

Keynote address to the Erasmus Plus Programme Official Launch event in Ireland

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Good morning and thank you for the invitation to address you at this very important event and I not alone congratulate the organisers but I also congratulate those who have had the vision and the determination to push through this new Erasmus Plus programme which has the potential to change and enrich immeasurably the lives of so many people and especially our young people in the member states of the EU and beyond.

Many of the speakers here today will deal with the logistics of this programme as they apply across so many third level, vocational, and professional sectors. What I would like to do, from the vantage point of someone now living and working in “Europe”, but also from the vantage point of a parent still educating five children, is to share some of my impressions of the European experience and particularly as it impacts on the life chances and experiences of our young people, many of whom have been so badly served in recent years by our own generation.

I took up office last October and, as an independent Ombudsman, it is not within my remit to comment on politics, a rather difficult ask as you can imagine in a European Parliament election year. But what I have done and done so unashamedly on many occasions is to state unequivocally that for my generation of women, educated in 1970s Ireland, our entry into the EU in 1973, unlocked and liberated our potential as adult women in a way that our own successive governments had never done, governments which had in fact, sought the polar opposite objective. The ending of the marriage bar, the removal of pay and other gender based discrimination, enabled Irishwomen to begin to stride the public stage and just this week, yet again, we witnessed the remarkable flowering of that 1973 act, when we noted how every top position in our justice landscape is held by a woman.

As someone who has also attained relatively high office, both here and within the institutions of the EU, I put my success squarely down to the pathways that were opened to me over 40 years ago. But when I tell that story in Brussels or Strasbourg I add a rider. And what I say is that the challenge for the EU is to create similar happy narratives for the young women and men of Greece and Spain and Portugal and Cyprus and all of those EU states who joined with the promise to their own citizens that membership would put an end to large scale unemployment to



poor living standards to forced migration and many of the other ills that have befallen the EU due to the economic downturn.

And this is, very obviously, where Erasmus Plus can play such a huge role. Not alone can it provide the actual courses, training opportunities and other types of professional development for young people throughout Europe, but in doing so it can help to plug the so called democratic and legitimacy deficit that bedevils the EU and which is, believe me, talked about non stop in “Europe” and particularly this year as we await the outcome of the battle between the Europhiles and the Eurosceptics.

In thinking and researching about my presentation today I was struck that the launch of the Erasmus Plus programme comes at a very opportune moment in time both for Ireland and the European Union.

On the one hand Ireland recently became the first Eurozone nation to successfully exit a bailout programme, and on the other hand, the European Union is renewing itself - putting into place a new political leadership over the next months - starting with the European Parliament elections in eleven days' time.

Neither of these events in themselves will mean an end to the recent economic troubles, nor do they provide a solution. But it could be that they mark a watershed - that Ireland will be able to return to the kind of advancement and prosperity that was so notable during its previous decades as a member of the EU, and that the EU will be able to begin the process of healing itself, of providing renewed meaning to its role as a Union of solidarity.

For that is the ultimate aim of the European Union, to provide the means for peace and the prosperity of its citizens, through ever closer Union - solidarity between its Member States, between its peoples, between generations and between economic classes.

Often, when in difficult times and when hard decisions have had to be taken, it has seemed that solidarity has been missing from the EU discourse, that it has been removed from the agenda. I would like to argue today that has never really been the case. The EU adds value to the economy of its Member States and likewise, international study and cross-border educational exchange adds value to people's experiences and career. The EU's contribution to people's lives is unmistakeable, and so too is its contribution - now through Erasmus Plus - to furthering the international and multicultural educational experience.

