

Achievements of and Challenges for the Erasmus Programme:

A Student's Perspective

By Giedrė Pranaitytė (Lithuania)

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Professors and Dear Colleagues,

I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of the conference “*Erasmus - the way forward and the Green paper on mobility of young people*” for providing me with the opportunity to make a speech on achievements and challenges for the *Erasmus* programme. I feel privileged to be at the University of Lund today and share some of my personal experiences about the studies at the University of Bergen in Norway as an *Erasmus* student in 2008. It is truly an honour to represent my beloved homeland Lithuania, my native city Kaunas and Vytautas Magnus University at this memorable event.

Since my address is related to the most important achievements of the *Erasmus* programme, I would like to distinguish three of them. Speaking about the very first achievement, it is necessary to emphasize the unique possibility to get acquainted with innovative scholarly approaches. My *Erasmus* period at the University of Bergen in Norway has been very interesting and fruitful in this respect. During an opening ceremony of the academic year 2008, it was especially inspiring to hear the words of the Rector of the University of Bergen, Professor Sigmund Grønmo, who encouraged all visiting students to “aim a little higher” by looking for “the newest knowledge” and taking an active part in “the development of even newer knowledge”¹. Upon my arrival to Bergen, I was fascinated by the scholarly atmosphere and local students who were eager to know more and discover new things. It has been quite obvious to me that namely the university makes the city of Bergen vibrant and alive.

Although some harsh critics of the *Erasmus* programme hold the opinion that it should be regarded merely as a waste of time and financial resources, my experience is quite the contrary. During the semester I attended two extensive courses taught by two outstanding professors, Harald Sætren and Gunnar Grenstad, who discussed various political and social theories as well as basic issues related to the American

¹ Grønmo, Sigmund. *Rectors adress to all new students autumn 2008*. Source: http://students.uib.no/?mode=show_page&link_id=157525&toplink_id. Checked: 25 09 2009.

presidency. While studying in Bergen, I could get access to various sources of information and succeeded in writing a new scholarly article called “The Presidential Leadership of George W. Bush and Its Impact on the Erosion of the Conservative Regime”. It has already been published in the scientific-analytical bulletin “Geopolityka” in Czestochowa, Poland. It should be emphasized that the University of Bergen may indeed be proud of its rich libraries that possess a great variety of the newest books and international journals. Being an avid reader, I noticed that most Norwegian students are keen on reading, too. In other words, there is no doubt that one semester at the University of Bergen has greatly contributed to my Master’s studies.

Another important achievement of the *Erasmus* programme is that it gives a chance for many European students to come to a foreign country and get acquainted with its culture as well as arts. At the very beginning of the autumn semester at the University of Bergen everybody was invited to the Grieg Hall to listen to the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, which performed Igor Stravinsky's “The Rite of Spring”. The entire audience was impressed not only by the music itself but by the conductor Andrew Litton’s detailed remarks about Igor Stravinsky and his works as well.

In addition, all students could participate at a special cultural week and visit several Bergen museums as well as the Bergen Aquarium. I was particularly interested in the exhibition “Wild Nature” at the Bergen Art Museum. It was devoted to Norwegian landscapes. The extensive collection of paintings, which had been created by Johan Christian Dahl, Nikolai Astrup and Edvard Munch was one more interesting discovery to me. Later, I decided to visit the house of Edvard Grieg at Troldhaugen as well as the Ibsen Museum in Oslo and made two trips to the Norwegian fjords by boat. Those precious moments of my life expanded my cultural horizons greatly and made me to fall in love with the beautiful nature of Norway.

Interesting meetings with internationally renowned scholars and experts make a third achievement of the *Erasmus* programme. Studying at the University of Bergen as an *Erasmus* student, I was lucky to meet Professor Andrew Rudalevige who had been invited to make an introduction to his famous book “The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate” and give a special lecture on the imperial presidency as a guest speaker. After the lecture, an additional informal meeting was also organized so that the students could ask him some questions or discuss some challenging political issues.

Another meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Norway Benson K. Whitney was truly a valuable experience to me as well. It was especially interesting to hear his speech at the University of Bergen and find out his opinion about the political legacy of George W. Bush and the 2008 presidential election. To my mind, such encounters with the leading scholars of the world as well as distinguished diplomats prove to be a real source of inspiration and encouragement for the future.

Three major challenges for the *Erasmus* programme must be indicated to make the entire picture complete. Firstly, the minimum duration of the *Erasmus* period should be extended to two semesters. There is a popular saying among some *Erasmus* students: “As soon as you start to feel the pulse of the host university, you are doomed to leave it.” Judging from my own experience, I can firmly state that no matter how productive one semester might be, it is a too short period of time if an *Erasmus* student is really eager to do a serious research at a receiving university and get immersed in the culture of the country. Of course, one might argue that it is possible to extend the period of stay. However, it takes extra time and much effort due to administrative procedures between the sending university and the accepting university. Financial side of this issue might add some extra complexity as well.

Secondly, it is hardly possible to learn the language of the host country in more depth if an *Erasmus* student arrives just for four or five months. This is especially true for those students who have never learnt the language of the host country before. I have never learnt the Norwegian language before going to Norway. Although there was a possibility to study this language at a complete beginner’s level, I decided to choose two professional courses taught in English instead. Being a professional philologist and a translator, I came to a conclusion that one semester is simply not enough to develop basic linguistic skills of Norwegian. However, I would like to make an observation that the number of courses taught in English was quite limited at the University of Bergen. I hope that it will be expanded in the future to make the academic activity much easier for some *Erasmus* students.

Thirdly, it is absolutely necessary to encourage the local students to communicate with the *Erasmus* students more actively. Many people took part in the *Buddy Bergen Programme*, which had been launched to encourage Norwegian students to make friends with international ones. However, it proved to be less successful than expected due to cultural and age differences of the participants. A possible solution to this problem would be to include some kind of a national presentation for each student as a part of the *Erasmus* programme. In this case, *Erasmus* students could organize some kind of a special event where they would be able to present their

countries and cultures. The students of the accepting university, in turn, should respond with a special event about their country and culture. It would stimulate the intercultural communication among all students at the accepting university.

I would like to emphasize, however, that the advantages of the *Erasmus* programme outweigh its challenges. Indeed, it is very important to encourage the mobility of students because the *Erasmus* programme truly allows them to explore other countries and increase their academic knowledge. I am sure that after spending some time at various European universities, most *Erasmus* students would enthusiastically agree with the words of the famous British poet William Ernest Henley:

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.²

Finishing my speech, I would like to say thank you to the coordinators of the International Office at Vytautas Magnus University Justė Čečkauskaitė and Žydrūnė Žemaitytė as well as to the international students' coordinator at the University of Bergen Marte Nørve Årvik for their encouragement and cordial help. I am especially grateful to the representative of the *Education Exchanges Support Foundation* Ilona Kazlauskaitė for providing me with necessary financial assistance in addition to the *Erasmus* bursary. Finally, I would like to express my eternal gratitude to my parents for their unconditional love and support.

² Henley, William Ernest. *Invictus*. Source: <http://www.bartleby.com/103/7.html>. Checked: 25 09 2009.