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IEREST - Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers

Progress Report

Public Part

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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 meets 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 aims to make such teaching activities freely available on the Internet under the 'Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike' *Creative Commons* Licence, and 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. These two objectives are the best guarantee of IEREST's sustainability.

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

IEREST is carried out by seven partners (University of Bologna; Durham University; University of Savoy, Chambéry; University of Helsinki; University of Primorska, Koper; University of Leuven; the Open University), which have complementary expertise, ranging from study abroad, Erasmus mobility and internationalisation, to intercultural education and communication, intercultural language education, and open education. The project has also three associate partners, which represent the main IEREST target users: students (AEGEE-Europe), teachers (AEDE-Hungary) and international affairs officers and stakeholders (T.M.Kempen).

Initially, the project mainly focused on obtaining a multi-faceted overview of the needs of the target users with respect to intercultural education for studying abroad. This overview was conducted by means of cycles of literature review, a student questionnaire (3,152 responses) and three focus groups, each with representatives of a different target group. The overall study provided crucial input for the design of the teaching activities.

At present, four pre-departure teaching activities for Module 1 have been completed, and are designed to promote the ideas that people are different but also similar across and within countries, and have multiple identities. These are being tested in five of the IEREST partner institutions. They will then be fine-tuned and published online.

The same overall implementation methodology will be used for the modules to be taught when students are abroad and upon their return (the piloting will take place respectively in autumn 2014 and spring 2015).

The project website and newsletter are the main sources of information about the project objectives and outcomes. The newsletter subscription form is available through the website: <http://ierest-project.eu/>.

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1. Project Objectives

The main goal of the IEREST project is to promote courses of intercultural education 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 competencies.

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 which 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 is to develop and test a set of teaching modules (an *Intercultural Path*) of intercultural education, which HE institutions can offer to Erasmus students before, during, and after their mobility period. By 2015, IEREST will have developed and tested specific resources, which will be freely available on a web platform under the 'Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike' (BY-NC-SA) *Creative Commons* Licence.

A further crucial objective of the project is 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. In the future, networks of HEIs could offer systematic intercultural preparation and support to mobile students by building on the IEREST processes and outcomes; 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).

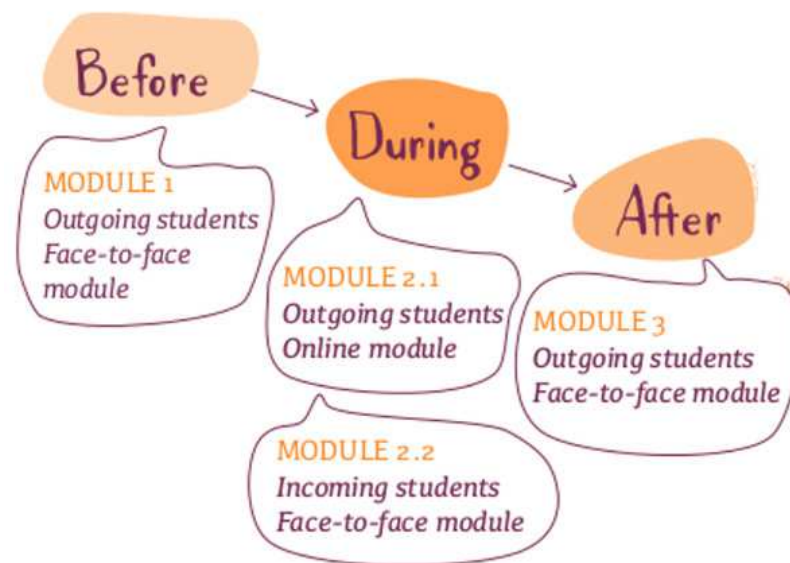


Figure 1 The IEREST Intercultural Path

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 are 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 finalised educational resources. In addition, students are represented within the project by AEGEE-Europe, one of the largest international associations of HE students.

During the first phase of the project, there have been two major occasions when students played a role as IEREST consultants: First, during the administration of the project questionnaire, completed by 3,152 (future, present, and future) Erasmus students, offering a multi-faceted overview of the 'youth on the move' attitudes, aspirations, needs and concerns. Secondly, during the online focus group held in September 2013 in order to explore students' interpretations of the data collected through the questionnaire.

