



Executive Agency, Education, Audiovisual and Culture



IEREST - Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers

Final Report

Public Part

Project information

Project acronym: IEREST
Project title: Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers
Project number: 527373-LLP-1-2012-1-IT-ERASMUS-ESMO
Sub-programme or KA: ERASMUS
Project website: <http://ierest-project.eu/>

Reporting period: From 01/10/2012
To 30/09/2015
Report version: 1
Date of preparation: 24/10/2015

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.

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Executive Summary

More than 25 years after the launch of the Erasmus Programme, fostering youth mobility and developing the intercultural competencies of the younger generation remain crucial issues within Europe. The IEREST project met these needs by developing, testing and disseminating an *Intercultural Path* (namely, a set of teaching modules) to be provided to Erasmus students before, during, and after their experience abroad, in order to encourage learning mobility, support students and enable them to benefit as much as possible from their international experiences in terms of personal growth and intercultural competencies. Besides developing the intercultural education resources for the teaching modules, the project aimed to foster the institutionalization of the *Intercultural Paths* within HEIs, in order to make the practice of providing Erasmus students with intercultural services the rule rather than the exception.

IEREST was carried out by five partners (University of Bologna; Durham University; University of Savoy Mont Blanc, Chambéry; University of Primorska, Koper; University of Leuven), which had complementary expertise, ranging from study abroad, Erasmus mobility and internationalisation, to intercultural education and communication, and intercultural language education. The project also involved three associate partners, representing the main IEREST target users: students (AEGEE-Europe), teachers (AEDE-Hungary) and international affairs officers and stakeholders (Thomas More Kempen, Belgium).

With the aim of developing a research-based *Intercultural path* which would also respond to the real needs of mobile students, teachers, and HEIs, a multifaceted project methodology was set up: firstly, an extensive review of the three target users' needs (including a student questionnaire which obtained 3,152 responses) was carried out; then the partners designed, piloted and tested the activities in four different partner institutions; finally, the activities were fine-tuned and published online as open educational resources.

Overall, ten teaching activities were designed, divided into three modules, the first to be taught before departure, the second while the students are abroad, and the third upon return. The IEREST activities do not prepare students to adapt to a specific place, by providing practical information on given institutions, cities or countries. Rather, the aim is to make students aware of what is involved in intercultural communication, by for example promoting the ideas that people are different but also similar across and within countries, and have multiple identities. All activities, together with additional materials and services, are freely downloadable from the IEREST website (<http://ierest-project.eu/>) and Humbox page (<http://humbox.ac.uk/group/19>), and are published under the 'Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike' *Creative Commons* Licence.

But the IEREST partnership did not end with the publication of the resources: the partners will continue their capillary dissemination, by publishing papers and additional resources, engaging in teacher training, and maintaining the professional relationships established during the project lifecycle with educational stakeholders - as these can make the difference in terms of the sustainability of the results.

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1. Project Objectives

The main goal of the IEREST project was to promote intercultural education courses for Erasmus students before, during and after their experience abroad in order to encourage learning mobility, to support students and enable them to benefit as much as possible from their international experiences in terms of personal growth and intercultural development.

More than 25 years after the launch of the Erasmus Programme, fostering youth mobility and developing the intercultural competencies of the younger generations remain crucial issues within Europe. A number of studies on the development of intercultural skills and competences have shown that first-hand experience of 'otherness' and even sojourns in a foreign country are not sufficient conditions to foster interculturality. Both study abroad and intercultural education literature state that, in addition to experience, intercultural learning requires reflection and analysis, and that immersion in a different culture does not in itself reduce stereotypical perceptions of others. Much of the rhetoric coming from national and European institutions and present in their programmes implies that mobility automatically offers students a transformative experience, often positively impacting on their future lives. But considering mobility as a value in itself may distract from focusing on the quality of the experience abroad, and on the factors that can influence and foster the development of intercultural skills. In addition, by putting emphasis simply on increasing the numbers of students who spend a period of residence abroad, higher education institutions may forget the core principles of intercultural education, which are to render mobility an opportunity for reflecting on one's own and others' identities, for developing critical thinking, and for promoting the principles of social justice and anti-discrimination.

The main objective of the IEREST project was to develop, test and disseminate a set of intercultural education modules (an Intercultural Path), which HE institutions can offer to Erasmus students before, during, and after their mobility period. To this purpose, IEREST has developed and tested ten teaching activities, which are now available in two different formats: they are collected in a PDF manual, freely downloadable from the project website (<http://ierest-project.eu/humbox>), as well as in an IEREST-dedicated page on *Humbox*, a web repository of open educational resources (<http://humbox.ac.uk/group/19>). In both cases, they have been published under the 'Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike' (BY-NC-SA) *Creative Commons* Licence.

A further crucial objective of the project was to foster the institutionalization of the Intercultural Paths within HEIs, in order to make the practice of providing Erasmus students with intercultural services the rule rather than the exception. Already during the project lifecycle, some of the universities involved integrated the IEREST activities within their existing educational offerings. In more general terms, by building on the IEREST processes and outcomes, now HEIs within and outside Europe can offer systematic intercultural preparation and support to their mobile students. In particular, as shown in Figure 1, students can receive intercultural support before, during and after their study abroad experience (Modules 1, 2.1, and 3), while also

attending a module in the host university, as incoming students (Module 2.2), where such a module is available.

