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# How the Erasmus+ Programme has affected ELTE TÓK

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International Relations are highly important in the operation of a higher education institution, a fact that is no different for our own institution, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). For the Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (TÓK), one of the smallest of faculties in ELTE, it is very important to have a positive international reputation and a fluctuation of mobilities. To support this aim, a wide and well working partner network is essential. Just as for every university in the world, it is very important for us to widen our networks, to promote and emphasise international possibilities and to look for new opportunities. In this following article I would like to introduce the International Relations of ELTE TÓK, while highlighting the Erasmus+ mobility programme and how this opportunity forms the life of the faculty.

## **When I was a junior coordinator**

I started working as an Erasmus+ coordinator in 2014. Among many other duties, my job is to supervise everything related to Erasmus+, including in- and outgoing student and staff mobilities, handling Inter-Institutional Agreements and administrating tenders for Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships and the like.

The academic year 2013/2014, just as now 2021/2022, was about re-signing the Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIA). This was my first big task as a junior Erasmus+ coordinator. I needed to check every agreement and decide whether it is beneficial for both parties, especially for us, to keep said agreement or it is time to let go. In the year 2014 we re-signed 22 IIA's and in their framework our students and staff could complete exchange mobilities. From here on there was nothing left but to go forward.

One of the best parts of my job is to find new partner universities, get in touch, get to know each other and eventually, sign an agreement. When signing an IIA, the main objective is to find a partner whose subject area matches ours, to have courses for easier course recognition without students having to do more work during their home exam period. Throughout the



years, I learned what is worth keeping an eye on and what is best to let go. As a result, by the beginning of the academic year of 2021/2022, we had 62 signed IIA's with institutions located throughout Europe that we must now re-evaluate again as the new, seven-year Erasmus+ era is upon us. During the past seven years we got to know the partners and could see what was working and what was not. Together with the leaders of TÓK, therefore, we reduced the agreement numbers to 42; in the meantime, we created new partnerships. Currently, we have 50 active IIA's with 21 European countries, including Spain, Denmark, Finland, Austria and Ireland. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude toward some of our lecturers who helped create many IIAs throughout the years. (Image 1.)

**Image 1.**

*European universities (Universitat de Barcelona, Mary Immaculate College)*

*Photo: Gabriella Daróczy, Ildikó Romanoczki*



*University of Lapland, Pädagogische Hochschule Steiermark*  
(Photo: Luca Mogyoródi, Szilvia Golyán)



### **It is all about the students**

When I think about international mobilities, the first thing that comes to my mind are the students. Since they are the cog work of Erasmus+, their mobilities and feedback are the most important factors in having a

successful programme year by year. They are, nevertheless, also the hardest factor, because no matter how long I have been doing this job, I still hit walls when it comes to them. For example, handling administrative tasks like the application process or completing the Learning Agreement. Often my work demands that I simply explain to applicants why it is a good thing to study abroad.

Most likely, the hardest part of my job is to motivate and inspire students to study abroad. Since every student is different, they all have their uncertainties when it comes to mobility. Some can be persuaded to take advantage of this one-of-a-kind lifetime experience, but others are unyielding. When I first started there were about 20-25 outgoing students a year. Unfortunately, this number hasn't changed much over the years: nowadays, about 30-32 ELTE TÓK students annually spend either one semester or a whole year abroad. During my time as Erasmus+ coordinator, I have met some issues that hold students back from mobility. Some of these aspects can then spread like a bad rumour about the programme.

### **Obstacles, but we overcome them**

In my experience, there are three main reasons why students do not dare to start this adventure: insecurity about their language capabilities; course recognition of their studies and teaching practices; family. Some students are afraid that their language knowledge is inadequate for understanding courses in a foreign university; no matter the level of their language proficiency, a very long period may have passed since they have used the language properly. Some students find this a good opportunity to sign up for language preparatory courses, or teach themselves to get back into practice, but others find this kind of preparation to be an unnecessarily extra task for the sake of study abroad. Little do they know that this would be their best chance to improve their knowledge: going on an Erasmus+ scholarship to live and study in a foreign environment!

When it comes to course recognition, it has been a long time coming. We have been through many hours of discussions about the best possible option for students to have their courses recognized in the shadow of not having a Mobility Window, which would make everything easier. A Mobility Window is a semester open for mobility without the nuances of course recognition or extra tasks in the sending university. Since courses from abroad are automatically recognised, students can continue with their home studies upon their return. Although we have been using the Uniquely Tailored Study Agreement for years as a means for course recognition, until not very long ago this process was far more complicated given that students had to deal with the teachers and their extra demands. Erasmus+ regulations forbid placing the weight of a double workload on students; making this change was therefore the utmost urgent task to address.

About a few years ago, ELTE TÓK separated the Uniquely Tailored Study Agreement to two parts. There is one *Erasmus Uniquely Tailored Study Agreement* which is to ensure the recognition of courses from universities abroad without having to do anything extra. Students do not have to register for these courses in our system (Neptun) since the results are added at the end of the semester. Parallel to this agreement is the *General Uniquely Tailored Study Agreement*, a document that creates an agreement between student and teacher regarding the completion of courses that do not have a match in the receiving institution or are strictly Hungarian-language courses.

According to students, another difficulty lies in having their placements recognized. I have mixed experiences with this issue as some can very easily find placement abroad, do what their home coordinator asks them to do and then have their coursework recognized back home. Then there are those who have no possibility to do anything like this in a foreign university which left them dealing with their placements in Hungary. Another possible obstacle arises from the importance that our faculty places on developing the careful usage and teaching of the Hungarian language: students must be able to use their native language properly when they teach in schools or kindergartens. Therefore, some placements may not be done abroad since this type of study must be completed in Hungary.

