Integration in the hosting community: cultural learning and public law

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Educating to internationalism: the birth of an idea

Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of current European Union who was called to build a new international reality starting from the ashes of the Second World War, said: “If I were to start again, I would start with education”.

It is during the immediate postwar period that the comprehension of the relevance of educating youths to internationalism is rooted, so that they can become better citizens of single Nations, Europe and the whole world.

The topic of education was not explicitly included in the Treaties of Rome.

During this first phase (1950s-1960s), single States and universities were the only promoters of the international university cooperation, implementing national laws and rules or drawing up agreements to allow the execution and the recognition of the studies abroad.

In the 1970s there was a first, informal admission of educations’ themes inside the competences of the European Community (see the Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers of education, meeting within the Council of 9 February 1976, which sets the first European action programme in the field of education).

Erasmus: the turning point

The real turning point was the Council decision of 15th June 1987.

It was adopted the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, aiming to achieve a significant increase in the number of university students spending an integrated period of study in another Member State, thus consolidating the concept of a People’s Europe.

Erasmus: legal framework and evolution

The Articles 128 and 235 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community were recalled as legal basis for this new Programme.

• These norms did not directly concerned education.

Only through the Treaty of Maastricht (art. 126, today art. 165 TFUE) the topic of education finally found its place in the fundamental Community laws.

• The Member States have the responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems, while the Union should play a role of support, supplement and coordination;

• Union action shall be aimed at encouraging mobility of students and teachers, inter alia by encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study abroad.

After almost 30 years from its birth, the Erasmus Programme has allowed more than 3 million of students to cross national borders. Anyway, Erasmus has not only a didactic purpose, making the exchange of people also an exchange of knowledge.

The Programme’s success has also led to several achievements: the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999, the establishment of the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS), the internationalization of higher education institutions.

Meanwhile the Programme has evolved, becoming a piece of wider programmes: during the 1990s, it became part of Socrates Programme; in 2007 it merged into the Lifelong Learning Programme.

Last step was the creation of Erasmus + Programme by the Regulation EU n. 1288/2013.

Main goals: enhancing the quality of European higher education; promoting understanding between people; contributing to the sustainable development of higher education and to socio-economic development; stimulating "brain circulation".

Mobility does not involve only university students, but also university staff and professors, students of all levels of school, entrepreneurs, athletes etc.

Internationalization and public law: the role of the Universities...

Public law played a primary role in this path toward internationalization and integration of foreigners.

Universities – a type of public administrations – are the first social structure the foreign student gets in contact with.

Every university which want to enter in the Erasmus circuit must:

• ensure a cost-free attendance to the courses for foreign students (they pay taxes only to home countries universities) and the recognition exams attended by their own students in the European universities they have an agreement with;

• give all the information needed for joining the Erasmus Programme;

• help students in administrative duties;

• organize the reception and the integration of foreign students, to whom also offer the opportunity to enhance their knowledge in the local language.

All these duties are described in detail in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), an act released to the Universities by the Commission, and they are reiterated in each Learning Agreement, meaning every agreement concluded by two universities in relation to every single student doing the exchange.

...and the role of the other public administration

Meanwhile the implementation of the Programme on the Union level belongs to the Commission, on a State level it falls among the competences of specific National Agencies, supervised by Nationals Authorities.

National Agencies tasks consist in managing specific actions of the Programme, as the one relating to learning mobility of individuals (typical assignments are: funds supply, advice and assistance to University and other institutions applying for the Erasmus Programme...).

Integration and public law

In order to facilitate integration and internationalization, the States take all appropriate measures to remove legal and administrative obstacles to the proper functioning of the Erasmus.

Among the several measures taken by the States, we can recall: the recognition of the right to access to the same services the local students can access; the possibility to supply grants in addition to the European ones; the recognition of different kinds of benefits, as reductions on public transportations or access to specific international students residences.

Are those tools effective for a full integration in the hosting community?

According to several social researches, although studying abroad led to increased socializing with other Europeans (“Erasmus community”), contact with hosting community might remain limited.

Beyond the effectiveness of the tools crafted by public law, this reflects the nature of particular society of the University, a community with a common vision and a sense of belonging, in which Erasmus students are firstly integrated.

Is the lack of a full integration in the hosting community a clue of Erasmus programme failure and failure of public law tools adopted in order to realize it?

No, if the main goal of Erasmus is still “consolidating the concept of a People’s Europe”. Cross-border interaction promotes collective identity (at least inside the Erasmus community), connects different populations and reduces national distances.

In conclusion, we must recognize that Erasmus Programme, as made possible through public law tools, is a first concrete attempt of transcultural education, in order to help the “foreigner” to lose his negative meaning as “stranger or enemy”, both for the hosting community and, mainly, for the whole “community” participating to the Programme.