

By Elaina Loveland

## Student Mobility in the European Union

**An interview with Jan Figel,  
European commissioner for education,  
training, culture and youth**

**J**AN FIGEL BECAME A MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION IN 2004—he is responsible for education, training, culture and youth. He was born in Vranov nad Topľou in Slovakia and was a research scientist before entering politics. He was a member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic from 1990 to 1998 when he became state secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He played a leading role in Slovakia’s accession negotiations with the European Union. He returned to the National Council in 2002 where he chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee before stepping down in 2004 to take up his Commission post. From 1995 to 2000 he lectured in international relations at Trnava University. He holds an engineering degree from Technical University in Kosice, from which he graduated in 1983. He also studied for a semester each at UFSIA Antwerp in Belgium and at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. in 1994.

**IE: How did Erasmus become a success story for improving student mobility?**

**FIGEL:** Erasmus is a fabulous opportunity for young people—a chance to try out life in another European country for up to a year! This is an opportunity that our students jump at, one that is life-affirming, and that can be life-changing, for those who take part. It doesn’t only enrich students’ lives academically, but it is important for personal development, for intercultural skills, and self-reliance.

In terms of how the program has developed over the years, we have had two decades of working together with universities and with governments to develop Erasmus from its rather modest beginnings in 1987 to the European success story it is today.

Looking at the numbers, in 1987 around 3000 students took part in Erasmus. During the last academic year, we had almost 160,000 students. Today over 3,000 universities, in 31 countries in Europe, take part. In all, 1.7 million students have had an Erasmus experience; few, if any, European Union programs

have had a similar impact on students and their families Europe-wide.

Four out of five Erasmus students have been the first in their family to study abroad. Given the program’s high satisfaction ratings, Erasmus has given “Europe” real meaning in hundreds of thousands of families for whom it would otherwise have remained a vague and abstract concept.

I could enumerate many specific success factors: the program is easy to access; we are constantly working on improving the quality: most universities have good facilities and programs for welcoming their Erasmus students; the institutions also find they benefit greatly from the staff exchanges. And I should also mention the role of former Erasmus students and teachers, who have spread a positive message about the program, encouraging more universities and students to take part.

**IE: The goal to increase Erasmus students to 2012 is an ambitious goal. What is the strategy to meet this goal? What will it accomplish?**



Jan Figel

**FIGEL:** The European Union has set itself a very ambitious target: we reached 1.5 million students after 20 years: now we want to double that and reach 3 million by 2012. The figures show that the numbers are still growing: 3 percent more students and 10 percent more university teachers went abroad in academic year 2006–07 compared to the previous year. The new EU Member States are particularly keen, increasing their figures in 2006–07 on average by 10 percent. Erasmus mobility from candidate country Turkey grew by 56 percent in the same year. UK figures are rising after some years of decline. However, in other countries, growth is slowing, or even decreasing.

We do expect future growth, however. Research shows there is still a substantial number of students willing to go abroad but who have not yet done so—a significant reservoir to tap into. Our strategy for increasing both the quantity and the quality of mobility. We strove to:

**Increase overall funding.** Erasmus has an overall budget of around €3,100 million for the 2007–2013 lifetime of the Commu-

nity Lifelong Learning Programme, of which it is a sub-program. As the limit of what the Lifelong Learning Programme can finance is reached, we need to develop other sources of funding, whether national, regional or local as well as other EU sources e.g., structural funds. This will enable us to fund more students and to provide higher grants.

**Promote Erasmus.** We need to publicise the benefits of participation more widely. For example, feedback such as the 2006 Valera study, which found that an Erasmus period of study abroad builds intercultural skills and makes an international career more likely.

**Improve quality.** Students must be well informed before and during their period of mobility—students do complain about lack of basic information. Universities must implement the Erasmus University Charter, which sets out the principles for participating institutions.

**Ensure the period spent abroad gets full academic recognition.** The issue of whether the time spent abroad will be properly accredited and recognised is crucial when choosing to take part in Erasmus. We need greater efforts to resolve legitimate recognition problems.

By boosting mobility, we continue to forge a new generation of Europeans ready to cope with the new global challenges, with a strong sense of European identity, openness and cooperation.

