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Promoting Intercultural Dialogue through Lifelong Learning Policies

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Abstract: *A dominant phenomenon in the last decades of the past century and the first decades of the 21st century is that of globalisation. The European Union emphasises more and more the role of education as a real element of reducing the distances between the member states, while stimulating the economic, social and cultural development of the community states. At the European Unions' policies, the universities are called to prepare the students for an independent life in a multi-cultural environment, to support the improvement of knowledge, skills and competences that are necessary for an efficient functioning in a pluralist and democratic society, to interact, negotiate and communicate with people from different groups in order to create a civil society functioning on moral principles and common values. The instrument, put at the disposal of the national education systems by the European Committee, is the initiation of action programmes in this domain. The actions that take place in these programmes are based on collaboration relationships between the member states of the European Union. They are also extended to non-community states or even to non-European ones. Among these programmes, emphasis is placed upon those designated to learning during one's entire lifespan (LLP), the most popular being the Socrates-Erasmus Programme. In these 52 higher education institutions from Romania, which take part to this programme, the University of Oradea has constantly occupied, in the last five years, on the 7th place, and this is due to the number of mobilities put at the students' and teachers' disposal every academic year. The objectives proposed by the European Committee, once starting this programmes, were successfully accomplished, as conditions have been created for building a real intercultural dialogue between the 27 countries of the European Union and not only.*

Keywords: *Lifelong Learning Policy, Socrates – Erasmus Programme, University of Oradea*

Comprising, at first, only few states, the European Community transformed itself into the European Union due to its extension towards Central and Eastern Europe. This is an European organisation made up of 27 independent states (starting from January 2007) which, having common political, social, security interests, united their efforts in order to accomplish them, creating at the same time the institutional mechanisms they need¹. The new integrated states were and continue to be confronted with huge economic differences as compared to the Western developed countries. In addition, the ethnical mixture characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, the secular conflicts between the countries from this space, resulted into armed conflicts.

Being based on Jean Monnet's principle: 'the extension of Europe means peace'², after analysing the social – economic and cultural – linguistics systems from the newly integrated countries, the political factors that lead the European Union, established that the solution for Europe's problems is the consistent initiation and supporting of some programmes for the European integration of education. Therefore, the educational systems are being seen as important institutions of society, having the mission to consolidate the young generation's capacity of knowledge.

¹ Vasile Ciocan, Liviu Tăut, Nuna Emil, *Drept european. Instituții europene. Politici europene. Fonduri structurale*, GrafNet Press, Oradea, 2007, p. 15

² *Ibidem*, p. 13

In a new cultural dimension, the education proves to be a real element for reducing the distance between the European countries, helping the transformation of the geographical Europe in a real human, spiritual and cultural community, based on sharing the same values³.

In this way, it becomes highly possible that school, reorganised after the European model, to act as a leader in the field of economy, culture and institutions, thus making easier their organic integration.

In this context, universities redefined their objectives, supporting today the development of the professional competences and gaining the collaboration and communication abilities with some different nationalities, cultures, religion and values. Other assignments, also important for the modern higher education system, are those referring to the necessity of creating a proper environment for building a multicultural education system in higher education institutions, to update the university's programme to the qualifications required on the labour market and to show the teacher's role in the process of forming a tolerant nation.

One of the ways to accomplish these objectives is that of creating the required environment so as students would be able to accumulate those pieces of knowledge, skills and competences that are necessary for their efficient functioning in a pluralist and democratic society, to interact, negotiate and communicate with people from different groups, in order to create a civil society based on moral principles and common values⁴.

An important instrument, put at the disposal of the national education system, is represented by the programmes initiated by the European Commission which, through their objectives, opened a permanent dialogue between the 27 countries. These programmes are based on a new philosophy - that of giving equal chances to all the involved countries, and also creating mutual and advantageous connections that could stimulate the solving of educational problems of common interest, at the European level.

