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Role of Erasmus in promoting European identity and European values

Introduction

European Union (EU) is the most successful and credible supranational organization (SNOs), maintaining the highest credibility and legitimacy in exercising political and economic functions. The EU is often cited as a single market with free mobility of people within the EU. However, the EU implements comprehensive programs to create jobs, promote economic growth, boost innovation and competitiveness, develop resilient and sustainable systems, and more.

The EU's history has evolved through different stages of expansion starting right after the devastation of World War II and was formalized through different treaties, i.e., the Treaty of Rome, the Treaty of Maastricht, and the Treaty of Lisbon. Economic cooperation or interdependence was intentionally created as a pathway to long-term peace for generations, especially warring countries, starting with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 with six member states.

27 European states are now part of the EU polity, which has emerged as an influential trading bloc and has earned a notable presence in the global arena as a strong voice for promoting human rights, dynamic business practices, and democratic values. The EU has vast programs, related to food

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security, health, defense, infrastructure, research, and education; however, higher education and youth have always been the central agenda of EU cooperation.

In this highly competitive and internationalized higher education landscape, mobility and cooperation programs, in addition to providing academic enrichment and knowledge exchange, are considered to foster cultural awareness, a global mindset, job skills (adaptability, open-mindedness, communication, independence, respect for diverse perspectives), life-long networking, multilingualism, etc.

These mobility programs are also presented as an “extensive natural learning situation which stimulates many more aspects of learners’ personalities than are usually catered for in educational institutions” [Murphy-Lejeune 2003: 101]. In other words, these short-term international mobility programs besides broadening subject knowledge also help to stimulate soft skills and enhancing individual traits [Cushing et al. 2019: 213].

Another interesting dimension of these exchange programs is the intellectual, academic, and social freedom that breaks the cycle of a serious academic schedule, and students can have a unique opportunity to have “fun, travel, or make new friends” [Forsey, Broomhall, Davis 2012: 134].

Erasmus is probably the most significant youth-focused program that promotes multilingualism, self-confidence, and independence [Asoodar, Atai, Baten 2017: 93]. Studies have validated the positive experience of Erasmus students as they considered a long-lasting experience and made them aware of their newly found European identity [Engel 2010: 2].

Erasmus also supports targets set for the broader EU policy agenda i.e., the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, the Europe 2020 strategy, and the EU Youth strategy through the promotion of EU values, and fostering key skills and competencies, thus contributing to overall job prospects of young Europeans [Nada, Legutko 2022: 184].

The world is immensely interdependent, the most recent example is COVID-19 which shows how policies of national governments and regional conglomerates (e.g. national and global vaccine distribution) can have an immediate short-term impact on the lives of people globally, that can either improve or exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities [Leask, Gayardon 2021: 326].

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East have again highlighted these complexities. Alignment between the internationalization and social engagement agendas of universities and higher education systems prepares the world to understand better the present-day and future challenges [Brandenburg et al. 2020: 83].

Erasmus

Mobility programs irrespective of their varying scope, structure, and magnitude, promote academic excellence, improve cross-cultural ties, and foster soft diplomacy among different countries. Erasmus+ (Europe), the Fulbright Program (USA), DAAD Scholarships (Germany), Commonwealth Scholarships (UK), Scholarships MEXT (Japan), and Australian Awards Scholarship (Australia) are the most credible and well-known mobility programs. All these programs have sustained the aspirations of millions and gained prestige over decades due to their highly competitive selection process, academic excellence, and professional development.

Among the abovementioned programs, the unique contours – flexibility, broader coverage, and simplified application processes – set apart Erasmus+ (generally referred to as Erasmus) from other similar mobility programs.

Launched in 1987, Erasmus (the acronym of the European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) has proved to be a shining success story of European aspirations of regional integration and higher education standardization. The EU has reiterated its strong support for Erasmus by significantly increasing scope and financial support and has been the core element of European Education Area goals set out for 2025 [European Commission, 2020]. Over these years, Erasmus has remained resilient and supported 13.7 million participants [European Commission, 2023].

Erasmus mobility grants for institutions and individuals embody various activities: vocational training (VET), student exchanges, internships, and faculty and staff training. This broad spectrum allows many participants, regardless of their academic or professional background, to find a suitable stream. Contrary to popular belief, Erasmus is not just limited to the EU zone, and for Europeans, instead, through its various strands, has expanded its outreach to 137 partner countries worldwide [European Union 2023]

European priorities are crystal clear as far as higher education is concerned and envisaged four key objectives; “to make lifelong learning and mobility a reality; to improve the quality and efficiency of education and training; to promote equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and to enhance creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training” [Council of the European Union, 2009].