Students also play a key part in the testing phase of the IEREST *Intercultural Path*, delivered in five partner institutions (Universities of Bologna, Durham, Helsinki, Primorska (Koper), and Leuven). Participant students will be asked for feedback about the usefulness, quality and attractiveness of the Intercultural Path. The feedback provided will then be used to adjust and improve the teaching activities before publishing them on the project web platform.

Finally, students will benefit from the revised IEREST Intercultural Path in two main ways: They will be able to access autonomously the web platform and its self-learning resources, or attend the modules offered at their home and/or host institutions, if the latter adopt the IEREST intercultural resources.

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. These too is actively involved in the project as consultants; in particular, a group of HE teachers took part in a teacher-dedicated online focus group, while others have joined the IEREST external quality control committee, taking part in class observations during the piloting of the Intercultural Path.

Educational stakeholders are represented within the project by the International Office of T.M.Kempen, a broad university campus in Belgium, acting as consultants. Educational stakeholders play a crucial role in the project, as the future of the IEREST educational resources mostly depends on HEIs' willingness to invest in the necessary human resources to deliver intercultural teaching activities 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 at different institutional necessities and priorities. To this end, International Affairs officers and stakeholders have been included in the project in several ways: in one of the project focus groups, through dedicated events (e.g., a Symposium in March 2014 in Koper and a workshop which will take place in Leuven in July 2015), and by means of Ally Agreements with a number of HEIs. These, while external to the IEREST Consortium, test the teaching resources during the project lifecycle and provide valuable feedback on how to increase their usability for teachers and make them more effective for intercultural learning.

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 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 application for courses or accommodation) and country-specific information. Such courses are mostly taught by administrative staff and adopt an instrumental and essentialist 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 overall IEREST project methodology is articulated and multifaceted; it can be summarised in four main stages:

- Review of target users' needs;
- 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);
- Test of the teaching activities;

- Development of the final version of the teaching activities and their adaptation to online access.

1. Review of target users' needs

The general aim of this first stage is 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 as: (a) How do students imagine and prepare for their study abroad experience? According to what criteria do they consider the study abroad successful or unsuccessful? 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 overall study has been carried out through 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 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*:

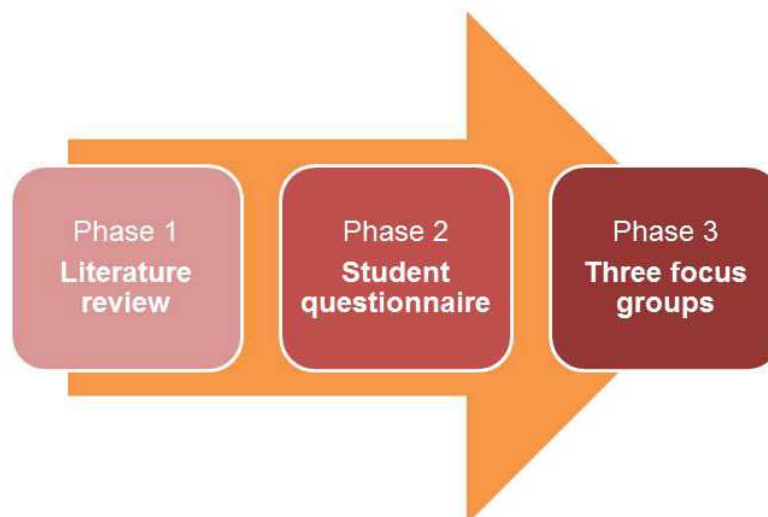


Figure 2 Review of target users' methodology

Besides providing insights from the scientific literature on study abroad and intercultural education, *Phase 1* has helped identify some trends concerning the existing cultural and intercultural offerings to mobile students: first of all it has highlighted that a great deal of current offerings are oriented toward mere 'survival' in the target culture. 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 administrated online in four languages (English, French, Italian, and Slovenian). A consent clause for the use of the collected data for research purposes was placed at the beginning of the questionnaire. 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*: year of birth, gender, language proficiency, home academic institution, area of study, degree level, main language(s) used at home academic institution; (2) *General information on the stay abroad*: primary purpose (study / work), nature of program (Erasmus / other), length of stay, distance in time at moment of writing, language(s) used at host institute; overall level of satisfaction from a personal and an academic point of view; (3) *Prior experience abroad*: length and destination of previous study stays and other long sojourns abroad; courses and experiences considered meaningful to prepare for stay abroad; personal and institutional preparation for the study stay abroad; (4) *Needs in stay abroad experiences*: needs as defined before, during, and after the experience; recommendations to home and host institutions, and to other outgoing and incoming students; criteria for considering a stay abroad experience successful; (lack of) contact with local students; aspirations following the stay abroad.

