



Coimbra Group comments to the European Commission's Green Paper on Learning Mobility of Young People

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The Coimbra Group welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to underline the importance of learning mobility of young people and would like to make the following comments to the Green Paper.

Priority: Enhancing mobility

Since the foundation of the Coimbra Group in 1985, student mobility has been one of the main priorities of the involved universities, with serious investments in infrastructures even before the start of the Erasmus Programme in 1987. The Coimbra Group Universities have been prominently represented in the original Erasmus Programme and are still extremely active in student exchange activities. The Coimbra Group pays special attention to the monitoring of two main indicators, which characterise the degree of internationalisation of a given university: the number of regularly enrolled foreign students (i.e. international degree seeking students), and the number of exchange students (i.e. credit seeking students, both outgoing and incoming)¹. According to our most recent survey (2007-2008) the 38 universities of the Coimbra Group, which represent less than two per cent of all higher education institutions active in Erasmus, "saw" almost twenty per cent of the total Erasmus mobility. Moreover in the same academic year the Coimbra Group Universities sent about 1900 students to European higher education institutions under programmes other than Erasmus and 3600 students to higher education institutions in the rest of the world.

The mobility priorities of the Coimbra Group include exchanges with different parts of the world, with grants provided by the Coimbra Group Universities themselves, and an internal Student Exchange Network (SEN) which enables students from individual universities to be mobile outside the existing programmes. The SEN is a network established originally to support the so-called "free mover students", but is still in place to provide opportunities for students who, for one reason or another, are not covered by EU-funded programmes.

It would be of value to discuss a more comprehensive and flexible definition of mobility than the existing 3-12 months to create a more attractive mobility concept. Several disciplines do not lend themselves easily to the restrictions of the present mobility definition, and at the doctoral and post-doctoral level it directly limits mobility. The definition accepted by Coimbra Group Universities for a wide range of activities has been "activities which result in credits", and we would like to propose that this credit definition be included in future discussion, allowing for shorter stays abroad and for the period abroad to be split – when clearly and appropriately motivated.

Priority: Quality mobility

A main priority of the Coimbra Group has always been the integration of the cultural and academic strengths of the individual universities, underlining the regional aspects as well as the academic cultures. The aim is to strengthen the quality of the exchanges, and we would like to stress this particular aspect as it is of importance to the further development of mobility of young people. Mere quantitative measures for mobility are not sufficient incentives for students or higher education institutions if not underpinned by quality cultures and support services to ensure high quality outcome of the exchanges. The investment at Coimbra Group Universities already before the start of the Erasmus Programme to create services for incoming and outgoing students and faculty, underlining the cultural and academic strengths of individual universities, has proved to be a winning formula as seen by the track record of the Coimbra Group Universities.

As underlined earlier in the Coimbra Group Position Paper on “European Higher Education after 2010”², a shift of focus in higher education policies is needed from mere structure and quantity to content-related and quality issues: “The attention needs to be shifted from the purely structural issues to concentrate on the in-depth details of learning outcomes, which are in turn linked to the contents of a given subject area. Flexibility and transparency are not guaranteed by mere structural measures or by broad descriptions of study programmes.”

It is of importance to the Coimbra Group Universities that the focus is shifted from quantitative measures to concentrate on content-related matters, the learning outcomes, without which the individual student will not increase his or her competences regardless of the destination and/or duration of a stay abroad. This also relates to thesis work (quite important at master level with possible spontaneous spin off effects in research co-operation between institutions), work placements, internships and other forms of activities during a period of mobility, and in this area there is a need for improvement, in particular concerning recognition issues. Once mobility is assured as a structural component of the degree course (e.g. by degree course related mobility flows, by identifying appropriate time windows, etc.) quality mobility underlines the clear added educational values of the study period abroad, values based on the quality of the learning outcomes, be it of an academic, a personal or a practical character. Several studies and the experience from careers services at Coimbra Group Universities show that employers highly value the international and intercultural competences acquired during an exchange or work placement provided the mobility period has not been one of ‘academic tourism’.

One important aspect of quality mobility is the opportunity to foster multilingual skills and thereby contribute to a growing sense of European citizenship. Good communication skills in a foreign language are more often than not prerequisites of a profitable learning experience abroad and ensures that students are not confined to an “Erasmus bubble” while abroad.

Finally we would like to underline that the development of quality mobility would not have been possible without the dedicated commitment of academic and administrative coordinators. Their efforts rarely receive the appropriate recognition at home institutions and European authorities.

Priority: Increased doctoral and postdoctoral mobility with equal opportunities

Doctoral mobility needs to be further promoted, also within the education programmes. The questions concerning quality education, employability issues and quality culture are just as crucial and important to the increasing number of doctoral students throughout Europe and beyond. In particular, there is a need to strengthen the employability aspects at doctoral level and stress the generic and transferable skills obtained, an area which is often overlooked at the third cycle level because of its special character. This is an area which lends itself to extended networking among research universities and is one of the priorities of the task force of the Coimbra Group dealing with the doctoral level and research.

There are formalities and regulations in each and every country to be observed and respected, but the infrastructures in place in most higher education institutions, and definitely in Coimbra Group Universities, are familiar with such issues and are often highly professional. But there are still areas where improvements are needed, in particular at the doctoral and post-doctoral levels. The status of doctoral candidates varies from one country to the next, and it would be of value, in particular to research universities, to have a general discussion about the status of doctoral candidates and their rights in the different Member States. In some countries doctoral candidates are ‘students’, in others they are ‘employees’, something which could lead to decreased mobility to/from some countries if not addressed appropriately.