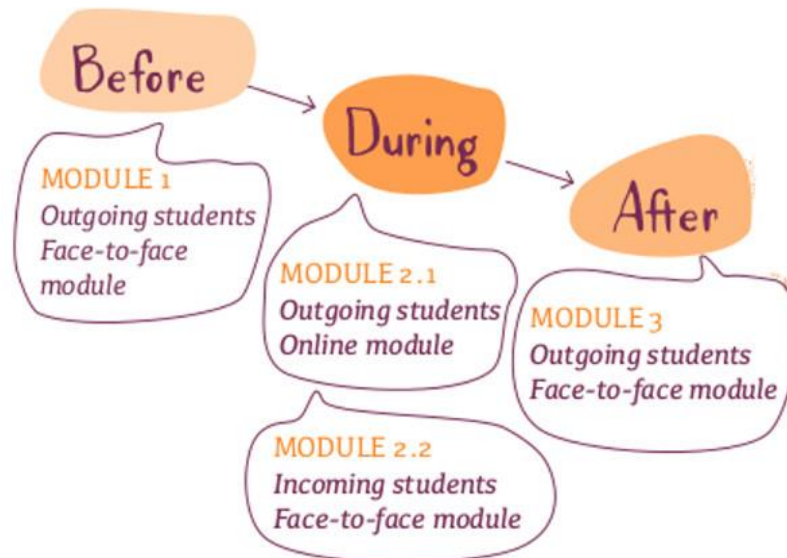


Figure 1 The IEREST Intercultural Path

The IEREST project has three main target users: potential, future, present and past Erasmus students, teachers in higher education, and HEIs' stakeholders and policy makers.

Students were actively involved in IEREST at several levels: (1) acting as experts and consultants in the area of mobility experiences and of cultural and intercultural needs, (2) taking part in the testing phase of the IEREST teaching activities, and (3) benefiting from the final educational resources. In addition, students were represented within the project by AEGEE-Europe, one of the largest international associations of HE students.

During the first phase of the project, there were two major occasions when students played a role as IEREST consultants: First, during the administration of the project questionnaire, completed by 3,152 (past, present, and future) Erasmus students, offering a multifaceted overview of the 'youth on the move' attitudes, aspirations, needs and concerns. Secondly, during an online focus group held in September 2013, aimed at exploring students' interpretations of the data collected through the questionnaire.

Students also played a key part in the testing phase of the IEREST *Intercultural Path*, delivered in four partner institutions (University of Bologna; Durham University; University of Primorska, Koper; University of Leuven). Participant students were asked for feedback about the usefulness, quality and attractiveness of the *Intercultural Path*. Their feedback was then used to adjust and improve the teaching activities before publishing them on the project website and *Humbox* page (both are accessible from here: <http://ierest-project.eu/humbox>).

Looking to the future, students will benefit from the IEREST *Intercultural Path* in two main ways: They will be able to access autonomously the learning resources provided on the IEREST website and *Humbox* page, or attend the IEREST-based modules offered at their home and/or host institutions, if available.

The second group of IEREST target users is constituted by **teachers**, represented within the project by AEDE-Hungary, the Hungarian branch of an international association of teachers. They too were actively involved in the project as consultants; in particular, a group of HE teachers took part in a specific online focus group, while others joined the IEREST external quality control committee, taking part in class observations during the piloting of the *Intercultural Path*. Many teachers also followed the developments of the project by subscribing to the project newsletter and by participating in the IEREST symposia, where project members showcased some possible uses of the resources in dedicated hands-on workshops.

IEREST has always recognised the key role played by teachers in disseminating the project results and outputs: They are the ones who decide if and how to adapt the IEREST activities and can easily act as multipliers, by promoting the resources to their colleagues. In fact, the resources have been designed mainly to respond to the teachers' necessities: they provide a wide selection of supporting materials (including theoretical slides and lists of scientific references); methodological instructions are provided, but possible alternatives are often mentioned; principles of training in the field of intercultural education/communication have also been integrated throughout the activities. It was with an eye to the teachers' day to day needs (e.g., time constraints in class preparation) that some features of the *Humbox* resources were devised; for example Word versions of the activities are offered, in order to facilitate the teachers' class preparation. Finally, some Consortium members acted as IEREST teacher trainers during the project, and will certainly continue this activity in the future.

Educational stakeholders are particularly strategic in fostering the diffusion of the IEREST *Intercultural Path* in higher education, as the future of the IEREST educational resources mostly depends on HEIs' willingness to invest in the necessary human resources to deliver intercultural education modules to Erasmus students. For this reason it is extremely important to put forward proposals which are considered attractive and useful by students, of high quality and easy to implement for teachers, but also flexible enough to be adapted to different institutional needs and priorities. To this end, International Affairs officers and stakeholders participated in the project in several ways: first of all, through the involvement of the International Office of Thomas More Kempen, the associate partner in charge of monitoring the development and implementation of the activities from the point of view of universities; then, by taking part in one of the project's focus groups and in dedicated project events (e.g., a Symposium held in Koper in March 2014, and a Seminar hosted by the University of Leuven in June 2015); finally, by means of Ally Agreements with a number of HEIs. These, while external to the IEREST Consortium, tested the resources during the project lifecycle and provided feedback on how to make them more manageable for teachers and more viable from the institutional point of view.

