

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an action programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus Mundus) (2009-2013)**

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On 10 September 2007 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an action programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus Mundus) (2009-2013)*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 21 February 2008. The rapporteur was **Mr Soares** and the co-rapporteur was **Mr Rodríguez García-Caro**.

At its 443rd plenary session, held on 12 and 13 March 2008 (meeting of 12 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 125 votes, with no votes against and two abstentions.

## 1. Summary and recommendations

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an action programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through co-operation with third countries (Erasmus Mundus) (2009-2013), which extends and improves the current Erasmus Mundus action programme, which the EESC also welcomed in its time.

1.2 In the Committee's view, the aim of making European universities centres of excellence attracting students from all over the world is of the utmost importance and should help to demonstrate the high quality of higher education and research in Europe. The EESC considers, however, that the programme should not contribute to the brain drain from third countries. To this end, it urges the Commission to study, in cooperation with third-country authorities and universities, strategies to encourage students and lecturers to take advantage of what Erasmus Mundus has to offer, and subsequently return to their countries of origin to contribute to sustainable development there. The Committee wishes to emphasise that, if this aim is to be achieved, EU development cooperation policies should be closely linked to programmes such as Erasmus Mundus.

1.3 The EESC notes the contribution that the new action programme will make to boosting mobility for lecturers by allocating teaching staff 40 % of all planned scholarships, as opposed to the 16.6 % under the current programme which is still in force. Such exchanges should be seen as a source of not only scientific but also cultural and educational enrichment. To this end, the Committee wishes to emphasise that the mobility of lecturers and students should no longer be an individual responsibility — as it is in many cases today — and increasingly become an institutional one.

1.4 The Committee urges Member States and the Commission to ensure that barriers arising from national legislation

affecting the mobility of lecturers and students, in terms of both access to the different EU Member States and the recognition and validation of qualifications acquired, are eliminated as quickly and effectively as possible, so that no one wishing to take part in the programme is prevented or discouraged from studying or teaching abroad.

1.5 The EESC considers that the selection procedures should provide for EU-level compensation measures in order to prevent serious imbalances between students' and academics' areas of study and regions of origin and the destination Member States. The Committee therefore endorses the wording in the Annex to Decision No 2317/2003, establishing the Erasmus Mundus Programme, and recommends that the European Parliament and Council also include this in the proposal under consideration.

## 2. Proposed decision

2.1 The overall aim of the decision is to enhance the quality of European higher education, to promote dialogue and understanding between different societies and cultures through cooperation with third countries, and to promote EU external policy objectives and contribute to the sustainable development of third countries in the field of higher education. The programme covers the 2009-2013 five-year period.

2.2 The specific objectives of the proposed decision are as follows:

- a) to foster structured cooperation between higher education institutions and academic staff in Europe and third countries [...];
- b) to contribute to the mutual enrichment of societies [...] by promoting mobility for the most talented students and academics from third countries to obtain qualifications and/or experience in the European Union and for the most talented European students and academics towards third countries;

- c) to contribute towards the development of human resources and the international cooperation capacity of higher education institutions in third countries [...];
- d) to improve accessibility and enhance the profile and visibility of European higher education in the world as well as its attractiveness for third-country nationals.

2.3 This initiative is to be implemented by means of the following measures:

- Erasmus Mundus joint masters programmes and joint doctoral programmes [...];
- partnerships between European and third-country higher education institutions [...];
- measures enhancing the attractiveness of Europe as an educational destination [...];
- support for the development of joint educational programmes and cooperation networks facilitating the exchange of experience and good practice;
- enhanced support for mobility, between the Community and third countries, of people in the field of higher education;
- promotion of language skills, preferably providing students with the possibility of learning at least two of the languages spoken in the various countries in which the higher education institutions are situated [...];
- support for pilot projects based on partnerships with an external dimension designed to develop innovation and quality in higher education;
- support for the analysis and follow-up of trends in, and evolution of, higher education in an international perspective.