In the first years of the European Union, these programmes have received minimum subsidies, but once the "Resolution for Intensification of the European Dimension in Education" has been adopted, in May 1988, two sets of strategic actions for implementing the European dimension were defined and financed, having the following objectives:

- to enhance the feeling of European identity in young generations and create a clear vision on the European civilisation values, on which European nations build their actual evolution;
- preparing young people to participate to the social and economic development of the Community, and to its progress, in order to achieve the European Union, as mentioned in the "European Unique Legal Instrument";
- make the young fully aware of both the advantages and the challenges of a European community, which offers them a larger social and economic space;
- extend knowledge in terms of all aspects (historical, cultural, economic and social) associated with the Community and the integrated states and getting used to the significance of cooperation between the European Community member countries and other countries from Europe and the world⁵.

In order to accomplish these objectives, some action programmes were initiated:

- COMETT (Community Programme for Education Teaching and Training), for the collaboration between universities and economic entities from the industrial domain to the advanced technology development domain;
- ERASMUS, having as objective to make easier the student's mobility;
- PETRA, addressing the vocational and the professional formation of the young and supporting their professional involvement;
- LINGUA – aiming at getting used to the communication abilities in the European Community languages;

³ Vasile Marcu, Florica Orțan, Carmen Chira, Valentin Blândul, *Dimensiunea europeană a educației*, University of Oradea Press, Oradea, 2004, p. 8-9

⁴ Viktoriya O. Levinskaya, "Implementation of Multicultural Curricula at the Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT)", in *Education and Cultural Diversity*, edited by Sandu Frunză and Michael S. Jones, Provopress, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p.143

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 14

- EUROTECHNET- for making easier the young professionals' formation in the context of the fast technological changes and their impact on the labour market.

After putting these programmes into practice, the governments of the European states saw the importance of the European dimension in education for Europe's future, which determined the inclusion, in the "European Union Convention from Maastricht" (signed in 1992 and used in 1993), in Chapter 3 destined to "The Education, Professional Formation and Youth", of 126 and 127 articles that bring new competences into the education domains. From that moment on, all education programmes would take place in a legal environment. This fact made the European Union and the Council of Europe to constantly develop policies, programmes and projects with the view of integrating the European dimension in the teaching-learning process. These were confirmed through the "Treaty of Amsterdam" (1997) but can also be found in the European Commission 2000 notebook⁶.

The result of these politics, but also the accent put on the development of the informational society, was that the learning systems extended, on the whole life. Therefore, two new programmes started off, namely SOCRATES – for education and LEONARDO DA VINCI – for professional formation and youth, which promote mixture activities, cooperation and communication between the participant states.

The Socrates Programme appeared in 1995 as a result of a common decision of the Parliament and the Council of Europe, with the goal of promoting the European dimension through education and supporting the cooperation between active institutions in education from the participant countries. The beneficiaries of this programme may be citizens of all ages from the continent that have the opportunity to learn in any stage of their life.

The Socrates Programme works are based on the 149 and the 150 article from "The European Union Treaty", articles that see the European Community's contribution in "the development of a good education" through various actions that will be achieved through partnerships among the member states. The same Convention sees also the commitment of promoting the permanent education for all the European Union citizens⁷.

There was a little doubt, relating to the capacity of financing, and that if the extension of the European Union along those 20 and something years, first at 12, then at 15, at 25 and now at 27 member states, it is going to be good in supporting the cultural and educational activities in Europe⁸. In other words, if the European Union is capable of ensuring the necessary funds to unfold the teaching programmes along the whole life in the context of increasing the European Community to East. This fear didn't come true, the proof being the decision made by the Council of Europe that the future candidate countries to take part at some activities before becoming members of the European Union. In some cases, the participation was extended even at non-European countries, with little chances, but with whom it is recommended to maintain nice and friendly relationships⁹.

The Socrates Programme came to life in Romania based on the 'Auxiliary Protocol to the Romania's Association Agreement to the European Union concerning the opening of New Community Programmes' signed in 1994 by the two partners. Based on the document signed by the Ministry of National Education and by the General Directorship for Teaching, Professional Formation and Youth of the European Commission, in December 1995, the measures to prepare the Romania's participation to the Socrates Programme (May 1996 – December 1997) were started. On 1st of September 1997, Romania was officially included into the Socrates programme. Therefore the National Socrates Agency (N.S.A) was set up at national level, being a public institution with legal personality under the leadership of the Ministry of National Education. The N.S.A. activity was coordinated by the Socrates

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 62

⁸ Michael Elliott, „The contribution of EU Education, Training and Cultural Programmes in promoting closer relations between all the peoples of Europe”, in *The European Parliament, Intercultural Dialogue and European Neighbourhood Policy*, edited by Ioan Horga, Grigore Silași, Istvan Suli – Zakar, Stanislaw Sagan, University of Oradea Press, Oradea, 2009, p.25

⁹ *Ibidem*

National Council (S.N.C), an organism with decisional role, made up of officials at the main institutes and organisations that have activities in the Romanian educational domain¹⁰.

