



SOCIEDADE
CRISE E RECONFIGURAÇÕES

VII CONGRESSO PORTUGUÊS DE SOCIOLOGIA

19 a 22 Junho 2012

Universidade do Porto - Faculdade de Letras - Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação

ÁREA TEMÁTICA: Sociologia da Educação

EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY IN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE. THE POLISH-PORTUGUESE CASE

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Abstract

The opening of state borders and job markets encourages mobility processes and intensifies intercultural contacts. These interactions are especially visible in the case of international programs, such as the Erasmus scholarship. The special value of these exchanges lies in the opportunity given to the attendants in their adolescence period: to associate with a different culture and society in a longer perspective, to get to know “the difference” and to develop their own cultural potential. The student exchange creates better educational conditions, gives the opportunity to raise the social status of scholarship holders and makes them gain new competences in a multicultural environment (e.g. language, education). To put it in Bourdieuan terms, they obtain a new habitus. Moreover, most of them become part of an international network of contacts and accumulate social capital – this fact influences later on their life attitudes and choices. The life learning process in an international environment is regarded nowadays as highly valuable. The competences acquired during this process smooth the path to the understanding of “the others”, and enable the work in the framework of different organizational cultures (G. Hofstede). However, the advantages of scholarship programs are not exploited enough in Polish-Portuguese relations. This causes losses both in the economical and socio-cultural dimensions, as mutual opportunities remain neglected. The aim of the paper will be to present the results of a research conducted among Polish youth of former holders of Erasmus scholarship in Portugal. The results will provide a sketch of the framing of Portuguese culture by Polish students, and also information about the influence of the Erasmus experience on their attitude life choices. It is a vital issue if experiences gained during external scholarships help to improve the competences to work in an international environment and facilitate intercultural contacts.

Keywords:(Intercultural communication, international education, international mobility, Erasmus programme)

Introduction

Accession to European Union and opening of state borders on one hand mean more perspectives for people looking for work or new experiences. On the other hand, increasing international mobility creates new needs, as: development of language competences or intercultural communication skills. This relatively new demand can be solved by properly projected educational mobility programmes. Many research studies indicate various benefits resulting from “internationalization of higher education”(Knight, 2004; Wende, 1999).

The Erasmus Programme, called “flagship education and training programme of UE”ⁱ was established in 1987 and since then enabled around 2 mln members of academic communityⁱⁱ to share learning experience in institutions located in different European (and not only European) countries. There are many hopes and assumed effects of successive implementation of Erasmus Programme. Among them one can find: creating “international academic network”, satisfying new business and societal needs (Juknyte-Petreikiene, Pukelis, 2007), creating new, so-called “Erasmus generation”(Bennhold, 2005). Some academics are quite enthusiastic about these possibilities, other provide studies suggesting that such assumptions are overemphasized and too optimistic (Wilson, 2011).

In our research we concentrated on experiences of Polish students- attendants of Erasmus scholarship in Portugal. We'd like to approach the question about derived profits and about the aspects that proved to be the most important during their stay.

Survey Overview

The first conclusions presented in the following report are the result of a survey project conducted by the Authors in May 2012. The aim of the survey was to provide the necessary knowledge of participants in the Erasmus program about Portugal and its inhabitants. The survey was based on IDI – *Individual In-Depth Interviews* method. 25 people were selected for survey, and 21 interviews were used for the analysis. Survey was conducted among the persons who participated in the Erasmus Program in the period between 2004 and first half of 2012. Usually the stay in Portugal lasted half a year (one semester), however several persons stayed for the whole year (two semesters). The shortest stay was two months (one person) and the longest one – 2.5 years (one person) All respondents live in Warsaw, however some of them only because of their studies. Most of the graduates or students completed or study Sociology or European Studies, although some studied economy, management, finance, human resources management, English philology, Latin American studies, IT and even design studies. Respondents represented most of the major Warsaw universities: University of Warsaw, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Warsaw School of Economics and Warsaw University of Life Sciences. The majority of participants were full-time students although there was one person who attended extra-mural studies. Most of the respondents are currently employed, however some of them combine work and studies. There is also a group of people who continue with their studies. Among the ones who are employed, the majority work in companies (and corporations), although several responses indicate that not in all cases it is work under contract of employment. The majority work in finance and HR, but some are employed in advertising and consulting.

