

## INTRODUCTION

The research results presented below highlight two features of particular relevance to the body of analysis that has studied international student mobility under the *Erasmus* programme and assessed its impact in individual countries and its efficacy at the European level.

Whilst the *student population* that has taken part in European Union mobility programmes has for some time been subject to analysis intended to construct a reliable 'identikit' of the typical mobility student, more complex – and perhaps for this reason less common – is investigation of differences in the *finished product* of universities as a function of the presence or otherwise of foreign study undertaken as part of the *Erasmus* programme.

In both cases, but especially as regards the finished product (graduates, that is to say), the aspect most difficult to analyse is the existence or otherwise of differences between the respective performances, first at university and then in the jobs market, of the users and non-users of European Union student mobility programmes, and especially as regards the sign of those differences, the reasons for them, the role of *Erasmus* experience, and so on. These difficulties arise because data on the main structural features of the young and university population are either unavailable or restricted and in any case non-comparable (in time and space; for different years and across countries), and this applies especially to information on the social and economic circumstances of students' families of origin.<sup>(1)</sup>

It was in precisely these areas – where country-specific gaps and shortcomings are perhaps more apparent than at the European level – that the research presented here explored the population of Italian graduates (with and without *Erasmus* experience) by examining their differential features as of 1999, and their occupational status one and two years after graduation.

The analysis used the information contained in the ALMALAUREA database (for the graduate profile) and the results of telephone and postal interviews conducted – again as part of the ALMALAUREA Project – with graduates who received their degrees during the 1997 and 1998 summer sessions (for occupational status). This documentation concerns only part of the Italian university system and should therefore be treated with caution; but it is nevertheless the case that the information on almost 45 thousand graduates stored in the ALMALAUREA database

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<sup>(1)</sup> The European Commission itself has stressed that "the work on the student survey has shown that there is a lack of harmonised and comparable European statistics relating to the socio-economic situation of students" (cf. European Commission, 2000).

represents more than 30 per cent of students who graduated in 1999 in the country as a whole.<sup>(2)</sup>

The research examined the backgrounds, university careers and occupational statuses of graduates, seeking to determine whether, to what extent, and with what specific features, there exist effective differences between *Erasmus* and *non-Erasmus* graduates. More specifically, the research analysed the socio-economic circumstances of the families of origin, pre-university educations, as well as the most pertinent aspects of the university study curricula, of all graduates in 1999 who had previously studied abroad on an *Erasmus* programme. Comparison was then made, using the same variables, with 1999 graduates who had not taken part in a mobility programme. Particularly close attention was paid to analysis of the occupational situations of 1997 and 1998 *Erasmus* graduates one or two years after the award of their degrees, conducting comparison with graduates in the same years who had not studied abroad on the *Erasmus* programme.

The survey covered the almost 40 thousand students (those completing the relative questionnaire) who graduated in the calendar year 1999 from eighteen Italian universities.<sup>(3)</sup> Of these, just over 7 per cent (2,844) had gained experience of foreign study through an *Erasmus* programme, while a further 9 per cent (3,555) had studied abroad either on another European Union programme (only 145) or on their own account.

The survey on occupational situation instead concerned 7,042 graduates from the 1997 summer session of nine universities,<sup>(4)</sup> interviewed one and two years after graduation, and 8,474 graduates from the 1998 summer session of thirteen universities<sup>(5)</sup> interviewed one year after graduation. Three hundred and ninety-six of the former had taken part in a EU foreign study programme, and 542 of the latter. Restricting assessment of occupational situation to a single graduation session imposes evident limits, but it has the considerable advantage of depicting the occupational situation of each graduate at the same time and with the same interval after graduation, thereby eliminating the bias due to the different durations of labour market presence.

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(2) Comparison with MURST data on 1998 graduates shows that the population surveyed was amply representative as regards gender (where the values are identical) and attendance on groups of degree courses, although it was less geographically representative.

(3) The universities of Bologna, Catania, Chieti, Ferrara, Florence, Messina, Modena and Reggio Emilia, Molise, Parma, Eastern Piedmont, Rome-Lumsa, Siena, Turin Polytechnic, Turin University, Trento, Trieste, Udine and Venice IUAV.

