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To cite this article: Manja Klemenčič, Martin Žnidaršič, Anže Vavpetič & Matej Martinc (2017) Erasmus students' involvement in quality enhancement of Erasmus+ mobility through digital ethnography and ErasmusShouts, *Studies in Higher Education*, 42:5, 925-932, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2017.1293879](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293879)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293879>



Published online: 06 Mar 2017.



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Erasmus students' involvement in quality enhancement of Erasmus+ mobility through digital ethnography and ErasmusShouts

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Erasmus+ is one of the European Union's flagship programs which supports short-term international student mobility within Europe as one of its primary purposes. Erasmus students are uniquely well placed to compare educational processes of their home and host institutions, the learning environments and student life conditions. They are so far under-utilized resource of information on quality of educational practices and insights on how to improve student experiences. Furthermore, international students often lack a collective voice in university structures where they could contribute to the decisions concerning quality of educational practices. So far, student surveys have been the most frequently used approach in understanding lived experiences of Erasmus and international students. This commentary argues that qualitative approaches to collect data on student lived experiences are superior to survey research, yet more costly. In times when all students are digital natives, it has become possible, however, to canvass data from students through digital ethnographic approaches. The commentary introduces ErasmusShouts, a web application, which engages Erasmus students as auto-ethnographers and prompts them to reflect on, and record their lived experiences of Erasmus mobility. This approach can be adopted to generate large-scale qualitative data on international students' experiences for use by higher education practitioners and researchers to improve educational practices and learning environments.

Keywords: international students; Erasmus students; university quality; student feedback; digital ethnography; ErasmusShouts

Introduction

Erasmus+ with its focus on skills development for employability and active citizenship is one of the European Union's flagship programs. It provides short-term mobility grants to students, academics and administrative staff, and it also supports other activities to enhance the European dimension of studies, such as intensive programs, curriculum development or thematic networks. Concretely, Erasmus+ provides European Union students with the opportunity to study abroad in Europe for 3–12 months as part of their degree. Unlike international students who leave their countries to obtain a degree at higher education institution abroad, Erasmus students study abroad only

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short term and are certain to return to their home institution to complete their degree. Eligible students receive an Erasmus+ mobility grant from the European Commission paid through their home institution.

The positive effects of Erasmus mobility on students' skills development and employability have been well documented (European Commission 2014). What studies of the effects of Erasmus Program have missed, however, is the unique position of Erasmus students to compare the quality of education practices, learning environments and student life conditions between their home and host institutions. Having studied at their home institutions for some years, Erasmus students find themselves studying in a completely new environment in another country. During the mobility, Erasmus students continuously and often seamlessly compare the education practices, learning environments and student life conditions. Frequently, they also develop prescriptive advice on how to improve these. The problem Erasmus students face, however, is that no one really listens to their prescriptive advice. As reported by Klemenčič and Flander (2013), in a study of the impact of Erasmus Program in Slovenia, Erasmus students who return to their home institutions are frustrated since they have acquired this wealth of experiences and have ideas on what could be done differently at their home institutions, but there is no space to voice these insights.

This commentary argues for strengthening the agency of Erasmus and consequently other international students in influencing university quality improvements. International students are a growing and highly desired student subgroup at higher education institutions worldwide. Once admitted to higher education institutions, the collective voice of international students tends to be absent or – in best cases – depicted by a few elected student representatives within the existing student council or union. Representative student bodies involved in university decision-making activities – student councils or unions – may have some specific provision or seat for international students, but this is not the rule. Further, student groups formed by international students tend to have social purposes, rather than serve political representation. Communities of international students tend to be highly fragmented following national or cultural affinities. Yet, international students are also a subgroup of the student population with particular challenges in terms of integration into the academic and social culture of their universities (Lee 2010; Sherry, Thomas, and Hong Chui 2010; Heng, 2016). International offices at higher education institutions are typically places where international students can obtain assistance or offer complaints, but typically this happens on individual basis. In other words, the collective agency of international students, construed as their capabilities to influence the quality of their student experiences, is fairly limited.

