

Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+

Warsaw seminar 2020

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FRSE THEMATIC REPORTS

Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+. Warsaw seminar 2020

Edited by: Agnieszka Rybińska, prof. Özgehan Şenyuva

Proofreading: Anthony Wright

Editing co-operation: Karolina Kwiatosz

Design and cover: Podpunkt, Artur Ładno

DTP: Grafpol sp. z o.o., Wrocław

Print: Drukarnia Braci Grodzickich

Publisher: Foundation for the Development of the Education System
Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agency
Al. Jerozolimskie 142a, 02-305 Warsaw
www.frse.org.pl | kontakt@frse.org.pl

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ISBN: 978-83-66515-63-5

doi: 10.47050/66515635

This publication has been developed with the financial support from the European Commission in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors and the European Commission may not be held responsible for the use, which may be made of the information contained herein.

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Citation:

Rybińska, A. & Şenyuva, Ö. (Eds.). (2021). *Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+. Warsaw seminar 2020*. Warsaw: Foundation for the Development of the Education System. doi: 10.47050/66515635

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PAWEŁ POSZYTEK
PhD, General Director
of the Foundation for
the Development of the
Education System

It is my distinct pleasure to present the third edited volume in the Warsaw Research Seminar series. In November 2020, researchers from across Europe gathered online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to present and discuss their research and findings under the theme “Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+. Impact assessment”.

Each year the seminar gathers researchers and scholars involved in research on Erasmus+ Programme in Europe. It aims at collecting and exchanging experience in research and analysis of Erasmus+ results while involving, apart from researchers, representatives of national agencies, and other institutions involved in international co-operation in education. The seminar offers space for networking, exchange of opinions, discussions on methodology, dissemination of research results and prospects of further co-operation in research on the Erasmus+ Programme.

The recent edition of the seminar “Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+. Impact assessment” was held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And indeed, the topic of mobility experience in the time of pandemic is one of the three main research areas addressed in this volume. The two others are: practical training in international mobility and personal and institutional development.

I strongly recommend all articles drafted by the seminar speakers who contributed to the seminar discussion by presenting their surveys’ results. The Foundation will continue its efforts in organising annual research seminars and publishing the survey results in post-seminar publications. For many years, we carry out national surveys leading to assessment of the Erasmus+ impact on its participants and institutions and to contribute to overall European analysis of the Programme’s results in its new 2021–2027 perspective.

Paweł Poszytek
General Director
Foundation for the Development
of the Education System

Editors' note

This volume collects papers presented during the fourth edition of seminar on evidence-based approach in Erasmus+ organised by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE) in November 2020.

Organising this seminar was a challenge, but we believe our resilience and strong commitment to ongoing co-operation and dialogue in the fields of research and practice paid off. Almost eight months into the pandemic, faced with strict restrictions and lockdowns, there was an overwhelming interest in the event, resulting in almost twice as many participants as in the previous year. We preferred to focus on the opportunities of going online rather than the challenges. Thanks to this approach we were able to organise the 4th Warsaw Research Seminar with a higher number of participants with less impact on the environment and carbon footprint.

Our insistence on organising the seminar in an online format proved to be useful, as the participants had the opportunity to follow research presentations in four different sessions. In line with the principles of the seminar series, we strived to be a platform that goes beyond research on student mobility and focus on evidence coming from research in different sectors of Erasmus+ (Vocational Education and Training, School Education, Higher Education, Adult Education and the Youth), looking at labour market issues, life-long education and teacher training. We are strongly committed to this holistic approach – providing a space for all research on Erasmus+ to be presented, and enabling cross-sectoral encounters and potential interactions between researchers looking at different dimensions of Erasmus+. The Warsaw Research Seminar series and its publications remain one of the few occasions that bring together research on all actions and all themes addressed under the Erasmus+ Programme.

FRSE is determined to continue to provide this platform to researchers, practitioners and policymakers from Europe and beyond. This publication series is proof of this determination to reach further audiences. And this volume provides very timely and important analyses presented at the seminar in a more concise and academic manner, with a special section looking at the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning mobility in Europe.

We would like to thank all those who have shown their great commitment and devoted the necessary time and energy to contribute to this volume. In line with the aim of sharing the research results with the wider public, we will continue to make our publications accessible for free, both online and in print.

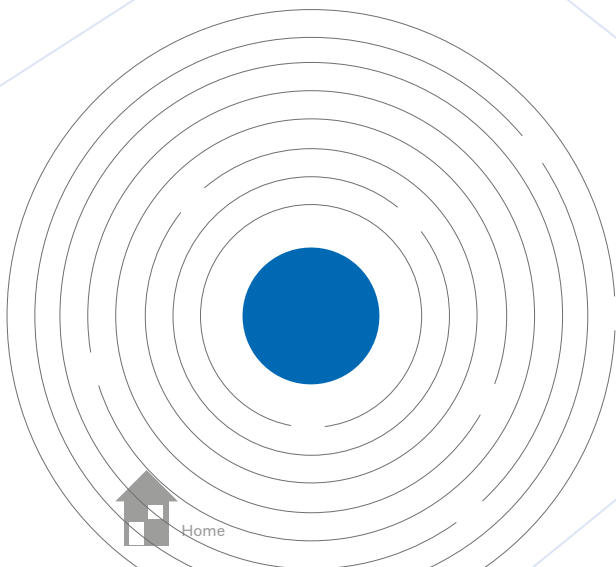
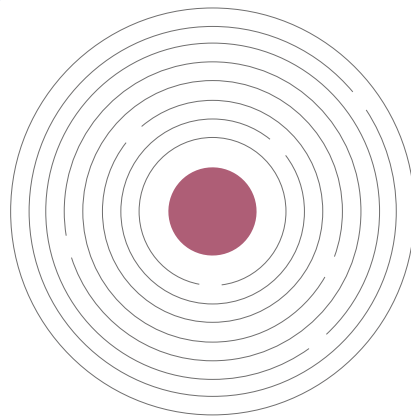
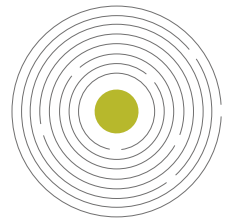
AGNIESZKA RYBIŃSKA
Director of Research
and Analysis Department
in the Foundation for
the Development of the
Education System.
She is experienced in the
co-ordination and monitoring
of state aid programmes.
Her research mostly addresses
the evaluation of public
interventions, including
EU funds earmarked for
SMEs and education sectors.
Recently she has been engaged
in the evaluation of various
aspects of education policy,
including the assessment
of education sector
performance and the
transition from school to work.

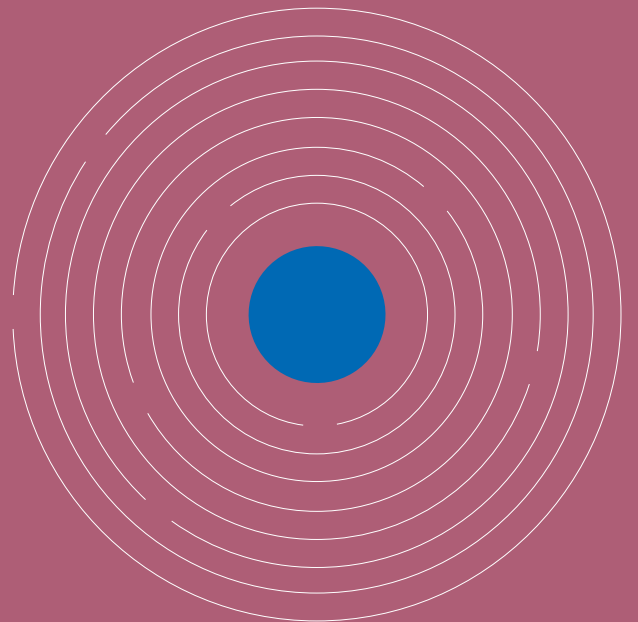
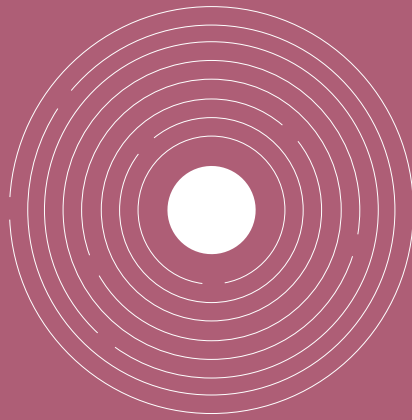
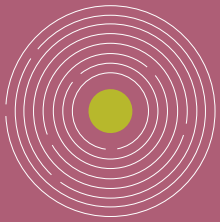
ÖZGEHAN ŞENYUVA

is an Associate Professor in the International Relations Department at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, where he works on youth, public opinion, Turkish-European relations and the politics of European football. He has extensive experience in international research projects. He has worked for more than two decades as a youth worker/trainer. He is a steering group member of European Platform on Learning Mobility and member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers of the European Commission and the Council of Europe. He is the author of numerous research publications and articles.

When the seminar series started, we were only hoping to become a permanent and respected item in the European calendar of Erasmus+ and youth research and practice. Our commitment is now to sustain its quality and inclusive dimension. Therefore, the forthcoming seminar will continue to focus on the pandemic both in terms of researching the implementation of the Programme under COVID-19 circumstances and researching practice in time of COVID-19.

*Agnieszka Rybińska,
Özgehan Şenyuva*





Practical training



Home

How do foreign vocational placements impact skills and future career paths?¹

By Michał Pachocki

Since EU funds became accessible to vocational schools, learning mobility has arguably been one of the most important means of increasing skills in initial VET training. When looking at the results of the Erasmus+ selection rounds, it can be noticed that in most of the programme countries, schools and other VET providers are eager to send their learners to undertake practical training in other European countries. Hence, it is worth considering whether, and to what extent, the mobility projects support the development of students' skills and to what extent they positively affect their further professional life.

1. Background and rationale

The core objective of the present research is to assess a mobility's impact on the skills and further career paths of mobility participants. Thus, the main research questions mainly aimed to determine to what extent the acquired competences have proven useful, especially in the context of participants' current professional status and standing in the labour market. Not only occupational skills were taken into account when the graduates' mobility experience was put under scrutiny, as the questions also covered both the soft skills and intercultural dimension of their mobility experiences.

The sample concerned mobility training implemented under the Erasmus+ VET as well as the preceding Leonardo da Vinci programme for lifelong learning. Both initiatives were mainly addressed to vocational schools and other practical training institutions. To make the mobility eligible in accordance with programme rules, it needed to be consistent with the vocational training obtained by the learners in their sending countries. The mobility programme was to be commonly agreed upon between the sending institution and the learner's foreign host.

MICHAŁ PACHOCKI

is an educational researcher, philologist, anthropologist and evaluator. He is also an author of reports and articles about education and learning outcomes. He has been working for the Foundation for Development of the Education System since 2009. Initially, he supported quality assurance of projects implemented first under the Lifelong Learning Programme and later under Erasmus+. Currently, he works in the Research and Analysis Department of the Polish Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agency.

KEYWORDS

ERASMUS+, MOBILITY, VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, SKILLS

¹ This text is based on the full transnational research report presented in: Fassl, A., Kirsch, M., Pachocki, M., & Zabko, O. (2020). *Tracing vet graduates with foreign mobility experience. Transnational research report*. Warsaw: Foundation for the Development of the Education System. doi: 10.47050/66515475

The research activities were carried out in co-operation with Erasmus+ national agencies from Austria, Belgium (Flanders), the Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. Before the project was broadened to a transnational scope, the initial research was carried out in Poland between 2016 and 2017. Then, by adapting the methodology for transnational purposes, all research activities were implemented in every participating country between 2017 and 2019, with a replication of study methods. Finally, the outcomes were analysed together with the aim of providing a comparison of similar trends and patterns between different national contexts.

This article presents mainly the results of quantitative research carried out with the use of an online questionnaire. These findings are provided only with reference to general trends observed in the remaining stages of the study. The overall results of all phases of this research, as well as the detailed analysis of data collected during interviews and focus groups (including quotes), are presented in the final transnational research report published by the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agency in December 2020.

2. Methods and tools

This research utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data were collected through an online questionnaire and interviews. In every country, the questionnaire was built on a comparable core that consisted of the same (or similar) questions translated into national languages that allowed participants to assess the mobility in terms of its content, quality, logistics and organisational aspects as well as in terms of its relevance to the needs of the contemporary labour market. For most questions, a five-point scale was used to collect participants' feedback, in which the higher the degree of assessment, the more positive the feedback. The survey also included multiple-choice, demographic and open-ended questions to collect more broad and detailed information. The quantitative methods covered the entire population of former VET mobility participants, while the only criterion applied to get enrolled in the sample was their participation in a placement organised by a given school. The invitation to participate in the study was addressed to those participants who gave their consent to be contacted to take part in further evaluation activities that would eventually follow the project after its completion.

Table 1. Number of respondents by country and research method

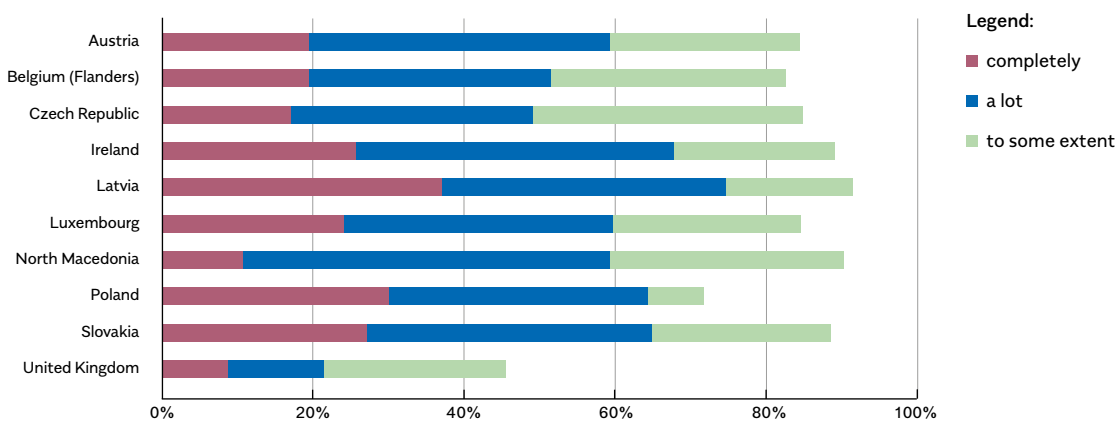
Country	Total number of valid cases	Individual in-depth interviews	Focus group interviews
Austria	797	5	2
Belgium (Flanders)	338	10	3
Czech Republic	2 252	14	2
Ireland	296	4	2
Latvia	335	5	2
Luxembourg	130	2	2
North Macedonia	237	20	3
Poland	2 592	20	5
Slovakia	590	10	2
United Kingdom	442	25	3

The survey was followed by focus groups (FGIs) and individual in-depth interviews (IDI). The FGIs were carried out with current learners and recent graduates of VET schools. During every conversation, the group of approximately 12 participants provided their opinions about their vocational learning mobility experience. The participants also discussed their future career plans and their expectations about future labour market requirements. The IDIs were conducted mostly face-to-face, with some exceptions when the interviews were held using phone or internet communicators. The target group were school graduates with mobility experience. Similarly to FGIs, the main topics of conversation were the quality of placements and their relevance as to the further career and education paths of the interviewees.

3. Impact on soft and communication skills

Among the acquired soft skills, the learners particularly enhanced their intercultural awareness and interpersonal competences. When looking at the qualitative data, the feedback regarding the development of interpersonal skills was mostly very positive. It can be concluded that soft skills are the area most universally developed by mobility placements. In many countries, the interviewees indicated that they had especially developed their soft and basic life skills. Respondents from Luxembourg generally viewed their mobility experience as having provided an added value to acquire additional soft skills abroad, while the Flemish learners underlined that they had become much more independent during their internships and they learnt to work to deadlines. The participants from the United Kingdom mentioned that living on their own, without their parents or carers, also resulted in an increase in self-confidence accompanied by a lasting impression that they were more capable of living independently than they had previously thought.

Figure 1. Opinions on acquisition of communication and team-working skills acquired by the mobility participants from respective sending countries

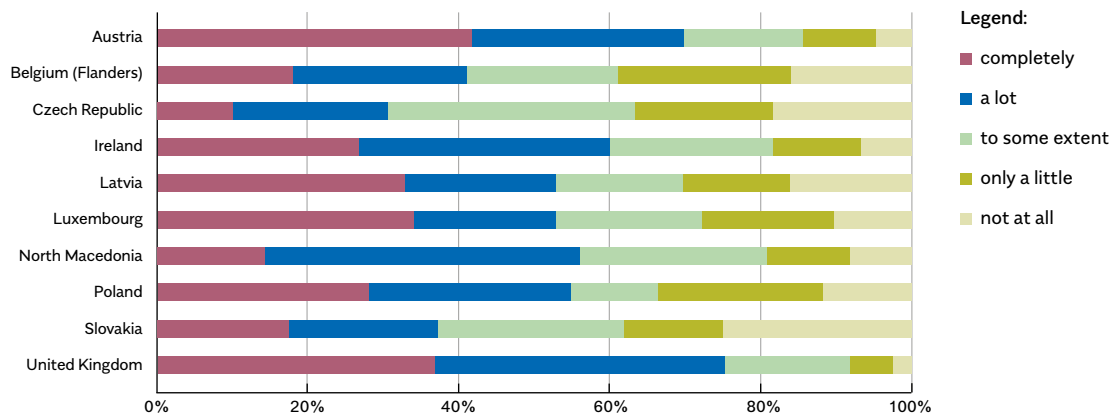


N = 7,901

For Austrian participants, working in new teams and in a completely new environment made the respondents more open, confident and independent. They had to organise and manage by themselves their commute to work and partly also their shared flats, and they grew with the challenges. Their self-confidence increased during the stay abroad, and they benefited from the new experiences. The interviewees from North Macedonia also emphasised that their stay abroad had had a significant influence on changing their views and attitudes. Often it was not only their first experience of actual professional work but also their first independent, long stay away from their families and a real-life lesson as well.

An important range of soft skills that increased upon the mobility's completion was communication and teamwork skills. The data show that learners in tourism, hospitality and catering enhanced their communication and team-working skills the most as they virtually always have to work in a team and have to communicate with colleagues and customers.

Figure 2. Opinions on acquisition of interpersonal skills acquired by the mobility participants from respective sending countries²



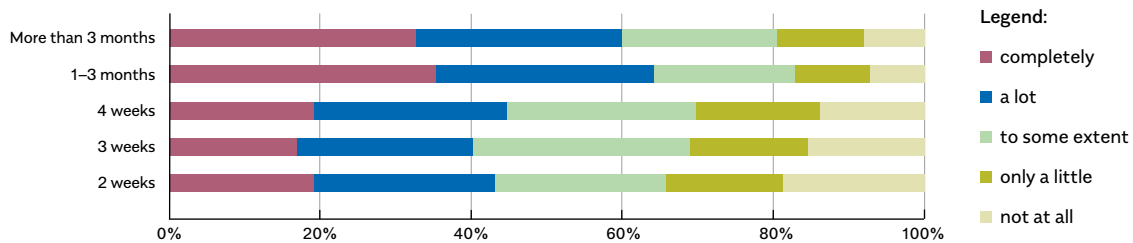
N = 6,784

Interestingly, the interpersonal skills were less frequently declared by survey participants. Less than half of them completely or largely agreed that they developed interpersonal skills during their placements, and only 24% of the respondents completely agreed with such a statement. Learners from the United Kingdom and Austria enhanced their interpersonal skills to a greater extent when compared to those from other countries. Similar statements were least frequent among participants from the Czech Republic (31%), Slovakia (37%) and Belgium (41%).

² As the percentage data resulting from the calculations has been rounded for the purpose of a legible tabular presentation (rounded to one decimal place), some of the percentage components in the tables and figures add up to one tenth error, which – when rounded to the nearest integer gives the value of 100%. These differences are due only to the arithmetic rounding of the data, and not to calculation errors.

Significant differences can also be seen when taking into account the mobility's duration, as longer placements contributed to a greater extent of interpersonal skills acquisition, i.e. 64% of the learners who went abroad for more than a month agreed that they gained interpersonal skills whereas similar declarations were made by 43% of those who went abroad for two weeks.

Figure 3. Opinions on interpersonal skills acquired by the mobility duration

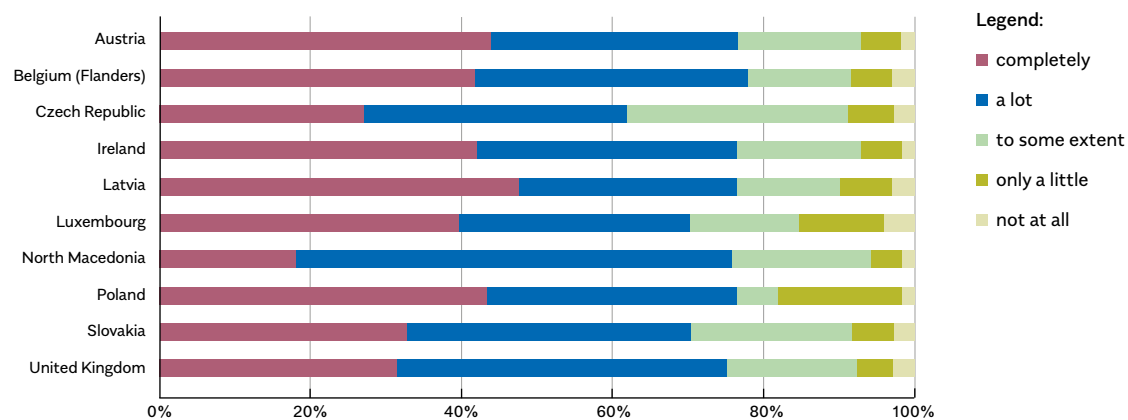


N = 6,784

4. Impact on intercultural and linguistic skills

Living and working abroad increased participants' awareness of different cultures, which resulted in more openness and increased motivation to visit other countries. The trainees also highlighted the cultural appeal of a traineeship abroad. In their opinion, the mobility experience allowed them not only to discover new cultures and visit new places, but also to meet and talk with people from other countries. When asked to what extent the trainee placement abroad allowed them to acquire, develop or improve their ability to work in an international environment, 37% of learners agreed completely, 35% a lot and 17% to some extent. Only 9% increased this competence a little and 2% not at all.

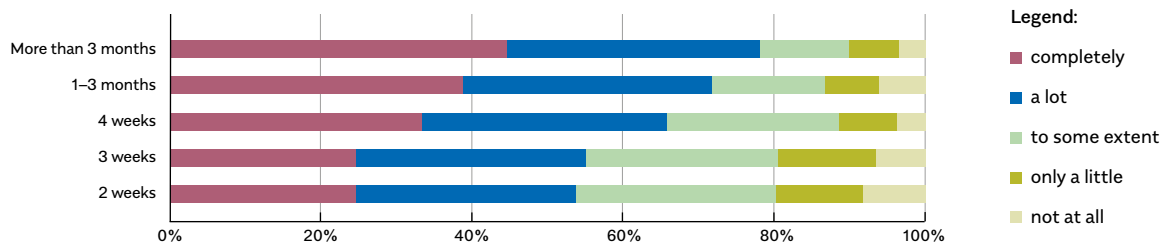
Figure 4. Ability to work in an international environment reported by the mobility participants from respective countries



N = 7,901

The opportunity to work abroad in international teams resulted in mastering language skills. When looking at the survey outcomes, it can be noticed that 61% of respondents completely or largely agreed that they had enhanced their ability to use a foreign language in a work environment. It was also noticed that the duration of placements had a significant impact on the acquisition of linguistic competences: 77% of the learners who spent more than three months abroad agreed completely or a lot that they enhanced their ability to communicate in a foreign language in a work environment, whereas only half of those who spent three weeks or less on their mobility agreed completely or a lot.

Figure 5. Opinions on linguistic competences acquired by the mobility duration

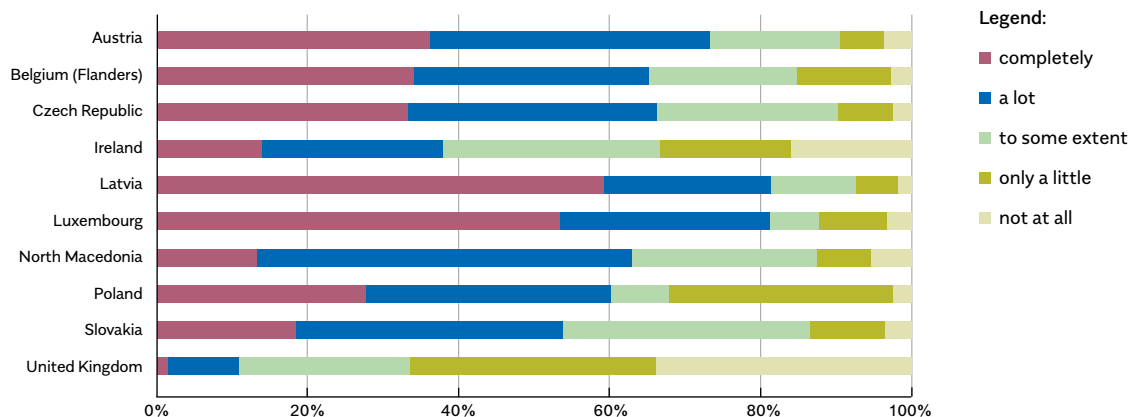


N = 7,855

A similar pattern can also be found in the qualitative data, as many participants confirmed that learning the foreign language of instruction turned out to be a must in order to carry out their placement. Such opinions were clearly evident in the interviews as the majority of participants noted a positive influence of the time spent abroad on their language skills. It was often claimed that the development of language skills was among the most achieved outcomes of their mobility. Also stressed was the fact that the focus on developing or improving language skills, in some cases, resulted in better school grades. Although the most visible change in the ability to communicate in a foreign language was noticed mainly by learners who had hardly any language skills before their mobility's completion, the placements also turned out to be beneficial for those who already had good linguistic skills before going for practical training abroad. This was due to the fact that they often gained rather theoretical knowledge of foreign languages at their schools.

The practical training abroad resulted in a significant increase in the language competence of the participants, making it one of the most visible effects of their vocational training. This was perceived by some participants as a significant value-added stemming from the difference between participation in a language course and practical learning while performing professional duties abroad. What also was raised was the fact that practical language learning happened outside the workplace when the participants used the local language to various degrees for shopping, moving around the neighbourhood and socialising.

Figure 6. Opinions on linguistic competences acquired by mobility participants from respective sending countries



$N = 7,855$

When comparing the learners' acquisition of linguistic skills by sending country, it can be seen that most frequently it was claimed by respondents from Latvia and Luxembourg. Contrariwise, the declarations as to gaining new linguistic competences turned out to be much less frequent among the native English speakers. Only 1% of British learners agreed completely, and 9% a lot, that they had improved their foreign language skills. What is more, every third British respondent did not acquire any linguistic skills at all, which could be explained by the fact that the English language is generally considered to be the lingua franca across Europe. On the other hand, 14% of the Irish learners agreed completely and 24% a lot that they enhanced their communication in a foreign language, which is lower than average, but still far above the percentages for the United Kingdom.

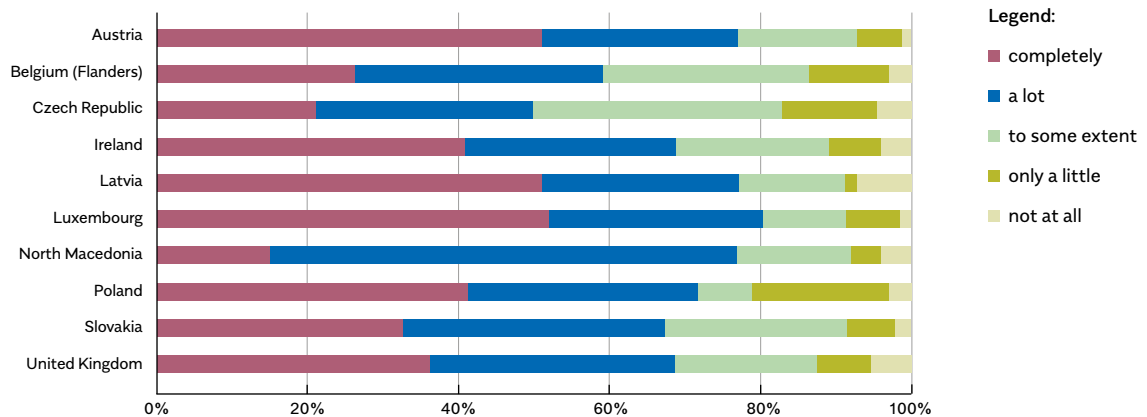
Another exception of linguistic skills acquisition applies to those participants who went to countries of the same or a very similar language spoken. This applied mostly to Czech and Slovak participants, and also to Flemish learners who went to the Netherlands. This was mostly evident in the qualitative data, as some participants expressed their regrets that they hardly noticed any difference in language and culture between the host country and their own country during the mobility. However, this does not mean that in these cases, too, there were no advantages to meeting new people and discovering a new way of working, even in such similar linguistic and cultural contexts.

5. Impact on job-related skills

The job-related competences have also changed as a result of participation in the transnational mobility programme. Most of the participants confirmed the mobility's impact on enhancing skills that were directly connected to their professions. Some participants had the opportunity to become acquainted with state-of-the-art technologies, new work environments, machines and techniques they did not yet know or would not have had the chance to use at home. It should be noted, however, that the acquisition of occupational skills was less frequently declared by the respondents than gaining soft skills. This might partially stem from learners' motivation since such personal motives as improving, expanding

and consolidating language skills, as well as the opportunity to be opened to new experiences, were mentioned most frequently by survey respondents.

