



Learning from BARCHcelona, an educational experience in the urban environment for incoming students of architecture studies within the Erasmus+ program

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Abstract

The ETS of Arquitectura del Vallès (ETSAV) of the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya is a medium-sized higher education school (1000 students). The demand of European students interested in carrying out an international mobility in the ETSAV within the Erasmus+ program has increased notably in recent years due to some prestigious professional awards given to their graduates and teachers. Any rapid increase in demand in a higher education institution leads to an imbalance that ends up affecting the quality of training and the educational environment shared by students and teachers. To partially alleviate this situation, an elective course exclusively aimed at incoming students was implanted, with the aim of improving the formative quality of their mobility experience in ETSAV. The goal is to present this pilot experience in order to share this initiative with the university community members involved in the international mobility processes and get a feedback.

Keywords: *international student mobility, open-air urban classroom, Barcelona, architectural high studies*

Resumen

La ETS de Arquitectura del Vallès (ETSAV) de la Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya es una escuela de educación superior de tamaño medio (1000 estudiantes). La demanda de estudiantes europeos interesados en llevar a cabo una movilidad internacional en la ETSAV dentro del programa Erasmus+ ha aumentado notablemente en los últimos años debido a algunos prestigiosos premios profesionales otorgados a sus graduados y profesores. Cualquier aumento rápido de la demanda en una institución de educación superior

conduce a un desequilibrio que termina afectando la calidad de la capacitación y el ambiente educativo compartido por estudiantes y maestros. Para aliviar parcialmente esta situación, se implantó un curso electivo dirigido exclusivamente a los estudiantes extranjeros que ingresan cada semestre dentro del programa de movilidad Erasmus+, con el objetivo de mejorar la calidad formativa de su experiencia en ETSAV. El objetivo de esta contribución es presentar esta experiencia piloto a la comunidad universitaria implicada en las actividades de movilidad internacional y retroalimentarse con sus aportaciones.

Palabras clave: *movilidad estudiantil internacional, aula urbana al aire libre, educación superior, Barcelona, competencias culturales, estudios universitarios de arquitectura.*

1. Introduction

The students of the Erasmus+ program of European mobility are a remarkable collective that each academic course temporarily interrupts its regular studies in its local center of higher education of origin to develop during the same period equivalent studies in another foreign higher education center, with which a correspondence agreement is already in place. The Erasmus+ program already has a long history and its benefits and shortcomings have been glossed in many reports and publications (Juva, 2011) (Maiworn, 2012) (Messer, 2007).

From the point of view of the receiving center, the visiting student (incoming) Erasmus+ represents an important educational challenge because it is temporarily incorporated at any stage of its regular educational flow that is underway. The student "incoming", at the time of his incorporation into this flow, must quickly acquire skills and prior competencies that native students have already acquired throughout the long local education system.

In the case that concerns us, that of the higher education centers that form for the exercise of the profession of architect, the requirement of a rapid insertion is increased by the remarkable weight exerted by each local cultural tradition in the configuration of urbanism, architecture and construction techniques of each host city.

The incoming student from the Erasmus+ system allocates a good part of the period of their stay (annual in most cases and one semester in the rest) to perform an immersion within the keys of the local cultural system. The agility of this immersion is hampered by their own previous prejudices, their deficits in language knowledge, the initial intercultural distance, as well as by the limited assistance obtained from local academic resources, which are preferably oriented to local students. The Erasmus+ program is based fundamentally on

immersion which means that the student immediately and without prologue access to the same educational atmosphere of local students. This hasty entrance is also difficult because the foreign student can select his educational menu with full freedom, an aspect that local students can not exercise.

The ETSAV is a young school of architecture (1979) of medium size (approximately 1000 students), dependent on the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. It participates from its beginnings in the Erasmus+ program and maintains each course a remarkable volume of mobility (incoming of 90 students and outgoing of 70 students).

The ETSAV's office of international relations, that attends and manages incoming and outgoing requests for mobility within the Erasmus+ program, knows the difficulties that students suffer, both their own (outgoing) and foreign (incoming) by temporarily changing the educational system and culture. These adaptation contingencies are relevant and consume a good part of the Erasmus+ stay. This period of adaptation is fruitful from the personal point of view but if it is very large it can be detrimental to the academic success of the stay.

It should also be noted that the incoming student is, in the higher education center that welcomes him, in an environment of low academic commitment because he is in transit and physically removed from the usual involvement he establishes with his center of origin. This situation probably also discourages the realization of an extra effort for immersion in the local culture.

