I mean, not in another way, not staying in a hostel, but around University”.* (G/Inter. Rel./f/Cologne/21)

The most impressive thing for students that they strongly expressed was meeting students who participated in the ERASMUS Programme from other European countries and sharing everyday life with them, along with students from the host country. Students who come from different European countries established intense relationships with one another through sharing living spaces, such as staying at the same hostel, and facing the same problems in the country and at the university.

#### 4.1. Learning About Different Cultures

Students expressed that their views on different cultures changed through learning about them, and they gained a trans-national perspective which changed their world view.

*“The most beneficial aspect of ERASMUS is that you learn about different cultures and you gain a different point of view. It means that prejudices are minimized”.* (PG/Economics/f/Cologne/33).

Since they are now successful in processes—living alone and being educated abroad—that they feared beforehand, the students expressed that their self-confidence increased, their perspectives *were* changed, that they were braver at taking chances and they behaved in a more conscious way. Vassiliki Papatsiba, in his 2005 study, reached similar conclusions.

Some of the students assessing the programme expressed that it *was* a turning point in their lives. In parallel to adapting to their new locations, students had to reposition themselves socially and accept new approaches easier.

*“... I saw my limits while I was here and experienced living alone in another country. This programme has changed my perspective and broadened it”.* (PG/Business/f/Cologne/5)

*“For instance, it was best year of my life”.* (G/Inter. Relationship/f/Cologne/21-Group)

We can say that the programme is very successful for students' development because of positive changes such as *those* described above.

#### 4.2. Easy and Cheap Overseas Journeys

Over 4-6 months of education time, students visited many additional places outside the country in which they were staying. All of the students interviewed visited at least *one* city; 90% of them visited more than three cities apart from the city they were staying in; four went to at least one

country in addition to Germany. Here, it is possible to see the contribution of the ERASMUS Programme to student mobility.

*“It is not easy to go abroad for someone who lives in Turkey. One of the biggest advantages of this programme is that it has created this opportunity. In addition, you do not stay only in the country you first went to. You can travel across Europe so easily”.* (G/Philosophy/m/Cologne/6)

Because these students can't access this opportunity in Turkey, they take advantage of it intensively, and their thinking that they would not be able to obtain this chance in the future contributes to this situation. It is very important in this process that the ERASMUS students can go to the Schengen countries without a visa, and therefore the opportunity of travelling to Germany is improved, the system established for student mobility being highly developed. The students took advantage of these opportunities, benefitting from the system.

*“My father did not believe me! He said: ‘you are doing something’”.* (G/Philosophy/m/Cologne/6).

*“... it is like a joke; 4-5 years ago, we needed to pay a lot of money to get an education in Europe; now, they are paying us money so that we go there and get education. It sounds too interesting”.* (G/Philosophy/f/Cologne/12)

Not only students, but also every social group in Turkey has become surfeited with the close structure of Turkish educational system. Opening it out is seen to be a maze, a source of wonderment in Turkey.

*“I most probably would not be able to obtain this chance without the ERASMUS Programme because to get education abroad, even for 6 months, is a really hard thing financially”.* (PG/Low/f/Cologne/25).

Some of the students said that they not only do not have access to education abroad but even for travelling abroad, but they gained the opportunity for both via the ERASMUS Programme.

### 4.3. Biographical Change

Students stated that their participation in this programme will effect both their academic and professional life in future.

*“... at least, for us. Perhaps not for students in Europe because they are always in contact, are able to travel, but we came and it changed all of us a lot”.* (G/Philosophy/m/Cologne/6-Group)

This is an environment that has not been experienced so far by

Turkish students because of the closed structure of Turkish universities in particular, the result being that there were not many foreign students who came from Europe. The students brought the new relation network they set up and their new connections back to their own country. Thus, the ERASMUS Programme has been a factor in the trans-national development of universities and an important turning point for students' biographies. The trans-national relationships they set up at this biographical period also play an important role in the development of students' social abilities.

*"... socially, your self-confidence increases. I feel like I can go anywhere on the world now". (G/Philosophy/m/Cologne/6).*

This programme provides a significant contribution towards students constructing a future outside their own country, and at this point increases their self-confidence, ensuring that they do not avoid risky and ambiguous environments and expand their world view.

