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The European master's programme in gerontology

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Introduction

As most European countries are faced with an increasingly ageing population, more persons work with and for the elderly. In addition, the creation of a liberalized market in Europe has a growing influence on the development of policies and services in the field of health and social care as well as in many other areas such as housing, insurance, pension systems and technology to better facilitate the elderly.

With respect to education in the field of gerontology, however, the European map of gerontological training still shows a variegated picture. There is a wide diversity in entry requirements, course structure and contents, duration, and degrees in programmes offered throughout Europe, and the number of higher education programmes is unevenly distributed. Of all full study programmes in gerontology in Europe 80% can be found at western European universities, most notably in the United Kingdom, France and Germany (Meyer 1999). In many other countries only gerontological courses, rather than full programmes are available. The idea to start a full academic programme open to participants from all over Europe was born in 1999, when a consortium of 18 European universities collaborated to develop a new European master's programme in gerontology (EuMaG). The initiative was strongly supported by the European Commission, which financed the initial years of development and implementation of the EuMaG project. In 2001 project management was taken on by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where the EuMaG Administrative Centre now resides.

Course contents

Since most European countries with increasingly ageing populations encounter a similar spectrum of issues around this theme—demographic changes, psychological, sociological and political issues—a multidisciplinary approach in this new programme was deemed essential. Major scientific disciplines conducting research and teaching in the field of gerontology have thus been incorporated in the programme. The five first-year core modules now comprise bio-gerontology, demography, psychogerontology, social gerontology and health gerontology:

Introduction to gerontology: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This module introduces to the basic concepts and theoretical approaches of the process of ageing and its modern European context. It offers lectures on the history of gerontology, demography, methodology, longitudinal ageing studies, and gives an introduction to psychogerontology, social gerontology and health gerontology.

Psychogerontology: University of Heidelberg, Germany

This module addresses basic concepts and theories in the psychology of ageing related to cognitive abilities, personality, adaptation and social integration. It examines the life course perspective as well as themes such as successful ageing, coping strategies, dementia and depression.

Social gerontology: Keele University, UK

This module assesses the roles of health and social policy in structuring the lives of older persons. Various macro- and micro-perspectives on ageing are considered, rang-

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ing from the historical development of European welfare provision and current debates around migration, work and retirement, to community services, housing, and social inclusion.

Health gerontology: University of Versailles Saint Quentin, Paris, France

This course focuses on interactions between ageing, health and disease in the field of public health. Other themes that are dealt with included epidemiology of ageing, prevention and health promotion, and cross-national comparison of formal and informal care systems.

Summer school: University of Malta

The EuMaG summer school is the concluding module of the first year and integrates the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous modules. It is multidisciplinary by nature and has a different theme each year.

Programme structure

The first year of the programme has a set structure of five core modules, organized by different universities of the consortium (Fig. 1). These modules offer the students a basic understanding of the various theoretical streams and current research, debates and policies in each discipline. The second EuMaG year has a more flexible structure and is intended for further specializa-

tion and for writing the master's thesis. All first-year modules start with an introductory residential course week, each in a different European city. Every core module is organized by the hosting university and usually uses team teaching, with at least two other lecturers from universities in the EuMaG consortium of the same discipline being invited for guest lecturing in that module.

To optimally facilitate participants' busy schedules all residential periods consist of only eight consecutive days (5 week days plus 2 adjoining weekends). The residential weeks combine lectures, seminars and field visits, and give ample opportunity for networking and exchange. Given the course weeks' intensive character, participants invariably return home slightly exhausted but highly inspired. The remainder of each module is completed at home via e-learning and frequent e-mail contact between students and tutoring staff. For this a distance-learning platform has been introduced to facilitate online discussion and exchange of documents. During the home study period each student is assigned to a tutor with whom she or he makes agreements on the type of work done, contact dates and deadlines and who provides feedback on the work handed in. Throughout the year there is additional supervision on study progress and on second-year specialization trajectories and thesis by staff of the EuMaG Administrative Centre in Amsterdam.

The second EuMaG year offers flexibility to the students in that they can choose modules that best fit the subject of their specialization. These modules can be chosen from a catalogue of elective modules offered by partner universities in the EuMaG network, which is handed out to the students in their first year. The elective

Fig. 1 The 2-year European master's programme in gerontology

modules should grant the students 20 'European credit points' (ECTS) in total. Following the specialization period participants write their final master's thesis.

The yearly summer school, the concluding module of the first year, provides EuMaG first-year students with a podium where they present a proposal for their thesis. Here they receive feedback and suggestions from lecturers and other consortium members present and from fellow students. Subsequently the final version of the thesis proposal is formally examined by the EuMaG Thesis Committee, who then assign two supervisors to the student, one usually from the student's own country or university and one other from the EuMaG consortium. Students present their master's thesis at the summer school of their second, final year.

The EuMaG experience

Without doubt the strong points in this programme are the multidisciplinary approach, its international comparative focus and the possibility for discussion and exchange between different countries and traditions. In addition, most core modules offer field visits to local care institutions which provide excellent examples of the regional practice and policies against the background of themes discussed during the course week. The travel to the different hosting cities is an additional bonus to all participants. Not only does the culture and setting of each university differ, but exploration of the residential city in the very few free hours is a non-requisite but essential part of the course schedule, and this certainly adds to the attraction of the programme. Students' accommodations, arranged by the hosting university, are a different experience in every city. The winning location in terms of accommodation has been Heidelberg, where EuMaG students each have their own apartment in a residence for the elderly. As far as the students were concerned, this was the best accommodation of all.

Because of its special format EuMaG attracts highly motivated students and teaching staff. Students are most often working professionals who need to organize a great deal in their lives in order to be able to follow this programme. In the past, EuMaG student cohorts have been very diverse in educational background, profession, age and nationality (participants have come from Slovenia, Finland, Portugal, Iceland, Italy, France, Mexico, Thailand and many other countries). For the team spirit as well as for networking this diversity has repeatedly proved to be very fruitful.

Various course evaluations have shown strong points in the programme as well as some points for improvement. Without exception participants refer to the multidisciplinary and international focus of the programme as its most exciting and stimulating characteristic. After the first year it was clear that the extraordinary structure of the programme requires more transparent agreements between students and tutors in terms of contact and coaching during home study periods—something which is less urgent in a common university setting with office hours and more regular meetings between students and staff. Suggestions for a more efficient way of tutoring have been incorporated in the revised distance learning format for the current academic year. As the work in progress that every training programme ideally is, we hope to further improve and expand this great project.

The ultimate EuMaG experience can be lived by enrolling for the programme, or by visiting the website at <http://www.eumag.org>. Welcome to EuMaG!

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