To create an impact and achieve these objectives, transversal education mobility has been the hallmark of the EHEA which agreed to double the proportion of students participating in international mobility programs to 20% by 2020 [European Commission, 2014: 61]. In 2020, 640,000 individuals took advantage of Erasmus+ mobility abroad opportunities either through study, traineeships, or voluntary activities, along with Erasmus+ funding to 20,400 projects and 126,900 organizations [European Union 2024].

History of EU Higher Education Cooperation

Since the formation of the European Community in 1955, there has been gradual Europeanization and internationalization of higher education. The Maastricht Treaty is credited as the first formal attempt to officially integrate education as one of the EU's priorities. Due to the devastation after World War II, the initial decades were dedicated to large-scale consensus building, peace attempts, strengthening institutions, and economic turnaround.

1972–1985 is considered “a period of stagnation,” however, these internationalization efforts gained momentum in late 1980 through the European open-door policy for international students' mobility although primarily the UK was the top destination; the development of an EU research and development policy; and the stimulation of student mobility, as the core part of student life [De Wit 2002: 47–48],

The most outstanding four key milestones are the Education Action Programme (1976), the Erasmus program (1987), the Bologna Process (1999), and the European Universities Initiative (EUI) in 2018. The Education Action Programme (1976) was the first formal recognition of education's role in promoting European integration. It introduced cooperation programs in language learning and student exchanges, setting a precedent for cross-border educational collaboration. It was a concrete step to counter initial skepticism of considering education as a unified agenda due to the conflicting political and cultural contexts.

The launch of Erasmus in 1987 aimed at the mobility of 29,000 students through ERASMUS grants during the first three years, and 3,000 grants for higher education institutions to structure student and faculty exchange programs [Corbett 2005: 145]. The Bologna process has been a watershed moment for bringing synergy and cohesion to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as it incorporated standardization of university degrees, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and quality assurance, thus making Erasmus more appealing compared to other global mobility programs.

Building on the experiences and setbacks of earlier initiatives dating back to the 1950s, the European University Initiative (EUI) was launched to bring “unprecedented levels of institutionalized cooperation, making it systemic, structural, and sustainable” [European Commission 2020: 131]. French President Emmanuel Macron presented the idea in his 2017 Sorbonne speech: “I believe we should create European Universities – a network of universities across Europe with programs that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages.”

The EUI can be perceived as a form of ‘Everyday Europeanhood’ similar to ‘Everyday Nationhood’ [Skey, Antonsich 2017: 5]. The idea is in line with

EU aspirations for ‘European Universities’ aimed at “promoting common European values and a strengthened European identity by bringing together a new generation of Europeans, who can cooperate and work within different European and global cultures, in different languages, and across borders, sectors, and academic disciplines” [EU Commission 2019: 125].

Salient features of the Erasmus Program

Erasmus was named after a Hollander scientist, Erasmus (1469–1536), considered one of the most notable supporters of Renaissance Humanism owing to his exposure of various European countries as a student and as a lecturer. Conceived in 1987 as an exchange program for university students, it incorporated into the broader Socrates program in 1995, which incorporated student and faculty mobility, and transnational cooperation among higher education institutions.

The Lifelong Learning Program (2007–2013) replaced Socrates/Erasmus as a comprehensive EU education and training action scheme. Ultimately all the existing EU education, training, youth, and sports programs were consolidated under the umbrella of the Erasmus+ *program* for 2014–2020. The Erasmus+ 2021–2027 program with a widened scope had additional areas, i.e., education, vocational training, school, adult education, and sport, with a budget of €26.2 billion (nearly double the funding compared to its predecessor program (2014–2020). The four overarching priorities for 2021–2027 are social inclusion, green and digital transitions, and democratic participation of youth [European Commission 2023].

In 2022, Erasmus+ earmarked a €4 billion budget to finance 26,000 projects, 1.2 million individuals’ mobility, and around 73,000 institutions’ support [European Union 2023]. Since the launch of Erasmus, over 15 million people have participated in Erasmus+ [European Commission 2023].