For most of them the Erasmus Program in Portugal was not something that they planned beforehand. The decisive factor was that in accordance with the documentation, no knowledge of Portuguese was required and only English (although the situation in some cases proved to be different). Portugal was a choice alternative to Spain and Italy. Advantages of Portugal also included its location, climate and tourist attractions as well as its exotic nature. Moreover, the offer – in the opinion of the participants – was very specific and the contact with the Portuguese representatives of the program was smooth. Stay in Portugal was relatively the easiest and the fastest to arrange at their alma maters. Some respondents chose Portugal because their friends were on exchange programs there and they were happy with their stay. Majority of the respondents had no contact with Portugal prior to their stay. Sporadic contacts were limited to vacations or short visits of friends. Knowledge about this country was very limited. It did not go beyond the information learnt at school. Persons with interests in football were an exception however their knowledge was not very extensive. There was also one admirer of Portuguese wine.

All respondents know (and had known prior to their stay in Portugal) English at different levels. This knowledge usually enabled them to communicate freely. Most of them have basic knowledge of Portuguese although there are some who continued their studies after their return and their knowledge may be considered as good. One person teaches Portuguese. Quite a few people speak or learn Spanish. Moreover the respondents said they had poor knowledge of French (mostly school level), German and Russian.

First cultural interaction

The first impression of the participants in the Erasmus Program who came to Portugal was disappointment. They expected among others, a large city and the university of the similar size as their alma maters. It turned out that in Portugal everything was smaller than they expected. Especially as they came from Warsaw (almost 2 million inhabitants) and Porto was significantly smaller (almost 270 thousand inhabitants). The weather was also a surprise. Winter was quite cold and the rainfall was quite heavy, and the Poles expected warm and almost summer-like weather. Summer was very hot. Customs such as siesta and no rush attitude proved to be a significant problem. Portuguese were not in a hurry to deal with various matters, therefore in the eyes of the Poles even basic things (such as issuing of library card) became a problem. Respondents also expected that their social life, mostly with Portuguese, will start as soon as they arrive. It turned out that it took days, weeks and even months to meet new friends. And very often they were not Portuguese but fellow countrymen (there were lots of Poles) or Erasmus participants from other countries. Another problem was that the Portuguese and students from other countries, especially where there were large numbers of them (among others Spaniards, Italians), often preferred their own company. Language proved to be a significant problem. Contrary to the information that they received, the knowledge of English among the Portuguese, especially the older generation was not common. Neither did many Portuguese students and lecturers speak fluent English and that proved to be the greatest obstacle in establishing of new contacts. However people who attended the university with the extended offer of subjects taught in English, emphasize that the level of classes was high and this had a considerable effect on their entire exchange program experience.

Any possible friendships with the Portuguese proved to be quite shallow as well. This hindered not only social interactions but also studying and exchange of experiences. It was the hardest for people who lived in a dorm to establish new friendships. They were practically limited to contacts with fellow participants in the Erasmus Program. Although the student organization Erasmus Student Network operates quite effectively and organized a large number of events and meetings, they took place in a closed circle of participants in the Program. However the members of the organization could take advantage of discounts in theaters and museums. But any possible disappointments did not dominate in the feelings of former participants in the program. Most of them were happy and sometimes even thrilled after their arrival in Portugal. What came as a surprise was the permission to smoke in public places.

The organization of classes was different as well, as almost of them were practical in nature. And that suited the students fine. With few exceptions, Portuguese lecturers were open to cooperation and ready to help. Erasmus participants noted among others that the lecturers did not create a distance that is a common practice in Poland. They were also very interested in students. It was easier because the university in Portugal was usually much smaller than in Poland and the students and employees of particular departments far less anonymous. After several months most of them knew each other at least by sight. Employees in the Dean's Office were also very helpful and although their way of work (slow in comparison to Poland) was different from what we have in Poland, the cooperation was usually very good. Poles also evaluated positively the infrastructure where they studied (condition of buildings, toilettes, cafeterias etc).

