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## **The Experience of Law Students on the Erasmus Study Exchange Programme** **Part 2: Impressions of Returning Students**

A study by Eric Jeanpierre & Graeme Broadbent

**1<sup>st</sup> DRAFT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

'We need a generation of people who speak other people's languages and more British students spending time abroad as part of their degrees.' (Business Secretary, Vince Cable)<sup>1</sup>

In these times of economic struggle, and with anxieties surrounding both the existing costs to students of higher education and the new fees regime that came into effect in September 2012, coupled with concerns about graduate employment and long term debt, it is not surprising that students are thinking critically about the benefits of going to university more than ever before<sup>2</sup>. For those deciding to undertake higher education, various forces combine to make completion of the undergraduate degree in the shortest possible time a desirable outcome. Firstly, for many there are economic pressures which make early completion desirable. Secondly, government policy has been advocating the obtaining of a degree as a passport to higher earnings. Thirdly, the government has been advocating two year degrees, instead of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Students Deterred from Year Abroad', 27 March 2012, *Prospects*, [http://www.prospects.ac.uk/latest\\_news\\_students\\_deterred\\_from\\_year\\_abroad.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/latest_news_students_deterred_from_year_abroad.htm) , accessed 13 June 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Current UCAS figures suggest that applications for law had been steadily rising then dipped in 2012 but have revived to show a slight increase on pre-2012 levels: see <http://www.ucas.com/data-analysis/data-resources/data-tables/he-subject> accessed 13 June 2014. Earlier reports suggested that even in the 2012 dip, applications for law held up when compared to falls in the numbers of applications for other subjects: see *Daily Telegraph* 20 March 2012. Latest UCAS figures show an overall 4% increase in applications for 2014 entry compared to 2013: <http://www.ucas.com/news-events/news/2014/2014-cycle-applicant-figures-june-deadline-2014> (accessed 22 July 2014).

the traditional three, in order to address the first two concerns<sup>3</sup>. Law has traditionally been a subject where students typically engage in some form of postgraduate study or training rather than going directly into employment, and so the pressures for law students are perhaps different from those experienced in other disciplines.

In that light, the overall aim of the present study is to assess the short and long-term impact of the year abroad, based on the experience of a sample of law students from a particular university, Kingston, which is located just outside London. The object is to explore and analyse the motivations, expectations and the actual experiences and reflections of students so as to understand more fully the impact of the Erasmus programme on their lives and careers. Our starting point is that spending a year abroad at another institution and in another country is likely to be beneficial, otherwise it would not be on offer and students would not take it up. There are, however, consequences flowing from the decision to study abroad, which may deter students from choosing to study abroad as they might perceive that the benefits do not outweigh the possible drawbacks. The fact that students do not pursue a study abroad option under the Erasmus scheme in large numbers might suggest that, for many, this is the case, though other factors may be persuasive.

We also wanted to find out whether those students who do choose to participate in the Erasmus scheme display any characteristics that differentiate them from their peers. By becoming involved in the scheme they are already different in extending the length of their degree programme.

To these ends, we have undertaken a longitudinal study over a number of years. The first part involving motivations and expectations of outgoing students, carried out over a number of years involved some 57 pre-Erasmus students. This part has now been completed and has been submitted for publication. The second part is an ongoing study and reflection of student Erasmus experiences. The basis for both parts to be obtained by means of a questionnaire and a series of semi structured interviews with Kingston law school outgoing Erasmus students at Kingston Law School over a period of seven years, the results of which are discussed below.

The interviews for this article (the second part) were carried out and are still ongoing with students returning from their experience abroad. The style of the interviews allows students to talk about a range of matters relating not only to their academic studies but also more generally to the wider experience of living abroad, comparing how the reality compared to expectations as well as the benefits that students believe to have gained from such an experience.

## **I - THE NATURE OF THE COHORT**

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<sup>3</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (Cm 8122, 2011), para 4.11.