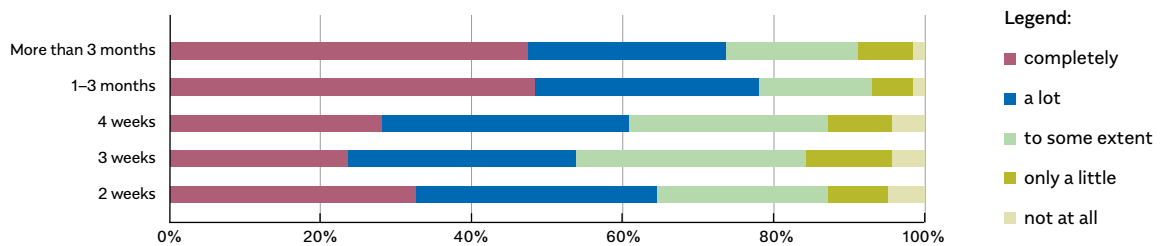
Figure 7. Opinions on acquisition of practical professional experience by mobility participants from respective sending countries



N = 7,922

When asked about job-related skills, the interviewees often indicated that the scope of these competences was very closely related to the quality of support provided at the workplace. What was largely appreciated by the participants was on-site mentoring, as most of them admitted that it had a strong influence on what was gained from the training. Another important asset was the possibility for participants to reflect on their own work and the ability to focus more on their own learning needs. While they largely appreciated the coherence of the mobility with the VET domain as well as with the learning programme undertaken at the sending schools, some of the learners complained about the mismatch between the work placement and their level of vocational skill or field of study. Many interviewees claimed that – in order to meet their needs – the traineeships should be closely related to a relevant industry and remain as close as possible to the VET domain in which they were trained at their school. Otherwise, it might be difficult for participants to notice any added value from the perspective of skills that are needed in the labour market.

Figure 8. Opinions on acquisition of practical professional experience by the mobility duration



N = 7,922

This research also shows links between the acquisition of skills and the duration of placements. This was particularly evident in the cases of language, communication and soft skills. The trainees with experience of a longer placement claimed that they became more aware of the characteristics of individual workplaces. Finally, the length of placements also played a noticeable role in shaping the participants' attitudes towards their position in the labour market as those who undertook longer internships were more optimistic when answering questions about their prospects of finding an interesting and attractive job, having had a foreign mobility experience of such a kind.

The data show, however, that relatively short mobilities were most common across the research sample. Although in Luxembourg and Austria most traineeships lasted from one to three months, in majority of countries that participated in this research, the most frequent duration of a mobility experience was three weeks or less. In total, more than 48% of respondents took part in a mobility of that length.

Table 2. Duration of the mobility period across the research sample (in %)

Country	2 weeks	3 weeks	4 weeks	1–3 months	More than 3 months
Austria	6.5	9.2	17.7	53.1	13.6
North Macedonia	43.9	40.9	8.9	5.9	0.4
Slovakia	57.1	29.3	8.8	4.4	0.3
United Kingdom	7.4	58.2	14.9	17.8	1.4
Belgium (Flanders)	36.7	32.5	19.8	8.3	2.7
Ireland	30.4	54.4	0.0	6.4	8.8
Czech Republic	7.9	56.3	23.4	9.8	2.6
Luxembourg	0.0	5.4	5.4	78.5	10.8
Latvia	21.5	9.9	38.2	22.4	8.1
All (average)	18.3	40.3	18.6	18.2	4.7

On the other hand, the relatively short duration of the mobility was rated by participants as a big challenge to obtain a sufficient training programme. This was, therefore, considered an important weakness and a reason of disappointment when the internship was too short to fully benefit from the internship. This also caused some problems with adaptation as some participants could not integrate themselves sufficiently and would have liked to have stayed abroad for longer.

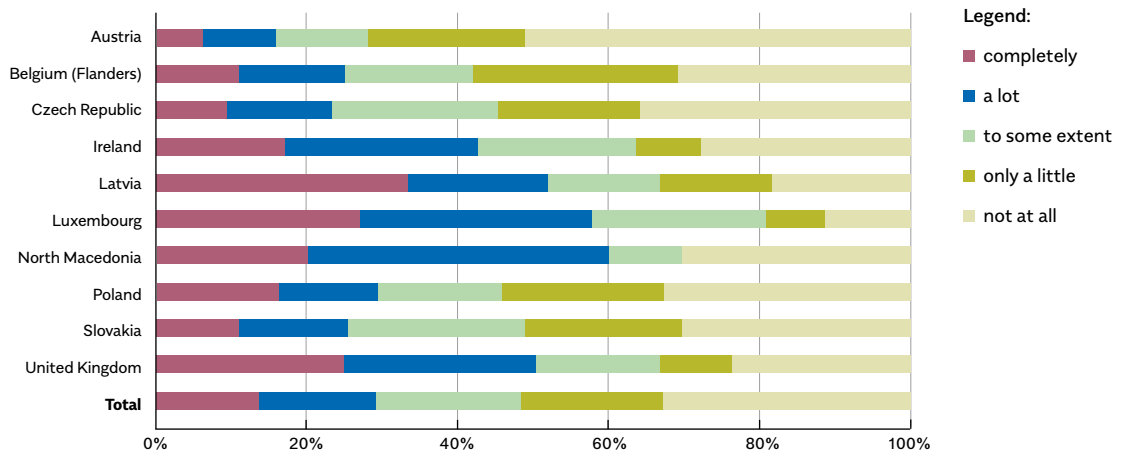
6. Impact on further life, education and career

The data show that most of the schools' graduates who enrolled in the research sample are only at the very beginning of their career paths. More than half of the respondents had finished their school or college at the time of survey implementation, while the rest still remained at school. At the same time, 40% of the surveyed graduates had decided to continue their education in higher education institutions, and 15% had completed their studies. This means that a significant number of former mobility participants still remained in education at the time this research was conducted.

On the one hand, having such a sample stratification allowed mobility training to be evaluated to a greater extent, mainly thanks to the fact that many of the participants still had a very fresh recall of their training experience abroad. But on the other hand, the analysis of mobilities' impact on participants' further education and career paths had to be limited to those respondents who had already entered those paths. Only they could interlink their mobility experience to their own learning or work-related decisions.

When looking at those who have continued their education at secondary or tertiary level, it can be concluded that their studies were often undertaken simultaneously with their job. During the interviews, some of the students admitted that they consider these jobs temporary and – most of all – consistent with such life priorities as the possibility of reconciling work with their studies, the chance to try something new or, simply, to gain their first permanent work experience.

Figure 9. Distribution of agreement with the statement “My internship/trainee placement abroad influenced my choice of subject to study”



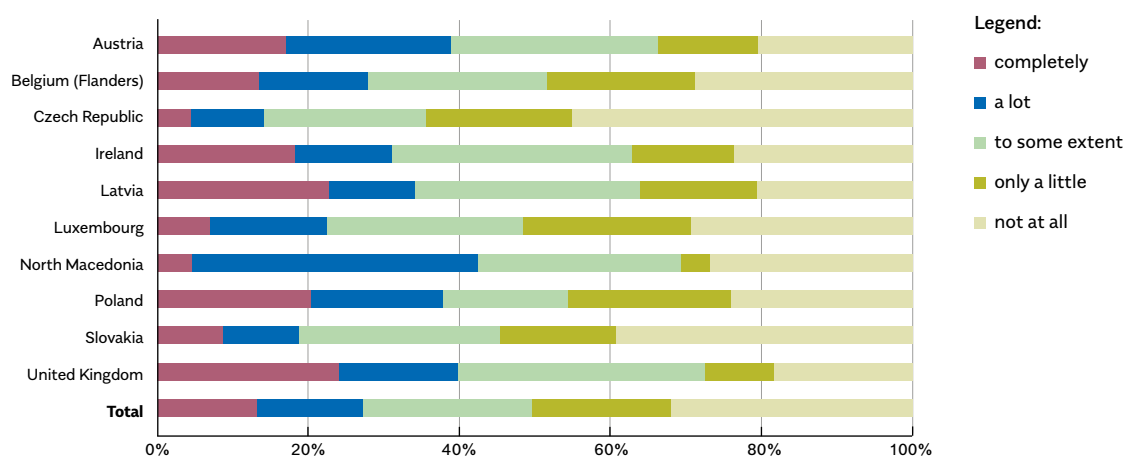
N = 2,317

The respondents who were continuing their education at universities or colleges were also asked about links between their foreign mobility experience and their further education choices. Although the scale of the impact varies considerably by country, it appears that this is most frequently noted by participants from North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg and Latvia. Additional insight into the way the mobility affected their future studies is given in the qualitative data. Looking at how the foreign mobility affected the interviewees' choices of study fields, it can be seen that the effect appears in two mutually exclusive directions – as choice-reinforcing or choice-strengthening to continue their education in the given VET domain, and as choice-changing whereby it led to another subject or field. The choice-changing effect emerges either through the discovery of new, attractive areas of interest or through the participant's understanding that came during the mobility abroad that they did not want to work in the originally learnt profession.

The graduates who had already entered their career paths were asked about links between the experience gained and employability. Looking at their opinions on the extent to which their foreign

placements actually helped them to obtain a job, it appears that the majority of them agreed (13% completely) that taking part in a placement had had a positive impact on the results of their recruitment process. However, it should also be noted that more than one-third did not see any links between their mobility experience and their success in applying for job positions. Participants in the interviews – on the other hand – were more likely to claim that the mobility had helped them in finding a job. Some of them also claimed that their prospective employers expressed curiosity about their mobility training abroad when they got to know about such an experience.

Figure 10. Distribution of agreement with the statement “My participation in an internship/trainee placement abroad helped me to get a job”

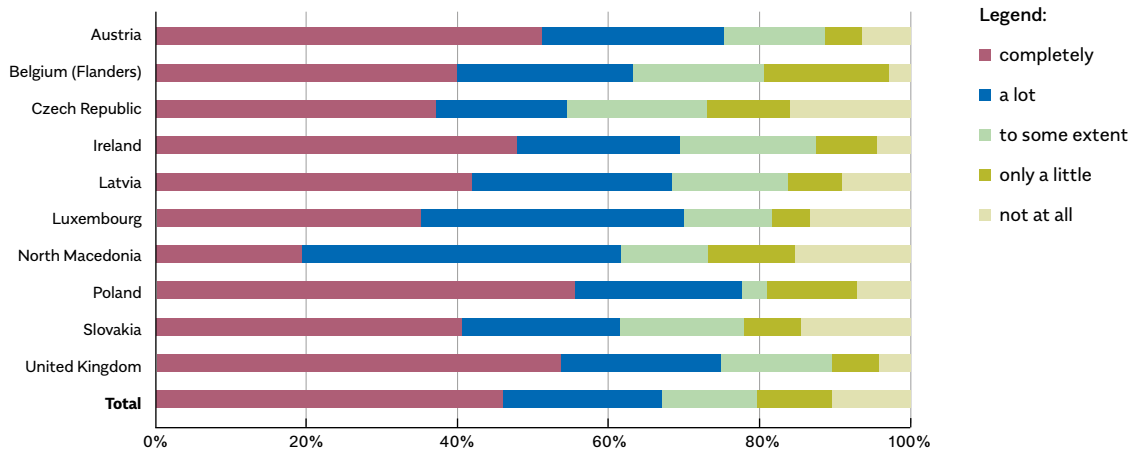


N = 3,074

When analysing the interview data, it can be concluded that participation in a VET mobility has been valuable for participants' curriculum vitae, and therefore it enhanced their chances in the labour market. What is striking, however, is the fact that relatively few graduates informed employers about their mobility experiences at all. On average, 46% of the participants completely agreed, 21% a lot and 13% to some extent, that they told prospective employers about their mobility experience abroad when looking

for a job. This may explain why quite a significant number of respondents fail to see a link between participating in a mobility and increasing employability, as many of the surveyed graduates assumed in advance that such an experience would not prove to be an additional asset in recruitment.

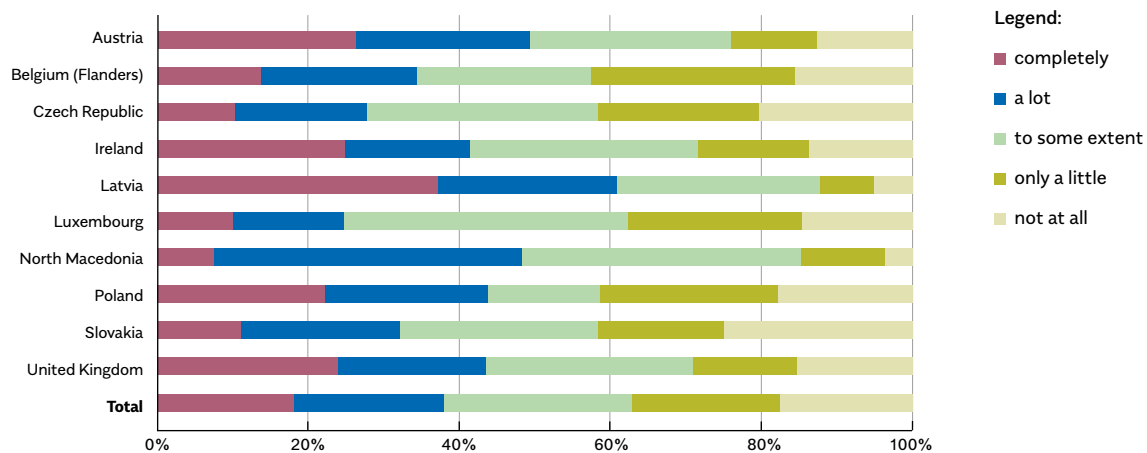
Figure 11. Distribution of agreement with the statement “When looking for a job, I told prospective employers about my internship/trainee placement abroad”



N = 3,031

Interestingly, the data show some links between sharing information about a mobility experience during the recruitment process and the duration of the mobility period abroad. If the duration of a stay was three weeks or less, then participants tended to tell employers about their experience less frequently. On average, if the length of stay was two to three weeks, 74% of respondents agreed (completely, a lot or to some extent) that they told employers about this experience. When their length of stay was at least four weeks, 83–88% of respondents told the employers about their mobility experience (the highest degree of agreement is seen where the length of stay exceeds three months). The given findings may thus underline the advantage of long-term internships abroad even more as they seem to have more of an impact on the further career paths of the participants.

Figure 12. Distribution of agreement with the statement “The certificates obtained during my internship/trainee placement abroad are useful in my further professional career”

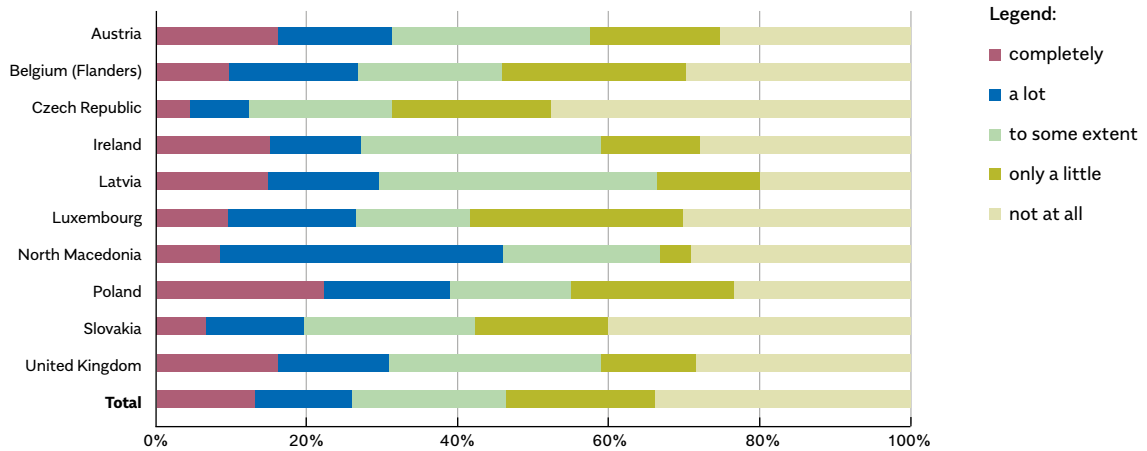


$N = 3,071$

On average, 18% of the respondents agree completely, 20% a lot, and 25% to some extent that the certificates they obtained during their mobility period abroad are useful in their further professional career. The participants from Latvia tend to attribute more importance to the certificates received, and a positive attitude towards the potential impact of the certificates is demonstrated by participants from Austria and North Macedonia as well as the United Kingdom and Ireland. The relation between certificates and the actual employability of participants is less strong, which may be related to the fact that many people did not use mobility information as an asset during the recruitment process.

The collected data do not show that there are any strong links between the attitude towards certificates and the duration of the mobility. In total, only 13% of respondents agreed that the certificates obtained after their placements helped them to find a job, while a third of survey participants believed that such a document did not help at all in their job recruitment process. The least optimism in this respect can be seen in the Czech and Slovak data, while the North Macedonian respondents claim most that their certificates turned out to be useful when compared with other countries.

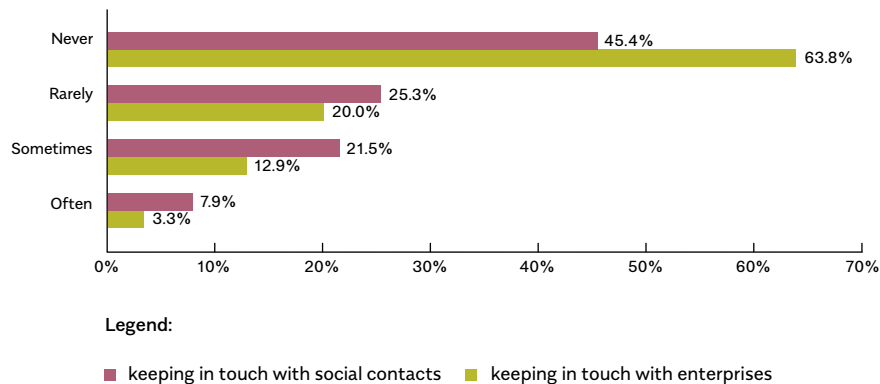
Figure 13. Distribution of answers to the statement “The certificates from employers obtained through my internship/trainee placement abroad helped me find a job”



N = 3,267

One of the aspects that needs more attention is the sustainability of contacts between participants and their host companies. As the data show a particularly low level of further contact after the mobility has been completed, it seems reasonable to put more focus on increasing the number of former participants keeping in touch with social contacts and enterprises they met abroad. This aspect seems important because those interviewees who maintained contacts established abroad benefited from them, e.g. by getting a job there after graduating from school or by going there for summer work.

Figure 14. Percentage of respondents who kept in touch with social contacts and enterprises



N = 7,992

7. Conclusions and limitations

The research showed that a large number of former participants and trainees recognise the positive impact of placements on their personal growth and basic life skills. Among the most commonly acquired soft skills, the learners especially enhanced their intercultural awareness and interpersonal competences. Both survey and interview data show that living and working abroad was a big challenge and an entirely new experience, especially for the younger learners. It was particularly evident in the qualitative data that the interviewees put a strong emphasis on their independence and self-confidence stemming from their mobility experience.

The vocational mobilities significantly impacted the language and skills of learners, although the links between mobility experience and language competences vary between countries. They also depend on language proficiency level and whether the mobility actually required the use of a foreign language on the spot.

What can also be noticed when analysing the collected data is that the longer the participants' stay abroad, the greater the declared impact on their skills. This was particularly noticeable when comparing very short trips lasting two weeks with mobilities lasting more than one month. It can be assumed that this results from their greater immersion in the local labour market and culture and from the increased opportunities to get acquainted with the host companies' organisation.

The survey also indicates that – according to the participants' beliefs – foreign work experience reduces the potential barriers of finding a satisfying job at the early stage of their career paths. On the other hand, it should also be concluded that quite a great number of respondents did not inform their prospective employers about their mobility experience when they applied for a job, which did not allow the links between mobility and employability to be explored in many cases.

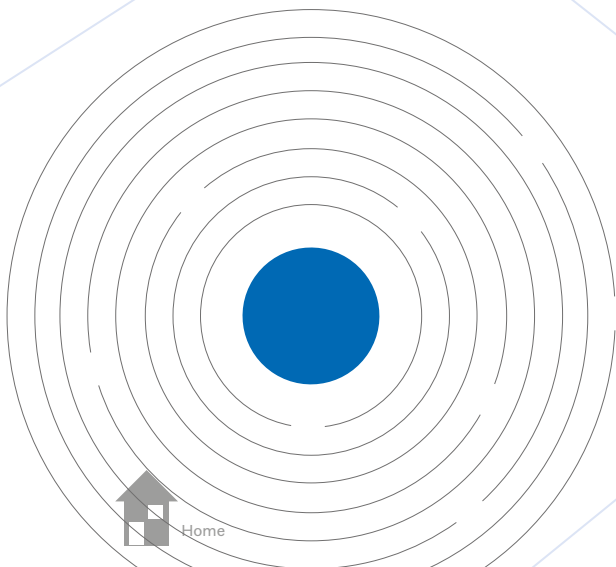
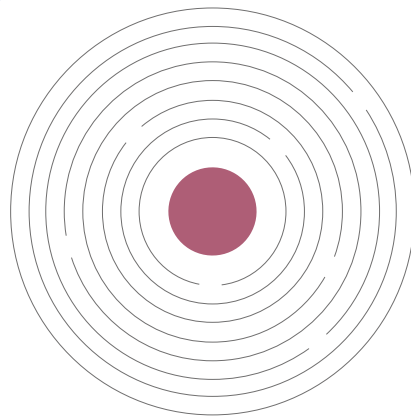
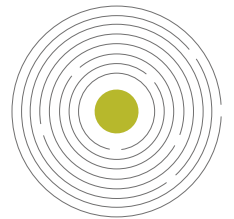
There are several aspects that need to be considered as potential limitations when generalising these research outcomes. Firstly, what significantly impacted the data collection was the difficulty of reaching the target research group. The main way of doing that was to use the contact information from participants' individual reports, completion of which was mandatory after getting back to the sending institution from abroad. In many cases, however, the contact details provided in these reports turned out to be out of date. This significantly affected the overall research response rate to the survey as well as the number of individual interviews.

Secondly, there is a self-reporting data bias. Taking into account that the main focus of this research was individual feedback from participants, one should be aware that a significant limitation in the interpretation of the results is their selective memory and over-interpretation of the mobility's role in their further career paths. Given the inability to examine a control group, such a limitation concerns the interpretation of both the survey and interview data, and therefore it needs to be admitted that it remained fairly inescapable.

Finally, the fact that this research was implemented transnationally also caused several substantive and logistical obstacles that might negatively affect the generalisation of the results. In terms of logistics, a very important problem concerned keeping to the timeframe so that this study could be carried out simultaneously. Such an approach had to be excluded in terms of the research activities that were carried out in Poland a year earlier. What is more, any methodological corrections and adjustments of the study to the transnational context could therefore no longer be applied to the results collected in Poland. Another problem stemmed from the differences between the partners' approaches. Although much effort was made to maintain an identical approach during the research's implementation, it was

impossible to avoid differences that were difficult to control. These mostly related to differences in translation as well as diverse national and cultural contexts, which always affect the interpretation of questions by participants from different countries.

What should be noted though is that, due to the visibly higher response rate among younger trainees, the mobility abroad still remains a rather fresh experience for the vast majority of research participants. Having the evaluation at an early stage allowed the participants to recall their mobility more clearly and to provide more accurate testimonies as to the links between the previously gained experience and current education or work-related decisions.



Evaluating the labour market impact of learning mobility: the case of Danish apprentice chefs

By Søren Kristensen

1. Introduction

Evaluations – or evaluative studies¹ – of the impact of transnational mobility programmes or projects face a number of challenges that affect the nature of the evidence they bring to light. The most important of these is arguably the difficulty, both for ethical and practical reasons, of carrying out mobility activities as randomised controlled tests (the “gold standard” of impact measurements). This would require that a population of comparable individuals be arbitrarily divided into two groups, where one is sent abroad and the other kept at home as a control group.

In real life, recruitment is based on the voluntary commitment of participants combined with a rigorous selection process, which in most contexts means that it is the most adventurous and competent that end up going abroad. Since they had a rich potential already before going abroad, it can be argued that they would have done well even without the mobility experience, and this will weaken links of causality between the dependent (the learning outcomes of participants) and the independent (the pedagogical intervention) variables. At the labour market level, the impacts can be hard to trace, as we deal with small populations whose contribution to a given professional field can be difficult to identify and quantify, and even harder to ascribe to participation in a mobility project, especially if this has been of a short duration. Moreover, effects of acquired competences (as well as the competences themselves) often only become visible after many years, and an evaluation carried out shortly after the mobility activity has ended (which most evaluations are) will fail to capture these.

¹ A distinction can be made between “evaluations”, which are commissioned and paid for by a client (project or programme owner) and carried out by researchers or consultants according to pre-defined terms of reference, and “evaluative studies”, which are carried out according to criteria defined by the researchers themselves.

SØREN KRISTENSEN

PhD associated with the Danish School of Education in Aarhus University, working on youth mobility since 1987. Former director of the PIU-Centret – the national centre for mobility in the field of vocational education and training and national expert to the European Centre for the Cedefop in Thessaloniki. He is an independent research professional, member of the Steering Committee of the European Platform for Learning Mobility since 2012.

KEYWORDS

LEARNING MOBILITY,
INTERNATIONALISATION
OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION,
LONG-TERM IMPACT

As a consequence of this, it is very difficult to find hard-nosed evidence about the impact and the importance of learning mobility² in a macro-economic perspective. We have a theoretical basis for establishing the learning potential of stays abroad (Kristensen, 2004), backed up by qualitative research (typically based on self-assessments triangulated with inputs from other actors), and we also have ample anecdotal evidence of subsequent successful career trajectories of individual participants. However, this generally has little effect on the decision-makers, who require more substantial evidence of the value of educational activities, preferably in the shape of exact estimations of economic benefits accrued for society through these. Therefore, acolytes of learning mobility, so to speak, often stand without the “smoking gun” that can offer a convincing argument in policy discussions. But every now and then, and mostly through a fortunate combination of events and developments, a situation arises where it is possible to elicit more than circumstantial evidence and bring it to light. Such a situation was the subject of an evaluative study carried out in Denmark in 2013, on the impact of Danish apprentice chefs’ placements abroad.

2. The New Nordic Cuisine

Briefly, the background is the following: over an astonishingly short period – roughly from 1995 to 2010 – Denmark’s rating on the gastronomical charts simply skyrocketed. From a position on the absolute fringe of modern cuisine, Danish chefs came to be hailed as famous innovators on the cutting edge of the field, developing new recipes and cooking methods and using innovative ingredients. Danish restaurants received a shower of Michelin stars, and one of them was voted best restaurant in the world for three years running, a feat which would have been completely unthinkable just a decade before. The concept of the New Nordic Cuisine (which came about as a Danish initiative) has become a household byword in gastronomical circles worldwide. Danish chefs have repeatedly emerged victorious from international competitions and new Danish restaurants sport long waiting lists despite stiff prices, creating employment, and generating revenue on an unprecedented scale. Of course, Denmark is not the only country that experienced a hike in gastronomical development in this period, and the growth of the internet and mass tourism as well as increases in disposable income were also contributing factors. But even so, the Danish situation was unique, given that – unlike many other countries – it had no established gastronomical tradition to build on, so there must have been other factors at play. One preliminary observation was that the chefs behind this revolution were relatively young, having been trained in the 1990s and early 2000s. Looking at the phenomenon through a pedagogical lens, the question is therefore: Whether anything new was introduced in the vocational education and training system (VET) during this period that can explain this development? This is where the learning mobility comes into the equation.

The early 1990s saw one innovation in the Danish VET system which appears pertinent in this context: the launch of a national mobility programme – placements abroad or the PIU scheme – which allowed Danish apprentices in initial vocational training (IVET) to take all or part(s) of their mandatory work placements abroad. There was nothing new in work placements *per se* – they have always been an integral feature of the apprenticeship-based VET system in Denmark. But until 1992, these placements could only be undertaken in a national context. With the launch of the PIU programme

2 A “learning mobility” is here defined as a stay abroad undertaken for a limited period of time and with a clear educational purpose.

(PIU stands for “placements abroad”), it was possible to undertake periods of work placements in other countries and have this recognised as part of the national qualification. The financing for this came from the so-called “employers’ reimbursement fund”, which is a levy paid by Danish employers to support apprenticeships³.

The decision to allow VET students to go abroad for placements (initially, at least) had little to do with pedagogical thinking but was instead seen as a way of compensating for a lack of training placements in Denmark. These placement agreements abroad are concluded for an extended period of time (many are away for a year or more)⁴, and students go out individually, not in groups. After the stay abroad, they return to Denmark to complete their qualification. Also – and this is an important point – there is no formal selection process. All applicants who can document that they have a placement opportunity abroad that fulfils certain minimum criteria⁵, in terms of learning environment, will receive funding. Students in the hotel and restaurant trades were quick to seize this new opportunity, even though only a few of these went to other Nordic countries. This would, at first sight, make it somewhat ironic to link it with a phenomenon that labels itself “Nordic”, but a distinct feature of the New Nordic Cuisine – despite the name – is its global orientation and sources of inspiration. In a manifesto drawn up by leading chefs in 2004, it is a declared aim that it should “unite the best Nordic recipes and culinary traditions with impulses from abroad”⁶, and the footprint from other gastronomical contexts is clearly discernible in its recipes, preparation methods and ingredients.