(4) Bologna, Catania, Ferrara, Florence, Messina, Modena and Reggio Emilia, Parma, Trieste and Udine.

(5) Bologna, Catania, Chieti, Ferrara, Florence, Messina, Modena and Reggio Emilia, Molise, Parma, Trento, Trieste, Udine and Venice IUAV.

### **1. The socio-economic circumstances of the family influence the likelihood of participation in an Erasmus programme.**

Our analysis shows that the socio-economic circumstances of the family of origin play a significant part in determining the likelihood of participation in an Erasmus programme. This finding bears out the results of the European survey of the socio-economic situations of Erasmus students,<sup>(6)</sup> which shows that the educational qualifications of the parents act as a selection factor. It is well-known, in fact, that high **educational qualifications of parents** are associated with the more comfortable economic situation of the student's family, and that they tend to determine a particularly positive attitude within the household towards foreign study. The empirical evidence for a connection between parents' educational qualifications and the probability of taking part in an Erasmus programme is not surprising, therefore: seventeen 1999 Erasmus graduates in every 100 were from families in which both parents had degrees, while the proportion among non-Erasmus graduates was half as much (8.6 per cent). The relation was reversed among students from households less familiar with formal study: in fact, graduates whose parents possessed no more than lower-secondary qualifications made up 24.7 per cent of those with Erasmus experience, and 39 per cent of those without.

A similar selection process emerged from analysis of Erasmus and non-Erasmus graduates according to **father's occupation**. A high-ranking occupation (executive or senior manager, free professional, entrepreneur), as regards only the father, was associated with a greater likelihood that the son or daughter would take part in an Erasmus programme (more than 47 per cent of Erasmus graduates, in fact, had fathers with high-ranking occupations, while the proportion was significantly smaller among non-Erasmus students: 10 percentage points less). The reverse was the case of the offspring of blue-collar fathers: these were over-represented in the Erasmus group, of which they made up 8.6 per cent (compared to the 16.3 per cent in the non-Erasmus group). To be emphasised is that these results differ from those obtained by the European Commission's survey, which does not report significant differences between the Erasmus group of graduates and the overall university population as regards the father's most recent occupation.<sup>(7)</sup> However, it should be pointed out that comparison is problematic because different classification criteria are used by the European Commission and by this report.

Further analysis was conducted by classifying graduates according to their **social class**; a complex undertaking in which social class was defined by the educational qualifications and most recent occupations of both parents. The

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<sup>(6)</sup> European Commission, 2000; Finocchietti, 2000.

<sup>(7)</sup> European Commission, 2000.

results yielded a picture very similar to that obtained on the basis of the father's most recent occupation: graduates from the bourgeois class were over-represented, while those from the working class were under-represented.

It is interesting to note that the relation between socio-economic characteristics of the family and the likelihood of undertaking an *Erasmus* programme was apparent in every group of degree courses,<sup>(8)</sup> but particularly in those with lower percentages of *Erasmus* graduates – those, that is, in which selection for participation in foreign study programmes was wider. Among graduates from the languages group of degree courses, by contrast, the differences between *Erasmus* and *non-Erasmus* graduates according to parents' educational qualifications and father's socio-economic position were less substantial.

In any event, the socio-economic variables (in particular, last occupation of the father and social class) do not only condition the chances of taking part in the *Erasmus* mobility programme; they also influence in general the probability of undertaking foreign study during the period spent at university.

## **2. Graduates who have studied abroad on an Erasmus programme are generally more successful in their university studies.**

Because admission to European student mobility programmes is regulated by a classification drawn up on the basis of examination results, the greater success of *Erasmus* students at university may perhaps be taken for granted. Verifying this consideration would require the focus of the inquiry to be sharpened in relation to year of the *Erasmus* experience, with analysis of the results obtained before and after the period of study abroad. But there is no doubt that the experience itself of foreign study is advantageous for the majority of students on their return to their home universities.