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 many useful hints.

The three focus groups took place before the analysis of the questionnaire data was completed. However, these helped include the target users' interpretations of preliminary questionnaire results (see *Section 3*) 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 have begun to design the teaching activities constituting the *Intercultural Path*. In groups, the IEREST partners develop 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. After several cycles of reciprocal feedback, the activities are ready to be tested.

So far (April 2014) the 4 pre-departure teaching activities forming Module 1 have been fully developed, while those for Modules 2.1 and 2.2 are expected by the summer of 2014. These initial activities are:

- Activity 1. Perceptions of Self and Other
- Activity 2. Anti-discrimination and racism study circle
- Activity 3. Exploring narrative in intercultural mobility contexts
- Activity 4. Meeting others abroad.

The activities should be taught shortly before students leave for their stays abroad. Each requires 10-14 learning and teaching hours. The activities have been written in English, the global academic lingua franca, but can be freely translated into other languages. Although the context is European mobility, the module can be adapted to other uses. The activities represent a mix of self-learning and interactive-reflexive teaching-learning; they complement each other and allow revision and reinforcement. In order to help students meet the objectives of the module, the activities promote critical thinking, co-constructivist perspectives and reinforcement of learning.

In terms of teaching materials, the IEREST team has put together videos and written excerpts that fit well with the modules, making them fun to work with and engaging students in reflective discussions and inquiry. Short *PowerPoint* presentations are also included to help teachers go through the basic theoretical and methodological elements with the students. These simple but to-the-point presentations will also be useful as revision between activities. 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 David Kolb's Reflective Model of learning. The model is composed of four steps:

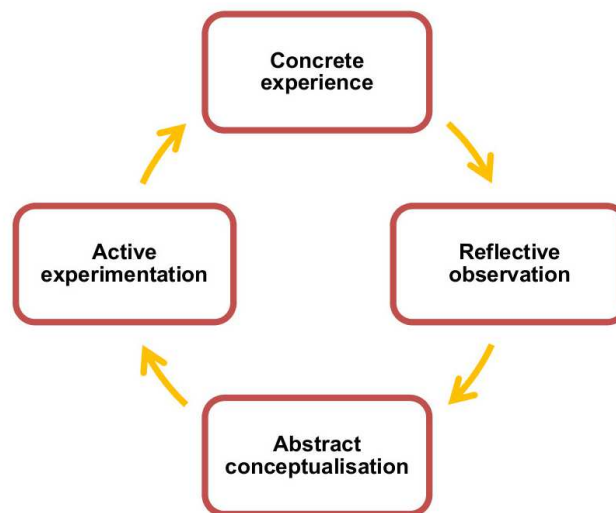


Figure 3 Kolb (1984)

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

3. Test of the teaching activities

In this third phase, five IEREST partner institutions (Universities of Bologna, Durham, Helsinki, Primorska (Koper) and Leuven) are testing the designed activities with their students. Each institution is adapting the activities to their local contexts and needs. This implies: 1) no limit to the number of students per module; 2) no restrictions for the enrolment of students; 3) partners can either decide to use the IEREST activities in existing institutional courses or organise special modules for mobile students, including bespoke one-day workshops; 4) each partner institution can decide whether to recognise credits to participants or not. This flexibility was adopted in order to guarantee sustainability to the project outcomes, as they take into account each institution's needs and practices.

By June 2014, each of the above-mentioned partners will have tested the pre-departure activities in their institutions, while Modules 2.1-2.2 and Module 3 will be piloted respectively in Autumn 2014 and 2015.

