

Open Letter to the EUREC Master Programme Steering Committee - Dissatisfaction with the EUREC Master Programme

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Dear Ms. Mazzucchelli, Mr. Golba, Prof. Schmid, Prof. Mayer, Prof. Eames, Prof. Valero, Prof. Zervos and Prof. Pearsall,

1 Introduction

Having completed my core module in Oldenburg and specialisation module in Kassel, I have decided to compose an open letter to the Steering Committee of the EUREC Master Programme.

In this letter I attempt to convey my unhappiness concerning certain parts of the EUREC Master of Renewable Energy degree. The intended goal of this letter is to be proactive and put forward possible improvements to bring about constructive change.

2 General Administration

2.1 Administrative staff

Since January 2008 no fewer than five people have held the position of EUREC Programme Manager (Heather Kiggins, Jorge Tanarro, Ramón Sanmartín, Jelle Goethals, Cecilia Wörlén).

I find it difficult to imagine how any form of continuity can be maintained, let alone any progress be made, in what I would consider a key role for the EUREC Master Programme in the Brussels head office. I suspect this instability may be one of the causes of some of the problems I will list below.

2.2 Course accreditation

Following feedback from the EUREC students of the last two intakes (2007 and 2008), this point has emerged as extremely important when:

- applying for jobs outside the EU,
- applying for PhD positions both inside and outside the EU.

The PPRE course in Oldenburg has been accredited since 2005. Much has been spoken about the accreditation of the EUREC Master Programme. I've been told that the process has been started but the details were vague and no completion date was forthcoming.

It would be courteous for the EUREC Steering Committee to provide full details on their website of:

- what has been accomplished so far,
- what the plan is going forward
- and by when the accreditation process is expected to be completed.

2.3 Course fees

Using the 2008 intake as a reference point, EU students were charged 7000€ while non-EU students were charged 11000€. Following a recent email conversation with Ms Mazzucchelli, I have come to learn the following points about the course fee and how it is distributed:

- The amount paid to each university does not depend on whether the student is an EU citizen or not.
- The amount paid by EUREC to each university varies. It depends on the number of students enrolled at each university and is composed of a fixed+variable fee. These figures are agreed upon by all universities at the beginning of each academic year (e.g. 3650€/student was paid to Loughborough and Northumbria Universities, 2300€/student was paid to Oldenburg University, 2500€/student was paid to Kassel University).
- In my case, having attended Oldenburg and Kassel, this leaves $11000 - 2300 - 2500 = 6200€$ of my 11000€ fee in the EUREC coffers.
- Ms Mazzucchelli was unable to give me an exact figure of how much money the EUREC office requires to administer each student over the course of an academic year. Instead I was directed to peruse the EUREC audited financial statements, which are freely available online, if I required more detailed information on how EUREC spends its money. I find it difficult to accept that each partner university has to agree to a particular amount per student per year to deliver the course but when placed under the same scrutiny, the EUREC office is unable/unwilling to supply similar information for the cost of administration.

I would be very grateful for adequate answers to the following questions:

- How much money does EUREC require to administer the affairs of one student for one academic year?
- Why do non-EU students pay 4000€ more than EU students when the amount paid to each university is not impacted by a student's citizenship?
- What does EUREC do with the sizable chunk of extra money earned from non-EU students?
- Why are the course fees not structured according to the core/specialisation choices of each student? The UK universities are significantly more expensive. If students choose to attend any of these universities I believe they should be charged accordingly. At the moment it seems to me that fees from non-EU students not attending the UK universities are being used to cross-subsidise the UK based students.

Failing satisfactory answers to my questions above, I kindly request that EUREC refund me the difference between the EU and non-EU fee amounts for the 2008-2009 academic year, namely 4000€.

2.4 Poor website

When the EUREC application process became electronic it signalled what should have been a major revamp of the layout and content of the website. As a student I was hoping it would be the nerve centre for all my communication with the agency as well as with other EUREC students. The exact opposite is true and is probably due to one of the following possibilities:

- the responsible person is not sufficiently qualified/knowledgeable or doesn't have sufficient time to do the job,
- the lack of continuity brought about by the frequent change in EUREC Programme Managers has led to the website not being updated or developed further.

The following points support my argument:

- a lot of the content from the old site has just been copied across to the new site,
- the information about the core/specialisation providers is insufficient, out of date and often irrelevant,
- sections are incomplete,
- most thesis/job placements are out of date¹,

¹As of May 2009

- the discussion forums have been severely spammed and my email address is also being spammed by <http://master.eurec.be>²,
- no moderation/organisation of the forums,
- unanswered questions from prospective students,
- generally poorly thought out design.

From the minimal traffic flow in the forums section, it can be deduced that the site is not being used to its full potential.

In its current, poorly maintained state, the web site detracts from the image of EUREC as an institution capable of running such a master programme.