Just a couple of weeks ago, the American journalist Anne Murphy Paul, who specialises in human creativity, wrote in TIME magazine that "there is a growing body of research on the effects of study and work-abroad experiences" and that those experiences make people "more flexible, creative, and complex thinkers". The researchers conclude that such study and experiences have a positive effect on employment and career prospects. [1]

Three years ago, my eldest child, did an Erasmus year. She wanted Prague; she got the small city of Umea in Northern Sweden. I cannot say that she was immediately pleased with the



offering not even when I told her that she could actually get a ferry to Finland from Umea. But then one day, I got a text from her saying herself and a few friends were going away for a few days. "We're taking," she said, "a bus to the arctic circle." I knew then, that despite herself, she was hooked, that even she could appreciate the wonder of the possibility gifted to her through Erasmus where you could study in a place where the local bus could take you to the Arctic Circle.

But the values of the year were multi layered, academically, culturally, socially and also personally as she coped with strange surrounding, new friends, multi cultures and all the time making sure that she kept her grades up so that she could pass into her final year back in Dublin. She matured, she became even more independent and she has now joined an increasing population for young people for whom the borders of the EU really do not exist.

And in my lived experience for the last seven months in Strasbourg and Brussels, the possibilities afforded to young people through Erasmus but also through internship and other kinds of employment within the institutions, agencies and bodies of the EU have been so impressive. A young Irish Erasmus student in Strasbourg wrote looking for a short internship which I was happy to provide, a young Spanish official in my office told me how she met her German husband on their Erasmus year, a young Greek woman has just been appointed as social media officer and all of those young people have their mirror images throughout the other institutions, bright young people afforded wonderful life possibilities and many of whom began that journey through Erasmus.

I am also conscious however that jobs in the EU institutions are highly prized and highly competitive and beyond the reach of many young people. Those that do succeed tend to be the academic cream of the crop or have some connection that has smoothed their path. The young intern working for me for example, not alone got 11 or 12 As in her junior Cert but also got 7A1s in the Leaving and that type of CV would not be unusual even for the lower grade jobs within the European service. Academic success is not always, as we well know, an indicator of how well people can actually do a job, but the first sweep through the thousands of CVS that land on EU desks does tend to make that discrimination.

So what do other young people? Those perhaps not particularly academically gifted, or those who want to take a vocational route or indeed those for whom the costs of third level education here in Ireland are beyond their reach. The recession cued a huge bulge in applications for further education here as we know and the system isn't always able to cope.

Clearly Erasmus Plus has a role here and other speakers today will explore it. But I think our educators at second level also need to look at the third level possibilities for students in the EU, outside of the direct Erasmus system. Are our career guidance counsellors and we as parents aware at all of what is out there for students if the CAO route doesn't work for them or even if they simply want that mind expanding experience of studying abroad and not just for a term or a year but for three or four years?

As a parent, I have recently had direct experience of this and I would encourage all of those



involved in guiding second level students to look at the possibilities that are open to them.

Last year, my son, not having got the course of his choice through the CAO system, was a bit despondent about the course he did get and not very enthused by it. About a week later, driving home, I listened to an interview on RTE with the careers counsellor Brian Mooney who was going through the post CAO options. Suddenly he mentioned something I'd never hear of, a website called Eunicas, which he is involved in, and which acts, in effect, as a sort of clearing house for third level colleges throughout the EU. Mooney noted that a large number of courses taught through English, were still open for applications. Literally, two weeks later, my darling son was on a Ryanair flight to Amsterdam to take up a four year course in European Studies in what is known as a Hoghe school, I think the equivalent of an IT here, in The Hague. And he is thriving.

And when I started to explore this, I came across some interesting facts. The first is that an astonishing number of courses from arts to law to engineering to medicine are taught through English, many of them in the top universities in Europe if not the world.

In the four Scandinavian countries the courses are completely free of charge irrespective of what you're studying and in the public colleges in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, the fees are less than €1500 per annum, that is less than the standard third level registration charge here. In some countries student loans are also available.

And for those students who struggle to get on to high points courses, most European colleges operate a low bar system – even for courses such as medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine. It's part philosophy, equal access for all, but it's also a matter of simple supply and demand.

One recent Irish veterinary graduate from a university in Budapest for example, was 150 points short of the entry requirement in Ireland and she is now working as a vet back home. I understand, anecdotally, that 90% of the vet students in that Hungarian university are Irish.