As soon as the Module 1 test/implementation phase is over, it will be possible to evaluate the pre-departure teaching activities on the basis of the data collected during the piloting (through student and teacher questionnaires; class observation – based on video-recordings – by external teachers, scholars, and education stakeholders; and face-to-face class observations made by members of the project). All these data, collected in each of the five partner institutions, will be then associated

with external expert feedback given on the paper-version of the activities. This important phase is a crucial pre-condition of the fourth and final one.

4. Development of the final version of the teaching activities

After completing the overall piloting, the IEREST teaching activities will be modified in agreement with the feedback received from participant students and teachers, and internal and external evaluators. Once the final version is complete, the activities will be disseminated through the IEREST web platform and the online repository *Humbox* (probably at the end of the project, in September 2015).

Dissemination strategies

Most of the actions conducted so far have yielded important results in terms of dissemination, in reason of the large numbers of representatives of the target users who have played an active role within the IEREST processes. The project website (<http://ierest-project.eu/>) is also fundamental in the on-going dissemination strategies: Between February 2013 and April 2014 (14 months) it was visited 6,833 times (average: 488 times a month, approximately 16 times a day), with visitors from 25 different countries: in addition to the 6 countries involved in the project, visitors also came from Spain (3.92%), Germany (30.5%) and USA (2.87%).

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 multiplication of results on a micro level by reaching individual students and teachers, who can access the IEREST activities on the web platform or via *Humbox*. Users can adapt them to their self-learning or teaching necessities, thanks to a series of supporting documents which will be also uploaded on the platform (and linked to *Humbox*) and include: theoretical and methodological guidelines to exploit the activities, a collection of additional information sources about mobility and intercultural education, a set of mini-video with extracts of the IEREST testing phase.

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 would allow the sustainability of the project results and 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 in *Humbox* (www.humbox.ac.uk), an existing well-known repository for open educational resources, is crucial for sustainability, as it guarantees that the IEREST products will be available beyond the project life-cycle. The second main measure is the decision to take “flexibility” as a main 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., no necessarily in mobility), in order to foster 'internationalisation at home'. The project is investing on flexibility, because for IEREST flexibility is sustainability.

IEREST is also investing in sustainability through its Ally Partner agreements. Ally partners are HEI which test the IEREST teaching resources during the project life-cycle and provide valuable feedback about how to increase their usability for teachers and make them more effective for intercultural learning. Besides contributing to the project's "culture of feedback", these agreements constitute 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. The University of West Macedonia signed an IEREST Ally agreement in January 2014 and is now testing Module 1.

The IEREST partners have 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 are planned for the forthcoming months, which will help the overall dissemination and exploitation strategy, including:

- 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 three Symposia in Durham (22nd October 2014), Helsinki (April 2015), and Bologna (September 2015). These events, like the previous one in Koper ("Intercultural universities in Europe: proposals from the IEREST project", 27th March 2014) are mainly aimed at teachers, local HEIs educational stakeholders and students;
- A workshop held in Leuven in July 2015, which will offer the opportunity to bring together international stakeholders and policy makers in education, in order to discuss the future of the IEREST outcomes.

In addition, the IEREST partners will continue the capillary dissemination strategy realised so far by publishing news and scientific articles, as well as organising and participating in conferences, meetings, workshops, roundtables, etc. focused on internationalisation, study abroad, and intercultural education.

All IEREST events and dissemination acts, besides being published on the website, are collected in the periodic newsletters. At the moment the project newsletter has 240 regular recipients and their number is increasing; it is possible to subscribe to the newsletter through the contact page of project website (<http://ierest-project.eu/contact>) or writing to info@ierest.eu.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

Due to the methodological sequencing of the IEREST project (see *Section 2*), most of the achieved results have not been made public yet. For what concerns the results of the questionnaire and focus groups (see below), they might be published on the IEREST website in the coming months, as soon as their contribution is fully exploited in the design of the activities for Modules 1, 2.1, 2.2 and 3.

The main results achieved so far are the following:

- A comprehensive report on the review of target users' needs (literature review, questionnaire, and focus groups);
- Four pre-departure teaching activities for Module 1, as well as the related introduction and lists of learning objectives and outcomes;
- A preliminary overview of the teaching activities for Modules 2.1 and 2.2;
- The set of tools realised to evaluate the implementation of the pre-departure teaching activities;
- A dissemination report and the above-mentioned Ally agreement.