A part of the problem here is that the lived experiences of international students are poorly understood by higher education practitioners. So far, student surveys have been the most frequently used approach in understanding the lived experiences of Erasmus and international students. This commentary argues that qualitative approaches to collection of data on student lived experiences are superior to survey research, yet more costly. In times when all students are digital natives it has become possible, however, to canvass data from students through digital ethnographic approaches. Focusing specifically on Erasmus students in Europe, this commentary introduces ErasmusShouts, a web application, which engages Erasmus students as auto-ethnographers and prompts them to reflect on and record their lived experiences of Erasmus mobility. This approach can be adopted to generating large-scale qualitative data on international

students' experiences for use by higher education practitioners and researchers in order to improve educational practices and learning environments.

With Erasmus+, a new generation of the Erasmus program launched in 2014, the European Commission expressed high expectations about the impact of the program (Klemenčič and Flander 2013). Specifically, the Commission expects that Erasmus+ will not only benefit individuals, but also higher education institutions and national higher education systems through modernization and internationalization (Klemenčič and Flander 2013). Consequently, higher education institutions' participation in mobility schemes should be more evidently reflected in the quality of higher education programs and student experiences. This objective calls for new approaches to quality assessment of Erasmus mobility and student experiences.

Data collection methods for understanding student lived experiences in higher education

At present, student surveys are the largest and most frequently used data source on student experience that are used for quality assessment in higher education (Williams 2014 cited in Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015, 368). This is also the case for quality assessment of Erasmus mobility experiences: home and receiving institutions as well as Erasmus+ national offices all seek feedback through surveys from Erasmus students on their mobility experiences. For example, all Erasmus students are requested to fill out a 'Participant Report Form.'

Yet, student surveys have been criticized for a number of methodological problems. Two issues stand out. One is the accuracy of student self-reported information, which points to the difficulties for students to retrieve information about their own behavior over a lengthy period of time and figure out the frequency of that behavior 'in a typical week' (Porter 2011 cited in Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015). Students' responses might not be genuine due to their susceptibility to social desirability bias: students will report behavior which they understand to be desirable rather than which actually occurred (Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015). Second, survey research is prone to observational biases when researchers look where they think they will find positive results, or where it is easy to record observations, the so-called streetlight effect (Porter 2011 cited in Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015). Surveys tend to give more attention to institutional factors that shape student experience and less to the other contextual and psychosocioecological factors, which are much more difficult to measure (Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015). In cases of mandatory reporting, such as the aforementioned Erasmus participant report, it is plausible that students will not carefully consider the responses or that, to the best of their intention, they will not be able to retrieve all relevant information to describe their experiences. At best, student surveys can be used as 'screening instrument to discover major deficiencies in educational environment and provision, and major discrepancies in student behavior from the expected' (Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015, 381). Such diagnostic findings then prompt the relevant decision makers within higher education institutions or national governments to explore qualitatively why certain patterns occur, and causes and consequences of various practices and processes (Klemenčič and Chirikov 2015, 381).

Unlike survey research which offers broadly generalizable findings about social phenomena, qualitative methods probe into the deep understanding of a particular social phenomenon. Superior in terms of delivering qualitative data into students' lived experiences is ethnographic method. Ethnographic data collection commonly involves

in-depth interviews and observation of behaviors of students in the contexts in which these behaviors occur. The ethnographic method focuses on the shared, common experiences specific to a group of people. Its unit of analysis is a group of individuals – such as Erasmus students – who share certain customs, beliefs and behaviors. As opposed to typical quantitative questionnaire surveys, ethnographical approaches emphasize the need for analytic categories to emerge from interaction with human subjects rather than being imposed by the researcher in advance. However, ethnographic research is costly in terms of investment of time and effort, limited in scope, and does not render easily to generalizability of findings. With the technological advancements and the universal use of digital media by students, it should be possible to adapt qualitative empirical methods to digital use and thereby canvass qualitative data on student experiences on a larger scale. This commentary suggests an alternative to student surveys: a digital ethnographic approach to collect data about students' lived experiences to generate large-scale qualitative data for use by higher education practitioners and researchers.

The commentary introduces a new instrument, ErasmusShouts, which engages Erasmus students as auto-ethnographers and prompts them to reflect on and record their lived experiences of Erasmus mobility. It also enables Erasmus students to offer recommendations on how to improve study practices or learning conditions by comparing their home and host institutions. ErasmusShouts, as an instrument of quality assessment in Erasmus student mobility, is grounded in the theory of student agency (Klemenčič 2015a) and is developed from the application of the theory of student agency to student involvement in university quality enhancement (Klemenčič 2015b).