2. Project Approach

Theoretical and methodological approach

Despite the remarkable improvements in services offered by European HEIs to mobile students in recent years, intercultural education offerings are not generally included among them. While thanks to the LLP, services such as counselling, language training and courses provided through the medium of English are more and more common, very few European HEIs provide intercultural education/communication modules expressly aimed at mobile students; most limit their services to providing information on administrative procedures in host institutions (including the application for courses or accommodation) and country-specific information. Such courses are mostly taught by administrative staff and adopt an instrumental approach aimed at facilitating students' adaptation to their new context.

This is where the innovative aspect of IEREST is most evident, in particular with regard to its theoretical underpinnings and overall methodology.

The term 'intercultural' is a polysemic term entailing very different approaches to cultural matters within education. The IEREST materials and activities are based on a non-essentialist paradigm, according to which 'interculturality' does not mean comparing two or more countries, nor learning to adapt to a specific 'national culture'. Rather, the concept implies, for example:

- Understanding how different types of identities (e.g. gender, age, racial, ethnic, national, geographical, historical, linguistic) impact on communication with others;
- Interpreting what people say about their culture as evidence of what they wish others to see about themselves, rather than as the 'truth' about a particular culture;
- Exploring the role of power in dominant discourses (media, political, institutional) and reflecting on how these discourses affect the way we perceive people from other backgrounds.

The IEREST teaching activities also aim to help students analyse and be critical towards the myths related to study abroad (as an opportunity to improve one's language skills, to make new friends, to change one's identity, etc.) in order for them to (re)frame expectations about the mobility period and develop their awareness of their own personal approach to their sojourn abroad.

The development of the IEREST project was multifaceted and can be summarised in five main stages:

1. Review of target users' needs;
2. Design of the teaching activities for each of the modules which form the *Intercultural Path*: Module 1 (pre-departure module); Module 2.1 and Module 2.2 (respectively the online and face-to-face modules while students are abroad); Module 3 (upon-return module);
3. Piloting of the teaching activities;

4. Multi-perspective evaluation of the educational resources;
5. Fine-tuning and publication of the activities as open educational resources.

1. Review of target users' needs

The general aim of this first stage was to provide a clear and multi-faceted overview of the needs of Erasmus students, higher education institutions, and intercultural education teachers/trainers, in order to fully address them in the implementation, evaluation and dissemination of the IEREST *Intercultural Paths*. Some general questions taken into consideration during this phase were: (a) How do students imagine and prepare for their study abroad experience? What main constraints and/or satisfactions do they experience before/during/after their sojourn abroad? (b) What do teachers consider to be powerful principles and practices for effective intercultural learning? What intercultural learning objectives are pursuable/reachable in teaching and how? (c) What are Erasmus/international officers interested in when it comes to preparing students for their sojourn abroad? What role might intercultural education have within existing offerings to outgoing and incoming Erasmus students?

In order to answer these questions while actively involving the three target groups in the process of defining their respective needs, the study was carried out in three phases: (1) Cycles of *literature review* focused on the intercultural aspects of student mobility, and on identifying what is usually offered to mobile students by HEIs from the intercultural point of view; (2) This review was taken into account when designing a *student questionnaire*; (3) Preliminary results from the questionnaire were then used as inputs for discussion during *three focus groups*, respectively with teachers, officers, and students from different HEIs in Europe. The research methodology required that the three actions be conducted sequentially so that the results of each could provide input for the following ones, as shown in *Fig. 2*:

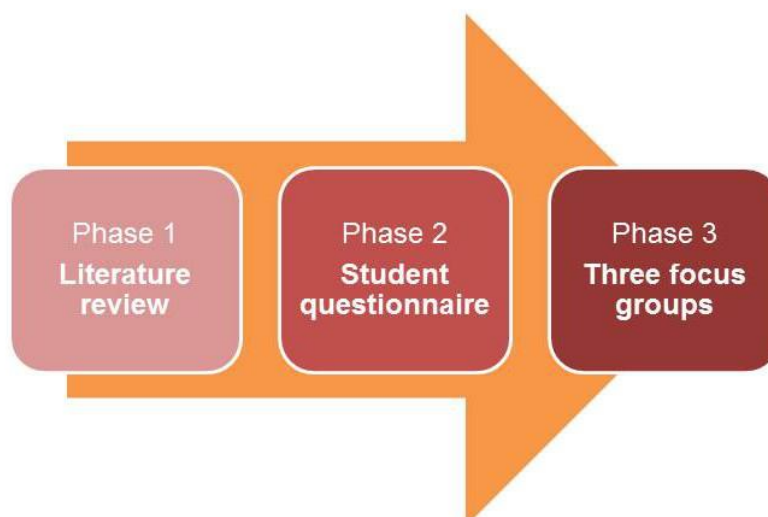


Figure 2 Review of target users' methodology

Besides providing insights from the scientific literature on study abroad and intercultural education, *Phase 1* helped identify some trends concerning the existing

cultural and intercultural offerings to mobile students: first of all it highlighted that a great deal of current offerings are oriented toward mere 'survival' in the host environment. Moreover, there is strong evidence of essentialist perspectives on mobility. Finally, while there is a growing trend that encourages students to see themselves as 'ethnographers' during their intercultural sojourn, there is usually no mention of the norms of good ethnographic practice.