2.4 This programme aims to pursue the activities of the first phase (2004-2008) <sup>(1)</sup>, but aims to be more ambitious by incorporating the External Cooperation Window more directly, extending its scope to all levels of higher education, improving funding opportunities for European students and offering enhanced possibilities for cooperation with HEIs located in third countries.

### 3. General comments

3.1 As it stated in its opinion on the Erasmus World programme (2004-2008) <sup>(2)</sup>, the Committee welcomes the proposed decision of the Parliament and the Council, together with the initiatives that have been and are being adopted to help enhance the quality of education in the European Union and boost cooperation with third countries, in line with Article 140 of the EC Treaty.

3.2 At that time, the Committee signalled 'its support for the adoption of specific initiatives which will pave the way for quality higher education based, *inter alia*, on cooperation with third countries, by working in partnership with top universities and attracting renowned scholars and the best qualified students from the countries

<sup>(1)</sup> See EESC Own-initiative Opinion of 26.2.2003 on the *Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008)*, rapporteur: J.I. Rodríguez García-Caro (OJ C 95 of 23.4.2003).

<sup>(2)</sup> *Idem*.

*concerned. This mutually beneficial synergy will contribute to the development of closer links and lay the foundations for better understanding and cooperation in the future between the European Union and the participating countries' <sup>(3)</sup>.*

3.3 Bearing in mind that the same kind of programme is involved here, the EESC would reiterate the comments it made at that time, with slight but important changes, and add the following remarks:

3.3.1 The Erasmus Mundus programme is concurrent with steps to achieve the main aim of the Bologna process, which is designed to create a European area for higher education and research by the year 2010 through reforms aligning national higher education systems.

3.3.2 However, it also coincides with another, outward-looking goal, namely to promote Europe in the eyes of the world as an area where there is quality higher education and research. Hence it is essential for the Bologna process to succeed, so that more than just the current handful of European universities attract young students from third countries.

3.3.3 This the Commission has acknowledged by accepting the Bologna process as an integral part of its education and training policy, with the same status as research in the European Union.

3.3.4 The objective — creating a 'European area of higher education' — implies a further aim, namely to attract students and lecturers from third countries. Given that this is an important, even essential goal for enhancing Europe's position in the world, the EESC would once again alert those concerned to the need to stem the brain drain from developing countries.

3.3.5 Action 2 (Erasmus Mundus partnerships) is a good example of this because, as well as taking account of the specific development needs of the third country/countries, it provides for limited, short-term stays. The measures proposed should, in the Committee's view, allow both teachers and students from third countries to benefit from a valuable period teaching and studying at European universities, but those concerned should be strongly encouraged to return to their country of origin so that they can contribute to sustainable development and social cohesion in their homeland and, at the same time, bring the high quality of EU universities to public notice in countries outside the European Union.

3.3.6 The risk of the brain drain speeding up precisely from those countries where brain power is needed — particularly due to a lack of market opportunities or quite simply of proper conditions for continuing scientific work — may also be countered by developing masters degrees and doctorate programmes in third countries, which include courses and study programmes in European countries which do not last long enough for students to feel uprooted from their country of origin.

<sup>(3)</sup> See EESC Opinion of 12.12.2007 on *Migration and development: opportunities and challenges*, rapporteur: Sukhdev Sharma (CESE 1713/2007 — REX/236).

3.3.7 This risk could also be reduced by means of measures involving the universities themselves, incorporating return strategies in any agreement signed, possibly even including compensation measures.

3.3.8 The Erasmus Mundus programme, which forms part of a global approach in European Union policies and ties in with the Lisbon strategy to turn Europe into a knowledge-based economy which is the most dynamic and competitive economy in the world — be it in terms of cooperation with the countries with which it already has agreements or as part of a broader approach to strategic cooperation with third countries — should also view the issue of brain drain as a serious problem for balanced development in the countries with which it works <sup>(4)</sup>.

