

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

The Quality Assurance of Studies in the Framework of the ERASMUS+ Programme

Nicoleta Ilieș, Cristina Campian, Doina Verdeș, Laurence Boswell

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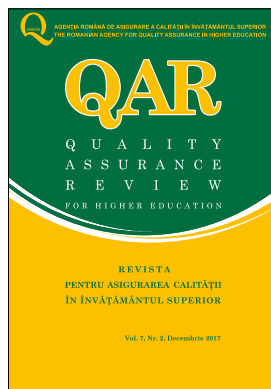
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The Quality Assurance of Studies in the Framework of the ERASMUS+ Programme

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Abstract: *The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca (TUCN), Romania, holds an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education and has more than twenty years' experience in the administration and management of student and staff mobility in the frame of European programmes: Socrates (1995), Erasmus (2007-2014) and at present Erasmus+, for the period 2014-2020. Thus, Erasmus plays an important part in the development of a new model of higher education at the TUCN and promotes a European system of transferable credits in order to guarantee the recognition of the Erasmus studies.*

The paper presents some examples of good practice in the administration and management of the mobility of students. It considers the efforts and outcomes of the Faculty of Civil Engineering in promoting and implementing the Erasmus+ Program and the European system of transferable credits in the Erasmus studies. The results have been obtained by a successful professional cooperation between partner institutions and their coordinators within the framework of the ERASMUS+ programme.

Keywords: *quality assurance, student mobility, cooperation, ERASMUS+ programme*

Introduction

The ERASMUS+ programme that supports education and professional training is funded by the European Commission since the 2014-2015 academic year.

Through its Erasmus Office, the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca provides for its students and the academic/administrative community the optimal framework for participating. The programme supports the actions, the cooperation and the instruments compatible with the goals of the Europa 2020 Strategy. Bilateral agreements are in place with over 160 European universities and colleges, supporting the exchange of students and teaching staff.

The effects of the ERASMUS programme are positively beneficial to the student's development and for expanding the knowledge of the teaching staff. It represents the main mean of supporting student mobility, and the effect on the student's progress is eminently positive. For the teaching staff it also represents a mean of supporting the academic and research cooperation, while for the other employees (administrative/technical staff) it provides the opportunity for professional improvement.

The Erasmus mobility is encouraged, as they allow personal, professional and social development by accumulating competences, skills and knowledge – in an international context, as well as the recognition of these competences. The mobility participants understand other countries' cultures, developing their sense of belonging to the European values and their active involvement in the community.

Erasmus+ supports the EU instruments for transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications – especially the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), as well as the EU education and training networks that support these instruments, especially the national agencies for the academic recognition of diplomas (NARIC).

The Objectives

The paper presents the ERASMUS+ mobility of students through the concern of the Faculty of Civil Engineering to ensure a proper quality based on the indicators of quality and by respecting the rules of the program.

The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca currently has 9 faculties, 27 departments, and 60 research teams. TUCN offers 64 BSc programmes, 60 MSc programmes and attracts more than 1.300 PhD students; altogether about 21.000 students are enrolled at TUCN. Several faculties offer entire curricula in English as well as postgraduate programmes as lifelong learning (Self-Evaluation Report, p. 7). The staff consists of about 700 academics and about 2.000 administrative personnel (Self-Evaluation Report, 2012, p. 16).

The Technical University assures, by continuing to apply the principles established at national and international level, the quality of academic processes by: accreditation of programmes, monitoring of educational programmes, reporting of activities carried out in the university, documentation and registration of bachelor's and master's programmes in the National Register of Qualifications (RNCIS), the procedures of university activities.

There is a Quality Assurance Department, which validates study programmes before they are delivered for accreditation by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). Every programme has to be re-accredited every five years. The accreditation is based on thresholds, half of which concerns teaching (curriculum, staff, infrastructure, student feedback) and the other half, research. Student evaluations are mandatory at the end of each semester.

The studies at the Faculty of Civil Engineering are organized on three cycles: Undergraduate (BSc degree) - four years, Master graduate studies (MSc degree) - two years, doctoral studies (PhD) - three years.

