

# IBS Report

## “Student exchange programs: students’ expectations”

### IBS Chania

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## Abstract - Summary

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During this workshop we tried to analyse the status of the student exchange programs, and see in which points the expectations of the students were fulfilled and in which not. We discovered that there were many things that a student could gain joining this kind of programs, such as Socrates; but not all of them seemed to have the same importance for the students. Student exchange programs also presented numerous problems that made them lose the attractiveness for the students. In this report we gathered the expectations of several students from different European countries, the problems they see to these programs and the possible solutions to them. We cannot forget the point of view of the professors, since it is an important part during the whole exchange. In this way we tried to find out why the professors are not enough motivated and how we could solve this.

## Overview

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## Introduction

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IBS's are seminars which gather together engineering students and professors from Europe with the purpose of evaluating and finding new paths for higher engineering education in Europe. The current IBS was held within the framework of E4, which is a thematic network between students and academics, where educational topics on the education of engineers are discussed and new solutions are found.

The topic of the discussion was "Student exchange programs: students' expectations". This topic is a part of the E4's activity 2, "Quality assessment & transparency for enhanced mobility & trans-European recognition", which is looking towards the better evaluation of courses taught, so that the students can find it easier to attend recognized courses at foreign universities.

In this case we put our focus in the exchange programs, where students from all around Europe move to another country for some months, to cover part of the courses they were supposed to take, otherwise, at the home university. The Socrates/Erasmus program was taken many times as reference because it is the most known one, but there are many other programs.

As we can see in the rest of the report, the discussion started with a brainstorming about the students' expectations concerning student exchange programs. The idea was to get an overview of which are the main reasons for students to go abroad as an exchange student and what students expect. After clarifying what are the expectations, it was discussed how well these expectations mentioned before come true, making an analysis that covered all the points mentioned during the brainstorming. One important point which was found out concerning the success of an exchange year was the motivation of academics. Therefore, the last point in the discussion was how they could be motivated to be involved in the student exchange programs.

## The Discussion

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At the beginning of the discussion everyone was asked where they came from and if they had ever been as an exchange student somewhere. When speaking about expectations, it may have quite a big influence if you have been as an exchange student or not. Juan Manuel had been as an Erasmus student in Norway (even though Norway is not a part of the EU, there are some special arrangements so that they are involved in Erasmus program); Heidi in Bordeaux, in France; Raluca Lucaci, Cecilia, Raluca Cantea and Magdalena in Greece; Dimitris had participated in an internship in another country with IAESTE. In any case, it was the general feeling that everybody would like to take part in this kind of programs.

## Students' expectations

The first thing that was done was a **brainstorming** about students' expectations concerning a year as an exchange student, about all the possible things a student wants from the exchange. These expectations are related to what students think they will get or find in the exchange itself and in the procedure to access to it. Even if they had participated in an exchange, all the participants were thinking of their expectations before applying for the program. All the ideas which came up are written below:

- Get enough money
- Have a special status as exchange student
- Easier study load
- That the language is not a barrier (expect courses in international language)
- Approach to study topic
- Be in contact with a "New way of teaching"
- Better teaching
- Adequate language preparation
- Minimal bureaucracy
- Cultural preparation
- Preparation for study culture
- Administrative/organisational matters
- Get to know another culture (the local culture)
- Learn a new language
- European thinking culture
- Get easy credits
- Enhance the CV
- Find acceptance abroad + adaptability
- Other courses (not existing at home)
- Develop a network of friends/colleagues
- Prove oneself (adaptability)
- Learn self-management
- Become open-minded / enlarge perspective
- Open pathways

We found out that not all of the ideas were expectations but there were also problems (the expectation would be that these problems do not exist). That is why a new list was made where all the ideas are considered as real **expectations**, meaning with it what a student think he/she will get joining an exchange program:

- Approach to study topic
- Be in contact with a "New way of teaching"
- Better teaching
- Get to know another culture (the local culture)
- Learn a new language
- European thinking culture
- Get easy credits
- Enhance the CV
- Find acceptance abroad + adaptability
- Other courses (not existing at home)
- Develop a network of friends/colleagues
- Prove oneself (adaptability)
- Learn self-management
- Become open-minded / enlarge perspective
- Open pathways

The expectations cover different levels and clearly show things that you cannot find at the home university.

