

English-Medium Instruction and Student Mobility: Exploring Incoming Student's Satisfaction with International Exchange at the University of Rijeka

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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incoming students' satisfaction with international exchange at the
University of Rijeka**

(M.A. THESIS)

Rijeka, 2016.

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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satisfaction with international exchange at the

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Abstract

The number of foreign exchange students choosing to study at the University of Rijeka (UNIRI) is on a constant rise despite a fairly limited offer of English-medium instruction (EMI) study programs, with courses conducted mostly in the Croatian language. The purpose of this research is to enquire into the level of academic satisfaction regarding several aspects of student mobility among exchange students at UNIRI faculties which do not offer established EMI study programs. Aspects explored were academic and administrative support provided during their mobility, course conduct and assessment, and the quality of EMI in chosen courses.

The findings suggest that students are generally satisfied with both the quality of EMI courses offered and with the level of English used in course conduct. The participants, however, observe that even though they did not have difficulties in understanding lectures, the English vocabulary range should be at a higher level, especially when engaging in discussion. While identifying positive aspects, such as the level of English as a language of instruction, course conduct, and academic support, participants criticized an overly casual approach to course-related obligations with frequent course re-scheduling and waiting for assignment correction standing out as main issues. Administrative support proved to be at a satisfactory, especially prior to their mobility.

Keywords: English-medium instruction, University of Rijeka, satisfaction, support, mobility

1 Introduction

From their launch, mobility programs provided the opportunity for stronger international cooperation among universities and their students. By erasing state borders in the name of academic prosperity, programs such as Erasmus+ were at the forefront of a movement designed to create a unified European Higher Education Area. In 1987 as many as 3244 students from eleven countries decided to join the program and spend a mobility period abroad (Erasmus, 2014). Up to the 2013/2014 academic year that number rose to 272 000 students and 57 000 staff from 34 countries participated in Erasmus mobility (Erasmus, 2014). Despite UNIRI's implementation of the Bologna Process and active membership within several mobility programs including Erasmus+, incoming foreign exchange students seem to be reluctant to choose UNIRI for their study exchange. Exchange students comprised "less than 1% of the student body in the academic year 2012/2013" (Drljača Margić and Žeželić, 2015). Students tend to consider the language barrier as one of the main issues to avoid when choosing a specific mobility destination. This is (among other things) what redirects students from universities, such as UNIRI, where the dominating L1 of higher education is the native language, in this case Croatian. So far this offer seems satisfactory to foreign students as UNIRI and its Office of International Relations note a slow but steady rise in the number of incoming students over the past six academic years. Progress made from 25 incoming students in the academic year 2011/2012 to 150 in 2014/2015 proves the increasing desirability of UNIRI as a study destination (University of Rijeka, 2016).

Considering the limitations of the EMI offer at UNIRI, the author aims to enquire into foreign exchange students' satisfaction with several aspects of their study abroad experience. These aspects include administrative and academic support, quality of education provided, and difficulties (if any) they faced while studying at UNIRI. This topic of research is important since direct feedback from students participating in EMI courses at UNIRI is the best source of information based on which improvements to lesson plans and course materials can be made. The paper is organized in several sections: in the second and third sections, we look at the development of EMI within European higher education as well as briefly overview strengths and weaknesses of EMI in higher education, as presented in relevant literature. The fourth section focuses on EMI at UNIRI where the author introduces the university EMI course offer. As a prequel to the current study, section five presents exchange students' study experiences at several European universities and comments on difficulties faced by those students while studying abroad in Europe. Section seven introduces the aims and research method of the current study, which is further discussed in section eight. Concluding remarks are provided in section nine.

2 English-medium instruction in European higher education

Each year the international scientific community sees a rise in the number of higher education students pursuing a foreign exchange experience with a large amount of universities opting to lure the brightest talents to their campuses. While the United States and the United Kingdom top the list of most desirable high-quality study destinations, new destinations emerge as bordering countries and regional hubs are competing for their fair share of financial revenue and intellectual capital provided by internationally mobile students (UNESCO, 2016). Why this constant increase in student mobility? The world is undergoing a rapid increase in the teaching of university subjects through the medium of English in countries where the language is not spoken as the L1 (Macaro, 2015).

As English advances into the role of the lingua franca, it serves as the vessel for achieving scientific and technological breakthroughs, higher finance and educational modernization in an ever-growing global society (Taguchi, 2014). Therefore, the widespread incorporation of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education should not come as a shock to universities. Taguchi (2014) states that the aim of EMI is to teach curricula using the English language in basic and advanced university courses in order to improve student's academic English proficiency. By doing so, EMI develops individual's general and specialized knowledge in their field of study; it increases students' competitiveness in the global job market and broadens their skill set. According to Taguchi (2014), English is seen as a tool for academic teaching, not as a subject on its own.

2.1. English-medium instruction trends in Europe

Why EMI? According to Macaro (2015), EMI is becoming the primary development area for more and more university managers who share the belief that their institution has to stand out on a global scale in order to progress and in the end gain additional finance. He goes on arguing that the global scale of student mobility would reach around 7 million students by 2020 (Macaro, 2015). The financial revenue gathered from the incoming foreign exchange students would not remain centralized on campus since these students consequently increase the demographics of the selected destination over a short period of time from which the local economy benefits as well.

In order to meet demand for highly sought-for EMI study programs, European universities as well as their Asian counterparts began responding to student enquiries by offering them numerous English-taught programs. Possibly, the most comprehensive source of European EMI education is the website StudyPortals.eu. This EMI higher education website boasts one of the most in-depth search engines regarding English-taught bachelor's and master's degree courses from top schools and universities in more than fifty countries worldwide as well as the opportunity to search and apply for more than a thousand grants and scholarships to gather additional finance. A fairly recent study conducted by Neghina (2016) provided insight into, what she ranks, the world's top 1000 universities EMI programs offer for international students. Neghina (2016) argues that even though the field of EMI is still overwhelmed by inner-circle countries (US, Canada, the UK and Australia), there is a notable increase in study options offered by European countries aiming to compete for their share of brain power (see table 1).

