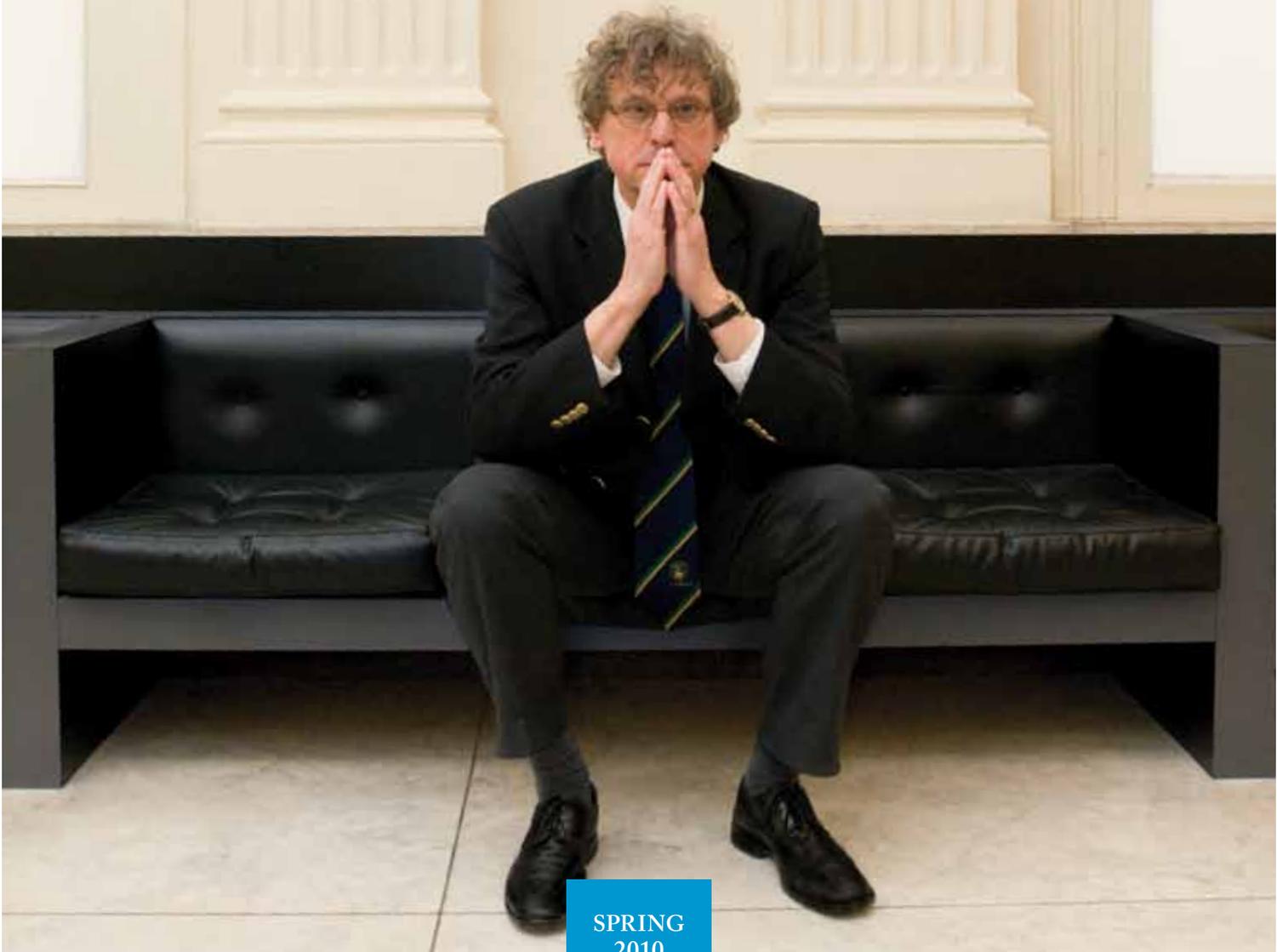


# FORUM

*Discussing international education*

**SAYING FAREWELL TO ALEX**  
**A SOCIAL MEDIA MAKEOVER**  
**SCRAPPING ERASMUS**  
**A FRENCH OUTLOOK**



SPRING  
2010

# SCRAPPING ERASMUS

*Jan Petter Myklebust and colleagues debate the usefulness of the Erasmus student-exchange programme and whether exchanges should be shortened or narrowed to certain fields of study.*

The Erasmus programme is the flagship of the European Union higher education and research programmes, involved in the mobility of more than two million students over the last 20 years. The programme hit a chord in early 1990, releasing much energy and optimism in European universities. In the first years of the programme, teaching staff played a major role in the Inter-University Cooperation Programme (ICP) networks, which had to be coordinated by a professor. In 1996–1997 these ICP-networks were substituted by an institutional contract, which shifted some of the executive responsibility for the Erasmus programme from teaching staff to administrative staff at universities. It has never been established whether this was the right move for the Erasmus programme.