The first step of the Socrates programme was completed between 1995-1999 and offered the institutions the possibility to take part to activities and partnerships, information changes, the promotion of the experience gathered in time and examples of well practice. In this period the number of students that benefited from Socrates mobility's increased, getting to 1699 in the academic year 1999 - 2000. The study domains were over 15, their area including: agriculture sciences, architecture, art and design, economic sciences, education and professional formation, engineering, geography and geology, human sciences, philological sciences, law, mathematics and informatics, medical sciences, natural sciences, social sciences, communication. Among the destination countries for the student's mobility one can mention: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Holland, Finland, Great Britain, Sweden, etc¹¹. During this step, the project evaluation was centralised, at the European Commission level, hence the little number of grants in Romania.

The second step of the programme took place between 2000 and 2006, being known as Socrates II, and it was approved by the "Decision no. 253/2000/EC seeing the Second Phase of the Community Action Programme in Education, Socrates II", adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. As an addition, this second part introduced the quality term in the development of the educational act and also the continuous formation notion. The objectives of this Socrates phase are:

- the consolidation of the European dimension at all levels, making easier the trans-national access to the Europe's educative resources, alongside the promotion of equal opportunities in all the educational sectors;
- the promotion of quantity and quality amelioration of knowing the member states' languages, especially of those less spoken and taught, in order to get to a better understanding and solidarity between the E.U. nations and promoting the educational intercultural dimension;
- promoting the cooperation and mobility in the education domain, particularly by stimulating the mobility among teaching institutions, encouraging distance learning, facilitating a better degree of recognising diplomas and study periods and developing the information changes by eliminating the obstacles;
- encouraging the new in teaching and didactic practice, including the use of the new technology and exploiting the common interest aspects in educational politics.

The Socrates Programme II, as community programme, was "called" to help accomplish the main objective of the Council of Europe, gathered in 2000 in Lisbon, namely that of developing a European society based on knowledge. Because of this, the programme benefited from a decentralised projects evaluating system, at national level, a direct consequence being the raising of the number of projects managed by N.S.A., and also that of the capacity of absorbing the funds.

In the larger limits of the Socrates Programme II, the European institutions and, together with them, the Romanian universities give more attention to the ERASMUS component, which has been conceived to have an essential role not only in coordinating the university teaching at European level, but also in terms of its cultural and social opening. The under programme mission is that of multiplying the bonds between higher education institutes from all the European states, in terms of both scientific matter and teaching activities, taking into account the existence of a new component among the programmes, that of the mobility of teachers and auxiliary personnel from the higher education institutions¹². Therefore, during the period in which the programme took place, the number of mobilities for students raised from 1899, registered in the academic year 2000-2001, to 2962 in the academic year 2004-2005, reaching its top in the academic year 2003-2004, when 3005 mobilities were registered. The study domains remained the same, reaching a record in the engineering domain during the academic year 2003-2004 (almost 600 mobilities), and among the destination countries of the mobilities some others were added in the last year of the period, namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia¹³.

¹⁰ V. Marcu, F. Orşan, C. Chira, V. Blândul, *op. cit.*, p. 63-64

¹¹ Statistic data taken from www.socrates.ro, Socrates National Agencies

¹² V. Marcu, F. Orşan, C. Chira, V. Blândul, *op. cit.*, p. 108

¹³ Idem, *Statistic data*

The students' and the teachers' mobilities are based on some bilateral agreements of cooperation established by the University Erasmus Charta (UEC). It establishes the fundamental principles and the minimum requirements showing the Erasmus activities which any university has to respect. The activities from the bilateral agreements are the result of the cooperation initiatives indicated by the teachers and they are being negotiated between the partners. These cannot come out from the institutional agreement between the higher education institution and the European Committee¹⁴. Many Romanian higher education institutions, have concluded an institutional contract, taking as their own the projects initiated by their teachers through the signature of the institutional official for projects LLP. These are from now on the object to be financed by the European Committee.

