

EXPERIENCE OF ERASMUS STUDENTS STUDYING IN POLAND

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Abstract:

The main purpose of the paper is analysis of problems which face foreign students studying with Erasmus Programme in Poland. The number of participants of Erasmus Programme who come to study in Poland has grown rapidly in the last few years. The survey of students shows some common and unique problems of studying in Poland. Some of the encountered problems are results of cultural differences, weather conditions, program of studies. The other ones stem from the quality of communication infrastructure, the size of the city. Unfortunately there were a problems also with the institution which admit foreign students. Language barrier is still a main cause of problems with study abroad. Erasmus students often take part in courses which they cannot understand due to low level of Polish, or because lectures in English are provide only for Erasmus students. Foreign students in Lublin complained mainly about adverse weather conditions and a small number of cultural events in the English language. Students opinions can be used to better match the offer to participants needs.

Keywords: student mobility, Erasmus students, study abroad, student needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mobility of students is the most important European Union educational programme, and also a key elements in the cooperation process towards creating a European Higher Education Area. Poland has been taking part in Erasmus programme since 1998/99. Erasmus programme started 25 years ago, and still offer many benefits. The most important are foreign languages competencies and intercultural competencies (Konevas & Duoba, 2007, p. 589). There are, however, some disadvantages connected with it. A lot of them were described and suggestions on how to improve the program were proposed five years ago, on the twentieth anniversary of the program. The authors have proposed supporting physical student mobility through virtual mobility (Op de Beeck, Bijmens, Michielsens & Van Petegem, 2007). Studies show that the old problems are current also today.

Higher education institutions in Poland trying to increase the number of foreign students in order to increase the internationalization of studies, improving quality of study and reducing the impact of demographic decline in Poland. The data indicate that the percentage of foreign students at Polish universities is much lower as in neighboring countries. The way to popularize study in Poland is to increase the number of Erasmus students and full courses students studying in Poland and the promotion of Polish universities abroad. The number of participants of Erasmus Programme who come to study in Poland has grown rapidly for the last few years. In 2009/10 growth of the number of incoming students was 23,3 %. More than 5.500 Erasmus students studied in the same year in Poland. The number of incoming students has doubled since 2004/05.

The main purpose of the paper is analysis of problems which face foreign students studying with Erasmus Programme in Poland. The aim is to answer the following research questions:

- What causes that students choose Poland as a place of study?
- What are the problems students face in adapting to life in Poland?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying in Poland?
- Perceived by the students of Polish universities offer to foreign students?
- What changes should enter the City Council of Lublin and Lublin universities to better meet the needs of foreign students?

The data was collected by a qualitative study 50 people with in-depth individual interview method [IDI]. The research of Erasmus students was a part of a broader project realized by the City Council of Lublin. IDI method was used because of the need to know the specific experiences of studying in Lublin/Poland, which would be difficult to know with the help of quantitative methods. The interviews were conducted in December and January, 2011/12. Students were interviewed about their experience of studying in Lublin/Poland, conversations were recorded. The needs of students often differ from what they find abroad. Some of the experiences of students are unexpected and surprising. Students' opinions can be used to better match the offer to the participants needs.

2. THE REASON OF CHOOSING LUBLIN, POLAND BY ERASMUS STUDENTS

This year about 150 students have come for a short study program to Lublin, Poland. Most of them are staying in Poland only for one semester. Foreign students come to Lublin mostly from Spain and Turkey, but with Erasmus Programme come also the French, Germans,

Lithuanians, Hungarians and other nationalities. Coming students study at various educational program. Lublin is the ninth largest city in Poland, there are located Technical University, Live Sciences University, Catholic University and Maria Curie-Sklodowska University. There are more than 80 thousand students in comparison to 350 thousand people living in the city. All this make Lublin the city of young People. There is also well-functioning Erasmus Student Network, supporting students during their stay in Poland (www.esn.org).

Students were asked about the reason of choosing Poland. Most Erasmus students had chosen Poland by several reason important to them. The most common responses include:

- economic aspects of studies in Poland,
- cultural differ between Poland and home country,
- friends' advice,
- possibility of studying in the English language.

