



Developing long-term mobility for upper-secondary students through Erasmus+: challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

The paper will address the opportunities and challenges of a specific activity in the framework of the Erasmus+ program: the long-term mobility of upper secondary school students in general schools. One of the tools upon which the EU aims to achieve the European Education Area (EEA) by 2030 stands in mobility of learners in Europe. While Higher Education Institutions have developed advanced mobility schemes and a wide offer of international activities for their students, non-vocational upper secondary schools are still mainly linked to short term mobility of students. Long-term opportunities for students both in Europe and overseas are to a great extent managed by private actors while, contrary to what happens at HE level, schools are at margins of the process and often lack organizational capacity to manage these kind of activities. Against this background, and on the basis of the first results emerging from the E+ project DEEDS, the authors will explore the main obstacles that general schools are facing in developing joint long term initiative aspiring to creating a common ground with other schools through the development of common study programs based on shared assessment methods. Attention will be also dedicated to the potential and possible impact that such transnational cooperation arrangements among schools can have on the achievement of the long-term goals of the EEA.

Keywords: General Upper secondary schools, Erasmus+, Long-term Mobility of students, European Education Area

Introduction

The paper will address the opportunities and challenges of a specific activity in the framework of the Erasmus+ program: the long-term mobility of upper secondary school students in general schools. The article is based on the main elements emerging in framework of the implementation of the Erasmus+ project “DEEDS Modelling a European Cross-curricular Study Programme for Upper Secondary Schools”¹ funded by the Italian E+ National Agency “Indire”.

The policy context

Mobility of students is increasingly becoming a pivotal element in the process currently being developed by the European Union (EU) to build the European Education Area by 2030. Such a centrality derives from Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) which states that the Union shall be aimed at “encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study”. More in general at policy and legislative level the efforts have been geared to removing the obstacles to mobility for secondary schools and to addressing the problems linked to the recognition of the study periods abroad, and within the EU. Against this background the most powerful and probably one of the most successful tools that the EU has ever developed to reach its policy goals has been the Erasmus+ Programme. Looking back at the process of convergence among the educational systems in Europe over the past decades, the driving force exerted by the Erasmus Programme has been different in terms of impact in the

¹ DEEDS project, <https://www.deedsproject.eu>



various educational fields it covers. While Higher Education Institutions have been able to lead the way by developing advanced mobility schemes and a wide set of international activities for their students, national school systems are lagging behind and they are still far from achieving the same level of cooperation reached at tertiary level.

The Erasmus+ Programme supports both the mobility of students and staff and strategic partnerships among different organizations in the field of school education with the aim of modernizing and improving quality in education, as well as strengthening the linkage between education and labour market. Students and staff can participate in various parts of the Programme, in particular in projects of the Key Action 1: Learning Mobility of Individuals and Key Action 2: Cooperation projects focused on innovation and the exchange of good practices.

In the framework secondary education, data indicates that transnational activities of non-vocational schools are still mainly linked to short term mobility of students.² If one looks, for example, at the statistics coming from the Italian E+ National Agency, the short-term student mobilities carried out by Italian schools between 2018 and 2020 have been 9.897 while the long-term ones were 41, i.e. 0,4% of the total. The reasons behind this situation are several and indeed two years of COVID pandemic have contributed to worsening, if possible, the situation. In this respect, a few elements should be considered: long term mobility in upper secondary schools has been a field where the school has so far played a marginal role due to the presence of non-public organization that historically have been playing an important role in arranging this kind of activities in several European countries and overseas. Other elements, as illustrated more in detail below, pertain differences in the way in which curricula are designed, differences in the way students are assessed and the capacity of the schools to adequately manage all aspects pertaining the planning, the implementation and follow-up of the long-term mobility.

Challenges that schools are facing in relation to long-term mobilities

The context of Liceo Aldo Moro, one of the partners of the DEEDS project, signifies well the situation that today many upper secondary schools in Italy are facing. The recent pre- and post-Covid years have shown a substantial increase in the total number of mobilities of Italian students abroad, mainly to English-speaking countries in North America and Australia, but also to Ireland and the UK. Most mobilities have been medium or long-term (3 to 10 months), with a wide variety of private or semi-private organizations (some with 50-year-long expertise) offering their services in the choice of host countries, host families, host schools and travelling arrangements. For the purpose of this paper, the authors will neglect the issue of the financial impact on families of an experience that the large public has taken to regard as essential for fostering a teenager's mature skills, but it is relevant to pinpoint the marginal role this 'family issue' attributes to the school the student leaves for such substantial periods.