Table 1

Top European universities offering EMI programs for international students

Country	Number of top European Universities offering EMI programs	Number of EMI programs offered to international students
The United Kingdom	65	18,321
Ireland	6	1,165
The Netherlands	12	1,034
Germany	54	835
Sweden	12	550
Denmark	7	482
Spain	27	426
Switzerland	10	413
Finland	9	240
Italy	28	230

These results are further backed up by research carried out and published in 2014 by the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) and edited by Wachter and Maiworm. According to ACA research results, the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden lead the EMI movement in Europe, as indicated in the table above. Interestingly, the top-tier countries listed are not the ones experiencing a boom in EMI study program development with Polish and Estonian universities seeing an above average growth rate in 2014 (ACA, 2015). Surely there must be goals universities are pursuing during this ongoing process. Among other reasons, the ACA claims that the universities included in their research reported that some of the more important reasons to

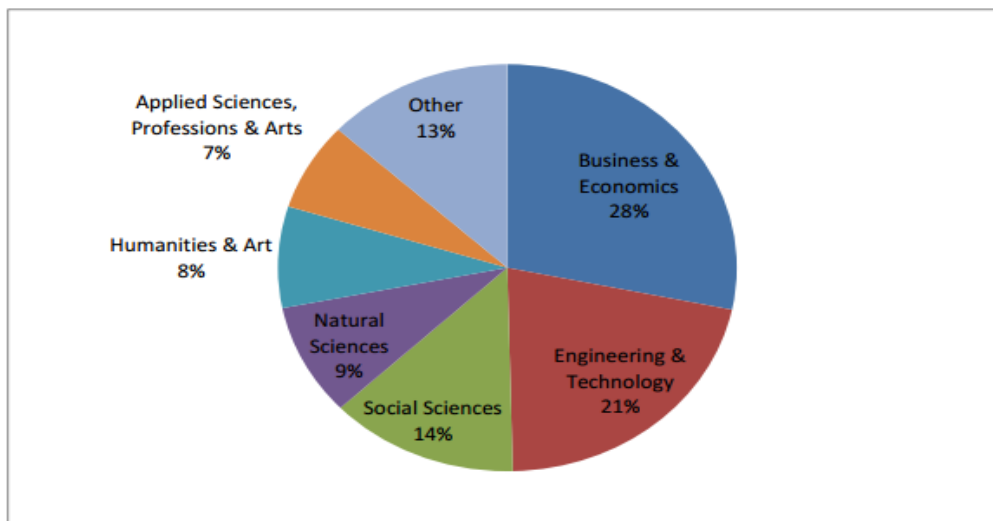
introduce EMI programs are “an international profile and awareness of the institutions as well as the strengthening of cooperation with foreign partner universities and institutions” (Neghina, 2015).

2.2. University offer

Internationally mobile students tend to select their target universities based on the quality of facilities it offers. Their information mostly comes from university websites from which they decide if their chosen university meets their academic expectations, mobility program requirements and budget (OECD, 2014). University disciplines taught at university level within EMI study programs did not change significantly even though the overall number of EMI programs noted an increase over the years. According to Brenn-White and Faethe (2013) the most popular study fields are business and economics, followed by engineering and technology. Other fields of study include social sciences, natural sciences, humanities and art, applied sciences and other professions and arts (see Table 2.).

Table 2

Subject matter in EMI Master’s programs in June 2013



A clear indicator that European universities are moving in the right direction with EMI development is the fact that according to research carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) almost 40% of total foreign students are hosted in the European Union (EU) with 78% of those students being EU citizens (Unites, 2014).

With such a large number of English-taught university programs, issues regarding curriculum content should be tackled as well, i.e. should the curriculum itself be modified to encompass more international content (Wachter and Maiworm, 2015)? The ACA elaborates on this issue by naming some aspects of this internationalized curriculum which should be taken into consideration if such changes would come into place. These include: specifically designed course content for foreign students, degree integration i.e. providing students with double degrees, specially designed courses aimed at enhancing students' intercultural abilities, and the introduction of a mandatory mobility window within the curriculum which would include a study abroad period and a mandatory work placement for foreign exchange students in their designated study destinations in order to provide a practical aspect to the study experience (Wachter and Maiworm, 2015).

One of the primary issues which universities across Europe have to address are related to reduced state funding, an aging population and an increasing influence of labor markets on higher education (Unites, 2014). As stated above, around 78% of internationally mobile students hosted at European universities are from EU countries. This statistic reflects the unsuccessfulness of European higher education to promote itself beyond EU borders, thus penetrating the Asian and American higher education area. A clear example of this is brought forward by Phillipson (2015) who states that the increasing dependency on funding directly from student scholarships is visible in British higher education. Namely, the British government went

as far as establishing an agency whose goal would be to increase the number of incoming foreign exchange students to British universities from Middle-Eastern countries and from India with the aim to raise anywhere from 14 billion to 21.5 billion British pounds per year until 2020.

3 Strengths and weaknesses of English-medium instruction

To name but a few strengths and weaknesses of this educational innovation, EMI is widely recognized as an approach that largely contributes to the integration of EU higher education. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, students of CLIL are subject to intensive language learning alongside their usual course workload which makes CLIL a teaching approach that largely contributes to students' language proficiency as well as their academic knowledge. According to Graddol (2006), university teachers in CLIL are expected to convey not only the relevant subject matter but also engage students in discussions, problem-solving, negotiation and class participation. This leads to an aspect of EMI that is very often a double-edged sword. As mentioned in the previous chapter, university teachers that tend to consider themselves capable of teaching subject matter in a foreign language sometimes underperform when it comes to actual course conduct damaging the quality of the course itself which would surely be at a higher level if taught in the L1. Better ranked universities are more likely to lure highly rated university teachers fluent in English, which leads to an even greater gap in the quality of education provided; for example, between top English, Dutch or German universities and smaller scale universities. A possible solution which would allow us to bridge the quality gap is to offer language support to university teachers. Overall, the level of English among students and teachers impacts the quality of education, particularly the quality of lecturing, discussion and class participation (Drljača Margić and Vodopija Krstanović, 2015). Other positive aspects include international student mobility and the ensuing development of multicultural and skills as well as better employability. In contrast, Drljača Margić and Vodopija Krstanović (2015) argue that universities are creating specialist who operate in the English language realm and might meet challenges when carrying work-related task and activities in their native language.

