

European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/131

Erasmus World 2004-2008

Brussels, 26 February 2003

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on the

Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008)

COM(2002) 401 final - 2002/0165 (COD)

On 30 August 2002, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008)

COM(2002) 401 final – 2002/0165(COD).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 5 February 2003. The rapporteur was **Mr Rodríguez García Caro**.

At its 397th plenary session (meeting of 26 February 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 110 votes to 0 with 2 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1. Article 149(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community stipulates that the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education in Europe by encouraging cooperation between the Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action.

Paragraph 3 of the same article states that the Community and Member States shall foster cooperation with third countries.

2. The European Union has shown a firm commitment to the development of quality higher education at Community level through measures to promote quality assurance and quality assessment as part of the ongoing drive to achieve recognised educational and scientific standards in European universities.

A number of Member States have longstanding traditions of cooperation with third countries in the sphere of education, which has helped to consolidate internationally prestigious reputations which are highly attractive to students from across the world who wish to pursue different university course in these countries.

At interinstitutional level, the European Union has used its experience in implementing different higher education programmes to develop various cooperation initiatives with third countries.

3. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 highlighted the importance of promoting the European higher education system in other countries and ensuring that it was able to attract students not only from Europe but from across the world.
4. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which makes recognition of academic work carried out in another country considerably easier in the country of origin, has attracted huge interest in other parts of the world. As the Commission communication on strengthening cooperation with third countries in the field of higher education states, further development of this system would be in line with the Bologna process and the conclusions of the meeting of higher education ministers held in Prague in May 2001, which highlighted the importance of mobility, accreditation and quality assurance.¹

5. Existing programmes provide for limited cooperation with third countries through exchanges, access for students from third countries to European higher education institutions, the creation of centres for European Union studies, cooperation with countries in the ACP region to improve education in these countries, etc. More decisive action is required to extend and expand these initiatives, some of which have been running for a considerable period of time, both in terms of quality and of quantity, since in their current form they may prove to be incapable of achieving the objectives set out in this proposal.

Existing programmes do not provide for the creation of European Union Masters degrees, partnerships between universities to deliver such courses, or the award of grants to enable students and scholars of repute from third countries to come to European universities in large numbers.

6. The proposed decision draws on the experience and prestige of programmes such as Socrates/Erasmus and the cooperation programmes with the United States and Canada. No Community programme combines in such an ambitious way a specific internal initiative with a large-scale grants system. In the near future, grants of international repute could play an integral part in achieving the decision's objectives.
7. The proposal would benefit the higher education systems of the Member States by reinforcing efforts to maintain and improve the quality of the education they offer, enabling European universities to attract not only the best students, but also the most highly regarded scholars from outside the Community who wish to spend a period of study, teaching or research in universities in the European Union.
8. Consequently, and in line with Article 149 of the EC Treaty, this proposal for a decision seeks to support and complement the action of the Member States by contributing to the development of quality higher education which is attractive to third-country nationals and ensuring that they have more opportunities to access this education than in the past.
9. Finally, the Committee would draw attention to one of the points it made in its opinion on the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education², which is in line with the principle on which this proposal for a decision is based:

*" The systematic application of the methodology of quality assurance as an instrument for continuously improving quality is the best way of achieving genuine quality higher education in the Union's teaching establishments. It will encourage university education in the Member States and make it easier to draw comparisons between different education systems in the Union."*³

2. The proposal for a decision

The programme's overall aim is to "enhance quality education by improving the perception of European higher education world-wide and by fostering cooperation with third countries in order to improve the development of human resources and to promote dialogue and understanding between peoples and cultures."

It is proposed that the programme will run between 2004 and 2008.

1. The proposal seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

- the emergence of a distinctly European offer in higher education which is attractive both within the European Union and beyond its borders;
- a higher profile for European education;
- greater international interest in acquiring European qualifications;
- more structured co-operation between European Union and third country institutions to promote greater mobility.

2. The following actions are planned as part of this initiative:

- European Union Masters Courses
- scholarships for third country graduate students
- scholarships for third country visiting scholars
- partnerships between European Union Masters Courses and third country higher education institutions
- making European higher education more attractive
- support measures.

3. The label "European Union Masters" refers to a group of European postgraduate courses, and is intended to present to third countries a distinctly European educational identity. Each Masters course must involve a minimum of three higher education institutions from three different Member States and implement a study programme which involves a period of study in at least two of the three institutions. At the end of the course, double or multiple degrees would be awarded.

European Union Masters courses would be delivered in universities in the European Union Member States, the countries participating in the programme and the European Union candidate countries. The proposed duration of courses is 15 months on average. A certain number of places would be reserved for those students from third countries who are granted financial support under the programme.

