

Finding the social dimension behind students mobility programs

(policy paper by the Campus Europae Students Council)

1. About the Campus Europae Students Council (CE-SC)

The CE-SC brings together student representatives from all university members of the European University Foundation (EUF) and it was created in November 2003. Its aims are:

- to represent the perspectives of the 300.000 students enrolled in the member universities within the EUF discussions and decision making process;
- to lobby for Campus Europae at local, national and European level and foster its continual development;
- to support Campus Europae exchange students and deal with any arising social and academic problems.

2. The need to develop a proper social dimension within the European higher education

Over the years many student, opinion and political groups have expressed their scepticism about if the Bologna process will truly be able to remove “all obstacles to the free movement of students” and to emphasise “the social dimension of mobility” (Prague Communiqué, 2001). Although these goals have been reaffirmed in the Berlin Conference such questions are still raised and used to divide Europeans and academics about the Bologna Process (BP) rather than making them work together to overcome such challenges.

We are concerned that in other areas of the BP (common degree structure, credits system, etc) the debates and decisions are happening at a much higher pace than in what concerns the development of the social dimension agenda. This lack of strategic cohesion does not help to dissipate fears and criticism and enhances the need to deal openly and creatively with all matters arising from the Bologna challenges.

The Campus Europae Students Council believes that it is time to shift the paradigm – we want that the social dimension development will from now on take its rightful place in the center of the debate about the BP. Efforts need to be undertaken so that a wide, serious and participated discussion may bring together all educational stakeholders (including some of the BP harshest critics) as a way to foster the exchange of perspectives and best practices and agreeing on what steps are to be taken in this field. Under this framework we have engaged ourselves in the challenging task of brainstorming about how to implement an improved social dimension of the Campus Europae (CE) mobility program while aiming to find answers that will also suit other ongoing projects within the same field.

3. Our analysis

Behind the label of the “social dimension discussion” there is a multitude of topics that interact in very complex ways. A combined analysis of accommodation habits, living costs, social support systems and counselling services would have to deal not only with differences between different countries but also with some specificities of each university.

Since the Students Council is able to reach and organize information coming from almost every university in the CE network we have decided to deal directly with data provided by local and regional sources, so that our analysis can be as close as possible to the “real reality” experienced by our fellow colleagues. Furthermore we have considered that the first subject to be extensively analysed should be the living cost differences in relation with the grant system as this is the most widely pointed barrier to mobility both by european-wide student organizations (namely ESIB) and by questionnaires handed out to students in some of our own universities.

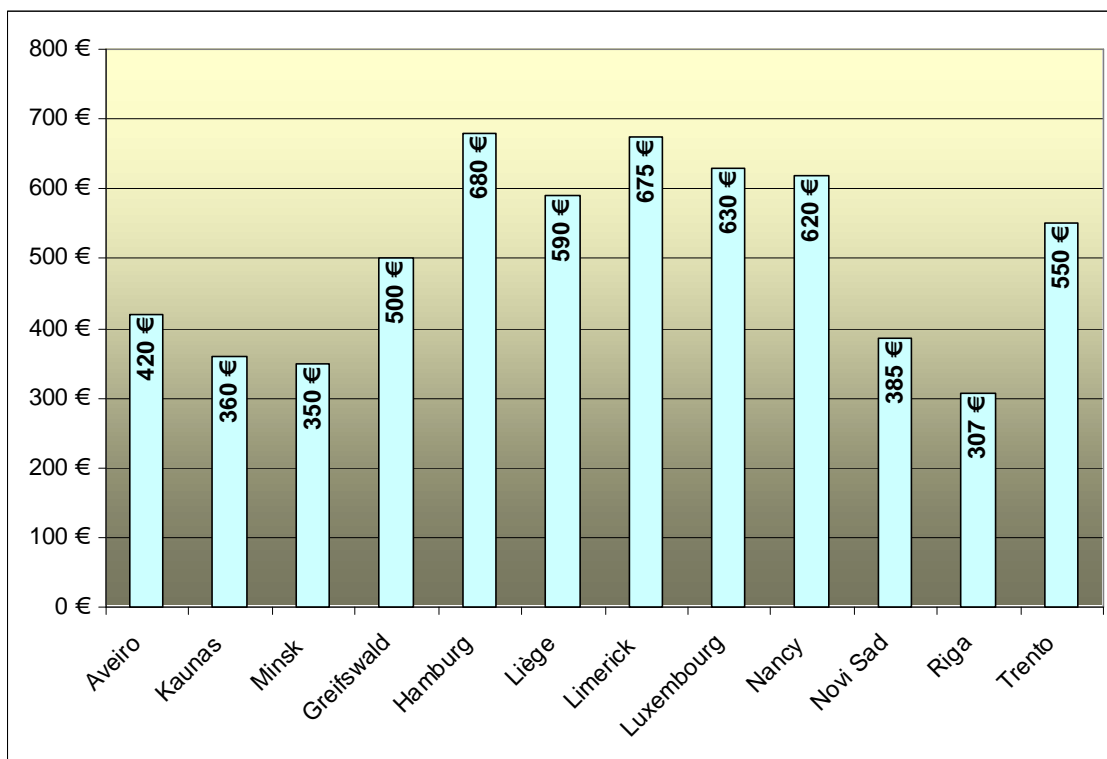
It should also be made clear that we are not trying to develop a scientifically valid paper as the gathered information hasn't been treated accordingly. Nevertheless we are convinced that the results we have achieved should be accepted as relevant because they reflect an in-depth empirical experience and have been compiled in a careful and rigorous way (any further information about this process can be requested to jbacelar@campuseuropae.org).