4 Student mobility

As countries become increasingly intertwined in the global market, governments are looking to higher education institutions to a proper number of graduate students equipped with international study and/or work experience, consciousness about multiculturalism, globalization and possibly even multilingual (OECD, 2014). That high demand for internationally competent students serves as an incentive for students to travel abroad and gain valuable international experience which they need to become or remain competitive in the labor market (OECD, 2014). To increase international student mobility has become a top priority objective for countries inside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the last couple of decades (Wachter and Maiworm, 2014).

4.1. Erasmus+

The most prominent mobility program is by far the EU exchange student program Erasmus+ which acts as the middleman between students and their target universities since the late 1980s. Erasmus+ is an exchange service which provides students with appropriate scholarships and the opportunity to study abroad mostly at universities that promote EMI study programs encompassing EU countries, three European Economic Area (EEA) countries (Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway) and Turkey as a candidate country to enter the EU (Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2008). The program is based on university cooperation across Europe as universities must have signed contracts in order to send and/or receive foreign exchange students and teaching staff. Students and/or teaching staff can choose to study/work abroad from three up to twelve months in each study cycle (undergraduate, graduate or doctoral) and are presented with traineeship opportunities after exiting their university.

International mobility through programs such as the Erasmus+ program has been extremely simplified after the Bologna Process was launched in 1999. As stated by EHEA the main objective of this ambitious project was to ensure a more compatible system of higher education across the EU. Consequently, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is known by domestic and international students as a method of calculating course workload and facilitating international student mobility as an integral part of the Erasmus+ study exchange program.

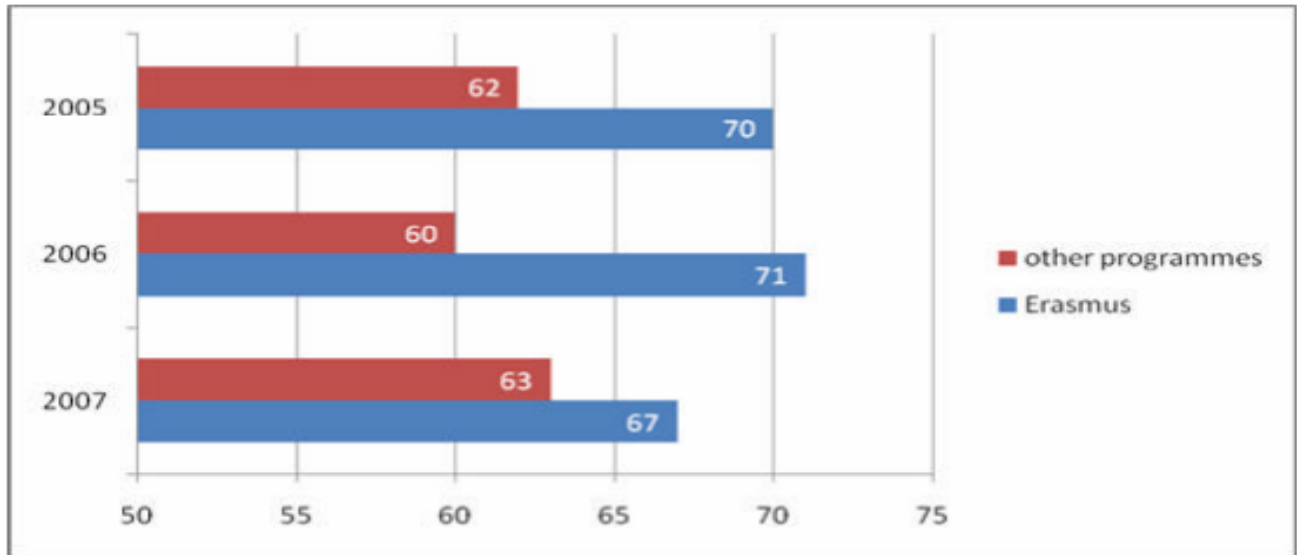
Over the last three Erasmus+ decades, the language used and spoken at universities is one of the underlying factors determining students' choice of study destination. It is safe to say that destinations whose languages are widely spoken, such as Russian, Spanish, French, German and, of course, English are top contenders for luring foreign students to their respective universities (OECD, 2014).

4.2. Erasmus+ and multiculturalism

Another social aspect endorsed by Erasmus+ is multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue. An in-depth survey conducted by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in 2007 and presented by two Polish teaching assistants from the Jagiellonian University brought forward valuable information regarding student reasons for choosing the Erasmus+ program. One of the reasons, particularly important for students with average or below average family income, is that the Erasmus+ mobility program involves EU scholarships provided to a number of academically more successful students (see Table 3.)

Table 3

Percentage of students with average or below average family income participating in Erasmus+ and other mobility programs



Furthermore, the findings suggest that social and cultural experiences are considered most important when it comes to the level of student satisfaction with international student mobility. In addition, the ESN survey categorizes students into two groups: career-oriented and experience-oriented and gives an interesting view on what students consider most important when travelling abroad (Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2008).

