

A European option in Erasmus+

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WHEN considering to study abroad, many Malaysians often look to countries that have English as their native language with the perception that there will not be a language barrier in terms of daily life interactions nor academics.

Because of this perception, universities in European countries have generally not been at the top of the list for many Malaysian students when thinking of furthering education.

Ambassador and Head of the Delegation of the European Union (EU) to Malaysia, Maria Castillo Fernandez, there is a lot of potential in continental Europe for Malaysians in terms of pursuing studies.

"A study stint in continental Europe is very positive for career and personal development. Students will not only be exposed to new surroundings, culture and a different way of thinking, they would also be able to build friendships and networks that would be invaluable for their careers," she said.

"In Europe you will find top universities and education institutes with programmes in English where tuition, lectures and classes are all conducted in English. Apart from that Malaysian students can also learn another language and have the opportunity to travel and get to know peers from the different countries."

Fernandez said Malaysian students can have access to higher education in Europe through Erasmus+, the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. Its global budget of 14.7 billion euros (RM67.8 billion) provides opportunities for millions of students around the world to study, train, gain experience, and volunteer abroad.

She elaborated that Erasmus+, which started in 2014, offers scholarships and international credit mobility schemes and encourages mobility and cooperation projects for education, training, youth and sports in 33 programme countries (all 28 EU member states and five other European countries).

"It runs for seven years, from 2014 to 2020, with organisations and institutions invited to apply for funding each year. Young people can study, volunteer and gain work experience abroad, to develop new skills, gain vital international experience and boost their chances and choice of employability.

"It can also help education staff teach or train abroad, so as to develop their professional practice, build relationships with international peers, and gain fresh ideas about their work," Fernandez said.

According to Fernandez, many of the Malaysian students who make up the 36 per cent of Asean students in Europe are there through the Erasmus+ programme. Projects involving Malaysian universities selected since 2015 have allowed for the mobility of 861 persons - 531 from Malaysia to Europe and 330 from Europe to Malaysia.

"These are small numbers still but we are working on making the programme more visible. Universities have to get together to facilitate this programme. We go to universities,

participate in education fairs to increase participation," she said.

Under Erasmus+, there are four programmes: International Credit Mobility (ICM), Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EM-JMD), Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) and Jean Monnet activities.

ICM is a two-way mobility that allows students to study in a foreign university for three to 12 months and obtain credits which are then recognised at the sending institution as part of their degree. A grant for staff mobility is also possible for five to 60 days.

EMJMDs award EU-funded scholarships to Master students from around the world that cover tuition, travel, and a living allowance. The programmes last from one to two years during which students study in at least two different European countries, and obtain a joint, double degree, or multiple degree.

"CBHE projects, which lasts from two to three years, are aimed at modernising and reforming higher education institutions, developing new curricula, improving governance, and building relationships between higher education institutions and enterprises," said Fernandez.

Jean Monnet (JM) activities aim to develop EU studies worldwide. In 2017, the Asia-Europe Institute (AEI) at Universiti Malaya became the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence (JMCoE). With this designation, the Asia-Europe Institute is now recognised as a Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence for three years from 2017.



Maria Castillo Fernandez

Also available is SHARE, a scholarship programme for intra-Asean and Asean-EU mobility. The SHARE Scholarship is meant for active undergraduate Asean students from selected Asean Universities that have completed at least two semesters at their home university to study for one semester at another selected Asean or EU university.

Fernandez said the next Erasmus programme will begin from 2021 to 2027 with a budget of 30 billion euros. "Building on the success of Erasmus+, the next programme will provide learning and mobility opportunities to 12 million people, in comparison to 4 million people in the current programme. It will further promote activities which foster knowledge and awareness of the EU, opportunities in forward-looking knowledge fields e.g. climate change, robotics etc. and better outreach and inclusion of people with fewer opportunities.

"The international dimension of the programme will also be boosted. Investing in people, their skills, and their knowledge will help respond to global challenges, maintain social fairness and drive Europe's competitiveness," she said.

To be eligible for any of the Erasmus+ activities, students have to be registered at a higher education provider that is part of the Erasmus+ programme, and has courses linked to one or more of the higher education institutions in Europe.

"Students must, therefore, be enrolled on a course leading to a recognised degree or tertiary-level qualification. Students must apply for the programme through their university's Erasmus or international office," said Fernandez.

Tham Jia Ying, 28, the current president of



Kevin Wanderman (second row from bottom, far right) with his classmates celebrating their graduation at Groupe ESA in Angers, France.



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THAM JIA YING
President of the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association Malaysia chapter

the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association Malaysia chapter, said her stint in studying for the European Master of Surface, Electro, Radiation and Photochemistry from 2012 to 2014 under the Erasmus programme was an eye-opening experience. "Throughout my two-year master's degree study, I went to three universities to attend the classes and complete my research, from France, Poland and Italy," said the lecturer of a higher education institution.

"I learnt the way to work with European researchers. I'm amazed with their spirit and dedication to their research work. For them, team work is important. Research is not an individual effort. Everyone have the equal opportunity to share their thought. The Erasmus Mundus Master Programme build a good foundation to those who wish to continue their PhD in Europe.

"When I attended job interviews, many employers were interested to know my international exposure via this Erasmus Mundus Programme. It showcases my good communication skills and the ability to work with people of various backgrounds," she said.

Entrepreneur Kevin Wanderman, meanwhile, did his International Vintage Master degree in five European countries with strong wine growing traditions: France, Italy, Spain, Hungary and Switzerland from 2009 to 2012.

"I was introduced to the Erasmus Mundus programme (precursor of Erasmus+) while inquiring on wine-sector focused Master courses in France. I was especially thrilled to find out that there was a full scholarship attached to a wine-sector focused joint master programme hosted by Groupe ESA, an established French private university based in Angers, France," he shared.

"I had truly no idea what adventure awaited me as I embarked on the Erasmus journey. As I had no prior academic or professional background in vine growing and wine making, prior to the official start of the Joint Master programme, I was paired with family-run French winery, Le Domain de la Tuffière in the Loire Valley region to gain first hand experience of working and living in a vineyard," he recalled.

Strengthened by the Erasmus experience, Wanderman felt empowered to take on the world.

Today he is an online community builder in the areas of gastronomy and wine culture.