Information Special on the ERASMUS BUREAU

In its ongoing assistance to the Commission of the European Communities in the administration of the ERASMUS Programme, the ERASMUS Bureau of the European Cultural Foundation is a privileged partner to one of the most exciting EC initiatives of recent years. In the following report, Brian Frost-Smith, who joined the Foundation's European Institute of Education and Social Policy in Paris in 1980 and the staff of the Bureau when ERASMUS was launched last year in Brussels, takes the lid off just a fraction of what has been happening. Photographs are by ERASMUS Bureau administrator Mieke Grazell.

Premises of the Erasmus Bureau.

Erasmus – A Glance Behind the Scenes

'When you're next on to Amsterdam,' ERASMUS Bureau staff member Hilde Merckx told a colleague recently, *'don't forget to ask them for plenty of extra copies of the European Cultural Foundation Newsletter as there are no longer enough for us all to get one'.* Her remark was just one of the many continual reminders of the wholesale transformation that has swept in a matter of months across what is currently the most quickly developing sector within the Foundation's varied remit - its support to the higher education cooperation activities of the European Community, as expressed in the one word 'ERASMUS'. It was an inspired appellation for the venture, linking at a stroke the ingenious acronym – albeit with a little cheating at the start – of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students and its appropriate reference to Erasmus the Man, than whom there can rarely have been a more 'mobile' scholar. But Erasmus's Dutch origins in Rotterdam are also a timely reminder as to how active a Netherlands-based Foundation has been in promoting the EC's university cooperation initiatives by the creation in 1982 within its Institute of Education and Social Policy in Paris, of the Office of Cooperation in Education in Brussels, renamed in July 1987 the ERASMUS Bureau.

This led to an unprecedented spurt in staffing and a concomitant move (within Brussels) from the old Rue de la Concorde haunts of the former Office for Cooperation to smart new premises closer to the European Commission, near the distinctive little Quartier Léopold railway station. At some 15 employees already one of the biggest of the Foundation's satellite bodies by the start of 1987, the Bureau hit a meteoric growth rate of over 100% from autumn of last year (the budget to be managed rose by 1000% over the same period!) to reach its current staff strength of 30 plus, including nationals of virtually all the 12 EC Member States. Propelling the increase has been the sheer thrust of ERASMUS itself which many throughout the EC think is the most exciting thing the Common Market has ever done. Although the initial annual cash outlay on ERASMUS is little more than a tiny fraction of the overall EC budget (0,07%), the present momentum of the Programme is irresistible. Like the former Joint Study Programmes (JSPs), ERASMUS is essentially about organized university student and staff mobility which, despite the modest budget, is already building into an avalanche. In the ten years prior to the ERASMUS decision, some 600 JSPs got off the ground. Now, under ERASMUS, the JSPs have Brussels-sprouted their successors, the so-called inter-university cooperation programmes (or ICPs) of which over 1000 have got the go-ahead in just over a year!

The ERASMUS Bureau at Work

So what's it like to be in the Foundation-powered backroom to the administrative fever which the first ERASMUS figures betray? The ERASMUS Bureau buzz in a typical day – there is usually someone there from 8 till 8 in some part of the building – begins with its second floor reception area where, seated at the switchboard, Nicole Goossens prepares to cope with the cacaphony of calls winging their way down the wires from all parts of the Community – and often beyond ('Comment, il est toujours en réunion...?'). Nicole distributes them calmly across the Bureau, but problems do occur when they come in clusters: *'Nothing but phone calls and visitors this morning,'* says Study Visits administrator Annamaria Trusso, but immediately remembering Nicole in the front line adds *'it's essential that we keep an open-door policy if we can, of course, but sometimes we just don't know how to fit them all in and still deliver the goods on all our other activities'.*

Fritz Dalichow (left) and Mary O'Mahony keep Bureau Director Alan Smith briefed on the run-up to the ECTS to be launched next year.

ICP and Contracts administration staff come together to compare notes at a typical Bureau meeting. From left to right, Heulwen Huws, Alan Smith, Thomas Arnold, José Puigpelat, Anthony Smallwood, Marleen Voordeckers and Dirk van Egmond.