Despite the problems with the language and selection of classes, students had a lot of work. Naturally, the timetable was dependant on individual preferences but even in the case of students who were focused on sightseeing and leisure, there was a lot to do. It was difficult for those who worked the hardest to find time for entertainment. Working day started at 8 am in the morning and usually ended at 7 pm. Of course this included siesta break. Persons who were involved in implementation of projects worked as late as 11 pm or longer. Additionally there was the Portuguese language course. At the beginning, intensive course i.e. the

classes took place every day and lasted approx. 2 hours each. After the intensive part was over, the Portuguese language classes were 2-3 times a week. Organization of studies in Portugal was such that even the small number of lectures consumed a lot of time. Especially that the attendance even at the classes taught in Portuguese was usually mandatory. Students had to be prepared all the time.

Perception of Portugal and its population

Poles perceived the Portuguese as very open and friendly as well as helpful and nice. Strangers in the street took their time to show them or take them to the place they were looking for. Friends readily help in everyday problems. However, as time went by, in the opinion of the majority of the Erasmus participants, it turned out that the Portuguese keep their distance and it is difficult to befriend them. It was also more difficult to befriend young Portuguese women than Portuguese men. This applied both to female –female as well as female – male contacts. One should also note that in the opinion of the Erasmus participants, Portuguese are mostly friendly, helpful and peaceful people. Just like Poles they are very family-oriented. But at the same time they keep their distance. According to the Polish students there are big cultural differences between the south and the north. This applies particularly in relation to the language. The north is less developed than the richer south. The north is more conservative. Lisbon is very different than all other regions of the country. The capital is a large, cosmopolitan and open city. Just like in Poland there are significant differences between the countryside and cities. Another dividing line is between the coast and the areas located further from the ocean. The coast is more open.

Erasmus participants were probably most impressed with the Portuguese way of life: peaceful, happy and warm. They also remembered open and friendly people as well as landscapes, cuisine and parties. As far as studies are concerned, some students were impressed by the Portuguese system of studies which put a lot of emphasis on practical aspects. Summing up their stay in Portugal, students claim that they divided their time more or less equally between studies and leisure. Of course there are people who devoted most of their stay to sightseeing and having fun, without doing any real studying. However this was not a rule. The most important disadvantage pointed by the students was the insufficient number of classes in English. Trouble with the language made it difficult for some of them to evaluate the level and selection of classes. However people who studied at the university with the wider selection of classes in English or spoke better Portuguese, claim that the selection of classes was wide and they were taught at the high level. Cooperation with lecturers who tried to get to know the students, was also valued highly. Poles also liked the practical way of conducting classes.

After their return home upon the completion of the Erasmus program, the participants have had very different experiences. Some of them were very emotional about the end of their stay in Portugal, others were already a little bit bored with it. This depended among others on the season of the year (ex. it was more difficult to come back from hot Portugal to cold Poland in the autumn time) and the responsibilities that awaited home. It was easier to adjust for the people who continued or came back to the active social lifestyle in their home country. And in the case of students who reacted badly to their return, the feeling of depression intensified after they got back to their alma maters and had to pass additional exams to make up for the differences in the course of studies. They sometimes had the feeling that they were being punished for their activity and curiosity of the world.

Some of the Erasmus participants also had to deal with the social circle consequences of their exchange program experience. Some of the friendships did not survive or the relations got considerably looser. Although there were people who went back to their old social circle without any problems whatsoever. Friends from university reacted differently. They mostly expressed curiosity but there was also envy and sometimes sympathy if the student had to resit the whole semester at the alma mater.

Most of the Erasmus participants did not notice any negative aspects of their stay in Portugal. Even if they indicated such aspects, they included most often the longing for one's family, problems with sustaining the relationships with partners left in Poland or keeping in touch with new friends in Portugal. The issue of insufficient classes in English was raised again. Return to their alma maters proved to be a considerable

problem. Students did not receive credit for subjects they completed in Portugal or they were given credit only in limited scope. So after their return they had to reset the whole semesters. There were even situations where the person sent from the university to Portugal was deleted from the list of students because the information on his/her stay did not reach the appropriate structures. Such situations made the students feel that they were being punished for their stay abroad.