It is our wish to deepen our work on this topic - we are particularly interested to compile information provided by CE movers and to datamine and cooperate with reputed international studies that also deal with the living costs issue. We aim to become a valid source of information for decision makers while keeping the students as our main sources of information as the conventional “expenses baskets” used by reference studies are often inadequate to describe the different kinds of costs that an everyday student has to deal with.

4. The outcomes

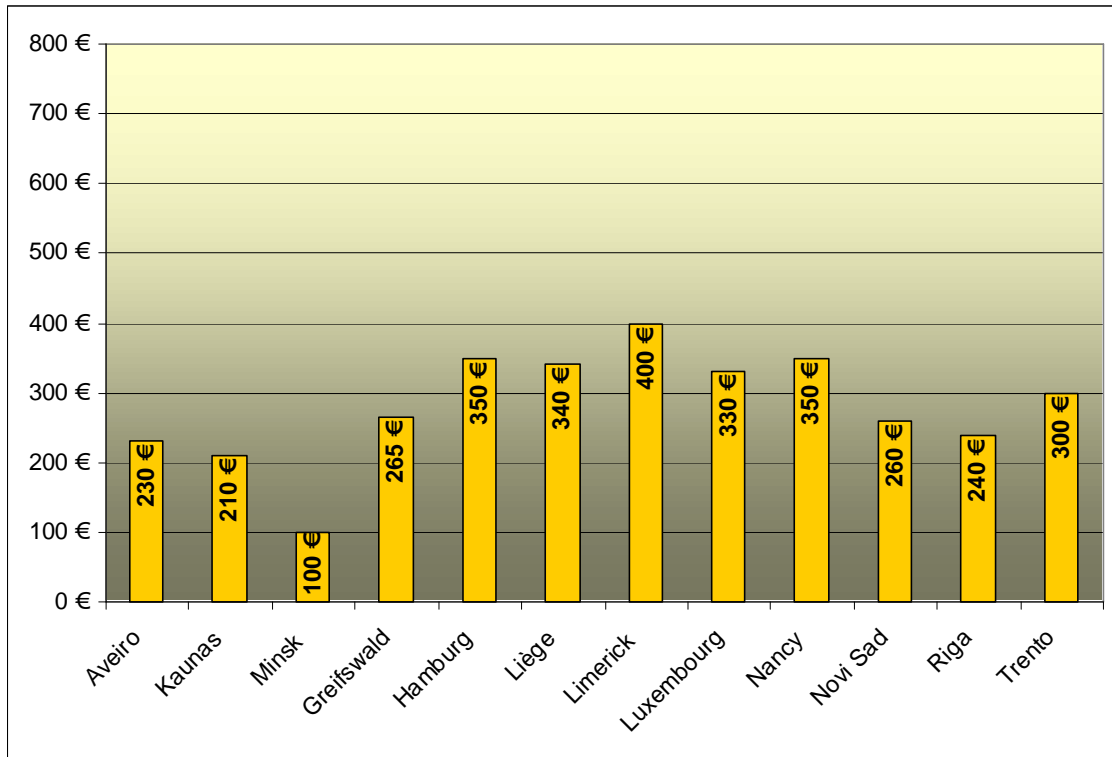
This work has been compiled upon the answers of student representatives from the Universities of Aveiro, Greifswald, Hamburg, Kaunas, Liège, Limerick, Luxembourg, Minsk, Nancy, Novi Sad, Riga and Trento who, in some cases, based themselves in questionnaires prepared for this project. Extensive datamining was then undertaken against the “Tour d'Europe Dossier” (November 2003, compiled by Friederike Hofmann and Johannes Keil) as this document also provides noteworthy information about living costs surveyed by the students representatives that visited the universities belonging to the Campus Europae network during three weeks between September and October 2003.