Table 4

Career-oriented and experience-oriented students

	Career - oriented	Experience - oriented
Reasons for going abroad indicated as important in survey	To improve academic knowledge To enhance future employment prospects To practice foreign language	To have new experiences To learn about different cultures To have fun To meet new people To be independent To live in a foreign country
Student groups who were more likely to belong to specific category	Non Erasmus exchange students Females with lower family income coming from South (e.g. Spain) Central and East European Countries (e.g. Poland) ³ Older	Erasmus students Males with higher family income coming from West and North European countries Younger
Quote	<i>With my Erasmus Program I had the opportunity to start an international work career</i> (Bruno Fernandes)	<i>I always wanted to smell freedom and independence</i> (Katerina Markova)

4.3. Erasmus+ at UNIRI

In order for a non-English speaking country, such as Croatia, to successfully participate in a foreign exchange program such as Erasmus+, certain educational and university standards have to be met. One of the most important prerequisite is an adequate number of courses and/or entire study programs offered in the English language. Without it university stature within the Erasmus+ community is severely affected.

EMI has been fueling international exchange making skilled and experienced teaching staff adopt English as their language of instruction. The University of Rijeka (UNIRI), the

second largest university in Croatia and the context under study joined the ERASMUS+ mobility program in 2009, when the Erasmus Charter was signed. However, the lack of study programs and individual courses taught in languages other than Croatian stands as the biggest weakness of Croatian higher education. This stems from the fact that Croatian university teachers are not used to conduct their courses in a foreign language (Lenac, 2008), although, according to Drljača Margić and Vodopija Krstanović (2015), half of 73 lecturers at UNIRI consider themselves capable of teaching course content in a foreign language; while a mere 12.3% do not feel competent of fulfilling the task. Despite the lack of full EMI study programs, faculties actively participate in the Erasmus+ mobility program along with several other programs. These faculties include the Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Maritime Studies along with the Faculty of Economics and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences both of which have established EMI study programs (Sveučilište u Rijeci, 2016). The university is showing improvement each year with more and more students choosing to study abroad at least for one semester. In recent years UNIRI has managed to increase its outgoing exchange student count from 35 students, 7 university staff members and zero incoming foreign students in the 2009/2010 academic year, to approximately 137 students and 25 staff members outgoing and 150 incoming students during the 2014/2015 academic year (Sveučilište u Rijeci, 2016).

5 EMI at the University of Rijeka

The introduction of multiple university programs conducted in foreign languages has been a goal for the UNIRI since Croatia's inception into the Bologna process of higher education. Despite the idea of a universal education system, the initial Bologna process did not require one specific language (in this case English) to become the "lingua franca" of European higher education (Graddol, 2006). The idea of academic improvement is supported by the 2007 and 2014 printed Strategy of UNIRI that states numerous ideas which are set to improve the quality of Croatian universities if put into practice. Consequently, one goal brought forward in the strategy from 2007 was an increase in the number of university programs taught in a foreign language to ten (Strategija Sveučilišta u Rijeci 2007-2013). Unfortunately, so far UNIRI has witnessed an introduction of only one study program at the Faculty of Economics. As a result students enrolled at that faculty have the opportunity to study *International Business* or its Croatian equivalent *Međunarodno poslovanje*.

Nonetheless, the idea of EMI study programs at the UNIRI was not abandoned and was again introduced in the 2014 Strategy of UNIRI. The new strategy aims to fulfill its goals in the period from 2014 to 2020 and is sets the bar higher by promising the introduction of up to twenty university programs taught entirely in a foreign language (Strategija Sveučilišta u Rijeci 2014-2020). Although EMI has been neglected at UNIRI, the university managed to establish itself at European level by engaging in several student and staff mobility programs provided by student organizations such as AIESEC or IAESTE as well as signing of the Erasmus Charter in 2009 (Sveučilište u Rijeci, 2016). Consequently, alongside the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Maritime Studies and the Faculty of Engineering note an increase of both Erasmus+ and

CEEPUS incoming students, despite lacking complete EMI programs. On the other hand, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Medicine are slightly lagging behind when it comes to number of courses offered in English. The above mentioned faculties make up for the lack of EMI study programs by introducing individual courses taught in the English language and even some in French, Italian and German (Fakultet za Menadžment u Turizmu i Ugostiteljstvu, 2016). An example being the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management which offers twelve undergraduate and four graduate courses in the forthcoming winter semester as well as fourteen undergraduate and four graduate courses in the summer semester for the same (2016/2017) academic year (Fakultet za Menadžment u Turizmu i Ugostiteljstvu, 2016).

6 Foreign exchange student study experiences at European universities

In view of the fact that the attitudes and experiences of international students have been underrepresented in the relevant literature on EMI, international mobility support website StudyPortals.com in addition to providing around-the-clock support to international students before and during their mobility, also includes collecting student feedback regarding various aspects¹ of their study period abroad, and boasts slightly above 173 600 study reviews posted by international students of various nationalities.

Exclusively for contrastive purposes six reviews have been chosen for further commentary on several key aspects of the study abroad period. These aspects include academic and university services and facilities provided to foreign exchange students during their stay at the receiving university. Reviews found on StudyPortals.com and presented in this paper have been posted publicly and anonymously on the website and can be accessed freely. For the purposes of this paper students are differentiated by nationality, length of mobility², study destination, and will be labeled in alphabetical order starting with “Student A” and ending with “Student F”.

Countries of choice for these students were Spain (University of Valencia and University of Barcelona), Germany (Darmstadt University of Technology), Finland (University of Turku) and Poland (Academy of Hotel Management and Catering Industry in Poznan and Philological School of Higher Education in Wroclaw), which are all EU member countries and active participants in the Erasmus student exchange program.

¹ The aspects reviewed by students were: accommodation, costs and funding, social life, practicalities, academics, university services and facilities.