However it could be much more effective if the design were improved and the day-to-day management was done by a knowledgeable person who has the necessary time to do so. The amount of time required to keep a website updated and relevant should not be underestimated. A website is a work in progress and should never be seen to be complete.

3 Core and Specialisation Provider Issues

3.1 Common rubric for core providers

The most basic expectation for a course of this nature/structure would be that all core providers assist in drawing up a common rubric (with input from the specialisation providers) which is adhered to as closely as possible. As the word "core" suggests, students should exit this phase with a common, basic grounding in all the major renewable energy fields, regardless of the selected institute.

Where core providers are not able to adhere to this common rubric, EUREC and its other partners should step in and provide the necessary advice and/or resources to assist the errant core provider to reach an acceptable level of adherence.

From student experiences it is clear that the discrepancies between the curricula at the various core providers is unacceptably large. In my particular situation these discrepancies resulted in much of the work already covered in Oldenburg being covered again in Kassel, as it became clear that students were not at the same level following the core module. Not only did this waste valuable time but it prevented adequate study of other important topics.

I recommend that:

- the EUREC Agency takes the lead in developing and maintaining a common rubric, encouraging all partner universities to contribute what they feel to be the strongest aspects of their local courses/programmes.
- A small working committee, consisting of members from the various partner institutes as well as a member of the EUREC agency, should be set up to create this common rubric.

²See the appendix 5.1 for an example of the spam I'm receiving.

- This work should be seen as a team effort and should not be done without regard to the local master programmes currently being run at the partner universities. It should be seen as an attempt to improve the material currently being delivered.
- Where gaps are identified, materials should either be produced by the working committee, or experts in the field should be contracted to assist with the development of the necessary materials.
- Once completed, all core providers should teach and examine according to this common rubric.
- If partners fail to adhere to this requirement, it should be the job of the EUREC agency to implement correctional measures which could ultimately end in revoking the membership of a particular university.
- The most current version of the rubric should be freely downloadable from the EUREC Master Programme website.

3.2 Specialisation provider rubric outlines

The specialisation providers should not be left to teach whatever they please. As an absolute minimum I would expect:

- the EUREC agency to be instrumental in setting up and maintaining an outline of the aspects which are required to be covered in each of the specialisation fields.
- There should be a way for EUREC to ascertain the quality of the material being delivered. This could take the form of reviewing the lecture notes and lab manuals as well as making random samples of lectures being delivered.
- If partners fail to adhere to the requirements, it should be the job of the EUREC agency to implement correctional measures which could ultimately end in revoking the membership of a particular university.
- The most current version of the rubric for each specialisation provider should be freely downloadable from the EUREC Master Programme website.

3.3 Challenging labs for core and specialisation providers

If you ask any Oldenburg alumnus what was the most valuable part of their training, they will almost undoubtedly say the extremely rigorous laboratories. From my perspective, these laboratories form the backbone of the PPRE programme. It would be a significantly weaker course without them. I cannot emphasise strongly enough, the need for laboratories such as those conducted in Oldenburg. I hereby make a special plea to all the other partner universities, both core and specialisation providers, to humble yourselves and learn from the PPRE staff at Oldenburg University.

I find it difficult to comprehend why only the PPRE programme places such strong emphasis on thorough, hands on laboratories, while this practical laboratory emphasis is not as rigorous or completely absent from the curricula of the other core and specialisation providers.

Imagine this scenario: A certain individual, who has no electrical background, attends the core in Zaragoza which offers no laboratories. They then move onto Kassel for the hybrid systems specialisation. Compared to Oldenburg, Kassel has only very basic lab exposure with minimal individual hands on work required by students³. As it turns out, this individual will go through the entire masters degree in renewable energy and never be required to construct even the most basic of electric circuits by themselves!

Questions: Is it acceptable for students from non-electrical backgrounds to complete a technically inclined master of renewable energy degree without ever having had the chance to construct even the most basic electric circuits by themselves? Furthermore, is it acceptable that they not be expected to learn how to use essential measurement equipment, such as a multi-meter and an oscilloscope?

If the EUREC master programme, as a whole, is to build up any form of credibility in the renewable energy education sector, it is my opinion that this situation must be rectified forthwith! I recommend that all EUREC partner universities (both core and specialisation providers), be required to set up or improve existing lab facilities and procedures, using the Oldenburg lab procedure as the definitive standard. One further item which could be added to the Oldenburg lab method is a debriefing session. This would provide an opportunity for student and tutor to talk face-to-face about the lab report and discuss areas of improvement as well as ensure all essential aspects of a particular topic have been adequately understood.

3.4 Keeping lecture notes and lab manuals updated and relevant

I have personally raised issues with the programme authorities at Oldenburg and Kassel Universities concerning documents written in poor English, containing inaccuracies, not being current and in some cases not being relevant. However the authorities inform me they don't have the time or money to make the necessary improvements. In addition I have heard from a very reliable source concerning certain Loughborough lecture notes that were last updated six years ago.