Increase in Staff

The increase in staff has been inevitable but, inevitably too, it has left some minor regrets. *'Back in the days of the Office for Cooperation in Education in the Rue de la Concorde'* says Bureau and Personnel administrator Danielle Boon, *'it was easy to remember everybody's birthday and take a drink to celebrate. Now with all the newcomers the reminder calendar behind my desk is getting a bit crowded. It's not of course that we don't care anymore. But in the hectic pace of a not untypical day we can sometimes just forget!'* It has been one of the main challenges in management terms to graft successfully in a matter of months the new team members on to the comparative veterans who joined the Office as far back as 1982. And Bureau Director Alan Smith sees the fact that this process has been achieved to such a large extent as one of the most gratifying aspects of the implementation of ERASMUS: *'Of course, we are not the small tightly-knit group we once were, but it speaks volumes for the commitment and flexibility of both the existing staff members and the newcomers that this potentially difficult transitional phase has been accomplished with such minimal friction and such high retention of a friendly working 'atmosphere', despite all the stress. It's also thanks to the Commission itself, for whatever minor complications may arise from time to time as is inevitable with any large organization, our colleagues in the Berlaymont are in general sensitive to our problems and cooperate with us excellently on the day-to-day running of the Programme'.*

Structure

As it has swelled in size, so the Bureau has inevitably compartmentalized – at least up to a point, by comparison with its childhood days as the former Office. The Bureau is now structured into five departments – grants to universities and students, academic recognition, information and publications, computer services, and a central unit dealing with questions of evaluation and programme development but also personnel and office administration. Of these, the first is by far the largest, and indeed the raison d'etre of the Bureau. From late-autumn

1988 onwards up to the New Year, several thousand applications for support of inter-university cooperation programmes or 'ICPs' (cooperative agreements for the exchange of students or staff members and for joint curriculum development projects) will fall into the Bureau's letter box. Picking them up, registering and then processing them with respect to the key criteria for ERASMUS support prior to their subsequent evaluation by the three academic advisory panels is the task of a core staff group of seven (including secretarial staff). *'Our workload in early 1989 will be unprecedented if the estimated 2500 requests total is reached,'* says Marleen Voordeckers who commutes to the Bureau daily from nearby Leuven. She should know, for as administrator responsible for the initial sifting of applications in what French academics often call the 'sciences humaines', she is likely to carry more than a moderate share of the pressure involved, particularly if languages and literature stay on course as the most heavily subscribed subject areas for ICP exchange. And pressure there can be. One of the increasingly apparent challenges of early ERASMUS is simply that of performing to deadlines on a continental scale given the crucially important responsibility of getting EC money to its users – whether universities, staff or students – on time.

The frenetic Bureau activity involved in delivering a palatable presentation of applications for selection is paralleled by similar work in its Visit Grants section, the other main group within the Grants Department. The ERASMUS visits are more often than not the catalysts for the future ICPs and, here again, the relevant statistics speak for themselves. The 1000-plus grants for the short study visit predecessors awarded in the ten-year run-up to ERASMUS have been totally eclipsed by over 2400 such projects financed since the Programme began, and in 1988 alone over 3500 requests for funding involving some 7000 university staff members have been processed at the Bureau. In the case of either ICPs or visits, the Commission's decisions on which projects to support are only a half-way house for the Bureau, since there then follows the vital task of helping to establish and monitor the contractual arrangements with the grantholders.

Efficient mailing of applications and contractual documents is vital to the ERASMUS Bureau's credibility. Computer Manager Jeff Harris (left) and information group coordinator Philip Clist trigger off another address label print-out.

Computerization

Essential to all this activity is the Bureau's computerized database, and thereby hangs one of the most fascinating tales in the ERASMUS Bureau effort as Director Alan Smith observes. *'In what is and must always remain a joint effort,'* he says, *'it's invidious to single out individuals or even sectors of our activity for special comment. But I am glad of the opportunity which this issue of the European Cultural Foundation Newsletter provides to mention also those sides of our work less liable to hit the headlines in publicity attracted by ERASMUS. Of these, computerization of the data on the ICPs making up the European University Network is certainly one. Its significance is twofold: first, in easing manipulation of the vast mass of factual information relating to applications and administration of contracts, including mailing operations (around 100,000 copies of the* ***Guidelines for Applicants*** *and application forms are dispatched each year); secondly, in enabling a much faster and more flexible response to enquiries about the Programme'.*

