

Experiencing ERASMUS: Reflections on integrating Polish psychology students onto a year of a degree in the UK

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The European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) supports students to pursue temporary periods of study in other European universities. During the academic year 2007/08 the UK received 15, 975 ERASMUS students. Although much research exists about the experiences of international students less attention has been given to the specific disciplines of study and the ways this might mediate the experience. With this in mind this paper is based on a piece of work currently in progress with ERASMUS students from Poland who have engaged in an exchange onto the final year of a UK Psychology degree course. Observations are made about the relative compatibility of Psychology in Poland and Britain by considering the course structure, curriculum and modes of assessment. Interview data is drawn on to explore the students' accounts of their experiences of studying Psychology in the UK. Findings indicate that there are some contrasting pedagogical and epistemological areas within the two systems which make integrating them a challenge for students. It is suggested that flexibility is required in order to better accommodate the students prior learning experiences.

Keywords: ERASMUS; Poland; student experience; flexibility.

What is ERASMUS?

ERASMUS, originally introduced in the late 1980s, is the acronym for the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. Since 2007 the programme has come under the auspices of the British Council and forms part of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. ERASMUS supports temporary periods of study abroad, the average period of stay for 2008/09 being six months (European Commission, 2010). Flexibility to pursue modules in more than one European country is made possible by a common framework of credits – The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). ECTS make it possible to continue working towards degree completion whilst studying abroad. Students would typically complete 60 ECTS during an academic year. In the UK, a 10-credit module equates to five ECTS.

The focus of the scheme is on facilitating mobility of students within the European community, though it also provides funding to enable exchanges of university lecturers. A central aim has been to increase the

number of graduates with experience of inter-community co-operation; but also, through emphasis on teacher exchanges and curriculum design it was envisaged that those who were non-mobile could also benefit from a more internationalised educational experience. In his overview of an evaluation of ERASMUS, Maiworm (2001) describes its launch as 'the beginning of internationalisation of higher education in Europe' (p.459). Whilst the internationalisation agenda is often associated with generating income for universities from the higher fees set for international students (e.g. Knight 2007, Haigh, 2008), such fee structures do not apply to students who move within European HEI's. Thus the term 'internationalisation' in the context of schemes such as ERASMUS becomes more about the benefits of increasing inter-cultural knowledge and interaction; nurturing what many authors (e.g. Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Montgomery & McDowell, 2008) describe as 'global citizenship'. The UK received over 20,000 ERASMUS students during the academic year of 2008/09 (European Commission 2010) making it the fourth most popular

destination (Spain, France and Germany being the top three). As such this represents a substantially-sized population for potential research related to the internationalisation process within our HEIs.

What do we know about international students?

Journals dedicated to this population include: *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *International Education Journal*, and *Journal of Intercultural Education*. The published research seems to be collected largely using questionnaire, survey-type measures or qualitative, interview-based approaches. Broadly speaking the literature relating to the experiences of international students is typically written from the perspective of the students who engage in foreign study (e.g. Tan & Goh, 2006; Montgomery & McDowell, 2008; Brown, 2009) though some authors have offered accounts of home students also (e.g. Dunne 2009; Peacock & Harrison, 2009). Less attention has been given to the view point of the academic staff themselves (an exception being Hyland et al.'s 2008 Higher Education Academy report which provides both international and home students and staff perceptions of internationalisation). The voice of the academic staff delivering inter-cultural education is usually provided through more pedagogic papers offering examples of good practice (e.g. Montgomery, 2009; Long et al., 2010).

It is notable that the term 'international' student adhered to in the academic literature appears to be an umbrella term for any student enrolled onto a course in a different country. The distinctions between those within and outside of the EU which are made for funding purposes (only those outside being considered international) no longer apply, thus studies often comprise students from many different countries of origin (e.g. Montgomery & McDowell, 2008's qualitative study about communication networks employed a sample from China, India, Nepal, Indonesia, Italy and Holland). Whilst it is important not to view 'international' students as a homoge-

nous group, there may be some general areas of similarity between them such as the challenges they face when studying in a different country (e.g. learning in a second language, different cultural values and expectations). However, when considering ERASMUS students, a stark area of contrast is the length of time which they will be engaging in foreign study. In the majority of cases international students take a whole course, allowing them more time to adjust to such differences.