The key issues which this study sets out to explore are therefore the following: Is there a connection between this outbreak of innovative thinking and entrepreneurship and the implementation of a mobility scheme? And if this is so – what are the mechanisms in mobility that promote the acquisition of these competences? Once these questions – or hypotheses – are answered (or confirmed), we may have some very strong arguments for the impact and value of a transnational learning mobility, and we could then identify elements that are conducive to learning and make evidence-based recommendations about the practical “engineering” of learning mobility (at least about placements carried out in a VET context). So this is what the author of this article set out to do, in a study financed by a grant from a research and development programme of the Danish Ministry of Education.

3. The study

The study carried out in the years 2013–2014, consisted of two parts, of which the first was a preliminary investigation (mainly based on document analysis) and served to establish the connection between the two phenomena. It focussed on the background of 70 leading chefs in the vanguard of the New Nordic Cuisine movement in Denmark with a view to ascertaining whether they had indeed undertaken placements (or work periods) abroad during their formative years. This phase also consisted of a limited analysis of ingredients and practices of the New Nordic Cuisine in order to determine possible influences from the outside. Very briefly, this first part showed that the majority (38) of the young chefs

3 The funding is based on capped real costs of up to DKK 32,000 per year (approx. EUR 4,300). Placements are possible throughout the world; approx. 1,500 VET students and apprentices make use of this every year.

4 The minimum length is 4 weeks and, on average, participants are away for 8–9 months. Many are away for a year or even 2 years.

5 Basically, a bona fide declaration from the placement host (company) abroad.

6 See <https://www.norden.org/en/information/new-nordic-food-manifesto>

at the vanguard of the New Nordic Cuisine had indeed spent extended periods of their practical training in restaurants abroad, most of them being away for six months or more. Furthermore, it showed that the New Nordic Cuisine, despite its focus on Nordic and homegrown ingredients, contained strong influences of culinary trends and developments originating from abroad that were not part of Danish culinary traditions and practices at the time, e.g. the French *terroir* principle, the (predominantly) Spanish concept of molecular gastronomy, the Italian slow food movement and others.

The second part involved a survey (a so-called tracer study) of 313 former apprentice chefs from Denmark's leading gastronomical school who had been abroad on placements in the period from 1995 to 2007. By limiting the scope to one school, it was possible to target the total population of participants, apart from persons whose whereabouts could not be established or who, via public registers, had declared their unwillingness to be contacted for surveys. The 313 former apprentices were sent a questionnaire and asked about their background, their experiences during their time abroad, their subsequent career trajectories, and their perceptions of the connection between the two. Nearly 40% completed the questionnaire, with a surprisingly even distribution for year of participation, so that the whole period (1995–2007) was represented. From the respondents to the survey, 12 were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews on the basis of a number of criteria based on sex, background and career path, year of placement, length of placement, target country, etc. To avoid "cherry-picking", the group of interviewees also included participants who had returned prematurely from their placement abroad due to various problems encountered or who had had negative experiences. In addition to interviewing participants, a small number of other actors were also interviewed (placement organisers and vocational teachers). For budgetary reasons, no actors from abroad (e.g. host companies) were interviewed, which could possibly have added exciting new perspectives.

This second part constituted the most substantial part of the study and arguably the most important as well. Whereas the first part demonstrated that the two phenomena were interlinked, the second explained how this happened by focusing on how participants, through their stay abroad, had developed competences related to vocational innovation and entrepreneurship.

4. Career trajectories and competence development

Even though the study was concerned with activities that, for some of the respondents, lay nearly 20 years back in time, it was still necessary to carry out some kind of crude baseline analysis to try and get an impression of who they were and where they came from before they went abroad. Therefore, both questionnaires and interviews also dwelled on their backgrounds. From the responses, it became quite clear that they differed from the average VET student in important ways. For one thing, they were generally older (70% being over 21 at the time of the placement, 19% being over 25), they had more advanced educational backgrounds (53% had qualifications from upper secondary education and training before they started training as chefs) and they all came with prior labour market experience (47% from the gastronomy sector). Perhaps most interestingly, nearly half (46%) had spent coherent periods of at least four weeks abroad prior to their placement, which is suggestive of more than just an ordinary holiday experience. Also, from the interviews, it clearly shone through that it was not necessarily those who had experienced problems in finding apprenticeships at home who went abroad with the PIU scheme (the original target group). For most, it was a search for adventure or excellence that had prompted the decision. It therefore makes little sense to compare them with "mainstream" learners in the sector, and

to execute a proper evaluation of learning outcomes and the importance of the experience for later career patterns, a more sophisticated baseline analysis of the participants, carried out before they went abroad, would have been preferable.

Of all the former participants who responded to the questionnaire, 8% replied that they now run their own enterprise and generate their main income from this. This is exactly double the percentage of enterprise owners in the total Danish population. Yet the hospitality sector is one where there are many small and medium-sized enterprises and a strong tradition for setting up one's own business, so it is to be expected that a larger share run their own enterprises in this field. On the other hand, it emerged from the qualitative interviews that many of the respondents have what has been called "new careers" (see Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999), where they had weaved in and out of different positions and occupations – as employees, business owners and students in higher education – in the course of their career trajectory so far. The questionnaire only asked about the participant's present occupation, which in hindsight was an unfortunate omission, as instances of entrepreneurship behaviour would undoubtedly have been more numerous if the full range of their experiences had been included and counted. However, entrepreneurship is not only about setting up businesses but also about displaying entrepreneurial behaviour within existing enterprises: 28% of the respondents were in managerial positions, which is a high number by any standards.

The participants value the importance of the stay abroad for their personal development very highly. In particular, when asked to rate their increase in competences necessary for entrepreneurship (independence and self-reliance, the willingness to take risks, the ability to handle new situations and surroundings, etc.), the stay was rated as having exercised a decisive influence. On a scale from 1–10, where 10 represent a maximum impact, over a third of the respondents gave a "10" as their estimate of the importance of the stay in developing these, and generally under 15% of the responses were situated between 1 to 5. These competences were undoubtedly already present before they went abroad, since the decision to up tent pegs and go and live in a completely foreign environment away from one's family and friends for an extended period of time is not one that is taken easily. But it is a fact that an overwhelming majority of the respondents stated that their personal development had been strengthened very considerably as a result of their mobility experience.

The picture is the same when the focus is shifted to innovation. Over 60% of the participants stated that they have used the inspiration from their stay abroad to introduce innovative developments within the culinary field or at their workplace. What this innovation actually consists of was explored in more depth in the qualitative interviews. As can be expected, some of it relates to the imitative introduction of new recipes, methods and ingredients that they had picked up from their colleagues abroad. However, what had the strongest impact were the very different attitudes to food and cooking which they experienced and the reflective application of these to a new context. Put differently: participants that had been to, e.g. Italy did not go back home and open an Italian restaurant but fused their new knowledge with existing traditions and ingredients to create something that was new, neither one nor the other. Especially those that went out early on reported the impressions made by the uncompromising attitudes to cooking and the quality of the raw materials used that they encountered in the top restaurants where they did their placements. Only the freshest and best ingredients are used, and the former participants revealed their astonishment when they discovered, e.g. that restaurants run their own gardens to ensure that their vegetables and fruits are as fresh as possible when they are put on the table. One of the interviewed participants stated: "I learnt that good cooking can be insultingly simple if only the ingredients are fresh and of the best quality" (a statement which says something about the level of Danish gastronomy in earlier days).

Also, the almost hysterical focus on every little detail in the preparation of food was a revelation to many, as was the strong reactions of head chefs and waiters if the work was not perceived as living up to their standards of quality. This was at the time considered very “un-Danish”, but a later participant drily noted about such an episode in the kitchen of a restaurant abroad that “now, this could just as well have happened in a Copenhagen restaurant”. This focus on the quality and freshness of the ingredients and the fastidious attention to detail are integral features of the New Nordic Cuisine.

5. Pedagogical implications

It is – as with any pedagogical activity – not possible to issue a guarantee for the outcome of a mobility. Some derive great benefit from the experience, whereas it leaves few traces on others. Certain conditions and interventions, however, stand out in the survey and interviews as conducive to a positive learning process.

However, the word “positive” in this context should not be interpreted as the equivalent of “pleasant” or “agreeable”. It appears very forcefully from both survey and interviews that the stay abroad was no pleasure cruise. Feelings of loneliness and isolation, of not being understood and appreciated, and clashes with colleagues due to differences in attitudes and values were integral parts of the experience. Over 50% thus describe their placement experience as “hard” or even “very hard”. It is the rule rather than the exception that participants spoke of having been millimetres from throwing the towel into the ring and giving it all up at some stage during their stay (usually within the first 4–6 weeks of the placement). Some did, but the majority soldiered on and came out in the end having learnt valuable lessons about coping with challenges. In fact, the hardships endured seem to lie at the very heart of the learning experience and be a condition for developing entrepreneurial skills like self-reliance and the ability to cope with insecurity and risk.

Another, equally important learning condition is the exposure to diversity. One vocational teacher mentioned that a distinguishing, common feature of those who had been abroad was that they had become more “argumentative” as a result – always ready to challenge established notions and wisdom, looking for other ways of seeing and doing things. This very clearly hangs together with their experience of cultural diversity in their field, having seen new and unusual ingredients or methods of preparation, and having been exposed to different perceptions as to what “proper” food and cooking is and, not least, to different attitudes as to how important good food is in the grand scheme of things. Again, this experience of diversity is often accompanied, at least initially, by conflicts and feelings of frustration, as different sets of values and attitudes clash in what can sometimes be a very hectic and stressful environment.

Pedagogically, this has the logical implication that it is wrong to wrap up the participants in cotton wool and try and shield them from all adversity, even though this may instinctively seem the right thing to do. Indeed, the “zone of proximal development” seems to lie in the grey area bordering on what we could somewhat facetiously call the “point of return”, i.e. the point where the participant has had enough and is seriously thinking of buying a ticket to return home before the stipulated end of their placement period. Nobody can live in that area for the duration of a long-term stay, but if participants have not at least ventured into it and spent some time there, precious possibilities for learning and personal development are seemingly not opened for exploitation and thus are lost. This may seem like walking on a tight-rope over an abyss, especially since participants are very different: what is well within

the comfort zone of one student is past the breaking point of another. But the project organisers told of ways of putting up safety nets and differentiating between participants to tune the experience to the right pitch.

A very direct way of doing this was in the allocation of placements. In principle, the students themselves were responsible for finding their placements, but over the years, the organisers (which in this case was the participants' vocational school) had built up a database of enterprises abroad where previous students had stayed and where the conditions were consequently known. This made it possible to reduce the chance of a premature return by matching the capacity of the participants with the demands of the placements, and enterprises that had previous experience with trainees from abroad were generally better at coping with the problems that arose. Prior to departure, each participant had individual talks with guidance counsellors where it was underlined that the stay would be no bed of roses and that crises were likely to occur during the stay due to cultural clashes combined with feelings of loneliness and isolation. The participants knew what they were letting themselves in for, and the most unrealistic expectations were shot down. Psychologically, the participants were therefore well prepared for the experience and knew that problems and hardships were part and parcel of it. During the stay, the participants were encouraged to keep in contact with the guidance counsellors and to use them to discuss problems or, if for nothing else, as "a shoulder to cry on". The organisers also, in many instances, visited the participants whilst they were on their placements. After the stay, participants were offered debriefing sessions to help them make sense of their experiences from both a personal and a career perspective (even though this was not systematically done).

Participants who were older, had previously been abroad for extended periods of time, or who came with previous work experience from the field generally stood better chances of "survival", but the main factor was undoubtedly the motivation of individual participants. Participants came with different motivations (e.g. looking for adventure or excellence within their field) or had a special affinity with the host country, but those who had a clear learning agenda generally fared better than others. Pedagogical preparation – i.e. discussing and agreeing learning objectives with the participant in a personal, long-term perspective (and not just doing what was necessary to have the stay recognised as part of their training course) – therefore seems an important part of the preparation process. Linguistic preparation, on the other hand, did not seem to play a decisive role in the long-term stays. Many had received language training beforehand and benefited from it, but several of the interviewed participants had arrived in the host country without having any proficiency in the language, and still managed to learn the language and have a profitable placement. Obviously, this would not work for short-term placements, however.

The findings of the study concerning these aspects thus contribute to the process of "professionalising" the use of long-term work placements abroad as a pedagogical tool in VET, i.e. expanding the focus from mainly practical arrangements (travel, insurance, accommodation, etc.) to also encompassing learning processes and interventions to optimise outcomes for participants. By constructing a pedagogical scaffolding around the practice (motivation, matching of participants with suitable placement opportunities, preparation, ongoing monitoring and support, etc.), organisers were also able to recruit beyond the very strongest and most competent individuals and include persons to whom a long-term period abroad was a more challenging proposition.

6. Impact of the study

Evaluations of the PIU mobility scheme have been made before, but this is the first – and so far the only – which argues convincingly about the activities' macro-economic impact. Thereby, it underpins the position of the PIU scheme, which still exists and is generally recognised as an integral part of Danish VET provision, sending approx. 1,500 VET students and apprentices abroad for long-term placements every year (that is, until COVID-19 struck).

The evaluative study was in itself a relatively restricted affair, carried out on a limited budget, but it benefitted from a number of external circumstances that greatly facilitated its implementation and results. At a technical level, the existence of so-called personal code numbers for Danish citizens made it relatively easy – once the necessary permit had been obtained from the authorities – to track and contact former participants, which saved a lot of time and effort. Much more important, however, was the fact that a unique situation prevailed, where a specific sectoral development (the expansion of Danish gastronomy, also in economic terms, through the emergence of the New Nordic Cuisine) could be directly linked in a causal relationship to the emergence of a distinct phenomenon (the launch and implementation of a mobility scheme in VET). In turn, this enabled us to zoom in on specific features of the learning process and its pedagogical implications and assess their relative importance. This would not have been feasible with other sectors, e.g. trade and commerce, which also sends out large numbers of VET students and apprentices every year through the PIU scheme, but where developments are more diffuse, with more variables coming into play, and causal relationships are consequently much more complex to establish.

7. Conclusions

Although the study was carried out in 2013–2014, it still holds relevant messages, also outside of a Danish context, where many Erasmus+ programme countries are now having their first experiences with long-term VET mobility on any significant scale due to the funding made available from the recently introduced ErasmusPro action.

The relevance is further exacerbated by the fact that – unfortunately – it is still one of the relatively few studies that look at the issue of the effects of mobility in a long-term perspective, particularly in a VET context. Adopting a long-term perspective makes it possible to form more convincing conclusions about effects and outcomes, and to identify factors that may not have been visible immediately after the completion of the activities, which is when many evaluations are undertaken. Such an approach therefore holds an important potential for expanding our knowledge base on the phenomenon, thereby enriching future activities. When it comes to pedagogical aspects, it has certain limitations, however.

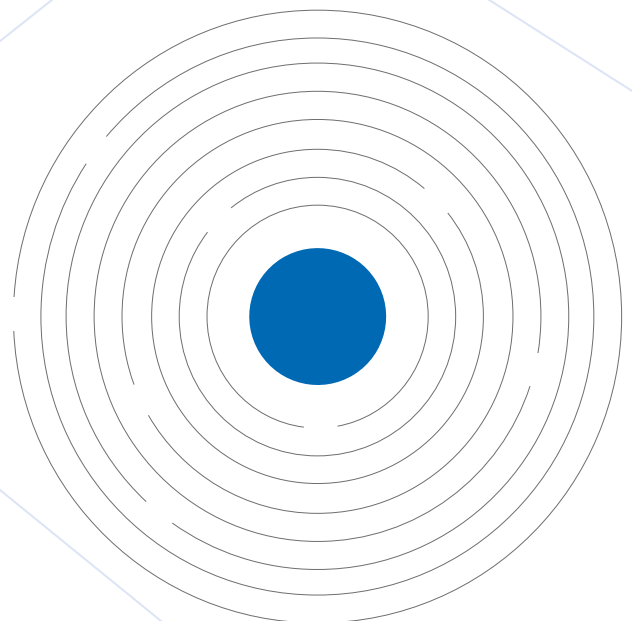
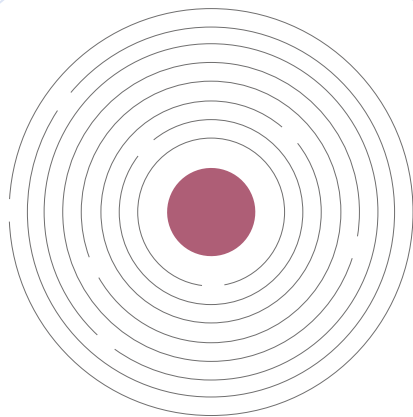
The study was carried out as a tracer study, which means that it draws a line in the sand at a certain moment in time and then looks back at a specific activity, trying to establish what has happened since. In this case, this meant 5–18 years after the placements abroad were undertaken, and much may have been forgotten in the meantime. This is what the circumstances dictated, but ideally it would have been carried out as a longitudinal study, where participants were contacted, e.g. every two years after

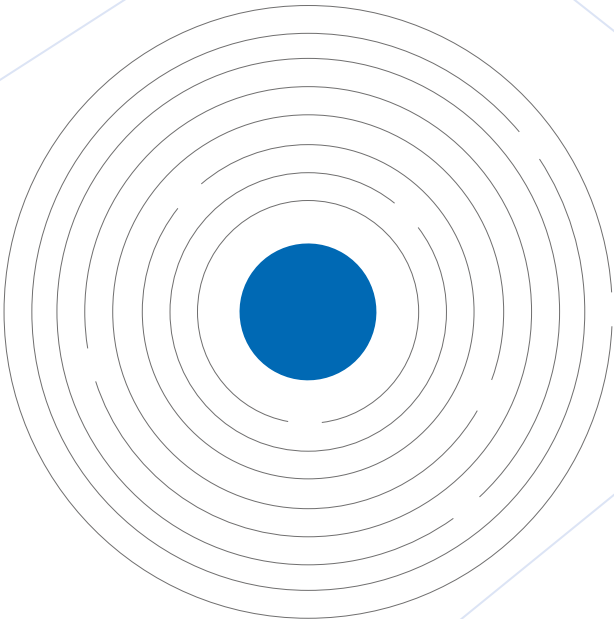
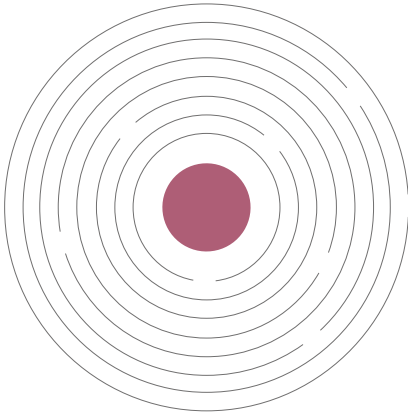
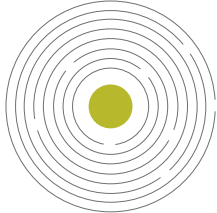
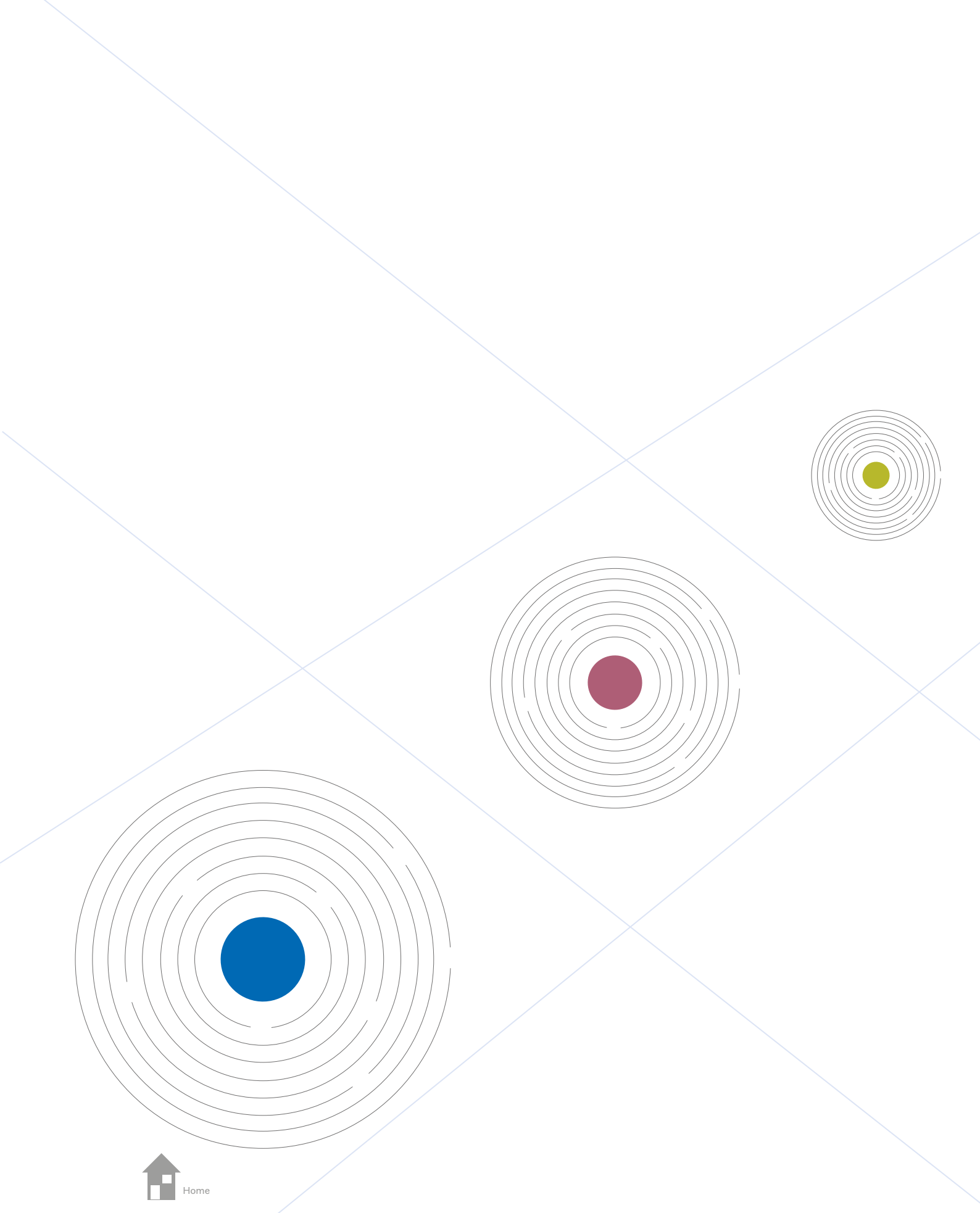
their homecoming so that we could have followed how they developed and what role the outcomes of their stay abroad played in that process more closely. In a perfect world, we would even have been able to interview participants before they went abroad so that we could have established a baseline, which would have enabled us to better assess individual developments and the efficacy of the pedagogical interventions.

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Impact of student mobility for placements on competencies, studies and employability

By **Melissa Bekaert, Jan Ceulemans, Petra Gillis, Frederik Van Crombrugge, Yves Beernaert, Magda Kirsch**

1. Rationale

An essential and unexplored dimension in higher education concerns the impact, role and relevance of placements or traineeships abroad, better known as student mobility for placements (SMP)¹, funded by European educational programmes and introduced in 2007.

Erasmus was the first mobility programme in education to be presented (1987) and is the one best known to the general public and the media. However, initially, it only funded studying at higher education institutions abroad. Until 2007, traineeships in higher education, local and international, were mainly organised in universities of applied sciences. The international placements were funded by the European education programme Leonardo da Vinci, by the placement provider or by the students themselves. However, in 2007, the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) introduced international traineeships in Erasmus, the higher education subprogramme of LLP (Decision No 1720/2006/EC of The European Parliament and of The Council, 2006). Having been introduced in 2007, it is now possible to assess the long-term impact of these traineeships. Epos, the National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme in Flanders (Belgium), has set up a research project on international placements based on a survey and interviews with students and commissioned Educonsult to assist in the research.

The main aims are to determine which competencies the students and recent graduates have acquired during their traineeship abroad and whether the placement impacted their further studies and employment. The full results of this study (Kirsch & Beernaert, 2021) were published in February 2021 by Epos. References to Erasmus mobilities in the press and social media are often limited to studying abroad, while traineeships abroad are

MELISSA BEKAERT

she graduated with a Master's degree in educational sciences in 2019. She is working at Epos vzw – the National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme in Flanders (Belgium) since 2020. As an executive officer of Flemish and European funding, Melissa works on the selection process of Erasmus+ applications and the implementation of the lifecycle of ongoing projects. She is also active in the research and publication field.

KEYWORDS

STUDENT MOBILITY,
COMPETENCIES, TRAINING,
HIGHER EDUCATION

¹ The term "traineeships" is used in more recent texts.

JAN CEULEMANS

holds a Master's degree in romance philology and in European and international law. He has been internationally co-operating in the field of education since 1992. From 2002 until 2009, he worked at the Foreign Policy Department of the government of Flanders. Since 2009 he is affiliated at Epos vzw, recently as a co-ordinator for higher education and a consultant for school education.

PETRA GILLIS

holds a Master's degree in economics. For 12 years she has worked as an accountancy lecturer, then as a full time international officer at one of the major higher education institutions in Flanders. In 2010 she became financial manager at Epos vzw, responsible for analysis and research, quality and data management, and communications with the Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture.

usually not mentioned in this context as making a significant contribution to enhancing students' employability.

It is essential to mention that this research took place while the COVID-19 crisis was hitting Flanders very badly (September to November 2020), resulting in an adjusted methodology. The pandemic probably also impacted both the employment prospects of recent graduates and the stay of mobile students in the spring of 2020. As no impact study had been carried out previously in Flanders on student mobility for placements in higher education, it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which this crisis impacted the results presented here. However, most students in the study took part in mobility activities before the COVID-19 crisis. It is important to note that the impact on competencies, further studies and employment is not measured but based on the respondents' and interviewees' self-assessments and the impact they perceived.

2. Methodology

The research consisted of three subdivisions:

- desktop research by Epos of the Erasmus – questionnaires filled in by returning participants,
- an online questionnaire, designed and disseminated by Epos and analysed by the researchers of Educonsult,
- twenty-two in-depth interviews with former SMP participants conducted by the same researchers (via phone, WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype and Teams).

Epos sent out invitations to fill out the online questionnaire to all participants who had previously agreed to be contacted for further feedback, resulting in 867 mails being sent to LLP participants (2007–2013) and 3,581 to Erasmus+ participants (2014–2020). Unfortunately, about 40% of all e-mail addresses were connected to the higher education institution at the time of the participant's placement and were no longer in use.

There were 869 respondents to the questionnaire (20% response rate), 739 of whom completed the questionnaire and were validated.

The questionnaire presented 60 questions subdivided into different groups:

- yes/no questions,
- questions where the respondents had to indicate to what extent they agree with several statements on the competencies acquired, their values and commitments, the impact on their studies and their employment,

- questions where the respondents could tick a maximum of three motives or criteria for their participation in the placements,
- questions where the respondents could scroll and indicate one item from a list of possibilities (type of placement, study field, institution, duration of the placement, gender, degree obtained and study or employment status),
- open questions where the respondents could indicate, amongst other things, the course, the level of the study programme, the year during which the placement took place and the host country,
- open questions where the respondents could comment to give their name, age and place of residence or remain anonymous. The quotes given in this paper will therefore sometimes be anonymous or provide a name and occasionally additional information,
- questions where the respondents could give a score to questionnaire statements, and
- a question asking if the respondents were willing to be interviewed for more in-depth feedback by the researchers of Educonsult.

Educonsult initially planned three focus groups as well as ten individual interviews. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the focus groups were replaced by 12 additional interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview guidelines and questions, drafted by Educonsult and approved by Epos, ensured the interviews were uniform.

Educonsult sent out 50 randomly selected invitations to respondents who had agreed to be interviewed. In addition, four respondents who had indicated by e-mail that they wanted to participate were added to the list. So that the interviewees could prepare themselves, Educonsult sent them the guidelines and questions in advance. The interviews were carried out via telephone, Skype, Zoom, Facebook Messenger, etc.

3. Characteristics of respondents and interviewees

The respondents' characteristics were compared with data made available by Epos for all participants on the Erasmus+ placements (2014–2020) to check the representativity of the sample. The majority of respondents were mobile under the Erasmus+ Programme (91%) and a limited number of respondents participated under the LLP. At the universities of applied sciences, the placements are generally embedded in the programme. This also explains why students from universities of applied sciences generally do shorter placements. Recent graduates who do a placement after their studies also do not have to take the planning and taking of exams at the university into account and are flexible when deciding on the duration of their stay.

FREDERIK VAN CROMBRUGGE holds a Bachelor's degree in information and communication technologies (ICT), and works as ICT co-ordinator for Epos vzw. Since 2007 he worked as a File Manager at the Belgian National Agency for the Lifelong Learning Programme, responsible for in-service training projects. Presently, he is an expert in using European ICT tools. He also assists with the analysis of data for research and publications.

