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[Comment] In defence of the Erasmus scheme

27.03.2006 - 09:55 CET | By Richard Laming

EUOBSERVER / DEBATE - In the wake of last December's rather unsatisfactory deal on the EU budget, it is not surprising that the Erasmus student exchange programme is being eyed up for cuts. This temptation should be resisted.

Latest figures announced two weeks ago (16 March) reveal that the scheme is now more popular than ever. Student participation rose by 6 per cent last year and that of teachers by 13 per cent. This is a practical example of European cooperation that is an astounding success.

I have soft spot for the Erasmus scheme, as it was the subject of one of the first pro-European campaigns I was involved in. The university I was studying at had declined to take part, and so the student union protested.

There already were bilateral links with universities in other European countries, we were told, so that this new scheme was not necessary. But the whole point of Erasmus was to expand opportunities. It would open the way for student exchanges that had not existed before, and importantly it would increase the number of students that could take part. The old system was fine for the privileged few for whom it had been designed: the new system would benefit many more.

And isn't that the point of the EU as a whole? The advantages it offers should be open to everyone, rather than the traditional elite. I have lost count of the number of Eurosceptics rejecting the description "anti-European" because they personally spend every summer in a delightful villa in Tuscany.

There is a decent criticism of the EU that it is not doing enough to spread the benefits of European integration throughout the whole of society. I share it. But the way to deal with it is to reform the EU, not reject it.

The Erasmus student exchange programme is a perfect example of this. Not only does it benefit the hundreds of thousands of students, living and studying in another country for a year, but also it benefits the universities and towns that host them. The vice-chancellor of one English university said to me that the atmosphere on campus had changed and improved immeasurably as a result of the influx of students from abroad. Education is supposed to broaden the mind: even those who don't choose to go abroad find Europe coming to their own doorstep and



"Education is supposed to broaden the mind: even those who go abroad find Europe coming to their own doorstep and"

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Back at my old university, the rules have finally changed and it is part of the Erasmus scheme, too. The number of students from elsewhere in Europe has soared to the benefit of all.

Helping the next generation discover the character and diversity of their continent and fulfil their own potential within it is exactly the kind of long-term investment in its own future that the EU should be making. Let's hope that the Erasmus scheme can survive the cuts.

Richard Laming is Director of Federal Union.

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