4. **Grants.** There is a single grants system, with two possibilities for eligibility:

Students. The scheme would support stays of up to two academic years (20 months). Scholarships would be linked to a specific European postgraduate offer. The selection process would ensure an appropriate balance across European Union Masters Courses, fields of study and students' regions of provenance and would encourage participation of women and the most disadvantaged students.

Visiting scholars. Visiting scholars would have recognised academic or professional experience and would receive grants with a view to carrying out teaching and research assignments connected with the Masters course which invited them. Each European Union Masters Course may host three visiting scholars per academic year. The grant period would be on average three months.

5. Partnerships with third country higher education institutions are designed to open up European higher education and raise its international profile by establishing relationships between institutions to promote cultural and educational exchange. Partnerships with top third country higher education institutions would enhance the attractiveness of European Union Masters Courses and offer students and visiting scholars from the European Union taking part in the programmes the possibility of working or studying in third countries.

Projects would run for a maximum of three years and would involve institutions from third countries in the Masters programmes by including a fixed period of study in these countries. The period of study would vary between one and six months, and would encompass periods of teaching and exchanges of scholars and encourage the spread of new information and communication technologies.

6. The aim of the programme is to make European higher education more attractive, raise its profile and improve access to it. Activities would be conducted within networks involving a minimum of three organisations from three different Member States and could involve organisations from third countries. There are three different kinds of action: support for joint promotional actions; support for services facilitating access by third country students to European education; and complementary activities, including quality assurance.

3. General comments

1. The Committee welcomes the proposal for a decision submitted by the Parliament and Council and the measures proposed pursuant to Article 149 of the EC Treaty aimed at contributing to quality education in the European Union. In this context, it considers that its comments in the opinion on the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, referred to above, remain entirely valid.

Concerning the present proposal, the Committee wishes to reiterate the comments it made in the opinion referred to above.

2. The Committee signals its support for the adoption of specific initiatives which will pave the way for quality higher education based, *inter alia*, on cooperation with third countries, by working in partnership with top universities and attracting renowned scholars and the best qualified students from the countries concerned. This mutually beneficial synergy will contribute to the development of closer links and lay the foundations for better understanding and cooperation in the future between the European Union and the participating countries.

The Committee is of the view that the national agencies should play a major role in the award of mobility scholarships and in providing information and advice. European-level tasks should be undertaken by existing or new structures, e.g. within the framework of the Socrates programme.

3. The proposal for a decision and its annex state more than once that the aim of the proposal is to improve the quality of higher education in the European Union by raising its profile and cooperating with third countries. However, although attracting the best students and scholars will certainly contribute added value, the Committee believes that other factors related to quality should also be taken into account.
4. The Committee agrees with the view expressed in the Communication that there is a need for an effort, at Community level, to encourage higher education institutions to take part in cooperation activities with third countries as a matter of course.

The growing international popularity among students of mobility and exchange should encourage higher education institutions to improve continually so as to make themselves more attractive to students from other countries. Alongside the well-trodden path to the United States and certain EU Member States, we should begin to see greater movement to the other States of the Union. The actions proposed in this communication could eventually pave the way for greater recognition for European higher education as a whole.

The new Erasmus World programme requires the necessary legal framework for the mobility of third country nationals in Europe.

5. The competitiveness of our higher education institutions must be backed up by continuous quality improvement. We must go beyond mere quality assurance in higher education: individual universities, departments and degree courses must be driven by the quest for excellence based on the introduction of total quality management systems which incorporate quality assurance.

Higher education institutions must be guided by criteria of excellence, including the satisfaction of different actors, continuous improvement and results which mark them out

from institutions not taking part in this process. We thus propose replacing references to quality assurance with references to total quality management systems.

In its opinion on the Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing the second phase of the Community action programme in the field of education "Socrates"⁴, the Committee welcomed the establishment of quality indicators and assessment of quality in education⁵. Higher education institutions in the European Union which participate in the actions provided for under the present proposal should have previously participated in quality assessment procedures either on an institutional level or in connection with the degree courses taught.

6. The Committee believes that the mobility of students towards higher education institutions in Europe has a dimension which goes beyond the mere transmission and acquisition of knowledge in specific subjects, however new or important. It contributes a human dimension to knowledge, involving exchanges and coexistence, which, over the course of time, could have a beneficial impact on understanding and trust between the students' countries of origin and the European Union. Attracting the best students may mean attracting the future decision-makers in politics and technology in these countries; thus the added value that the programme may bring in terms of better intercultural relations is, in the Committee's view, a major advantage.
7. In this regard it is essential to implement support measures to ensure that participants return to their countries of origin, to prevent countries in great need of their most highly qualified human resources suffering from cultural and professional brain drain. It is important to promote not only the attraction of the intellectual elites in third countries, but also to facilitate their return to their countries of origin. In this connection, due attention should be paid to those higher education establishments which have reciprocity programmes with centres in developing countries.
8. The programme must safeguard linguistic diversity. The Committee has expressed its views on many occasions on the importance of spreading a knowledge of the Member States' languages and of protecting and promoting minority languages.