The city of Barcelona has been increasing its prestige and recognition as a friendly city rich in architectural content and, as a consequence of this, the higher education centers in architecture that are located there have notably increased their attractiveness for foreign students. This increase in requests forces the higher education centers to receive a remote selection of the requests received. This selection usually focuses on demonstrating the minimum academic level established. In the case of higher architectural studies, the document called portfolio is adequate evidence of that level.

Goals

The ETSAV international relations office team is satisfied quantitatively with the annual result of the Erasmus+ program exchanges but considers that its next actions should be aimed at improving the qualitative result. Among the various actions proposed in the short term is:

- to improve the quality of the students admission process
- to improve, in quality and speed, the acquisition of local cultural skills (Sherwood, 2017) (Williams, 2005).

Both initiatives should allow as a consequence an improvement in the academic achievement of the ordinary subjects that the incoming student has decided to study during their stay in the ETSAV.

In order to improve the students admission process, at random, tele-interviews were conducted with the students who applied to the ETSAV in which, through an informal interview, the candidate was asked:

- What reasons had led him to request this destination?
- What previous references do you have of the catalan architectural culture?

As a whole, these first qualitative interviews show that the selection of the destination city, in this case Barcelona, and the selection of the School of Architecture of destination, in this case the ETSAV, is not a conscious, suspect, reasoned and long meditated but rather an inclination based on the advice of fellow students or a reputation generated in the mass media of public communication but not based on solid personal criteria. The selected destination city and its own culture, seen from hundreds or thousands of kilometers, are shown as a dense nebula of topics.

In order to speed up this process of acquiring local cultural competences, it was proposed to incorporate in the teaching curriculum of the ETSAV a new elective semester subject, exclusively oriented to these students and that was able to accelerate their immersion in the catalan architectural environment. This subject would segregate incoming volunteers only one afternoon a week and during the first semester of their stay.

The motivation to write this paper is to present this pilot experience in order to share this initiative with the university community members involved in the international mobility processes. From our point of view all the educational practices must be updated and adapted to the nowadays situation in the XXI century, even in the case of the international exchange students mobility.

2. Related experiences and works

In the ETSAV there is a tradition of developing semester introductory courses, such as the one that for decades facilitated the academic transition of students from secondary education to university studies, taught at ETSAV (<https://etsav.upc.edu/ca/estudis-old/recursos-docents/webs-signatures-etsav/curs-introduccio>).

There were also experiences of elective subjects of historical sign oriented to the diffusion and recognition of the canons of local architecture. Almost a decade ago a group of professors, at this time retired, launched a parallel initiative of recognition and dissemination of the history of catalan architecture. Unfortunately these educational initiatives are often linked to particular initiatives by some professors and disappear when these teachers retire.

This year closed 2018 has been declared European Year of Cultural Heritage (<https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/>). This celebration must make us think that the educational processes must not only occur within the classroom where the competences are acquired, but most of these competences are acquired by the student's own daily immersion in the urban social environment. Probably in the urban environment is where the immersion in a new cultural environment becomes more apparent and evident. The city projects, through its common heritage built over the centuries, the cultural contents of the various societies that have been building it successively. Some outgoing students of the ETSAV comment that in some of the higher education centers of destination also begin to perform similar experiences oriented to incoming students.

Recently, more and more parallel projects and initiatives are being developed that aim to improve the value acquired during the Erasmus+ experience (<https://www.esn.org/projects>). One of the cultural activities suggested to Erasmus + students during their stay in Barcelona is to participate in the OpenHouse BCN event that opens the access to hundreds of public and private buildings for public visit during a weekend. (<https://www.48hopenhousebarcelona.org/>).

The academic experience of incoming students during their stay in the receiving School of Architecture is diluted within the set of academic progress of the native students of each School of Architecture, and the authors does not know if a differentiated evaluation of their academic progress has been made so far. Nor does the authors know if there is evidence that the sending schools evaluate the progress their students have made outside of their classrooms when they return to their school of origin.

These reflections suggest that the training experience acquired during international exchange mobility is in many cases a bracket for the discovery of how a diverse cultural reality addresses training for the same discipline. This parenthesis can be closed with a return to the own university of origin or be the spark to make the decision to return to the visited city to study potgraduate studies. In either case, the host university must ensure the quality of this immersion in a diverse cultural environment.

3. Methodology

Based on these objectives and previously declared background, with what methological criteria is the initiative to introduce a new optional subject to be channeled to speed up the acquisition of local cultural competences by incoming Erasmus+ students?