Theory of student agency

Student agency refers to capabilities of students to engage in self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment for purposes of self-formation and university citizenship (Klemenčič 2015a, 2015b). The commitment to both of these purposes is significant. Students face competing demands on their time. Their intrinsic purpose in higher education is self-formation and well-being (Klemenčič 2015a, 2015b). Their actions are oriented towards formation of a projected idea of future self, towards 'becoming.' They learn to take care of themselves, build and maintain relationships, define their unique identity, balance academic responsibilities with other interests and, of course – and hopefully – gain knowledge, develop skills and build understanding of and relationship to the discipline and the projected profession. While university environment is built on strong interdependencies between students, academic and professional staff, and these nurture collective spirit and enable collective behavior (Klemenčič 2015b), it is not self-evident that students would automatically enact university citizenship. University citizenship implies students' voluntary contribution to make a positive impact on their university and its communities; that is to maximize collective well-being and university quality beyond individual self-interest (Klemenčič 2015b). In other words, students' university citizenship implies their public service to their universities. There have to exist institutional conditions that initiate students' citizenship behavior. There have to be possibilities for students to enact agency for collective purposes, and – equally important – students have to be willing and motivated to act for collective purpose.

Students' willingness to be involved with questions of university quality needs to be instigated. Such involvement can be manifested in many forms: responding to student surveys, participating in focal group meetings or interviews conducted by student

council or recording their experiences in an online web platform such as Erasmus-Shouts. Students' internal predisposition to such involvement is based on the sense of efficacy ('I can make a change') and on the sense of belonging ('I belong to this community'). The sense of efficacy comes with students recognizing that they possess resources – student capital – which are salient for the purposes of enhancing university quality. They need to come to understand that they have first-hand experience of, and thus valuable insights into, educational processes and learning environments and that these insights are beneficial and relevant to and valued by university (or government authorities). On the same token, students need explicit affirmation from university administrators or government officials that they find student feedback and expertise valuable. Furthermore, student involvement in improving institutional quality needs to be part of the cultural codes of expected and valued student behavior within the higher education community. These are then used by students as personalized normative prescriptions.

For genuine, conscientious involvement, students also need a strong sense of belonging, defined as a strong feeling of allegiance and attachment to one's university or to a collectivity within the university (Klemenčič 2015b). Higher education officials can intervene in the higher education communities to create conditions which strengthen the sense of students' belonging to the institution and its communities, and thus consequently their socialization and agency (Thomas 2012 cited in Klemenčič 2015b). These interventions should address students' need to feel that being at the university is good for them and that they matter to the university. The former is often part of institutional efforts to highlight the achievements of the members of the university and the universities' social prestige which in turn shapes social standing of its graduates. The latter revolves around efforts to build a sense of collective identity and community through services and activities which signal to students that university cares about their well-being (and not only academic experience).

Sense of efficacy and belonging are necessary conditions for students to be willing to offer conscientious feedback on quality of their educational experiences and student life, and also to contribute in other ways – for example through student councils – to quality improvements of their universities. Essential is also an institutional culture of partnership between students – individual, collective or as represented by student associations – and university, which is built around a sense of shared responsibilities for collective well-being and university advancement, and collective commitments to mutually agreed goals. At the same time there need to exist spaces and pathways for student involvement; that is, real possibilities for students to be involved. The web application ErasmusShouts presents a possible space where students can reflect on their experiences and record their insights as they emerge from feelings of satisfaction, dissatisfaction or puzzlement with certain aspects of their experience. The idea is not so much to bypass the formal channels of representation, but instead bridge student representation with the voice of the student body at large – students as auto-ethnographers in participatory research.

Conceptual underpinnings of ErasmusShouts

ErasmusShouts is founded on the notions that students should be prompted to reflect on their experiences as they live through their Erasmus mobility, and to record these experiences when they reach particularly powerful insights. Students generate records of their experiences or insights about their experiences when they come to

understand something significant about their student experiences. Unlike student surveys or student reports which ask students to recollect their memories of experiences, ErasmusShouts tries to capture these experiences when they have just happened or when students have just thought about what is happening to them and came to understand their lived experiences in some significant way. In such a moment, students will be more motivated to share them, to 'shout' about them.