The Committee also believes that teaching centres should be free to deliver Masters courses according to the criteria they deem most appropriate. Nonetheless, it wishes to point out that the Union's linguistic diversity must be preserved and as far as possible the move towards linguistic simplification on grounds of efficiency or effectiveness must be avoided.

It thus welcomes the measures proposed under the section on European Union Masters Courses with regard to linguistic preparation of students and assistance in this matter.

9. In its opinions the Committee has repeatedly expressed its concern for facilitating the integration of the disabled. Accordingly, it would urge the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament to include in this programme some funds to assist towards this end.

10. The Committee urges the Parliament and Council to do their utmost to ensure that the proposal is dealt with in time for a launch in 2004.

4. Specific comments

1. The Spanish version of the explanatory memorandum refers to "associated countries". The Committee believes this term to be misleading as it is the legal term used to refer to those countries which have association agreements with the European Union. It thus calls for a less specific term to be used (the English text refers to "partner countries").
2. The same section of the explanatory memorandum states that:

" In pursuing these objectives the Community will also seek to improve links between higher education institutions and industry".

While the Committee shares this view, it considers that this aspect is not sufficiently developed further on in the text or the annex. The Commission should specify what part of the proposed action is designed to improve these links.

3. On the basis of the general comments regarding quality in higher education institutions which may take part in` the various actions, the Committee believes that two selection criteria should be used in choosing which institutions are to take part in each European Union Masters Course, either jointly or independently.

Higher education institutions taking part in the Masters scheme should operate a recognised quality management system which has been subject to at least an internal evaluation. This would ensure that the teaching centre is not only committed to the quest for excellence, but also that it is itself involved in the process.

It would also be desirable to ensure that degrees on which European Union Masters are based have been subject to a process of quality assessment as part of a quality management system.

These or other means of evaluating quality must form part of the criteria for selecting Masters courses or centres wishing to take part in a programme designed to achieve improved quality in higher education institutions in the European Union.

4. The Committee endorses the idea of awarding a double or multiple qualification on behalf of all of the teaching centres involved. This kind of qualification could help provide an integrated picture of the academic process followed and enable studies carried out in the European Union to be presented in a uniform manner.
5. Paragraph 5.3 of the financial statement states that scholarships for third country students and scholars entail the allocation of fixed amounts for

accommodation and subsistence, which are provided on the basis of merit. Paragraph 6 details the average cost of all actions, including scholarships.

The Committee believes that the Commission should define "merit" in greater detail, in order to clarify the criteria which would be used to calculate the funding granted to each student.

Independently of this, and in accordance with the line taken in other Committee opinions, including that on the second phase of Socrates, the Committee believes that corrective mechanisms should be introduced in the allocation of resources, to ensure that those with lower incomes are guaranteed higher levels of assistance and grants.

6. Concerning mobility for students and scholars from the European Union to higher education institutions in third countries, the Committee would reiterate the comments it made in its opinions on the first and second phases of Socrates, to the effect that the Commission and Member States must introduce mechanisms to allocate and monitor funding so that the greatest possible number of people are able to access the initiative, ensuring that assistance is not monopolised by specific individuals or institutions.
7. The proposal provides for citizens of third countries residing in the European Union to participate in the mobility actions in the framework of partnerships with higher education institutions in third countries. The explanatory memorandum establishes a minimum period of residency of three years, but does not specify whether this refers to continuous residence or whether breaks are permitted.

Article 11 of the Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Directive on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States⁶ allows breaks in residence of up to six months, and longer in specific circumstances, for third country nationals who are family members of Union citizens, which do not affect the validity of the residence permit.

The Committee thus considers that the requirement for three years' residence must be clarified to specify whether continuous residence is required or whether breaks in residence are permitted. Likewise, it would be desirable to specify whether this requirement will apply to third-country nationals who are family members of European Union citizens.

Brussels, 26 February 2003.

The President

of the

European Economic and Social
Committee

The Secretary-General

of the

European Economic and Social
Committee

Roger Briesch

Patrick Venturini

¹ COM(2001) 385

² COM(97) 159 final

³ CES 1180/97

⁴ COM(1998) 329 final

⁵ CES 1307/98

⁶ COM(2001) 257 final

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SOC/131 - CESE 285/2003 - COM(2002) 401 final - 2002/0165 (COD) ES/ET/ym

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