The student questionnaire was based on findings from the previous literature review on student mobility. It was administered online in four languages (English, French, Italian, and Slovenian). Depending on the stage that the respondents were at (before, during, or after stay abroad), they were offered three alternative versions of the questionnaire (with the necessary adjustments made to the phrasing and contents of the questions). A variety of compulsory and optional closed and open questions were asked. After the initial choice of language, a series of questions were presented under the following headings: (1) *Personal data*; (2) *General information on the stay abroad*; (3) *Prior experience abroad*; (4) *Needs in stay abroad experiences*. The form of the survey "Your experience of life abroad" is available here: <http://ierest-project.eu/node/12>.

The questionnaire was administered as an online survey to more than 12.400 future/present/past Erasmus students. Potential respondents were contacted by email, face-to-face dissemination before and during lectures, and AEGEE-Europe's *Facebook* page. Overall, 3,152 students answered the questionnaire: a considerable number, which provided the project with useful input.

The three focus groups took place before the analysis of the questionnaire data was completed, in order to consider the target users' interpretations within the overall study. Nine teachers of intercultural communication, six officers from international relations and Erasmus support offices, and four students, all from different HE institutions in Europe, participated in the focus groups. The general aim was to discuss some of the findings from the questionnaire; in the case of the officers' focus group an additional aim was to explore how those responsible for organising and supporting mobile students viewed the usefulness of preparing both incoming and outgoing students, what aspect of preparation they considered important, and finally how they envisaged the possibility of adopting the IEREST intercultural paths in their own institutions.

2. Design of the teaching activities

Taking the results of the previous phase as starting points together with additional theoretical readings and discussions, the partners designed the teaching activities constituting the *Intercultural Path*. In groups, they developed drafts for the activities in agreement with a defined set of learning objectives and outcomes and in respect of the overall activity structure agreed within the project.

Overall, ten teaching activities were designed, divided into three modules: the first is to be taught before departure, the second while the students are abroad, and the third upon return. The first module is formed of four activities and encourages reflection on the students' expectations regarding their future intercultural encounters. The second module, which can be taught both online and face-to face,

engages the students with their concrete experiences abroad, helping them to understand better what they are going through. Finally, the third and last module encourages the students to analyse and make the most of what they have learned abroad. The following table reports the titles of the activities:

Module 1	Module 2	Module 3
(1) Perceptions of self and other	(5) 24h Erasmus life	(8) Bringing interculturality back home
(2) Anti-discrimination study circle	(6) Intercultural geography	(9) One, two, many... Erasmus experiences
(3) Exploring narrative in intercultural mobility contexts	(7) Experiencing (interculturality through) volunteering	(10) Student mobility beyond the Academy
(4) Meeting others abroad		

Each activity requires 10-14 learning and teaching hours, and is written in English, the global academic lingua franca, but can freely be translated into other languages. Activities present a mix of self-learning and interactive-reflexive teaching-learning, and are inspired by the theoretical underpinnings introduced above. They complement each other, although there is no pre-established order for teaching them, nor is it necessary to teach all the activities, as they are self-standing.

In terms of teaching materials, the IEREST team has put together videos and written excerpts that fit well with the modules and engage students in reflective discussions and inquiry. Short *PowerPoint* presentations are also included to help teachers cover the basic theoretical and methodological elements with the students. Of course, teachers and students are free to complement the activities with their own materials if they feel that these can help meet the objectives and are compatible with IEREST. The activities are based on Kolb's Reflective Model of learning. The model is composed of four steps:

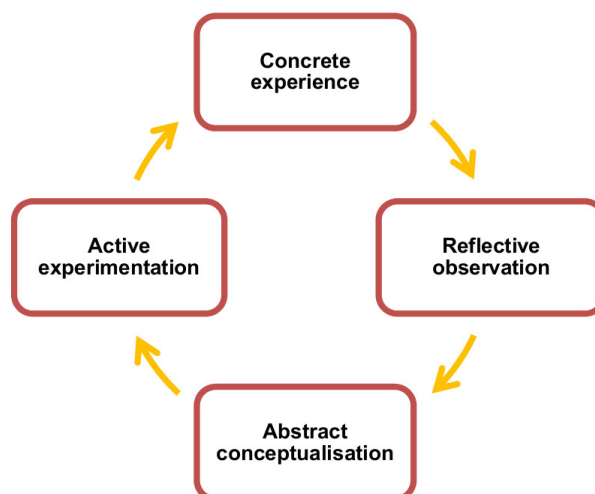


Figure 3 Kolb (1984)

Each activity contains at least one of these steps. Ideally each component should be taught following the model, starting from Concrete Experience going clockwise: According to Kolb, the first step should involve (past) actions and experiences so that reflection can be based on something concrete. Nevertheless, depending on the context and the needs of the students, teachers may decide to start from any step as long as reinforcement with the remaining three steps takes place.

3. Piloting of the teaching activities

After several cycles of reciprocal feedback on the materials, methodologies, overall structure of the activities and coherence with the stated objectives, the partners were ready to pilot the intercultural paths.

Four IEREST partner institutions (Universities of Bologna, Durham, Primorska-Koper and Leuven) piloted the activities with their students. Each institution adapted the activities to their local contexts and needs. This implied: 1) no limit to the number of students per module; 2) no restrictions for the enrolment of students; 3) partners were free to use the IEREST activities in existing institutional courses or organise special modules, including bespoke one-day workshops; 4) each partner institution was free to decide whether to recognise credits to participants or not. This flexibility was adopted in order to guarantee sustainability to the project outcomes, by taking into account each institution's needs and practices. Details on the IEREST pilotings can be accessed here: <http://ierest-project.eu/node/166>.

