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Happy birthday and best wishes, Erasmus!



The three Jacques Delors Institutes are enthusiastically celebrating the Erasmus programme's 35-years of existence, during which time some 12 million Europeans (students, scholars, apprentices, educators, etc.) have had the opportunity to participate in a training course at a university or educational establishment in another Member State. In 1987, only several hundred students were enrolled in the programme; by 2027, there will be well over a million per year. What is the driving force behind this success, this popularity?

In 1986, when the Commission adopted its Erasmus proposal, cooperation between European universities was in its infancy. Member States were deeply suspicious - if not outright hostile - towards the idea of European Institutions getting involved in university affairs. It is assumed today that there was enthusiastic support for the creation of Erasmus, however, this was far from being the case. In fact, the opposite was true. When the Council meeting of ministers for education took place in October of that year, the UK Presidency had drawn up an agreement that not only reduced the programme's budget by two-thirds, but also excluded student exchanges completely. An Erasmus, therefore, that was not intended to apply to students! This agreement was approved by the ministers. Alerted by my adviser, whom I had asked to attend the Council, and in agreement with Manuel Marin, the European Commissioner who sat on the Council, I decided to withdraw the Commission's proposal, as the Treaty allowed me to do. This was one of the

rare cases in history where the Commission had to withdraw its proposal on the grounds that its original concept had been distorted by the Council.

It was at this time that I requested the heads of state and government, who were to meet in London two months later in December 1986 under the presidency of Margaret Thatcher, to take a decision on the future of Erasmus. Ahead of the meeting, in a one-on-one discussion with the British Prime Minister, I told her that if it failed, I would have to publicly regret the European Council's lack of interest in students and universities. Beyond diplomatic language, it would signify a marked failure of the summit over which she presided. Margaret Thatcher understood this fact, and it was shortly thereafter that the heads of state and government began paving the way for Erasmus' adoption.

Therein marked Europe's entry on the educational scene. While Europe was making a fresh start on several grounds with the prospect of the single market, social dialogue, and the reinforcement of its social cohesion, we were in the process of doubling the structural funds budget in order to help regions lagging in their development with the launch of a major research and development policy embodied in the Esprit programme as well as the inclusion of the environment in the Treaty. It was essential to demonstrate that this new common space for Europeans was also an arena for cooperation and solidarity beyond competitive economic activities.

And so went the lesson from this period. Europeans were up to the task. Every time a field of cooperation had been introduced, whether in education or research to name but a few, Europeans were always ready and keen to join the process.

Europe is not, as it is sometimes portrayed, an abstract, artificial entity, but rather a living, active community. Today, almost all universities and research centres in Europe are involved in collaborative training and research activities on a daily basis. Hundreds of thousands of Erasmus students can be found in practically every university on the continent, acquiring experience that will facilitate their integration into the labour market, and introducing their own cultures in lecture halls and classrooms. In this way, the spirit of belonging to a Europe "united in diversity", to use Fernand Braudel's beautiful expression, is nurtured.

— “by virtue of Erasmus, Europe's deep roots are ever-present”

In an era where the quest for identity is turning into a nationalist obsession, where French political debate has a limited horizon, and where “ignorance” of European affairs is becoming “encyclopaedic” as said Jean Jaurès; let us first remind ourselves that, by virtue of Erasmus, Europe's deep roots are ever-present. University cooperation, student and teacher mobility, common training courses and universally recognised diplomas all date back to the Middle Ages wherein the Sorbonne, the universities of Bologna, Coïmbra, Salamanca and dozens of others welcomed teachers and students from other European nations. With the creation of Erasmus, Europe was in fact reviving its brilliant past.

In expressing my heartfelt best wishes for Erasmus, I would also like to pay tribute to the successive Presidents and Members of the European Commission who have tirelessly supported Erasmus. Since 1995, they have notably extended the programme to include apprentices for short periods of exchange and, since the launch of Erasmus Pro

in 2017, for long periods of exchange, which was initiated at the impetus of the Delors Institute. Today, more than 185,575 young people and teachers in vocational training benefit from various forms of mobility.

Erasmus also paved the way for the development of “European Universities”, which was launched by Emmanuel Macron in his speech at the Sorbonne. It is both a natural and admirable extension of the programme: in just two years, 41 “European Universities” have been established, bringing together more than 300 institutions. Its budget has even been doubled for the period between 2021 and 2027! We must also pay tribute to the European Parliament, which has always supported and defended the programme, despite some states wanting to abolish it.

I would also like to pay tribute to the Commission officials who, for years, have worked hard to convince national authorities of the advantages of cooperating within the European framework and to design a bold Erasmus programme. Only a handful of them worked under the leadership of the Welshman Hywell Jones, the Italian Domenico Lenarduzzi, and the Briton Alan Smith. Their efforts were a true reflection of their institution.

Today, I am delighted to learn that this exchange programme is poised to further extend to secondary school students. Secondary school exchanges will offer young people an initial European experience to encourage openness and broaden their horizons. Our Institutes are proud to have supported these initiatives. We have also advocated for the addition of a blue component to the programme. If we are to ensure that Europe protects and restores its hydrosphere as envisaged by Mission Starfish, as well as fulfils its responsibilities as a maritime power, we must equip our youth with the necessary skills and competencies.

Godspeed to Erasmus, and may future generations, the youth of Europe, continue to enrich this great European project. It is now up to them to envision and shape the future, as some of them are already doing by taking part in this year’s Youth Conference. To all these young people, I send a heartfelt greeting.

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