Another component of the Socrates programme, known as Erasmus Mundus, promotes cooperation and mobility activities in the high education studies domain, in order to promote the European Union as a centre of excellence in the whole world. Its goal is to organise a high quality master at the European universities opened to any student in the world, offering scholarships for those from the non-European countries and also for those who go to study in the non-European countries. This programme was launched in 2004 and, in the first three years, more than 2300 students participated to the programme, over 1800 were selected to start their studies in Europe in October 2007. The best phase of this programme is the Erasmus Mundus II, which will take place in the period between 2009 and 2013 and has a budget of over 950 million Euros. It is destined to the countries within or outside Europe and is aimed at developing common programmes and partnerships¹⁵.

At the University of Oradea, the Erasmus mobilities are managed by the Department of International Relationships, which also organises the students' selection in order to be trained in this programme. Usually students from the 2nd year of study, with good academic results and who are able to speak foreign language of international circulation are selected. The file for the selection is completed with a CV and a very well reasoned letter of application. The study domain followed by the student is being chosen in the lecturing desk with the help of the teachers involved in the collaboration agreement. The students can participate at 1-2 weeks probation, or spend one semester or an entire academic year probation, respecting the transferable credits system and other conversion principles of the didactic activities made by the student in the host institution at the university he/she comes from. Therefore, the student concludes a contract of studies for transfer of credits in the mobility programme. In case of short term probations, the didactic activity is recognised not only based on the number of convertible credits but also with the help of a credits system associated to some interdisciplinary modules. For the didactic contracts, the Erasmus under-programme meant a raise of 50% of the funds for mobilities absorbed from the European Union and this got to the raising of the number of Teaching Staff probations having a length from one week (8 class hours) and 8 weeks (64 class hours).

Analysing the Socrates-Erasmus data (kindly provided to the authors by the Department of International Relationships), concerning the University of Oradea students who benefited from Socrates-Erasmus programmes, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. in the pre-adhering period, as it can be seen in the table and diagram below, the European funds for the mobility projects initiated by the academic staff from the University of Oradea, raised from 115.105 euro in the academic year of 2004-2005 to 180.901 in the 2006-2007 academic year, almost being doubled once Romania joined the European Union.

2. the number of the countries destined to the Erasmus mobility's from which the students benefited raised from 9 in the 2004-2005 academic year to 14 in the 2006-2007 academic year; alongside funds raising, a stagnation has been observed after 2006. This is due to the increasing number of universities with which collaboration agreements were concluded, the number of countries remaining almost constant.

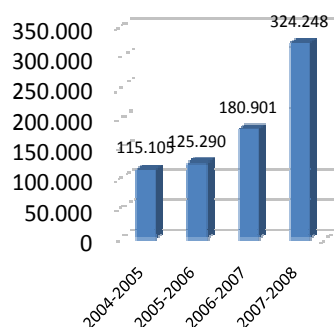
¹⁴ ***, *Programul Lifelong Learning – Ghid Practic*, University of Oradea, 2007, p. 10

¹⁵ M. Elliott, *op.cit.*, p. 32

The Erasmus mobility budget at the University of Oradea 2004-2008

Table 1.

Academic year	Budget allocate for Erasmus mobility for students of University of Oradea [Euro]
2004-2005	115.105
2005-2006	125.290
2006-2007	180.901
2007-2008	324.248