Most resources were also piloted by the IEREST ally partners (<http://ierest-project.eu/node/159>). This allowed collecting a larger amount of data about the testing of the activities and their overall quality. Moreover, since some ally partners were located in non-EU countries, their involvement in the project contributed to measure the resources in mobility contexts beyond Europe.

4. Multi-perspective evaluation of the educational resources

During each test and within each piloting institution (including the Ally partners) a multi-perspective evaluation was carried out. It consisted in the collection and analysis of participant students' post-class questionnaires, teacher narratives, and the opinions of a pool of experts who made class observations at different stages in different institutions. The overall analysis provided information on: degree of clarity of activity instructions, easiness/difficulty of the teaching materials and methodologies, students' reactions and preferences, teachers' specific needs, etc. This enabled the IEREST partners to proceed with the final phase in the development of the *intercultural path*.

5. Fine-tuning and publication of the activities

In the last step of the process, the IEREST teaching activities were modified in agreement with the feedback received from participant students, teachers and class

observers, and then prepared for publication. This implied editing the IEREST manual and uploading the individual activities and supporting documents to the dedicated project page on *Humbox*.

Dissemination strategies

The IEREST actions have yielded important results in terms of dissemination, most probably in reason of the large numbers of representatives of the target users who played an active role within the project development processes.

The project website (<http://ierest-project.eu/>) was also fundamental in the on-going dissemination strategies: Between February 2013 and October 2015 (33 months), the website of the project was visited 22,567 times (average: 744 times a month, approximately 25 times a day), with a significant increase in the second part of the project (during the first 14 months, the website had been visited 6,833 times, with an average of 488 times a month, approximately 16 times a day). The visitors came from over 25 different countries; in the last part of the project, excluding the 6 countries involved in the project, most of the visits were made from (in order): USA (6.49%), Brazil (5.27%), Spain (2.74%), Netherlands (2.59%), and Germany (2.38%).

Dissemination and exploitation of results are two of the main objectives for IEREST, both on a micro and on a macro level.

The project intends to foster the multiplication of results on a micro level by reaching individual students and teachers, who can access the IEREST activities on the IEREST website or via *Humbox*. Users can adapt them to their self-learning or teaching necessities, thanks to a series of supporting documents which are also uploaded on the IEREST website: a collection of additional information sources about mobility and intercultural education (<http://ierest-project.eu/external-online-resources>), and a set of mini-videos which offer an account of the project (<http://ierest-project.eu/latest-videos>).

At a macro level, the project aims at transferring the praxis of delivering intercultural modules to outgoing and incoming Erasmus students in HEIs. This institutionalisation of the *Intercultural Path* is the best possible exploitation outcome for IEREST, as it ensures the sustainability of the project results and can multiply the project impact in terms of number of mobile students prepared for studying abroad.

Two main measures have been taken in order to strengthen the dissemination and exploitation potential of the project: First of all, the publication of the activities on *Humbox* (<http://humbox.ac.uk/group/19>), an existing well-known repository for open educational resources in the field of the humanities, is crucial for sustainability, as it guarantees that the IEREST products will be available beyond the project lifecycle. The second main measure is the decision to take “flexibility” as a criterion for piloting the activities in the partner institutions, in order to test them under different real (institutional and political) conditions. This can foster the transferability of the IEREST results across a plurality of teaching contexts: in different universities, schools or departments, with or without the attribution of ECTS, using different languages of instruction, integrated in existing courses (language courses, intercultural communication courses, etc.). Also the target group of students might be different: not only Erasmus students as initially planned, but also international students and

students in general (i.e., not necessarily involved in mobility), in order to foster 'internationalisation at home'. The project has invested a lot on flexibility, because for IEREST flexibility is sustainability.

IEREST also invested in sustainability through its Ally Partnership agreements. Ally partners are HEI which piloted the IEREST teaching resources during the project lifecycle and provided valuable feedback about how to increase their usability for teachers, making them more effective for intercultural learning. Besides contributing to the project's "feedback culture", these agreements constituted an added value for the project; the involvement of international offices as external stakeholders and the fact that an institution is already familiar with the IEREST products can facilitate the future adoption of the IEREST intercultural path within that specific HEI. At the end of the project (September 2015), IEREST had eight Ally partners (<http://ierest-project.eu/node/159>).

The IEREST partners actively involved policy-makers and decision-makers in their own institutions, with a view to ensuring sustainability of project results after the lifetime of the project. Moreover, a series of events took place at different stages, which helped the overall dissemination and exploitation strategy, namely:

- An international conference for a mainly academic audience entitled *Teaching the intercultural in contexts of student mobility* (Bologna, 12th-13th June 2014);
- A series of four Symposia in Koper (27th March 2014), Durham (22nd October 2014), Chambéry (28th April 2015), and Bologna (23rd September 2015). These events had different main target groups: local, national and international educational stakeholders (Koper), scholars (Durham), teachers (Chambéry), and all these together (Bologna);
- A Seminar held in Leuven in on the 4th June 2015, which offered the opportunity to bring together international stakeholders and policy makers in education, in order to discuss the future of the IEREST outcomes.

For further information on the event programmes, visit the section "News" on the project website (<http://ierest-project.eu/news>).