Review of target users' needs

The achievement represented by the IEREST literature review and its overall results have been already delineated in *Section 2*. The analysis carried out on the questionnaire and focus groups is helping define some important features of the *Intercultural Path*, and thus achieve the project's objective: to design the IEREST teaching activities around the expectations and needs of the IEREST target users. 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 declare that they take various personal initiatives to explore their host culture 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 vary with the stage they are in: Students who are about to leave more strongly affirm that success will heavily depend on social ('having friends') and academic ('interesting courses', 'academic success') factors, while students who have already returned tends to stress the importance of some personal qualities ('openness'; 'independence / courage').

(3) Both in the questionnaire and focus group, students who claim success in contacts with local students at the host institution tend to attribute this to themselves, while those who report a lack of contact with local students attribute the causes to external factors: host institution, local students or general population. At the same time we observe that before students go abroad, they attach as much importance to

making friends with local as with international students but that, by the time they have returned, making friends with international students has 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 of one's own culture(s), as well as of 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 with students' expectations expressed in the questionnaire (e.g., "becoming (more) independent" is considered the most important criterion for considering a stay abroad successful, whatever stage of the experience abroad students are in).

(6) According to the officers participating in the focus group, most universities write about the importance of study abroad and developing IC in their missions statements, but without clear (and shared) definitions of IC. Participants also confirmed that providing students with practical information regarding their destination country and host institution is important, but it is just as crucial to provide students with intercultural preparation, because mobility is a life experience. 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 IEREST exploitation, 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 academic side, the administrative offices would not be able to make such a decision, which would have to be taken centrally by the university.

Pre-departure teaching activities for Module 1 and related documents

This outcome has already been described in *Section 3*. It is expected that, by participating in the module (during the test phase and even more so thanks to the final versions of the activities), students get a better awareness of how to examine their own and others' intercultural communication and encounters -through processes of experiential learning, analysis, and reflection, and develop their ability to reflect on certain myths that have circulated about student mobility over the last decades but also throughout history. One main aspect of the module is to promote the idea of multiple identities and that people are different but also similar across and within countries. The idea that people construct both who they are and how they see other people is also central. As such, the modules 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. Related to the idea of multiple identities is that of the role of power. Thus, a second aspect is to teach students how to identify

words, phrases and discourses that limit the opportunity for some people to enjoy multiplicity.

Preliminary overview of teaching activities for Modules 2.1 and 2.2

Though this outcome is still work in progress, the activities which will be part of Modules 2.1 and 2.2 (conducted when students are abroad, respectively online and face-to face) have two overarching goals: First of all, they aim to develop in students an understanding that interculturality in today's world is such a complex concept that they might be easily tempted to revert to safe assumptions and behaviours that ignore the complexity of the concept and the intercultural learning to which they have been exposed. Moreover, the activities are designed to encourage Erasmus students to explore their own autonomy in the world out of the class.

Some of the intended objectives for these teaching activities are: (a) Exploring and reflecting on their emotional reactions towards living abroad, going beyond easy attributions of their attitudinal states to (cultural) diversities (while other factors such homesickness or language constraints might in fact be the cause of such stress); (b) Reflecting on how communication in academic communities is shaped -despite European integration- by differing histories, expectations and attitudes towards learning; (c) Examining how using another language -more or less successfully- can affect one's self-image (and capacity to project an image) and one's cultural identity and feeling of belonging.

Overall, the three activities are being developed for both Module 2.1 and 2.2. Their topics will be: "Exploring Erasmus groups and communication in the learning environment"; "Intercultural geography of the city"; "Intercultural volunteering abroad".

The set of tools realised for evaluating the implementation of Module 1

The tools for the evaluation of the IEREST pre-departure activities are already available, though they have not yet been made public. They consist in a participant student questionnaire, a teacher questionnaire, an observation grid for internal and external evaluators, and an evaluation form for external evaluation of the paper-versions of the activities. All these will be administrated to the relevant persons by means of online surveys.