- We can talk about expectations related to the **academic part** of the program, such as taking courses that you cannot find in your home university, or improving the quality of the teaching, because the host university has more resources or labs for that course, etc.
- A lot of expectations are more linked with the **spirit of going abroad** to make and exchange. You merge with a new culture, learn a new language, know a lot of people from many different places, so finally you enrich your knowledge and understanding of other cultures and you become open-minded.
- Another group of expectations has to do with the development of **personal skills** in an environment far away from home, like self management, adaptability and so on.

Then we started a discussion about which are the most important expectations and why. To have a first view, we made a voting round; everybody had two votes to set their expectations. Some used just one vote. The votes are marked in the following list.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| - Become open-minded / enlarge perspective        | 6 |
| - European thinking culture                       | 5 |
| - Learn a new language                            | 4 |
| - Approach to study topic                         | 3 |
| - Other courses (not existing at home)            | 2 |
| - Prove oneself (adaptability)                    | 2 |
| - Be in contact with a "New way of teaching"      | 1 |
| - Better teaching                                 | 1 |
| - Open pathways                                   | 1 |
| - Enhance the CV                                  |   |
| - Get to know another culture (the local culture) |   |
| - Get easy credits                                |   |
| - Find acceptance abroad + adaptability           |   |
| - Develop a network of friends/colleagues         |   |
| - Learn self-management                           |   |

As we can see in the ranking of expectations, the two most important seem to be "**Become open-minded /enlarge perspective**" and "**European thinking culture**". So what a student wants to find with an exchange program has to do, in general, with the fact of going to another country, with another culture and another way of doing things. Also, there are some academic and personal reasons to go abroad, as it is showed in the ranking, but they are not so important in principle (many other ideas related to these expectations did not get any votes). To study why some of the expectations are in the top of the ranking and why others did not received any vote, a discussion about all these topics followed.

It was curious that the ideas that got the most points appeared at the end during the brainstorming, this was because when we ask for expectations everybody started by saying things related with the administration and bureaucracy, and some other problems; but also because it was quite clear for everyone that you are going to get an "international spirit" so it was not mentioned at the beginning but it was the most wanted at the end. We will see in the next point if this is get as well as it is expected to.

→ The mixture with other cultures should give as a result to become more **open-minded** and get a **European thinking culture** (at least European because it is the framework of our exchanges), these ideas were quite clear for the participants. To get all this was seem almost "accidentally" in the sense that you open your mind and learn a lot

about other people even without expecting it or realising about it. This means that when you want to go abroad you really think this is the important part, this is what you want to gain out of it, and that is why there is such a high expectation about it.

→ The **language** is something desired by it is not so important from the students' point of view. Most of the courses that you do when you are in an exchange are given in English in most of the countries, so they do not push you to learn the local language (on the other hand this is desirable to make things easier). And, sometimes, you can learn the language at home, so depending the student this can raise their interest for learning the local language of the university that will host the exchange or not.

On the other hand if what we want is to know the culture to open our mind, is learning the language a pathway to the culture? The participants agreed that is just one more aspect of it, you are able to find some other points also. During the exchange you will also find all the other exchange students, and you will learn wide culture basics, both European thinking and local thinking at the same time. You can concentrate on improving the language that you can use anywhere, so it can also be English, which often is spoken with other exchange students. But which are the goals of an exchange program? Should you learn the local language and culture or is it also acceptable to learn English? In general it was accepted that the language was not everything and that the local language can be learnt depending on the motivation of each student.

→ Another point that could make students to apply for an exchange program is that it seems **easy to get credits** abroad, due to the fact that the educational systems are different, and above all due to a more flexible way of evaluation. In fact this depends on the system in your own country compared to the system in the country you go to. In general it is not considered such an important reason.

→ The professors participating in the group thought that "**enhance the CV**" should have got some votes, but students probably do not recognise the benefits in this case. They just are not aware of that. Probably it also depends on which way you are going to continue your life after your studies and the type of job you want to do. You can take advantage of it, but many people even forget to mention it in their CV.

→ "**Other courses (not existing at home)**" is not probably a reason to go in basic studies, but in post-graduate studies it can be important. Normally you do not learn different things from those you are taught at home, unless that the courses are very specific.