Several academic and media publications contributed to making IEREST and its results known among academics, teachers, and the general public. For a detailed list of IEREST-related publications, presentations in conferences, and training workshops, please consult the project dissemination report (<http://ierest-project.eu/node/12>). This capillary and multi-faceted dissemination strategy will continue also in the future, and some main events are already scheduled; e.g., a presentation at a conference in Tyumen, Russia (10th-13th December 2015); a teacher training event in Paris (26th January 2016); a workshop for officers in higher education in Belfast, during the 2016 Utrecht Network Annual General Meeting (27th-28th April 2016).

Besides being published on the website, all IEREST events and dissemination acts were collected in the periodic newsletters. At the end of the project the newsletter had 349 regular recipients. Past issues are available here: <http://ierest-project.eu/node/106>.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

All public IEREST outputs and results are now published online and freely available. They consist in:

- A comprehensive report on the review of target users' needs (literature review, questionnaire, and focus groups);
- The IEREST manual and the IEREST *Humbox* page. Both collect the ten teaching activities of intercultural education developed through the project. However, while the former presents itself as a downloadable e-book, the latter constitutes a web space where the activities (provided in Word format) are accompanied by additional services, i.e. a multilingual "IEREST Humbox user manual", and four sets of accompanying slides with the theoretical underpinnings of the teaching activities;
- A number of additional services for teachers and students, provided on the IEREST webpage. Such services include a database of external web resources about student mobility, and a set of mini-videos which introduce the users to the project aims, process, actors, and expected results;
- Additional products and information about the project, which help give an account of the processes behind the realisation of the main project results. These include the tools realised during the project to evaluate the educational resources; a comprehensive report about the project dissemination actions; information about the IEREST Ally partners and collaborators.

Review of target users' needs

The achievements represented by the IEREST literature review and its overall results have already been described in *Section 2*. The analysis carried out on the questionnaire and focus groups helped define some important features of the IEREST activities and thus achieve the project's stated objective of designing educational resources which met the expectations and needs of all IEREST target users (students, teachers, and educational stakeholders). Some main points resulting from this analysis are:

(1) Respondents to the questionnaire confirm the findings of the literature review: that only a small group of mobile students prepare for their experience abroad by taking part in courses (with the exception of language courses) or other institutional activities. At the same time, two out of three respondents declared that they took various personal initiatives before departure to explore their host environment and seek information from other exchange students.

(2) When asked in the questionnaire to name what they think is essential for a successful stay abroad experience, students' responses varied with the stage they were in: Students who were about to leave more strongly affirmed that success would heavily depend on social ('having friends') and academic ('interesting courses', 'academic success') factors, while students who had already returned tended to

stress the importance of some personal qualities ('openness'; 'independence / courage').

(3) Both in the questionnaire and focus group, students who claimed success in establishing contact with local students at the host institution tended to attribute this to themselves, while those who reported a lack of contact with local students attributed the causes to external factors: host institution, local students or the general population. At the same time we observed that before students went abroad, they attached as much importance to making friends with local as with international students but that, by the time they had returned, making friends with international students had far surpassed making friends with local students as a criterion for success.

(4) Some returning students mentioned the need to reflect on the intercultural experience; sometimes they also linked it to their willingness to act for change, generally by helping future mobile students or advising home institutions to better guide Erasmus students.

(5) The main findings deriving from the teachers' focus group concerned the specific objectives of intercultural preparation for mobile students. These were: (a) Increasing awareness and gaining a critical attitude on one's own culture(s), as well as on other cultures; (b) Preparing for culture shock(s): general culture shock, academic culture shock, and language shock; (c) Bringing together foreign and local students; (d) Becoming more independent. With the exception of the first one, all other objectives match the students' expectations expressed in the questionnaire (e.g., "becoming (more) independent" was considered the most important criterion for considering a stay abroad successful, whatever stage of the experience abroad students were in.

(6) According to the officers participating in the focus group, most universities write about the importance of study abroad and developing intercultural competences in their missions statements, but without clear (and shared) definitions of such competences. Participants also confirmed that providing students with practical information regarding their destination country and host institution is important, but that it is just as crucial to provide students with intercultural preparation. Moreover they affirmed that it is important to involve students who are traditionally less interested in languages and intercultural matters (hard sciences, engineering, etc.). Finally, crucially for the exploitation of IEREST, the officers pointed out that there would be a need to involve departments in order to implement IEREST in their institution: Without the interest of the academics, the administrative offices would not be able to make such a decision, which would have to be taken centrally by the university.

IEREST manual & IEREST *Humbox* page

The IEREST teaching activities are published under the Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>), and are available by means of two complementary services, the IEREST manual (downloadable here: <http://ierest-project.eu/humbox>) and the IEREST *Humbox* page (<http://humbox.ac.uk/group/19>). Both present the same ten activities, although in

substantially different formats, in order to meet the necessities of their main users, i.e. teachers and students.

Before introducing the differences between accessing the resources through the manual and the *Humbox* page, the following section provides information on the different IEREST activities.