The studies are taught in Romanian language for the following three domains: Civil Engineering, Engineering and Management and Geodesic Engineering. The domain of Civil Engineering has several specializations: Civil Industrial and Agricultural Constructions, Railways, Roads and Bridges, Hydro - Technic Constructions, Urban Engineering and Regional Development. The Master graduate studies are organized for the following specialisations: Structural Engineering, Pathology and Rehabilitation of the Constructions, Engineering of Transportations' Infrastructure, Sustainable Reinforce Concrete Constructions, Soil Mechanics Engineering, Engineering of Special Technology in Constructions, Advanced Design of Wood and Steel Constructions, Eco – infrastructures for Transportations and Art works, Green Buildings, Management of Designs and the Assessing of Property, Land Measurements and Cadastral Survey. The doctoral studies are in the field of Civil Engineering.

The studies are taught in English language for the specialization Civil Engineering at undergraduate level (four years of study). There are books written in English language for all study subjects conforming to curricula. The teachers of English programmes are almost entirely Romanians and very few visiting teachers from abroad are working at TUCN.

The structure of the academic year at the Faculty of Civil Engineering is on two terms with fourteen weeks of study. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is used in academic process for all students and the transfer component for student mobility. The Diploma Supplement and Academic Transcript is delivered at the end of the study period, to all graduates. The university recognizes the results of education abroad in the frame of ERASMUS+ Programme conforming to the Learning Agreement for Studies or to the Learning Agreement for Traineeships agreed bilaterally by the sending and receiving partners' institutions. The students of Undergraduate and Master levels participate more intensively in mobility programs; the undergraduate students accomplish the Study mobility and students at Master level- the Training mobility. The mobility development and coordination are organised at university level by the ERASMUS Office in the frame of the International Relations Department, at the faculty level by dean's office employees which are responsible for mobility development, namely vice-dean for international relations and other persons responsible for the Programme (contact persons). The

recognition of the periods and the results of studying abroad are based firstly on the Bilateral Agreement between the partner institutions signed at University level, and then by the Learning Agreement for Studies or Learning Agreement for Traineeships made for every Erasmus student before starting the mobility period. The internal quality assurance is compulsory in TUCN and consequent for the Faculty of Civil Engineering. The persons from the management of institution, the academic staff, students and external experts are part of the team supervising the internal quality assurance. The student mobility is managed respecting the quality assurance procedure. Internal quality assurance has the participation of students.



Figure 1. The TUCN Erasmus Agreements by countries

There are employees in the dean's office responsible for education quality in mobility programs; they work to verify the compatibility of academic curriculum and programs, the achieved skills and abilities, the transfer of marks from partner institution system into the national system, the transfer of educational work content into credit system etc. The student mobility is aided by the use of learning outcomes in describing the subjects from Learning Agreement for Studies or Learning Agreement for Traineeships; this also helps the transparency and recognition of the study period.

Examples of Good Practice at Civil Engineering Faculty

The student mobility carried out within the Erasmus+ programme at The Faculty of Civil Engineering is based on the European Academic Charter and on the guidelines of the National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training (ANPCDEFP). The student mobility carried out within the Erasmus+ programme is: study mobility, training mobility and combined mobility- study and training. They are carried out based on pre-existing agreements between the involved institutions. The duration of study mobility is between 3 and 12 months, while the duration of traineeship mobility is between 2 and 12 months.

The same student may participate in mobility periods totalling up to 12 months maximum per each cycle of study, independently of the number and type of mobility activities.

The candidate selection for Erasmus+ mobility consists of a competition that evaluates the academic results, the specific skills and abilities according to the activity to be performed at the partner institution, as well as the language skills and the compatibility with the required mobility options. The Faculty of Civil Engineering management offers alternative financing sources for students with outstanding academic results but with limited financial resources

The training and the preparation of the mobility application (Learning Agreement for Studies or Learning Agreement for Traineeships) are carried out by the Erasmus+ representative and by the teaching staff that initiated the Erasmus agreement, respectively. The choice of subjects to be studied over the duration of the mobility must be in line with the studies and the specialization of the host university.

At the end of the mobility, the host institution provides the beneficiary of the mobility with a certificate attesting the fulfilment of the study or practice programme, as well as a transcript of records that certifies the results. The undertaken studies are recognized by the University as part of the graduation curriculum.