Probably the most visible mobility strand of Erasmus is the short-term undergraduate exchange in which students take courses similar to the discipline they are already pursuing in their home institution ensuring to continue a current trajectory instead of starting a new one. These flexible arrangements between different institutions are rare in other global exchanges, in which students often take an extra semester in their home institution, because the credits they earned during their exchange semester are not transferred or accepted in their home university.

European identity

It is common to assume Europe is a homogenous region due to close regional proximity. However, in Europe as a whole and the EU in particular, each country has unique traditions, diverse customs, linguistic pluralism, and rich cultural heritage. The differences are not just limited to culture; there are substantial differences in governance and economic structures, welfare systems, geography, etc. These differences may be fascinating, but this is a critical EU obstacle to reshaping a collective identity without undermining the national identities of its 27 members.

Around the world, there has been a diffusion of cultures, and due to the fast-paced and rapid evolution, European countries are also making conscious multi-faceted efforts to maintain the centuries-old legacies by preserving physical architecture and a special focus on preserving the other cultural elements of their unique national identity.

The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 states, "Citizenship of the Union shall complement and not replace national citizenship." This addition to Article 8.1 of the Maastricht Treaty can be considered an effort to navigate the sentiments of EU members that EU citizenship will not be detrimental to their unique national identities [Mancini 1998: 32].

There is no clear definition of European values and European identity considering the region's diversity, multiculturalism, and multilingualism. European identity could be perceived as a "summation of identification processes with Europe," as shared identity does not require clear demarcation of the group boundaries [Van Mol 2013: 210–211].

Article 1a of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) can be seen as the guiding principles for defining European values: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men prevail."

The EU reinforces a sense of European identity through a combination of cultural, educational, and political initiatives that promote shared values, cooperation, and a sense of belonging among its citizens. For example, it funds programs like Creative Europe and Horizon Europe, which support cultural projects, heritage preservation, and research. The EU promotes symbols that exemplify European unity, including the EU flag, the official EU anthem (*Ode to Joy*), the annual Europe Day, and the euro as a common currency in several EU countries. These symbols act as reminders to nurture a sense of community, solidarity, and political and social identity among EU

people. Higher education cooperation also emerged as the influential driver of the EU's conscious efforts towards Europeanization.

Why promoting European values are central to the EU agenda?

The concern and focus on European integration is no longer limited to the power corridors of bureaucracy, instead, they have now surfaced as a highly polarized central electorate agenda [Wagner 2022: 1070]. The rise of right-wing populism (RWP) of similar anti-migrant and Euroscepticism and detachment from the political system and institutions is another challenge for the EU [Rossem, Roose 2022: 353]. The growing number of people inclined towards RWP ideologies could be detrimental to democracy [372].

Euroscepticism has garnered support from both right-wing parties disagreeing with EU cultural influence and from left-wing disagreeing with the EU economic model [Wagner 2022: 1071]. The enhancements in the EU, the changing geopolitical landscape, and the volatile economic situation have also resurfaced deliberation on the common values that bind the EU people and states [Foret, Calligaro, 2018: 1].

Every political community entails values of a symbolic nature for their citizens associated with their shared history and future with which their citizen [Obradovic 1996: 196]. The EU through its various institutions and entities, inculcates and reinforces these common values to counter multiple threats that are compromising the region's democratic foundations [Foret, Calligaro 2018: 1]. This requires carefully crafting its narrative to legitimize supranational authority for making long-term policy adjustments that may typically come under the ambit of traditional-based political narratives [Della Sala 2016: 527].

European values consistently referred to in the Union's policies are also meticulously aligned while shaping the EU cultural policy and the region's discourse [Calligaro 2014: 60]. The EU has been eager to show its deep-rooted commitment to 'unity in diversity' [70]. For the last 35 years, the EU has branded and associated itself with values that are considered the core elements of contemporary cultural values and systems [Leino 2005: 383].

The global influence of the EU cannot be taken for granted, being the largest global customs bloc, a significant population of around 500 million, and a huge voting power in international institutions [Leino, Petrov 2009: 654]. Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, these European values were exported outside the EU as well to counter the ideological and economic influence of Russia in promoting democratic systems and market reforms in the regions aligned with the Eastern Socialist Bloc [656].

These values are continuously highlighted in policy documents and strategy papers and incorporated into the EU's programs. The EU has explicitly linked these values to the values enshrined in the UN conventions to highlight their universality instead of branding them solely as European'

which bypasses the impression that these values are being forced on others [Arynov 2022: 1033].