The Erasmus programme has been widely acknowledged, from the Pope to European Ministers of Education and the public at large. France played an important role in the planning of the programme and President Mitterrand showed a personal interest in its conception. Franck Biancheri worked closely with top French politicians in the establishment of the Erasmus programme. It is therefore of interest to hear his view on the future of Erasmus.

## TIME FOR CHANGE?

In a recent article in EUobserver, Franck Biancheri proposes to scrap the Erasmus student exchange programme from the EU Commission, claiming that the 22-year-old programme is outdated. His voice could carry some weight on this issue since he actively participated in the establishment of the Erasmus programme. The scheme, which today costs €440 million a year, is not delivering value for money, he says, and the traditional six-month exchange should be given back to the Member States.

“We need to produce managers who are trained to work throughout the EU,” he believes, “[and who are] at ease in several languages. Therefore, more short-term exchanges for a greater number of students should be developed, also focusing on training the young in more civic-oriented programmes.”

When asked if he could see a role in the future of the Erasmus programme as a bridge between the Framework Programmes of the EU and the Grand Chal-

lenges addressed by the Swedish EU Presidency, Mr Biancheri stated, “The problem with the EU Framework Programme is not money, but relevance. Its bureaucratic procedures, linked with the incestuous nature of its steering/management/evaluation (the same researchers are generally in all three positions ensuring that only friendly projects get significant funding), cause the objectives and priorities of the programme to almost always be out of sync with the pace of real scientific research. The Erasmus type of European discovery is adapted to give students a good flavour of another European country. However, it is neither sufficient in numbers to have a significant democratic impact, nor sufficient in terms of studies to train future European managers of all types. In order to get 10% of each year’s generation, we need something less costly and shorter.”

#### STUDENT UNION’S VIEWS

Ligia Deca, Chairperson of the European Students Union (ESU), agrees that the Erasmus scheme has to change, focusing support on academically meaningful mobility without narrowing it down to training multilingual managers, as Biancheri suggests. Entrepreneurship is a key competence for the future, but certainly not the only one. ESU fully agrees with the call for more links with European citizens and that a branch of the programme should foster acquiring competence, leading to active citizens with a sound democratic exercise.

“ESU’s repeated call for more student-centred learning is the frame that reunites all these views,” Ms. Deca states, “as it calls for flexibility for the learners to allow them to reach their full potential. This also includes mobility opportunities.”

#### COIMBRA GROUP’S VIEWS

Inge Knudsen, Director of the Coimbra Group’s office in Brussels, who has seen thousands of Erasmus students exchanged among the 38 universities of the group, is sceptical.

“The remark about having to train young managers is way off the mark, especially at a time when we are all trying to make higher education accessible to more young people who all need to carve out their place in society in the future.”

Ms Knudsen further believes, “It is not up to the Erasmus programme to define what the students will become in the future, it is up to the higher education institutions to provide them with the knowledge they need to find their own way, be it as managers or something else. The Erasmus programme is not outdated; it has managed to keep an open access policy, supporting mobility regardless of discipline, field of interest, country, *etc.* One can always question whether the inclusion of work placements was the right move, but it does show that the programme is keeping up with the times and reforms in providing employment-oriented mobility as well as the more traditional ‘academic’ mobility.”

#### ACA’S VIEWS

The Director of the Academic Cooperation Association in Brussels (ACA), Bernd Wächter, says that the Erasmus programme is certainly not outdated.

“It is one among many meaningful forms of the promotion of mobility and has contributed most to the creation

of a generation of European-minded young people. I cannot recommend narrowing it down to the education of European managers only – as much as we need them. And I certainly cannot recommend shortening the duration. Stays of a few weeks only undoubtedly also have an impact – but of a rather touristic sort. ‘Something cheaper’ than Erasmus will be hard to get; already now the student grants have reached rather symbolic levels,” he says.

#### REACTIONS

Peter Floor, Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Coimbra Group 1986–1997, states in a reaction to this issue, “I agree that it is too narrow-minded to look at Erasmus only from the utilitarian side. On the other hand I felt disappointed hearing reports from students who considered going abroad as a subsidised time off from their studies rather than as an incentive for extra study efforts. Looking from the outside now, I wonder whether the bigger, underlying problem is not that the implementation of the Bologna Declaration in a number of countries has been rather Pavlov-like, but that these countries fail to highlight the added value of international cooperation that it was intended to generate.”

Is it time we scrap Erasmus? Revisions are essential in order to rejuvenate the programme. But with today’s organisation and function already cemented, a new approach could be hard to create. Clearly this is a topic that warrants further debate as well as the attention of Brussels. **E**

**SOMETHING CHEAPER THAN  
ERASMUS WILL BE HARD TO GET**