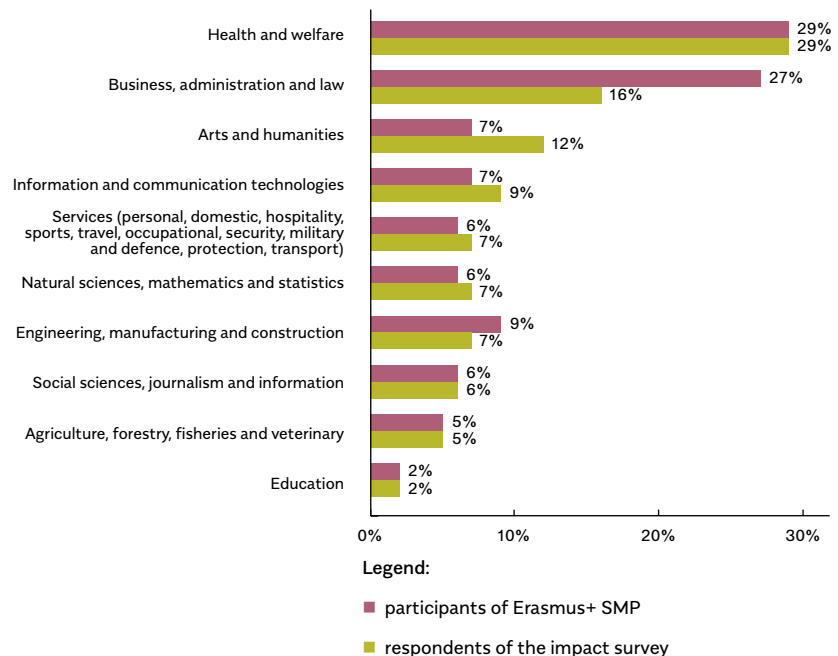
YVES BEERNAERT language teacher, teacher trainer and an inspector in the Congo and Belgium for 18 years. In 1991 he created EURASHE, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education. He worked for 12 years in several executive agencies of the European Commission and European organisations in education field. In 2001, he co-founded Educonsult. Since then, he is an independent EU education consultant implementing or evaluating European projects. Author and co-author of numerous country reports and international publications.

MAGDA KIRSCH

English teacher and deputy head at the Business School of the University College Leuven-Limburg for over 30 years. She was also responsible for the joint study programme and for the Erasmus since 1984. Between 2003 and 2013, worked as an external expert for the quality assurance unit of the university colleges in Flanders (VLHORA). In 2001 she co-founded the Educonsult. Author and co-author of numerous studies and research for the European Commission, including studies on European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and a large number of evaluations of professional development courses for STEM teachers in Europe.

For the Erasmus+, the participation of students from research universities rose to 29%. The fact that Master's programmes offered by universities of applied sciences have been transferred to research universities in addition to the rising popularity of placements at universities explains the rise.

Figure 1. Study fields of the respondents and the SMP Erasmus+ participants



$N_{\text{impact study respondents}} = 739$; $N_{\text{SMP Erasmus+ participants}} = 8,405$

Some facts and figures about the respondents:

- Most respondents were aged between 20 and 30 (90%) and 10% were older than 30.
- 84% did their placement during their studies, while 16% were recent graduates and did it after their studies.
- 85% of the recent graduates came from research universities and only 15% from universities of applied sciences².
- Similarly to the cohorts of participants under Erasmus+, 36% of respondents were men, 63% women and 1% other.
- For 82% of the students, their placement was embedded in the curriculum. Most respondents (68%) did a 3- or 4-month

2 For more on higher education in Flanders, see <https://www.studyinlanders.be/higher-education-in-flanders>

placement while 21% did a more extended placement, but for 12%, the placement was shorter than three months³.

- For 85%, it was their first placement abroad. For 11%, it was their second and for 2%, it was their third traineeship abroad. 1% did more than three placements (not necessarily SMP traineeships).
- 87% of the respondents received a grant, 5% did not and the others (8%) did not remember.
- The most popular destinations were neighbouring countries: the Netherlands (15%), the United Kingdom (14%), France (11%) and Germany (9%). The only exception is Spain (11%).
- Nearly one-third (29%) of the respondents studied health and welfare, followed by business, administration and law (16%) and arts and humanities (12%). Only 2% studied in the field of education.
- Recent graduates are overrepresented in the respondents' sample (12% vs 5% of actual participants), as are respondents from research universities. Indeed, 45% of the respondents were university students or graduates compared to 29% of participants on the Erasmus+ Programme. Taking into account these exceptions, the sample is otherwise fairly representative.
- 84% of participants were living in Belgium, 9% in the country where they did their placement and 7% in another country.
- 73% of the respondents were working, 20% were studying and 8% (of which 5% were job-seekers) were unemployed at the moment of the survey.

Some facts and figures about the respondents who gave an interview:

- Twenty-two respondents were interviewed.
- One did a placement in 2010, while the others were mobile under the Erasmus+ (since 2014). Three participated during the academic year 2019–2020 and two during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Four interviewees came from health and welfare, three from business and law, one from education, three from social sciences, four from engineering, two from natural sciences, one from information and communication technologies (ICT), three from arts and humanities and one from veterinary studies.
- Eleven interviewees were women and eleven were men.
- One of them was a mature student⁴ who made a career switch.
- Twelve came from universities of applied sciences and ten from research universities. Two interviewees progressed from a university of applied sciences to a research university and a PhD.
- Six interviewees did their placement after graduating, of whom only one graduated from a university of applied sciences.
- Four interviewees were self-employed.
- Six interviewees were abroad at the time of the interview: three for their PhD or residency, the others were working there.

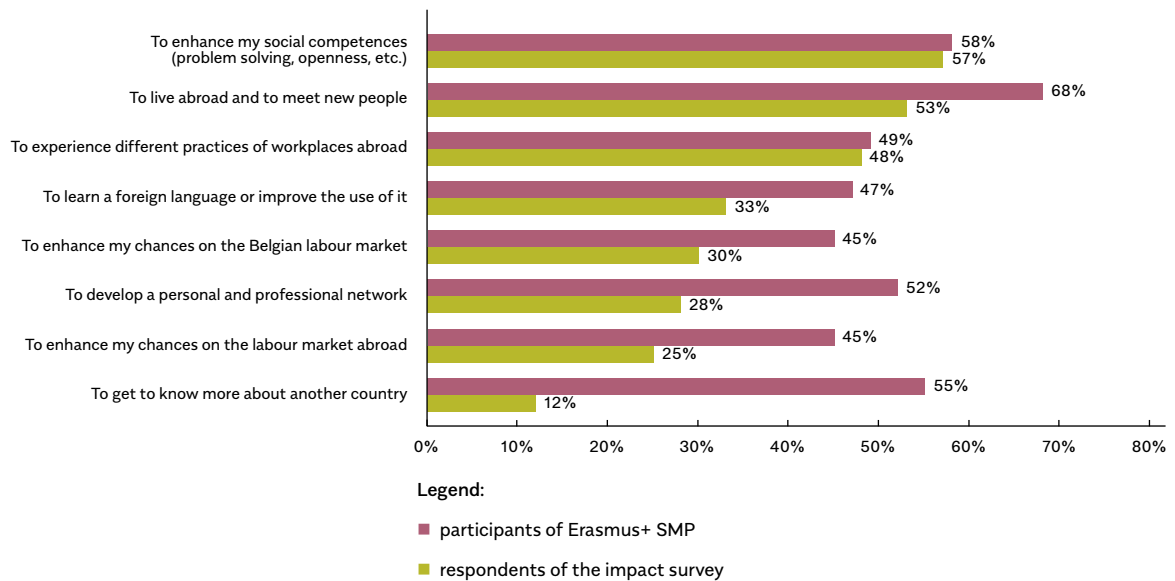
³ For 2%, the mobility was shorter due to COVID-19.

⁴ Mature students are persons who begin their studies at a university or a college a number of years after leaving school or start studying again because they have chosen a new career, so they are older than most of the people they are studying with. In this case, it was someone who already had a Master's degree and chose a totally new career after 25 years in various management positions.

4. Motivation for SMP and criteria for the traineeship

The respondents to the survey could tick three reasons that motivated them to do their placement abroad. They could also give three other reasons and three criteria for choosing a particular placement.

Figure 2. Distribution of answers to the question: “What was your general motivation to choose for a work placement abroad (regardless of the specific company or country)?”



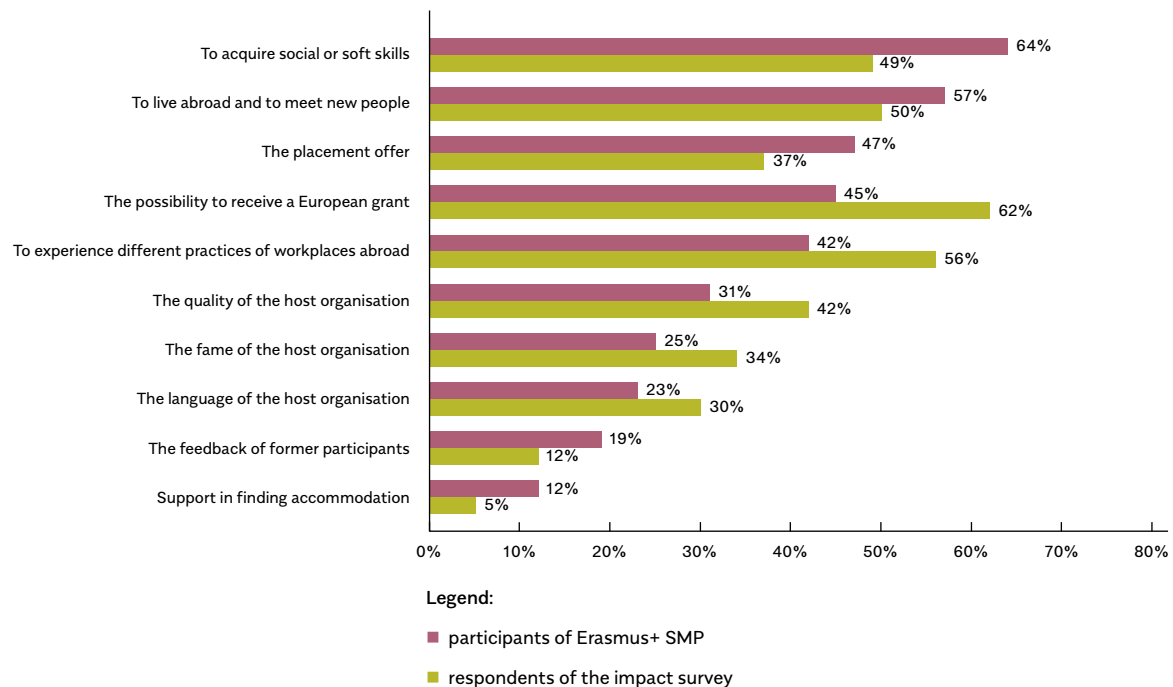
Respondents could choose more than one answer.

The responses to the survey show that:

- 57% wanted to enhance their social skills.
- 53% wanted to live abroad and to get to know new people.
- 48% wanted to experience different practices in the workplace.
- Only 12% participated to get to know more about another country.
- Acquiring or improving a foreign language has gradually become a less important motive over the last years. However, there are huge differences for some items when the data are analysed by host country.
- Acquiring social skills (58%) and experiencing different practices in the workplace (49%) have similar scores in both the participants' report and the more recent survey.
- The statement “to get to know more about another country” differs significantly from the participants' report. This was a motive for 55% of the returning participants but for only 12% of the respondents to the impact survey. Other differences are noticeable for “setting up a network” and “learning or improving a foreign language”.
- As far as other reasons for participating in the mobility are concerned, receiving a European grant was important for 53% of the respondents in the impact survey.

→ The duration of the placement was important for 47% of returning participants and 41% of the respondents to the impact survey.

Figure 3. Differences in motives and criteria of students or graduates from professional and academic study programmes



$N_{\text{students/graduates from professional study programme}} = 390$; $N_{\text{students/graduates from academic study programme}} = 330$

Respondents could choose more than one answer.

Approximately 10% found support in finding accommodation important. In a comment section, 15% of these respondents indicated "other reasons" such as having relatives or friends in the host country, the placement being recommended by a professor, friend or relative, or a positive experience of studying there. As far as the criteria for the placement's selection were concerned, 42% of the respondents referred to the placement offer and 43% to the city and its culture. For 28%, the fame of the host organisation was a decisive criterion and, for 26%, the language spoken at the host organisation.

The collaboration between the home institution and the organisation offering the placement was a criterion for 19% of the respondents. The mentoring during the placement as well as the feedback of former participants was important for 15% of the respondents. 12% thought that being able to socialise was important (this was more important for men than for women). 7% indicated other criteria. These were often identical to the other reasons given earlier. In the comments section, several respondents indicated that they were not able to impose criteria as they had to take what they could get.

The motivations and criteria of the interviewees are largely in line with the motives and criteria given in the survey. Although acquiring social skills was the motive mentioned most in the impact survey, it was not mentioned so often during the interviews: the majority of the interviewees wanted a placement abroad because it had been recommended by professors, colleagues or relatives. Also, living abroad and getting to know new people and a previous positive experience with studying abroad (six of them had already studied abroad) were reasons for participating in the placement. The fame of the host organisation was a reason given by several interviewees.

It should be pointed out that most participants from professional programmes (at universities of applied sciences) are younger, as only Bachelor programmes are offered at the universities of applied sciences. There are hardly any Bachelor students of academic programmes (at universities) who participate in placements abroad. Acquiring social skills, living abroad and meeting new people are much more important for students on professional programmes than for those on academic programmes⁵. Also, the placement offer as well as feedback from former participants and support in finding accommodation are more important for them than for students or recent graduates from academic programmes.

Conversely, the possibility of getting a European grant as well as the fame and the language of the host organisation are mentioned more often by students and recent graduates from academic programmes. The group for whom receiving a European grant is extremely important are recent graduates who do a placement after their studies. Indeed, no less than 82% of recent graduates thought the European grant was a decisive reason for participating in the mobility compared to only 49% of the students who did a placement during their studies.

5. Problems during the traineeship

Although the traineeships went very smoothly overall, the research nevertheless identified some recurrent problems. The most common problem was a too vague learning agreement. This problem was mentioned in both the open section of the questionnaire as well as during the interviews. This sometimes resulted in assignments being too easy or, in some rare cases, too difficult. The student might also have had to be creative and propose assignments.

Some sending organisations intervened immediately, but others waited too long or did nothing to correct it. Although this regards a small minority, the few trainees concerned were deeply disappointed with their placement, but they did indicate that their efforts to solve this problem themselves increased their problem-solving abilities and the eventual quality of their placement.

Another problem for some students were difficulties with accommodation. One interviewee was even a victim of accommodation fraud. Others had booked accommodation that did not meet the minimum requirements.

The lack of local language knowledge on the trainees' part or on the part of the people they were working with also caused some minor incidents. Especially students in social, medical or paramedical studies realised they should be able to interact directly with local people, colleagues or patients.

⁵ Some programmes are offered at both a professional and an academic level (e.g. marketing), which means it is not always possible to find out whether the respondents attended a professional or an academic programme.

A lack of information was another issue. In particular, respondents and interviewees who did a placement as recent graduates complained that their home institution had not given enough detailed and concrete information about placements for recent graduates.

Eighteen respondents to the impact survey and two interviewees explicitly mentioned that they did their traineeship during the COVID-19 pandemic. For all of them, the traineeship was embedded in the curriculum. Twelve had to return prematurely. The others could stay in the host country but often had to turn to teleworking, which made it more difficult to get to know the culture of the country and work placement.

A few young respondents and two interviewees complained about loneliness, especially at the beginning of their stay. Unlike students who study abroad and are immediately surrounded by peers in higher education institutions, they sometimes had to work alone or with people who were a lot older, and they thus had fewer opportunities to socialise with other young people in the evening or during weekends.

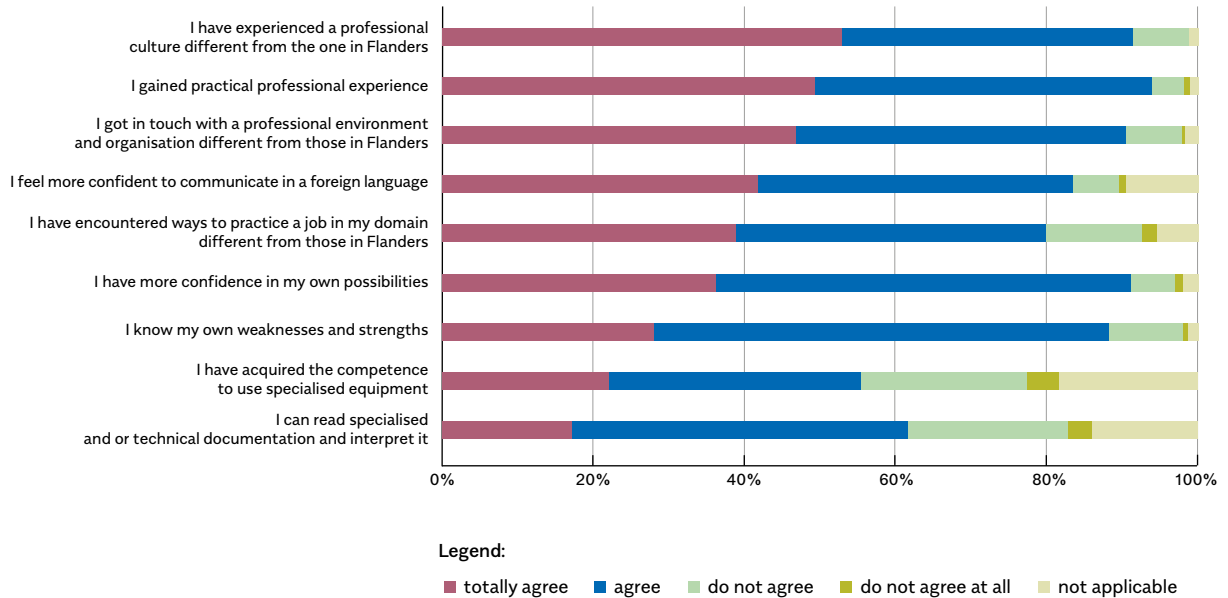
Finally, a few students complained that their home institution did not convert their score in the final assessment of their placement correctly or lowered the marks. This often concerned students who had received a letter that had to be converted to a figure in Flanders.

6. Competencies acquired

Nearly all interviewees and many respondents pointed out that they became more self-reliant, resilient and independent during their mobility and that their problem-solving capacity and creativity increased. 90% have become more confident about their own possibilities, and 88% know their own weaknesses and strengths better. Many even emphasised that this is probably the most significant added value of this international mobility. 83% became more confident in communicating in a foreign language. This percentage varies widely over the different host countries, however. Most of the respondents agreed that they acquired practical professional competencies (94%). Majority also experienced a professional culture (92%), environment and organisation (90%) that differs from Flanders.

80% experienced different ways to do their job. They also acquired specific technical competencies to use specialised equipment (55%) and to read specialised or technical documentation and interpret it (62%). For the latter two, 18% and 14% respectively indicated that this was not applicable.

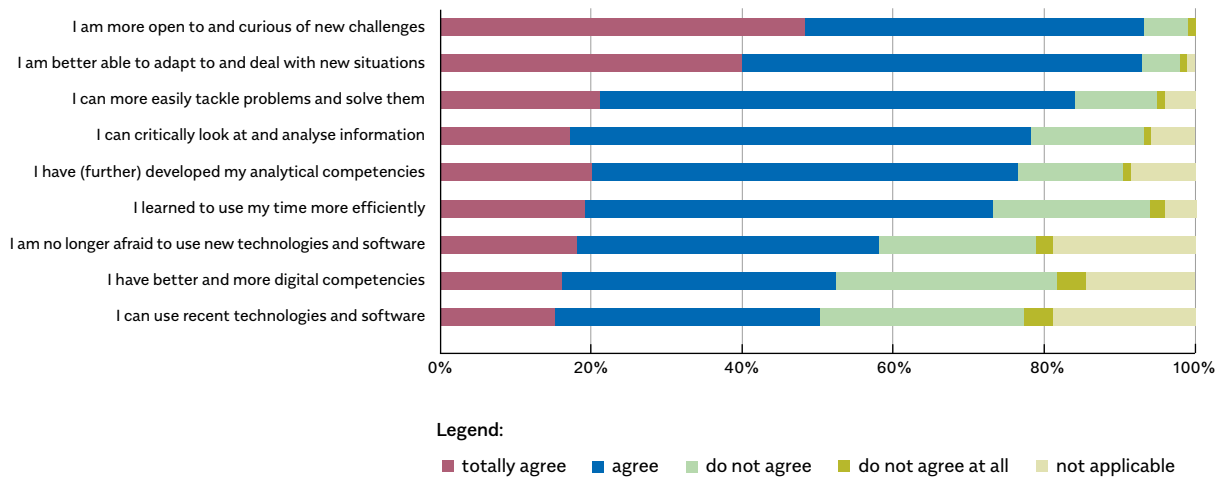
Figure 4. Practical competencies acquired during the placement



The fact that the traineeship had a very positive impact on their practical competencies was also confirmed during the interviews and in the open response sections.

In addition to the impact on professional skills, the mobility mainly impacted soft skills such as communication skills, team competencies and intercultural and transferable skills. The impact of a work placement abroad is in line with *A new skills agenda for Europe* (European Commission, 2016), which stresses that, besides looking for the right job-specific skills, employers are increasingly demanding transferable skills such as the ability to work in a team, creative thinking and problem-solving.

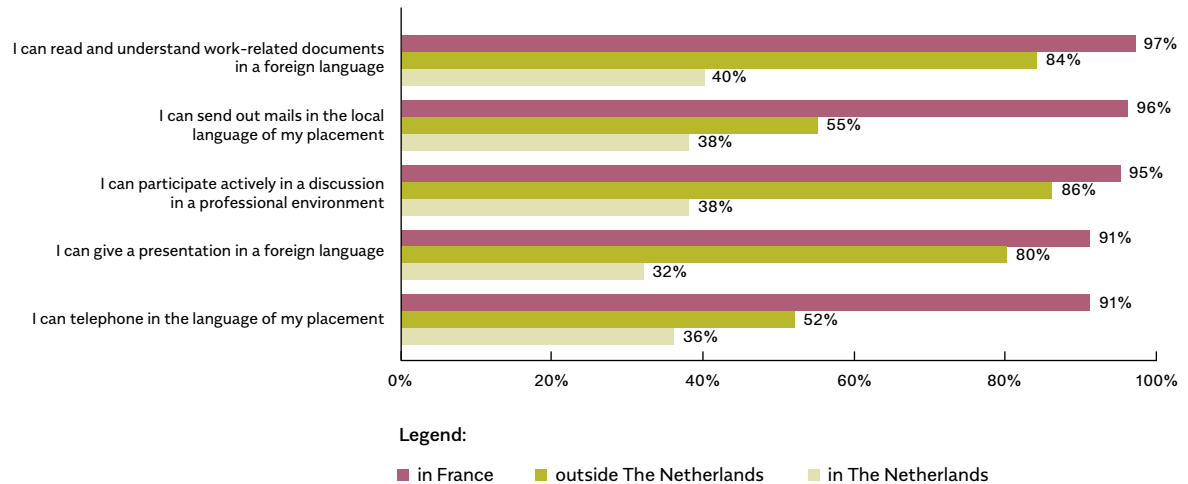
Since their traineeship, 91% of respondents can clearly express themselves in an intercultural environment, 83% can make contact with others easily, and 82% have improved their communication in a professional environment (orally and in writing). Moreover, 78% can now easily establish a personal network and 76% a professional one.

Figure 5. Impact on 21st-century competencies

93% are more open to and curious about new challenges and are better able to adapt to and deal with new situations. 84% can more easily tackle problems and solve them. The respondents also stated that they can critically look at and analyse information (78%), and have further developed their analytical competencies (77%). They have also improved their time management – 73% say they have learnt to use their time more efficiently.

The traineeship abroad has had the least, but still quite important, impact on digital competencies: 58% of respondents said that new technologies no longer put them off, while 53% have more and better digital skills, and half can use recent technologies or software. It is surprising that almost one in five of the respondents indicated that the use of recent technologies and software is not applicable, given the importance of digital skills in *A new skills agenda for Europe*. It was especially engineering (89%) and ICT (87%) students who acquired the most digital competencies.

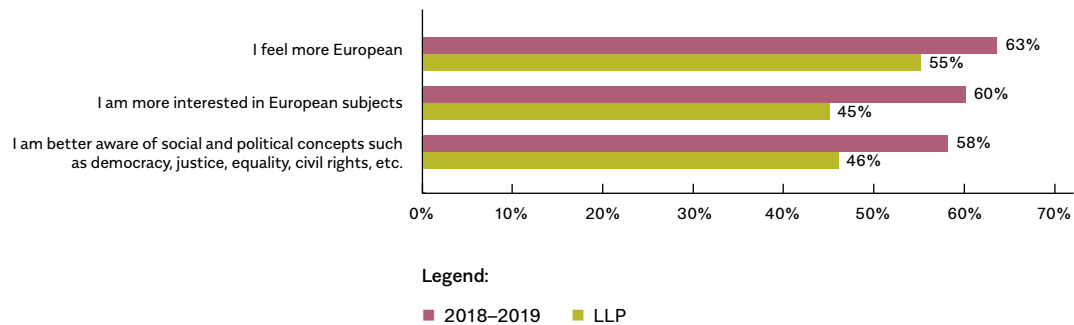
Figure 6. Opinions on activities mastered in a foreign language by country of placement



80% of all respondents can participate actively in a discussion in a professional environment in a foreign language, 79% can read and understand work-related documents in a foreign language and 74% can give a presentation in a foreign language. Only 57% can send out e-mails in the local language of the placement and even less (54%) can telephone in the language of their placement.

It should be noted that 15% of the respondents went to the Netherlands, a country that shares a common language (Dutch) with Flanders. It is therefore not surprising that the biggest differences in impact are noticed when the host country is added. 97% of the respondents who went to France can read work-related documents in a foreign language, compared to 84% of those who went for a traineeship outside the Netherlands or France. 96% of those who went to France can send out e-mails in French, compared to 55% of those who went to any other country outside France or the Netherlands. Telephoning in the local language has been mastered by 91% of those who went to France versus 52% of the respondents who went to any country outside the Netherlands and France.

95% of those who went to France can also participate actively in a professional discussion and 91% can give a presentation in a foreign language. These results relate to the initial motivation to participate in a work placement abroad: 78% of those who went to France indicate that learning a foreign language was their main motivation compared to only 2% of those who went to the Netherlands.

Figure 7. Interest in and commitment to European values by the period of placement

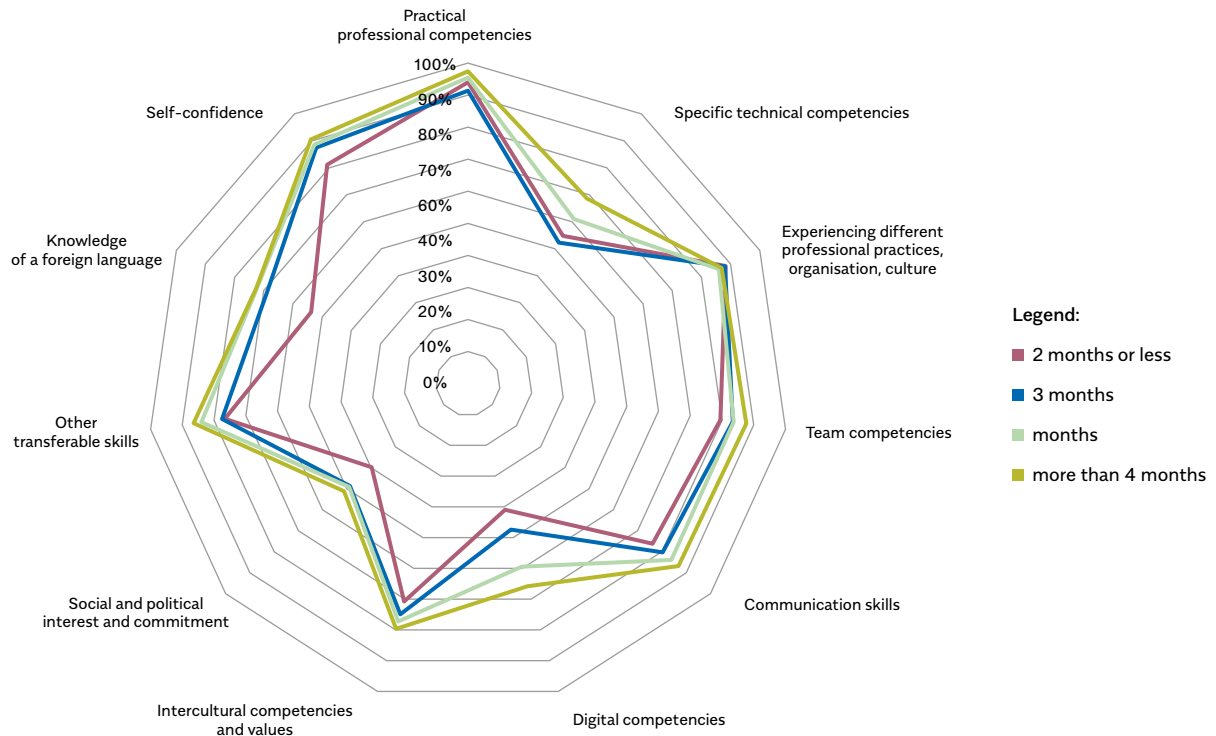
One of the items surveyed was the impact of the traineeship on respondents' interest in and commitment to political and social issues as well as on their European identity and values. The traineeship has fuelled interest in what is happening in the world among two-thirds of respondents. Only 8% gave the response "not applicable", indicating a lack of interest or involvement. The same applies to other statements contained in this part of the survey.