From my own investigations I have managed to find out that lecturers in Kassel are paid 40€/hour of lecture time. They are not remunerated for creating or updating lecture notes or laboratory manuals. EUREC cannot expect lecture notes and lab manuals to remain relevant and up to date if no resources are directed towards this effort?

I recommend a systematic programme be put in place to regularly check (i.e. at least every two years) that:

³As in building or measuring circuits on their own or in pairs. Doing labs in groups larger than two often results in the less confident individuals letting those with prior experience do all the work, thereby missing out on essential learning opportunities.

- the common core rubric and specialisation provider rubric outlines are still relevant and whether certain topics should be included, removed or modified.
- financial resources be set aside each year for keeping notes, labs and lab manuals up to date.

3.5 Finding a thesis

There is a general feeling among students that the process of finding suitable thesis placements could be a lot more efficient than it currently is. An alumnus recently sent me a copy of a spreadsheet which contains the information of all EUREC placements between 2002-2007. It was supposedly compiled by EUREC but seems is no longer available to students! May I ask why? What I found so valuable in this spreadsheet was:

- the instant exposure to so many company and institution names I had never heard of before.
- the stimulation of my imagination regarding the newly discovered possibilities available to me. It's a pity I discovered it one month too late.

This type of information really needs to be documented, kept up to date and actively distributed among students *upon enrolment*. Once they have a better idea of where they want to go, then a one on one approach with EUREC staff members would be a lot more effective in achieving results.

I also recommend that all non-confidential dissertations, upon consent from the authors, be placed in a searchable, online database and made available for download from the EUREC Master Programme website.

4 Conclusion

After speaking to a number of other past and present EUREC students, as well as students enrolled in the local master programmes, I have found that my points of view are not unique. Many people are very disappointed with the current state of the EUREC Master Programme and subsequently some of the local master programmes.

This does not bode well for the future of the EUREC Master Programme.

- I challenge the EUREC Master Programme Steering Committee to take a deep look into the affairs of the programme and make a concerted effort to address the problems that have been raised in this letter as well as the problems which remain hidden.
- I challenge you to remove any obstacles which may be standing in the way of producing well rounded engineers, who question everything, take nothing for granted and are willing to alter the status quo by daring to be innovative in the field of renewable energy.
- I challenge you to greater transparency and less defensiveness regarding your affairs, always keeping a watchful eye and listening ear open to improvements.

I look forward to and *expect* you to engage me on these issues by formulating an official response to this letter. I will then post your response, with this letter, on my blog (<http://eurec.wordpress.com>) for free public access.

I would also like to propose a discussion forum between the EUREC Steering Committee and the present students at the end of the final presentations in Brussels on 15 December 2009. The idea being to hear what decisions have been made so far and give other students the opportunity to put forward further suggestions.

Thank you for considering my recommendations. Despite my deep seated dissatisfaction I hope to assist in whatever way I can.

Yours sincerely,



Roy Emmerich (EUREC 2008-2009)

5 Appendix

5.1 Example of spam email being received

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From: asasas <master@eurec.be>
Date: 2009/6/15
Subject: RE MASTER 2007 - 2008: 'Status and insurance of students
during internship' at EUREC Masters degree
To: roy.emmerich@gmail.com
comment 'In 2007 <a> by asasas
In 2007 <a href="http://www.linksjewel.co.uk">links [1] of london</a>
was named Jewellery Brand of the Year at the 2007 UK Jewellery Awards
for the third consecutive year. links of london specialises in quality
handcrafted designer sterling silver jewelry, links of london Shop
provides hundreds of discount, cheap and links of london Tiffany <a
href="http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-earrings-19.html">links
[2] of london Bracelet Earrings</a> <a
href="http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-friendship-16.html">link
s [3] of london Bracelet Friendship</a> <a
href="http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-necklaces-14.html">links
[4] of london Bracelet Necklaces</a> Links of London, the leading
British contemporary jeweller was founded in 1990 by jewellery designer
Annoushka Ducas and her husband John Ayton. Excellent craftsmanship,
generous tactile forms and the use of the finest materials remain
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integral to each collection. links [5] of london store linksoflondon</a [6]> links [7] of london Bracelet links [8] of london Charms tiffany [9] jewellery

[1] <http://www.linksjewel.co.uk%22%3elinks/>

[2]

<http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-earrings-19.html%22%3Elinks>

[3]

<http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-friendship-16.html%22%3Elinks>

[4]

<http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-necklaces-14.html%22%3Elinks>

[5] <http://www.linksstore.co.uk/%22%3Elinks>

[6] <http://www.linksstore.co.uk/%22%3Elinksoflondon%3C/a>

[7]

<http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-bracelets-13.html%22%3Elinks>

[8] <http://www.linksstore.co.uk/linksoflondon-charms-15.html%22%3Elinks>

[9] <http://www.jewelrytiffany.co.uk%22%3etiffany/>

View original: <http://master.eurec.be/node/514#comment-371>

Post reply: <http://master.eurec.be/comment/reply/514/371>

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