→ The rest of the points (better teaching, to learn self management, to create a network of colleagues ...) is interesting, but definitively not the main reason to go as an exchange student. The other kind of expectations that talked more about the problems you can encountered in the program are desirable to be avoided, for example getting enough money for the exchange or reducing the bureaucracy to the minimum are things wanted for all the students, so we do not need a special analysis for them; instead, they will play an important role when talking about how well the expectations are fulfilled and how well the program is run.

## How students' expectations are fulfilled

We have already found out which the expectations of the students are and which are the most important for them when joining an exchange program. Now we have to measure, somehow, how all these expectations are fulfilled when you finally join one of these programs. At this point we have to base our analysis on the experience of the people that have already taken part in one of these programs. We had some people among the participants of the workshop that meet the requirements, but also everybody knew how the program works from other friends or classmates.

We will analyse not only the expectations but also the problems encountered in the programs, and we will try to propose a solution for them. We will just go through all the ideas that have been mentioned so far, starting from the expectations.

→ To **enlarge your perspective** becoming open-minded and get a **European thinking** were identified as the most important preferences for the students. It was seen during the workshop that even if some of us think that a year abroad will not enlarge your perspective, after they have been abroad, they will recognise that their mind has opened. It is also true that to apply for an exchange program people are normally already open-minded, so we can say that it is something that you have and you develop during your staying in the foreign country.

→ One problem in learning a **new language** is that people start language courses with totally different basic knowledge. In the group there were two examples: being Spanish in Norway and studying Norwegian with Swedish

and Danish and being Finnish in France and studying French with Italians and Spanish. There are two sides in the language question: if you already know the basics, you will learn fast and otherwise it is impossible. So there should be courses to prepare the students before and during the duration of the program.

→ It is quite important for the student to have a good **approach to the topic** that will be studied. The big problem here is that nobody tells you about the different approach that it is made in the host university, so you are completely lost at the beginning. There should be any kind of orientation before you go abroad. This can be achieved by providing information to the students at the international office and, above all, with the experience of previous years, through reports made by the students that went to the same foreign university the previous years, and, the best, having the possibility to personally talk and ask doubts to these students.

→ It seems very interesting to be able to **study new things** that you cannot at the home university, and in many cases you could have the possibility, but here we find one of the biggest problems of exchange programs. Many times you can not take the right courses abroad, and not only about new courses you want to take, but also for the compulsory courses you are supposed to do at the home university for a certain year of study. There is a lack of compatibility, and even if the agreement between universities is established, you can have problems to get the courses you made abroad recognised once you are back at home.

This is really problematic, because if your degree is difficult to finish you question yourself what will you win and what will you lose with going abroad for a year. You may know that you will get a lot of benefits for you (you can have some of the expectations that we have seen already), but you can not be losing your "academic" time. In Socrates program you should not lose a year because your credits made abroad should be accepted in your home university. But as we have already said, often you do not get courses recognised when you come back. The situation is different depending on the country we are talking about: in Italy, for instance, it is preferred to finish your studies as soon as possible. In England students always get full credits when they have been abroad, that results from the close relationship with the exchange university. Or in Greece, for example, Erasmus is not a very popular program, due to this problem of recognition.

All this is part of the institutional problems where a lot of effort from departments is needed to solve them. To give more information to students is also needed.

→ One important thing that students often do not get abroad is **acceptance and adaptability** because as an exchange student you are not involved in the culture. Often you are with the people from your country. Communicating with local people would be important also for learning the local language. That seems to be a problem everywhere.

It was seen that exchange students have normally a special status, we were questioning if this status was needed; but it all depends on how social the student is. Some students may have the need of more help to get involved with other people from other countries, so special activities are welcomed.

We can also see this from the other side: should local people approach you? This can also be beneficial for the local students, because not everybody has the opportunity to join an exchange program, so this way they can get part of the cultural exchange that they would obtain abroad. In any case, the contacts with foreign students are not enough, even if they attend the same classes. A case where an Erasmus student disappeared from the classes because of the language problem was mentioned. This means that all this should be promoted more among the local students, and also, it would be necessary to find other ways to facilitate the contacts, rather than just going to the same classroom; maybe to organise some kind of common activities. Of course, in some places there are few chances to do this because the number of foreign students is very reduced.