61% of respondents, an encouraging figure, feel more European after the traineeship and 59% are also more interested in European topics. Thanks to the placement, many respondents (40%) are more active in the social life of their community, and 19% are more active in the political life of their community. It is remarkable that 56% of the self-employed are willing to engage in the social life of their community.

Figure 7 also shows that the interest in European topics and values have considerably increased over the years. When comparing respondents who participated in the LLP with those who were mobile in the academic year 2018-2019, it is clear that the respondents feel more European.

The longer the traineeship, the more important the impact is. When the different items are summarised according to the competencies or values concerned, digital skills, knowledge of a foreign language and interest and commitment to European values are clearly impacted by the duration of the placement.

Figure 8. Impact on competencies, values and attitudes by placement duration



Recent graduates who did their placement after their studies experienced a more significant impact than those who did their traineeship during their studies: the former usually stayed abroad for a more extended period up to twelve months. 85% of the respondents who did a traineeship for recent graduates were university graduates.

7. Quality and appreciation of the placement

It is clear that the respondents were very positive about their placement. When asked whether they would recommend a placement abroad, an average of 8.76 was received on a scale of 1–10 and the Net Promoter Score (NPS) was 54⁶.

When asked whether they have good memories of the placement, an average score of 8.93 was received. Regarding respondents who did their placement as recent graduates, the NPS for recommending the placement was extremely high (74) and the average score received was 9.22. Having good memories on the placement also scored very high with 8.97 on average. Once again,

6 The Net Promoter Score is an index ranging from -100 to 100 that measures the willingness of customers to recommend a company's products or services to others. See <https://www.medallia.com/net-promoter-score>

those who stayed abroad longest gave the highest scores (9.24). Most students (89%) considered the assignments given relevant for their further studies. In an open response section, this relevance was clarified as to whether it was because the assignments were in line with their studies, because they acquired competencies they did not have before, or because they contributed to a lasting product or process that is still being used in the organisation where they did their placement. 97% of the students from the study field of business and management stated that the assignments were relevant for their studies.

Being treated as equals by other professionals and being allowed to really contribute to the activities and the projects in the host organisation contributed significantly to increasing the trainees' confidence and making them more assertive. Those who thought the placement was not relevant for their studies explained this by stating that they had already graduated, that the placement was not in line with their studies, that they did not acquire any competencies, or that the placement was either too easy or too difficult.

8. Contact after the traineeship

After the SMP, respondents still regularly contact (26% often, 32% sometimes) people they met during their foreign traineeship such as other students, their host family or colleagues from the workplace. Social media is crucial for maintaining these bonds. Contacts with people from their professional environment are much less frequent (12% often, 22% sometimes and 35% never). Some see the contacts they have established as an important added value of the placement. The longer and the more recent the placement, the more frequent the contacts still are.

Of the people interviewed, most are still in touch with former colleagues, both professionally and personally, even when the traineeship took place several years ago. Although 65% of respondents rarely or have never had contact with the host organisation since the placement ended, 81% still think that they could easily contact it if they found it would be valuable or useful for their (next) job.

9. Impact on study results

The placement was embedded in the curriculum in the case of 82% of the respondents. 97% of those did the placement during their studies. 82% of the respondents indicated that the traineeship was fully recognised and 1% that it was partially recognised. Only 1% stated that the placement was not recognised. The others could not remember.

Almost all students (98%) also obtained their final higher education diploma, but 2% (12 students) stopped prematurely. Altogether, no less than 26% of the respondents changed the course of their studies after their traineeship. Sometimes, the lack of quality of the traineeship led to it not being recognised as part of their higher education studies and the trainees had to do a new traineeship in Flanders.

74% of the respondents stated that the traineeships had a positive effect on their study results. This percentage was lower for the self-employed (58%). Taking the "not applicable" answers out of the calculations, 88% of the respondents indicated that the placement had a positive impact on their study results. Two interviewees progressed from doing a professional Bachelor's degree to do a Master's and

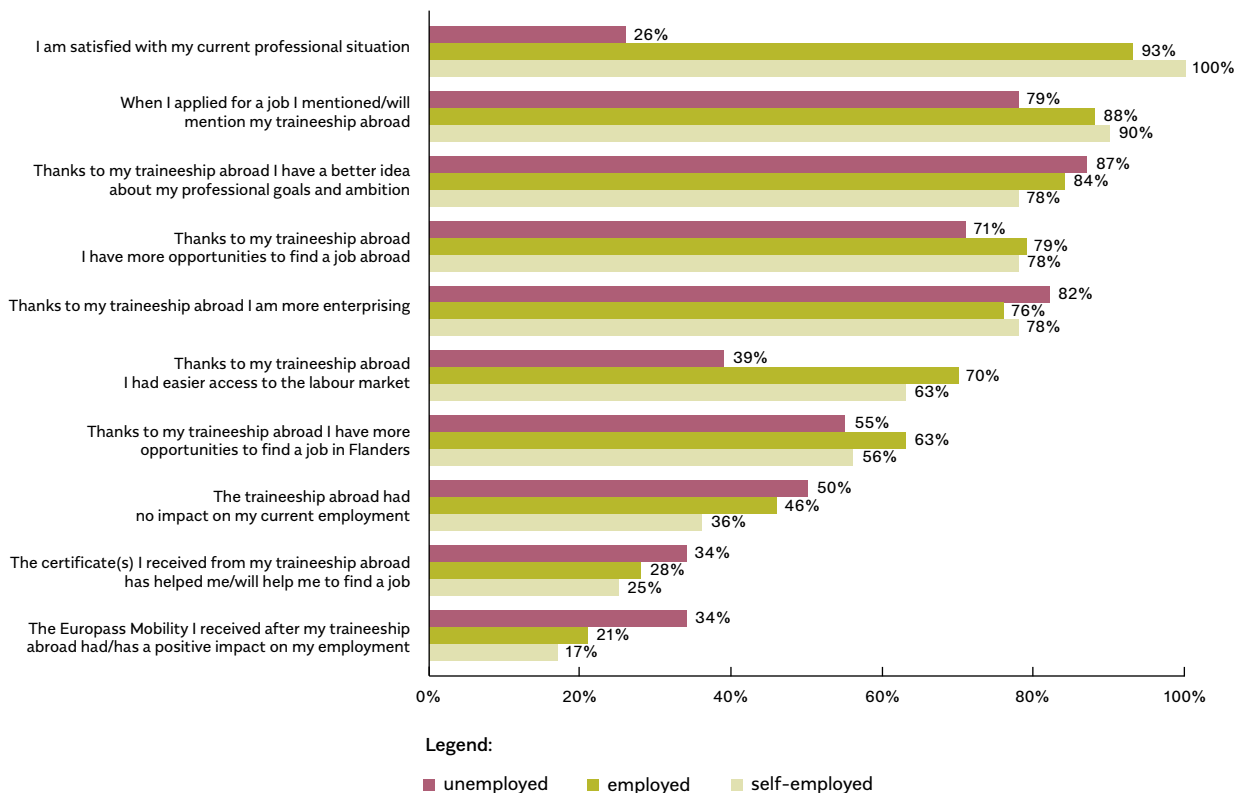
even to a Doctoral degree. 25% of respondents who did a professional Bachelor’s degree (at a university of applied sciences) during their traineeship are now studying for or have obtained an academic title at a research university. 35% of the students who changed their study programme (either moving to a different study field or moving from professional to academic studies) stated that they decided to continue studying thanks to the traineeship. The self-confidence that they gained during the traineeship helped them make this decision.

Several PhD students pointed out during the interviews that their placement or internship at a renowned foreign institution or research institute contributed to their doing a PhD or being accepted for a residency.

10. Impact on employability

20% of the respondents were students when filling out the questionnaire. Of the 80% who were graduates, 91% were working and 9% were not working at the moment of the survey. Of the 56 unemployed respondents, 38 were job-seeking and 18 were not looking for a job due to COVID-19, travelling, being in anticipation of a new job or being on a study programme or training course.

Figure 9. Impact on employability according to employment status



The survey and interviews took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, making it a lot more difficult for graduates to find work after their placement abroad. However, nearly two-thirds (65%) of the graduate respondents pointed out that the traineeship abroad had improved their employability.

In the quantitative data and the comments, the respondents indicated that the traineeship abroad mainly impacted their employment opportunities abroad (76%) and, to a lesser extent, in Flanders (62%). 85% of the respondents are also more open to a job abroad.

84% of the respondents have a better idea of their professional goals and ambition, and just as many are content and happy with their present employment situation. 75% of them have become more entrepreneurial thanks to the traineeship. Nearly as many (74%) use the knowledge and skills they gained during their foreign placement in their present job. 54% stated that their current job is in line with the activities they did during their traineeship. The more recent their traineeship, the higher the percentage. Graduates do not consider the certificate(s) received (31%) or the Europass Mobility (20%) important when finding a job. Only 13% think that the traineeship has/will have an impact on their salary. Sometimes the traineeship has led the graduates to work in a different sector or helped them to know exactly what kind of job they want to do.

It is not surprising that important differences can be seen when comparing the data according to the status of employment. All the self-employed are satisfied with their current professional situation compared to only 26% of the job-seekers. Although most (86%) former participants told their prospective employer about their traineeship when applying for a job, that percentage is lower for unemployed job seekers (79%). There are also considerable differences in terms of the assessment of labour market opportunities.

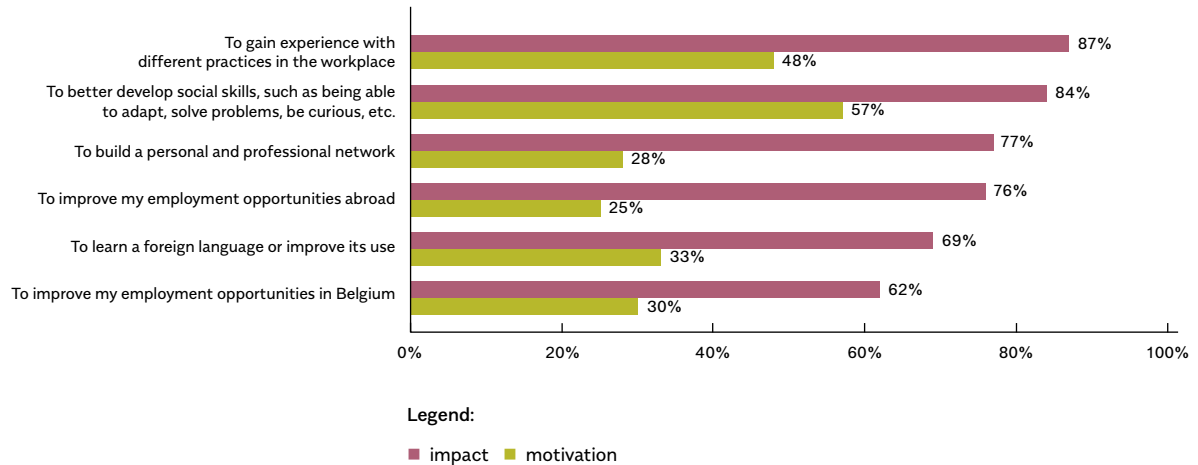
Only 39% of job-seekers who are unemployed believe that they have easier access to the labour market thanks to the traineeship abroad, while this is the case for 68% of employees and 63% of the self-employed. 63% of employees believe that it is easier for them to find a job in Flanders thanks to the placement compared to 55% of the self-employed and 56% of the unemployed.

34% of the unemployed hope that the Europass Mobility will have a positive impact on their employability, whereas only 21% of the employed and 17% of the self-employed think it actually helped them.

11. Impact compared to expectations

When the perceived impact is compared to the expectations and motivation of the respondents, in general, all expectations have been fulfilled.

Figure 10. Impact compared to the motivation of the respondents



87% stated that they gained experience of different practices in the workplace. 84% of all respondents also developed their social skills, which was an expectation for 57% of them. More than three-quarters of the respondents think that their employment opportunities abroad have improved (76%) and that they have been able to improve their personal and professional network (77%), although this was a motivation for only 25% and 28% of respondents, respectively.

Concerning acquiring or improving a foreign language, 69% of all respondents stated that this is the case compared to 33% who were motivated to go abroad for this reason. It is especially those who were motivated to go abroad in order to learn a foreign language who think that they have improved their foreign language skills. Thus, 95% of the respondents who went to France have improved the use of a foreign language (all aspects of its use) compared to 78% who went to France for this reason.

Fewer respondents (62%) think that their employment opportunities have improved in Belgium, although 30% thought that this would be the case.

12. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has shown the positive impact of going abroad for a placement on higher education students or recent graduates: it broadens their horizons and has an impact on their professional competencies and skills as well as on their social and cultural competencies and on their self-confidence.

Having benefited from a placement abroad enriches their CV and is a once in a lifetime opportunity with long-lasting effects on their employability and on their personal development. Participants have also increased their interest in European and international topics, and embraced European citizenship and values.

Some issues were raised by a small group of respondents and interviewees, e.g. some higher education institutions pay much more attention to the promotion of studying abroad compared to placements abroad. Particularly in the case of traineeships for recent graduates, little information appears to be available to those interested in doing a placement once they have graduated. For these graduates in particular, obtaining a European grant is a decisive factor to be able to participate in SMP.

It is therefore recommended that higher education institutions provide more detailed information about traineeships not only for students but also for recent graduates and get them in touch with specialised or international organisations.

The sending institutions must ensure that the learning agreement for the students whose traineeship is embedded in the curriculum is detailed enough. The assignments must be carefully agreed upon to avoid doubts about the student's level and the competencies to be acquired. They should also see to it that a mentor is on-site to whom the student can turn if he or she has any questions or problems. A clear roadmap should be drawn up in case difficulties arise. The students must know who to contact in case of problems. The institutions must foresee how they can respond as quickly as possible to issues of all kinds. It would also be useful for the home institutions, together with their partners, to draw up lists of reliable accommodation addresses to prevent students from becoming victims of accommodation fraud. University accommodation facilities can help too.

The Europass Mobility certificate has almost no impact on the employability of the graduates. Employers are more likely to associate this Europass Mobility with VET (at secondary school level). Therefore, the European Commission is invited to create a special European placement label that includes the term Erasmus+ traineeship or placement associated with higher education.

Younger students (in particular) feel lonely during their traineeship abroad. Unlike students studying abroad, they often do not have peers or colleagues of their age with whom to socialise. Therefore, it would be good for institutions to provide buddies or host families where students can go for a weekend or whom they can talk to when they have problems or feel lonely. Students who do a placement can also stay in university accommodation, which would facilitate contact with other students. While abroad, trainees can contact Erasmus Student Network – the student organisation in the host country. The activities of this organisation can help them build social contacts and make them feel less lonely.

As shown in this research paper, the impact of the placement increases with its duration. If possible, placements should therefore last for at least three months to increase the impact on competencies, studies and employment opportunities.

As an overall conclusion, most participants highly appreciated the traineeship. It was a unique experience that has enriched their personal and professional lives and expanded their horizons beyond their expectations.



They have gained new knowledge and competencies that certainly increase their employment opportunities in the labour market. Most have built networks that will be of considerable use in their professional careers and personal lives.

Thanks to the traineeship or placement, most students consider themselves a European citizen and a citizen of the world. They want to contribute to society's development in their own country, in Europe and even internationally. Over recent years, more and more respondents have embraced these European values.

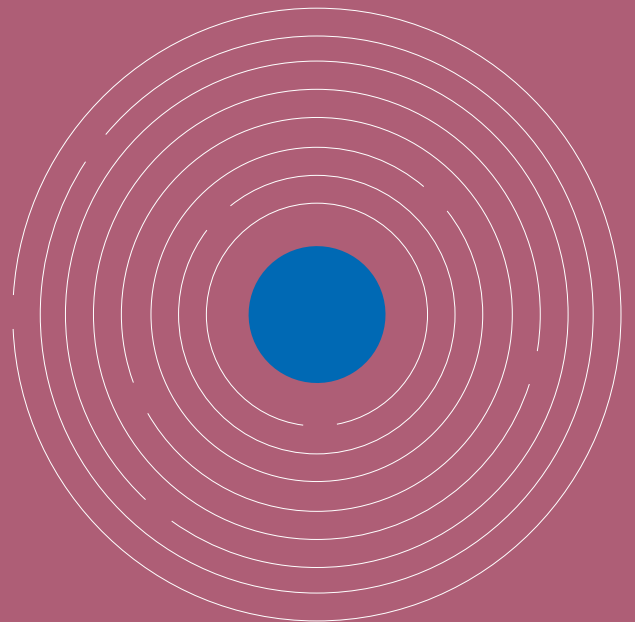
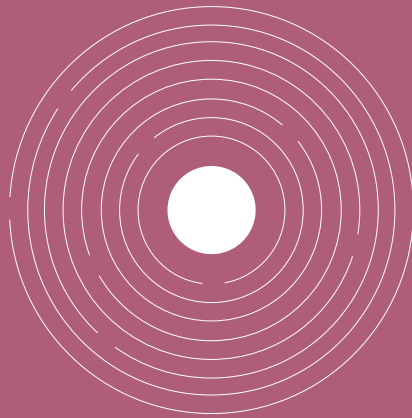
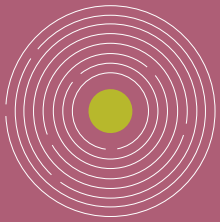
Erasmus influencers can make the Erasmus+ traineeships more attractive and better known. Several interviewees expressed their willingness to take on that role. The Commission is finally advised to set up more research to investigate the impact of Erasmus+ traineeships on further studies. Based on the results of this study, Epos can prove that the aim of European educational programmes such as Erasmus+ has been clearly achieved.

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Mobility experience in the pandemic



Home

The COVID-19 pandemic and international students: consequences for researchers, stakeholders and policymakers in the mobility field

By David Cairns, Thais França, Daniel Malet Calvo, Leonardo Francisco de Azevedo

1. Introduction

Since the early months of 2020, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on societies, transforming social, economic and political life throughout the European Union. This resulted in dramatic change in a central aspect of life for many Europeans: the freedom to circulate between countries for non-essential purposes, including tertiary education. This loss has created problems for EU citizens and others from third-party countries, who have found themselves cut off from essential support or the means to return home in a safe and timely manner. In this chapter, we take a look at this situation, with our research questions considering some of the most prominent impacts of the pandemic on internationalised learning for both intra-EU exchange students and extra-EU educational migrants. To illustrate the emerging challenges, we have conducted research with international students in Portugal during the initial months of the public health emergency, from which we were able to identify issues that may be of concern to researchers, stakeholders and policymakers in the mobility field.

While our main aim is to present the findings of our study, this is a subject that resonates beyond the confines of the student mobility research field, not least due to the fact that Erasmus+ students in particular have been widely reported in Portugal as being responsible for spreading the virus (e.g. Silva, 2020). As such, we have an opportunity to provide an important counterpoint to an overwhelmingly negative viewpoint and reveal what actually happened in the lives of international students at this time, acknowledging the efforts students and host institutions have been making to control the spread of COVID-19 during what have been unprecedented events in internationalised learning. This includes the challenges of coping with social isolation and prolonged separation from families, and complying with government edicts regarding public health and personal safety.

DAVID CAIRNS is a researcher at ISCTE University Institute of Lisbon (Portugal). Previously, he worked and studied at Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, National University of Ireland Galway and University of Lisbon. His research interests include youth, mobility, education and political participation.

KEYWORDS

STUDENTS, MOBILITY, COVID-19



THAIS FRANÇA is researcher at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology of ISCTE University Institute of Lisbon. Her research interests focus on migration, mobilities, gender, social inequalities and post-colonial studies, including a project on scientific and gender equality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DANIEL MALET CALVO holds a PhD in social anthropology from University of Barcelona. Currently, he is an assistant researcher in the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, developing research on student mobility, policies on higher education and the transformation of urban settings prompted by the presence of international students.

At a more general level, the pandemic provides us with an opportunity to re-think the place of groups such as international students in tertiary education and the practicality of maintaining free circulation at a time of widespread restrictions and risks relating to corporeal travel. This includes assessing the efficacy of alternate learning modes using virtual platforms and looking towards different means of establishing intercultural conviviality, including making better use of social activities outside formal learning contexts. We therefore hope to demonstrate, using our evidence, how students are able to manage their mobility in a safe and meaningful manner, providing some ideas for maintaining such forms of exchange at a time of limited horizons.

2. The inverted meaning of mobility

In approaching these issues, it becomes immediately apparent that the meaning of mobility has changed during the pandemic, not only for students but also for the institutions that host them. There is also a potential change in the way in which young Europeans in particular make transitions to adulthood. In the years prior to the pandemic, geographical mobility and personal development appeared to have become conjoined, woven into many young people's lives and featuring prominently in their attempts to complete education and find secure employment (Cook & Romei, 2020; Robertson, Harris & Baldassar, 2018). We now face the task of re-thinking what mobility means for students and for society, with the negative aspects of international travel having become very apparent.

The abruptness of this change – mobility moving from being imagined as valuable and pleasurable to something risky and inconvenient – makes re-thinking mobility difficult, since we have to re-assess some of the main assumptions that have underpinned the rapid expansion of the student mobility field, a development charted in numerous studies (e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2011; Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; King, 2018; Raghuram, 2013). Furthermore, despite a high volume of work being produced on this topic, relatively little attention seems to have been paid to the health risks of internationalised learning, a criticism we need to accept in our own work (e.g. Cairns, Krzaklewska, Cuzzocrea & Allaste, 2018; França & Cairns, 2020; Malet Calvo, 2018); we seem to have focussed more on the economic and political implications of heightened levels of student circulation rather than the well-being of individual travellers. This deficit means that relatively little is known about the stress and anxiety experienced by mobile students, beyond relatively self-evident issues such as the culture shock and alienation some experience in their host society due to the somewhat artificial nature of intercultural learning (Cuzzocrea, Krzaklewska & Cairns, 2021).

Such neglect may also help explain why, prior to the pandemic, the positivity of mobility was rarely, if ever, questioned. And also, why the recent societal transformations make this an appropriate time to consider what an inversion in the meaning of mobility means for students and other interested parties in our field. Furthermore, re-starting mobility in a post-pandemic world is not simply a case of re-opening borders and increasing funding for host institutions. As we hope to illustrate with our evidence, trust needs to be generated among students so that they feel they can travel without concerns for their physical and mental health, and be assured of a quality learning experience.

3. Research context and methodological approach

In what remains of this article, we focus on discussing the results of research conducted in Portugal with international students. More specifically, we look at their lives during the pandemic and at how their mobility experience changed. Questions hence focus on adjustment to abrupt changes in lifestyle and learning after the start of the pandemic in March 2020, and day-to-day life during the initial lockdown of the months that followed. Alongside the new challenges, we also consider existing vulnerabilities, especially in economic situations as well as the capacity to sustain intercultural connections with their international peers and friends and families in their home countries.

In regard to scope, our analysis includes evidence from students from inside and outside the EU, some of whom were engaged in credit mobility exchanges, others being student migrants with relatively settled lives in Portugal. Diversity is also present in regard to country and region of origin, reflecting the national context. Portugal has quite a distinct student mobility profile, encompassing both intra-EU movers participating in programmes such as Erasmus+, some of whom we have explored in our prior work (e.g. Cairns, 2017; França & Cairns, 2020; Malet Calvo, 2018), and those from outside the EU, especially Portuguese-speaking African countries and Brazil, who moved to Portuguese universities for the entirety of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree programme.

Fieldwork was conducted in Lisbon between May and June 2020, involving semi-structured interviews with 27 international students aged between 20 and 28. These students were recruited using various social media, i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp. In line with social distancing guidelines, all interviews were conducted remotely by the authors, using Zoom and Skype. In regard to the sample, we included students from different degree levels (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral) and a range of academic disciplines. While not a representative sample, a maximum diversity principle was followed to ensure representation from these different

LEONARDO FRANCISCO DE AZEVEDO is a PhD candidate in social sciences at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (Brazil). His research interests include student mobility, internationalisation of higher education and skilled migration. Currently, he is working on international mobility of Brazilian researchers.

student cohorts, maintaining balance for gender and socio-economic background. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the authors, a process that also enabled an initial analysis to take place during which prominent themes emerged from the material.

4. Results

The discussion of the results is organised around a number of key themes, starting with an outline of some of the immediate responses to the pandemic lockdown. Also mentioned are a few potentially positive outcomes, including lessons learnt by the student interviewees during the period of confinement.

4.1. Immediate changes in circumstances

As international students, the interviewees were able to discuss the immediate impact made by the closure of universities and support structures and the abrupt shift to online classes and remote working. Being suddenly cut off from families also had a drastic effect on their lives, including issues arising through the loss of financial support, with those reliant on income from employment also badly exposed. With much of this work taking place in restaurants, bars and the tourist sector (e.g. as tour guides or tuk tuk drivers), typically without formal contracts, many students immediately lost their jobs during the lockdown and, with this, an essential part of their income. Disruption to academic work was also common, with this interruption creating other difficulties, including financial penalties. This situation is illustrated by the case of 25-year-old Laura from Italy. Laura moved to Portugal in September 2018 to pursue a two-year Master's degree in chemistry. Her programme had been proceeding as planned, but the start of the pandemic coincided with her final semester, during which she had been conducting experimental analysis in the laboratory.

I was going to graduate in July, but I have an experimental thesis, so as I cannot go to the lab, I will not be able to graduate in July, but maybe in November or December. As I have to wait a few more months [to conclude the thesis], I will also have to pay extra rent for the room, which is quite expensive, and I thought, "Maybe I can get a job to pay for my groceries." That is why I got the delivery job in the bar. My parents pay the rent, but at least I would then have some extra cash.

Here we have an illustration of the manner in which the pandemic disrupted the immediate plans of one international student, bringing with it economic penalties and a potential delay to the completion of studies. Also notable is the fact that despite being at an advanced stage in her education, Laura still depends on her parents to pay the rent. Her response has been to seek employment in a bar, creating additional complications, since the hospitality sector has also been affected by coronavirus restrictions. Equally significant is the potential cost of a late finish to a degree course, which may also have an impact on the ability to take the next step in a career trajectory, potentially postponing labour market entry.

Looking at other common experiences among the interviewees, maintaining social contacts during the initial lockdown was difficult for many students, especially in university dormitories. These residences were converted into hyper-securitised environments with no possibility of leaving, except to buy groceries

in a prearranged manner. Rodrigo, a 28-year-old Master's student in economics from Guinea-Bissau based in Lisbon, explains what happened in his case:

Here at the university residence, there were intransigent measures and no one dared disobey them [...]. They left guidelines on how we should use the kitchen and what distance we should keep between us [...]. It was then that I experienced the loss of my freedom; it was very hard. Emotionally it was very complicated, because there was no freedom to leave the house. Everyone was required to stay at home. I could only go out and buy something. I could not use my time to do the things I like. And that, psychologically, being in the same space for 24 hours a day, is very exhausting. Psychologically, almost unbearable. I reached my limit. I was not well, a little exhausted, worn out.

This is obviously quite a difficult situation that emphasises the need to focus on issues like mental health within international students' lives. If such a topic was already relevant, with the pandemic situation its importance became even more obvious. However, we can see that the impact of the pandemic in its first few months was both severe and far-reaching. Not only were studies disrupted, maintaining any kind of semblance of normal life among international students became impossible with the accompanying emotional and economic strains for both European and non-EU learners.

4.2. Less immediate impacts

Much of what the interviewees related to us about the impact of the pandemic on their lives was perhaps to be expected, in line with what much of the population was experiencing at this time. The stress and anxiety being induced was obvious. This feeling extended to a sense of isolation and dislocation, especially where host institutions failed to provide enough support and information. In the specific case of Erasmus+ students, the European Commission proactively issued some guidelines on how the Programme should react to the pandemic at an institutional level, recommending that sending universities apply a "force majeure" clause and provide support to international students who wished to return home. Those who had migrated independently fared much worse, being left to deal with the situation by themselves.

A lack of information about what was happening with studies also seems to have been an issue, for postgraduate movers in particular, including both those in receipt of grant funding and others responsible for paying their own tuition fees and expenses. In general, news about what was happening in universities seems to have been posted with domestic students in mind, and largely in the Portuguese language. The confusion among international learners can be observed in the case of Katrin, a 25-year-old Master's degree student in international studies, funded by DAAD, the German agency for international exchange for higher education students and staff. She confirmed that communication was largely restricted to the Portuguese language, even though, in her case, her course was entirely taught in English.

Maybe the university wrote to me in Portuguese, but I do not really understand Portuguese. Maybe they sent an e-mail, but I do not know as I have a problem with my institutional e-mail address, I cannot access it anymore.

The predicament among fee-paying students is explained by Sergio, a 21-year-old student who moved from Italy to Portugal in 2018 to take a Master's degree in architecture in Lisbon:

The response, it was really slow. They [the universities] closed the courses and did not say anything about that, about doing courses online, at the beginning. We stayed, more or less, one month without having any classes. It was a little bit strange. Some professors sent us e-mails asking how we were doing, like in a human friendly way, but the institution itself took lots of time to respond to anything and after one month we started the second semester, and then nothing. Now we are having classes online. I knew because they sent e-mails.