Erasmus student from different countries see Poland as a cheap country. They compare cost of living in England, Sweden, other countries in Eurozone and choose Poland from many other possibilities. A lot of foreigners from Western Europe look for different culture, lifestyle, exotic country. According to their statements, it is meaningless to study in France, Portugal, Italy, England, Spain because the lifestyle in those countries is more or less the same. Some students were suggested to choose Poland. Mostly such advice was given to them by their friends or acquaintance, sometimes also professors. Foreigner students choose Poland also due to possibility of studying in the English language. Some higher education institutions taking parts in Erasmus Programme offer foreign students only courses in their national language. For some students it is a Chinese wall. They don't want to learn any other foreign languages than English or try to polish knowledge of English by taking part in students exchange. Typical students statement were as follow *“Why Poland? Because I want to go to a country, which is quite different from my home country. I'd like to study in English. I had to choose Ireland, Great Britain, or Poland. I decided studied in Poland because I expected to see more cultural differences.”*

Less common reasons of studying in Poland for Erasmus students were:

- studies connected with Polish culture or language;
- Polish location in Europe;
- belief that it is easier to study in Poland than in other countries.

A less common situation was that someone choose Poland because their field of study is connected with Polish culture. Interviewed students sometimes studied in home country Polish or Slavic language and culture. Some people were fascinated with Polish history or people. Location in Europe was a reason of choosing Poland in various ways. For some people Poland was preferred as a country on the borders of Europe, others choose it because of the distance (long or short) from the home country. Some nationalities prefer Poland as a country in a good location for traveling around the EU. Few students said that studies in Poland are easier than in other countries and it was the main reason of choosing Poland. Quite often questioned people said that they hadn't chosen Poland at all. They would prefer to study in other countries but they had no choice. The other students might study only in Poland because their high education institution have got partnership only with a Polish institution.

Lublin as a place in Poland was often an unwanted place to study. Foreigners would prefer to study in other cities, for instance Warsaw or Krakow. Surveyed people often declared that they hadn't had any influence on the place of studying because of partnership their home

university only with an institution in Lublin. Typical statements were as follow, *“Why Lublin? There is no reason. In fact at the beginning Lublin and the Catholic University of Lublin was the last place in my application when I wanted to go. But unfortunately in other countries I was expected to know German or French but I don’t speak those languages.”* Part of students said that Lublin had been chosen by chance. If people really wanted to study in Lublin it was because there was a recommendation from other students for the city, other people from the same country chose Lublin or there was a possibility to study abroad for one year not only for one semester. Lublin has an opinion of the city in which costs of living are lower than in other, biggest cities in Poland. There were also statements that Lublin is a nice city and a lot of foreigners study there, Lublin is close to Ukraine. One of the students said, that if someone needs to experienced culture of a different country, than it is best to go to a small city.

Collected data shows, that Erasmus students often choose Poland as a place of studies because of the many advantages this country. People prefer less often Lublin as a city in which they are study; if they did it, it was mostly because of advice of former Erasmus student living in that city.

3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF STUDYING IN LUBLIN, POLAND

The survey of students shows some common and unique problems of studying in Lublin/Poland, a medium-size city on the east of the EU. The nationality of students may influence the experience of studying abroad. Also, people from Cental-East and Western Europe present a different opinion.

3.1. First impression after arriving in Lublin/Poland

The first impression after arriving to Poland/Lublin was often negative. But it was changing during studying in Poland. Students were surprised with the low quality of Polish interurban transport. They complain about carriages and time-consuming travels by train; Polish bus station which look seedy. They were also dissatisfied with presence of unattractive neglected old gray buildings in the city. Typical statements were as follow *“When I arrived, the first experience I had was quite dramatic. We travelled by train from Warsaw. When I saw the train I was terrified. Then the train had terrible delay. But the best part is how it is possible that the train due to schedule goes 180 kilometers over three hours?”* Other bed experiences were connected with the low quality service offered by dormitories and unexpected weather condition.