Research specifically related to temporary study periods abroad is limited. Sachau, Brasher and Fee (2011) offer three models of short-term study: the summer semester, the study tour and the service learning trip, offering tips on how to design and manage such programs. Likewise, Long et al. (2010) provides a discussion of the design of a study tour for American students visiting Japan. However, these are written primarily from the perspective of US educators rather than within a European context. Research specifically on the ERASMUS experience although sparse is available. One may have to look at more specialised sources such as monographs commissioned by the ERASMUS Bureau and reports by the British commission in addition to trawling the dedicated journals.

Such research has indicated that there are perceived benefits from engaging in ERASMUS (Huisman et al., 2005) as well as persistent areas of difficulty. Survey data suggests that although the importance of ERASMUS in enhancing employment prospects seems to be waning this remains important to over half the students surveyed. Likewise, participants reported substantially valuing the foreign language proficiency, the international study experience and generally look back favourably on their year abroad (Teichler & Janson, 2007). Papatsiba (2005) using a qualitative methodology, reported that engagement in ERASMUS mobility schemes had provided students with with a heightened confidence to face changing environments, to monitor the self and generally to be able to take control of their life-paths.

ERASMUS schemes are not without their problems, though. Survey data on the problems that students reported falls into two categories (Teichler & Janson, 2007). The first, administrative includes issues like finances, credits and accommodation. These findings are supported in an independent study by Lamie and Issitt (2005). The second category, teaching and learning related difficulties, highlighted the following in descending rank order as:

1. Different teaching or learning methods;
2. Teachers meeting or helping students;
3. Taking courses in a foreign language;
4. Too-high academic level.

According to Maiworm and Teichler (1995) examinations might also be added to the list. This earlier survey also showed that students were selecting host institutions on the basis of their foreign language skill and to a much lesser extent on the perceived reputation and quality of the host institution. Students were also concerned about the preparatory provisions for their study abroad, rating it towards the poor end of the scale.

ERASMUS students not only have a shorter period of foreign study but arrive with previous experience of a higher education institution. Potentially this can present another level of contrast and adjustment which other international students are not faced with (the exception being those engaging in postgraduate study abroad). With this comes experience of studying in another country, where there might be a contrasting emphasis on the salient discipline topics and different methods of teaching and learning employed. When researching this idea in relation to psychology, Craig and Trapp (2008) were only able to identify one previous piece of research. Subsequently they engaged in a pilot study with Masters students to establish if a disciplinary perspective might be fruitful for understanding the learning experiences of international students. The study revealed that the students found the course harder than expected, essay writing particularly challenging and the format of examinations

different to their previously experienced short answer and multiple choice examinations. When comparing themselves to home students they felt that their knowledge of modern psychological theories and terms was not as strong. Home students were also perceived as having a broader understanding of research and statistics. It appeared that epistemological differences in the discipline, together with contrasting styles of teaching and learning left the students feeling unprepared for the course. It is with this in mind that the present research is being conducted.

Background to the present study

The Department of Applied Psychology at UWIC introduced its first cohort of Polish ERASMUS students in the academic year 2007/08, from the University of Wroclaw. Since then a small group (either three or four students annually) have taken the opportunity to complete a year of their studies in the UK. This academic year is the first year that four students from Spain have also joined us (and two further Spanish universities will be sending students next year. In addition to this links which have been made with higher education institutions in Germany and Italy. Our ERASMUS population is set to grow further in future years). Anecdotally, it became apparent very early on that these students were different in many ways to our home students, and also that their experiences of what psychology was, how it had been delivered and assessed were often quite contrasting. This fuelled curiosity into the experiences of ERASMUS students studying psychology abroad, and a desire to collect some systematic data. To date data has been collected from the 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 cohorts in the form of small focus group interviews ($N=6$) conducted when the students arrive in September and again at the end of their stay. The interviews are structured around a number of areas relating to their year in the UK, exploring not just the academic issues, but more social aspects such as their accom-