Consequences of the student exchange program

Practically all students, indicated as the biggest benefit of their stay in Portugal, the possibility to learn and revise the foreign language. This concerned both the Portuguese language as well as English. Significant number of students continued after their return home to study Portuguese but in most cases this did not last very long. Some people still keep in touch with friends they met during their stay. Friendships from their stay in Portugal are mainly maintained by the people who came back recently. Facebook is very helpful in this respect. A lot of friendships with Poles, Portuguese and other nationalities have survived. However a lot of them no longer keep in touch. It was very important to get to know the daily life in a different country, get to know people from other countries, make new friends and friendships, which were maintained after their return and are still maintained. The effect of these contacts for the people coming back from Portugal was a greater openness to the world and tolerance as well as greater resourcefulness. Different methods of teaching were also noted, more practical and systematic. Learning how to work in groups. Participation in the exchange program, need to take care of oneself in a foreign environment and constant contact with foreigners contributed to the greater openness and readiness to interact with foreigners. Although some students pointed that the said traits were necessary at the start of the program as they made the stay considerably easier. Even if the languages have not been mastered to the perfection, the barrier in speaking is gone. The stay abroad allows people to look at their choices from a distance and to reconsider them, see their limitations and try to overcome them. It helps to gain new experiences. Naturally it helps with the study of foreign languages. Some claim that the stay mostly contributes to the development of social competences and that it does not contribute at all or only in to a very limited extend to widening of the formal knowledge. However all respondents think it was worthwhile to participate in the program.

Stay in Portugal did not result in the increased interest in this country which was very low or non-existent beforehand. Respondents have fond memories of their stay but in majority of cases this does not mean any specific actions. They are no longer interested in politics (even if they were during their stay). Not many people follow cultural events related to Portugal and only one person said that he/she participated in such event. Only one person is interested in Portuguese literature. Neither are many people interested in Portuguese cuisine or wine, although some say that they sometimes cook Portuguese dishes (they would visit a Portuguese restaurant but apparently there is not a single one in Warsaw). Several people visited Portugal again as their holiday destination.

Majority of the respondents expected to have fun in Portugal. It was supposed to be sort of like a holiday adventure. Chance to meet new, interesting people, exotic culture, sightseeing and rest. The main benefit not related to having fun was to be the study (or revision) of a foreign language and that would be mainly English. For some people it was a chance to be live on their own and independently (as if only for a while) from their parents. A chance to test oneself in a situation where one needs to take care of oneself. All Erasmus participants expected that they would meet new friends in Portugal and that they would be mainly Portuguese as well as people from other countries. They wanted to meet interesting cool people with whom they were going to party. One should note that in the opinion of the Erasmus participants the knowledge of Portuguese may prove to be useful while looking for a job. Some employers also value the stay abroad as such, as a proof that the participant is independent and active. However the majority of recruiters do not put a lot of significance to this fact unless they themselves participated in the Erasmus program. The reason for it is that more and more students participate in such programs and it is not something that would make a person stand out.

In conclusion

Exchange programs activate the personal and social potential and offer a chance to meet inhabitants of countries with different cultures. The exchange programs make it easier to break the stereotypes and oversimplifications which follow from the lack of knowledge of cultural contexts. Exchange program requires the student to take care of himself in a “foreign” environment and to interact with foreigners contributing to the greater openness and readiness for contacts in an environment which is culturally different. Moreover the exchange program provides for the possibility to not only interact directly with a different culture but also activates mechanisms of individual exploration of a different culture before the trip. Students prepared for their stay abroad in various ways by among others, reading literature, making inquiries among friends if they participated in a similar program and primarily by studying the foreign language and thus acquiring basic knowledge of the Portuguese culture.

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ⁱWeb- page of European Commission Education and Training Programme: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm accessed at [30.05.2012]

ⁱⁱOp. cit. http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/statistics_en.htm#1 accessed at [30.05.2012]