As the study of law is a country specific topic<sup>4</sup>, the exchange programme therefore involves a departure from the study of English law and so traditionally adds an additional year to a student's degree, sandwiched in between the second and third/final year. As a consequence, all students interviewed during this study completed, or will complete, their undergraduate law studies in four years.

The profile of typical outgoing Erasmus students from Kingston Law School displayed the following headline characteristics:

- Predominantly female
- Almost exclusively non-mature
- An average age at the time of departure of around 22 years
- Almost exclusively EU students, and mainly UK students
- A substantial percentage of English native speakers mastering more than 1 language, though not necessarily the language of their country of destination
- About half never visited the host country (or countries if two destinations)
- Approximately half of all students have a minority ethnic background

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## **II – KEY INITIAL FINDINGS**

### **A – THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE**

Our starting point is that spending a year abroad at another institution and in another country is likely to be beneficial and enjoyable.

When asked to describe their general mood before studying abroad, a large majority of students were excited to study abroad. For some students, however, this was coupled with a degree of anxiety in facing a new environment. The initial finding is that most students enjoyed the study abroad experience but a number of student experiences at times weren't been devoid of complications, upsets and problems. In a way this is hardly surprising as the Erasmus study exchange programme extends over a lengthy period of time: it would be quite surprising if no unexpected difficulties should appear. They can be divided up into different categories, ranging from serious ones such as financial ones (e.g. difficulties to pay the rent or the need to change to a cheaper destination in the second semester) or personal ones (e.g. health problems or difficulties of getting a visa issued on time) to lesser serious ones (e.g. struggling in some courses or issues with a staff member or a neighbour). The complication arises from the absence of the habitual support mechanism (e.g. family) that is often not replaced by any other one while abroad. So, there is a need for ongoing support by the sending university, even if it is at a distance.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Jeanpierre, 'The Pitfalls of Legal Translations between Legal Systems from Two Different Legal Families: A Focus on Translations of French Legal Material into English' Lapland Law Review, 2011, issue 1, <[www.ulapland.fi/loader.aspx?id=f27bd93f-52a1-482c-ad4e-ee252ffc90e6](http://www.ulapland.fi/loader.aspx?id=f27bd93f-52a1-482c-ad4e-ee252ffc90e6) .

## **B – LANGUAGES**

Overall, students' thoughts about the benefits of the year abroad have been reinforced. In general, students came back in a better place than when they went. However, the perceived benefits of the year abroad differ between pre and post Erasmus interviews of the same cohort of students. For example, learning or improving a language was cited as one of the main reasons for studying abroad during pre-departure interviews (22%). Except for students studying in a foreign language, there was often a realisation that mastering the language spoken locally was not a necessity to get on, especially with English having become a modern type of *lingua franca*. This had naturally an impact on students' motivation.

## **C – ACADEMIA**

Students overall acknowledged the academic benefits of the year abroad, with a belief of having gained a better understanding of law, a new self-confidence as well as added motivation and dedication. The final year at KU was often perceived as a fresh start.

## **D – FINANCES**

Nowhere more than in relation to finances, did it become clear how little informed students were about the requirements of the year abroad. There was of course some degree of understanding and to an extent students were somehow informed, but it was all very general, e.g. that it would have more or less the same financial requirements than studying at Kingston or that parental help would be sufficient to get by. That was confirmed during the pre-departure interviews, with slightly over a quarter of students acknowledging a precise understanding of the financial costs of the year abroad. There were two financial elements that were similar to all students, no matter their destination: the Erasmus grant and the fee waiver. A slightly bigger figure of students than during the first interviews recognised that the year abroad would not have been a realistic option without an Erasmus grant, though many students, without belittling the importance and benefits of the financial help, believed that the non-payment of such a grant would not have impacted in their of studying abroad, they would just have had to be more careful in regards to expenses. What was rather more surprising was the revelation by some students during the post-Erasmus interviews that the fee waiver had been infinitely more important in their ability of studying abroad than the Erasmus grant. This is an issue that will definitely need further future attention in relation to future outgoing students with the now generalised requirement of paying a fee for the year abroad though a fraction of the one paid for studying in the UK, typically 1/5.