modation, leisure time, employment and finances. Initial interviews have been conducted with this year's cohorts and it is envisaged that the cycle of data collection will continue for the next two academic years, in order to establish a bigger sample and further evidence. This paper offers some initial reflections on the emerging findings, with the focus being on the two following research questions:

1. How do the students previous experiences of studying psychology compare with their experiences in the UK?
2. How have their experiences to date informed the curriculum and assessment we offer for ERASMUS students within our department?

Verbatim quotations from the students will be offered as illustrative evidence. Note also that the title 'Experiencing ERASMUS' does not refer exclusively to the experiences of the students, but seeks to reflect on how we have attempted to address some of the apparent conflicts between the two systems to facilitate a smoother integration onto our course.

Goodness of fit between psychology degrees in the two countries.

The structure of a psychology course in Poland differs to that offered in the UK. An undergraduate psychology degree in the UK lasts for three years. The psychology course at the University of Wroclaw is a five-year course, incorporating a Masters programme. Five-year degrees are not standard in Poland, and in a similar fashion to the UK system a Bachelor's degree would typically be awarded after three years. However, those working within the field

impress that in order to qualify as a psychologist five years of study together with a Master's thesis are required. Subsequently the five-year model has been embraced for Polish psychology higher education courses (Heszen-Niejodek, 2004). The ERASMUS students who have come to study have typically been in either their third or fourth year of study (though two have been in their final year).

One of the largest areas of contrast appears to be the curriculum. The UK curriculum for accredited psychology degrees is set by QAA and the British Psychological Society, the focus being on the different sub-disciplines of psychology. The Polish curriculum is set by the Ministry of Education and Sport and prescribes a wider breadth of subject areas in addition to the more traditional sub-disciplines of psychology. Table 1 summarises the Polish curriculum.

Adapting to a different system

The group discussions have highlighted some differences in emphasis in discipline based knowledge between the two degrees:

FG2 – P2: 'In here there are some differences... for example, in clinical psychology which I'm interested in. Because in Poland it's much more focussed on psychodynamic. So here it's rather CBT, cognitive, so, like another perspective.'

Greater emphasis on the psychodynamic approach seems to be a common finding to emerge. Other students have noted that they had never encountered critical psychology taught on the social psychology module here.

Table 1: The psychology curriculum in Poland (from Heszen-Niejodek, 2004).

General courses: for example, philosophy with logic, biological mechanisms of behaviour, foreign languages (180 hours of English is mandatory), physical education and other (e.g. computer science). 405 hours.
Basic courses: introduction to psychology, history of psychological thought, research methodology and statistics and psychometrics and psychological diagnosis. 330 hours.
Disciplinary courses: cognitive processes, development over the lifespan, emotions and motivation, individual differences, personality and social psychology. 450 hours.

This participant noted that she found the UK degree less theoretical:

FG1 – P3: ‘In the theoretical examination you have to read books, books, yeah not much articles so our knowledge is based mainly on the books... which is also one of the biggest differences from studying here and our university because we learn a lot of theory and here it’s based around the research and the findings. So it’s difficult to study psychology in a different way.’

However, the area where adaptation was reported was the acquisition of different types of skills. The following response was elicited from reflections about the harder aspects of the year:

FG1 – P2: ‘...because there’s a difference with the educational level here between our universities, they teach us different things and you demand different things here. So the beginning was a bit hard, we were lacking skills but we could learn those skills here so it will be very useful.’

