

Camembert with Chopsticks:

The Rocky Road to Cultural Understanding

How three different cultures forge common goals

What did we expect from this Erasmus Mundus programme? We certainly all had our own ideas. However, most of us got lots more than we bargained for. This article addresses both the expectations we had before starting the course and the experiences we lived and learned through. Both aspects have great relevance for both our personal and professional future in public health.

We all knew it was not going to be easy studying in a different language, but perhaps we did not expect that interacting with our classmates would be potentially more energy-consuming than reading Foucault or Berger. We spent the first year in Sheffield, England in a course of approximately 60 people and around 25 nationalities from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean. Sharing a classroom with all these students turned out to be both a very fruitful and a fairly traumatic adventure. Trying to understand different accents, the way others formulate questions and perform debates about social and cultural aspects can be quite disconcerting at the beginning. Step by step, we learned that there is no ideal or unique answer to some issues; it might be possible in mathematics, where two plus two equals four in every corner of the world, but a child or woman's status in Nigeria might not necessarily be the same in Korea.

There are numerous anecdotes to illustrate this general point, but let's look at the question of punctuality. Classes

started on time, but different students arrived at different times. For some this was normal, for others it was disrespectful. We even had a debate about banning the entrance to class after 10 minutes. This however did not lead to any concrete result due to "cultural differences". The expression "cultural differences" highlights a very important lesson we learnt in the first year: how to adapt to a new culture. At the begin-



••• Elsa Dufay, César Eduardo Wong Alcázar, and Ying Wu experienced first-hand both the challenges and enrichments of intercultural collaboration.

ning we needed to "deal" with other students and with being surprised about their clothes, their way of speaking and pronunciation, the way they said hello and introduced themselves. After one year of obtaining "cultural skills", two groups of Europubhealth (Sheffield and Granada) came together and took part in an integrative module for one month in Krakow. Here we worked and lived together and managed to get along well with each other.

The three of us come from three completely different ethnic and cultural backgrounds: China, France and Peru. We got through our first year of adaptation and are now hopefully better equipped for making the second year a less shocking and more easy-going experience. But coping with a new environment, a new city, new people and new courses still remains a challenge. In our case it could be a help that we have already spent time together and learned to accept the fact that each of us is different, so the process of adapting in the second year has not been so tough. The fact that we are living in France and that one of us is French has helped the other two to better and more easily understand the culture, but on the other hand it has also been a process for the French student of readapting to her own culture after spending almost 18 months abroad. Sharing our differences and explaining them to each other has become a valuable way of learning from each other, which we do not look on negatively but rather enjoy. One activity we enjoy doing is cooking and eating together. This can lead to interesting novelties: using chopsticks to eat camembert (a typical French cheese) could become an interesting way of spending an evening! While we eat we learn and talk about our differences and home cultures. We learn something new every day. "Cultural differences" still exist, but we have been much better at taking them on board this time. The question is how we can take advantage of what we have lived through and



The Many Shades of *Erasmus Mundus*

An opportunity for many unique life-lessons

Having spent a year in the Erasmus Mundus programme I would say that Erasmus Mundus has several meanings for me. As a student from a developing country, I would give the following answers to the question "what is Erasmus Mundus?":

A group of Masters courses, which cut across various disciplines ranging from engineering and sciences to humanities and arts.

A chance to study and live in at least two different countries in Europe.

A chance to gain an international degree as well as skills and knowledge which propel one to greater heights career-wise.

A chance to meet and interact with peers from diverse backgrounds and cultures. A chance to hear from „the horse’s mouth” about other countries you have formerly only read or heard about.

A chance to enhance interpersonal skills.

A chance to visit popular cities in Europe.

A chance to learn at least two foreign languages, and observe new customs and cultures.

A time to commit at least one faux pas.

A time to be most grateful that there is a single currency, namely

the Euro, in most countries of the European Union.

A time to learn just a bit more about banking terms involved in the transfer of money across countries, such as the SWIFT and IBAN codes.

A time to learn a little bit more about shipping services and logistic firms that ship luggage around Europe.

A time to gain exposure and broaden your way of thinking.

And certainly a time to make friends! Friendships that cut across the bounds of nationality, language, ethnicity and religion.

I have no doubt that several other Erasmus Mundus students would have one or more items to add to the list above because we have all had diverse experiences. And the list goes on and on

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experienced and how we should apply it in our future private and professional lives. Firstly in the personal area, we have learnt to be more open and not judge other people’s actions and behaviour too quickly. We need to accept others the way they are, and not be too eager to change them so that they think like us or believe in what we believe. While working in public health even in our own countries, we will need to come to terms with different groups and their needs. We need to understand populations and communities, and it is vital to take into consideration their beliefs, needs and expectations whenever we implement or design a project. Over and above the valuable academic and professional input from course work and lectures this is perhaps one of the most crucial insights we can take home with us from Europubhealth.

After all we have been through, it may sound easy and may seem that from now on we could live, work and adapt easily to any new situation, but in fact this is not the case. Yes, we have become better and more easy-going people in many respects, but cultural adaptation is a never-ending process. Nevertheless we can say that the more one is exposed to other cultures, the easier it seems to become to adapt to them. So we would recommend you all to take advantage of all situations where you may learn from others. Open your minds and learn even the smallest thing from your classmates and colleagues. You will not be surprised anymore if one day you end up having dinner sitting on the floor with your legs crossed, eating with your hands while watching a bunch of "giant human apes" in a strange pile fighting over an oval shaped object and being cheered for it (Rugby World Cup, 2007). Just enjoy it.

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