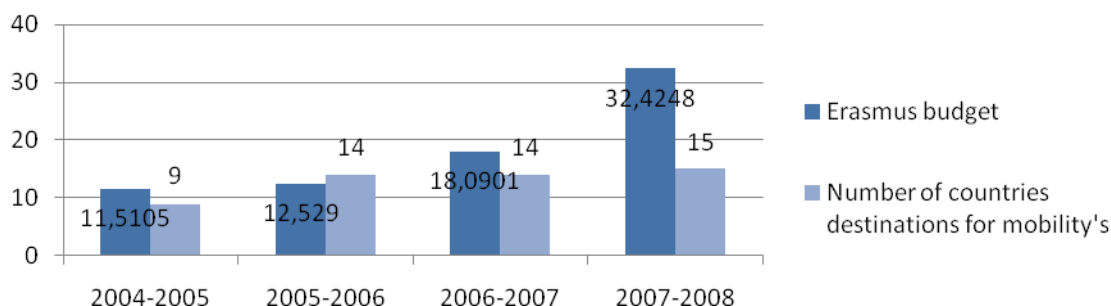


Graphic 1. *The Erasmus mobility budget at the University of Oradea 2004-2008*

The number of countries with whom the University of Oradea developed collaboration relationships in the Erasmus grants

Table 2

Academic year	Budget allocate for Erasmus mobility for students of University of Oradea [thousands of Euro]	Number of countries destinations for Erasmus mobility's
2004-2005	11,5105	9
2005-2006	12,5290	14
2006-2007	18,0901	14
2007-2008	32,4248	15



Graphic 2. *The number of countries with whom the University of Oradea developed collaboration relationships in the Erasmus grants*

3. in what concerns the number of Erasmus mobilities for the students, which had taken place in the collaboration agreements concluded at the University of Oradea with the countries from the E.U, these are different every year, depending on the teachers' initiatives. Anyway, we can say that, analysing the data shown as follows, France the first destination place for the students' mobility. It is also due to the existence of a traditional collaboration between the University of Oradea and superior

teaching institutes in France, and to the fact that French is spoken by a large majority of Romanian students.

Table 3 and Graphic 3. *The number of collaboration agreements with the host countries for the Erasmus mobility's in the academic year 2004-2005*

Academic year	Countries destinations for Erasmus mobility	Number of collaboration accords
2004-2005	Belgium	13
	Finland	4
	France	41
	Germany	8
	Greece	14
	Italy	30
	Poland	5
	Portugal	9
	Spain	13

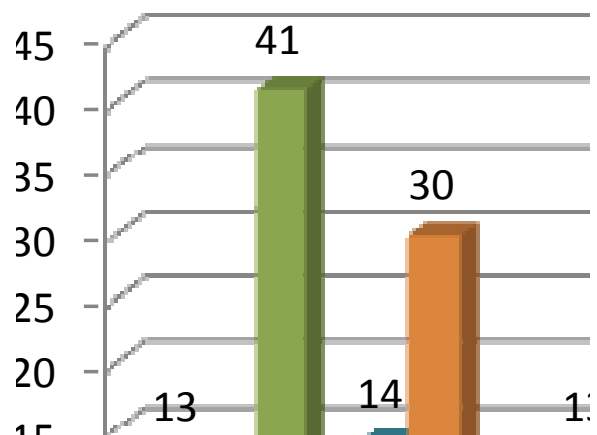


Table 4 and Graphic 4. *The number of collaboration agreements concluded with the host countries for Erasmus mobility's in the academic year 2005-2006*

Academic year	Countries destinations for Erasmus mobility's	Number of collaboration accords
2005-2006	Belgium	12
	Switzerland	1
	Finland	1
	France	44
	Germany	4
	Greece	17
	Italy	26
	Nederland	2
	Poland	6
	Portugal	14
	Slovakia	4
	Spain	21
	Hungarian	12
	Great Britain	2

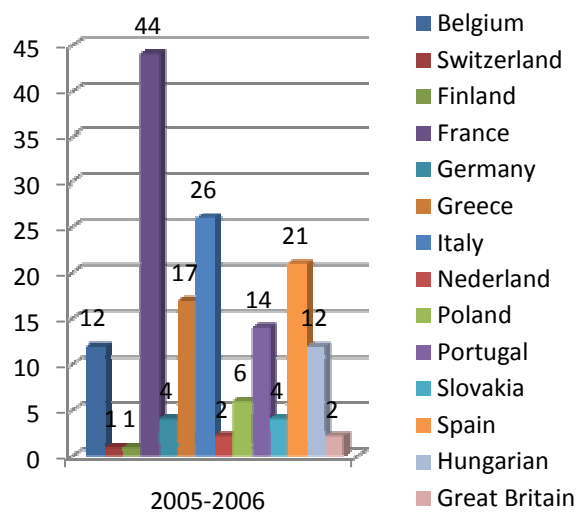


Table 5 and Graphic 5. The number of collaboration agreements concluded with the host countries for Erasmus mobility's in the academic year 2006-2007