It seems that term one in particular necessitated a very steep learning curve as students adapted not only to studying in a different language but also to different ways of having their knowledge tested. Commonly discussed were the different methods of assessment and expectations about the nature of resources to use to inform their work. For example, in the UK students would be expected to engage with literature searches on dedicated data bases such as PsycINFO. The Polish students were not familiar with this. Consequently finding information for assignments proved a challenge:

FG2 – P2: ‘the most difficult I think was having to look for the articles; I wasn’t so worried about the second part when you have to write in English. Like the use of grammar and that was difficult too but uh the most difficult was first looking for that information because at first when we came we didn’t know how to use the library and we were searching like blind.’
Interviewer: ‘We use databases, like PsychINFO, do you not have those in Poland then?’

P3: ‘We don’t do so much research on the internet. We have some journals, like specifically on psychology, we don’t use it all the time, like borrow...’

P2: ‘Sometimes we use it, but not very often. But sometimes our tutor, if there is an article they tell us, uh for example which chapter.’

Similarly focus group one lamented the lack of data base resources and more emphasis on books in Poland:

FG1 – P2: ‘...we don’t have access to databases.’

P3: ‘well we do, but it’s quite modest.’

Later:

P2: ‘we don’t have access to the research database, so I think that’s the biggest difference. A lot of books...’

Although reading journal articles was not standard practice, the ERASMUS students did report having read more ‘classic’ texts. Names such as Fromm, Freud, Horney, and Zimbardo were cited as authors whose texts they were familiar with. Heszen-Nlejedek (2004) refers to *Psychology: An Academic Handbook* (2000) as a standard text in Polish universities. This is an edited collection by Strelau, a Polish academic at the University of Warsaw, and comprises three volumes, with contributions from 50 academics. The ERASMUS students were familiar with this handbook.

Availability of resources might be attributable to historical issues related to the development of psychology as a discipline in Poland. It was only after the political changes in the late 1980s that Poland became open to and influenced by more international influences. Subsequently more tools for psychological measurement, journals and foreign books became available. However, financial restraints mean that it is only the prestigious universities which are able to provide such resources. Heszen-Nlejedek (2004) notes that PsychINFO is only available at two or three universities. Strelau’s *Psychology: An Academic Handbook*, was seen as a way of ensuring that the standards required of academic psychology were available throughout

Polish universities. Such historical accounts provide important background knowledge when attempting to understand the apparent contrasts between the degrees in the two countries.

The focus on research methods has emerged as another key area of difference between courses in the two countries. One of the Polish students who was in the final year of their Masters course talked about there being more emphasis on statistics in the latter years. For those who were at a less advanced stage of their degree though, the following observation was more common:

FG2 – P3: ‘...and here it is I am sure more focussed on methodology and statistics than in Poland.’

Whilst home students can access SPSS on numerous computers on campus, they can obtain a disc with SPSS on it free of charge, for personal use; clearly such resources have not been available to the Polish students. Not surprisingly, the resources available in terms of IT and library facilities in the UK were highly praised by the Polish students.

Comparatively less familiarity with statistics presented particular problems when the students elected to complete a dissertation as part of their studies.

FG 1 – P1: ‘Most challenging, definitely the dissertation project, it’s certainly been the most challenging for me. I brought some knowledge about statistics but generally I lacked the skills needed...’

This became apparent after the first year of the exchange programme. Initially students had been offered the choice to select from our final year modules, together with the compulsory dissertation. This mirrored the syllabus followed by final year home students. However, it became apparent that to directly transfer the same syllabus might not be appropriate to fit the prior experiences of the Polish psychology curriculum. It seemed that we might have to be more flexible regarding the nature of the modules offered. For the second cohort of students the dissertation was no longer compulsory. None took it! The down side was that the dissertation

was worth 15 ECTS so they were faced with having to do a larger number of modules than the home students. Whilst this approach addressed the issue of less familiarity with research skills, it might be considered avoidance, rather than finding a way to furnish the students with this knowledge (which would also facilitate an understanding of some of the material covered in other modules). Negotiations between the ERASMUS co-ordinators in both countries, and the head of psychology at Wroclaw, led to the decision that students could complete relevant modules from other levels of our course. This year they have been following our first-year modules in statistics and research methods.