- Restrict access to the subject for visiting students to establish an experience among equals.
- Basing the educational method on a group, participative and collaborative activity
- Select a varied teaching team, capable of transmitting diverse optics of the three dimensions in which ETSAV trains: architecture, urbanism and technology.
- Establish an attractive teaching atmosphere rich in shared experiences.

- Propose some deliverables, at the end of each session, that are of a friendly and synthetic nature, as well as capable of demonstrating the skills acquired.

Collecting all these criteria, the *Learning from BARChcelona* (LFB) course was designed, deeply inspired by several upcoming initiatives that arose previously and come from two different but complementary professional fields:

- The previous experience of morning urban walks, promoted on spring Saturdays by the emeritus professor of urbanism, Dr. Ricard Pie of the ETSAV.
- The course of Theory and Practice of the Historical Itinerary promoted by the Museum of History of Barcelona.

(<http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/museuhistoria/ca/relats-urbans-teoria-i-pr%C3%A0ctica-de-l%E2%80%99itinerari-hist%C3%B2ric>)

4. Results

The subject LFB was considered as 10 consecutive sessions, of 3 hours each, of active walk through the streets of the city of Barcelona. The expected size of the group of students (up to a maximum of 20) allowed it. The classroom becomes the host city itself.

The beginning of each session took place at a different meeting point, every Friday at 3:00 p.m. It was proceeded to distribute cartography of the time that delimited the walk of that day. From there the walk began with small stops where an interpretative story was developed from the observation of an urban, architectural or technical detail. The story would be inserted in a general historical context of ideas and techniques in Europe. The session was complemented with a visit to a singular architectural interior where a specialist directed a guided tour adapted to the group.

Session 0, first of the cycle and the presentation of the attendees, began with a self-presentation by each student from their own city, highlighting its urban, architectural and technical singularities that constitute its identity and heritage. The last session was a visit to the technical services of the municipality of Barcelona where students could see first-hand the future challenges posed and that are still in the design and study phase, before proceeding with their approval and implementation. The vehicular language during all walks was Spanish, with the aim of reinforcing the character of disciplinary immersion.

The follow-up of the progress of the students was established through the delivery, after each session, of three drawings made by raised hands, where the student synthesized the urban, architectural or technical aspect that had most impacted him.

It is still early to evaluate with consistency the experience presented here and provide conclusive evidence. However, aspects to be improved are already mentioned:

- Of the total of 20 students enrolled, 17 followed the full course and could be evaluated. One of them abandoned the subject in the middle of its development due to the difficulties of comprehension with the spanish language.
- Of the 17 students who followed the subject, not all attended all the trips. The average attendance was 14 students, which shows an improved degree of commitment (80%); 10% of these students attending each session did not finally present their work for that session.
- The papers presented and evaluated accounted for 75% of the possible initially, noting that 10% corresponds to students who did not attend a visit but did present the corresponding work so as not to be evaluated unfavorably.
- The students, at the time of attendance, positively valued the teaching activity but we must recognize that their degree of involvement is limited, according to the low commitment of the incoming student population.

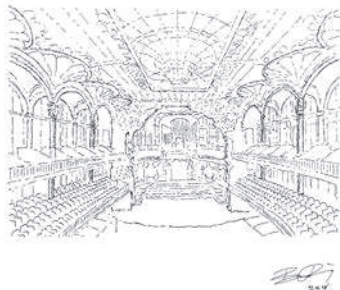


Fig. 1 Some drawings from the sesion 9

Fig. 2 A picture from the session 10

5. Conclusions

The experience has been received with sympathy by all the participants and its implementation has been easy and immediate. The results point to the need to improve the commitment of the Erasmus+ student with its academic institution of destination. This probably requires participating in the initiative to teachers of the subjects that benefit from it.

The urban itinerary has, in most cases, been limited to following a synchronic narrative, where each visit was a story of a single historical stage. The attendance to several sessions of consecutive stroll in the time helps that the student establishes the necessary diachrony. There remain doubts as to whether the incoming students who enrolled in this subject in the first semester would be interested in taking a complementary course where the itineraries follow a disciplinary discourse of timeless realities such as the square, the use of brick or ornamentation on the facades. The itinerary on foot always has the physical limitations of the specific date in which it is developed (eg the weather, daylight, accessibility, etc.) aspects that could be overcome in next editions through the digital itinerary (Redondo Domínguez, 2012)

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