The Faculty of Civil Engineering's focus on good education practices led to an increase in the number of mobility students and, implicitly, to an improvement of their academic results, as well as to an increase of the number of foreign students. By taking part in the mobility, the students were integrated in the European Higher Education Area, they understood the globalization of the work market, as well as the European education context.

The validation of the skills and qualifications is in accordance with the Bologna process, based on the Bologna declaration of 1999, adopted by the representatives of the member countries, granting academically and professional recognition of the studies carried out in European universities.

At the Faculty of Civil Engineering, the mobility is recognized according to the curriculums containing the studied subjects and their corresponding ECTS credits and the gained knowledge, skills and abilities. The curriculums and specialties are based on the correspondence between the results of the learning or research process and the attained university degree.

The knowledge, skills and abilities acquired during Erasmus and Erasmus+ mobility were a major contributor to the successful integration of the graduates in the job market, to the development of their own businesses or to the continuation of their academic studies within the country or at the universities where the mobility took place.

Due to the mobility, the student's degree of satisfaction regarding their professional and personal development rose significantly, with more than 90% of the students giving a positive evaluation of the learning and research environment provided by the Faculty of Civil Engineering and by the partner universities.

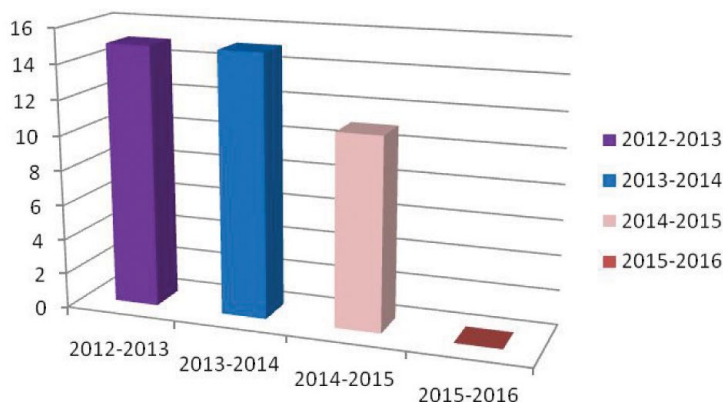


Figure 2. The number of students accomplishing study mobility (Dean’s Report 2012-2016)

The medium and long-term strategy of the Faculty of Civil Engineering is to encourage this type of mobility, as their results led to an increase of the graduates’ competitiveness on the job market and to the transfer of knowledge and technology through the gained skills and abilities.

An increasing number of students at Master level choose to carry out training mobility with the aim of preparing the graduation project. The student number dynamic can be observed in the graphs from figure 3.

The programme runs occasionally into difficulties, especially with regard to the study mobility, when choosing the subjects that the student will learn at the partner university. The curriculum of these subjects must be recognized as similar or very close to the current curricula of the home student Faculty. Sometimes, those similarities can be difficult to find; when the curricula of the partner university do not include one of the subjects, the students are directed towards a related subject, that insures the accumulation of knowledge and abilities that are useful in the field of study. The subject will be included in the Learning Agreement and will be validated when the student returns by including the grade and the ECTS points in the Diploma Supplement.

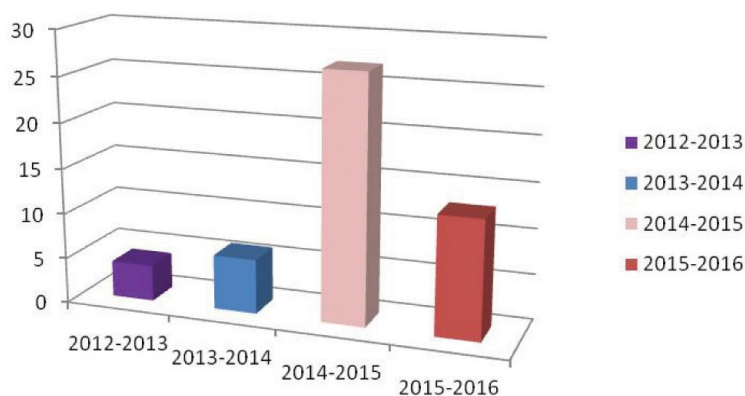


Figure 3. The number of students for Training mobility (Dean’s Report 2012-2016)

The graph from figure 4 presents the dynamic of Study and Training mobility of outgoing students developed in the period 2012-2016 at partner universities. The very good partnerships are with the universities: City, University of London, UK; University of Rennes, France; Universidad Nova Lisbon, Portugal; University of Graz, Austria; University of Oldenburg, Germany; National University of Athens, Greece; University of Naples, Italy etc.

