

Submission to Review on Balance of Competences between the United Kingdom and European Union

I took part in an ERASMUS exchange programme in academic year 2004/05 as part of an undergraduate degree in European Studies and Italian at University College Cork. The year abroad was embedded in the degree programme and it was largely the certainty of time abroad that attracted me to the course. I had never been particularly strong at languages, although I had studied French and Irish (as is compulsory in Ireland) at Leaving Certificate level (equivalent to A-level). I had continued with French in the first year of my degree and selected Italian over Spanish as a second language option on the basis that I would prefer a year in Italy than Spain.

From the perspective of a lecturer, selecting a degree because one thinks it comes with a holiday is not a good starting point. By the end of second year my average mark was around 50 per cent and I began my year abroad at the Università degli Studi di Siena very concerned about how limited my grasp of Italian was.

However, to paraphrase Dewey, real education comes through the stimulation through the demands of social situation. For me participating in the ERASMUS programme is encapsulated by this philosophy. While the nuances of Italian had been unintelligible in the language laboratory at UCC, the dynamics of this language were thrown into stark relief in the lecture theatre, apartment, street, and bar in Siena. My increased ability to process Italian was not solely due to *necessity*, it was due to *intensity*. The continual demands of my social situation – from the need to write an essay to the need to speak to housemates – lead to an exponential growth in my language ability. Additionally, over the course of the year, subtler forms of communication – inflection, non-verbal expression – which could only be spoken about in abstraction at UCC became second nature. It is these forms of communication which mark the threshold between competency and fluency. When I returned to Ireland ten months later I was fluent and I graduated with first class honours.

Despite the clear impact ERASMUS had on my language proficiency in the short-term, it is important not to evaluate the programme too simplistically. Beyond the obvious outcomes, I feel that participation in ERASMUS has had effects far beyond the straightforward metric of exam results. The experience of living with non-English-speaking flatmates whose Italian was as stilted as mine meant that I had to become more aware of non-verbal communication and approach conversations as a process of interpreting meaning rather than receiving statements. This skill has been of great assistance in my work after graduation as a professional researcher and academic. My professional interest in qualitative research design and analysis, specifically ethnographic and observational methods, has been greatly influenced by my experiences of co-construct a shared language with other ERASMUS students in the early days of my year abroad.

ERASMUS also helped my academic writing and has, I believe, improved my ability to write for audiences beyond my immediate contact group. In order to progress from 'translating' to communicating, I needed to unlearn the idiosyncrasies that had become embedded in my own expression. To try and best capture what I wanted to say I needed to shift my focus, asking first

“what do I want people to take away from what I say?” In research dissemination, where findings need to be reconstituted without being emptied of their original meaning, this question is of critical importance. In this regard, by forcing me to separate what I wanted to *say* from what I wanted to *mean*, ERASMUS introduced me to a skill which is of increasing importance within the academy.

In addition to the specific benefits for my current career, the very experience of being immersed in a different culture as part of the ERASMUS programme helped me develop my ability to adapt to changes in context and work with diverse groups of people. Such soft skills are obviously invaluable in employment.

Overall, at the expense of gushing, I view participation in ERASMUS as one of the best things I have done. Not only was it great fun at the time, it has had a profound impact on my career path. The experiences I had during my year abroad have influenced how I think – and teach – about understanding and expression. Participating in ERASMUS also forced me to become adept at adapting my style of communication in order to ensure that I was understood as clearly as possible. Lastly, living in Italy, I feel, taught me more about the dynamics of Italian life than I would have otherwise known. To borrow from another sociologist, James Clifford, the only way to truly understand a culture is to “stand in its way until it bodies forth and enmeshes you”.

With regards

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