What surprised me most about all of this is how few people, even middle class ambitious for their children parents, had any awareness of the bounty on our doorstep. Yes, many students are encouraged to apply to the UK through UCAS but how many are encouraged to look a tiny bit beyond that and see what potentially they could be doing there. Of course most students want to study at home but at times like this, when resources are squeezed, and competition for the high points courses is intense, our children should be made aware of the options just a short flight away.

Forgive me if I have digressed somewhat from Erasmus but to my mind, the overarching intent of this project is to create more rounded, globalised graduates and young jobseekers, young people who have greatly added to their value by having the initiative in the first place to study abroad but whose world view will have been developed and whose insights into Ireland's own role within the EU and the wider world must bring fresh thinking back to the home place.



Erasmus also reminds us of the continued benefits of the union. Despite the recent, awful, economic crash, membership of the EU has brought great benefits to Ireland, as the many tens of billions of Euros provided through agricultural support and structural funds meant that Ireland was able to both modernize its economy and infrastructure and also become more competitive in the global economy.

The deregulation of the airline market by the European Union in the 1990s enabled Ryanair to become one of Europe's largest carriers. And through the European Single Market, Ireland became the European base for many multinational enterprises seeking out a skilled, hard-working workforce to provide them with access to the European market.

And that workforce has acquired its skills in no small part due to European programmes that provided the means to learn and to train. For the EU is not - and has never been - just an economic and financial Union. The original Erasmus programme dates back to 1987, well before the Single Market or the introduction of the Euro.

That original Erasmus programme was European solidarity in action - so were the programmes that eventually complemented it (all under the umbrella of Life Long Learning in the previous period) - and so too is Erasmus Plus - for training, for improvement of skills, for cooperation and networking, and for increased knowledge and better opportunities in the labour market for school leavers, for students, for employees as well as for teachers and trainers, for life-long learning ... European solidarity in action.

And more so, because Erasmus Plus represents one of the EU's contributions to a better understanding between the peoples of Europe, for improved knowledge of the cultural diversity of the continent and of the motivations and aspirations of citizens taking decisions about their daily lives and in their social and political spheres.

The office of European Ombudsman also fits into the solidarity framework of the EU. It was set up in the Maastricht Treaty - which also introduced the concept of European Union citizenship - and started its work in 1995. I deal with complaints about maladministration in the functioning of the European institutions and bodies. Any citizen of the EU or legal resident or entity established in the EU has the right to complain to the Ombudsman - in any of the official languages of the Union.

The complaints I receive can cover a broad range of allegations - failure to comply with the law, with the principles of good administration or with fundamental rights. They have recently included access to clinical drug trial data and allegations about favourable tax treatment for Spanish football clubs.

The interactive guide on our website is accessible in all official languages. Its aim is to empower citizens by finding the most appropriate complaint-handling body for their problem and sparing themselves frustration and delay. In 2012, more than 19,000 citizens received advice through the guide. Empowered citizens have a better understanding of their rights and of how to defend those rights.



In order to achieve all this, the European Ombudsman is served by a dedicated team of multi-national staff who are multi-lingual so as to respond to the needs of citizens when they address correspondence to the Ombudsman in their own language as quickly and efficiently as possible. And a staff that is knowledgeable both about the alternative forms of remedy that a complainant may seek at the European level but also at the member State or regional level. A staff - the majority of whom have lived abroad, worked abroad, studied abroad and who have brought to the Ombudsman all the richness of the diversity of their collective experience.

Furthermore, Ombudsmen exist at the national and/or regional level of governance in all the Member States of the European Union. To help serve their needs, as well as those of the European Ombudsman, we have collectively created a Network of European Ombudsmen, to which all the Ombudsmen at national and regional level in the EU and candidate countries belong, as well as the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament.

The purpose of this Network is twofold, to exchange new and information about best practices in complaint-handling, good administrative practice, and developments in EU law that may affect the work of Ombudsmen; and also to exchange cases and pose queries as and when necessary.