A circumstance such as this is what spreads the rumour that not being able to have a placement recognized means that students will lose a year, thereby making the entire programme “not worth it” in the students’ eyes. I usually tell these students that they will not lose a year if they make sure to have their studies and placements in order. They must inform the colleagues organising placements in time in order to find the best possible time for completing their placement (this can be before departure, or after their return during the exam period).

The only thing the faculty cannot alter is the opinion of the family. Sometimes financial problems get in the way, such as when the family is still supporting the student. Often personal reasons, such as “My boyfriend will not allow me to go abroad,” or “I would rather get married and have a baby instead of studying abroad” are expressed. These are situations in which we have no say at all, but must be mentioned because they illustrate what socio-economic factors may inhibit students from broadening their university experience.

Thankfully, beyond all of the challenges detailed above, I receive an overwhelming amount of positive feedback from students who say that completing this mobility has changed their lives: studying abroad helps them become more independent, more confident in using another language and allows them to gain more experience in their field of studies. Some have forged friendships that will last for a lifetime; others have taken advantage of the twelve months of Erasmus+ mobility that all students may access during their university studies in order to returned to the same university for further study, a traineeship, or a combination of both.



While the gradually increasing number of outgoing students is not negligible, the incoming numbers ELTE TÓK has been experiencing in the past few years is another factor worthy of mention. Notwithstanding the many restrictions brought about by the C-19 pandemic, we have received around 30-40 students per semester. This roughly total 80 students per year. For a small faculty, this a fantastic number! (Image 2. and 3.)

**Image 2.**

*Erasmus+ students from Autumn 2021, ELTE Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (TÓK)*

*(Photo: Ildikó Romanoczki)*



**Image 3.**

*Erasmus+ students from Autumn 2019, ELTE Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (TÓK)*

*(Photo: Dóra Keve)*



Yet another historical event that affected not only us, but every country in Europe, is BREXIT. For the moment, we have lost all those students coming from our partner university in Northern Ireland, which amounts to at least five students a year. Although the Erasmus+ programme has found a way to send students to the UK, this solution does not include receiving them. How we will be able to welcome students from Northern Ireland again is a question that remains to be answered.

The most popular country among our outgoing students is Spain which is, funnily enough, is also the country that sends us the most students. The country that sends the second most students is Germany. When it comes to outgoing students among the most popular countries, next to Spain of course, are Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Ireland.

### **We all need a supportive teacher**

As I mentioned, encouraging students to study abroad is an enormous task upon which the teaching staff of the faculty has a great impact. Access to staff mobilities has changed a lot over the years. *Teaching staff mobility* was the leading programme among our colleagues when they could go abroad to teach, to get to know students of the foreign university and observe their work. This changed in 2018/2019 when a new form of mobility surfaced that is called *non-teaching teaching staff mobility*. This programme allows lecturers to complete a mobility without having to teach, thereby allowing them to

focus on their professional growth by doing library research, participating in language courses or Staff Weeks, doing field work, etc. What attracts staff to this kind of mobility is that it is not restricted to IIA's as teaching staff mobility is. They can complete their mobilities in every country and institution of the European Union. What matters is for the chosen programme to have a connection to their teaching profile.

The *training staff mobility* programme is mostly for the staff of educational support. With this they can visit partner institutions/offices, taking part in Staff Weeks or language courses. Since the launch of the non-teaching teaching staff mobility programme, the numbers of the regular training staff mobility have decreased because lecturers do not use this type anymore.

When it comes to incoming staff mobility, we welcome at least 10 colleagues per year who come to teach or train (visiting offices, or the library). When a colleague reaches out to us via email regarding a possible visit to our faculty, it is the departments who take care of them by finding the best time and activity for the visiting party.

Teachers have a very important part in motivating students. The more teachers travel and experience, the more they can give to their students, the more they can encourage them to apply for the opportunity. Also, they can help students more with finding the best courses to study abroad.

### **The future**

In conclusion I am very proud of what our faculty has achieved so far in the area of international mobility. Developing this essential aspect of our profile is a complex task and requires a lot of coordinated planning and groupwork, but I think we have a stable foundation for aiming higher and developing the faculty further.

And what are my plans for the future? To me, the most important aspect that remains to be further developed is recruiting and motivating students and raising our level of information dissemination to that of excellent. I try to keep our platforms updated for both students and colleagues, I organise informational meetings, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature organises many Erasmus afternoons and international related events, all of which are geared toward inspiring students to start their own international journey. (Image 4.)



**Image 4.**

*“Drop everything and learn languages” 2022 (Photo: Ildikó Romanoczki),  
“Drop everything and learn languages” 2018 (Photo: Zoltán Inczédi)*



Recruiting students, programme advertisement, helping incoming students and organise events for them are all areas that the International Office requires help with from the Student's Union. Unfortunately, not every year provides a group of students that are highly motivated in the areas mentioned above: some Hungarian students are very demotivated when it comes to international relations, it is very hard to find good ones to become a mentor/buddy.

We need to up our game in organising programs and events for incoming students. Sometimes communication is lost between parties and the Student Union organises programs that would have been needed at the beginning of the semester too late. When students arrive at the beginning of each semester, they do not have a proper welcome from the Student Union as they are all helping in the “Gólyatábor” (Initiation Camp for Incoming Students) that is organised for Hungarian students. It would be quintessential to have them at each Orientation Day and have a welcome programme straight away so students and the Union can get to know each other.

I think if we could solve all the above and, if we could maybe fit a Mobility Window to our profile, that would change the whole game for us.