Positive opinion were, unlike to negative, connected with positive assessment of attractiveness of the city, a large number of monuments and young people living in the city. People were surprised with the attractiveness of the Old City and a friendly campus located close to the city center. Some students noticed kindness and helpfulness of Polish people towards foreigners. However, it was mostly negative first impression that most Erasmus students got when they compared it to their expectations.

Generally students didn’t have any problems with adaptation to living in Poland/Lublin. Polish students former taking part in Erasmus exchange abroad were helpful in adaptation to living in Poland. They took care of arriving students and helped them with any problems. Not

all foreigners got this kind of support. There were a difference between various universities. If students had a problem it was because of:

- Language troubles with communications with polish people because of low level English knowledge in Poland (especially trouble in shops, at a bus station),
- Trouble with adaptation to a different culture (lack of typical national food, lack of food for Muslims or unusual meal times),
- Intolerance for foreigners.

Most students have problem with shopping in supermarkets because of trouble with communication with English language in such places. There were also students complained about adaptation problems. It was because they didn't get support from polish Erasmus students, come late for students exchange or didn't know English well enough to communicate. Typical statements were as follow; *"Sometimes I have got a language problems. I don't know Polish language. Only young people know the English language. Sometimes this creates problems, when I do shopping or go somewhere. I learned a little of the Polish language and it is enough for me"*.

3.2. Experience of living in Lublin

Experience of living in Lublin for Erasmus students are mostly positive. Students were asked for complete the sentence *"Lublin makes me think of....."* in way that was meaningful for them. Using the sentence completion test (projective technique) we could conclude that respondents connotations with the city are generally positive. Respondents connect Lublin with:

- friendly, nice people,
- students, a lot of young people and meeting people,
- fun, party, holiday,
- city, the Old Town, academic city.

Lots of ending of the sentence were *"...cold weather"*. Students from Spain and Turkey were surprised by bad weather conditions. During the interview this topic returned repeatedly. Some interviewers weren't ready for bad weather condition. Some Erasmus simply suffer from cold weather in winter.

Respondents like most in Lublin friendly, nice people, other students, a huge number of young people, the Old Town, and the atmosphere of this part of the city, clubs and bars for students. They often emphasize that live is cheaper here than it is in their home country.

There are also some problem which face foreign students study in Lublin/Poland. Some of the encountered problems of living in Lublin are results of cultural differences; the other ones stem from the quality of communication infrastructure. Erasmus students don't like polish people biased towards foreigners. Some young Poles are intolerant of strangers. Students mentioned hostile or even racist behavior of young, drunk Polish man. They are also afraid of tussles nearby clubs during the night. They don't feel safe when they happened also because there are a few policemen on the streets during the night. Erasmus students also complain about cleanliness and condition of streets and pavements. The condition of some of them is so bad, that respondents said that they were unsuitable to walk. There is also a lot of holes on the streets caused by winter weather. The interviewers also can see speeding and dangerous driving of Polish drivers. Some students said that polish drivers drive recklessly. Negative experiences are also connected with small number of cultural or sport events, lack of cultural

events in the English language and tourist offer for foreigners. Interviewers mentioned also insufficient public transport at night. Unfortunately some interviewers claimed that what they most dislike in Lublin was the higher education institution they were studying on.

Despite some disadvantages, most Erasmus students think, that Lublin is a good place to study. Young people appreciate huge number of Polish and other foreign students, friendly people, low cost of living and a lot of places like clubs for students. The worst think they see in the city is an aggressive behavior of young, drunk people at night.

4. EXPECTATION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS VERSUS POLISH UNIVERSITY OFFER

Experiences of the studies in Poland were often dependent on the conditions of studying in their own country or individual expectations. There were some problems also with the institution which admit foreign students. The interviews shows, that for many students studies in Poland are easier than in their home country. Erasmus students have often less hours of lectures than in their home country. Some people need more hours of classes than they have. It is also easy to pass the exams. Some students believe that education level is low.

