

ERASMUS: RENEWING THE ORIGINAL AMBITIONS

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As in 2017 the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus programme was celebrated throughout Europe, this paper uses the Jacques Delors archives¹ to provide a more effective analysis of the initial objectives of education and lifelong learning programmes, and to highlight the prospects of these initiatives for which the goals and results are commonly appreciated despite their impact often being criticised as limited.

The expression “If I were to start anew, I would start with culture” is ascribed to Jean Monnet. While the founding father of Europe never actually uttered these words, many of his successors strove to ensure that European construction would not be confined to an economic achievement. Just after becoming President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors marked the first milestones of what would very quickly become one of the most praised initiatives of the European Union: Erasmus. The thirtieth anniversary of the programme is an opportunity to consider its origins, with a view to gaining a better understanding of its essence and prospects.

1. An initiative on the fringes of Europe’s scope of power

It was out of conviction that Jacques Delors decided to include education and lifelong learning initiatives in the work objectives of the European Commission, of which he had just become President in 1985. At the time, and even today, the treaties only gave the

European Community, now the European Union, authority to take supportive action when it comes to education: EU Member States only mandated the Commission to facilitate the harmonisation and “Europeanization” of national education initiatives. Based on this supportive authority and on the article on vocational training, President Delors attempted to convince the heads of the twelve States represented at the European Council of London in 1986 of the necessity of the Erasmus programme using these thin legal foundations and a telex sent by forty deans of European universities providing strong and warm support for the European Commission’s proposals on this subject². As soon as the education and lifelong learning initiatives were launched, the European Union was able to count on company directors and academics to support and establish them, although the harmonisation and equivalence processes later came up against logistical and political obstacles.

Jacques Delors had to deal with the reluctance expressed by heads of state and government who were

1. The Jacques Delors Institute is the custodian of the Jacques Delors archives which can be consulted in the institutions partnering the “Archives of Jacques Delors” project.

2. Symposium organised by Le Monde, Education and training at the heart of the European project, the Sorbonne, 2 March 1988

against the Commission being able to exert an influence over their education and training policies. The European Commission launched its education and lifelong training initiatives from a very different perspective and they were ultimately extended and supported by Member States, a fact that is still true today: the idea was naturally to build a common space for culture and citizens, but first and foremost to give the burgeoning Single Market a solid foundation, by training its young people and workers, in partnership with the academic community, employers, trade unions and European business leaders³.

2. Going beyond Erasmus: education and lifelong learning

As early as 1988⁴, Jacques Delors stated that “the emergence of the market without internal frontiers supposes the free movement of people and a transformation of the labour market”, and that our economic growth depends mainly on the development of human resources. These are among the considerations that encouraged him to work towards the establishment of a “skills-oriented Europe” by offering harmonised training to young people and workers within the European Union. He immediately worked with social partners to ensure that these initiatives could be rolled out as part of social dialogue and that their objectives and implementation could foster the discussions conducted as part of this dialogue.

The two initiatives which were set up at the time, ERASMUS and COMETE, demonstrated from 1988 the need to support education and lifelong learning – not merely during a person’s studies – in the fields of formal and informal education. These two programmes allowed the European initiatives to be rolled out and are found today in the actions supported by the Erasmus + programme, which covers both formal and informal education, youth and sports.

The skills harmonisation and equivalence process, which was also initiated at this time and gained new momentum with the Bologna Process, is another result of this drive to train contemporary and future workers of the Single Market, offering them the necessary mobility opportunities for full endorsement of the market’s mechanisms.

In addition to the skills objectives of the education and lifelong learning programmes, the cultural and citizen-based objective was also right at the heart of Jacques Delors’ concerns: “What is even more

important is our moral and political obligation to contribute, through education, to developing understanding and mutual respect between peoples and cultural and linguistic groups”⁵. The drive was to “educate and prepare young people for a common destiny as future European citizens”⁶.

Thirty years on, the existing programmes have met these objectives in part, and have often been restricted in their mission by the gap between the ambitions they embodied and the resources allocated to them. Three million young people have been able to benefit from Erasmus, the resources allocated to mobility programmes have been constantly on the rise and there has been an increasing number of mobility opportunities open to an ever-broadening target group of citizens⁷.

However, while Erasmus and mobility, education and lifelong learning programmes may be legitimately presented as successful achievements, the criticism deeming them insufficient or elitist is also justified. To date, only 5% of university graduates are subject to European mobility via this programme. Similarly, only 1% of European apprentices carry out a stay in another Member State during their training, not to mention the discrepancies in percentages of young people or workers conducting European mobility supported by European mobility programmes according to business sector and fields of study.⁸

These shortcomings must be corrected as a priority in order to meet, not only the original ambitions of the Erasmus programme, but above all the challenges that European citizens must face in a world in which the European Union views itself as a driver of innovation and a guardian of universal values.

3. The challenge raised by the massification and diversification of mobility opportunities

From the launch of the European education and lifelong learning programmes, questions were raised that still feature, thirty years on, among the major challenge of initiatives taken by the European Union in this area.