*"The ERASMUS Programme changed my life ... I do not feel myself Turkish anymore, I started feeling like someone cosmopolitan". (G/Philosophy/m/Cologne/6)*

#### **4.4. Academic and Professional Career**

Some of the students assessed the ERASMUS Programme as a stage in their academic career. The students' plan regarding their education abroad either came about as a result of the ERASMUS Programme or it was understood that the ERASMUS Programme was considered a step in the realization of an pre-existing overseas education plan.

*"Yes, I think there will be very big positive sides ... on one hand you meet many people, on the other you meet many people who study on your field". (PG/Law/k/Cologne/38).*

It can also be seen that relationships that were created were effective for those studying related topics and sharing studies that were necessary for academic development.

*"That I have had education abroad will be demonstrated in my CV and I think it could be an advantage for me". (G/Construction/m/Bochum/41)*

Most of the students stated that the education they got abroad will be stated on their CV and this will create a positive impact on their professional life in the future. In thinking that it might respond to the business world's demands (education and life experience abroad, and flexibility and mobility)

they valued the time they spend abroad. By expressing directly their profession beyond this formal approach, they stated that the time they spent abroad is important and that they gained experience for their future professional life by participating in the ERASMUS Programme.

*“As a student teacher, it was a very important opportunity for me. I am thinking of using these techniques in my future professional life”.* (G/Education/f/Cologne/11).

*“I developed a new point of view to people and their environment and as a student who is a candidate of psychology, I think that it will reflect positively on my profession”.* (G/Psychology/m/Bocuhum/39)

Students who participated in the mobility process via the ERASMUS education programme expressed that they will be able to construct their future biography through this frame. The mobility *started* by this programme was described by the students both as continuing their education abroad and setting up their business life in the international business market. ([Dunkel & Teichler](#) 2006).

*“I think I can transfer my experience in this programme to my business since I want to work in an international workplace”.* (G/Economics/f/Berlin/31)

## 5. THE PROBLEMS FACED

### 5.1. Losing a term

*“My university does not accept the subjects that I took as optional. Since I did not take major subjects, it will lead me to lose a year. I think it is worth it because later on, perhaps, I can go abroad again but it may not be easy and I might not have this chance again”.* (PG/Law/m/Cologne/18)

Even though it is a big disadvantage for students in Turkey to lose a term, a significant number who participated in this program say that they were happy to do so, with a third accepting the loss of a term before coming. These high numbers demonstrate the value that *students* give to the programme and the importance of its non-educational aims. Even if academic aims are not the priority, it has been assessed that by participating in this programme, students gain in other areas such as being in a European country and learning about another country. Thus, we can say that the student profile in Turkey of someone who completes his or her education as soon as possible as being synonymous with success is changing.

*“Even if I said it did not add too much in an academic respect, it is*

*worth it to live in Europe for a while and see the education system of Europe". (G/Sociology/f/Cologne/17)*

As expressed above, students established a relation between losing a term and participating in the ERASMUS Programme. The larger part of the students *accepted* losing a term as a pre-condition while participating in the programme. This situation is contrary to the logic of the ERASMUS Programme as well as its aim to increase the quality of higher education in Europe and strengthen the European dimension. It is important to the approaches of the ERASMUS Programme that studies made in the overseas universities are accepted as academically mutual by the universities to which they are enrolled with in Turkey. It is not possible to say that this approach of the ERASMUS Programme has been valid for participating students from Turkey.

## **5.2. The problem of language**

It has been stated that the most important problem for the students is that they were not able to speak German. In the conversation carried out at the end of the term, students said that they faced serious problems due to language barriers (German and English) and different university systems. The larger part of the students who participated in the conversation had a limited knowledge of German and therefore it was not possible for them to participate in lessons.

*"There is an English lesson but I could not find many related to my own topic for my development; I could find only one. Available lessons are at the post-graduate level, that is, they will put pressure on me or I do not have a enough of a basis for them". (G/Inter. Relat/f/Cologne/8).*

Nearly all of the students said that they'd like to participate in the university's language course for foreign students. One of the most important reasons for students' coming here for education activities is to learn or improve their German. In the conversation at the end of the term, the students' grades for German were the following: seven students at A1, sixteen students at A2, nine students at B1, five students at B2, two students good, and four students very good. The level of the students who had been in Germany for at least one term shows us that most of them had very limited or no knowledge of German before coming here.

### 5.3. Difficulty of Preparing Syllabus

In the survey carried out at the beginning of term, the majority of students (25) said that he or she believed that they had adequate knowledge about their German university and department, that they would not change any detail of the syllabus they prepared (16 students), or would only make minor changes (11 students). But, in the conversation at the end of term, the majority of students stated that they changed their syllabus completely and expressed the reason as being that Turkish universities do not have adequate knowledge.