A further pedagogical contrast has been the emphasis on different modes of assessment. For example at the University of Wroclaw the students had engaged in many multiple-choice tests, which the following participants perceived as requiring less detailed knowledge:

FG2 – P1: ‘In Poland we have to study and remember information.’

P2: ‘But on the other hand we do have exams where we have to write for a long time and compare. There is not as much as here where you have to critique but we’ve got some...’

P1: ‘Maybe in some subjects but not as much as here. We have tests like ABCD.’

Interviewer: ‘Oh right, multiple-choice?’

P1: ‘Yeah I don’t think it’s a good idea.’

P3: ‘No, it depends how you learn for this one. Because this is specific, you are recording the information for this type of assessment when you know you have test for an assessment you just focus for some important words, yes? you do not try to explore the issue, you don’t try to go deep, so...’

P1: ‘It’s not about appreciation. That you appreciate something and have to write it down.’

Participants in focus group one also discussed the greater emphasis on exams and tests in their degree in Poland to date:

FG1: Interviewer: 'What would you typical assessments have been?'

P1: 'Exams.'

Interviewer: 'Oh it's all exams is it?'

P1: 'Exams, yeah.'

P3: 'Tests.'

P2: 'Tests, yeah. Sometimes it's a project but very rarely.'

P1: 'Yeah, presentations. During workshops we usually do presentations.'

P3: 'Yeah, but also tests at the end of the module.'

It would be somewhat impractical to alter the format of all our examinations to fit with previous assessment experience. However, ERASMUS students are not expected to sit a three-hour examination in their second language under the same time constraints as home students. Instead they are given the examination paper and allowed one week to complete it, writing the required number of essays each in 1500 words.

The heavy emphasis on tests also meant that on arrival the students were unused to writing essays; a skill which would be firmly established by the final year of a UK degree course. Understandably, they found this challenging:

FG1 – P1 '...I found quite difficult writing the essays in the first term. In our university they don't learn us how to write kind of essays like...'

P2: 'We didn't do essays at all actually.'

Interviewer: 'oh didn't you?'

P3: 'During my three years of education I wrote two essays.'

P2: 'I didn't have any so it was quite difficult to evaluate some research, evaluate some data bases and just to write conclusions, analyse it and do some really nice work. It was really difficult because we were learning how to do that and because other students were at the third level so they are greater at this rate than we so we were confused and it was difficult.'

As would be expected from such revelations there were significant adjustments to be made in order to complete assessments in

the format required for the UK degree. Initially writing essays was reported as being incredibly time consuming and taking much concentration:

FG1 – P1: Reported long periods '...when I had to sit in my room and just write essays... it was so tiring for me because I had to concentrate, sit in one place, stay there. So it was quite hard...'

Another described a similar scenario as 'frustrating' with the added hardship of thinking in Polish (something she reported she did not do by the end of the year). Their stoicism is evident as they reflect back on the year:

FG1 – P3: '...the beginning was a bit hard, we were lacking skills but still we could learn those skills here so it will be very useful.'

P1: 'It depends on the term. The first term was quite hard... but after the first week, after the second week, after the third week it was better and better.'

P2: 'But I think that every essay was better than the previous one just because we learn how to do this and we had feedback from the lecturers.'

Whilst a participant from FG2 made the following comments:

FG2 – P2: 'I would like to say that I am just so happy about studying here because for me sometimes it has been very difficult, uh for me to read the articles uh sometimes it was very hard, but I can see the progress this has given me with satisfaction when I am understanding more.'