3.3.9 It is also important to stress that this programme has another objective, which is to promote the exchange of cultures through better quality education and scientific rigour <sup>(5)</sup>. Hence this programme should not serve as a pretext for introducing a commercial perspective into higher education, but rather should foster high quality education, independent research, respect for academic freedom and, as envisaged in the proposal, help step up the fight against all forms of social exclusion.

3.4 Lastly, along the same lines as the Bologna process, the internal and external assessment system for universities needs to be based on criteria that take account of the current academic situation and act as an incentive to reach high levels of excellence — a *sine qua non* if they are to succeed in attracting students and lecturers from third countries, whilst at the same time preserving their identities.

#### 4. Specific comments

4.1 One key aspect of the Erasmus Mundus programme relates to the mobility of students and lecturers. The Bologna experience has demonstrated that more attention has been paid to the mobility of students than to that of lecturers, despite the fact that the importance of lecturer mobility for guaranteeing success in the Bologna strategy has been underlined in several declarations. The Council of Europe also stressed this in 2006, stating that the strategy was incomplete and inconsistent.

4.1.1 With the above as a case in point, it is important that Erasmus Mundus constitute a factor propitious to such lecturer mobility and, as defined in one of the six main objectives of the Bologna process with regard to lecturers and researchers, it is also important to overcome the obstacles impeding effective lecturer mobility, paying particular attention to the recognition and development of skills and expertise gained in research, teaching and training during the period of absence from the lecturer's usual place of work.

4.1.2 It is essential to take into account the various aspects of the matter, which cannot be played down:

- discrepancies between the educational systems in the countries receiving and sending lecturers;

<sup>(4)</sup> See EESC Opinion of 25.10.2007 entitled 'EU immigration and cooperation policy with countries of origin to foster development', rapporteur: L.M. Pariza Castaños (OJ C 44 of 16.2.2008).

<sup>(5)</sup> See EESC opinion of 20.04.2006 entitled 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)', rapporteur: Agnes Cser (OJ C 185 of 8.8.2006).

- the need to recognise and capitalise on the training, and teaching and research experience of those concerned;

- recognition not only of scientific contributions but also of socio-cultural values;

- exchanges of lecturers and researchers, to be viewed as enhancing culture and education and not only as a way of selecting the best qualified lecturers, students and researchers from third countries, as if they were 'qualified' immigrants.

4.1.3 In this particular context, efforts must be made to ensure that lecturer exchange is a factor benefiting the countries receiving and sending lecturers, the students and also the universities themselves. Enabling people from third countries to acquire qualifications and knowledge through study visits to Europe could be one means of fostering the type of intellectual exchange that benefits both the countries sending their academics and students and those receiving them. Of the different forms of exchange, visits and short study programmes, sabbaticals and specific research programmes are the best known, but there is still a wide range of other possibilities in this domain.

4.2 The Communication mentions some aspects which the EESC fully supports and which, by virtue of their importance, should be underlined:

4.2.1 The challenge of achieving linguistic diversity in Europe, raised by this whole issue, should be viewed as an additional opportunity by those opting for Europe as a destination. Recognising that one particular language is in the process of becoming the 'language of science' does not mean ignoring the value for education and research in a globalised world of learning other languages; such learning ensures linguistic richness and more opportunities for all, including those citizens and residents of the European Union who only speak their mother tongue.

4.2.2 The complicated migration rules which are continually being changed (and becoming increasingly inflexible) constitute another problem to bear in mind in relation to academics and students from third countries. In no way can or should this constitute grounds for impeding the mobility of lecturers, researchers or students. In particular, the European Council resolution on granting visas to students and teachers involved in this type of programme should be finalised.

4.2.3 Erasmus Mundus must also fully meet another of the objectives proposed: it should be an instrument for combating all forms of exclusion, including racism and xenophobia, and should help smooth out inequalities between men and women.