An important issue common to both Spanish universities is that two separate languages were often used in lectures which posed difficulties for exchange students. Student A³ commented on in-class participation and discussion stating that discussions conducted in the English language were “good to follow and nice to participate”⁴, however, discussions held in Spanish⁵ were not considered as productive but rather “hard to follow and even harder to participate”. Despite language setbacks both students (A and B)⁶ reported a high quality of lecture conduct and student – teacher interaction with lectures being “quite intensive”⁷ and teachers taking you “as seriously as they take local students”⁸ (StudyPortals, 2013). Other positive aspects highlighted by students A and B are: a) communication and cooperation with other foreign and domestic students, b) supportive administrative services and c) quality accommodation services provided by universities at reasonable pricing (StudyPortals, 2013).

Difficulties concerning the lack of EMI courses were reported by student C⁹ staying at the Darmstadt University of Technology in Darmstadt, Germany. Student C comments on these language difficulties by stating that “there are some courses in English but most are held in German”¹⁰, and it is clearly suggested that other incoming students should brush up on their German proficiency through intensive preparatory “language courses offered by the university before the beginning of the semester” (StudyPortals, 2012). Conversely, students D, E and F, participating in student exchanges in Finland and Poland did not have negative comments

³ Dutch exchange student at the University of Barcelona, Spain. Source of original review: <http://www.stexx.eu/students/experience/8942/barcelona-spain.html>

⁴ Quote reproduced in its original form.

⁵ Possibly due to larger numbers of domestic students present in the lectures. Further research is needed to clarify.

⁶ Slovak exchange student at the University of Valencia, Spain. Source of original review: <http://www.stexx.eu/students/experience/74048/university-of-valencia-spain.html>

⁷ Quote reproduced in its original form.

⁸ Quote reproduced in its original form.

⁹ Italian exchange student at the Darmstadt University of Technology, Germany. Source of original review: <http://www.stexx.eu/students/experience/20658/darmstadt-university-of-technology-germany.html>

¹⁰ Quote reproduced in its original form.

regarding the lack of EMI courses provided by their respective universities, but rather the opposite, with student F¹¹ stating that the university “offers a variety of courses in many different areas related to Humanities which are taught in English, Spanish and Polish”¹² and student E¹³ commenting that despite providing EMI courses to international students, the “teachers were not speaking English” (StudyPortals, 2007). Thus, intensive language courses provided by the Poznan Language Academy similar to those provided by the Darmstadt University of Technology in Germany, were provided (StudyPortals, 2007). When it comes to university facilities provided to international students, Student F situated in Wroclaw, Poland noted that the university provided “good services and facilities”¹⁴ singling out the university library. On the other hand, student E located in Poznan, Poland observed that his/her Academy of Hotel Management and Catering Industry lacked “experience about the overall exchange student process and information about the Erasmus student exchange program”¹⁵ (StudyPortals, 2007). The only review complimenting EMI courses, English language proficiency and the overall study experience including provided accommodation, course conduct and student-teacher interaction was given by student D¹⁶ placed at the University of Turku.

To summarize, it is interesting to note that although EMI is deeply rooted in Western European higher education students participating in international mobility programs encountered difficulties with languages used in courses at universities in Darmstadt, Barcelona and Valencia. It is important to say, however, that the issue in Spain was not the lack of EMI courses provided

¹¹ Portuguese exchange student at the Philological School of Higher Education in Wroclaw, Poland. Source of original review: <http://www.stexx.eu/students/experience/88285/blank.html>

¹² Quote reproduced in its original form.

¹³ Turkish exchange student at the Academy of Hotel Management and Catering Industry in Poznan, Poland. Source of original review: <http://www.stexx.eu/students/experience/17686/poznan-poland.html>

¹⁴ Quote reproduced in its original form.

¹⁵ Quote reproduced in its original form.

¹⁶ Spanish exchange student at the University of Turku, Finland. Source of original review: <http://www.stexx.eu/students/experience/23148/natural-sciences-mathematics-university-of-turku-finland.html>

to international students but rather the mixture of English and Spanish in class which made discussions and class participation difficult if not impossible for incoming international students. On the other hand, the EMI course offer at the Darmstadt University of Technology is scarce as they promote courses taught in German and provide intensive language courses to those interested in becoming proficient enough to successfully complete these courses.

Finnish and Polish universities seem to experience a boom in EMI and are becoming more and more recognized in the European Higher Education Area as potential study exchange destinations. According to the reviews brought forward in this chapter, Polish and Finnish universities seem to be a safer choice for students who do not speak the country's L1 since the possibility of bilingual course conduct is virtually non-existent while at the same time being provided with a high-quality university standard and an enriching cultural experience.

7 The present study

7.1. Aims

This study aims to enquire into academic satisfaction of incoming students with the overall study exchange experience at the UNIRI at the faculties which do not offer established English-medium instruction (EMI) undergraduate or graduate study programs, but do offer a select number of courses taught in the English language and several other languages. Specifically, it investigates: 1) motivation before mobility, 2) experiences with course conduct and teaching staff, 3) quality of academic English at UNIRI, and 4) satisfaction with the overall quality of academic life at UNIRI.

7.2. Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what degree are foreign exchange students supported academically before and during their mobility period at UNIRI?
2. What is the level of satisfaction among international students at UNIRI regarding the quality of courses conducted and the level of English as a medium of instruction?
3. What do foreign exchange students identify as faults in the study process at UNIRI?

7.3. Context and participants

Research for this study was conducted at UNIRI, an active member of multiple international student mobility programs such as Erasmus+ and CEEPUS, and Croatia's second largest university. During the academic year 2013/2014 the university had a total of 48 active

undergraduate and 50 graduate degree programs, and 25 post-graduate specialist degree programs as well as 17 doctoral studies with the number of students participating in all three study cycles exceeding 17 500, which is in a constant rise since 2007 (Strategija Sveučilišta u Rijeci 2014/2020, 2014).