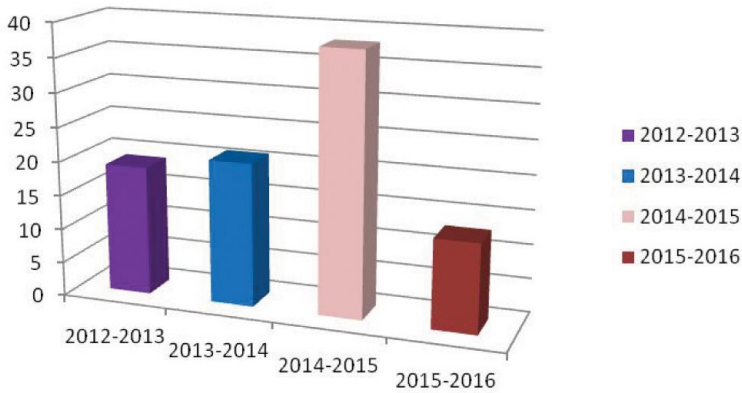


Figure 4. Total number of students accomplishing Mobility (study and training) in partner institutions (Dean’s Report 2012-2016)

The ERASMUS+ programme encourages the yearly increase of the flux of incoming students. This was made also possible by the good study and living conditions offered to students at the Civil Engineering study programme which is offered in English since 2008 at the Faculty of Civil Engineering.

The programme has been externally evaluated and is accredited by ARACIS.

The graph from the figure below shows the dynamic of this process.

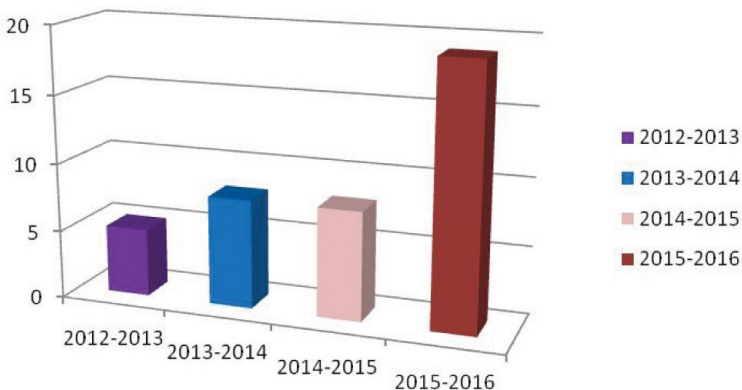


Figure 5. The total number of incoming students (Dean’s Report 2012-2016)

The students obtain, by accomplishing the study program conforming to Learning Agreement for Studies or Learning Agreement for Traineeships, the specific competences for the Civil Engineering specialization.

The generic competences for the engineering field obtained by accomplishing the mobility are: appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism, ability to work in an interdisciplinary team, knowledge of the field of study, basic knowledge of the profession, capacity for analysis and synthesis, capacity for applying knowledge in practice, capacity for generating new ideas (creativity), capacity to adapt to new situations, capacity to learn, critical and self-critical abilities, decision-making, ethical commitment, interpersonal skills, knowledge of a second language (Boswell, Pantazidou, Verdeş and B. Le Tallec 2010, 98). All these will prepare the students better for their future workplace.

Conclusions

The medium and long-term strategy of the Faculty of Civil Engineering is to encourage this type of mobility, as their results led to an increase of the graduates' competitiveness on the job market and to the transfer of knowledge and technology through the gained skills and abilities.

The quality assurance of learning in Erasmus mobility (study and training) contributes to the development of specific and generic competences of graduates in the Civil Engineering field. It has to underline the fact that the period spent abroad is a physically, psychologically, financially overstrain of the student. The majority of students face these challenges and are content and proud to accomplish the mobility. They understand other countries' cultures, developing their sense of belonging to the European values and their active involvement in the community and are better prepared for their future workplaces.

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