As highlighted in Section 2 (“Theoretical and methodological approach”), the activities generally aim at stimulating students to go beyond national diversities and enjoy their own and others’ multiplicity as individuals. More specifically, the four activities collected in **Module 1** (the pre-departure module) generally aim at introducing the students to the concepts of non-essentialism and of multiple identities, and to the ideas that people are different but also similar across and within national boundaries, and that people construct both who they are and how they see other people. As such, the activities help students become aware that when they meet a person, they do not meet a ‘culture’ or a ‘country’ but a multifaceted individual who, like them, negotiates who they want to be and how they see/define/make sense of their interlocutors. The activities also stimulate the students to go beyond the idea of a single identity and to consider the fact that, when people meet each other, aspects such as gender, age, social class or language work hand in hand to create impressions of each other. These understandings will be crucial for students when abroad, as they will prepare them to look beyond the fixed labels people give each other. **Module 2** (the while-abroad module) has two central ideas, and two methodological orientations. On the one hand it invites students to reflect on their own lives abroad in terms of emotions, relationships, and appraisal of their pre-departure expectations; on the other hand it creates opportunities to explore the new environment and meet different people. Methodologically this means that the activity integrates a more self-oriented analysis conducted through the writing of personal journals with forms of fieldwork inspired by ethnography. Overall, the driving themes of ‘non-essentialism’ and ‘multiple identities’ assume here a new relevance, as they are introduced to students on the basis of their first-hand experiences. Finally, activities in **Module 3** (the upon-return module) have the purpose to encourage students to look both ways: back to their past Erasmus experiences, and ahead to how they can capitalise on their new competences and understandings in their social and (future) professional lives. In doing so, the module recalls most of the theoretical concepts introduced in the previous ones (the subjective nature of narratives, how to avoid essentialist views of people and places, etc.).

By accessing the activities through the IEREST manual, teachers and students can benefit from a product which coherently integrates the teaching resources within the broader frame of a book (with an index, introduction, intra-textual references, final list of references). Differently, *Humbox* presents itself more as a working space, where activities are stored separately, without a precise order and, above all, in a Word format. This last feature is crucial for teachers, who can modify an activity in its original file, without wasting time copying and pasting or photocopying. Moreover, users have the advantage of easy access to the four sets of slides which collect the main theoretical underpinnings of the activities (such slides are also accessible from the IEREST manual, by means of web links which redirect the reader to the relevant *Humbox* page). A feature of *Humbox* that can truly make the difference is its potential to host a community of IEREST users: teachers and students can indeed download

the resources, comment on them, and upload their adapted versions of particular activities for the benefit of other community members. In order to encourage and facilitate this kind of participation, the IEREST partners have set up a “IEREST Humbox user manual” which is available in English, French, Dutch and Spanish.

Set of additional services for teachers and students

In order to offer a selection of supporting and information documents to complement the teaching resources, the IEREST partners have also prepared a database of external web resources about student mobility, and a set of mini-videos which introduce the users to the project aims, process, actors, and results. Both services are accessible through the IEREST website.

The “external online resources” (<http://ierest-project.eu/external-online-resources>) is a collection of online materials and useful links on student mobility, which can offer teachers supplementary resources on the topics and issues raised within the IEREST activities. These resources were also collected to provide students, particularly those preparing to study abroad, with a variety of texts, videos and websites where they can find further information and advice, or simply personal experiences of students who have studied abroad, that they can draw from. The external web resources are divided into three broad sections: “Student Testimonials” (including blogs, as well as other written and video testimonials), “Information and advice on student mobility”, and “Tools for intercultural preparation for student mobility”.

The set of mini-videos (<http://ierest-project.eu/latest-videos>) offer new IEREST users a first-hand introduction to IEREST, by presenting the project aims, context, partners and possible future scenarios. They also hear about both students' and teachers' experiences in pursuing intercultural learning through IEREST.

Additional information about IEREST

Besides the main outcomes described above, the IEREST partners achieved some less visible mid-term objectives, essential to guarantee the quality of the IEREST activities. This is the case of the tools developed to collect data from the pilotings, in order to carry out the multi-perspective evaluation of the educational resources described in *Section 2*. They consist in participant student post-class questionnaires, forms for collecting teachers' narratives, and observation grids to be completed by internal and external evaluators during their class observations. All these have been published on the IEREST website, where they are divided according to the module they were used for (see <http://ierest-project.eu/node/12>).

In order to offer a complete picture of the IEREST actions, the same web page provides access to the project dissemination report, which offers an account of the capillary dissemination activity of the project members (99 dissemination events, including presentations at conferences, official meetings, publications, entries in institutional blogs and magazines).

Finally, two different page of the project website are dedicated to introducing the IEREST ally partners (<http://ierest-project.eu/node/159>) and collaborators (<http://ierest-project.eu/node/192>).

4. Partnerships

IEREST partners had complementary expertise, ranging from study abroad, Erasmus mobility and internationalisation, to intercultural education and communication, intercultural language education, and open education. This varied composition guaranteed multi-faceted perspectives on the IEREST processes and outcomes, and also satisfied the often-lamented lack of connection among specialist researchers and practitioners in the fields. Moreover, it helped obtain a multiplier effect in the dissemination and exploitation of the project results, thanks to each partner's different professional and academic networks.

In September 2015, the institutions involved in the project were:

- University of Bologna, Italy
- Durham University, UK
- University of Savoy Mont Blanc, Chambéry, France
- University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia
- University of Leuven, Belgium

The IEREST project had also three associate partners, representing the three main project target users: AEGEE-Europe, AEDE-Hungary, and Thomas More Kempen. The associate partners' contribution was essential in developing meaningful, effective, practicable, and enjoyable intercultural teaching activities, in assessing IEREST's ongoing and final results, and in accomplishing dissemination strategies.