The first step taken was to figure out how much students need to sustain themselves per month, considering accommodation, food, transports, communications, study materials and others. For most universities/cities we are also able to provide a category-cost analysis but for the sake of an easy understanding we will only express global values for now. Everyone was asked to keep in mind that we were wondering about the cost of a no-thrills lifestyle (exact words to describe it could be “not far beyond survival costs”) and the results are:



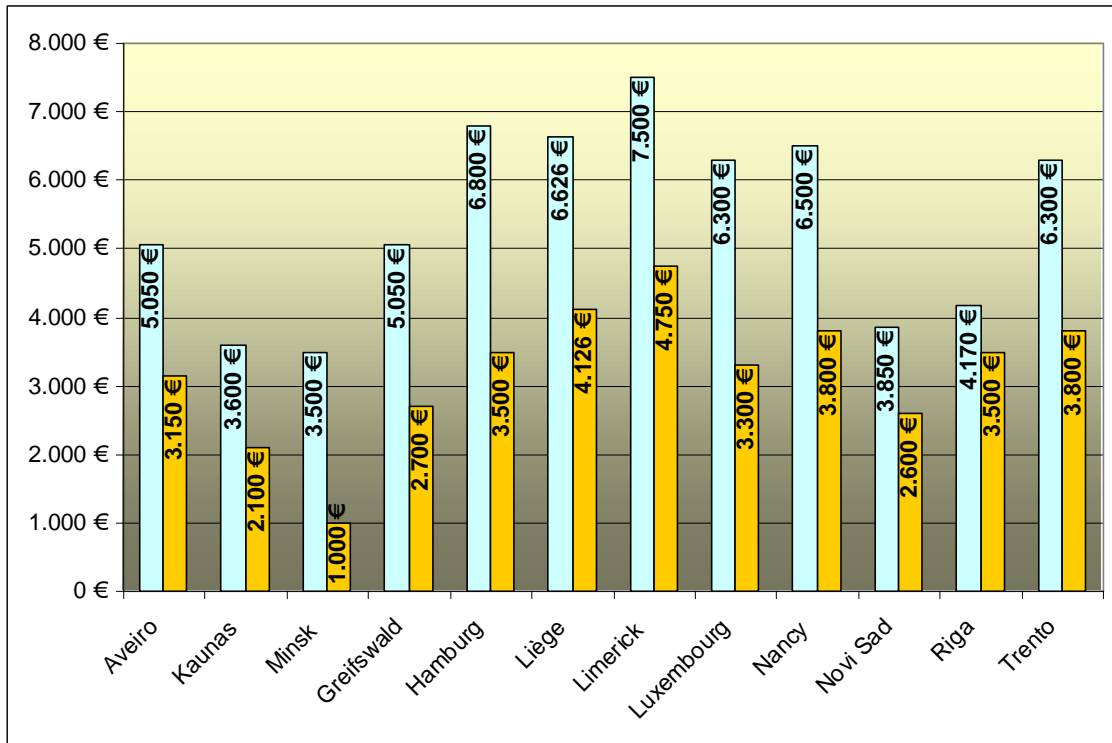
graphic 1: average living costs (per month) in the different Campus Europae cities

Afterwards we have subtracted the costs concerning accommodation so that we can have a rough approach of the monthly budget of a student living with its family. It is crucial to work with this second scenario as in some cities a vast majority of students is still living not by themselves – and as the graphics show this makes an important difference in their budgets, as accommodation alone accounts for 20 to 48% of most students monthly expenses. It should also be said the following budget estimations will in many cases be hyped as such students will often also be saving money with food and other goods provided by the relatives they are living with:



graphic 2: average living costs (per month) for students staying with their families in the different CE cities

By the time we reach this point the most sensible and important part of the work is already done: compiling realistic living costs. Assuming that we this paper is founded on reliable numbers finishing our exercise is a matter of simple arithmetic. So we started by multiplying the monthly budget by ten (months) and by adding the tuition fees to be paid in each university (Campus Europae will, on the long run, ask to its students to pay the tuition fees not in their home university but rather in their “foster” higher education institution). So by now we will know what the yearly budget of a student from each city will be:



graphic 3: average annual living costs for students staying with their families in the different CE cities per year. The blue bar in the graphics concerns annual costs including accommodation while the orange bar does not take in account this category.