A lot of students emphasize that professors are helpful and try to explain everything. They do this assessment comparing Polish academic teachers with other ones in other countries. An advantage of studying in Lublin is also that campus is close universities. Typical statements were as follow; *“School is close to dormitories. Classes are held in small groups. Lecturers focused on each individual so you can learn a lot more”*. The level of satisfaction of students depend on a university. The most satisfied are students Catholic University of Lublin. The worst experience have got students of the University of Live Sciences in Lublin. Erasmus students from this school said that some lecturers refused them help because he/she couldn't speak the English language. Students hadn't expected such situation. They were afraid that they wouldn't learn anything during the whole year.

Some of the students declared that she had to change the planned courses due to the fact that it turned out upon arrival that the course will be running in the Polish not English. Because of the small number of courses in English, some people not knowing the language attend classes conducted in Polish. Some students take part in courses in which they cannot understand anything. Students are bored on such courses. Lectures run in the English are provide only for Erasmus students. Young people complain that they have no contact with Poles during the study. Typical statements were as follow *“In fact, we participate in classes only in the group of Erasmus students. For it is very difficult to know the views of Polish students and to be honest I really wanted to meet polish people when I planned Erasmus here”*. Students also have problems with formalities at the university office because of the bureaucracy. Employees were not very helpful even to foreigners. Some students also complained about the schedule. Problems are also students learning the Polish language. They complained about the methods of teaching, emphasize that most of the time they learn grammar while not be able to ask for bread in Polish language. A lot of students couldn't find any problems in the study at polish universities.

5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATION OF RESEARCH FOR CITY COUNCIL OF LUBLIN AND UNIVERSITIES

The practical implications of the research is the need to change the activity of the city towards foreigners who wants to study in Lublin. Undoubtedly City Council should increase the safety on the streets of Lublin. It is necessary to increase the number of policemen on the streets at night. The city should also change the information aimed on websites targeted at foreign students. Today this sites inform about programs for fields of study, scholarships, procedures and city (picture 1). Most of this information's should be provided by the university website. The collected interviews shows that's students need more useful, practical information. City website for international students should present weather condition in Poland, the cultural differences that may surprise foreigners, cultural events taking place in the city. They can help students adapt to life in Poland, providing information on basic words or phrases in the Polish language to facilitate communication. There may be also the mobile applications which can help foreigners move around the city or find interesting place.

Foreign students see the disadvantages of living in Lublin/Poland. To increase the number of foreign students at Polish universities it is also need to improve the quality of urban infrastruktury. The experience The experience of current international students affect the number of potential future Erasmus students interested in studying in Poland and Lublin.

Picture 1: City Council website for foreigner students



Source: study.lublin.eu.

Many recommendations from the interviews can be suggested to schools admitted Erasmus students:

- schools shouldn't separate Polish and foreign students,
- foreign students should have classes with teachers who know the English language,
- universities should conduct satisfaction survey of foreign students,
- the Polish language teaching should be focused on communication skills,
- there is a need to improve university office service.

6. SUMMARY

The collected interviews allowed to form a few conclusions:

- Language barrier is still a main cause of problems with study abroad. Erasmus students often take part in courses which they cannot understand anything due to low level of Polish, or the lecture in English are provide only for Erasmus students.
- Erasmus students in Poland have some problem with intolerance for foreigners, aggressive behavior young, drunk people. Most Erasmus students in Lublin typically face such situations at night.
- Expectations of foreign students towards the programme of studies are often unfulfilled. Some people need more hours of classes than they have.
- The most satisfied seem to be students who study abroad to have fun and leisure time.
- Positive opinion about studying in Lublin concern helpfulness of the citizens, the Old Town atmosphere and the number of young people living in Lublin.
- Erasmus students in Lublin complained mainly about adverse weather conditions, condition of streets and pavements and a small number of cultural events in the English language.

The conducted research has several practical implications, including the need to manage students expectations provide better local information e.g. weather conditions. Students should be offered a more flexible choice the number of courses and hour of lectures or other activities. There is a need for better integration of Erasmus students into the culture of the country/city and with local citizens.

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