The lack of meaningful engagement from universities in Portugal in regard to these international students is disappointing, especially considering the fact that they are making a substantial financial contribution to these institutions and providing an internationalisation dividend to the host city through their presence. Nor was there any compensation for the loss of human contact that takes place between international learners, ruling out the possibility of intercultural learning in the traditional sense of students from different countries mixing inside or outside the classroom. This situation suggests that more care and attention needs to be taken within host institutions that brand themselves in terms of internationalisation, especially in regard to issues such as maintaining effective communication, with international students feeling left out by a somewhat insular approach being taken that assumes everyone is local.

It is also clear that the experiences of the Brazilian and African students were markedly different compared to their peers undertaking intra-European exchanges in Portugal in regard to a number of practical issues arising from the lockdown, e.g. in their prospects for a rapid return home. As well as facing much higher travel costs and fewer flight options, there was the fear of losing a scholarship if they returned to the sending country and, subsequently, of permanently losing the opportunity to study in Europe. This concern was quite pressing for students in the first year of their degree courses when the pandemic started, as explained by Jazmine, a 19-year-old aeronautics student from São Tomé, now based in Covilhã:

When I realised that this pandemic was here to stay, I went into panic mode. I am a grant student, so I thought that maybe it might be impossible for me to return home, then go back to Portugal at a later date, after the pandemic, to continue my studies here. Also, access to [the] internet in my country is rather limited, so following the online lessons would be impossible.

As this interview extract from Jazmine illustrates, another issue that emerged related to the potential return home was a lack of facilities for remote learning. While this problem has also affected domestic students, keeping up with classes online is even more difficult for overseas learners who may not only lack reliable internet access but also be in a different time zone. Such considerations created much stress and uncertainty, at a time when anxiety was already running high.

Another less immediately apparent impact of COVID-19 relates to changes in the global economy, with the devaluation of currencies and the imposition of budgetary cuts by governments in sending countries. Universities and the institutions funding international students have become stretched, with mobility becoming less of a priority due to the need to respond to urgent public health needs. This was one further issue that affected students' finances, but it also reveals a pre-existing economic precarity

in many of their lives related to a reliance upon multiple sources of income. For example, Ana, a 25-year-old student from Cape Verde, studying for a Master's in quantitative methods in Lisbon, explains:

The level of the scholarships is too low. If you are living with your family, it is OK, but if you must pay for your expenses the grant is not enough and you must work. Actually, even those that live with relatives eventually get a job, and this job tends to be informal, without a contract, which is not even permitted when you have a grant. Either during the first degree or the Master's, the African student always works.

This position explains why many international students, especially those from the Global South, need to supplement their incomes with money from employment despite being in receipt of grant funding. Another financial problem, faced by Brazilian students, concerns political instability back home and the impact this has on exchange rates as well as the country's poor performance in coping with the pandemic. According to Ricardo, a 19-year-old communication sciences student based in Setúbal:

Even with a scholarship covering the university fees I need money for my expenses, especially the rent and food, which is very difficult because of the exchange rate of currencies. My mother lost her job recently and that has a strong impact on the possibility of sending money, because she loses an important part of her income when [it is] converted into euros.

We therefore have another driver pushing these students to get a job: to release families from the pressure of sending money to Portugal. While these financial issues pre-date the pandemic, we can clearly see that further complications have been introduced, all of which serve to create additional stress at a time of uncertainty.

4.3. Positive developments?

While there is nothing to emerge from the pandemic that might be viewed as positive, we can highlight a few possible chinks of light that give us a modicum of solace, particularly for the Erasmus+ students we interviewed. During the initial lockdown period, when students were confined to their homes, some new forms of international conviviality did seem to be emerging within these households as people learnt how to cope with an unprecedented situation. For example, Thomas, a 25-year-old Erasmus+ student from Germany, moved to Portugal in September 2019 as part of a mechanical engineering Master's degree course. The comfortable size of his house and good relationships with his roommates were important in regard to how he coped with the pandemic:

We did not go out but we stayed in our apartment, chilled together, in the kitchen or on the balcony. It was quite nice. I think I enjoyed it more than if I was with my family [...]. I had a very good relationship with my flatmates and we also have a very big balcony, it was a shared balcony but it was very, very big. So, it came in very useful as it gave us the opportunity to be outside for a while.

Agatha, another Erasmus+ student, this time from the Czech Republic, who arrived in Lisbon in the months prior to the pandemic, also made reference to this new form of conviviality and the necessity of building a tolerable living environment together with her housemates:

I live in private accommodation, but there are just Erasmus students here. There are three of us, just girls, living here in the house. We set some rules together. We bought alcohol for disinfecting things. We bought masks together. We are taking care of each other. We take decisions together. We created the right kind of environment for that. Everyone knows when someone else is going out.

We can therefore observe from these two cases that having a comfortable place to live and good domestic relations helps a great deal in coping with a public health crisis. There is no suggestion that the pandemic situation has been easy or without stress for them, but having mutual support was important during the initial months of the lockdown. We can see that under such conditions, informal solidarity can independently emerge between students from different national backgrounds, based around the need to cope with the demands of the pandemic rather than engaging in more traditional forms of internationalised learning on campus, the somewhat artificial “learning bubble” environments created by mobility programmes (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion: learning from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

Bringing this paper to a close, we can see some of the most prominent consequences emerging from the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on evidence from international students in Portugal. These individuals witnessed a sudden change in their learning culture and patterns of conviviality as well as a curtailment of personal liberty. We might also argue that there has been a shift in the meaning of their mobility: from a form of liberation from the limitations of their place of origin to something of an endurance test. It also seems as if some universities were slow to recognise the specific needs of international learners and the limitations of online teaching. However, we should note that we are witnessing unprecedented shifts in how internationalised learning is practised, and it remains to be seen what lasting impact the pandemic has upon globalised tertiary education.

For national and European policymakers involved in funding and managing mobility systems, the pandemic has also proved to be an enormous challenge. In the short term, dilemmas now exist about how to continue programmes such as Erasmus+ at a time when non-essential travel remains restricted and risky. The viability of the expanded Erasmus+ may also come into question, especially if there is a decline in interest and a lack of resources to fully integrate health and safety provisions. Mobility may therefore come to feel like more of a luxury and less of a necessity for stakeholders and policymakers. Having passed through the initial waves of COVID-19, educational institutions now need to consider the medium and long-term impacts of the pandemic and the heightened costs of remaining operational. As mobility researchers, we also need to re-think some of the assumptions we hold about the place of international circulation within the educational sphere. As a sign of things to come, we might need to pay more heed to immobility and the importance of attachment to a single place, with the prospect of tertiary education being oriented around local concerns and situated increasingly at home (see also Finn, 2017).

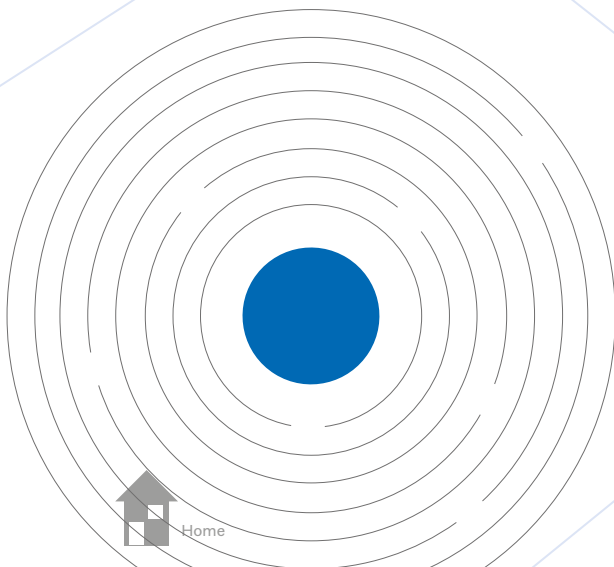
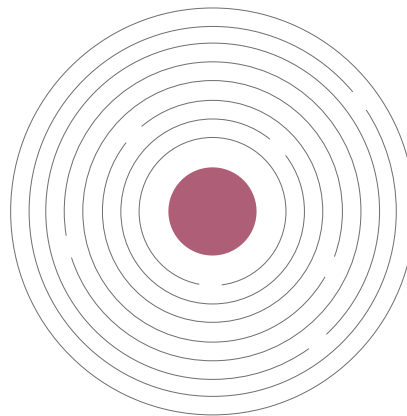
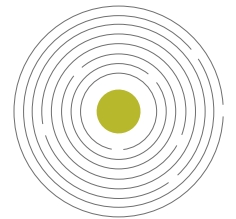
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The well-being of international students in the COVID-19 pandemic – a case study of the Jagiellonian University¹

By Karolina Czerska-Shaw, Ewa Krzaklewska, Eva Modebadze

1. Introduction

As a result of the introduction of the state of epidemiological emergency in March 2020, higher education institutions in Poland, like elsewhere in the world, were closed and all classes moved online, changing the conditions for participation in higher education for the foreseeable future. The present article concentrates on the analysis of challenges faced by international students of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this exploratory study is to take stock of and track the experiences of different types of international students studying at the Jagiellonian University at the time of the first lockdown between March and June 2020, in order to analyse the challenges and opportunities they faced in three dimensions: organisational, educational and psychological well-being. In this period, diverse organisations launched studies to describe and evaluate international student mobility in relation to the crisis (e.g. Erasmus Student Network, 2020; European Commission, 2020; for a systematic review of the studies, see Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020). This study fits into this body of research and may provide insight from a qualitative perspective. Most importantly, the findings of the study constitute a basis for recommendations (listed at the end of this article) to university structures, programme managers and academic teachers, which may in turn serve to strengthen institutional support and channels of communication, as well as improve teaching and learning experiences in an international setting.

It is important at the outset to underline the particularity of international students during this pandemic period, who largely define their educational experiences through mobility and social networks formed in transnational

KAROLINA CZERSKA-SHAW holds a PhD in sociology and is assistant professor at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland). Her research interests include migration and integration policies and practices, civic education and citizenship testing schemes as well as issues of belonging in transnational social spaces and international student mobility.

KEYWORDS

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY, COVID-19 PANDEMIC, ERASMUS+ STUDENTS, ACADEMIC MOBILITY, WELL-BEING

¹ This article is a shortened version of the research report entitled "Pandemic im/mobilities. A report on the situation of international students at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków" (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska & Modebadze, 2020). The research was conducted within the project "International student (im)mobility in times of COVID-19" financed by the SocietyNow!#1 competition within the framework of the Excellence Initiative programme at the Jagiellonian University.

EWA KRZAKLEWSKA is assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University. Her research interests relate to youth sociology, including transitions to adulthood, youth mobility, youth work and policy as well as gender equality and family studies. She has been studying youth mobility for several years, starting with the 2005 Erasmus Student Network survey on Erasmus students' experiences.

EVA MODEBADZE is a PhD candidate at the Jagiellonian University and holds a Master's degree in Central and East European Studies from the University of Glasgow. Her special interest field includes sociological and gender approaches to security and vulnerability.

spaces (Beech, 2019; Cairns, Krzaklewska, Cuzzocrea & Allaste 2018; Cuzzocrea, Krzaklewska & Cairns, 2021; Czerska-Shaw & Krzaklewska, 2021). The sudden suspension of the core of their educational experiences placed these individuals in spatial and social limbo, creating an environment likened to the concept of "waithood" (Honwana, 2014), which refers to the situation of young people stuck between youth and adulthood, unable to move forward with life plans because of socio-economic constraints. As we know today, the situation of the pandemic has been a longer than anticipated "moment" of waithood, which has revealed both individual and structural challenges, but also some opportunities.

The study reveals important challenges which go beyond this unique situation and point to institutional weaknesses that need to be addressed. Even though international students shared the experience of lockdown with local students in many respects, their mobility status brings different problems, mostly due to their lack of local language knowledge and access to information, e.g. about public services, weakness of social safety nets as well as their legal status as foreigners – the latter revealing a great divide between EU and non-EU students. What comes to light is the precariousness of international students' status, the need to re-think teaching and learning methods and, importantly, the alarming mental health issues that are surfacing in the wake of the global pandemic, particularly amongst young and mobile individuals, and the need to develop and expand support structures to help mitigate the effects on well-being.

The article first provides a brief background to the study, followed by an analysis of findings and concludes with a series of recommendations. While this is a small-scale exploratory study of one university, we believe that the challenges students faced may be extrapolated to different contexts in other educational establishments and that the proposed recommendations may serve a more general purpose for those hosting international students.

2. Dimensions of well-being

The study is grounded in the discussion and concept of well-being. According to the World Health Organization (1993), quality of life is broadly understood as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. In this understanding, and as suggested by recent discussions around the WHO concept, well-being very broadly relates to diverse aspects of one's life and environment: psychological and physical health, social relations, level of independence and an evaluation of one's living environment, including financial situation or available infrastructure (Woźniak & Tobiasz-Adamczyk, 2013).

In relation to this broad understanding, in our analysis we considered three dimensions of experiences that have posed challenges to well-being, particularly in the context of the pandemic and in the space of international student mobility: organisational, educational and psychological/social well-being. While there has been a tendency to link the stress of international studies to the socio-cultural sphere, research highlights the psychological and physical dimensions as equally important (Krzaklewska & Skórska, 2013). Along the same lines, our study points to the importance of the physical environment (infrastructure) for well-being, which is rarely considered in international student evaluations.

It is important to note that these three spheres are strongly interrelated and that the interconnections between them strengthened during the epidemic, or at least became more visible, possibly due to the sudden overlapping of physical spheres – private life, education, social life – which were all happening in the same room or house, often simultaneously, in the virtual sphere.

3. Research methodology

Five focus groups and seven individual in-depth interviews were conducted online between March and May 2020 with 29 international students at the Jagiellonian University in diverse types of programmes: full-time stationary Bachelor's and Master's programmes, Erasmus+ exchanges and double or joint degree consortium programmes such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees. At the moment of the study, the Jagiellonian University hosted around 34,000 students, 12% of whom were foreign students. International students come most of all from Ukraine (approx. 1/3), followed by Norway, Belarus, the United States, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, China and Turkey².

The choice to predominately use focus groups was to encourage students to share their experiences also with each other and, in this way, to jointly come up with recommendations based on their collective challenges. This also created a space for them to make sense of their situation, which for some was an important moment to connect with others and formulate their own solutions.

The sample consisted of 18 women and 11 men, with 20 full-time and 9 exchange students from diverse faculties, both from the EU (e.g. France, Spain, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal and Latvia) and non-EU countries (China, Bangladesh, the United States, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Belarus). The country of origin was a critical variable determining the experience of the lockdown, with non-EU students facing significantly more administrative/visa barriers and more difficulties to return home (see Erasmus Student Network, 2020). Another critical characteristic that impacted the situation of students during the pandemic was the length of their stay in Kraków – those who were “well-anchored” in the city and academic environment, in particular full degree students but also those who arrived in Kraków in the autumn semester, had more resources at hand in comparison to those who had arrived just 2–3 weeks before the outbreak of the pandemic.

Additionally, four expert interviews were conducted with those who manage programmes for international students at departmental and university levels and those who run the Student Centre for Support and Adaptation (SOWA). The interviews opened up the institutional perspective on the crisis, highlighting the complexity of administrative procedures, the lack of top-down information channels, and the dependence on various external agencies in relation to information on scholarships and loans, legal status or educational recognition.

2 Source: USOSweb of Jagiellonian University (accessed on 28.05.2020).



4. Main findings

4.1. Organisational dimension: access to information, travel uncertainties and finances

Difficulties linked to diverse administrative arrangements dominated the first period of the lockdown. The decision to stay in Kraków or return to one's home country (or other country of residence/destination) was a key concern in the first weeks of March 2020, and highlighted the lack of clear communication channels of both university and public service systems, especially in English (we will discuss this in detail later in this section). Challenges were also felt in relation to external funding mechanisms (for scholarships, loans), national restrictions and border and visa issues, particularly by non-EU respondents. Students' decision-making in the first period of the emergency was thus done in the context of uncertainty and unclear information, which heightened stress and anxiety, and brought to light the sometimes precarious legal and financial situations of international students.

Access to information was a critical factor mentioned by students in relation to their well-being. Students stressed the need for more prompt, filtered and streamlined information in English in relation to public services: visa/residency issues, healthcare assistance, border closures, etc. Not being sure whom to call in an emergency was an important factor in the feeling of security. A sense of confusion was also felt regarding information about university services, including course registration, schedule updates, students' rights, etc. Language barriers became considerable burdens, particularly when dealing with health and legal issues. Furthermore, bureaucratic hurdles associated with legal issues in the host country proved, unsurprisingly, to be most taxing for non-EU international students. The lack of certainty and clear information in this regard left non-EU students feeling the precariousness of their status and rights, particularly those who were engaged in intensive onward-mobility programmes and had only short-term stays at each partner university.

We also noted the support and care that was provided to students through the expert interviews conducted with the International Student Office and particular international programme co-ordinators. The following quote is telling of the efforts made beyond the "call of duty":

First and foremost, we were concerned with the safety of our students, both those who went away on an exchange, and those who came here. Therefore, this flow of information was direct, quick. [...] However, we also were completely overwhelmed. It was practically unlimited work hours, because we were working around the clock in those intense moments, the most difficult when, for example, we needed to collect information on where our students were, if they are safe, if they need support, help... It was a difficult time.

[employee at the International Student's Office]

However, top-down channels of information through university structures were oftentimes not conclusive, informative or relevant. In fact, those working at the programme levels at the university were amongst those to condemn the ineffective lines of communication present within the organisational structure, particularly the lack of information in English at this critical time.

The students' responses highlight the haphazard system of communication that trickled down to them at the end of the day:

Of course, I received a lot of very useful information from the university, but a lot of times I also received irrelevant information [...]. I remember myself spending most of my productive time, especially the mornings, reading all this different news and trying to make, to find some sense in this chaotic situation.

[male, full-time student from EU country, back home]

Access to information about healthcare was another important challenge that international students faced. Lack of knowledge of the language and lack of access to reliable information about health services, testing and quarantine, amongst other things, amplified feelings of insecurity:

Access to information is actually the main point of well-being [...]. Because I think, in these times, you are always worried about what if I get sick and what will happen to me. Can I go back to my country? Is there someone to reach out if I am sick?

[female, full-time student from non-EU country, in Kraków]

While the pandemic situation took the entire world by surprise, and difficult individual stories abound, the often piecemeal or inconclusive information given by national and university authorities left students in limbo, sometimes causing them to miss narrow windows of opportunities to act. If, during normal times, international students rely on their peers for support, during the pandemic this became impossible, since many international students did not have time to forge new friendships. This related in particular to students who had only just arrived in Kraków. This is when strong institutional anchoring becomes particularly important.

Being an international student, of course, involves more difficulties [even] in a normal period. If you have any difficulty and any issue, you could ask the other international students, for instance. In these situations, it is not possible. Some of us arrived in February and then [in] the second week of March, lockdown started. So basically, it was not even possible to create those relationships that you might need in a difficult period. So, of course, when there are no relationships, it is important for the university to make available another person who will help with all the issues that you may face.

[male, exchange student, EU country, in Kraków]

Travel uncertainties associated with border closures and restrictions were particularly challenging for students who had to make the decision between staying in Poland or going back home. While reasons behind such decisions varied, many students underlined the need for clearer communication from the University. On the other hand, the course managers we interviewed stressed that they were not able to adequately respond to student inquiries due to the unpredictable nature of the situation.

Some students underlined that they did not have a choice between leaving or staying. For some, there were no available repatriation flights to their home countries – this was emphasised by both EU and non-EU students, with the latter facing more obstacles to returning home. Others were afraid that they would not be able to come back and continue their studies after leaving the Schengen Area. The subsequent quotes illustrate the complexity of the situation, highlighting the obstacles faced by students coming from non-EU countries:

Right now, I just want to go home, and I have been waiting for any chance, but there are not any flights. The embassies are trying to provide some charter flights, but the number of them is really small.

[male, full-time student, non-EU country, in Kraków]

If I leave the Schengen Area now, there is a high chance that I am not going back to the Schengen Area [because] it is not yet sure whether I am going to get a visa.

[female, full-time student, non-EU country, in Kraków]

Financial insecurity during the pandemic was another pressing issue for several interviewed international students. They noted stress connected with scholarship delays and uncertainty about the continuation of grants; a few also lost part-time jobs as a result of the pandemic. Some international students experienced delays in the payment of their scholarships, particularly those who were funding their studies from external sources or via bilateral agreements between the host university in Poland and the university abroad:

I had taken out the student loan money for living expenses and my tuition, and [when scholarship payments were denied or delayed] it was incredibly stressful. I felt that I was not getting much help from the office here that is designated to work on student loans [...]. So, I would say the first month of everything happening was incredibly stressful for me financially and I did not feel as if I was being supported as a student.

[female, full-time student, non-EU country, in Kraków]

To summarise, during the pandemic, international students experienced various organisational problems of different degrees and severity. In times of uncertainty, the precariousness of their status and the lack of social connections jeopardised many international students' sense of wellness and security, which in turn had a significant effect on their educational experience.

4.2. Educational dimension: methods, approach, assessment

The importance and intensity of learning through international student experiences is well known, although it takes place predominantly outside of the classroom and in face-to-face encounters (Cairns et al., 2018). Forging new social networks, experiencing independent living outside of the parental home, intercultural awareness and reflexive self-positioning are amongst the key competencies developed in educational stays abroad (see, e.g. Beech, 2019; Czerska-Shaw & Krzaklewska, 2021; Krzaklewska, 2013). When the global pandemic and ensuing lockdown hit in March 2020, students' learning experiences became almost totally confined to the digital space. It soon became saturated with online classroom schedules and time spent learning to manoeuvre new platforms and new forms of learning, alongside efforts to build and maintain private social networks. What was only a few weeks prior a space for predominately private interactions and social networks became a space for both educational and social spheres, both public and private, often overlapping and intimately so. The saturation of the digital space – or the sudden infiltration of the private digital space by the public educational one – had a number of important consequences on teaching and learning outcomes. In our study, our respondents highlighted

both the positive and negative side-effects of this sudden shift, which may have lasting effects on teaching and learning practices and expectations.

Opportunities

In the first place, it must be highlighted that the almost immediate switch from face-to-face to online education was evaluated positively by study participants, as it provided them with structured learning, assured their student status and routinised their days, which was particularly important in the first weeks of the lockdown period. The platforms were introduced swiftly, without much disruption between face-to-face and online schedules. Scheduling the digital space may have provided a sense of security and stability in an otherwise physically and ontologically insecure situation. Our respondents also highlighted that it was a moment of intense learning curves, particularly in honing digital skills, which may have given students the space and initial enthusiasm to fill up their time with novel forms of learning.

Further, a more direct and personal approach of some instructors was also appreciated by our study participants, particularly at the start of the lockdown, as it personalised the learning environment and motivated them to participate in classes and ease their way into online education. The perception amongst the respondents was that the teachers became more approachable and the learning environment more relaxed and ultimately less hierarchical. In the Polish educational context, this may have far-reaching effects on teacher-student relations and the rigid social structures which underpin them. This window onto the private sphere – and, more so, the intimate space of home life – of both students and teachers may not be easily covered up again.

The prolonged online learning during the second wave of the pandemic in the autumn of 2020 leading into 2021, might indeed lead to deeper behavioural changes and expectations that these new relational structures will persist beyond the scope of the present pandemic. It is important to note here, however, that these expectations also vary depending on the prior education and cultural background of international students. Those used to more hierarchical student-teacher relations (particularly noted by some of our respondents from Ukraine, Belarus and China) may also have had a harder time in “entering” the private space of these encounters, resulting in more passive forms of online classroom behaviours (i.e. an unwillingness to turn on one’s camera or use the microphone).

Challenges

While there may have been some initial enthusiasm for new and more learning opportunities online, this was mostly an attempt to fill in the extra time that was not being spent on socialising with new friends, travelling and exploring the city. The lack of regular, face-to-face social contact was unsurprisingly very difficult for students: they missed this very important social learning experience “in reality”. Confinement in lockdown quickly resulted in feelings of monotony (being in front of a screen all day), social isolation, including sometimes from family and dependents back at home, difficulties in concentration and ultimately a lack of motivation to study.

Well, I would say that the negative, I think, it is like a common thought that being always on the computer. At a certain point, you lose your attention, so it is like it is really difficult for me to keep up with what they say, at a certain point I just start staring at my window or at the wall. [...] And also, the fact that you can record what they are saying makes you more like “OK, I will do that when I need it so there is no need to do that”. During my presentations on remote, it is like tough, because I think, it is better like to have the interaction and to see what people really think about

your things. I would say, OK, there will be 20 people connected on Teams while I am speaking, but who is actually following me? So, it is more challenging in this sense, but I think that I mean it is almost the end of the semester, so it is been quite good in general, we reached what we needed to study during this month, so yeah.

[female, exchange student, EU country, outside Kraków]

Just like the initial enthusiasm to engage in diverse learning activities on the side of students, the switch to online learning was often accompanied by an overload of extra reading or study materials and platforms to compensate for the lack of regular classes from the side of academic teachers. The course material and technological overload added to the stress and a decrease in motivation to study. As the teaching methods were often not suited to online learning, passive lectures would lead to passive learning. Students also noted the difficulty in keeping up with a multitude of teaching and learning platforms which all take time to learn and, if overloaded, create a cacophony in communication flows.

Finally, the breakdown in boundaries between the private and public (educational) spheres may have highlighted inequalities amongst students and in front of their academic teachers. Students found themselves in a variety of difficult learning environments: some were isolated in dormitories, others faced difficult situations in their parental homes, and still others noted difficulties with accessing technological tools, maintaining steady internet connections and gaining access to study materials, library archives or empirical data/fieldwork.

4.3. Psychological/social well-being: support in isolation, intervention

Psychological well-being was a critical issue for international students during the lockdown, although this has also been a concern in relation to young people in general both during the pandemic (Mastrotheodoros, 2020) and beyond the period of lockdown (Pitchforth et al. 2019; Yeung, Weale & Perraudin, 2016). On many levels, the experiences of our respondents were similar to those of millions of people across the globe. In the first phase of the pandemic, the respondents faced fear and anxieties in relation to the epidemiological situation, their health and the health of their families. Further, their experiences of the transition to online education generally mirror those of other students, pupils and teachers alike. Yet in the case of international students, additional factors came into play, particularly those that have already been discussed in the previous parts of this article: feelings of insecurity in a foreign country, organisational matters, including access to information and financial stability. Dealing with the pandemic in a foreign environment without knowing the local language, cultural codes and ways in which the system (particularly health system) works might be difficult. Importantly, social isolation resulting from the closure of universities had particular consequences for this group, as they lacked other local social support networks.

The loss of control over one's life was for many a frustrating experience, e.g. being stuck in Poland when a person wanted to go home to their family, or, conversely, being at home when a person actually wanted to be back in Poland. This confinement experience – the feeling of “being stuck” as described by students – was not only linked to the inability to go to the university, party or meet friends, but also in relation to international mobility, as many students had planned international trips around Europe. The collapse of their mobility plans was an additional factor beyond the initial frustration and feeling of loss, severely impacting their educational outcomes:

[...] Frustrating situation. Because the main reason I chose this [...] mobility programme, was that you get to stay in at least three countries, three cities, and this is my first time in Europe. Of course, that is not happening anymore. And the second thing is like, I was kind of scared and frightened all the time, [...] my country is not very responsible about its citizens at [this] time. So, [...] when they closed the borders, I knew that I cannot go home. Even now I cannot go home. Because flights are not operating. So, feeling that I do not know when I get to see my family members, my mum and dad, that is kind of scary. So, this hampered my study at the same time.

[female, full-time student, non-EU country, in Kraków]

Some students remarked that their return home was a source of anxiety and emotional challenge (see Erasmus Student Network, 2020):

For me, I think the biggest challenge of being stuck at home is that I am not used to living with my family anymore. I mean, I live in a family of four and the house is not that big, and when I am abroad, I am really used to living in my own space, to having my own independence [...]. Because when I am abroad, I also have my own routine in terms of studying, for example. So, I have a much more fixed routine, while here I feel a bit like I am living in a bubble, living in a kind of parallel universe.

[female, full-time student, EU country, back home]

We may say that this difficult situation in a way legitimised the discussion around mental well-being, lifting this topic out of the realm of taboo. The feeling that “it is OK not to feel OK” became more commonplace. In fact, during the focus groups and interviews, students openly talked about their feelings of frustration, isolation, depression, anxiety, stress as well as underlying mental health conditions. The study participants also talked about factors that relieved their stress and the actions they undertook to improve their well-being, including seeking professional psychological support. This awareness of the importance of psychological issues was mentioned many times, with students raising the issue of social campaigns in relation to mental health.

The employees of SOWA underlined that the fact that being an international student is already a particular situation that may bring additional stress and anxiety and that difficulties linked to adaptation may stir up already existing conditions. The centre’s employees pointed out that students were mostly coping with forced isolation in relation to the lockdown introduced in March:

Most students came to Kraków for the second semester [as Erasmus+ students], and lockdown started somewhere in mid-March, so they did not have a chance to build relations with peers, as they maybe had two meetings at the university. So, the isolation and lack of social contacts were the biggest issues. They could only use chats, Messenger or meetings on Teams. And this resulted in fear, loneliness, bad moods. But also, not tolerating uncertainty, how long this situation would last, would this change. [...] Plus, there was much worrying for the families. [...] Another matter was the adaptation to a new way of learning.

