

INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS: ERASMUS STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

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The Erasmus Mundus Program was established in 1987 to promote student mobility between international universities in participating countries in Europe and beyond as a means to “promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures” (European Commission, n. d., para. 1). The goals of the Erasmus Program are reflected in the aims of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), which advocates for increased intercultural awareness and experience (CoE, 2001, 2011). Since the inception of the program, over 3 million students have taken advantage of Erasmus funding to participate in study abroad (European Commission, n. d.). However, relatively few formalized studies have been carried out to explore whether this program of international study is achieving its aims of promoting positive attitudes toward other cultures, developing competence in foreign languages, and increasing global awareness. The existing research indicates that, from a broad perspective, the majority of program participants report a positive and enriching experience (e.g., Mutlu, Alacahan, & Erdil, 2010). On the other hand, more focused investigations have also noted numerous issues that may have a negative impact on individual students’ perceptions of their experience, including language barriers, cultural differences, and problems related to the program of study (e.g., Lipowski, 2012). In light of these issues, the researchers believe that it is important to develop a more precise understanding of participating students’ personal experiences from an academic and social perspective. By doing so, it may be possible to identify the strengths and potential weaknesses in individual institutions’ implementations of the Erasmus program and to guide program coordinators in designing a more enriching environment for visiting students. Accordingly, this study was designed to explore the attitudes of Erasmus students visiting a Turkish university toward the Turkish language and culture and their overall experience in the program. The researchers

surveyed a group of 9 foreign students from four different countries who were studying at a prominent university in Turkey's eastern Black Sea region through the Erasmus program. The data were collected through open-ended questionnaires that were designed to elicit respondents' views concerning their intercultural experiences in Turkey. The survey items revolved around the participants' prior beliefs about Turkish culture, their views of Turkish culture following their experience, their level of comfort with Turkish culture, their prior and current proficiency in the Turkish language, their perceptions of Turkish attitudes toward their home cultures, and whether they would return or maintain contact with any of the Turks with whom they had become acquainted. The results revealed that while the participants generally held positive views toward Turkish culture, both prior to and following their experience, few of them had developed sufficient skills in Turkish to communicate on more than a superficial level, and many of them still regarded Turks and Turkish culture as "other" and inaccessible in many ways. The fact that most of the participants reported spending more time socializing with other foreign students and communicating in either English or their native languages may largely account for this issue. While this study is small in its scope, it may draw attention to some considerations that should be addressed in terms of program planning, including provisions for increased instruction in Turkish, as well as enhanced opportunities to interact with Turkish students on a social level.