All of the above illustrate the nature of the academic challenges faced by the students and how quickly they have had to adapt to a very different approach to studying psychology. As EU students they are not able to access the support offered by a dedicated team working within the international office. Therefore, they are precluded by virtue of not being 'international' from attending the additional classes on essay writing and language skills offered within the university. Whilst they could be referred to student services on campus (who offer both pastoral and

academic support in certain circumstances) the amount of time it would take to be assessed and individualised support packages put into place would not be feasible for students on such short term study periods. Also, the language would affect the nature of the assessments on offer, such as the test for dyslexia, which would require English to be their first language. ERASMUS students seeking such extra academic help have had to rely on the good will of staff members, most notably the departmental ERASMUS co-ordinator, who has spent much time checking grammar and reassuring students who are shocked when their first assignment is returned with a lower than expected grade (often because it is presented in an inappropriate format). If the population of ERASMUS students grow as predicted during the next few years such one to one help might not to be possible. Again the goodwill of staff members could be the only means of support for a group who seem to fall through the net of the 'systems' of extra support offered within our institution.

Points of discussion

From the evidence presented it is apparent that the Polish students' prior experiences of psychology did mediate their year of study in the UK. This supports and adds to the findings of Craig and Trapp (2008), though in the present study the students are not reporting feeling unprepared, rather that they have to work extremely hard, especially in the first term. It should be acknowledged, however, that students who elect to engage in foreign study may be more confident than a 'typical' student, and more proficient in their second language. Their knowledge, not just about the nature of psychological evidence, but how this might be assessed and how to find relevant information initially conflicted with the requirements of certain parts of our curriculum. The focus of the discipline appeared different than in Wroclaw, especially in relation to research methods and statistics. This meant that the initial transition required a very sharp learning curve

over and above that which might be anticipated when learning a subject in a second language.

Similar to Teichler and Janson (2007) the ERASMUS students have described their study period as a positive experience over all. Many report wishing to return to the UK to work or for further study. Despite the pedagogical and epistemological differences highlighted it could be argued that the acquisition of new psychological knowledge and methodologies represents a good example of inter cultural education and development of global citizens in relation to the discipline. Surely here, the remit of ERASMUS is being fulfilled.

Accommodating the academic needs of the initial cohorts of ERASMUS students within the framework of our degree also represented a steep learning curve for us! In order to integrate the diversity of prior learning it became apparent that our third-year options as they stood were not all appropriate for the ERASMUS year. As outlined in this paper, a more flexible approach to the curriculum was required. A lesson we have learned from this is that while ECTS might represent a common currency across European HEI's one can not assume functional equivalency. However, as ECTS are based on the number of hours of learning such flexibility has been possible.

The feedback from the students who have taken part in the ERASMUS scheme has been invaluable in alerting us of the differences between the two countries – both in informal settings such as discussions with the departmental co-ordinator and in the more formalised setting of the focus groups for this research. Methodologically a qualitative form of inquiry has furnished rich, detailed accounts of the ERASMUS experience. Clearly these are narratives relating to a specific university, and it is acknowledged that what students report may be prone to error. This is certainly not presented as the 'truth' about the Polish degree, and caution must be raised towards any claims of generalisations to psychology in Poland as a whole. However,

the work of Heszen-Nlejodek (2004) has helped to contextualise some of the findings within the wider context, and this does concur with aspects of the students' accounts.

It seems that it might be fruitful to pay more attention to previous educational experiences when seeking to integrate students onto courses for a short study period. It is not just different cultural values in everyday behaviour and customs which represent a point of contrast but different cultural values relating to the epistemology and assessment priorities within the discipline. This appears to have received little attention from the wider literature on international student populations.

The research presented here represents work in progress. I make no claims of generalisability to all ERASMUS students, though suggest that some areas of their accounts

may resonate with colleagues in other institutions who have worked with students studying abroad for a year. It is hoped that the issues raised in relation to the integration of such students onto our psychology degree will be informative to others engaged in inter cultural teaching. It highlights some of the inherent challenges involved in the internationalisation process. I would be interested to hear how other institutions have found working with such cohorts. Certainly, I have learned a lot from 'experiencing ERASMUS'.

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