

BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT HOW TO COPE WITH EUROPEAN MOBILITY FINANCIAL CUTBACKS

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ABSTRACT

Donald Puchala's metaphor of the blind men and the elephant is used to stress what the authors consider to be the current situation with the financial aid cutbacks from the European Commission: each of one of the member states is able to see only part of the problem and cannot see the whole picture. How can we cope with the consequences of having less students in mobility programs and more strategies to increase mobility in our own universities? We will share with you (1) how Portugal is trying to solve this problem, (2) the data from the past 2 years from our National Agency's new policies and (3) the results of a case study of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, regarding incoming and outgoing Erasmus students for the 2010/2011 academic year.

INTRODUCTION

We want to start by reminding the reader of Donald Puchala's vision of the EU as an enormous and harmless beast that is at its best when discussing shared values but that often struggles to define what these as well as a 'common interest' are, because there are, after all, huge cultural differences between the 27 countries. When we think about programs like Erasmus Mundus the scenario is even more complex than a "27 head beast". Each one of the EU state members looks at the third countries from a different angle than the one they look at other state members,

while the third countries look at the state members as if they were standing on an “ivory tower”, given their discourse geared to the defense of human rights and to the emphasis on environmental issues. Among the third countries, those with a capitalist or totalitarian economy may be less prone to consider this discourse as an important one, for a plethora of reasons that range from historical to political and economical.

All of us who are involved with mobility programs have been working very hard and the impact of that effort can be seen in the success of international mobility programs from Socrates to LLP, which have arguably been important tools for the integration of the young generations and of a European Identity in general.

The purpose of the Socrates Program and, later, of the LLP Program is clear: to promote the mobility of students, teachers and staff, to develop educational practices and especially, to make European education more transparent through mutual learning. The key words are European integration, sustainable economic growth, competitiveness and social cohesion.

According to the LLP Program, the aims of enhancing student mobility in the EU (decision 2006/1720/CE) are:

- to enable students to benefit educationally, linguistically and culturally from the experience of learning in other European countries;
- to promote co-operation between institutions and to enrich the educational environment of host institutions;
- to contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded, internationally experienced, young people as future professionals;
- to facilitate credit transfer and recognition of periods abroad, utilizing ECTS compatible credit system.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGER THREATS TO STUDENTS' MOBILITY TODAY?

For the authors, the origin of these threats is tied to the economic crisis, which started in the US and later hit Europe in a very hard way. With an increasing number of EU states, this global crisis resulted in financial cutbacks and this, during a time when most Universities' strategic plans demanded an increase of internationalization of students and teachers.

We are facing the weakening of our economies: a recession that is impacting all of us. Arguably, Europe is losing priority in intercontinental partnerships with such countries as the US: as an example, the Program Atlantis, funding partnerships between the US and the EU, has come to an end, though the US maintains similar mobility programs with China and India.

This takes us to a second big issue: bureaucracy and comitology, (the committee system overseeing the delegated acts implemented by the EU). An estimate of 95000 pages have been written since the treaty of Rome, with rules of law and procedures that should enable European governments to bind them together. However, there are a lot of loose ends and place to different interpretations. Arguably, less national bureaucracy and a stronger supranational position could be the solution.

In fact, European governance has a complex web of institutions connected at the supranational, national and subnational levels, in which authority and policy makers' influence are shared across different levels rather than monopolized by national governments. Although national states make their decisions jointly through the European Commission, they often accept with great difficulty some of the policies to follow. If we think about educational policies, these go through a four stage process: European Commission, State Members, National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions. There is a wide gap between the interests of students and of institutions. If we were to analyse European integration education programs into its policy components. Elites and students desire to shift different policy.