The geographical distribution of the partners included Southern, Northern, Western, and Central Eastern Europe. This spread ensured a maximum dissemination of the results throughout Europe. Moreover, since the IEREST project had among its main aims the development of results which were relevant and meaningful at a European level, the composition of the partnership was considered important from the very beginning: To be truly generalizable and exploitable in as many teaching, institutional and national contexts as possible, the *Intercultural Path* needed to be tested under different conditions, including diverse norms at national-institutional level (e.g., concerning language(s) of instruction, criteria for class set-up, educational offers and policies) and at a broader cultural level (current affairs, norms of class behaviour, role-negotiation processes between teachers and students, etc.).

It is perhaps worthwhile mentioning that the setup of the IEREST project has the potential to contribute to the European added-value of higher education: The *Intercultural Path* and its specific design involving teaching modules - which theoretically can be provided to the same group of students in both home and host institutions - have indeed the potential to foster new forms of collaboration among universities in Europe.

5. Plans for the Future

From the very beginning of the project, the foundations were established for the long-term exploitation of the project results, by actively involving all three main target groups (students, teachers, and educational stakeholders) at various levels and stages (see *Section 1*). Considering the numbers of visits to the project website, of subscribers to the newsletter, of participants in the project events, and the number of students wishing to participate in the pilotings, this constant and multi-faceted strategy has proved successful, ensuring the different target groups' use of IEREST far beyond the end of the project.

For what concerns **students**, they will certainly be able to use the resources as a means of intercultural self-learning by accessing the IEREST website and *Humbox* page. On the website, in particular, they can benefit from the mini-videos, and the database of web resources. In addition, it is worth considering not only what IEREST can do for students, but also what students can do for IEREST: considering the appreciation that IEREST received from participants in the pilotings, it is fair to expect that students can act as multipliers by informing others – fellow-students and teachers, as well as their international offices, of the positive experiences they had through IEREST.

Teachers too will benefit from accessing the resources. After all, it was with an eye to their everyday necessities (e.g., time constraints in class preparation, need for focused study, and need for clear methodological choices and step-by-step approaches) that some main features of the manual and the *Humbox* page were set up. For example, the Consortium decided to upload the Word versions of the activities on the *Humbox* page in order to facilitate the teachers' class preparation (they can change the activities directly on the original file, after download). It is also expected that teachers will act as multipliers: they are the ones who decide if and how to adapt the IEREST outcomes in their classes, and can introduce IEREST to their networks of colleagues and contacts. It is already planned that some IEREST members will facilitate these processes, by continuing their intense teacher-directed dissemination (e.g., through forms of teacher training) also in the future.

Educational stakeholders are particularly strategic for sustainability. With their help, the intercultural modules have already been adopted in the partners' HEIs (in Leuven, for example) or in additional European HEIs (Ally agreements served this purpose). Since the IEREST activities are extremely flexible (e.g., in terms of teaching hours, number of students, credit attribution, etc.), it is foreseeable that some institutions will employ forms different from those explored in the pilotings. For example, they can be integrated in language learning and teaching for incoming students (this direction is being explored by Bologna) or in international curricula in Medicine or Engineering (Bologna and Leuven). Moreover, Ally partners can play a main role in spreading IEREST, as they already know well the resources and are geographically located in different places in the world. Similarly, a key idea for sustainability is considering that IEREST is not only circulating resources (the activities) but also highly-prepared practitioners who can act as trainers and advisors on their uses.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The *Intercultural Path* developed within IEREST represents an innovative device to foster higher education student mobility, support Erasmus students and enable them to benefit as much as possible from their international experiences in terms of personal growth and intercultural awareness. This is possible thanks to a coherent set of teaching modules which take place - in both their home and host institutions - before, during, and after the experience abroad. From the literature review (*Section 2*), it is clear that this practice is relatively uncommon in Europe. Therefore, the project fulfils the action's demand for innovative mobility strategies and removal of barriers to mobility in higher education. In particular, IEREST addresses barriers/factors which 'may contribute to keeping many young people from even considering a stay abroad: time pressure to finish their studies or training, jobs, lack of funding, lack of language skills and intercultural knowledge, as well as a general reluctance to leave "home"' by explaining to them the benefits of learning mobility (COM(2009) 329: 7).

Besides the priority of developing strategies for and removing barriers to mobility, IEREST also partially addresses additional priorities:

(1) It supports the achievement of a European Higher Education Area proposing comparable, compatible and coherent intercultural services to Erasmus students, which in future may be developed into complete institutional courses in European HEIs. Therefore, it represents a step towards the modernisation of European higher education for what concerns Erasmus mobility.

(2) IEREST promotes an awareness of the importance of multilingualism and intercultural dialogue at many levels: within the intercultural paths which specifically address the issue of language and culture differences to prevent racism, prejudice, and xenophobia; and with the multicultural and multilingual teaching materials/methods it produces (since the intercultural path as a model will be sensitive to the local contexts).

(3) It fosters excellence in higher education with respect to intercultural education/communication, since the project involved researchers, teachers, students, and educational stakeholders with the objective of producing outputs which are meaningful to all these actors and target groups.

(4) IEREST aims to foster Erasmus mobility in order to boost students' personal development, a sense of European identity, and also their future job opportunities. Such priorities are totally in line with the European Commission's Europe 2020 Strategy and its flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move', where young people learning mobility is seen as occupying a strategic role in forging new generations of Europeans, open and cooperative, able to cope with the new global challenges.