The participants in the research were 13 international students participating in Erasmus+ mobility program at four UNIRI faculties, namely the Faculty of Civil Engineering (15.4%), Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management (38.5%), Faculty of Law (30.8%) and the Faculty of Medicine (7.7%) with one student taking courses at multiple faculties. Participants in this research are students from Germany, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Spain, and the Czech Republic. Most participants (84.6%) are studying at UNIRI for one semester only, while the rest (15.4%) are staying for an entire academic year. Out of the 13 participants 23.1% are graduate students, 46.2% are seniors, 23.1% of students are in their junior year, while one student (7.7%) is a sophomore. None of the participants possess prior study exchange experience.

7.4. Research method

The data presented in this research paper was collected by way of an online questionnaire written in the English language and filled out anonymously. The survey was distributed online via e-mail and social media platforms to a sample of 50 foreign exchange students that have participated in the Erasmus+ study exchange program at UNIRI. Out of the selected 50 students a total of 13 students responded to the survey. The survey was divided into three parts: 1) general information, 2) experiences with courses and teaching staff, and 3) overall study experience. The first part comprised nine questions regarding background information such as their country of origin, current year of study, length of mobility at UNIRI, and prior study exchange experience. Other information provided by participants in this section included the name of the mobility

program they participated in, their respective faculty of choice at UNIRI and reasons for choosing it, and finally feedback regarding information channels through which they gathered mobility program related data. The second part included 16 questions designed to provide insight into student – teacher relations and the level of administrative support provided to foreign exchange students, the level of English possessed by teachers both in oral and written form as presented in handouts, possible difficulties regarding language proficiency and understanding course material, the number of domestic and foreign students attending their courses, and forms of midterm and final exam assessment. In the third part, participants were asked to comment on the overall student exchange experience taking into consideration similarities and differences in teaching methods at their home university and at UNIRI. Participants also gave insight regarding problems they encountered when seeking administrative support and commented on the introduction of entire EMI programs into the UNIRI offer.

7.5. Research results

The findings suggest that a substantial number of participants had positive experiences regarding academic and administrative support at their receiving faculty, as 92.3% of participants state that they contacted teaching staff via e-mail, and teachers were in most cases (84.6%) very responsive. They also express their satisfaction regarding student – teacher communication by stating that teachers are often “friendly and open minded” (9), “open to consultations and conversation” (3), and conscious about students’ difficulties with adapting to a new academic environment, so they provide constant support throughout the length of the mobility. A small number of participants note their dissatisfaction with faculty staff and administration arguing that the bulk of the information they got was from peers as “not all staff is open for conversation to help” (13).

Although 76.9% of participants attend a study program at their home university conducted entirely in the L1, the findings show that none of the students had major difficulties in understanding subject matter due to a lack of English proficiency. They express their dissatisfaction with teachers' "fast English speech" (2) when conducting lessons, and the fact that "parts of some lectures were held in Croatian" (3), the latter occurring mostly when domestic students asked for further clarification of subject matter. The same issue appeared in chapter 5 with the example of exchange students attending Spanish universities. In the case of the teachers, 76.9% of participants rated their English proficiency as very good and excellent while 23.1% were not as impressed labeling the teaching staff as average.

When asked about the number of foreign students attending courses with them, participants say that the number of foreign exchange students attending the same courses varies from one to ten or more students. There may be several possible reasons for this discrepancy in numbers, some of which are: strict selection of courses based on a set of rules of the Erasmus+ learning agreement, the possibility of choosing only from the list of electives, or even that the overall number of exchange students is below five exchange students per semester at some faculties at UNIRI. On the other hand, the number of Croatian students attending the same courses also varies from courses with one to ten and more depending on the faculty and the courses. One possibility for this is that domestic students choose these courses as electives in order to strengthen their professional English proficiency. However, 30.8% of participants noted that there were no domestic students in the courses they attended. Nonetheless, further inquiry into the topic is needed.

The teachers do not refrain from promoting in-class participation, and 61.6% of participants noted that teachers tend to provide opportunities for student participation, while 53.9% seldom engage in discussion (see tables 5 and 6).

Table 5

Frequency of in-class discussions promoted by teachers

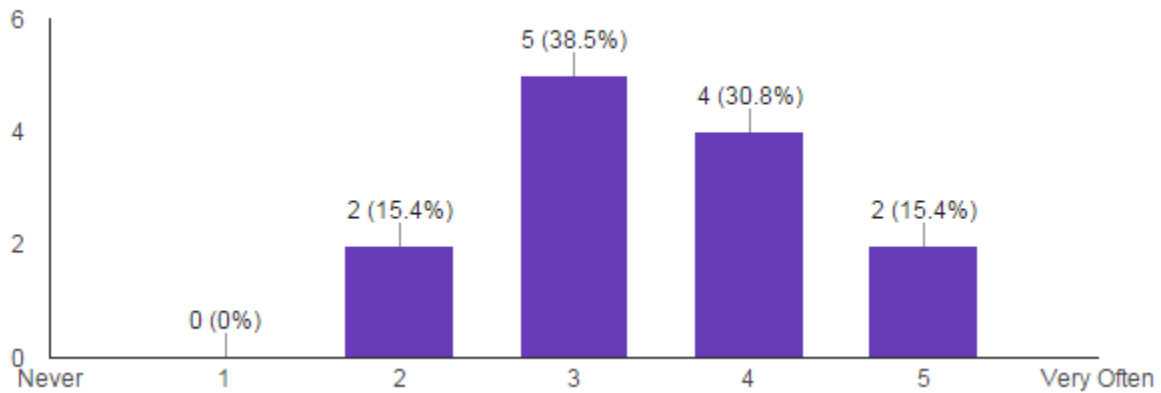
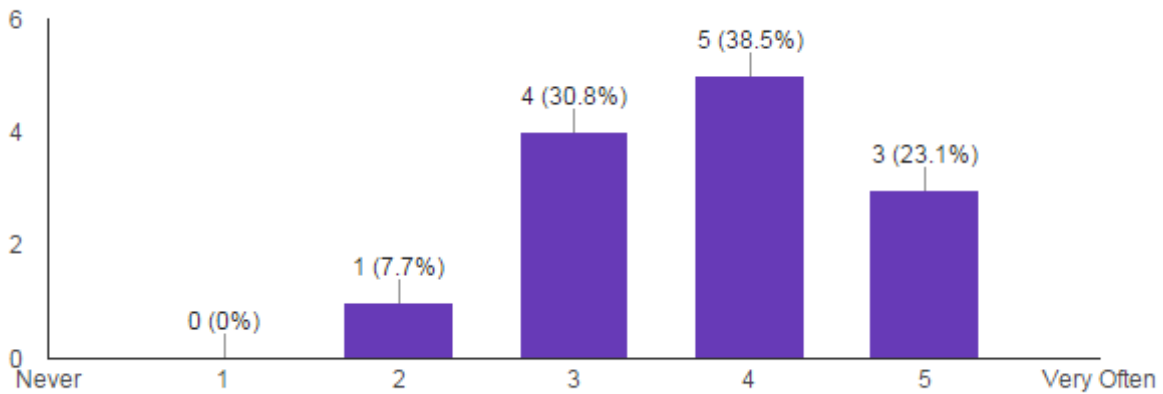


