How satisfied are Erasmus students?

Introduction
The Erasmus scheme has been running for seventeen years and during this time, a million students have taken the opportunity to study abroad within Europe. Through a comparative analysis of institutions in two countries, this study aims to establish what areas Erasmus students view as satisfactory or otherwise, how far they are satisfied with their experience and to explore the main satisfying factors over a period of time.

Background
Higher education authorities around Europe are increasingly interested in the satisfaction or otherwise of their students and several institutions are now running surveys to test how satisfied their students are (Harvey, 2001). Most institutions are mainly concerned with their own students or those who are studying there at any given time. Overall, however, there appears to be little work on the experiences of Erasmus students either at institutional level (where they are usually subsumed within the main body of students) or internationally. Much research over the last two decades has shown that it is often the specifics of the learning environment that affect the student’s experience of higher education (Pascarella and Terezzini, 1991; Harvey et al., 1992; Weirs-Jenssen et al., 2002)

Clearly, the most important survey to date has been the SOCRATES (2000) Evaluation Study (Jahr and Teichler, 2000), but this is now some years old and does not address (and did not seek to do so) the specific issues of students ‘on the ground’.

Comparisons are always problematic and the choice of countries and institutions used in this study require some explanation and justification. The initial impetus was provided by the existence of consistent data from both universities on the experiences of Erasmus students. The surveys were comparable in that they both used the same approach to questionnaire development, the Student Satisfaction Approach. Second, both universities possess data from surveys, using the same methodology, covering three years, thus providing longitudinal data on the student experience. Third, the countries represent two very different higher education traditions, as well as having very different cultural, political and economic backgrounds. The idea that each country was from either side of the new European Union was a very attractive one. Furthermore, and more significantly, the two countries represent old and new membership pf the EU.

Method
Both the UK and Polish surveys use the Student Satisfaction Approach to developing questionnaires (Harvey et al., 1997; Saryusz-Wolski et al., 2003). Using this method, questions are generated by the students themselves using focus groups to identify key areas of concern. Because the questions used in the surveys were not developed with this study in mind, a brief examination of the variables that were used in the comparison is necessary and identification of which variables is comparable. This helps identify whether the students were interested in the same issues. In theory, at least, the Erasmus student body would be of a similar background wherever they are (see Jahr and Teichler, 2000), as well as having a particular personality.

The surveys used questionnaires that were designed to enable students to rate both their satisfaction with and the importance of these aspects of their experience. The questionnaires used a seven-point liker type scale in order to identify smaller variations in satisfaction. Overall satisfaction with particular aspects is calculated by using a formula that converts mean satisfaction scores into a percentage (where satisfaction = 50% or above).
The study tests three hypotheses. The first part of the paper establishes the main areas of satisfaction or otherwise and the main areas of similarity or difference. In particular, it would be interesting to test the tentative theory that students are generally more satisfied with the interactive aspects of their experience than with the physical aspects. This has been suggested as an important distinction in the case of students in the UK (Capelleras and Williams, 2003).

The second part explores trends over three years. It will be interesting to see how far there are fluctuations in student satisfaction and to what extent trends are similar at the two institutions.

The third part explores the factors behind these results. In part, differences in satisfaction are explained by external factors such as the institutional context (differences in the culture of teaching and organisation), political or economic contexts. The similarities are explained by a range of factors relating to the students and their personal or group attributes (Jahr and Teichler, 2000; Teichler, 2001; Weirs-Jenssen et al., 2002). Hence, the study investigates personal characteristics of the students such as age and gender.

Relevance to Track 6
The study is relevant to Track 6 because it is principally about the student experience of internationalisation and mobility within the EU.

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