[employee of SOWA]

A very important differentiation was made by employees of SOWA between students coping with adaptation issues (with or without the pandemic) and those who arrived in Poland with pre-existing



health conditions. In the latter group, the difficult adaptation process may intensify pre-existing illnesses as well as difficulties in accessing the health system due to a lack of knowledge of the Polish language or organisational principles (e.g. related to insurance).

Additionally, some of our respondents recommended that such a centre as SOWA could offer students guidelines on how to deal with pandemic-related stress and anxieties, e.g. podcasts or videos which provide some targeted advice in English. This suggests that in the case of mental health, not only is intervention work of critical importance, but preventative activities are also welcomed by students, who are increasingly aware of the importance of mental well-being.

5. Conclusions

This study has highlighted the experiences of students whose international mobility was interrupted and curtailed by the sudden introduction of lockdown restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, it is important to note that this prolonged moment of isolation and crisis has revealed new forms of micro-level coping strategies on the side of students (e.g. time management techniques, self-development goals) and a measure of structural adjustments on the side of university authorities (e.g. new modes of communication, discussion of online learning techniques, awareness of mental health issues). Yet this period has also revealed significant gaps in institutional support frameworks, the inefficacy of information channels and disparities in teaching and learning styles and their effectiveness, as well as the still underdeveloped support for mental well-being.

Together with the voices of institutional university actors who have had to deal with this unprecedented crisis situation, students' accounts have served to develop a list of recommendations to increase support structures for future crisis situations. While the recommendations have been based on the experiences of students at a particular university, we list here the most important ones that are of a general character that may suit other educational institutions. We would like to stress the diversity of needs that should be taken into account when devising strategies for supporting international students based on their length of stay and region of origin, as well as the particularity of the course of studies. We would also like to highlight that the term "international student" carries with it a certain positive, privileged, but also temporal connotation, and some students who come from abroad for regular studies simply do not consider themselves eligible for this category. In the Polish case, this includes students who study on the same terms as local Polish students, particularly those from Ukraine and Belarus, and who are largely out of the social networks based around Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes. This points to a limitation of the study but also a need to further explore the potential challenges that these types of international students may face, as well as the weaknesses or even lack of support structures that cater to them.

Main recommendations on how to support international students in a pandemic

1. Organisational dimension – "one-stop-shop": a centralised, online information access point for international students with up-to-date information, translated documents and links to essential services, including how to proceed in case of emergencies:
 - Direct source of information and contacts in case of emergencies (a list of phone numbers, English-speaking medical services) as well as an e-mail address or forum for diverse concerns;
 - Clear guidelines for students in case of infection as well as more general information on the functioning of the health care system and other public services;
 - FAQ section or feed in relation to crisis situations, both in the local language and English.

2. Educational dimension – teacher training: a comprehensive system of teacher training to suit blended/online formats, with an emphasis on student-centred, active methods:
 - Develop a comprehensive framework for online learning;
 - Strengthen the general digital literacy of students, e.g. provide training for students on the most common online platforms used in an institution, netiquette and online communication;
 - Support vulnerable students and take note of individual students' needs;
 - Promote innovative and engaging methodologies of online education, including through teacher training.
3. Socio-psychological dimension – mental health awareness campaign and development of support structures to accompany international students:
 - Provide clear information (in English and other common languages) on psychological support services at the university and develop a more comprehensive support system tailored to international students;
 - Raise awareness and break taboos of mental health through campaigns, FAQ pages, guidelines, advice on how to deal with crisis situations, etc.;
 - Encourage students to discuss their experiences and concerns with mental health professionals within their programme framework but also within peer groups and more informal settings.

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Forms and know-how of virtual internationalisation in secondary education in Finland

By Siru Korkala

1. Introduction

When the pandemic closed national borders in spring 2020, it also changed the nature of international activities in the education sector. General upper secondary schools' study visits, learning projects and workshops directed abroad as well as vocational institutions' work-based learning periods abroad and studies at foreign institutions were cancelled. Additionally, development projects, including mobilities that had already been launched or for which applications had been submitted, needed to be completely re-thought.

This article is based on a survey conducted in Finland in autumn 2020. A survey and interviews were conducted to investigate educational institutions' capabilities for virtual international activities and the virtual means of continuing international activities that upper secondary educational institutions may already have used. This study examined all international activities of educational institutions, regardless of how their funding was sourced. The survey part of the study was conducted in September 2020 and the in-depth interviews in November 2020. This article aims to shed light on the experiences that Finnish educational institutions had and the opportunities they identified in the spring and early autumn of 2020.

2. Research design and focus group

First, the survey was prepared, and a web link to it was sent to all general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions. The survey was addressed to principals in general upper secondary schools and international affairs co-ordinators or officers in vocational institutions. Each educational institution was asked to identify the best person to respond to the survey. The survey was available for three weeks in September 2020.

SIRU KORKALA

holds a PhD in sociology and currently works as a senior adviser in the Finnish National Agency for Education. She works in the Information and Analysis unit, which is responsible for education statistics in Finland as well as for producing information about the Finnish education system.

KEYWORDS

BLENDING MOBILITY,
EQUALITY, VIRTUAL
INTERNATIONALISATION



The objective of the study was to describe good practices that the educational institutions had so far used in virtual internationalisation activities. Other main questions were:

- How has internationalisation work continued in the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic?
- What have educational institutions done to maintain internationalisation?
- What has helped institutions to continue virtual internationalisation work?
- What obstacles are there to continuing international activities in the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic?
- What types of skills has virtual international co-operation produced?
- How extensive or active has virtual international co-operation been?

Responses were received from a total of 175 educational institutions: 80 vocational institutions and 95 general upper secondary schools. The response rate was 32%, which can be considered good. The largest group of respondents was the principals, who accounted for 40% of all those who responded. More than one-third of the respondents were responsible for international activities (international affairs officers and co-ordinators). In general upper secondary schools, more than one in two respondents were principals.

Table 1. Number of survey respondents by institution type

Institution type	Principal	Teacher	International affairs officer/ co-ordinator	Other	Total
General upper secondary schools	52 (55%)	16 (17%)	19 (20%)	8 (8%)	95 (100%)
Vocational institutions	18 (23%)	7 (9%)	39 (49%)	16 (20%)	80 (100%)
Total	70 (40%)	23 (13%)	58 (33%)	24 (14%)	175 (100%)

Based on the survey findings, six educational institutions were selected for the interviews: three general upper secondary schools and three vocational institutions. Two of the vocational institutions selected for the interviews were large, with nearly 10,000 students, whereas the other had approximately 3,000 students. All three vocational institution representatives interviewed for the study were international affairs officers. Two of the general upper secondary schools selected for the interviews were medium-sized with 500 to 800 students, while the third one was small with fewer than 100 students. The general upper secondary school representatives interviewed for the study comprised two international affairs co-ordinators and one principal. All interviews were conducted virtually using the Teams application.

3. International activities in educational institutions

The survey found that mobilities, or periods spent abroad by students and staff members, are the most common form of international activity in normal conditions. Half of the educational institutions that responded to the survey have participated in development or partnership projects; this figure is considerably higher for vocational institutions (68%) than for general upper secondary schools (38%).

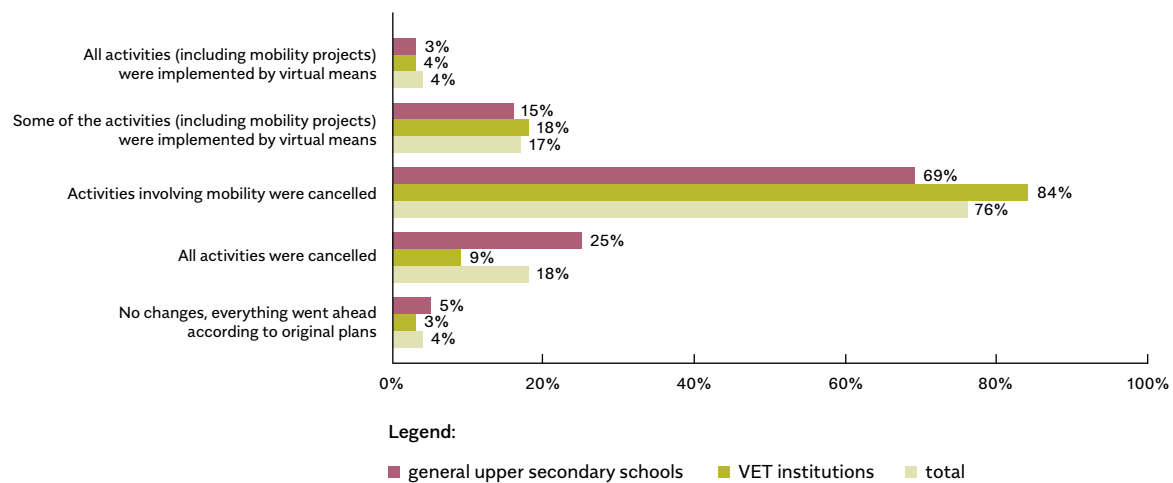
The activities reported in the section “other activities” included school twinning projects and hosting international visitors in general upper secondary schools and education exports and hosting international visitors in vocational institutions.

The coronavirus pandemic put a stop to almost all activities involving physical international mobility in educational institutions. Having all activities cancelled was more common in general upper secondary schools. Of all respondents, 76% reported that all activities involving a mobility had been cancelled.

There were more cancellations among mobility projects in the vocational education and training context than in general upper secondary schools. On the other hand, some activities in vocational institutions (including mobility projects) were carried out by virtual means.

In vocational institutions, the activities were strongly focussed on planning future projects and alternative implementation models of mobility, but final seminars for projects were also organised by virtual means. The long-term planning of international mobility and the planning of digital activities were additionally continued, and a virtual language and cultural café was organised. Institutions also experimented with virtual mobility: students have communicated on different platforms and completed remote assignments with foreign students and so on. The aim was to keep in touch, making it possible to continue the co-operation as before when normal conditions return after the pandemic. As physical mobility has not been possible, resources have also been freed up for developing internationalisation at home.

Figure 1. Distribution of answers to the question: “How did your planned international activities change in spring 2020?”



As many as 41% of the general upper secondary schools and 32% of the vocational institutions that responded had already experimented with virtual international activities, and these institutions are constantly coming up with new methods and practices for them. Only 6% of general upper secondary schools and 2% of vocational institutions had had time to acquire versatile experience of virtual activities. As many as 10% of general upper secondary schools and 28% of vocational institutions were already preparing for and piloting virtual international activities. One in five educational institutions were in the planning phase of virtual international activities, while another one in five said they had no virtual international activities.

Table 2. Role of virtual international activities in educational institutions (in %)

Answer	General upper secondary schools	Vocational institutions	Total
We had none	21	19	20
We have been planning activities	22	19	20
We are currently preparing or piloting virtual activities	10	28	18
We have already experimented with virtual international activities	41	32	37
We have gained versatile experiences of virtual international activities	6	2	5

However, the survey responses indicate that educational institutions found maintaining international activities important. For many, virtual activities have meant keeping in touch with international project partners by means of remote meetings. Projects initiated under normal conditions have been continued on various virtual platforms and with the help of social media. An extremely wide range of answers was received to the question “What types of international activities has your institution mostly had?”, and the open-ended answers indicate that many institutions are still working on their definition of virtual international activities.

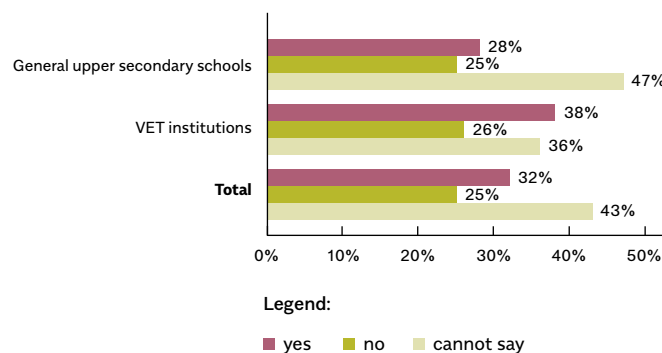
Skills in digital tool use are at a good level in Finland. More than one in two respondents to the survey felt that their skills are good. According to the respondents’ capabilities for virtual activities by type of educational institution, it appears that general upper secondary schools are slightly more familiar with virtual methods and the use of digital tools in teaching than vocational institutions. Students’ motivation related to virtual international activities is also assessed to be higher in general upper secondary schools than in vocational institutions. In general upper secondary schools, virtual international activities have traditionally also been more common in normal conditions, whereas in vocational institutions, internationality has very often meant physical mobility in the form of placements abroad.

3.1. Blended mobility as a new possibility

The survey results indicate that in September 2020, slightly more than one in three Finnish educational institutions intended to implement blended mobility, which means a combination of virtual mobility and physical mobility periods. This was slightly more common in vocational institutions than general upper secondary schools. Blended mobility was only added to Erasmus+ activities in autumn 2020, which is why experiences or models relating to it remain relatively few. This fuels a need to share different experiences and models as soon as possible to reduce uncertainty. In this context, some of the respondents considered that maintaining motivation may become a challenge if the physical mobility period planned as part of blended mobility cannot go ahead. Respondents also asked themselves whether talking about “virtual mobility” makes sense in general if the idea of mobility is to travel to a different country.

The study found that one in two general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions were not yet able to say in September 2020 whether they intended to go for blended mobility in 2020/2021, and one in four institutions said they were not planning blended mobility in that academic year.

Figure 2. Plans to combine virtual mobility and physical mobility periods into blended mobility in the 2020/2021 academic year



4. Experiences of virtual international activities

Based on the interviews, the experiences of virtual activities have mostly been positive. For example, general upper secondary schools found that virtual activities included in lessons diversified and livened up teaching. According to an international affairs co-ordinator interviewed for the study, teachers should be encouraged in the increased use of virtual international activities because these teach many types of skills, ranging from technology use to communication. General upper secondary schools thus believe that virtual international activities should be more closely integrated into the planning of lessons, even if finding a time for remote meetings with partners that suits everyone is sometimes difficult.

According to an international affairs officer in a vocational institution, initial experiences have shown that with the help of suitable virtual methods, the entire class can quickly be involved in international activities. Another international affairs co-ordinator who was interviewed noted that virtual project work can improve the quality of project co-operation as the work on the project and the co-operation are carried out continuously online, rather than there being a strong focus on meetings.

If the idea is easy and well planned, it can be implemented without any trouble.

[international affairs co-ordinator, vocational institution]

The interviewees were asked to give examples of how teachers, other staff members and students can be inspired to show enthusiasm for virtual international activities.

An international affairs officer in a vocational institution said they felt that their role in motivating teachers was essential: supporting teachers in virtual internationalisation activities was an important task of theirs. Co-operation with teachers must be easy; when teachers are handed ready-made technical tools and supported in using these tools, rather than being left to cope alone, they will be enthusiastic. The

international affairs officer had created prerequisites for the activities and enabled the partners to find each other. After this, responsibility for pursuing the activities was transferred to the relevant field of education, which started planning pedagogical content. It is also important to raise teachers' enthusiasm about the activities in the international partner schools; interaction between teachers is the key to everything.

We must inform our staff about internationalisation ideas across a broad front and in a positive spirit to raise enthusiasm among teachers about virtual co-operation with international partners. Various ready-made "packages or templates" must be prepared for the teachers, ensuring that they do not have to start from scratch and come up with their own ideas. The International Affairs Office helps them get started and supports them. The main point is that starting should be made very easy for teachers and students.

[international affairs co-ordinator, vocational institution]

An international affairs officer from another vocational institution said that international affairs officers in charge of an entire field of education have proven a more effective solution in virtual activities than institution-specific co-ordinators. The fact that the international affairs officer "speaks the language of the field" – in other words, knows the relevant field of education – increases the motivation of both teachers and students to engage in international activities. The institution in question has also gained good experience of involving personnel from different fields of education and working in different roles in project implementation.

An international co-ordinator of an upper secondary school pointed out that motivation for the activities is increased by understanding that internationality is not just about mobility; it can genuinely help the school develop while involving different actors in collaboration. The upper secondary school in question engages in co-operation with higher education institutions and employers within the framework of an international project. Co-operation across the boundaries of subjects and different organisations motivates teachers. When teachers of different subjects can work together on projects, the results are better and there is great enthusiasm.

Interviewees from both general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions emphasised the fact that virtual internationalisation activities should be a fun and inspiring way to study, regardless of whether it ultimately leads to a physical mobility period or not.

The challenge of projects lies in motivating the students: usually, mobility acts as a motivator for the actual work. Students do not find virtual work outside the lessons interesting enough to participate in it – at least not regularly. The project has the best chances of succeeding if it is part of the work carried out during lessons, and everyone participates. The challenge in building co-operation, however, lies in finding partners who have similar ideas which they wish to implement at the same time. If these activities were a built-in part of compulsory courses, they would be accessible to all students.

[international affairs co-ordinator, vocational institution]

General upper secondary schools and vocational institutions found it important to integrate virtual internationalisation into studies and to ensure that the competences acquired in each activity can be recognised in a way that benefits the students.

As the most inspiring feature of virtual internationalisation, both interview participants and those who gave open-ended answers in the survey brought up promoting sustainable development, as these activities involve little or no physical mobility. Another important factor is the equality of the activities. Internationalisation that takes place on the premises of the students' home institution and is integrated into teaching enables the participation of a larger group.

4.1. Critical issues of virtual international activities

Understandably, many interviewees found it a challenge that, in the early autumn, no models were yet available for the activities and not enough experiences had been accumulated. Spring 2020 was burdensome for educational institutions, and many teachers had no enthusiasm or energy to start planning virtual international co-operation. Some open-ended answers in the survey gave voice to the tiredness and frustration caused by distance learning in spring 2020 and the cancellation of planned activities for both teachers and students. For some, maintaining international activities purely by means of virtual methods seemed to be an impossible challenge in early autumn 2020. As they considered blended mobility, the uncertainty of whether physical mobility periods would be able to go ahead in spring 2021 was also a concern for respondents.

Virtual Erasmus+ mobility periods are challenging as combining them with physical mobility is mandatory. What if physical mobility is still not possible next spring? In this case, all our work on the virtual part will also be "wasted", and mobility support cannot be used at all.

[open-ended answer, vocational institution]

According to the interviewees, the significance of existing co-operation relationships is highlighted in virtual internationalisation. Creating new networks and relationships based on virtual means alone is considered difficult. Some interviewees also mentioned that virtual project work is slow and requires flexibility, among other things in terms of schedules. Operating in different time zones, especially with partners outside Europe, creates its own challenges in virtual co-operation; enabling face-to-face remote work in the school's daily life is not always easy. Organising project co-ordinators' meetings has usually been possible, but finding a common time for the students can be more difficult.

For many upper secondary level students, motivation to engage in international activities has been associated with physical mobility, and virtual activities alone do not motivate everyone. Additionally, some teachers in educational institutions do not find virtual internationalisation meaningful as there is no possibility for concrete meetings with people. Therefore, they are not necessarily always prepared to invest time and resources in it.

Virtual internationalisation activities require specific expertise and resources; some take launching these activities for granted, whereas others have difficulties with getting started. There are differences in the digital skills of international partners, and their hardware is not necessarily as advanced as in Finland. All interviewees emphasised that their virtual project work was based on strong long-standing networks – new actors are few and far between. They found it difficult to do virtual project work with new people they did not already know. Finding new partners on the web is not impossible, however.

Educational institutions are looking forward to a return to normal conditions after the pandemic. A vocational institution representative said in the interview that virtual and physical mobility are closely

linked; in exceptional circumstances, it was necessary to get the Finnish school and the partner school to work together virtually, thus already establishing connections for the physical mobility period. This helps to maintain awareness of internationality also in exceptional circumstances. In other words, virtual international activities are seen as a temporary springboard for actual mobility. This also came up in many interviews with representatives of general upper secondary schools.

Additionally, it emerged in the interviews that the experiences of personal growth achieved through virtual activities do not match those gained through physical mobility. If the activities were purely virtual, a great deal would probably be lost. Virtual activities are also planned to such a high degree that the spontaneity of physical meetings is lost. This is why people sometimes feel they fumble with creativity and innovation in a virtual environment.

Virtuality is rather two-dimensional, and it lacks the sense of warmth and light on your skin that you would have in a different environment, the smells and tastes, the soundscapes and all that, and a sort of 360-degree experience of other people is missing...

[international affairs co-ordinator, vocational institution]

5. Conclusions

This study found that educational institutions continued their international activities in the emergency conditions of the pandemic. Especially in general upper secondary schools, where internationalisation had commonly been based on virtual activities even prior to the pandemic, continuing projects that had already been launched using digital tools seemed natural. Students' online interaction was encouraged, and the staff continued the efforts to develop their educational institutions on various digital platforms.

In vocational institutions, the pandemic interrupted periods of work-based learning and studies at educational institutions abroad or made it necessary to cancel them, which led to a need to develop alternative solutions. It has not been easy; many educational institutions were concerned about how to motivate students, and also teachers, to continue international co-operation when physical mobility periods were not an option.

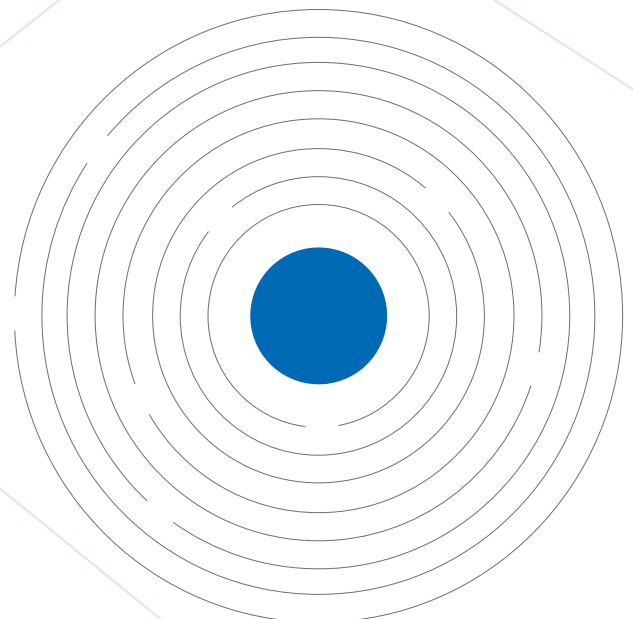
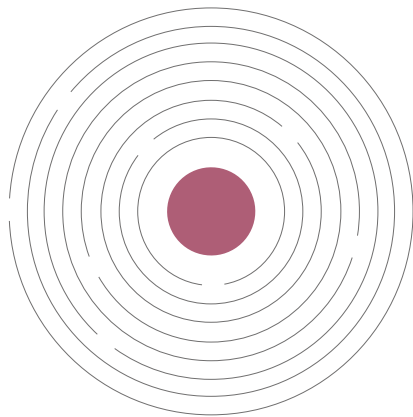
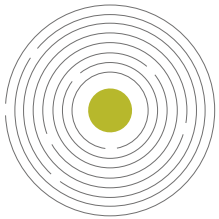
The continuation of international co-operation was facilitated by good partner networks and the persistent efforts of educational institutions' international affairs officers to motivate teachers and facilitate project work. In both general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions, internationalisation work has been closely integrated into studies, allowing students to accumulate credits and attainments even if physical trips did not go ahead.

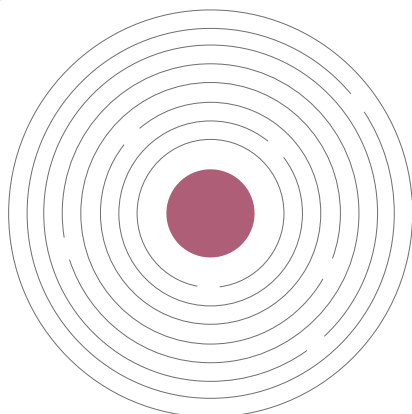
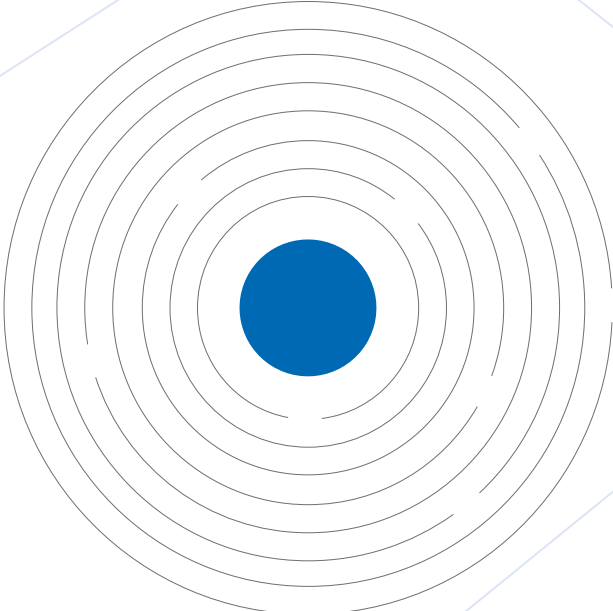
Some educational institutions experienced problems with the workload and time required by virtual projects as an obstacle to virtual internationalisation. Planning and organising online meetings and seminars were experienced as burdensome. In addition, clear guidelines were not yet available in early autumn 2020, although more detailed instructions were issued and webinars and training were organised later in the autumn.

Nevertheless, educational institutions understood the equality of opportunities offered by virtual internationalisation. An increasing number of students and staff representatives can participate in international activities that take place within the framework of their home institution. Participants also learnt many technical skills in virtual projects, and new types of communication competence have been gained.

At the time of the survey, virtual international co-operation had not yet been put on a permanent footing in most upper secondary educational institutions. Nearly 40% of the educational institutions that responded to the survey had experimented with it, but both the survey and the interviews showed that a return to normal physical mobility was eagerly anticipated. While virtual activities are regarded as desirable in terms of equality and sustainable development, many felt that meeting people in real life and experiencing different cultures abroad are something that should not be lost.

The majority of mobility projects will probably also be cancelled in the year 2021, so virtual activities are the main means to maintain internationality among education. It is also possible that virtuality is here to stay, or at least that blended mobility will be more and more common in Finnish secondary education.





Solidarity in times of COVID-19 – the perception of the notion and value of solidarity by European Solidarity Corps volunteers during pandemic

By **Mateusz Jeżowski**

1. Introduction

This article discusses the perception of the concept of “solidarity” by foreign volunteers who carried out their volunteering activities in Poland during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (between January and May 2020). The notion of solidarity was introduced to modern sociology by Émile Durkheim and referred to the social unity of a given group. Durkheim formed the theory of mechanical and organic solidarity, where the former refers to the social integration of individuals based on common values, beliefs and, by consequence, actions (Durkheim, 1947). The latter, on the other hand, means social integration arising from the need of society members for each other’s services and is based on the division of labour in modern societies and the interdependence of individuals in society. For Durkheim, law was an important mark of solidarity, as all permanent forms of social life strive towards some form of order, and law in this context is nothing more than institutionalised order (Durkheim, 1947).

In Europe, the notion of solidarity is often associated with the Polish trade union *Solidarność* – the first independent free trade union of the Eastern bloc, which started in 1980 in Gdańsk during a growing wave of strikes protesting against rising food prices. It was in the Lenin Shipyard of Gdańsk that over 17,000 workers barricaded themselves under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa – then an electrician and between 1990–1995 the first president of Poland to be elected in general elections (Karabel, 1992). The values underlying *Solidarność* referred directly to workers’ solidarity, Christian ethical norms and values, Polish independence traditions, social justice, freedom and tolerance (Obserwatorium Żywej Kultury, nd.).

Solidarity is also one of the fundamental values of the European Union, along with the securing of a lasting peace, unity, equality, freedom and

MATEUSZ JEŻOWSKI
is Co-ordinator in the
Research and Analysis
Department of the Polish
Erasmus+ and European
Solidarity Corps National
Agency. His current research
focusses on transnational
volunteering, university-
-business relations as well
as on competences gained
in non-formal education
settings. He is a member
of two international
research consortia and acts
as a National Correspondent
for Youth Wiki project.

KEYWORDS

**SOLIDARITY, EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY CORPS,
VOLUNTEERING, COVID-19,
LEARNING MOBILITY**



security, as written down in the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2007) – one of the cornerstone documents preceding the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon. The Treaty itself also refers to solidarity in Article 2 (*Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union...*, 2007). The principle of the solidarity of the European Union is based on sharing both the advantages, i.e. prosperity, and the burdens equally and justly among members (EurWORK, 2011). Title IV of the Charter, entitled “Solidarity”, refers directly to workers’ right to information and consultation, right of collective bargaining and action, right of access to placement services, fair and just working conditions, the prohibition of child labour and protection of young people at work, social security and social assistance, healthcare and environmental and consumer protection (*Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, 2007). It is therefore clear that solidarity as a value in the European Union is understood in the context of social security and social protection.

In this article, I will focus on one of the mechanisms of the European Union promoting solidarity as a value at the grassroots level, namely the European Solidarity Corps Programme (ESC). I will try to describe and explain what the perception of solidarity is among ECS volunteers in times of crisis, based on research carried out among foreign volunteers hosted in Poland during the first lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I will link it to the existing theories related to solidarity.