In a survey conducted by the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria with incoming and outgoing students of educational mobility programs, we found that regardless of home country, many students complained of a lack of transparency regarding the source of their grants. Students under the Erasmus program are a "big family" and can easily find out and understand that the grants differ from country to country and that this fact is not an indication that they are richer or poorer. However, an explanation about not only the rules but the rationale behind these rules would be beneficial. What we are suggesting is that in each of our national agencies, at each of our Higher Ed institutions, we take the time to explain the ups and downs of this bureaucratic system to which we all must submit, which starts in the EC and ends at the higher institutional level.

European citizenship is not an acquisition but a long road full of obstacles. The fact that we are 27 countries emphasizes the obstacles to the citizenship - what Balibar called a "necessary impossible". In fact, and quoting this author again "They all refer to the absolute blockage of the question of the people understood not as *ethnos* or communal identity but as *demos* or constituent political power" (Balibar, 2000). One of the issues that makes Europe a difficult task is the cultural differences between individuals and groups. Hence, and in this study we looked at the relationship between cultural values and economic development, since the economic values are linked to systematic changes in basic values (Inglehart, 2000). So if it is predictable that cultural and political changes may occur, can we think of a convergence of values across Europe?

Inglehart mentioned that "economic development tends to push societies in a common direction, but rather than converging, they seem to move on parallel

trajectories shaped by their cultural heritages”(Ingleheart, 2000)._There are big differences between students of a lower economic background, with less educated parents, and students of a higher economic background and with more educated parents. The former are naturally disadvantaged in:

- mastering the language
- their attitude to learning
- other cultural features of education

FIGHTING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Acknowledging the need to make the problems around poverty and socio-economic status a priority, the EU made of 2010 the year against social exclusion. More than words, *we the Europeans*, need to be more pragmatic and engage ourselves in a true crusade where the real word is engagement and develop capacities to fight poverty and social exclusion. To know exactly the social impact of these factors we have to rely on some case studies.

Immediate sources of students' income that come to mind are family, state and job. Once more, the way that the state, the family and a job contribute to the student's income has to do with his/her national origin. Cultural differences have a significant impact on the differences between Northern and Mediterranean countries.

There is, to the authors, a crosscutting factor: arguably, and for “rich” students, parental aid is of the utmost importance. However, for students of average social-economical background, the way family, state and job influence depends on cultural factors. In northern countries, students are more family-independent than in Mediterranean countries: to the former, the fact that their parents are rich or poor doesn't affect the amount they receive as grant. They are all entitled to the same grant. Family is not that important but the state is. Furthermore, they tend to leave their parent household at a young age and part-time jobs are a regular occupation for students.

As opposed to the Northern European countries, families in the Mediterranean countries tend to protect their youth until later in life. The consequence is that young people are more dependent, live with their parents until late (in some cases until they are well in their thirties), and they often need to choose between studying or working as part-time jobs seldom permit them to have a regular school schedule. In this case, then, family is very important, state comes right after and job in the least important.

Each member state deals with the problem of the financial cutbacks according to national culture /sociological understanding. The European Commission gives each

of the State members the “strength of thin ties” showing the path but it is up to each member State to choose the tools to use.

HOW PORTUGAL IS RESPONDING TO A DECREASED EUROPEAN FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The current social-economic situation across the EU is of some concern, especially for the medium income students. Poverty and inequality are increasing in a context of economic and financial downturn. The challenge imposed by the "Strategy to Europe 2020" document (Europe 2020 Targets) is to prepare national reforms programs under this strategy. The guidelines recommended for preparing these programs emphasize the need to adapt national legislation and make the necessary programs' reforms. This implies an effort on the part of higher education institutions to adapt to the new tools, as well as a more integrated approach among the EU states.

The Ministry of Science Technology and Higher Education of Portugal, following the path of the Lisbon Treaty and the common strategy, offers a worthy starting point to overcome the decreasing number of students going abroad in the frame of the LLP program due to economic issues.

BSE-SOC is a support grant for students with low economic background to eliminate possible barriers due to poverty that may prevent students from the amazing experience of mobility. The idea is to protect students in social disadvantage guaranteeing all students the same opportunities. Students with proved socio-economic difficulties and who are already funded by a grant from the State to be able to study, may receive up to 50% more of their Erasmus grant. The financial status is checked through the analyses of their parents' educational and economical backgrounds.