Attendance of a complete schoolyear in a hosting school is implied in the case of a long-term stay, with an explicit duty on the students' side to provide official documents issued by the host institutions, necessary to their Class Teachers' Council (Consiglio di Classe) at home for an accurate evaluation of the competences acquired during the experience and a smooth re-introduction into their original class groups.

Inevitably, this rises major difficulties in the Italian school system, probably among the most tolerant in Europe in certifying the returning student's passage to the next class (usually the final year – 5th grade) without any formal assessment of the pivotal skills and notions required from the other students, and without a thorough check of the range of skills and competences catered for by a school in a different system.

This situation is one of the reasons why the Liceo Moro has adhered with enthusiasm to the DEEDS project, and indeed the results of the first 18 months of strict cooperation with colleagues in Sweden and Spain are encouraging. The Deeds Project schedules 3 main instruments to reach its aims: 1) the alignment of national school curricula of the partner organizations through a jointly developed study plan for mobilities of 12 weeks; 2) the sharing of consistent assessment procedures for the competences acquired in the common curriculum, and 3) a package of administrative and certification procedures to ensure the bridging of the gaps existing among the three school systems. More in detail, the study plan contains a programme for a 12-

² P. Cavicchi, A. Miniati, "L'Erasmus (+) per gli studenti della scuola Mobilità di breve e lungo periodo nei partenariati KA229", Agenzia Nazionale Erasmus+ INDIRE, Ufficio Studi e Analisi, Firenze, 2021.



week curriculum in 8 subjects, common to all three schools: English, Spanish, History, Philosophy, Art, Physical Education, Science and Maths.

Aligning curricula does not appear to be such an issue in the fields of Humanities. In the case of languages, for instance, teachers have revealed to possess a fairly common methodological background enforcing a good amount of flexibility in the strategies employed. The development of the highest possible mastery of communicative competences for students has been found to be the main aim in the three school systems, granting the opportunity to easily find a 'what' for the widely shared 'how': meaningfully, the items in the curriculum shared by teachers of English and Spanish may stretch to cover a complete schoolyear.

Another side of language teaching included a full agreement on the necessity to provide a basic course in the national language (Swedish and Italian) of the hosting countries, with the aim of implementing students' social skills for the length of their stay while receiving regular tuition in English as lingua franca, and to receive regular tuition online in their own language in the subjects not covered by the programme.

Not so easy with Science, History and Philosophy. The latter two are both taught as separate subjects by the same figure in Italy, and consistent methodological and notional differences exist in Italy and Sweden (in relation, for example, to the higher relevance given to the study of historical sources in the Swedish system). The subject-group of teachers has been able to bridge the gaps, agreeing on a common basis of knowledge and of coherent assessment tools in both subjects, awaiting to be tested next year. Science teachers too have agreed on a common ground for the teaching of their subject, coping with the different distribution of contents over the various years.

The major difficulties had to be faced with the competences in Mathematics, an area where a cognitively demanding national syllabus did not seem to leave much room to negotiation over contents and methods. The use of a language (English) other than the students' own has been found not to contribute to smooth acquisition of concepts and procedures. The final outcomes of the teachers' group works in the area strictly attain to a limited range of topics, though enough to cover the 12 weeks' period.

A second set of challenges pertains the identification of common assessment procedures for each subject. The schools have been working on the collection and comparison of tools and methods used in the each of the subjects. A possible common convergence has been found by focusing on a competence-based assessment though rubrics and authentic tasks³. A blend of key competences for lifelong learning and subject-related competences appears to emerge as an adequate and balanced solution upon which a convergence can be successfully achieved.

Conclusions

Despite the reflections above pertaining the implementation process of the DEEDS project will have to be reviewed again in the light of the testing activities to be carried out in 2023, the elements emerged so far lead to consider not only the obstacles but also the opportunities and the long-term vision connected to the future of the European Education area.

The success in establishing a transferable model of cooperation among upper-secondary schools can open up opportunities for extending the achievements obtained in the Higher Education sector to general upper secondary education. This means creating the ground for forms of collaboration among upper secondary schools in Europe leading to the development of transnational study programs designed along the same principles at the basis of joint degrees, a tool which today is offered by many universities. In the same way, the development of permanent long-term mobility programs can also constitute an opportunity for linking the most forward-looking upper secondary schools with the most advanced cooperation formats in the field of Higher education. In fact, the preparation acquired through a transnationally designed learning path at upper secondary level would see its natural continuation at tertiary level in the framework of a European University.

³ Capperucci D. "From Competence Curriculum Design to Assessment and Certification of Achievement two empirical models for TEFL", Studi sulla Formazione 1, 2019, 147-175.



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