To finish we will simply calculate the differences between the several “living costs baskets” for both scenarios:

Coming from	Aveiro	Kaunas	Minsk	Greifsw.	Hamburg	Liège	Limerick	Luxemb.	Nancy	Novi Sad	Riga	Trento
Aveiro		0 €	0 €	0 €	175 €	158 €	245 €	125 €	145 €	0 €	0 €	125 €
Kaunas	145 €		0 €	145 €	320 €	303 €	390 €	270 €	290 €	0 €	0 €	270 €
Minsk	155 €	0 €		155 €	330 €	313 €	400 €	280 €	300 €	0 €	0 €	280 €
Greifswald	0 €	0 €	0 €		175 €	158 €	245 €	125 €	145 €	0 €	0 €	125 €
Hamburg	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €		0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €
Liège	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €		87 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €
Limerick	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €		0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €
Luxembourg	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	120 €		0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €
Nancy	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	100 €	0 €		0 €	0 €	0 €
Novi Sad	120 €	0 €	0 €	120 €	295 €	278 €	365 €	245 €	265 €		0 €	245 €
Riga	88 €	0 €	0 €	88 €	263 €	246 €	333 €	213 €	233 €	0 €		213 €
Trento	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	120 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	

table 1: average monthly living costs differences (monthly living costs differences < 75€ haven't been considered)

Coming from	Aveiro	Kaunas	Minsk	Greifsw.	Hamburg	Liège	Limerick	Luxemb.	Nancy	Novi Sad	Riga	Trento
Aveiro		0 €	0 €	190 €	365 €	348 €	435 €	315 €	335 €	0 €	102 €	315 €
Kaunas	295 €		140 €	295 €	470 €	453 €	540 €	420 €	440 €	175 €	207 €	420 €
Minsk	405 €	260 €		405 €	580 €	563 €	650 €	530 €	550 €	285 €	317 €	530 €
Greifswald	235 €	90 €	80 €		410 €	393 €	480 €	360 €	380 €	115 €	147 €	360 €
Hamburg	155 €	0 €	0 €	155 €		313 €	400 €	280 €	300 €	0 €	0 €	280 €
Liège	92 €	0 €	0 €	92 €	267 €		337 €	217 €	237 €	0 €	0 €	217 €
Limerick	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €	205 €	188 €		155 €	175 €	0 €	0 €	155 €
Luxembourg	175 €	0 €	0 €	175 €	350 €	333 €	420 €		320 €	0 €	87 €	300 €
Nancy	125 €	0 €	0 €	125 €	300 €	283 €	370 €	250 €		0 €	0 €	250 €
Novi Sad	245 €	100 €	90 €	245 €	420 €	403 €	490 €	370 €	39 €		157 €	370 €
Riga	155 €	0 €	0 €	155 €	330 €	313 €	400 €	280 €	300 €	0 €		280 €
Trento	125 €	0 €	0 €	125 €	300 €	283 €	370 €	250 €	270 €	0 €	0 €	

table 2: average monthly living costs differences for students living with their families in their home town (monthly living costs differences < 75€ havn't been considered)

We have reached the end of the road without having felt the need to deal with GNP's or any other technicalities but succeeding in perceiving the real amount of money that students will find in their pockets when moving between different universities, cities and countries. As said before we are very aware about the need to guarantee the credibility of the values that are being used in these calculations – so we will do our best to keep them updated and to improve their precision as time goes by. Some shortcomings should also be diagnosed right away, being the most obvious one the fact that the values recorded for accommodation in Minsk refer to the arrangements made to host CE movers and do not meet the actual prices in the local accommodation market which are much lower. This biases the whole process of calculating the financial support that a student coming from Minsk will need when he reaches a different city but this an easily upgradeable point of the document in a near future. Another critical aspect is the fact that we haven't calculated the amount of money to be provided for one round trip between the departure location and the future place of study – nevertheless this cost should be added to the mobility financial support whenever the student qualifies to receive some and, last but not least, that in some cases it is still not clear the amount of tuition fees to be paid by CE movers in some of their possible university-destinations within the network.