There is no formal basis to the Network, rather it runs on the collective desire of the Ombudsmen to learn from their peers and to be more efficient in their own complaint-handling. Here therefore, we see the elements of cross-border networking and training with an aim to improving our Ombudsman function, just like the partnerships that have been built up in the past for educational institutions through the forerunners of the Erasmus Plus programme.

It is vital to understand that the good workings of a European Union of over 500 million people are based upon the notion of legitimacy. The people will properly engage with the EU, its institutions and its programmes only if they are incentivised to do so, if they believe that they can have trust in the EU enterprise, if they feel that there are proper reasons and positive benefits for them to do so. This notion applies not just to the electoral choice to be made on the 23rd, but also to any decisions to engage with the EU, whether it is to promote a European Citizens Initiative, to address a complaint to the Ombudsman or even to engage in a partnership under Erasmus Plus.

Through the decisions taken on inquiries into complaints, and through the outreach activities I make online, with publications and in speeches and presentations to European citizens, civil society and decision makers the European Ombudsman makes a small - but I dare to hope - increasingly influential contribution to improving the legitimacy of the Union in the eyes of its citizens.

I am certain on the other hand, that Erasmus Plus is a programme destined to make more than a small impact on European citizens' lives. It's not just because of the ambitious scope of the program, but because it is addressing a perceived need at the right time .



The latest Eurobarometer report asked questions about what people wanted from a future EU. 49% of the Europeans surveyed believe that society should emphasise social equality and solidarity, 34% progress and innovation, 31% protecting the environment, 28% free trade or the market economy, 18% cultural diversity and openness to others, and 11% defence of traditions. [2]

Erasmus Plus is clearly about contributing to progress and innovation, and through raising the skills set of young people and workers in Europe it can contribute to combating unemployment - hence it contributes to solidarity and - most obviously - it is a programme that is designed to meet the needs of Europeans who wish to take advantage of cultural diversity and openness, to learn from others, to internalise their international experience, and - though that - to make a better life for themselves.

Making a success of Erasmus Plus is your challenge. We all need to be better informed, we do this through learning and exchanging experiences with our peers. In that way we can better transfer our knowledge to those that have most need of us - our young people, and those who need to take the next step up in their professional lives.

The more we can learn from others, ensuring that our citizens are better informed and interconnected, the more we can provide them with the tools to take a participatory interest in their societies - to help them take steps towards bridging the gap of the so called "democratic deficit" and to engage more with the European Union.

To conclude, let me mention an incident that happened last month during my first ever visit to Poland to meet with the Polish Ombudsman in Warsaw. The Ombudsman kindly invited me to a concert one evening and as we were waiting to take our seats she introduced me to an elderly lady. We shook hands and moved away. "Have you seen the film *The Pianist*," asked my Polish colleague, referring to the powerful 2002 movie about of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Polish Jewish pianist, Vladislav Szpilman, who survived its horrors and that of Treblinka. "Well," said the Ombudsman, "That was his widow, Mrs Szpilman."

Some days later I re watched *The Pianist* and I thought of how so much of the talk within the EU today is of the need for a new narrative to replace the old one of war and destruction and genocide and eventual peace. But that brief encounter in the concert hall in Warsaw taught me that the old narrative is not faded yet, and then when we watch what is happening on the eastern borders of Europe, we need still to hold on to that narrative because the impulses that cued it linger still. My so far brief but more engaged encounter with Europe has certainly sensitised me both to the value of the union and the need more than ever to have our young generation engage both with its past and with its future through the deepening of cross cultural understanding and the strengthening of the great ties that can bind us. Our union can at times be fragile and we should never ever take for granted the great freedoms and riches that we continue to enjoy and that we need more than ever to share with those who struggle against anti democratic forces or poverty. Erasmus Plus can legitimately site itself in that noble aim and that is the worth and the value of this great project being unrolled here today.



I wish you all the best, and I thank you for your attention.

[1] <http://time.com/#79937/how-studying-or-working-abroad-makes-you-smarter/> [Link]

[2] See above, page 20.