We have noted that the implementation of these programmes received enthusiastic support from many higher education institutions and their students. From the outset, it was more complicated to interest and motivate European youth as a whole and in particular young people with little or no qualifications for a

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Yves Bertoncini, Sofia Fernandes, *Extending Erasmus: a new impetus for youth mobility in Europe*, Policy paper, the Jacques Delors Institute, 14 June 2017

6. European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training: Europe in the making – an example*, 2006, p.120

3. Address given in Nantes to the Regional Council, Jacques Delors, 19 March 1988

4. Address given in Münster, at an informal meeting of education ministers, 25-26 February 1988, on the contribution that education policy could make to completing the single market by 1992

mobility which often comes with other obstacles than a tight budget. Like mobility opportunities, the process of qualification equivalence launched in Bologna generally concerns young people in higher education, in specific areas of study for which mobility is facilitated⁹. In addition, the language barrier remains intact, a fact which was identified by Jacques Delors as early as 1988, when he expressed the need for all European young people to be able to speak at least two European languages¹⁰.

Many initiatives have been created to increase the scale, scope and diversity of mobility opportunities available to young people: those offered by Erasmus + Youth & Sport are a prime example, but we must now move forward and extend our aspirations.

EU Member States therefore set themselves the objective that 20% of higher education graduates conduct part of their studies in another Member State by 2020¹¹. Speaking about the formal education system, President Macron proposed in his address at the Sorbonne¹² that Europe commits to establishing a process of harmonisation and mutual recognition of secondary education diplomas, creating European universities and enabling 50% of each age group to spend at least six months in another European country before the age of twenty-five.

Ideas abound as regards initiatives outside of the formal education system. In 2015, the Jacques Delors Institute proposed the creation of a new vocational mobility programme - Erasmus Pro - which could enable one million young Europeans to acquire a professional qualification in another EU Member State over a five-year period. The young people on the programme would be taken in by a training centre and a business in the host country for a period stretching from two to three years. This initiative would complement the national reforms necessary to develop learning within each country, particularly in southern Europe, and could be operational by 2020¹³.

President Juncker launched the initiative to set up a European Solidarity Corps which would bring together young European citizens who “will be able to volunteer or work on projects organised in their country or abroad with a view to helping communities and people across Europe”¹⁴.

These proposals add to the existing body of opportunities provided by the Erasmus + programme. They also highlight the need to increase the resources allocated to European youth mobility. This is yet another debate that was launched in the 1990s, during which the Delors Commission had to wage “an endless battle to obtain derisory sums of money, with which we are all the same providing mobility for thousands of researchers and entrepreneurs”¹⁵. While the objective today is to provide increasingly varied opportunities to a broader public, it is no longer possible to count solely on the involvement of researchers, entrepreneurs, students or rectors. The European Council must record the support of Member States for a series of education and lifelong learning initiatives which must be conducted on a European level in the interest of all concerned.

Another challenge that has not yet been entirely achieved, back in 1988 Jacques Delors wanted education and lifelong learning programmes to acknowledge and leverage digital technology. Thirty years on, digital technology must be placed at the centre of European education and training initiatives more than ever, in order to stop us lagging behind in this area¹⁶.

Whatever the opportunities, the greatest challenge remains promoting an appetite for mobility in Europe. As early as 1993, candidates for mobility were attracted more by a departure from the EU than a position within the EU. Mobility is definitely perceived as an opportunity, but European mobility is less appealing¹⁷. Is it less exotic? Do people wish to see somewhere different? Are there better opportunities further afield? The fact remains that the EU does not really attract its own young people, which once again underscores the need to promote Europe as a place of culture and values, but also as a prosperous and attractive economic area to motivate young people to a greater degree to travel the EU and lay the cornerstones for a more mobile European citizenship.

Like Nation-States, which have successfully used education to create strong national identities, the European Union identified mobility as a key tool both at the advent of the Single Market and for the emergence of a feeling of belonging and of European citizenship. The task now is to enable a greater number to benefit from these opportunities so that European construction can be enriched by the cornerstones laid by its citizens in all its Member States.

9. Yves Bertoncini, Sofia Fernandes, “Extending Erasmus: a new impetus for youth mobility in Europe”, Policy paper, Jacques Delors Institute, 14 June 2017

10. Symposium organised by *Le Monde*, Education and training at the heart of the European project, the Sorbonne, 2 March 1988

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Initiative for Europe* – Address by Emmanuel Macron for a sovereign, united and democratic Europe, Sorbonne, 26 September 2017

13. Jacques Delors et al., “Erasmus Pro: for a million “young European apprentices” by 2020”, Tribune, Jacques Delors Institute, 12 May 2015

14. State of the Union Address 2016: *Towards a better Europe - a Europe that protects, empowers and defends*, Strasbourg, 14 September 2016. See also on this subject the tribune published by Sofia Fernandes, Jérôme Quéré and Claire Versini, “L’Europe et les jeunes forment-ils un couple gagnant?”, *Huffington Post*, 12 December 2016 (in French)

15. Address given in Nantes to the Regional Council, Jacques Delors, 19 March 1988

16. Paul-Jasper Dittrich, “Balancing ambition and pragmatism for the digital single market”, Policy Paper, Jacques Delors Institut - Berlin, September 2017

17. *La Croix*, Europe : jeunes sans frontières, Issue 33158, 27 March 1992 (in French)

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