As mentioned above mobility programmes also have to be adapted to the special character of the doctoral and post-doctoral levels. This very often means that a series of short work-intensive stays abroad is more appropriate in a given research programme than one long period of absence from the home institution. This formula also has obvious advantages to young families.

Priority: Employability is not restricted to ‘employment’

Closely linked to the priority of quality mobility and the wish to increase doctoral mobility is the central question of ‘employability’. All too often employability is confounded with ‘employment’ and the need to train a well educated work force. But higher education is about far more than preparing the next cohort of workers and about far more than transferring acquired scientific knowledge to the economic benefit of society. There is sufficient evidence from a large number of countries that tailoring education programmes to immediate labour market needs often leads to unemployment for the involved students after graduation. Some of this can, of course, be modified by a higher level of mobility of the labour force to countries where there is a need for particular types of employees, but in most cases this type of graduate mobility will not solve the problems of “education for unemployment” based on short-term needs of the labour market.

Apart from acquiring new knowledge and skills students are being trained as responsible individuals and mature citizens. Only in this way can future graduates nurture the skills and the knowledge to contribute to the development of their societies – creating new enterprises, new jobs, alternative ways of solving problems, functioning in multi-cultural environments, etc. “Employability” is about the social role of future graduates, not the short-sighted fulfilment of today’s labour market needs. The present economic crisis only further underlines the need to have a clear focus on how diverse and multi-faceted, creative and entrepreneurial the future graduates need to be. Universities train people to think, to synthesise, to combine, to analyse – they train tomorrow’s inventive, responsible entrepreneurs.

Mobility can contribute immensely to the development of entrepreneurship by providing international networks to future graduates, enable them to function in multi-cultural and multi-linguistic societies, and embed them in a culture of quality with a clear view to the opportunities afforded by change.

Priority: Academic mobility at all levels, across sectors and to new horizons

As universities of importance to their respective regions, the Coimbra Group Universities have underlined the necessity to promote academic mobility at all levels and across sectors (i.e. universities, enterprises, public institutions, etc.). Healthy local and regional co-operation structures between universities and enterprises, public institutions and organisations are of importance to all Coimbra Group Universities. One result of the success of such local and regional networks is the increase in students applying for work placements and being welcomed by employers from all sectors, nationally as well as internationally. The furthering of internships and work placements across borders has been facilitated by these networks and by the career services in place in Coimbra Group Universities.

Academic mobility should not be limited by European borders. Unfortunately very few mobility programmes support such outward mobility, but especially at the post-doctoral level a Eurocentric attitude can be detrimental. The new horizons to be considered are not just the Anglo-Saxon world, but Latin-America, Asia as well as Africa.

Furthermore, academic mobility should include faculty as well as students. In this context the Coimbra Group welcomes new typologies of university staff mobility as those aimed at university administrators and at competent industry representatives to take up university posts. On the other hand the Erasmus Programme has developed over the years in ways which have left academic staff without the sense of ownership originally implied in the inter-university co-operation programmes. The steadily decreasing demand for academic staff exchanges is one indication, but in today’s climate efforts to effectively promote these exchanges should be renewed in order to establish among faculty a genuine appreciation of a mobility culture, with a positive multiplier effect on both student mobility and curriculum innovation, and encouragement to undertake and appreciate inter-sectoral mobility would be of particular importance here. The area of teaching staff mobility as such needs serious consideration and encouragement.

Concluding recommendations

The Coimbra Group Universities recommend that

- a more comprehensive and flexible definition of mobility be adopted:
 - for activities awarding academic credits, allowing for stays of less than three months,
 - the possibility to split the overall study/training/research period, when clearly and appropriately motivated, into two, or possibly more, coordinated stays abroad, and
 - based on quality mobility, focused on content-related issues, independent of time frames and thus a prerequisite;
- efforts to enhance mobility are increased to allow for genuine support of mobility, along the lines of e.g. the Mobility Statement of the Coimbra Group General Assembly in Jena in 2008, which advocated a mobility culture in Coimbra Group Universities with an increase of student mobility of fifty per cent over the coming five years, establishing university funds to promote mobility, and recommending appropriate commitments to national governments in favour of the European Commission’s 2012 targets;
- mobility be promoted under the headline of quality mobility to stress the necessity to concentrate on the contents and learning outcomes of all mobility activities;

- the importance of teaching staff exchanges and the role of coordinators are recognised for their intrinsic importance in developing a mobility culture;
- transparent recognition procedures aim at achieving high quality average standards in the number of credits gained abroad and recognised at home;
- a considerable increase of doctoral mobility be supported, and that the issues particularly relating to the mobility of young researchers are discussed and aligned;
- a diversified concept of employability be promoted to underline the needs of a knowledge society of graduates with skills, creativity and knowledge to function as responsible individuals and mature citizens;
- mobility of academic staff be reconsidered to encourage international as well as inter-sectoral mobility; and that
- permanent attention is paid to the societal role of universities by assisting them in efforts to liaise with local and regional authorities, enterprises, and organisations to promote increased mobility at national, international and inter-sectoral levels of students, faculty and administrative staff.

Executive Board of the Coimbra Group
15 December 2009

¹ *Promoting Student Mobility. A Coimbra Group Experience*, EUA Bologna Handbook, RAABE Academic Publishers, Berlin 2008.

² http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/actionlines/documents/CG_PositionPaper-Final-2March09.pdf