Table 6

Frequency of opportunities for in-class participation provided by teachers.



Lectures attended by foreign students were held regularly, as 92.3% of students were attending courses every week, while only one student was instructed via personal consultations

with the teacher. The majority of participants (84.7%) grade the level of written English in course materials and handouts as very good and excellent.

Although participants praise teaching and administrative staff regarding academic support during the period of their mobility, they criticize several aspects of the overall study exchange experience, stemming from an overly casual approach to work and class-related obligations. Some of the aspects participants criticize are: a) course schedule described as “overrated at UNIRI” (2), with courses being re-scheduled on demand; b) course offer in English, which proved to be the biggest issue at the Faculty of Law since participants noted they had no use of some courses since they “had to enroll in certain courses strictly related to Croatian law and legislation in order to get ECTS points” (3); and finally, c) the issue of administration that tends to last longer than expected when solving specific issues and/or providing information to students. Students criticized the speed of exam correction, deviations from lesson plans and the speed of information distribution among students and teachers.

Participants were also asked to compare teaching methods at UNIRI and their home universities. Participants commented on differences in teaching effort stating that “at UNIRI the approach was more personal because of less people attending class” (8) than at their home university. Furthermore, several participants from different universities emphasized the importance of projects and practical work as an integral part of university courses with exams being less important if not even redundant at UNIRI. When discussing this issue, students noted that, for example, “in Finland [they] do a lot of projects and exams only sometimes” (1), while others report a lack midterm tests, only “final exam at the end of the semester” (2) with semester requirements comprising “maybe a presentation or an essay” (2). It seems that the participants

consider student projects and practical work to be even more productive teaching methods at university level after they have experienced a more theoretical approach to teaching at UNIRI.

As final remarks in the research, participants were asked if they believed the incorporation of entire EMI study programs at the university level would make the overall study exchange easier, and the results show that a high percentage (92.3%) of students strongly agree that this would improve the quality of student exchange at UNIRI.

8 Discussion

Students participating in study exchange programs at UNIRI are provided with a narrow range of possibilities from which to choose since the bulk of university programs at UNIRI are conducted in the Croatian language. Nonetheless, faculties with no English-medium instructed undergraduate or graduate programs actively participate in mobility programs such as Erasmus+ and CEEPUS with the aim to gain international recognition within the European Higher Education Area. Students are therefore left with the choice of individual EMI courses provided by various departments within each faculty in order to fulfill their own university requirements.

Research results show that foreign exchange students participating in the Erasmus+ study exchange program at UNIRI are generally satisfied with the quality of courses offered in English and the level of English as a medium of instruction despite attending faculties that do not provide complete English-medium instructed study programs at both undergraduate or graduate study cycles. Students at faculties such as the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management and the Faculty of Engineering are provided with a substantial amount of individual EMI courses that seem to be sufficient for the students to fulfill their Erasmus+ requirements. Given that UNIRI offers only one EMI study program, provided by the Faculty of Economics, it does not yet have an organized English language support program for teachers conducting individual EMI courses. Despite the lack of linguistic support for university teachers, academic staff are “willing to teach in English” (Drljača Margić and Vodopija Krstanović, 2015: 53) and seem confident enough to conduct EMI courses at a level which proves to be satisfactory to foreign exchange students.

This claim is supported by survey results which show a substantial number of participants (76.9%) praising teacher’s vocabulary range and an even greater percentage (84.7%) complimenting the level of written English in course materials and handouts. Although the level

of English presented by university teachers was sufficient for conducting EMI courses, foreign exchange students did not refrain from mild criticism by stating that even though they did not have difficulties in understanding lectures, the level of English should be at a higher level, especially when engaging in discussion. A mere 46.2% of students claimed teachers actively promoted and engaged in discussion which is beyond expectation considering the number of students grading the language of instruction as decent. This is possibly due to the level of conversational English possessed by the teachers or simply due to the structure of the courses themselves, which sometimes leave no room for participation. This requires further attention since questions from this survey do not cover the issue.

The level of English possessed by foreign exchange students seems high enough for them to successfully finish a study cycle abroad even though their domestic education is, in most cases, conducted in the L1 and all of the research participants are studying abroad for the first time. Teachers, on the other hand, are those who are ongoing participants in international conferences and are guest teachers at foreign universities, and therefore, expected to perform at a higher level when teaching their EMI courses. As foreign exchange students are required to fulfill English language requirements upon applying for an Erasmus+ (and any other) mobility program, it should be also introduced as mandatory for university teachers to provide proof of English language proficiency at a minimum C1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) grading scheme (cf. Drljača Margić and Vodopija Krstanović, 2015). This positive feedback regarding student satisfaction with individual EMI courses at UNIRI must not lead to complacency on behalf of UNIRI in the process of establishing (additional) EMI study programs and individual courses since all research participants fully support the introduction of additional EMI study programs claiming it will

benefit future incoming students. It should also prove as incentive to provide current teaching staff with adequate linguistic support to increase the quality of the existing EMI offer and ultimately provide a higher quality of education for both foreign and domestic students willing to participate in EMI programs.

