

A bridge of knowledge across the Mediterranean

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In Syria the **Tempus** program has financed 35 projects allowing the mobility of 300 Syrian Academics to European Universities. Tempus or (Trans-European Mobility Program for the University Studies) is based on transfer the experiences from European educational institutions to their counterparts in neighbouring countries. **Erasmus Mundus** was inspired by the highly successful Erasmus programme, an internal EU programme supporting co-operation and mobility between European higher education institutions. It offers a valuable framework for exchange and dialogue between cultures and gives many Syrian students the opportunity to complete their education in European universities.

Text and photos by Maurice Aaek

Damascus - It's a dream for many Syrian students, the dream of studying in Europe. On the other shore of the Mediterranean, there is another dream, that of sharing Europe's higher education with its neighbours – a dream of intercultural dialogue among students, ultimately leading to a better world.

On Study in Europe Day, organised recently by the EU Delegation in Syria, students brought with them their dreams, but also their concerns and fears – financial, linguistic and cultural.

As EU-funded student exchange programmes seek to address the financial difficulties, additional efforts are being made to address the fears of adapting abroad.

From this perspective, growing student mobility between countries is of particular importance, as Pascal Restel, administrator of the cultural section of the Swedish Embassy in Damascus, explained: "The Syrian who has never been to Sweden will build a picture that is not

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based on personal experience, so it will be unreal, just like the Swedish student who has never been to Syria."

Restel said the experience of one or two students would make little difference, but the mobility of thousands would lead to a better understanding, a better integration across cultures. Such personal experience is exactly what Ziad Naser has gained. Ziad, an IT student, spent nine months at the University of Brighton in the United Kingdom, as part of the Erasmus Mundus exchange programme.

The Dream of Studying in Europe

Ziad had never thought of going to Britain, especially given the international political climate – "How could Arabs be accepted in Europe?" he wondered. But his experience was an eye-opener: "Travelling to Europe has enhanced my experience in dealing with other cultures, it showed me a different lifestyle and different research methods... It's an unforgettable experience."

Tempus and Erasmus Mundus are EU-funded programmes for the exchange of students and academic expertise between Europe and its Neighbourhood, including Syria. Tempus is specialised in promoting higher education in participating countries, while Erasmus Mundus is based on financing scholarships to exchange students between participating universities in Europe and its neighbours.

Tempus is based on transferring expertise between European educational institutions and their counterparts in partner countries. In Syria, Tempus has financed about 35 projects over eight years, most of them at Damascus and Aleppo Universities, allowing Syrian academics valuable exchanges with European universities.

The programme, says its coordinator in Syria, Dr. Rami Ayoubi, is an important opportunity for dialogue and to stimulate academic networking. "If we want to talk about a programme that transfers knowledge from more advanced countries into Syria, we won't be able to measure it quickly, it is an accumulated process and it takes time... Tempus works to finance that process." The programme, which allocated about €10 million to Syria from 2002-2006, has been extended to 2013. The new orientation of Tempus in Syria, Dr. Ayoubi explains, is moving from developing curricula, to giving greater support to comprehensive sectoral and structural evolution projects, benefiting Higher Education in general.

Stimulating the academic dialogue

Erasmus for its part gives students the opportunity to spend time at European universities, offering scholarships for both undergraduates and postgraduates. According to Dr. Ayman Hemada, the project coordinator at Aleppo University, Erasmus aims to bridge the cultural, linguistic, and social divide, while also supporting convergence between Middle Eastern and European students through a mobility scheme between eleven EU universities and nine in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

Dr. Hemada says the scholarships cover all expenses, from tickets to tuition fees and health insurance, as well as a monthly stipend ranging from €1,000 for undergraduates, up to €2,500 for members of the faculty. During the last three years, the project provided 35 scholarships a year, 20 for Syrian students to study in Europe, and 15 for European students coming to Syria.

Dr. Rand Quwatli, Erasmus Mundus coordinator at Damascus University, is enthusiastic: "We were able to send Syrian students of all disciplines to European universities, where they showed very high standards. At the same time, we received students from EU universities. On the basis of the positive results achieved, we reached many agreements between Syrian and European universities."

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■ Dr. Rami Ayoubi
Tempus programme coordinator
in Syria

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■ The "Study in Europe Day" was organised by the EU Delegation in Syria.



Speaking at Study in Europe Day, Dr. Maher Kabakibi, Syria's Deputy Higher Education Minister, underlined the importance of cooperation with Europe, revealing it was the government's goal to see formal collaboration with foreign research institutions before the end of 2010. A new law had been passed, he said, allowing the creation of joint programmes with European universities that would allow students to get degrees from both universities.

According to official statistics, 62% of all Syrian students abroad are studying at European universities, and more than 75% of academics were educated in the EU. Most students attending Syrian universities dream of studying in Europe. With Tempus and Erasmus, that dream is one step closer.

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Erasmus Mundus II – Action 2 Partnerships

<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/extcoop/call/index.htm>

Promotes cooperation between higher education institutions through encouraging partnerships, mobility and exchanges of students, researchers and academic staff

Participating countries

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine (East)
Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia (South)

Timeframe

2009-2010

Budget

€29 million

Objectives

The Erasmus Mundus II - Action 2 Partnerships seeks to promote better understanding and mutual enrichment between the EU and third countries and in the medium term strengthens political, cultural, educational and economic links.

Find out more

Erasmus Mundus fiche > http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=246&id_type=10

TEMPUS IV for higher education

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/tempus/index_en.php

Supports the modernisation of higher education, creates opportunities for cooperation among actors in the field and enhances understanding

Participating countries

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine (East)
Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, occupied Palestinian territory, Syria, Tunisia (South)

Timeframe

2008-2013

Budget

aprox €35-39 million per year (ENPI)

Objectives

The Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies (Tempus) supports the effort of the Partner Countries to modernize their higher education systems and creates opportunities for cooperation among higher education actors of the EU and the participating countries through joint projects. It also enhances understanding between cultures as it promotes a people-to-people approach and promotes convergence with EU developments in higher education leading to more jobs and growth.

Find out more

Tempus fiche > http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=248&id_type=10&lang_id=450

ENPI Info Centre – Education and Training thematic portal >

<http://www.enpi-info.eu/thememed.php?subject=11>

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