The decision to computerize was vital, but its implementation was not easy after ten years of the admittedly more modest JSP and short study visits activity whose operations were handled almost exclusively by human rather than electronic resources. In the event, the task of developing the highly specialized software required by the ERASMUS operation was entrusted to a U.K. university department which is itself involved in ICP projects and therefore knew the problems involved, namely the department of management science at the University College of Swansea (Wales). In a brave effort not to get too technical, systems developer, Dr. Jeff Harris, a lecturer in database theory who had already written several university database management systems prior to the ERASMUS project, and Maria Gonzalez (Data Base Manager) explain the ERASMUS software system thus: *'the architecture adopted was as novel and experimental as ERASMUS itself, based on a brand-new extremely powerful software package that allowed a dBASE system to run in a compiled multi-user mode along a PC Network using a futuristic front-end/back-end arrangement. The result was the complete and accurate input of the ERASMUS database in a smooth operation in just six weeks. This not only provided the platform for the automatic production of the myriad of reports requested on the ERASMUS Programme, but was also the core for a computer-based decision support system brought into play as an instantaneous information aid to the complicated selection procedures that followed. In the long term, the investment in an electronic database will provide an on-line archive, transforming information requests on the evolution of ERASMUS into an operation lasting a few seconds and keystrokes'.*

Behind this apparently bland 'front-end' statement, however, lies an extraordinary stressful 'back-end' period of systems development, testing and implementation of software elements according to deadlines which would make the authors of academic studies on how best to introduce computerized systems shudder. Nor should we forget the vital role played by word-processing – the other main responsibility of the Computer Department. *'It would be impossible to handle the mass of correspondence and documents (many of which go through numerous drafts and versions before assuming their final shape) without a flexible text- and word-processing system implemented throughout the Bureau,'* says Danielle Maes, taking a breather between giving the training sessions which are

Inter-university Cooperation Programmes 1988/9: General Overview by Member State.

Member State	Coordinating Institution (1)					Total Number of Involvements (2)			
	All Applications		Accepted ICP		Succes Rate	All Applications		Accepted ICP	
	Number	%	Number	%	%	Number	%	Number	%
B	173	8.5	89	8.2	51	347	17.0	191	17.5
D	293	14.5	144	13.2	49	830	40.7	449	41.1
DK	44	2.2	25	2.3	57	120	5.9	73	6.7
E	180	8.8	103	9.4	57	532	26.1	314	28.8
F	444	21.8	225	20.6	51	1,044	51.1	578	53.0
G	51	2.5	20	1.8	39	137	6.7	74	6.8
I	211	10.3	124	11.4	59	489	24.0	291	26.7
IRL	57	2.8	26	2.4	46	160	7.8	95	8.8
L	2	0.1	0	0	–	8	0.4	4	0.4
NL	169	8.3	96	8.8	57	418	20.5	260	23.8
P	50	2.5	29	2.7	58	160	7.8	101	9.0
UK	367	18.0	210	19.2	57	1,030	50.5	571	52.3
Total	2,041	100	1,091	100					

(1) Each ICP has one coordinating institution. This institution is in many cases the main driving force behind the ICP.

(2) The figures mean that, for example, Belgian universities are *involved in* 191 (17.5%) of the 1091 accepted ICPs. Each country is counted only once in each accepted ICP in which it is involved, even if several universities from that country are participating in the ICP concerned.

scheduled to make all ERASMUS Bureau staff conversant with at least the basic skills by the beginning of 1989.

Information

The other side of the Bureau's activity which has lately seen the start of a more streamlined approach, and again in conjunction with computerization, is that of information. In the very first months of ERASMUS, the pace was so hectic that there was barely time to think of anything but the essential task of making sure that prospective recipients of the different categories of ERASMUS grants had a guide to the Programme and the application forms they needed in order to apply for the money (although amazingly, in between times, Bureau staff members managed to contribute to nearly 100 information events on ERASMUS before the Programme was a year old!) Now, in consultation with the Commission, the Bureau is beginning to develop a real information policy and the tools and items needed to implement it properly.

So far, the lure of the Programme has been such that the Bureau's information group, headed by new recruit Philip Clist, have hardly had time to think about generating publicity for it in any simple sense. The perceptible built-in charisma of ERASMUS seems to be doing much of this work for them. After all, there is something very powerful in the image, however over-simplified, of young people coming together at last on a kind of Community-wide campus to help construct 'The People's Europe' in a continent which in the first half of the century knew little other than war and despair. Accordingly, what some have even described as the Programme's sex-appeal has led to remarkable attention from the media, with staff from the Bureau, as well as the Commission, already filmed on the premises or invited to take part in numerous interviews or broadcasts.

