

Michele Vangi:
Universities as a driving Force for Europe



In the German-Italian Centre Villa Vigoni, I have been organising with a colleague for 4 years an annual conference about European issues in which students from Germany and Italy participate. In 2014 we chose the topic: *The University as the Origin of the European Identity and driving Force for Europe*. The invited students discussed the relations between the university world and Europe. We raised issues as: in what way can Italian and German universities be considered European? How did the European Student Exchange Programmes change our perception of Europe? What can be done to make students' careers more European?

We called the University an *Origin* of the European identity. Founded in the Middle Age, Universities are a genuine European invention and – as Umberto Eco said in 2013 – played a key role in creating a European cultural identity. By peaceful and transnational circulation of intellectuals and their ideas, Europe began thinking of itself as a cultural community overcoming different languages and traditions. The European Union remembered this special cultural heritage when it named its most important student exchange programme after the great Dutch Philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Trying to use what I learnt from the Italian-German Forum for Students, I focused my reflections for the Young Professionals Seminar on ERASMUS which could still be a *driving Force for Europe*

- **How does ERASMUS contribute to make the European identity more tangible?**

This programme established in 1987 is for sure a very tangible success for the EU. Students choose Erasmus both for practical and emotional reasons. Students participate in Erasmus because they want to internationalise their carriers – e. g. through learning a foreign language – and increase their opportunities on the labour market.

This aspect is statistically documented by a recent Report of the European Commission: *The Erasmus Impact Study* (2014) about the effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions. Mobility seems to influence positive employment rates.

We should not underestimate these practical reasons. Many former Erasmus students, who have been living abroad because of their careers, cite practical reasons for supporting the EU (common currency, no passport, European health insurance card, etc).

Yet there are not just tangible benefits or long-term material effects of studying abroad. Any long stay in a foreign country gives us an “emotional heritage”. It is no coincidence that we speak about the “Erasmus Experience” or the “Erasmus feeling”. In my opinion, the European identity could be mediated by identification: indeed, identification often has nothing to do with rationality. It is linked to our emotions with an emotional and concrete impact on our biography. The more European projects manage to affect this sphere, the more they will succeed. Therefore, ERASMUS should be a reference for other EU projects in order to strengthen the power of positive identification with Europe.

- **How can we reach other strata of society?**

If we all agree that Erasmus works well in practice, we should try to spread this good practice by reaching out to other strata of the European society.

The first step should be to strengthen ERASMUS and other study experiences abroad at the universities. Although the number of the Erasmus-students has steadily grown during the last decades, only a small part of the whole student population is making use of the opportunity to take part to this programme.

Reaching out to other strata of society, not just to students: this was one of the aims of the European Commission when it redefined the Erasmus Programme. **Erasmus+** aims at boosting skills and employability as well as modernising education, training, and youth programmes. It also aims at improving the quality of vocational education and training across Europe, providing opportunities for vocational students and staff to undertake traineeships abroad. The EVS (**European Voluntary Service**) is also part of Erasmus+, giving young people the opportunity to express their personal commitment through full-time voluntary work in a foreign country, within or outside the EU.