Academic year	Countries destinations for Erasmus mobility	Number of collaboration accords
2006-2007	Belgium	5
	Denmark	2
	Finland	3
	France	28
	Germany	2
	Greece	12
	Italy	22
	Nederland	4
	Poland	2
	Portugal	6
	Slovakia	6
	Spain	18
	Hungary	5
	Great Britain	6

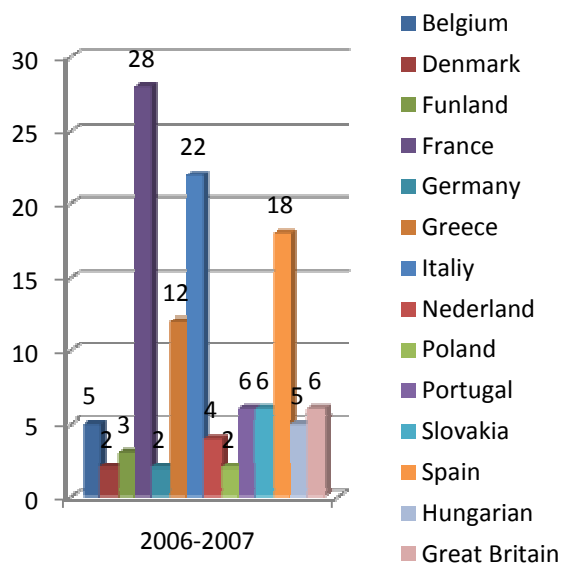
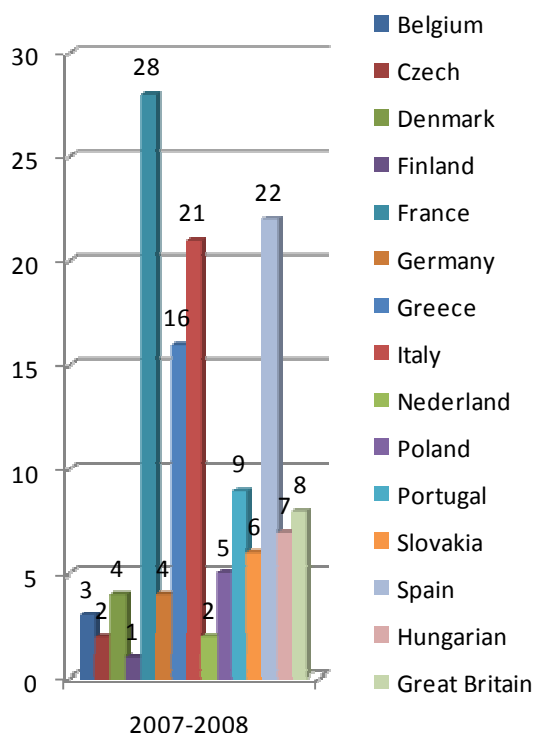


Table 6 and Graphic 6. The number of collaboration agreements concluded with the host countries for Erasmus mobility's academic year 2007-2008

Academic year	Countries destinations for Erasmus mobility	Number of collaboration accords
2007-2008	Belgium	3
	Czech	2
	Denmark	4
	Finland	1
	France	28
	Germany	4
	Greece	16
	Italy	21
	Nederland	2
	Poland	5
	Portugal	9
	Slovakia	6
	Spain	22
	Hungary	7
	Great Britain	8