As regards overall **examination scores**, *Erasmus* graduates achieved 0.8 points on average more than did their *non-Erasmus* counterparts (27.1 compared to 26.3) – an apparently minor difference but one which assumes particular significance if one takes account of the strong concentration of examination scores in these ranges of values: almost 20 in every 100 graduates concluded their university studies with a score of between 20 and 27. This difference may be due to the distribution of *Erasmus* graduates among faculties and degree courses. That is to say, the better scores of *Erasmus* graduates may have resulted from their greater concentration in courses characterized by more generous systems of assessment. But this is not the case, in fact: *Erasmus* graduates on average achieved 0.6 points

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<sup>(8)</sup> Analysis was also carried out by group of degree courses (those falling under the general headings of agriculture, architecture, chemistry-pharmacy, economics-statistics, geobiology, law, engineering, education, arts, languages, medicine, political-social sciences, psychology, science).

more than the average for their degree courses; instead, graduates who had studied abroad independently of European Union programmes obtained the same scores as their fellow course-members.

But may not the better scores of *Erasmus* graduates have been due to the more comfortable socio-economic circumstances of their families? The results of the survey gainsay this hypothesis as well: on average, *Erasmus* graduates scored an average of 0.6 points more than other graduates of their own social class, while the difference with parents' qualifications remaining equal rises to 0.7.

Analysis of final **degree grades** points to entirely similar conclusions: *Erasmus* students achieved an average of 3.4 points more than *non-Erasmus* students, and 2.8 points more than the average scores for their degree courses.

However, *Erasmus* graduates recorded better results not only in examinations but also in the **duration of their studies**. Here the difference between the two groups, expressed by the median value, was 0.6 years.

The hypothesis that these differences arose because fewer *Erasmus* graduates attended degree courses of longer legal duration (five or six years) is contradicted by the index of duration of university studies. According to this indicator as well, which does not reflect differences among the legal durations of degree courses, *Erasmus* graduates as a whole completed their degree courses more rapidly than did their *non-Erasmus* counterparts.

These various factors are reflected in the **age on graduation** of these students: *Erasmus* graduates were on average more than a year younger than *non-Erasmus* graduates (26.3 years old on average, compared to 27.5).

As in the case of socio-economic characteristics, this greater success concerned all the groups of degree courses, but to differing extents. *Erasmus* and *non-Erasmus* students achieved largely similar examination results in the languages group, while the differences were more marked in political-social degree courses and in those with lower levels of participation in *Erasmus* programmes (sciences, medicine, geo-biology, chemistry-pharmacy, etc.).

### **3. *Erasmus* graduates are more closely involved in university life and tend to assess their experience of university more critically.**

*Erasmus* students were more assiduous in their attendance at lectures (a feature common to all the groups of degree courses). In fact more than 58 per cent of *Erasmus* graduates (compared to 53 per cent of *non-Erasmus* ones) declared that they had regularly attended almost all courses; and they also made more frequent use of libraries and laboratories.

*Erasmus* and *non-Erasmus* students concurred in their assessments of **experience of university**, which they rated it with medium-to-high values (66 and 65 points out of 100), and of the adequacy of **lecture rooms** (in this case with

medium-to-low values). But *Erasmus* students were more severe than their colleagues in assessing **relationships with lecturers, libraries** and, in particular, **laboratories** (which were regarded as unsatisfactory, albeit to varying extents, by all graduates). In faculties where lectures are most crowded (law, economics and arts), *Erasmus* graduates were more critical than their *non-Erasmus* counter-parts, assigning lower scores to the lecture rooms.

It is difficult not to conclude that these differences in assessment were not influenced by experience of how universities in the rest of Europe are organized.

**4. *Erasmus graduates have had more experience of temporary work than other graduates, but less experience of steady employment.***

Of the graduates who completed the questionnaire, 60 per cent declared that they had undertaken some sort of **work activity** (including temporary and casual work) during their time at university; but the proportions were 72 per cent among *Erasmus* graduates and 59 per cent among *non-Erasmus* ones. Graduates from all degree courses had some experience of work, but it was most frequent among graduands in political-social sciences.

