Opportunities for Study Abroad: the SOCRATES-ERASMUS Programme

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Today there are many opportunities to broaden your horizons and add an international experience to your education by undertaking part of your studies at a university in another country. For those of you rising to the challenge this will be the experience of a lifetime.

Opportunities to study abroad for part of your degree are available within Europe and beyond. A significant percentage of placements in Europe are organised through the SOCRATES-ERASMUS programme. This programme offers many advantages, which are discussed below in more detail, and will be the focus here. However, many of the general principles (financial arrangements most notably excluded) apply to other types of study abroad. The range of placements for geography students, across all schemes, varies from one university or college to another, so you should contact your International/European Office or geography department for full details. For those of you still choosing your university, open days or selection interviews provide ideal occasions to enquire about the possibilities.

The SOCRATES-ERASMUS programme

The SOCRATES programme is funded by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Education and Culture. It began in 1995 and is now its the second phase. It covers all areas of education from school level to adult and distance learning. The Higher Education section of SOCRATES is called ERASMUS. The first ERASMUS programme began in the 1980’s and the term ‘ERASMUS student’ is well recognised across Europe, though ‘SOCRATES’ or ‘SOCRATES-ERASMUS’ are sometimes used instead. ERASMUS funds activities such as student and staff exchange and curriculum development.
The programme aims to introduce a European dimension into education and thereby to improve international cooperation and the quality of education. Practical objectives include improving knowledge of European languages and promoting cooperation and mobility throughout education. Approximately 2000 higher education institutions across Europe are involved in SOCRATES-ERASMUS, including about 200 in the UK. The programme has expanded to include a total of 31 countries (see box).

**Countries eligible to participate in SOCRATES-ERASMUS:**
- Member States of the European Union: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom;
- EFTA/EEA countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway;
- EU associated states: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia;
- Turkey is expected to become eligible in 2001.

SOCRATES-ERASMUS student exchanges are established when the collaborating universities sign an agreement. Each university will have its own ‘partner’ universities; many specific to particular departments or subject areas. This means that you will not have a completely free choice of university at which to study abroad. However, there are advantages in this: each department will be working with a selected number of universities and can therefore develop a good relationship with each. This helps to ensure a high level of personal care. Agreements are usually signed each year, so opportunities may vary from year to year. Not all universities offer SOCRATES-ERASMUS placements in geography. You should check with your International/European Office or SOCRATES Departmental Coordinator for up-to-date information.

**What’s in it for you?**
There are many advantages in participating in the SOCRATES-ERASMUS programme:

**Financial**
- You will not pay tuition fees at the host institution.
• If you spend a full academic year abroad you will not have to pay tuition fees to your home institution for that year. The British Government will pay your fees, in recognition of the benefits of SOCRATES-ERASMUS.

• Most ERASMUS students receive a modest student mobility grant from the European Commission to help meet the additional costs of study abroad. Supplementary student loans are available through the Student Loan Company and some assistance with travel costs may be provided by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Contact your LEA for further details.

Academic recognition
• The period abroad will be recognised as an integral part of your degree. For some students credit will be transferred to their home university through the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Not all universities subscribe to this scheme and some do not use it in all subject areas. However, this should not affect the recognition of the period abroad.

Language skills
• Living and working among native speakers is the most effective way to improve your language skills.

Personal
• Studying and living in another country helps to develop life skills and independence, and is an opportunity to make lots of new friends.

Employability
• The ERASMUS label has significant currency amongst employers across Europe. Employers appreciate the initiative and independence demonstrated by ERASMUS students, and their excellent language skills. There are also specific benefits for geography students. If you want to use your geography in your job and are thinking of a career in planning or urban and regional development, for example, your European experience will make you more attractive to prospective employers as these professions are now heavily influenced by developments in the European Union.

Geographical
• It may be possible to arrange a period of overseas fieldwork associated with your placement. Many geography students take the opportunity of an extended period of residence abroad to work on a dissertation topic related to the city or region in which they are studying.

• If you are interested in postgraduate study for a Masters degree or a PhD, then there may be opportunities available in your host institution which you will be well placed to take up.

Studying geography abroad
The UK Guide (UK SOCRATES-ERASMUS Council, 2000) is an excellent resource for those applying to university as well as existing students. It gives details about the benefits of the programme and has entries for all participating UK institutions. It lists the subject areas and countries in which placements are available, and includes 44 universities and colleges that offer exchanges in geography and related subjects. It should be available from your local library or careers office.