BSE-SOC 2009

Table 1- BSE-SOC grants allocated to public and private Portuguese Higher Education Institutions

	STARTING DATE	PUBLIC		PRIVATE		TOTAL (PUBLIC+PRIVATE)	
		SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED	ALLOCATED FUNDING	SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED	ALLOCATED FUNDING	SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED	ALLOCATED FUNDING
BSE-SOC 09-10 CIVIL YEAR 2009	Junho	0	- €	0	- €	0	- €
	Julho	1	1.440,00€	0	- €	1	1.440,00€
	Agosto	38	24.240,00€	0	- €	38	24.240,00€
	Setembro	418	287.480,00€	29	25.340,00€	447	312.820,00€
	Outubro	108	65.900,00€	5	3.520,00€	113	69.420,00€
	Novembro	14	4.860,00€	0	- €	14	4.860,00€
	Dezembro	12	4.320,00€	0	- €	12	4.320,00€
	TOTAL	591	388.340,00€	34	28.860,00€	625	417.200,00€

TAX BRACKET SAS	SCHOLARSHIP BSE-SOC 2009 (PUBLIC + PRIVATE)	%	ALLOCATED FUNDING	%
1 - < 0,25xRMMG	11	1,76%	13.600,00 €	3%
2 - > 0,25xRMMG < 0,35xRMMG	27	4,32%	29.520,00 €	7%
3 - > 0,35xRMMG < 0,5xRMMG	123	19,68%	100.840,00 €	24%
4 - > 0,5xRMMG < 0,6xRMMG	96	15,36%	72.060,00 €	17%
5 - > 0,6xRMMG < 0,7xRMMG	71	11,36%	46.380,00 €	11%
6 - > 0,7xRMMG < 1,2xRMMG	297	47,52%	154.800,00 €	37%
TOTAL	625	100,00%	417.200,00 €	100,00%

Table 2- percentage granted according with tax revenue

BSE-SOC 2010

Table 3 - BSE-SOC grants allocated to public and private Portuguese Higher Education Institutions

	STARTING DATE	PUBLIC		PRIVATE		TOTAL (PUBLIC + PRIVATE)	
		SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED	AMOUNT	SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED	AMOUNT	SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED	ALLOCATED FUNDING
BSE-SOC 09-10 2010	Janeiro	57	29.880,00 €	4	1.200,00 €	61	31.080,00 €
	Fevereiro	291	145.240,00 €	11	6.900,00 €	302	152.140,00 €
	Março	59	30.300,00 €	3	1.000,00 €	62	31.300,00 €
	Abril	7	3.220,00 €	1	720,00 €	8	3.940,00 €
	Maior	8	3.240,00 €	0	- €	8	3.240,00 €
	Junho	6	2.040,00 €	0	- €	6	2.040,00 €
	Julho	8	3.180,00 €	1	300,00 €	9	3.480,00 €
BSE-SOC 10-11	Agosto	29	22.020,00 €	2	1.200,00 €	31	23.220,00 €
	Setembro	381	249.520,00 €	4	2.760,00 €	385	252.280,00 €
	Outubro	59	44.600,00 €	10	7.520,00 €	69	52.120,00 €
	Novembro	19	7.540,00 €	0	- €	19	7.540,00 €
	Dezembro	3	960,00 €	0	- €	3	960,00 €
	TOTAL	927	541.740,00 €	36	21.600,00 €	963	563.340,00 €