As far as conclusions are concerned we believe the numbers speak fluently by themselves to some extent. However some very important outcomes should be highlighted:

- a. The values estimated by the CE-SC clearly indicate that the costs of mobility are rather diverse – as a consequence the needs (of support) of such students also reflect such diversity;
- b. The currently existing social support systems are unable to cope with the need to address costs that are often much higher than the available grants – so it is plausible to say that such organizational shortcomings are actually putting a damper on the very low mobility rates achieved so far;
- c. It is only fair to demand that the support/grants given to students who go abroad in will be enough to cover the extra expenses that such students will have to deal with – but in the cases where the expenses are irrelevant or when the students end up saving money by going to a cheaper city it will be better to save such resources rather than giving away as symbolic grants. This is because we find that the priority should be given in helping the ones who really will depend on financial help to be able to go away; the efficient management of the available funds should also be a high-level priority, due to the deficit of sufficient support to achieve these ambitious goals;
- d. Furthermore we stand for that the grants should be given away by combining the living costs with the students social background. As therefore it is necessary to redesign the existing systems so that they will be able to provide individually-costumed grants;

- e. Although for many students these conclusions may mean that they may no longer be entitled to direct financial support when they move away (namely the ones coming from cities/countries where the living costs are higher and are going to equally or less expensive destinations) the importance of the grants currently being given should be put in perspective as for such students it may be more attractive to enrol in a well organized mobility plan where all the factors are superiorly organized (from recognition to fairly priced accommodation) than to receive little financial support. This way giving some high grants won't mean that the system will be financially unbalanced;

5. Actions that should be taken...

a. by the CE-SC:

- ✚ It is necessary to keep in mind the need to continue to develop this project, namely by increasing the sample of students providing information about their living costs, both at their native universities and when they are studying abroad. This information should be kept in a database publicly available and regularly updated. It would also be important to cooperate with social scientists so that an extensive and rigorous comprehension of the gathered data can be achieved;
- ✚ It is crucial to increase the detailed knowledge of how the social support for international mobility is managed in all countries that participate in the CE project. By this the best and most successful practices can be taken in the account when developing a new and more fair method to allocate grants and support;
- ✚ The CE-SC should take the initiative of presenting this document to other student organizations and political decision-makers and to discuss with them how these conclusions can positively influence their agendas and initiatives.

b. by the EUF, member Universities, Governments and the European

Commission:

- ✚ the EUF should adopt a clear strategy on how it intends to deal and develop the "social dimension" within the Campus Europae project and keep this concern on the top of its agenda;
- ✚ only an active commitment of all participating Universities can provide the practical groundwork for this discussion. As therefore is it very much needed that their most experienced and skilled human resources will be engaged in the debate and that any conclusions commonly reached will be actively supported and implemented;

- ✚ allowing and encouraging all students to participate in educational mobility programs will prove decisive for their personal, academic and professional development – and vital for the development of an European citizenship. But it will not be possible to incorporate such audacious goal as an integral part of higher education in Europe without stronger political and financial support (both at national and European levels). Although other forms of financing (that do not interfere of the widely accepted principle of education being a “public good”) may be considered it is necessary that the politicians who are often unease with demands for more support and funds ask themselves if the Lisbon Summit Agenda for 2010 and the perpetual building of an stronger, bigger and united Europe are reachable without such investment;
- ✚ last but not least it is necessary to guarantee the support so that projects like Campus Europae can become frontrunners in the development of new, creative and bold solutions to the challenges laid by the Bologna Process, as their successful developments can later be used by all the actors in the higher education field.

6. Conclusion

As we reach the end of this position paper we are more convinced than never than deepening the discussion and developing the so called “social dimension” is not only necessary in itself but also a fundamental step to win the cooperation of some of the (open-minded) critics of the Bologna Process.

It seems clear that the funds available nowadays are not being used to its fullest potential as the support to the ones who have to face higher costs for mobility is often insufficient. As therefore the CE-SC expresses that it would be of interest to develop a second generation of grant system capable of providing more competent help to the students who cannot afford to engage in mobility programs by themselves. The basis of such a grant system could be inspired in our work on how to determine the living costs differences, combined with the know-how of each university services in evaluating the social background of their students.

If such reorganization will be undertaken seriously and successfully we believe that the real costs of mobility can, in the future, be fully supported by such an improved grant system – and that may very well promote both a takeoff on the percentage of students going abroad as well as allow that students coming from less favoured social backgrounds can participate more than they do today, adding some social justice to a problem that seems to be critical (at least at some) of the countries considered. Subsequently the CE-SC shall strive for the experimental settlement of new policies and criteria in this field.