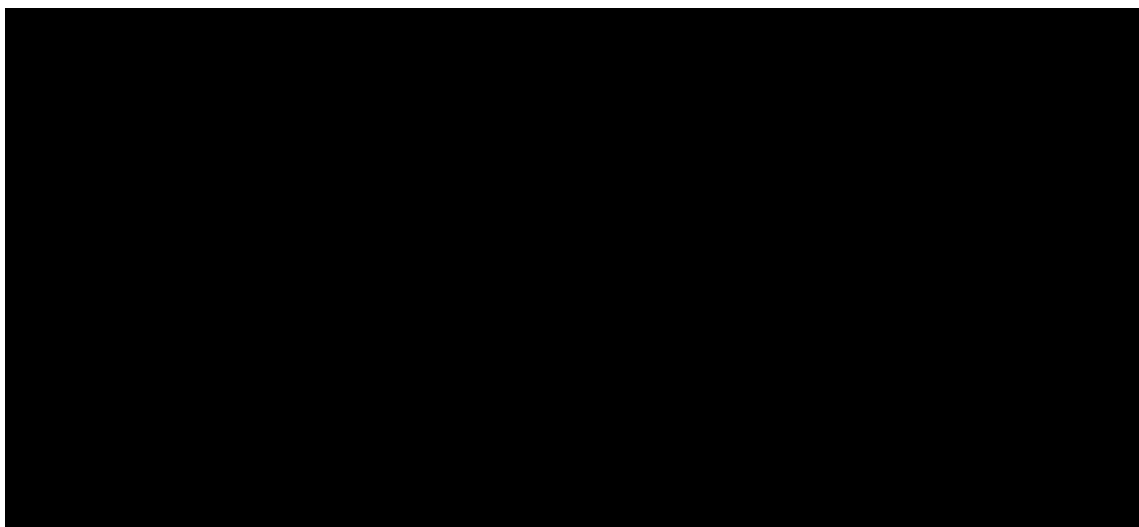


4. the “equality of chance” principle was respected in all the Erasmus grants, a proof being the fact that students, irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender or financial possibilities, benefited from such mobilities. The table and the following graphic prove these statements for the issue of gender equality. It can be also seen that the number of female students that benefited from mobilities in the Erasmus programme is larger than that of male students, this being

due to the girls' higher degree of preoccupation for study, the selection conditions being the same for all students.

Table 7. *The number of male and female students that benefited of Erasmus mobilities between 2004-2008*

Academic year	Male students	Female students
2004-2005	60	78
2005-2006	68	99
2006-2007	44	78
2007-2008	57	84



Graphic 7. *The number of male and female students that benefited from Erasmus mobilities between 2004-2008*

All the students that benefited from such mobilities accumulated both professional and personal experience. The National Agency for Community Programmes in the Domain of Education and Professional Formation (NACPDEPF), appeared in January 27, 2005, because of the fusion of A.N.S and C.N.S. and the National Centre for the Programme of Professional Formation Leonardo da Vinci, and initiates many opinion surveys among the students and the teachers who benefited from the Lifelong Learning programmes.

The results of these surveys are published on a yearly basis, an example being *The Grade of Gratification Report of those who beneficiate of the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes – 2006*¹⁶. From its data we can draw the conclusion that the majority of students declared themselves satisfied with the professional abilities and competences gained after the probation period. The same majority it is found in the second grade of gratification in the superior teaching institutions where both the student and the teacher has its activity.

As a conclusion we can say that the logistic effort made by the European Union for the well-development of the mobility programmes from the Lifelong Learning system was not for granted. The assumed objectives by the European Parliament and the European Committee for the Policy of the Education, Culture and Youth domain were successfully accomplished. The fact that they benefited of an Erasmus mobility, helped many students to find a job quicker after graduation. These programmes offered the students the chance to acquire new knowledge in the probation domain and to study some inapplicable aspects at the university they came from, which helped them improve their qualification level, adaptability and openness to new ideas. Moreover, the students had the possibility to improve their linguistic proficiency, better understand other cultures and promote the image of the university they come from in the European space, helping to the maintaining and even developing the cooperation relationships between universities. These mobilities also initiated and further stimulated

¹⁶ www.edu.ro/politici_educationale/raportari

the intercultural dialogue among European countries, this being extended to the non-European ones or even to other continents.

For Romania, this dialogue was a real help in the period before joining the EU and it still is today, after two years from the integration in the European Union. For the higher education institutions Romania, the partnership relations established with European universities was a major help in understanding other teaching systems, as well as the mechanism of using the Transferable Credits System, and organisation and management methods of different universities. A direct consequence was the acceleration of the Romanian superior teaching system.

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