TAX BRACKET SAS	SCHOLARSHIP BSE-SOC 2009 (PUBLIC + PRIVATE)	%	ALLOCATED FUNDING	%
1 - < 0,25xRMMIG	12	1,25%	8.600,00 €	2%
2 - > 0,25xRMMIG < 0,35xRMMIG	40	4,15%	37.620,00 €	7%
3 - > 0,35xRMMIG < 0,5xRMMIG	211	21,91%	163.680,00 €	29%
4 - > 0,5xRMMIG < 0,6xRMMIG	132	13,71%	83.200,00 €	15%
5 - > 0,6xRMMIG < 0,7xRMMIG	144	14,95%	77.040,00 €	14%
6 - > 0,7xRMMIG < 1,2xRMMIG	424	44,03%	193.200,00 €	34%
TOTAL	963	100,00%	563.340,00 €	100,00%

Table 4- percentage granted according with tax revenue

The tables show the evolution of the number of grants assigned to Portuguese students between 2009 and 2010, with a total of grants going from 625 in 2009 to 975 in 2010. The total financial support also increased from 417.200,00€ to 563.340,00€ during that same period of time. Only students with very low social economic status are eligible to the 50% aid on top of the basic grant. As shown on the tables, there were no students in this situation: the variation is between 47,52% and 1,25%, according to their family tax revenue.

The table identifies the impact of the social-economical status in the equal treatment law and the cooperation between State, National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions. It also describe how the type of multi-level governance is supported by good practices, which in turn raise awareness for other similar situations in other countries with the same problem of drop outs or students who do not apply.

THE POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF LEIRIA

The Polytechnic Institute of Leiria is one of the country's first polytechnic institutions, founded in 1980. It was first established with the School of Education, and currently comprehends five schools, distributed throughout several towns of the Leiria district. During these years, the number of students and teachers at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria has grown considerably. The institution currently has about 891 teachers, 13,500 students and modern facilities and equipment.

Aimed at delivering quality teaching, the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria has made an investment effort, which makes it a national example in terms of higher education, with a strong influence in the region.

The new European dimension has created innovative corridors of communication which have led to an increasing co-operation mobility within the EU.

The Polytechnic Institute of Leiria has been involved in the Lifelong Learning Program - old Socrates, namely with Erasmus, since the very early times. IPL was the first Portuguese polytechnic in the frame of the Erasmus within the Pilot Project in Business Administration, but throughout the years the study field was extended to other areas: Maritime Biology, Communication, Civil Protection, Design, Education, Engineering, Fine Arts, Management, Nursing, Para-Legal studies, Tourism. Whereas most institutions deal with a shortage of students, the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria is proud to register the opposite tendency and exhibits a high employment rate amongst its graduates.

Among the measures that contribute to a better performance of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria in carrying out its mission - "to train appropriately according to the legitimate expectations of the civil society, the students and their families" - we find the partnerships with national and international educational and research institutions, the enhancement of our teaching staff's qualifications, the improvement of buildings and premises and a greater demand in the students' entry requirements.

In 2007 and 2008, the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria had increased the incoming students and teachers in an astonishing number of more 60% year but with a dropping of outgoing students of 25% de first year and 30% the next.

A survey conducted with outgoing students under the BSE-SOC grants strongly suggests that there is a significant number of students who, due to economic problems, would not have been able to study abroad in the absence of the financial aid enabled by the grant. The analysis and monitoring of the data shows an increased of 20% in 2009 and 25% in 2010

in the total number of outgoing students with a low income background, due to this particular support grant.

CONCLUSION

Despite over five decades of European Integration and huge efforts of scholars to explain this processes, The EU, in the present days, is more diverse and less understood than before. Special circumstances demand special measures. The National Agencies in the EU countries should take adequate measures to leverage a dialog aiming at the implementation of good practices to overcome these economic challenges. We need to try to have a common voice. As Balibar says (Balibar, 2000), our “weness” is not a code but a constantly transformed system of cross usages. We must reduce the gap and work together in rediscovering a common strategy for our students: not an asymmetrical interdependence but one that gets us out of an encapsulated mindset and lets us generate new strategies for mutual understanding and collaboration.

Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 – source National Agency for the LLP Program- Portugal

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