Dissemination report and IEREST Ally agreement

Besides the outcomes described above, remarkable results have also been achieved through the IEREST dissemination and exploitation strategies. The signature of an Ally agreement was already mentioned in the previous section. The capillary dissemination activity (48 events, including presentations at conferences, official meetings, publications, institutional blogs, and magazines) will soon be published on the website, while most activities are already available in the news section: <http://ierest-project.eu/news>.

4. Partnerships

IEREST partners have complementary expertise, ranging from study abroad, Erasmus mobility, internationalisation, intercultural education and communication, intercultural language education, and open education. This varied composition guarantees multi-faceted perspectives on the IEREST processes and outcomes, and also satisfies the often lamented lack of connection among specialist researchers and practitioners in the fields. Moreover, it helps obtain a multiplier effect in the dissemination and exploitation of the project results thanks to the several networks each partner is linked to.

The institutions involved in the project are:

- University of Bologna, Italy
- Durham University, UK
- University of Savoy, Chambéry, France
- University of Helsinki, Finland
- University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia
- University of Leuven, Belgium
- The Open University, UK

The IEREST project has also three associate partners, which represent the three main project target users: AEGEE-Europe, AEDE-Hungary, and T.M.Kempen. The associate partners' contribution is 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 includes Southern, Northern, Western, and Central Eastern Europe. This spread will ensure a maximum dissemination of the results throughout Europe. Moreover, since the IEREST project has among its main aims the development of results which are relevant and meaningful at EU level, its European-level approach is important: To be truly generalizable and exploitable in as many teaching, institutional and national contexts as possible, the *Intercultural Path* needs 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 IEREST has the potential of contributing to the European added-value of higher education: Thanks to the *Intercultural Path* and its specific articulation in teaching modules which are provided to the same student in both home and host institutions, the project has indeed the potential to foster new forms of collaboration among universities in Europe.

5. Plans for the Future

Half way through the project, the overall implementation methodologies have been tested: Efficient group-work modes of designing the teaching activities were fine-tuned during the planning of the pre-departure module; a common framework for testing such activities has been established, based on the above-mentioned criterion of flexibility (*Section 2*); the set of tools needed to evaluate the implementation of module 1 is ready. Therefore, it is safe to predict that, for the rest of the project, the IEREST partners will be in the position to build upon the results accomplished so far for designing, testing and evaluating the educational resources of the remaining modules (2.1, 2.2, and 3). This will result in a general speed-up of the decision and collaboration processes, as well as their continuous improvement.

The time and energy saved thanks to the intense work during the first half of the project will thus be employed in the preparation of the materials for the web platform, and in the enhancement of the project dissemination and exploitation strategies.

Concerning the former task, the IEREST team will adapt the final (i.e. piloted and fine-tuned) teaching activities in order to make them accessible by means of the IEREST web platform as well as Humbox. While the adoption of this external repository of open educational resources is crucial for sustainability (see *Section 2*), the web platform will offer users a series of additional services and products: (1) A database of web information sources about the Erasmus world and its possible educational potential on the intercultural level; (2) a set of mini-videos presenting students who have participated in the IEREST modules and their Erasmus experiences, extracts of the class-recordings, and some backstage stories; (3) a multilingual user-manual aimed at facilitating the exploitation of the web platform and its contents. In the coming months, while working on these additional resources which complement the teaching activities, the IEREST team will design and publish a teaching course, a textbook with a collection of the teaching activities which will also be uploaded to the web platform.

In the remaining part of the project and especially from Autumn 2014 the project dissemination and exploitation strategies will reach their peak, and progressively polarise on the project's different target users and intended impacts: Scientific publications and presentations in conferences for an academic audience; the above-mentioned symposia in order to reach teachers, students and local HEIs; the IEREST workshop and the setup of additional Ally agreements to involve educational stakeholders at an international level in discussions on the future of the IEREST activities beyond the life-cycle of the project.

The website and newsletter will continue to serve their crucial function of making the project known and of facilitating and encouraging networking.

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 through a coherent set of teaching modules which take place -in both 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 two 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; with the multicultural and multilingual teaching materials/methods it produces (since the intercultural path as a model will be sensitive to the local peculiarities during the five experimentations); and with the multilingual web platform.
- (3) It fosters excellence in higher education with respect to intercultural education/communication, since it involves 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.

