Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents the results of the interim evaluation of Cooperation Programmes in Higher Education and Vocational Training between the European Union and the US and between the European Union and Canada. The programme can be traced back to 1990, when the Transatlantic Declaration on EC-US Relations and the Transatlantic Declaration on EC-Canada Relations were adopted. A two-year exploratory phase, launched in 1993, provided the basis for a formal EU-US Cooperation Agreement and an EU-Canada Cooperation Agreement in 1995. Both agreements were renewed in 2000 for a further period of five years (i.e. 2001-2005). The EU’s annual budget for the EU-Canada Programme is about €0.7 million, and for the EU-US Programme about €1.5 million. The first period of the Cooperation Programmes was evaluated in 1999. This interim evaluation focuses on projects initiated during the 1999-2002 period.

While the EC Directorate-General for Education and Culture is responsible for administering the two Programmes on behalf of the European Union, the Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and the department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) administer the US and Canadian programme, respectively.

After an open tender procedure, the contract for this evaluation was awarded to ECORYS, a research and consulting firm based in the Netherlands. In this report, ECORYS presents the results of its evaluation activities, which were performed between October 2004 and February 2005.

The Programmes

The Cooperation Programmes’ primary aim is to promote understanding between the people of the European Union on the one hand and those of the US and Canada on the other, and to improve the quality of their human resource development. To achieve these objectives, the Programmes support innovative, multilateral, and student-centred projects, which have the potential to promote substantive, long-lasting structural and transatlantic co-operation in higher education and vocational education training. They may also support

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international education projects that give rise to new forms of cooperation between the US and the EU or Canada and the EU.

The evaluation

The main research questions of this evaluation refer to the classic evaluation topics of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, utility and sustainability. In order to answer the evaluation questions, a number of data collection tools has been used, namely: (i) literature and document review, (ii) online questionnaires completed by students, project partners, stakeholders and non-participating students, (iii) interviews on location as well as by telephone, (iv) focus groups during the Washington Conference for project partners, (v) assessment of initial conclusions and recommendations by means of a discussion paper for project partners and stakeholders. For the interviews held in the US, we worked closely with consultancy firm Cassandra Drennon & Associates Inc.

A total of 250 respondents completed the online questionnaires, and around 115 people were interviewed. In general, we have reached a representative group of participants. Consequently, we believe the results of this study offer a reliable overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the Programmes. The technical details of the evaluation are addressed in Chapter 2 of the report and in the annexes.

Evaluation results

Successful in establishing transatlantic partnerships

It is clear from the evaluation that the Programmes promote the establishment of transatlantic partnerships in higher education. Almost all projects successfully establish student exchanges based on shared or mutually developed curricula. Although the projects generally involve the targeted number of exchange students, they frequently require more time than was originally planned. A word of caution is appropriate regarding the preparation activities, which appear to be lacking in some respects. Of the participating exchange students, 85% receive the same or, in exceptional cases, a greater number of credits abroad compared to what they would have received from their home curriculum.

Participation in the projects (1999-2002) can be summarised as follows:

- Of the 3,000 students participating in exchanges, 66% were involved in EU-US projects and 34% in EU-Canada projects.
- The number of other students involved (i.e. not related to an exchange programme) is roughly double that of participating exchange students.
- The number of staff exchanged is estimated at 900, half of whom are teachers and professors.
Students are enthusiastic about the quality of the projects
The students are highly satisfied with the quality of the project activities. On a scale of one (poor) to five (outstanding), the students gave their respective project a mark of 4.2, meaning that 85% is very satisfied with their participation. They are particularly satisfied with the ability to come into contact with other students and the quality of computer and educational facilities at the host institutions. As regards the socio-cultural aspects, the students are particularly positive about social relationships with students from the host country, foreign students and local residents.

Outcomes of the projects are in line with the Programmes' objectives
The outcomes of the Cooperation Programmes are in line with the objectives, especially as regards promoting understanding between the participants and improving the quality of human resource development. This applies to both the students and the staff of the institutions. In the long run, these outcomes are expected to help promote understanding between the people of the EU and the US/Canada, and also to improve the quality of human resources. It is important to note, however, that the number of participants in the Programmes is very small in relation to the total number of students in higher education and vocational education training. In this respect, the Programmes' sphere of influence is somewhat limited.

It is clear that the Cooperation Programmes have the ability to strengthen transatlantic cooperation and increase student mobility. Although transatlantic cooperation and student exchange might also have been achieved without the Programmes, they would not have reached the same scope within the given period. In this respect, the Cooperation Programmes have a distinct added value.