In this context, however, not all publicity is necessarily good publicity, and there is still an urgent need to improve the quality of information on ERASMUS for the purpose of correcting the misconceptions which still abound. *'In particular, there is still a lack of good information geared specifically to student needs,'* says Cécile Desalle, who as secretary in the information group sees the mass of daily requests for information from students in all Community countries. One of the problems here is that responsibility for the award of student grants lies with the National Grant-Awarding Authorities (NGAAs) in the Member States, and the arrangements vary from country to country. In general terms, however, we are constantly obliged to remind students that, for the time being at any rate, the Programme ethos is to give priority encouragement to the development of institutionally or departmentally organized mobility to galvanize the still untapped enthusiasm for cooperation and ensure that students can spend their periods abroad in the most favourable conditions. *'If this policy is successful,'* says Alan Smith, *'the years ahead will see a proliferation of opportunities for the enterprising student and our battle for his or her right to cross EC frontiers for purposes of recognized study will have been well worthwhile'.*

Directories

Two important weapons in this battle are the annual **Directory of ERASMUS-supported ICPs,** and the forthcoming second edition of a **Directory of Higher Education Institutions** in the EC which the Bureau is producing for the Commission. The utility of the latter speaks for itself, while the former is an invaluable asset in giving students (as well as universities), an idea of where and in what subjects EC university cooperation has already been mobilized. For as recent research conducted by the Foundation's European Institute of Education and Social Policy has shown, students are increasingly beginning to take such opportunities into account when choosing their institution and discipline.

Both books lean heavily on the above-mentioned computer expertise, which is similarly helpful in answering nothing less than a flood of daily enquiries both within and beyond the academic community. Typical simple questions here are of the 'how many ICPs from which Member State and in what subject areas?' variety. Or 'how many ICPs is such-and-such a university taking part in?' A mother of two secondary schoolchildren recently wanted to know the universities in their country to which they might profitably apply with a good chance of joining an ERASMUS ICP in their likely areas of specialization - languages and international law. The Bureau computer resources cracked the problem and presented the answer conveniently and comprehensively in an hour or two, in contrast to the several days' secretarial work which might otherwise have been involved in counting and collating the necessary data. And in the future, a computer presence at events like exhibitions will enable visitors to a stand to get immediate replies to questions for which, in the past, enquirers' names and addresses would have to be noted for the subsequent transmission of the answers following the necessary documentary research.

At the start of the 1989-90 academic year, ERASMUS will take a special new turn with the launching, on an experimental basis, of the European Community Course Credit Transfer System, or ECTS for short (see also ERASMUS Bureau entry in this Newsletter). Prime responsibility for developing and coordinating ECTS within the Bureau lies with senior administrator Fritz Dalichow, from Bonn, assisted by Irish colleague Mary O'Mahony. *'When it is remembered how jealously universities often guard their prerogatives in the area of assessment or examination of students,'* says Dalichow, *'the interest expressed in the project is staggering. I didn't know so many university professors read the EC Official Journal on the beach! Only some 80 university faculties will be able to take part in mainstream activity within the six-year ECTS pilot scheme. Yet following a summer advertisement in the Journal we're still counting the candidates by hundreds!'*

ERASMUS back home

The main trends in the initial phase of ERASMUS are getting plenty of attention in publications like the ERASMUS Newsletter published by the Bureau for the Commission. In the present context, though, it is perhaps interesting for readers to glance briefly at Dutch involvement so far, given again the origins of Erasmus the Man – and the Netherlands headquarters of the Foundation so closely involved in managing ERASMUS the Programme. With due allowance for the relatively smaller size of the country, Dutch involvement is indeed impressive. Nearly one-tenth of all ICPs are coordinated by Dutch institutions. As one might expect, the two major Amsterdam establishments, the University and the Free University, are between them active (whether as coordinators or participants) in over 50 ICPs in a comprehensive palette of subjects. Impressive ERASMUS practitioners too are the Universities of Utrecht (33 ICPs), Leiden (30), Groningen (21), and appropriately enough, Rotterdam's ERASMUS University (20). But perhaps the most interesting Dutch trailblazer in the participation stakes has been the Agricultural University of Wageningen where involvement in some 23 ICPs has given a much-needed boost to a still somewhat under-represented subject area in the ERASMUS adventure.