→ The last point that was considered of some importance for the students was the possibility of being in contact with a **new way of teaching** or the search of a **better teaching**. In general the university works in different ways in different countries, and there are some things that are taught better in one place than in another.

The question of having a ranking of universities was raised. In Romania, for example, the best students are sent to the most difficult universities, but how can we determine which are the most difficult or the best universities? In Europe there is a ranking of 15 best universities, where universities are ranked according to 25 parameters that vary from the investment made to the price of the beer. Romanian students seem to run for good universities: they check which universities are publishing the best papers etc. That anyway depends where in Europe people come from. A Romanian girl said that she is just interested in studies and that is why she searches for a university which is good.

In some countries it is compulsory to go abroad. For example French engineering students have to do 10 weeks of practises abroad. Students have a whole year time to contact companies. The student has a total responsibility for organising the place. IAESTE, for instance, offers this kind of programs.

In Europe there are also traineeship programs, paid by companies. That is cooperation between universities and companies. It is a different program from Socrates and has nothing to do with it. Anyway, Erasmus seems to be most famous program. Another program is Athens where 5 to 6 universities are participating.

So we have several programs that can provide us with the specific courses we are looking for, with better ways of teaching courses than those we have in our university, with trainees in companies, etc. Of course this is also one criterion to choose one university or another, and depending of the final choice, you can get what you wanted or not. The problem here is related with a lack of possibilities.

### ***Problems of an exchange program***

So far we have seen how well the students' expectations come true once the student has participated in the exchange program. At the beginning, when we did the brainstorming among the "expectations" there was a special group of them that more than expectations themselves were problems that you could encounter in the program. Let's go back to these problems and analyse now how well these problems are solved and what more we can do to avoid them.

First we were voting which were the most common problems that we would like most to be solved. It follows a list of ideas concerning the problems and the votes they got, though some of them have been already mentioned when talking about how well the expectations were fulfilled, because all this is talking about the same programs, so it is very much related.

- Enough money 7
- Minimal bureaucracy 5
- That the language is not a barrier (courses in international language are expected) 4
- Have more choice 3
- Preparation for study culture 2
- Special status
- Easier study load
- Adequate language preparation
- Cultural preparation
- Administrative/organisational matters

Another important problem that it is not listed here is the lack of motivation of academics, because somehow we concluded that everything seems to work when academics are involved. We will see in the last point of the discussion what makes an academic not be motivated and how we can improve the situation.

→ The **money** is one of the most important problems because it keeps many students away from the possibility of going abroad. It is also a big problem that most of the times you receive the same amount of money with independence of the country you are going to, so it is quite not a balanced situation. Other sources should be found to solve this problem. Maybe apply to complementary grants, ask for credits to banks or even provide free accommodation to students.

→ **Minimal bureaucracy** is always desired. It is really a problem because many times you do not get any help to fill all the papers in. The cooperation among departments should get better so you do not have to fill in the same papers again and again. The bureaucracy is needed, but it should definitively be easier. At the end students should be provided a paper with the program approved to get ETCS, and another one at the beginning

→ We have to look why we go for an exchange, to see if the **language** is one of the reasons to go, or it is the studies. If it is the studies, then you can go anyway. Exchange programs are also quite used for learning languages, and there are other specific programs only for learning languages.

Many times it is recommended to know the language before, or at least have some basic knowledge. Some courses should be taught in advance at the home university. The problem is that some languages are not very common or popular, such as Finnish. The host university should also provide intensive courses on the local language.

A solution can be to have the courses in an international language, you go to study and it is easier to study in an international language. If you want to learn the language, you can do that in a different way. This is better because

the language can influence the marks. Another way is to have the exam in the international language, while the classes can be in the local language. But doing exams in an international language can also influence. Maybe students should choose the place where they are confident they can cope with the language. In general it is a tricky matter because engineers do not know how to express even in their own language.