Administrative student mobility support proved to be at a satisfactory level with research participants commenting positively on support provided before their mobility, however, during mobility issues emerged regarding course scheduling, administration working hours and speed of problem solving.

Some of these issues could stem from the fact that foreign exchange students are sometimes marginalized in courses where the majority of participants are domestic students. This could lead to exchange students being given fewer course assignments and excused from attending midterm tests and/or final exams, with course assessment being specifically designed for these groups of students. These claims are not supported within this survey and demand further inquiry into the subject. Possible solutions to these problems, as suggested by research participants, is to enforce consistency and adherence of deadlines among teaching staff, and constant improvement of lesson plans and course obligations based on previous experiences with exchange students.

The majority of students criticized the overly theoretical approach to course conduct, which mostly includes an ex-cathedra teaching approach with students taking the role of passive recipients. Criticism is based on students study background at universities where (according to survey results) curricula promotes student research projects in place of midterm tests, and an approach that focuses more on practice than theory. Finding a quality university equipped with state-of-the-art research facilities is also considered a top priority among Asian students going on

mobility programs in Europe. As noted in research conducted by Hadas (2006), the quality of study and research programs aimed at fields which are not available in students' home institutions are what many underlined as most important when choosing a study destination. Also, both research and practice opportunities have been noted as aspects from which exchange students benefited the most. The students interviewed by Hadas (2007: 52-56) commented on the importance of research by saying that they "chose to study in Europe because a lot of work in Archaeology, especially in prehistory, is going on in Europe", as well as to "broaden [their] knowledge and experiences from leading universities as well as to get exposure to modern technology".

The idea of introducing more practice-oriented content into the existing theory-based lesson plans within several study programs might improve the desirability of UNIRI on an international level. It might also improve the number and overall satisfaction of incoming exchange students who are used to such a teaching system. At this point numerous strategic goals of improvement have already been suggested by the Strategy of UNIRI 2014-2020, however, the introduction of student projects and more practical content is not mentioned among academic goals for the designated time period.

To ensure a brighter future for EMI and student mobility at UNIRI, greater cooperation among faculties and other institutions within the university is required as well as alumni who are willing and able to contribute through research to the field and course development. With the number of incoming students at Croatian universities constantly on the rise, surveys regarding foreign exchange student experiences with EMI and all other aspects of student mobility at UNIRI should be considered invaluable in the internationalization process of UNIRI, as they provide much needed feedback regarding courses, quality of teaching and administration. Such

research is best for pinpointing the faults in the study process which need to be corrected by teaching staff or by teachers individually in order to accomplish higher-quality course conduct. All students participating in the Erasmus+ exchange program participate in obligatory in-depth post-mobility surveys conducted by their university's Office of International Relations and the Erasmus+ mobility program itself. However, these surveys enquire into their socio-cultural and academic experiences abroad with the goal of improving future mobility experiences. An example of this is a survey conducted yearly by the ESN which enquires into local integration of exchange students, financial impact of international mobility on local economy, financial support provided to mobility students, and support from student associations provided to mobility students (ESN, 2015). Little effort is put into surveying incoming students on behalf of the receiving university (in this case UNIRI) during and after their stay on campus. Although limited by the number of possible participants due to a small number (72)¹⁷ of Erasmus+ students enrolled at UNIRI, this survey provided student feedback which opened up space for further enquiry into the topic (Ured za međunarodnu suradnju UNIRI, 2016).

¹⁷ Information provided via e-mail by the UNIRI International Relations Office.

9 Conclusion

The study sheds some light on EMI and student mobility (at UNIRI) experience largely missing from relevant topic-related literature. Since the introduction of the Strategy of UNIRI 2007-2013, the importance of academic reform has been acknowledged, although little has been put into practice regarding the development of EMI at the university level. Unfortunately, field research conducted by scholars has been, and still is, limited to a handful of university teachers devoted to promoting EMI higher education. Academic and financial support provided by higher instances still remains out of reach as the internationalization of UNIRI and a transition to more than one EMI study program seems far from prioritized. This relatively small-scale inquiry into student satisfaction with EMI and mobility at UNIRI briefly shifts focus from former research aimed at domestic students and teachers to questions concerning incoming foreign exchange students and their experiences with the current EMI situation at UNIRI. There is an improvement in UNIRI's status as a host institution, rather than just a sending institution, within mobility programs such as Erasmus+ and CEEPUS. Over half a decade in, surveys enquiring into student satisfaction are still mostly conducted by offices such as the Office of International Relations and/or the Erasmus Student Network with a common goal of enhancing the quality of academic support provided to outgoing students. In light of the current EMI situation at UNIRI being fairly stagnant, it is necessary to promote research aimed at students (both foreign and domestic) in order to build academic foundations for future EMI study programs based on constructive criticism and feedback extracted from end users.

We hope that the present study will kick-start further research into the subject matter, which would help fill gaps in subject-related literature. Several questions emerged that require further attention:

- How can UNIRI provide language assistance to teachers of EMI courses and administrative staff?
- How can university teachers make adjustments to lesson plans in order to cater to exchange students' study habits?
- What can be done to (further) develop domestic students' interest in EMI?

Certainly, much time and effort needs to be put into surveying the field in order to answer the questions above and many more which will emerge in the process. It will surely be a considerable leap in EMI research at UNIRI, which will hopefully speed the process of establishing additional EMI study programs, ultimately providing a higher quality education for both foreign and domestic students.

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