At the same time, such intense activity harnessing the energies of relatively few universities in a smaller country is illustrative of the frequently concentrated nature of participation in ERASMUS. This is a quite common feature by no means confined to the Netherlands where, although 56 universities and other higher education institutions have joined ICPs, the 96 ICPs coordinated from the country are the responsibility of no more than 25 institutions. If this trend establishes itself it may well hold lessons for how the future promotion of ERASMUS should be targeted, given the sense of balanced participation the Programme is striving to achieve.

But back to the Bureau where the last word belongs to Annalis Iversen of its information group. *'I've worked in a lot of places in over 20 years of professional life both in EC Brussels and my native Denmark, but this is the first where I've never seen anyone reading a newspaper (except of course the education column!!) during office hours'.* Apt comment. Nobody in the European Cultural Foundation's ERASMUS Bureau is in it for the ride!

How to Apply

ERASMUS GRANTS 1989-90

Applications are now invited in respect of financial support under the terms of the ERASMUS Programme in the academic year 1989-90. Detailed **Guidelines for Applicants** and application forms are available on request from: **ERASMUS Bureau, 15 rue d'Arlon, B1040 Bruxelles, Belgium. Tel.:(32)2-233.01.11. Fax: (32)2233.01.50. Telex: 63528.**

Applications for the Inter-University Cooperation Programmes and grants for students within these programmes should be mailed to the Bureau **before 31 December 1988,** those for other grants before **28 February 1989.**

Students wishing to obtain a grant outside the framework of Inter-University Cooperation Programmes can obtain all information concerning the application procedures to follow from the competent National Grant Awarding Authority in each Member State.

ERASMUS National Grant Awarding Authorities 1989-90

Belgium (French-speaking)
Agence Francophone ERASMUS,
rue d'Egmont, 5
B-1050 Bruxelles.
Tel: (32)(2) 512.58.15

Belgium (Dutch-speaking)
Vlaamse ERASMUS Comité
Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap
en Permanente Vorming,
Bestuur voor Onderwijszaken,
Internationale Samenwerking,
Kunstlaan 43,
B-1040 Brussel.
Tel: (32)(2)513.74.64

Denmark
NGAA,
Ministry of Education,
Frederiksholms Kanal 26,
DK-1220 Kobenhavn K.
Tel: (45)(1) 92.53.87

Federal Republic of Germany
ERASMUS Arbeitsstelle,
Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst,
Postfach 20 08 04,
D-5300 Bonn 2.
Tel: (49)(228) 88.22.77

Greece
IKY,
Service ERASMUS,
14 Lysicratous,
GR-10558 Athinai.
Tel: (30)(1) 32.54.385

Spain
Agencia Nacional Espanola para becas ERASMUS,
Secretaria General,
Consejo de Universidades,
Ciudad Universitaria,
E-28072 Madrid.
Tel: (34)(1) 449.74.37

France
CNOUS - ERASMUS
6-8, rue Jean Calvin,
F-75005 Paris.
Tel: (33)(1) 47.07.61.70.

Ireland
Irish NGAA,
Higher Education Authority,
21, Fitzwilliam Square,
IRL-Dublin 2.
Tel: (353)(1) 61.27.48.

Italy
Direzione,
Istruzione Universiteria (ERASMUS),
Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione,
Viale Trastevere, 76,
1-00153 Roma.
Tel: (39)(6) 58493412

Luxembourg
Agence ERASMUS,
Ministère de l'Education Nationale,
6, Boulevard Royale,
L-Luxembourg.
Tel: (352)(46) 80.25.55

Netherlands
NUFFIC (ERASMUS),
Badhuisweg 251,
NL-2509 LS Den Haag.
Tel: (31)(70) 51.05.38.

Portugal
Ministério de Educaçao,
Avenida 5 de Outubro 107 - 9°,
P-1051 Lisboa Codex,
Portugual.
Tel: (351) (1) 766942

United Kingdom
U.K. ERASMUS Student Grants Council,
The University,
UK-Canterbury CT2 7PD.
Tel: (44)(227) 76.27.12