*“It has changed a lot. In Turkey, you are choosing without knowing a lot of things and your school is not helping you at all”.* (G/Law/f/Cologne/32).

It was revealed that the syllabus that students prepared for participation completely differed from the Turkish higher education system and is not an applicable programme in reality. Students who could not obtain enough information through their own universities, The ERASMUS offices or coordinators, could not obtain enough information from universities that they had come to directly.

## 6. THE ERASMUS Offices

*“A chain of red tape that annoys you and makes you sick of your life, makes you regretful that you’re involved with the ERASMUS Project with its interminable procedures, as if they are paying the money from their own pocket for you.”* (G/Law/f/Cologne/32).

The ERASMUS Offices of Turkish universities put great importance on whether the necessary conditions for formal procedures have been met when choosing subjects, and want students to give subjects definite codes and names before going to Germany. On the other hand, the subjects and their contents offered at German universities are generally decided at a later date, or it is impossible for students to access this information before enrolling with the university. Problems created by the differences between the educational systems that, in Turkey, prioritise passing the classes, while other higher education systems have students form a syllabus according to different elements are revealed.

*“The biggest problem I faced was that the ECTS points for lessons were not decided beforehand. We needed to write down credits while preparing the Learning Agreement. Since the system here is very different*

*from our university, the date of sending the Learning Agreement was left until the end of the term and it's been very difficult for us to explain this situation to our own university". (G/Education/Cologne/11).*

When they participated in the ERASMUS Programme, the students were faced with a bureaucracy that they could not understand, aside from their own universities' bureaucracy. Students had to meet the requirements of both these bureaucracies and face the problems emerging from discrepancies between them. On the one hand, this developed new openings which allowed the students to improve themselves, while on the other the students faced applications that took a long time to complete. The problems revealed at different stages included not receiving their grants on time and not being accepted onto their subject, increasing the length of time of study.

### **6.1. Differences of System**

*"Students know what to do themselves".*  
(G/Philosophy/m/Cologne/14-Group)

Students who compared German university education with the Turkish education system commented that the German system improves students' skills with its qualities, such as giving responsibility to a person, or providing the possibility of choosing different subjects and topics while the Turkish educational system provides obstacles for students to increase their personal skills.

*"I was very impressed by their style of teaching a lesson. They teach a lesson in a universal way. Students either present their study or participate in the lesson actively".* (G/Philosophy/f/Cologne/15).

Students express two main points about the lesson system of German Universities. The first of these is that the subjects offered either mandatorily or optionally are very few. The second is that they open their ideas by preparing certain topics at subjects they participated in; in other words, that lesson is based on active participation, rather than passive. While in Turkey there are strong external control mechanisms on the student, in the German Education system students determinate their own programme by taking the initiative. As a result of this, the students expressed that they became more conscious of the educational process.

*"If I make five presentations here, I learn more things than I do in Turkey, but I study more in Turkey. I mean, there is a contrast here, we can't become efficient despite our study".* (G/Int.Rel.f/Cologne/8-Grup).

By stressing the weakness of an educational system based on examination, the students stated that they attained a more permanent knowledge in the studies they actively prepared.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Students describe their experience of the ERASMUS programme with dramatic expressions such as “experience of a lifetime”, “a vital condition”, and “the best year of my life”. With these kind of expressions, students stressed how important the change they experienced was for them while affirming the programme. Students’ self-confidence increased as a result of living abroad and participating in learning in another country. This programme also played an important role in the construction of trans-national structures. Various relationship networks were set up by the students who participated in the programme, paving the way for long term trans-national relationships (Tekin 2010). Students improved the skills that strengthen trans-national social relationships, entered into relationship with global cultural structures and formed new social networks. While the students re-positioned themselves in the host country, they adopted a flexible approach to new perspectives and relativized their old tendencies. It is possible to describe this situation as a biographical bounce. Depending on the skills and trans-national relations a student sets, an important change in private and professional life in the future is rooted. It has been established that there is a direct relation between finding a job outside of the home country and being educated in this country or participating in education in other countries (Jahr, Schomburg & Teichler 2002; Wit 2002). Close relationships between the students who participated in this programme and the student mobility triggered by these relationships has been the most distinct expression of the mission that the ERASMUS Programme describes as “removing borders”.

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