**5. *Erasmus graduates differ from their colleagues as regards their future study intentions.***

Overall, 68 per cent of *Erasmus* graduates and 62 per cent of *non-Erasmus* graduates **intended to continue studying** after graduation. The difference was especially apparent with regard to *M.A./specialization courses*, which were the forms of postgraduate study most preferred by *Erasmus* graduates, followed by a *doctorate*. By contrast, they were less interested than other graduates in continuing their studies on an *internship* or at a *school of specialization*. This latter result was affected by the smaller proportion of *Erasmus* graduates attending medical faculties.

**6. *Erasmus graduates are more willing to move away from home for reasons of work.***

For *Erasmus* students, much the **preferred geographical area of work** was **Europe** (which is attributed an average preference of 82 points out of 100), while their *non-Erasmus* colleagues generally preferred their **province of residence**.

Similarly, *Erasmus* graduates were much more willing to accept **work transfers**: 79 per cent of them were willing to undertake even frequent transfers (as opposed to 56 per cent of *non-Erasmus* graduates) and they expressed very little reluctance indeed to travel (only 0.6 per cent of *Erasmus* graduates would refuse any form of work transfer).

Europe is therefore the area of work preferred by *Erasmus* graduates. This applies to all groups of degree courses, with the sole exception of the education group, whose graduates, like *non-Erasmus* students, prefer to work in their province of residence.

### **7. A special case: the *Erasmus* graduates in the political-social group of degree courses.**

Not only had students in the political-social group of degree courses participated in *Erasmus* programmes to a very large extent (12 per cent of graduates, a proportion only exceeded by students of languages), but they represented a particularly selected group.

As regards examination scores, they achieved an average of 1.3 points more than the other graduates in their group of degree courses, while the already sizeable difference in the other groups was 0.7 points.

As for the duration of studies, while *non-Erasmus* students from the political-social group were generally slower to graduate than other groups, the reverse was the case among *Erasmus* students: those in the political-social group of courses graduated more rapidly than did other groups.

Another positive feature of this group of graduates was their more regular attendance at lectures and their favourable assessment of the overall university experience. One might accordingly conclude that it is the political-social group that benefits most from participation in *Erasmus* programmes.

### **8. The employment situations of *Erasmus* graduates.**

Although the differences are not particularly marked, the survey showed as regards all the graduates who started work after receiving their degrees that the highest employment rate was among *Erasmus* graduates, and that they found employment more rapidly. Overall, among graduates in 1997 and 1998, one year after conclusion of their university studies the employment rate among *Erasmus* students was increasing (respectively 56.4 per cent and 59 per cent) and stood at around 3 percentage points higher than that of their *non-Erasmus* colleagues.

Two years after conclusion of their university studies, the employment rate among *Erasmus* graduates had increased even further (by 16 percentage points), and almost 73 per cent of them had found employment (while the difference with respect to *non-Erasmus* graduates remained substantially unchanged). For all the limitations due to the different period and different survey methods used, we would point out that the survey conducted by Teichler and Maiworm two and a half

years after conclusion of an *Erasmus* study period<sup>(9)</sup> found a 63 per cent employment rate among Italian graduates.

Even two years after graduation, and with a certainly higher degree of reliability given the reference time–span, confirmation is forthcoming of the greater rapidity of labour–market entry by *Erasmus* graduates (9 months on average, compared to 11 months for other graduates).

The minor difference between *Erasmus* and *non–Erasmus* graduates highlights, at least in the short period, the limited ability of Italian employers to appreciate the value added represented by the '*Erasmus* training experience'.

Of particular interest – and with somewhat surprising results – is analysis of the data when disaggregated by gender, which shows that the higher employment rate among *Erasmus* graduates, both one and two years after graduation, is entirely due to female *Erasmus* graduates (while there are no differences among males).

*Erasmus* graduates more frequently work far from home, in a region different from the one in which they resided when they received their degrees (21 per cent compared to 12 per cent on *non–Erasmus* graduates), or abroad (5 per cent compared to 0.6 per cent).

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<sup>(9)</sup> Teichler and Maiworm, 1994.