The EU President addressed the EU's *polycrisis* at an event appropriately titled "Europe—Back on Track," and observed that in recent few years EU was likely to suffer through multiple crises in which multiple and interconnected crises were following each other [European Commission, 2018]. However, even the major challenges, such as Brexit, the 2007 global financial recession, the immigrant crisis, COVID-19, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, have only augmented unambiguous support for United Europe.

How did Erasmus foster European identity and European values?

The role of Erasmus as a catalyst for promoting European values was acknowledged by the ministers by explicitly stating that "efforts to promote mobility must be continued to enable students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff to benefit from the richness of the European Higher Education Area, including its democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages, and diversity of the higher education systems" [Prague Communiqué 2002].

European Commissioner for Education and Culture, Viviane Reding reaffirmed Erasmus' role in her acceptance speech of the 2004 Principe de Asturias Award for International Cooperation that "Erasmus enables them (students) to discover, sometimes for the first time, a different kind of citizenship founded on roots common to all Europeans, respecting historical, cultural, and linguistic diversity."

A Belgian academician, Roger Dillemans, contemplated "the belief that university education contains much more than just training for the practice of a profession... After 30 years of Europe's existence, the public thinks studying other peoples' languages, culture, religion, and scientific achievements is relevant to every one of us and a necessary part of university education, of common interest to the peoples of Europe" [Corbett 2005: 137].

The White Paper on Education and Training: Towards the Learning Society shows recognition of the instrumental role of education and training as a "main vehicle for self-awareness, belonging, advancement, and self-fulfillment" [European Commission 1995: 2]. Accordingly, it was anticipated that with the ease of mobility, there would be an increase in European understanding towards sensitivity and inclusivity of cultural differences and societal elements [European Commission 1996: 1].

Scholars cautioned that "without a specific systematic action to support intercultural learning, acquiring a feeling of belonging in an enlarged Europe, enriching national identities with the desired European dimension, seems

to be random outcomes of individual experiential learning” [Papatsiba 2006: 109]. 82% of participants of Erasmus mobility programs declared that they feel more Europeans, 72% are more interested in European topics, and 52% are more aware of European topics [European Commission 2023].

Several scholars, political figures, and practitioners have sensitized the Union since the inception of the EU that inadequate investment can hinder the region’s innovation, competitiveness, and prosperity; therefore, developing competence, adaptability, and enterprise of the young resource is instrumental. They also stressed bringing youth to the mainstream political and democratic systems and made them aware of their rights and responsibilities as EU citizens, enabling and further strengthening their voice. The EU has always been a cognizant and ardent supporter of the need to develop the leadership of tomorrow; that is capable of working beyond state and cultural boundaries.

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Streszczenie

Rola programu Erasmus w promowaniu tożsamości europejskiej i wartości europejskich

Erasmus to jeden z flagowych programów UE, którego celem jest podtrzymywanie wartości europejskich i budowanie tożsamości europejskiej, przeciwdziałając eurosceptycyzmowi. Erasmus wniósł ogromny wkład w rozwój kolejnego pokolenia europejskich pracowników i liderów, legitymujących się odpowiednimi kompetencjami i postawami, które pozwalają im rozwijać karierę na wspólnym rynku pracy UE. Erasmus zapewnia włączenie wielojęzyczności, kontaktu z wielokulturowością i poszanowania różnorodności do standardów młodego pokolenia. Obecnie UE porusza się w nowej dynamice i prowadzi dyskusje na temat dalszej integracji i dostosowań politycznych, koncentrując się na takich kwestiach, jak cyfryzacja, zrównoważony

rozwój i większa spójność polityczna, a Erasmus umacnia swoją pozycję, aby nadal skutecznie realizować priorytety UE.

Abstract

The Erasmus is one of the EU's flagship programs that envision upholding European values and constructing European identity, countering Euroscepticism. Erasmus has contributed immensely to developing the next generation of the European workforce and leaders with appropriate competencies and attitudes to advance their careers in a unified EU market. Irrespective of the Erasmus strand, Erasmus ensures, some way or another, to incorporate multilingualism, exposure to multiculturalism, and respect for diversity in the Erasmus generation. Today, the EU is navigating new dynamics and discussions on further integration and policy adjustments, with a focus on issues such as digitalization, sustainability, and greater political coherence, and Erasmus is growing stronger to advance EU priorities with the same zeal.

Słowa kluczowe: Erasmus, mobilność, tożsamość europejska, wartości europejskie, Unia Europejska

Keywords: Erasmus, mobility, European identity, European values, European Union