**IE: You are proponent of degree programs having a “mobility window” for students to be able to study abroad as part of their degree. How can institutions do this and how can educators promote this idea?**

**FIGEL:** Many countries are still adapting their study structures to the three cycles of the Bologna Process, so it's too early to

come up with a detailed picture. It is true that the Bologna Reforms have led in some countries to overloaded study programs, in particular at the bachelor's level. This needs to be remedied, as it could encourage students to stay home, study hard and graduate quickly instead of risking a stay abroad that doesn't fit into their schedule.

One remedy would be to systematically build so-called “mobility windows” into all study programs. This would require careful joint preparation by the different partner universities, to ensure that the stay abroad is fully recognized and fits into the study program of the student. But the institutions would clearly benefit from being able to offer such “windows.”

At the same time we are beginning to see increasing ‘vertical’ mobility or degree mobility, which means students obtain their bachelor's degree in one country and their master's degree in another. This is exactly one of the advantages that the architects of the Bologna Process wanted to create.

A slightly different issue is the financial aspect: some universities seem to prefer taking in fee-paying students from outside Europe over non-fee-paying Erasmus students.

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is carrying out a study on transnational mobility and we look forward to receiving the results in November 2008.

**IE: How did you become an advocate of students studying outside the borders of their home countries? Did your experience as an international student contribute? Why is education abroad so important for today's college students?**

**FIGEL:** I studied in the United States and I know firsthand how enriching a period of study abroad can be. Studying abroad is much more than an academic experience. It is also about personal growth and better prospects when it comes to finding a job. Zooming out from the individual to

the social level, international education is a positive force for building cooperation and mutual understanding across cultures and countries.

But there is still a lot to do. My vision for education in Europe is that in the future it should be the norm—rather than the exception—for university students to undertake a period of study or a work placement in another country of the Union. Studying abroad gives students a host of opportunities. Exchange students not only improve their educational record and their international and cross-cultural skills, they develop a more flexible mindset which brings the confidence to operate in an increasingly global society. But the benefits go much wider. Mobility strengthens Europe's competitiveness, building its knowledge-intensive society, and deepening our young people's sense of European identity and citizenship.

**IE: What is the difference between Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus? How is funding for students studying through Erasmus Mundus obtained?**

**FIGEL:** Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus are both EU cooperation and mobility programs in higher education. Erasmus covers Europe: it supports cooperation between universities across Europe and gives European students the opportunity to study in a different European country from their own. Erasmus is also open to staff who want to teach or train abroad. (More details at [http://ec.europa.eu/education/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/index_en.htm))

Erasmus Mundus' geographical scope is global. It promotes the European Union around the world as a center of excellence in learning. It supports top-quality master's courses in Europe and awards EU-funded scholarships of one or two years to master's degree students from outside Europe. It also awards scholarships to EU nationals to study for short periods outside the EU. Students interested in an Erasmus Mundus scholarship should contact the university coordinating the master's course. (More details at [http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/mundus/projects/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/mundus/projects/index_en.html))



**ERASMUS:** Erasmus is the EU's flagship education and training exchange program, enabling 200,000 European students to study and work abroad within Europe each year, as well as supporting cooperation actions between higher education institutions across Europe. It caters not only to students but also to professors and business staff who want to teach abroad and for university staff who want to be trained abroad.

**ERASMUS MUNDUS:** The Erasmus Mundus program is a higher education cooperation and mobility program with a global scope, promoting the EU around the world as a centre of excellence in learning. It awards EU-funded scholarships of one or two years to students from outside Europe taking part in master's courses supported by the program. It also awards scholarships to EU nationals to study for short periods outside the EU.

**ATLANTIS:** Cooperation program between the EU and the United States in higher education and vocational training supporting academic cooperation, joint/dual degrees and exchanges of students and faculty with recognition of study abroad periods.

**BOLOGNA PROCESS:** The overarching aim of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world.

The European Higher Education Area will:

- make it easier for students, graduates and higher education staff to move within the EHEA;
- prepare students for their future careers and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their personal development; and
- offer broad access to high-quality higher education, based on democratic principles and academic freedom.

The Bologna Process is named after the Bologna Declaration, which was signed in the Italian city of Bologna on June 19, 1999 by higher education ministers from 29 European countries. Today the Bologna Process unites 46 European countries.

The Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window (EM ECW) is a funding program that operates between Europe and certain parts of the world. Again, as well as funding student and academic mobility, it supports university partnerships and institutional co-operation exchanges. (More details at <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/extcoop/call/index.htm>)

**IE: There will be a new phase of Erasmus Mundus from 2009-2013. What are the goals of this next phase?**

**FIGEL:** We expect to launch a new phase of Erasmus Mundus (2009-2013) at the end of this year with a planned total budget of €950 million. The goals of the second phase will be very much in line with those of the first. The main new features will be the inclusion of joint doctoral programs, increased scholarships for European students and intensified cooperation with higher education institutions outside the EU. The new phase will also integrate the EM ECW into Erasmus Mundus proper.



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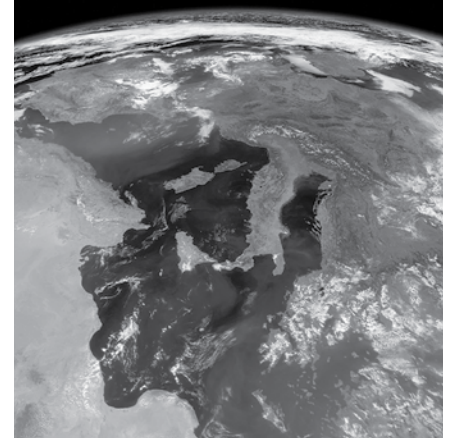
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## **IE:** How has the Atlantis program increased student mobility for European and U.S. students and institutions?

**FIGEL:** Since the start of the EU-US higher education and vocational training cooperation program in 1995, now called “Atlantis,” over 5000 European and U.S. students have received grants and studied on the other side of the Atlantic for at least one academic term. More than 800 institutions took part in joint curriculum development and student and faculty exchange projects. This involved the institutions sharing resources, comparing and innovating in their study programs, and setting up ways of recognizing and transferring the academic credits gained by the students abroad.

In 2006 we extended the Atlantis program by eight more years. We have refocused it on supporting the innovative format of joint and dual degrees. This format involves the universities in even closer cooperation, and gives students the opportunity to spend an even longer period on the other side of the Atlantic—no less than one full academic year. With the European Commission at one end, and the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) at the other, Atlantis is a real bridge between the EU and the United States, uniting people and bringing home an understanding and appreciation of diversity.

## **IE:** How many international students are studying in the European Union? Of these, how many are from the United States?

**FIGEL:** In 2006 there were 1.7 million students with foreign citizenship in the EU (however, many of these are resident foreigners, real mobility is lower), of whom more than 700,000 came from other continents. About 30,000 came from the United States, if one full year or longer periods are counted.

The United States is a net receiver of students from the EU: more than twice as many students go from the EU to the United States than vice versa. The picture changes somewhat if short-term study periods and summer courses are included. The number of

U.S. students in the EU then reached 130,000 in 2007—58 percent of the total number of U.S. students going abroad. Europe thus remains the main destination for American students who decide to study abroad.

But we should take the data with a small pinch of salt: we know a lot about organized mobility such as Erasmus, but a certain amount of individual mobility goes unrecorded.

## **IE:** What trends in student mobility in Europe do you see on the horizon?

**FIGEL:** We will probably see a continuation of current trends: an ongoing increase in intra-European mobility (Erasmus participation grew by over 40 percent since 2000), but also an increase in the exchange of students outside the EU (the number of students with foreign citizenship in the EU-27 grew by more than 50 percent in the period 2000–2005). At the same time, we expect the flows of students between countries to even out, as many countries make efforts to improve the quality of higher education.

The number of students from Africa, Asia, and America studying in the EU has nearly doubled since 2000. While growth of students coming from developed countries like the United States (+31 percent), and Japan (+19 percent) was moderate, the number of students from emerging and developing countries has increased quickly. For example, the number of Chinese students in the EU has grown six-fold in this period. We expect this tendency to continue in the future, although at a less pronounced pace.

But as the global economy becomes increasingly interlinked and many countries invest heavily in higher education (particularly in East Asia and the Persian Gulf Region) we also expect more European students to study outside Europe. So, overall, we expect more balance between incoming and outgoing students in the long run. We also expect mobility to grow in disciplines where there was less mobility in the past. **IE**

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