Projects result in sustainable relations
The evaluation indicates that the Programmes' projects are fairly sustainable. However, this generally involves a somewhat modified version of the projects. After the projects' funding has ended, the projects’ focus is likely to shift from student exchange to the exchange of expertise and research and the use of curricula and courses, all of which is frequently conducted online. The main factor hampering further student exchanges is the lack of additional funding for travel and accommodation. Some institutes appear to be more creative in finding additional sources than others.

Sustainability is often not one of the predetermined objectives of the projects, even though it should be incorporated more into the project itself. This also applies to the dissemination of activities. Sustainability of relationships appears to be more likely when the project partners are already acquainted with their project colleagues before the start of the project.

There is a need for efficiency indicators
Although the projects' budgets do not vary substantially, there is some variance in the conversion ratio of inputs to outputs. The projects vary significantly in terms of the number of student exchanges involved. Some projects involve more than 100 student exchanges, while others result in 10 to 20. This can be attributed in part to differences in the length of exchange periods. On average, around €5,200 is spent for each student
exchange, with EU-US exchanges costing an average €5,600 per student and EU-Canada exchanges an average of €4,200².

Another important issue relating to efficiency is project duration. Many consider the projects' three-year time limit too short to provide an appropriate 'return on investment' for the time, effort and resources spent by the institution to design the project and establish the consortium in the first place. The fact that some 40% of the projects consider the funding barely sufficient could be considered an indication that the programme is efficiently using the limited resources available, especially as most of the projects realise the expected outputs. On the other hand, scarcity of financial resources might hamper the sustainability of the projects.

In terms of project implementation, monitoring and evaluation, this evaluation of the Cooperation Programmes indicates that efficiency gains could be realised with a certain degree of reorganisation. For instance, efficiency gains could be achieved if:

- consortia projects were started after satisfying several key conditions (e.g. effective working network, agreement on credit recognition and courses);
- additional resources for programme management were made available;
- a fully operational and uniform web-based monitoring system were available;
- projects were evaluated on a regular basis.

**Programme logic appears to be valid**

The motives for higher education institutions and students to participate in the projects are in line with the Programmes' official objectives. The objectives 'promote understanding' and 'improve the quality of human resource development' are the key motivators encouraging project partners to participate in the Programmes and to organise their activities. In this respect, the Programmes' objectives are still pertinent with respect to the goals of strengthening transatlantic cooperation and improving the quality of education and training systems in the EU. Furthermore, the Cooperation Programmes appear to complement other relevant programmes.

**Fulbright-EU Programme**

Despite its size, the Fulbright-EU Programme is a key instrument in strengthening academic relations between EU and US scholars and their institutions. Although it does involve formal and informal connections with other grant and scholarship programmes (e.g. the EU-US Cooperation Programme, the regular Fulbright Programme, the EU Centres, etc.), the Fulbright-EU Programme is unique and stands on its own with regard to facilitating the exchange of postgraduate scholars between EU and US academic institutions as a means of promoting mutual understanding.

Fulbright-EU Programme grantees are satisfied with the opportunities offered by the grant scheme. Most participants perceive the grant as an interesting opportunity to realise preconceived ambitions. However, in some cases, the grant fails to cover all living and working expenses.

² The insights provided here are based on EC-budget data.
Being a Fulbright grantee is considered an asset to an international career in academics. Although it does help to achieve ambitions, its effects should not be overestimated. Most of the participants do not maintain contact with the people they meet or remain involved in activities they conducted abroad.

The Fulbright-EU Programme's budget is relatively small. However, as the programme involves ten successful grantees a year, we can speak of quite an efficient programme. Participants appreciate the Programme's small scale and the low levels of bureaucracy and informal contacts with the Brussels Fulbright Commission.

**Recommendations**

In general the evaluation of the Cooperation Programmes is positive in terms of the effects and sustainability of the activities performed. The evaluation team found no serious shortcomings. However, we have found some aspects that deserve special attention. We have formulated a number of recommendations with regard to these aspects. The full reasoning behind these recommendations is presented in Chapter 9 (Conclusions and recommendations).

**Intervention logic**

**Recommendation 1**

As the equal importance of all the objectives is not yet recognised, we recommend *prioritising the Programmes’ six official objectives* (in terms of the specified goals of the Programmes). Particular consideration should be given to reformulating or suppressing the objective regarding e-learning and distance learning.

**Recommendation 2**

Participation of Canadian students is now restricted to undergraduate and graduate students up to the age of 30. Taking lifelong learning into consideration, this age restriction should be eased. Accordingly, the evaluation team recommends *reconsidering the age criterion* of the Canadian programme.