→ We can visualise the **lack of choices** with the Erasmus program. In this program, the first thing to do is an agreement between universities, which has to be done 1.5 years before. Many people choose the place to go based on geographical reasons first, but they find out that there is not the possibility to go everywhere, because one of these agreements needs to be established. This agreement seems not to be too difficult to get, you just need the support of academics, which are not so motivated many times. Besides, someone should take care of them, not only the students by themselves, above all because there is a lack of information on how to do this. This **lack of information** starts from the moment that a student usually do not know that new agreements can be achieved with other universities, so sometimes you have a small number of possibilities that do not adjust to what you wanted to do, for the study plan, for the language of the host university or for any other reason; and also there can be not enough places for all the applicants, so the competition is high, and sometimes even good students are out of the program.

Normally people do not choose the university where they are going to study thinking of the possibilities they are going to have to join an exchange program, because most of the time you are not aware at all of the existence of these programs (unless you heard it from someone else), so it is not a criterion to choose one university or another. There is also a lack of information even before the beginning of the university.

We can also find the extreme case, when there are a lot of choices. There should be kind of research to see why one place is more demanded than the others. The European network does not work like a network, there is no feedback between institutions and also many times the agreements arranged are not updated, so students can find a lot of surprises when they are already abroad.

The problem for having a big network is recognition. If you have fewer choices, the number of bilateral agreements is smaller, and the bureaucracy is reduced. For recognition the problem can be that each university consider itself as the best, so why they should recognise a course in another university?

The lack of information is not only about Erasmus program, that was the example used here, but also about other programs, that students not even know that exist. There are other alternatives to get the same or part of what you can get out of an Erasmus scholarship. For example, if the student is only looking for cultural exchange, some extra curricular courses instead of spending months abroad making a normal course, then courses like those offered by BEST, or by other associations can fit perfectly.

→ **Preparation for study culture.** It is difficult to understand the information about a different country even if it is accurate. In Madrid this kind of information is given by students who have been in Erasmus the previous year (this is given for incoming students). The experience from students of the previous year is the most important for outgoing students. They can fill an evaluation and give contact information. They should write about everything, from shops to the kind of teachers, etc.

## Motivation of academics

In former discussion we found out that exchange programs would work better if academics were involved in searching a convenient exchange university. Why they are not motivated then? Mainly because being involved means volunteer work; academics are not paid more for working extra hours. Most of the people do not want that. On the other hand, teachers do not find time for the exchange students, because it involves a lot of bureaucracy, so they are not much willing to cooperate. Finally, there is a lack of promotion also among academics.

If exchange programs mean so much work, why universities are interested in being involved in such programs? We could say that they work for the students so they want to offer something else to them, which they could not get otherwise at home. Nevertheless, it is mainly because of prestige, they get involved in these programs so they can show that they offer more things and that they try to launch students at the higher level. Of course, many times the prestige is based in the number of agreements the university has signed, rather than in the quality, so they do not put much effort to work on the projects, but it is always nice to mention that the university is involved in many things.

To sum up we can say that for some students exchange programs are not attractive due to the lack of motivation among academics. The situation is improving though, but it depends on the country. For example in Italy people do

not know about Erasmus; the reality is that professors do not know about it, so students do not know either. In Romania Erasmus is the only way to go abroad. In Grenoble (France) professors are motivated financially. In Madrid the motivation is done by less working hours. The cases of Grenoble and Madrid can be considered of good practice and they should become more generalised so the whole project can benefit a lot from it.

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## Conclusions

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The discussion has been moving around the expectations of students about the exchange programs. We analysed these expectations and we showed that the reasons for going abroad are mainly learning European thinking and enlarging your perspective, more than "academic" reasons, like the different courses you can do or improving one's CV, and more than the personal reasons related with the development of some self management skills. So students want to get what really makes such programs different from studying at home.

The benefits of an exchange program were clear for all the participants, and even if your program is a total failure, you always learn something. In general you get more than what you were expecting, but sometimes you do not realise, you just get it step by step.

Fortunately the main expectations of the students always come true, but there are many problems to get some others, especially there are a lot of difficulties in getting adapted with the local people and learning a completely new language. Besides, we have to add a lot of problems with the administration and bureaucracy, which many times make it difficult even to recognise the credits you have been doing in the exchange program, once you are back at home. A lot of effort has to be put in these areas to lighten the bureaucratic load of the programs.

Finally we realised that students represent only part of the program, there is another one that consists in academics. The pity is that they are not much involved, and everybody recognised that everything would work better with their participation. The universities have to find the way of motivating them, maybe with economical support.