ErasmusShouts resembles weblogs in that students post stories of their lived experiences, however, it more purposefully facilitates self-reflection and at the same time builds communities of practice. Weekly reflective prompts are posted on the platform by Alma (the researcher) prompting students to reflect on their experiences and post their insights. In less frequent intervals Erasmus students are asked to offer recommendations on which educational practices at home or host institution could be improved and how. On the one hand, ErasmusShouts offers students a reflective space and guided reflection with aim to help them to self-regulate towards meaningful and rewarding Erasmus mobility experience. On the other hand, ErasmusShouts builds an online community of practice for Erasmus students who are willing to engage in public and collective meaning making of their individual and collective Erasmus experiences and quality of higher education more generally.

Focusing on personal experiences as the object of reflection, Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985, 19) refer to reflection as encompassing 'those intellectual and affective activities that individuals engage in to explore their experience, which leads to new understanding and appreciations.' Reflection has been widely used to facilitate deep learning (Moon 1999), but it can be equally utilized to guide students towards meaningful and rewarding experiences, such as the Erasmus mobility experience. Reflection has also been incorporated into Zimmerman's (2002) model of self-regulative learning, which comprises self-evaluation and self-reaction, both of which lead to adjustments of one's strategies of action to achieve intended goals. Among strategies recommended for reflection, reflective journals as well as peer feedback have been widely noted as particularly helpful to facilitate reflective thinking (Moon 1999; Boud 2001). As suggested by Xie, Ke, and Sharma (2008, 19), 'journal writing offers a method for students to externalize their thinking and reflection, while peer feedback can provide a different perspective and allow peers to assimilate and accommodate their thinking.' Those two strategies combined are depicted in the form of online blogs (weblogs) (Sim and Hew 2010).

Reflective journals with peer feedback can also be organized within communities of practice. Wenger (1998) describes communities of practices as those where individuals with shared interests engage in collective meaning making. They are characterized by continuous flow of information and sustained mutual relationships. The challenge to establish an electronic community of practice among Erasmus students is in that Erasmus students do not necessarily have prior relationships in the material world to draw on. These relationships have to be established in digital world building on shared purpose, explicit or implicit agreements on rules of engagement and use of the community. They may or may not be reinforced by developing relationships in the material world.

By way of conclusion: agency of international students in institutional quality enhancement

This commentary first and foremost argues in favor of giving international students a voice in quality improvements of educational practices and study conditions. The case presented here focuses on Erasmus students who are exceptionally well placed

to compare their home and host institutions, and thus develop insights on possible quality improvements. ErasmusShouts is an instrument which offers Erasmus students a space to voice their insights on mobility experiences and recommend quality improvements. The same instrument can be adopted for international students at a single higher education institution or across the national higher education system. International students' first-hand experience of and their expertise in overcoming challenges of integrating into the educational and social processes of their university and socializing into the university culture present valuable data for higher education practitioners seeking to strengthen the quality of education provision.

Unlike student surveys, digital ethnography and instruments such as Erasmus-Shouts, have the potential to yield a large-scale deeper, richer and more authentic data into the lived experiences of international students. While the methodology of digital ethnography is in its early phase, the advancement of user-friendliness in technology is rapid. Contemporary generations of students – both domestic and international – are digital natives and use digital technology seamlessly and continuously. The challenge in the success of this method is not technological. Rather, it rests with higher education institutions and their capabilities to create conditions in which international students – like domestic students – feel a strong sense of efficacy in influencing the university practices as well as sense of belonging to their university and university communities. It is only if those conditions are met that students will be willing to use the opportunity to reflect on, record and thus influence the educational practices, learning environments and student life conditions.

It must be noted, however, that there are barriers that deter students from engagements beyond study. Students who work while studying, and students who have family responsibilities, are less likely to have the time and motivation to contribute to their universities as ErasmusShouts invites them to do. Such a service to universities and their communities is more likely to be expected from students who have the time for various extracurricular engagements or are already engaged in public service. Indeed, students' agency in quality enhancement of their universities undoubtedly varies with students' social identities.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and Tang Tang Heng for her excellent feedback and meticulous editing work which helped to improve this commentary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Center Republike Slovenije za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja (Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes) [grant number 2016-0355-500].

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