One of the most interesting aspects of a year abroad is the chance to study geography as it is taught and understood in a different country. Subjects such as chemistry and engineering are broadly similar all around the world, because there is a well integrated international scientific community in these fields that enables the rapid dissemination of new ideas and results. In philosophy and sociology, the works of major continental philosophers and sociologists are established elements of degree courses in British universities. Geography is different. In physical geography the situation is similar to that in the other natural sciences. The content of modules on geomorphology, for example, is likely to vary as much between different universities within Britain as between universities in different countries. By contrast, human geography is divided into a number of relatively distinct linguistic traditions. The human geography taught in British universities draws almost exclusively on the anglophone (English language) tradition (for a survey see Johnston 1997). While there is no doubting the richness and vibrancy of the anglophone tradition, it is a mistake to assume ‘that human geography conducted in English somehow constitutes the “authorized” version of the discipline’ (Johnston et al 2000 p.viii).

The different linguistic traditions in European geography have developed in relative isolation from one another, and there is considerable variation between countries in the
dominant schools of thought, the major fields of research, the principal methodological approaches, and even in what constitutes ‘geography’ (for a survey of the development of geography in different countries up to 1984 see Johnston & Claval 1984). These national differences are reflected in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. For example, German geography has a strong tradition of geomorphology and historical settlement studies, and an emphasis on overseas research. Although things are changing, the traditional dominance of individual professors and their specific research interests produces a degree of inertia, so German geography has not experienced the dramatic pluralisation and influx of new ideas and methods evident in anglophone geography since the 1970s. By contrast Scandinavian and Dutch geography overlaps rather more with British and American work, but is also distinctive particularly in having stronger links with the state planning systems in those countries. As with other aspect of SOCRATES, the key here is information. Try to find out as much as possible about the kind of geography taught at the different host universities. Use the internet and talk to others who have studied there. If you have strong preferences about the topics you wish to study then make sure your areas of interest are available.

There are also significant national differences in teaching methods and styles. In many European countries, students go to university later and take longer to graduate than in Britain. Degree courses are often very flexible and modules can sometimes be repeated to obtain a higher mark. This means that students (and their teachers) do not always share the British obsessions with passing a rigid number of modules in a year and completing a degree in a set time. Lecture classes may be very large and there may be less contact between lecturers and students than in Britain. Examining systems also vary. In some countries assessment is based on coursework, in others there may be oral exams and so on. Again, the key to a successful year abroad is information. Try to find out in advance what to expect, preferably from someone who has been through the system.

**How to apply and preparing to go**

ERASMUS placements generally take place in the second or third year of your degree and last from three to twelve months. They are a compulsory element of some degree programmes, and in this case you will know before you arrive at university that part of your studies will take place abroad. For other courses, an ERASMUS placement is optional and you can apply after you have started your degree. In this case, you should register your interest with the person responsible in your department as early as possible. Departments
select students for placements according to a range of criteria. These vary from university to university but normally include academic performance, language skills and ability to cope in different country.

Preparation is vital and you must start well in advance. A year or so before you depart is desirable as this gives you plenty of time to choose your host university, get your language skills in shape, take care of the application forms, decide which courses you will take, book your flights and arrange accommodation. Your department will help you through most of this, but be prepared to do a lot of the work yourself.

There are various ways in which you can prepare linguistically, even if your degree does not include a language component. Many universities offer language modules to non-language students and language centres provide self-access materials. Many universities offer intensive language courses for their incoming ERASMUS students before the study period starts, sometimes at no cost. The European Commission sometimes provides funding for courses in the less widely-spoken languages. If all else fails, certain universities (most notably in the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries) offer courses in English, so a period abroad might still be an option. However, some knowledge of the language of the host country is desirable for social reasons and to help you make the best use of library and other facilities. Enquire about the various possibilities well in advance.

We hope we convinced you by now that a period abroad can be a wonderful life-changing experience. Throughout this chapter, we have pointed out that information is a key element of a successful period abroad. Space permits us to give you just a flavour of the opportunities available, so if you are interested do contact the people we’ve suggested and consult the publications and web-sites below. And have a good time!

References


**Websites**

European Commission site - the SOCRATES programme:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/socrates.html

Technical Assistance Office for SOCRATES: http://www.socrates-youth.be

UK SOCRATES-ERASMUS Council: http://www.erasmus.ac.uk/

**Further reading**

The UK Guide for Students Entering Higher Education. Available from: ISCO Publications, 12A Princess Way, Camberley, Surrey GU15 3SP (£13.00) or in your local library or careers office.


Travelling, Studying, Working and Living within the European Union. Available free of charge from: Publications Department, The European Commission, 8 Storey’s Gate, London SW1T 3AT.


The European Union: What’s it all About - Where to find out more?. Available free of charge from: Publications Department, Office of the European Parliament, 2 Queen Anne’s Gate, London, SW1T 3AT.