4.3 The findings of a study carried out by the Academic Cooperation Association between 2004 and 2005 at the request of the Commission highlight the need to define a European strategy to establish a European area of higher education, in

order to counter the idea that in Europe only universities in the most highly developed countries, or those with the most illustrious university traditions, can offer quality.

4.3.1 This strategy was based on the requirement (already formalised in the current Erasmus Mundus programme) that partnerships must be established between at least 3 universities from at least 3 countries in order to be eligible to apply for the scheme. The 2009-2013 programme upholds this requirement, which the EESC fully endorses <sup>(6)</sup>.

4.3.2 Nevertheless, other elements are crucial to improving European universities' ability to attract students, relating to their international prestige, the quality of the teaching body, cost of studies, value of the scholarships awarded, prestige of the degrees, subsequent job opportunities, knowledge which people in third countries have about the different universities in EU countries, and also the cost of living and how easy or difficult it is to obtain an entry visa. Consideration of all of these factors, in particular the cost of living and tuition fees, should be decisive when deciding on the award of scholarships.

4.3.3 Hence this new phase in the Erasmus Mundus programme should present an opportunity for discussing with university representatives, lecturers and students measures which might help publicise the merits of other universities in other EU countries, with a view to encouraging students and lecturers from third countries to apply to a wider range of such institutions.

4.3.4 One way to achieve this is, taking the good example of the Bologna process, to raise the profile of the European University Area as a whole in the information sources currently consulted by those intending to study outside their country of origin (internet, websites, EU representations).

4.3.5 Thus it might be possible, through close institutional cooperation between Member States, the Commission and university authorities, i) to create a well prepared European university portal, permanently kept up to date, easily accessed, with attractive content and widely publicised, allowing access to the portals of the different European universities and ii) to create departments in EU representations specifically geared to providing information about the European University Area.

4.4 One element essential to the capacity of the European University Area to attract students and lecturers is the presence of a highly qualified, well paid and professionally recognised body of teachers.

4.5 The EESC reiterates its firm belief that the Erasmus Mundus programme offers an excellent opportunity for detecting the most promising young students, teachers and researchers from third countries, who will most certainly be of great value for the development of Europe itself. However, it feels it must point out that many young European graduates encounter serious difficulties in finding decent and appropriate work in their own countries. Rather than an observation about the Erasmus programme, this should be seen more as a call to launch a debate on that particular issue.

4.6 It is important to stress that, in many developing countries, only public universities have the capacity to democratise higher education, eradicating discrimination and inequality (one of the declared objectives of the Erasmus Mundus programme). To this end, and regardless of the fact that the programme should not draw any distinction between the public and private sectors, it should in such cases help consolidate and bolster public universities in third countries, helping them meet their goals to produce high quality education and research, with academic freedom.

4.7 Article 5f) of the text of the proposal should include a reference to the social dialogue partners (employees and employers' representatives), since the social partners are aware of what is happening on the ground, as well as the skills and qualifications which the labour market really requires. The economic and social development needs of third countries should also be taken into account when planning the content of masters degrees and doctorates.

4.8 In the Annex to Decision 2317/2003 establishing the current Erasmus Mundus programme, indent b) states that 'selection procedures shall provide for a clearing mechanism at European level, in order to prevent serious imbalances across fields of study and students' and scholars' regions of provenance and Member State of destination'. This reference has been left out of the annex to the proposal for the new Erasmus Mundus programme. If one of the priorities of the programme is to raise the profile of European universities and secure their participation in the programme, the Committee feels that implementing this principle in the selection of participating centres is a priority, in order to avoid a situation where support from the programme goes to the same Member States and the same universities.

Brussels, 12 March 2008.

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

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<sup>(6)</sup> Data published by the Commission show that over 350 universities from almost every EU country have to date been involved with the Erasmus Mundus programme, with universities from 12 of the 27 Member States having taken responsibility for coordinating the schemes. The data also shows that most of these schemes have involved partnerships with more than 4 universities from different countries.