**Recommendation 3**

Furthermore, we recommend *widening the Programmes’ scope to postgraduates* as there is a need for the exchange of postgraduates.
Effectiveness

Recommendation 4

a. To better attune project planning to the actual project period, we recommend extending the possibilities for one-year preparatory projects, preferably as an integrated part of the consortia projects.
b. Furthermore, we recommend that the management of the Programmes clearly enunciates its position on 'no-cost' project extensions as soon as possible.
c. Moreover, serious consideration should be paid to enabling successful projects to apply for follow-up mobility funding.

Recommendation 5

To increase the Programmes' sphere of influence (in accordance with the Programmes' ambitions), we recommend substantial increases in the Cooperation Programmes' budget.

Recommendation 6

As many projects encounter similar problems in organising their activities, we recommend that good practices be made available to applicants and project partners, for instance via the Internet. These good practices should provide information on such subjects as organising language training and cultural preparation, coordinating educational settings, structures and time schedules of participating institutions. Special attention should be given to successful dissemination and follow-up activities.

Recommendation 7

a. We recommend redesigning the administrative procedures in order to relieve project partners of the administrative burden as much as possible.
b. Furthermore, we think that a team of programme managers could enhance the effectiveness of communications with project partners. A possible solution involves appointing account managers to a specified number of projects.

Efficiency

Recommendation 8

a. We recommend allocating additional resources to manage the Programmes, for instance by appointing an executive agency for the Programmes.
b. Furthermore, we recommend adapting the calendar of the Programmes' procedures to the academic/educational years.
c. The institutions should be informed of the decision regarding their proposal at least six months before the start of the academic and educational year to improve the efficiency of the projects. Consequently, the project selection procedure should start six months earlier as well.

Recommendation 9

We recommend focusing efforts on fully integrating the preparatory projects and the three-year projects. Winning a grant for a preparatory project should result in a higher chance of being granted support for a three-year project. This will encourage institutions to undertake sufficient preparatory activities.
Recommendation 10

The current monitoring method fails to allow efficient project comparison. We recommend refining and strengthening the existing software-based monitoring system, preferably via the Internet. The monitoring systems in the US and Canada are good examples as they enable the comparison of projects on a regular basis and the exchange of information on good practices. The use of questionnaires in monitoring should also be considered.

Sustainability

Recommendation 11

We recommend taking existing previous contacts into consideration in the project selection process. However, this recommendation merits caution as selecting only projects involving the participation of previous contacts may limit the Programmes' accessibility and may discourage institutions to apply.

Recommendation 12

We recommend incorporating sustainability into the project plan. A suitable way of doing this would be to require a sustainability plan to be included in the final report. The sustainability plan should clearly indicate which activities are to be pursued, how they are to be effected and an indication of the resources involved.

Recommendation 13

The evaluation demonstrates that the availability of student mobility grants is by far the most important factor in fostering the sustainability of projects. We therefore recommend an additional grant for student mobility, which will enable successful projects to continue exchanging students.

Recommendation 14

We recommend disseminating good practices on additional funding. This can be done in several ways, including presentations made during the annual conference, compiling a handbook or database of examples, which is made available via the EC.

Fulbright

Recommendation 15

If the EC strives for greater diversity in terms of professional and institutional background, the selection of subjects should be less strict and a broader focus on European academic institutions should be considered. We recommend increasing the visibility of the Fulbright-EU Programme, for instance, by publishing the call for proposals in academic journals.

Recommendation 16

For the purpose of monitoring and evaluation, the Fulbright Commission should ask grantees to provide better insight as to what they produced during and after their time abroad. Output (e.g. articles, books, etc.) in response to participation in the scheme should be listed in a database.
Recommendation 17
We recommend introducing a minimum stay abroad of six months (one semester). Return on investment appears to be limited when scholars are sent out for only a period of three or four months.

Recommendation 18
As grantees seem generally unaware of its existence, we recommend improving the visibility of the Fulbright-EU Programme alumni organisation.

Recommendation 19
Fulbright-EU Programme grantees should establish follow-up connections with their host institution. An option would be to provide additional subsidies to EU and US institutions for arranging ongoing exchange of (postgraduate) academics. A connection with the current plan for mobility grants under the EU-US Cooperation Programme could be considered.

Recommendation 20
While there are concrete signs that the financial resources for grantees might not be sufficient to cover the costs of professional activities abroad, we recommend a study to assess whether the financial resources provided to Fulbright-EU Programme grantees are sufficient.

Recommendation 21
Given the success of the Fulbright/EU Programme, we recommend increasing the programme's budget to augment the annual number of academic exchanges. This increase should be contingent on an overall reinforcement of the EU-US Cooperation Programme.