2. European Solidarity Corps

The ESC builds on the previous initiatives of the European Voluntary Service and Erasmus+ Volunteering, dating back to 1996. The programme is addressed to organisations, institutions and companies, which can apply for funding for volunteer activities and subsidies on workplaces for employees and trainees. The aim of the ESC is to facilitate the co-operation of entities carrying out social activities with young people who want to serve as volunteers or trainees or work abroad. The ESC activities are carried out at the national and international level. As part of the ESC, organisations, institutions and companies can implement the following actions:

- volunteering projects, as part of which one can invite domestic or international volunteers to co-operate,
- traineeships and jobs, which enable entities operating in the social work and voluntary sector to host domestic and international trainees and employees,
- solidarity projects, as part of which local initiatives are implemented in co-operation with various types of organisations and local government institutions.

The target group of the European Solidarity Corps are people aged 18–30. They are mainly engaged through organisations, institutions and public or private bodies that undertake solidarity initiatives.

The notions of solidarity and solidarity activity, in the context of the European Solidarity Corps, were tackled by Snezana Baclija and Susie Nicodemi in the report *4Thought for Solidarity* (Baclija & Nicodemi, 2020). Their observation was that the current need for solidarity comes from identified challenges faced by society, the main ones being:

- a focus on individual needs, without caring for the needs, rights and challenges of others,
- the rise of right-wing populism and turning inwards within national borders and closed groups of solidarity,
- the climate crisis and the lack of action for a sustainable future (Baclija & Nicodemi, 2020, p. 2).

Baclija and Nicodemi, based on a study of several hundred practitioners, young people, researchers and policymakers, identified four cornerstones of solidarity: empathy, human rights, active citizenship and inclusion (Baclija & Nicodemi, 2020). These cornerstones are based on the following seven supporting ideas: support, active participation, equality of opportunity, strong communities, social justice, volunteering and responsibility.

3. A unique time to study solidarity

As demonstrated above, there are various definitions of the concept of solidarity. One of the main aims of the research carried out by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System, the Polish Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agency, was to find out how ESC volunteers perceive the notion of solidarity and how it refers to the existing concepts of this notion.

The COVID-19 pandemic also seemed like a unique time in history to take a close look at the concept of solidarity. It was (and still is) one of the few moments in contemporary history when individual behaviours influence not only the entire societies but also the global population to an unprecedented level and, at the same moment, in the matter of highest value – the human life.

4. Research design

The research described in this article aims to analyse long-term European Solidarity Corps volunteering projects that took place in Poland between January and June 2020 – during the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when there were severe governmental restrictions regarding travelling and leaving home. The subject of the study were foreign volunteers hosted in Poland, and the research questions included:

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence long-term volunteering projects implemented in Poland?
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence foreign volunteers who implemented long-term volunteering projects in Poland?
- How did the volunteers who stayed in Poland to finish their long-term volunteering project perceive the notion of solidarity?

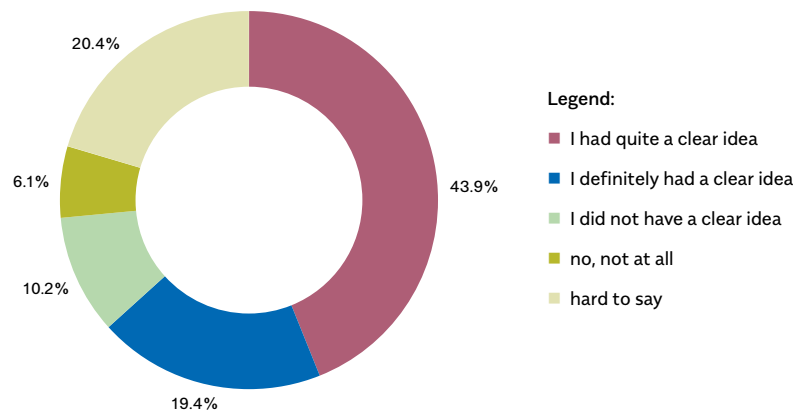
The study was carried out between April and July 2020 with an online survey sent out to all 183 foreign volunteers who were present in Poland between February and June 2020. The survey consisted of 16 questions (11 close-ended and 5 open-ended). In total, 98 complete questionnaires were received and analysed.

5. Perception of solidarity

As many as 63.3% of volunteers who took part in the survey had a clear idea of the notion of solidarity in the context of the European Solidarity Corps. At the same time, over 15% of respondents claimed the opposite, and for one in five it was hard to say. This leads to the conclusion that despite the notion

of solidarity being understood by more than half of ESC volunteers, the concept still remains obscure for almost 30% of them.

Figure 1. Distribution of ESC volunteers' answers to the question: "Before your volunteering project, did you have a clear idea about what 'solidarity' was in the context of the European Solidarity Corps?"



N = 98

The study also included open-ended questions, and their analysis helped to understand what volunteers understood solidarity to be and how their perceptions relate to theoretical concepts of this notion.

The respondents, when asked about what solidarity meant for them, most often indicated the following five semantic fields: (1) respect, (2) understanding, (3) empathy and unity, (4) tolerance, and (5) help, support and care (Jeżowski, 2021). Volunteers underlined in their answers that solidarity is related to respect for other people and their needs. They also underlined the ability to recognise other people's needs and to respond to them as an important feature of solidarity. Also, the respect is directly linked to an understanding of others that entails empathy and unity, especially in times of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the respondents stressed the importance of help, support and care, which also refers to taking responsibility for other, more vulnerable people.

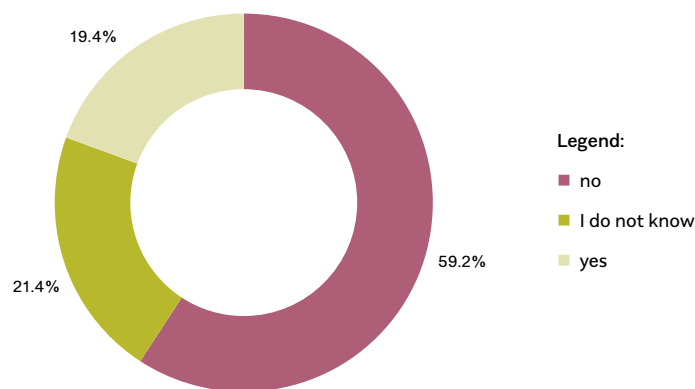
Examples of their acts of solidarity during their ESC project in Poland included doing shopping for elderly people in their communities, sewing protective masks, providing foreign language classes online (both group and individual) for Polish students who were about to take their final high school exams in May 2020, and cleaning up the neighbourhood areas – one of the very few activities they were able to do outdoors. It must be noted that these activities were not planned as part of the ESC project – they were carried out ad hoc because it was not possible to implement many planned activities because of government safety measures on the one hand and, on the other, the needs of local communities where the volunteers worked changed, and they adjusted to these changing needs.

The analysis of the understanding of solidarity by ESC volunteers and the examples of the actions they described as "solidarity activities" leads to the conclusion that the activities of ESC volunteers during the COVID-19 crisis can be described as a combination of Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity. The research revealed a high level of unanimity in volunteers' thoughts and actions (typical of mechanical

solidarity) and, at the same time, their acknowledgement of relations between individuals and the need for co-operation (organic solidarity).

The study also helped to understand whether the perception of solidarity evolved in any way as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the respondents answered negatively. 21.4% of them were not sure, while 19.4% admitted that their perception of solidarity had changed somehow because of the ESC project they were carrying out.

Figure 2. Distribution of ESC volunteers' answers to the question: "Did your volunteering experience during the pandemic change your idea of 'solidarity'?"



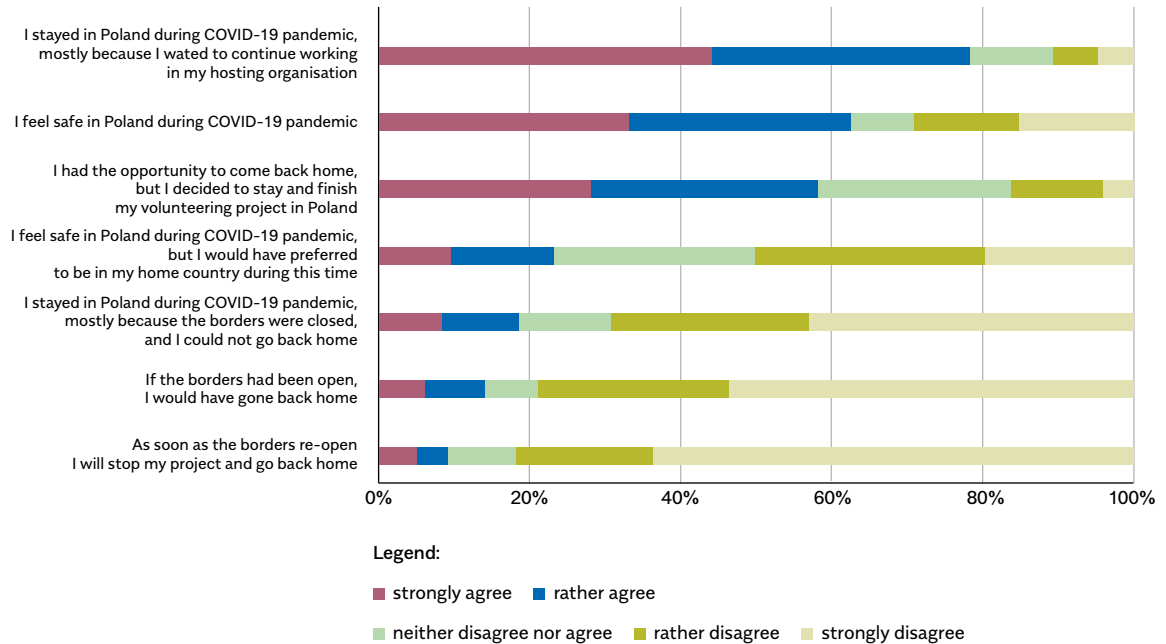
N = 98

Those who claimed to have changed their perception of solidarity most often argued that it became more important to them and considered it as one of their crucial values. Some respondents also stated that they had never thought about solidarity before, but their ESC project during the COVID-19 pandemic had made them more reflective about this value.

One might argue that the fact that they stayed in Poland and finished the project and did not return early to their home countries was the ultimate act of solidarity of ESC volunteers. Over 77% of respondents declared that they had stayed in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly because they wanted to continue working for their host organisations. What is more, over 62% claimed to have had the opportunity to go back to their home countries (mostly in early March 2020, when the borders were still open); however, they decided to stay and finish their project instead. This is even more significant given the safety concerns expressed by over 16% of respondents (see next paragraph). At the time of the research, most Polish borders were closed for international travel, however, only 9.2% of volunteers who took part in the survey stated that they will stop their project and go back home as soon as the borders re-open.

The most polarised answers concerned the safety of the volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. 27.6% claimed to have felt safe, 30.6% rather safe, 25.5% neither safe nor endangered, and 16.3% did not feel safe during the pandemic in Poland. At the same time, 22.5% stated that they felt safe, but they would have preferred to have been in their home country.

Figure 3. Distribution of ESC volunteers' answers to the reference: "Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements"



N = 98

6. Conclusions

Taking into consideration the fact that many respondents did not take the opportunity to go back home and stayed in Poland to continue their projects, even though the project activities planned initially were mostly cancelled due to government safety restrictions, can be perceived as an act of solidarity. Moreover, for the majority of volunteers, their perception of solidarity did not change as a result of their ESC experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the majority of them had a clear idea about solidarity before their volunteering experience in question. The analysis of the qualitative data demonstrated that, for ESC volunteers who took part in the survey, solidarity was an important value, and several respondents concluded that in times of crisis, it was one of the key principles helping to shape modern societies, where individuals depend more and more on each other. Finally, the research revealed a high level of unanimity of volunteers' thoughts and actions and, at the same time, their acknowledgement of relations between individuals and the need for their co-operation.

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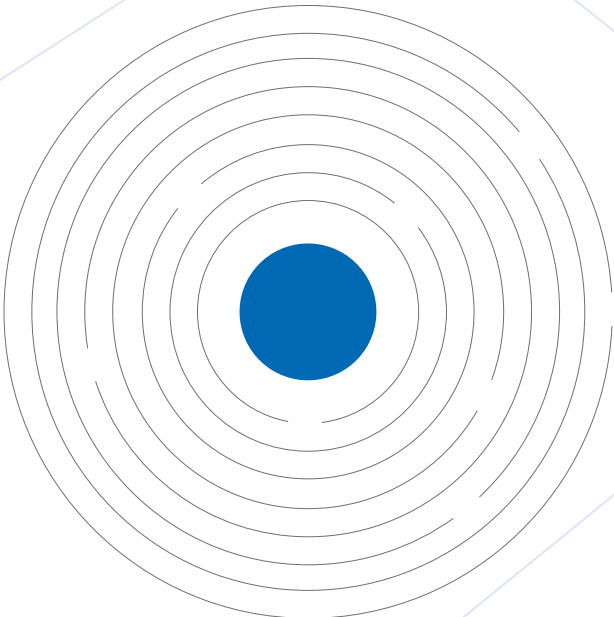
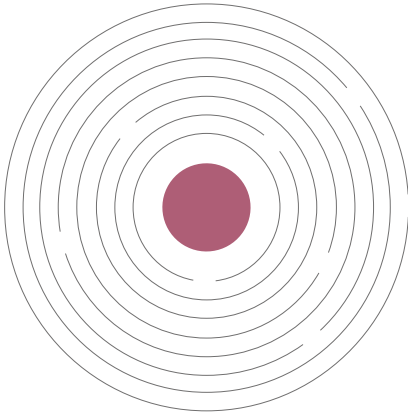
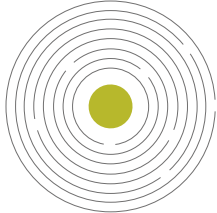
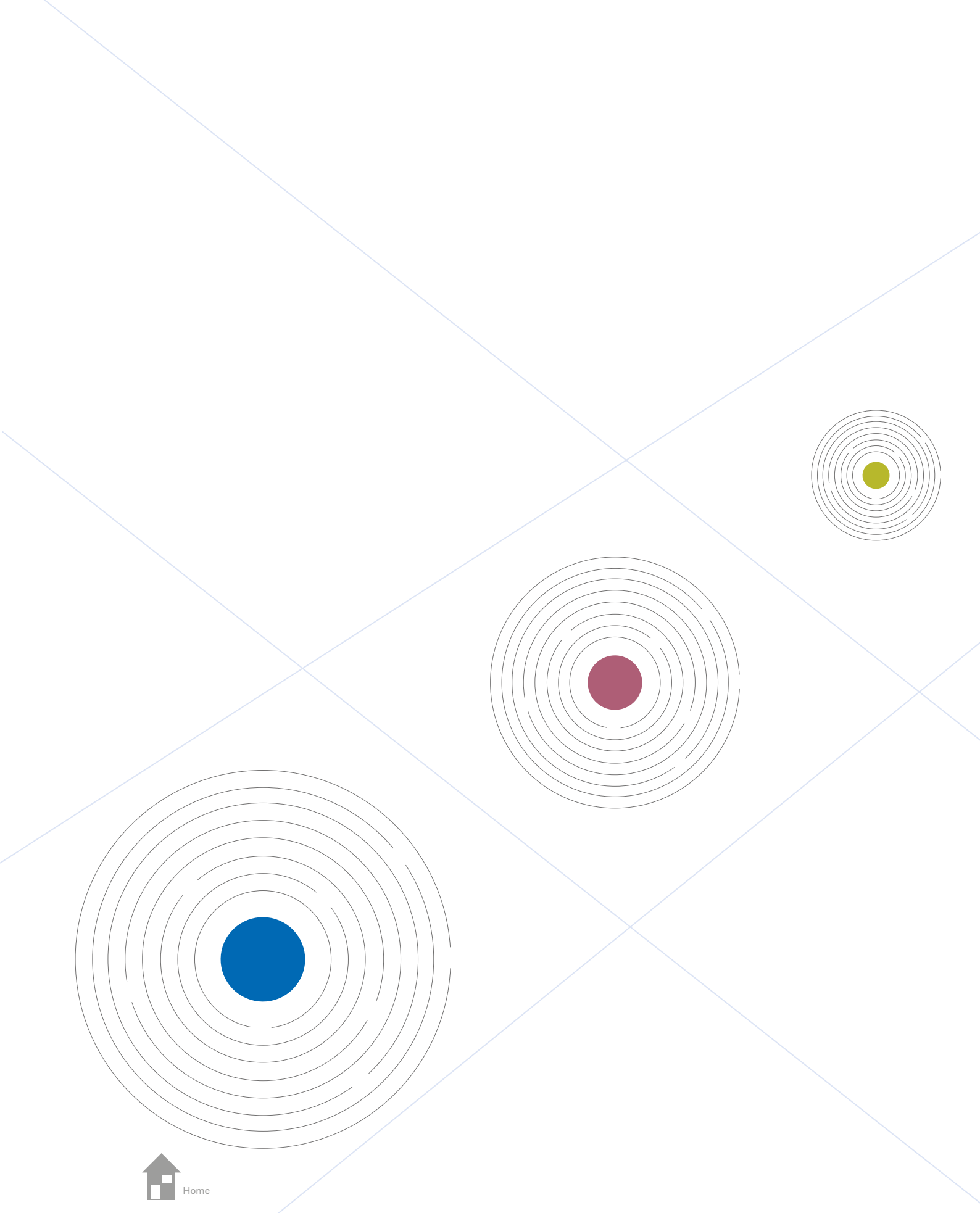
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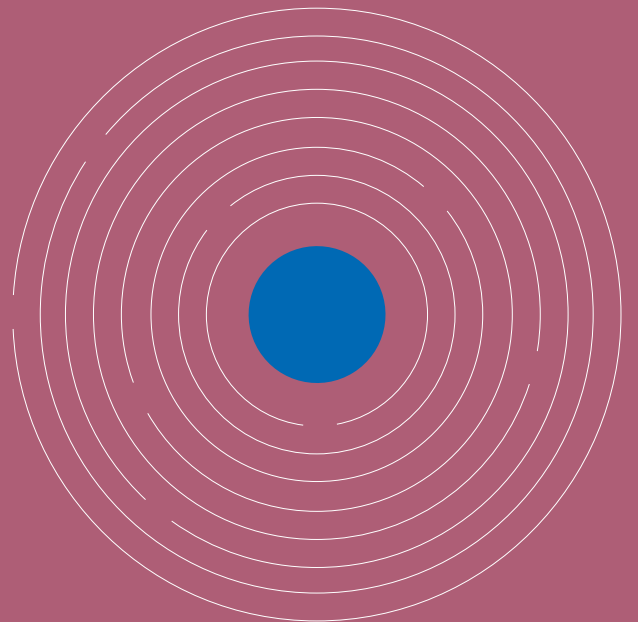
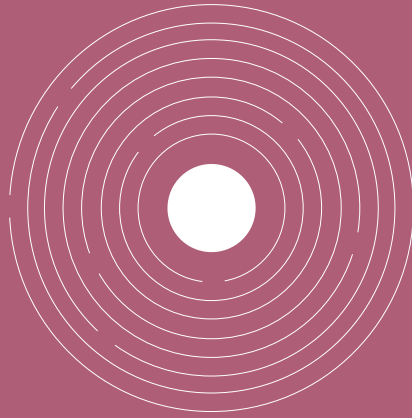
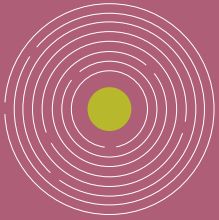
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Towards institutional development

Erasmus+ staff mobility motivations, impact, recognition and satisfaction – an exploratory study of post-mobility survey responses

By **Queenie K. H. Lam**

1. Introduction

In the European context, the Erasmus+ mobility has been the main driver of internationalisation processes over the past three decades, setting in motion the development of a wide range of services, activities and strategies that led to an increasing professionalisation of international co-operation in higher education. Both student and staff mobilities have been financially supported by the programme, which in the 2014–2020 period was extended to cover partner countries worldwide.

The Erasmus+ plays a key role in supporting staff mobility, which is less known than its student mobility component. Moreover, there is much less research on staff mobility compared to the student mobility part of the programme¹. Although there is a vast amount of data and information collected on an annual basis on staff mobility via the Erasmus+ Participant Reports, which mobile individuals funded via the programme must fill in, little has been done with the data on either the EU level or the national level.

In light of this, nine Erasmus+ national agencies from nine programme countries came together and commissioned the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) to carry out an exploratory data mining study covering almost the entire programme period (2014–2019) in 2020 to assess:

- the potential of this dataset for a better understanding of Erasmus+ staff mobility

¹ To date, staff mobility has been covered in the two Erasmus(+) Higher Education Impact Studies conducted in: 2014 (bit.ly/3mRretl) and 2019 (bit.ly/3llwYM8). These studies give some first insights into the added value of the programme on mobile staff's personal development, teaching and employment. Also, a snapshot picture of staff mobility flows in higher education is given in the annual Erasmus+ reports published by the European Commission. The latest one for 2019 and its statistical annex are stored at: bit.ly/3ahYzrp and bit.ly/3AnXGYI. Occasionally, further analysis is pursued at the national level.

QUEENIE K. H. LAM

holds a Bachelor's degree in translation, a Master's degree in communication and one in higher education research and development. She occasionally serves as an independent expert for the European Commission and as a reviewer for academic journals. She has been working for the Brussels-based Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) since 2010. First, responsible for a mixed portfolio of project development, policy research and membership services. At present, she is responsible for consultancy services for ACA members. Her core expertise lies in international higher education marketing, branding and strategising.

KEYWORDS

ERASMUS+ STAFF MOBILITY, DATA ANALYSIS, MOTIVATION, IMPACT, RECOGNITION, SATISFACTION

→ the potential added value of a comparative analysis of staff mobility along some key dimensions such as general trends and patterns, motivations, impact, recognition and satisfaction.

This paper highlights the motivations, impact, recognition and satisfaction dimensions of the full study (Lam & Ferencz, 2021) as well as topics for further research using the dataset.

2. Methodology

2.1. Coverage

The nine countries that took part in this comparative study represent a diverse geographical spread as well as a broad variety in size, measured through the volume of finalised mobility instances², although this was somewhat coincidental as the countries volunteered to take part in this comparative analysis. The nine countries are: Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy and Slovenia. The group covers countries from the Northern/Western, Central/Eastern, Central/Western, Central/Southern and Southern parts of the European Union (EU). For an exploratory study, this coverage provides a rather good basis for generating initial insights for designing a fully representative study that would cover all the Erasmus+ programme countries.

2.2. Dataset

The analysis highlighted in this paper was based on survey data extracted from the Erasmus+ reporting tool by the nine participating national agencies. After data cleaning, 75,023 unique records were captured in the reference years 2014 to 2019 (calendar years when mobility activities funded by Erasmus+ started; Figure 1). These are responses of individual Erasmus+ staff mobility participants who were obliged to return the report after undertaking outgoing mobility activities, including KA103 and KA107 mobilities for teaching and training. The average response rate is estimated to be 99%, covering almost an entire mobile staff population. During the reference period, the questionnaire remained largely unchanged as well. It was thus stable enough to return comparable data for longitudinal studies on major dimensions of staff mobility.

3. Data analysis

Intended as an exploratory pilot study, the full study cross-tabulated almost all the variables of the survey responses except those concerning personal data and financial data, which were excluded from the dataset. The analysis highlighted here was primarily quantitative and based on the survey data

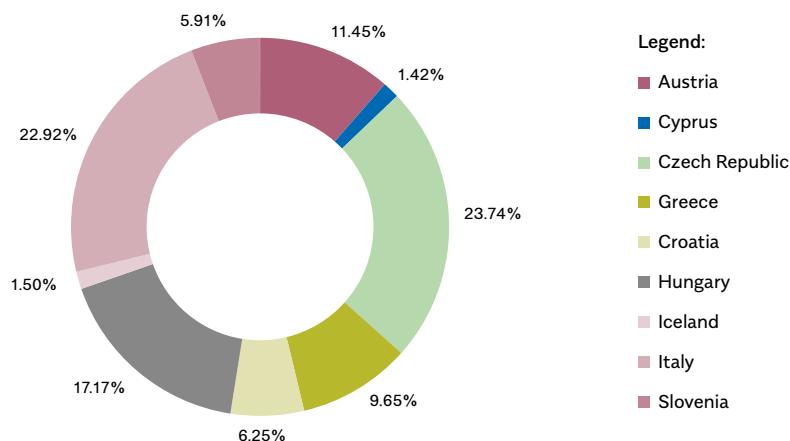
2 As is shown in this study, it is not uncommon for staff members to take part in EU-funded mobility programmes (Erasmus+ and its predecessor, the Lifelong Learning Programme) more than once. Each of the survey responses corresponds to one mobility occurrence, termed as a "mobility instance" in this study, instead of one unique person who may have returned more than one response in a given year or the selected reference period.

sourced from the nine countries. For more in-depth analysis, especially on the differences observed on a country level, more qualitative data (e.g. interviews with data collectors, funding programme co-ordinators, policymakers and a sample of mobile staff, or a document analysis of policy papers, funding guides and priorities) would be necessary to explain the trends and patterns observed in the trend and pattern analysis.

It must also be noted that the survey data gathered in this study are not without flaws. As with most large-scale datasets, there is a trade-off between data accuracy and timeliness. The data for the recent years, covering up to the 2020 calendar year in some countries, may not have been validated and may still be subject to changes.

Another potential flaw of the data from a mandatory post-mobility survey with a 99% average response rate is a positive bias about the EU-funded mobility experience and a potential bias towards personal impact. Such potential biases should be taken into account when interpreting the responses or when improving the survey instrument for the new funding programme.

Figure 1. Share of mobility instances by country of origin



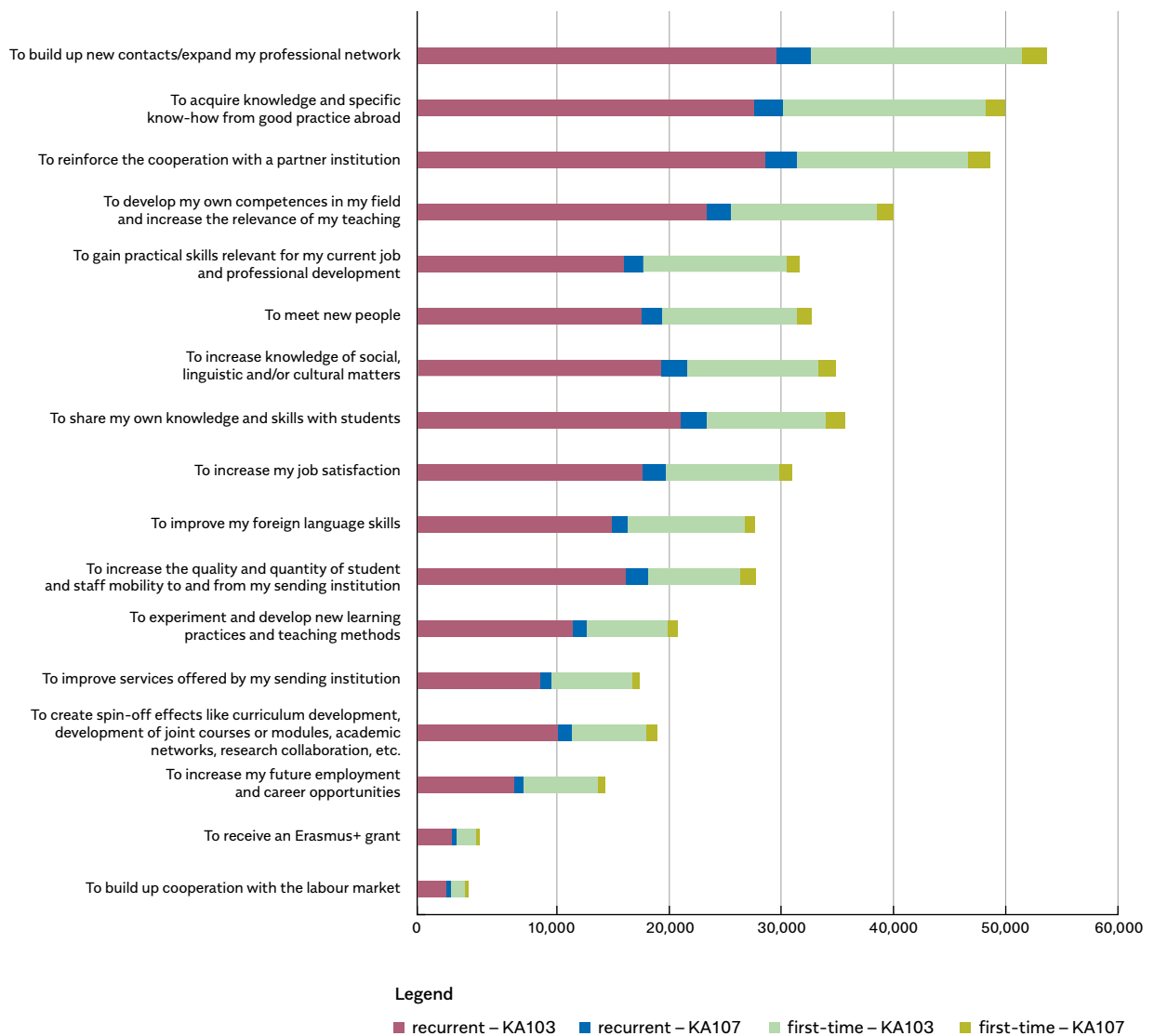
N = 75,023

4. Motivations

The analysis of the motivations reported by mobile staff members shows that the most common motivations, considering all the mobility instances concerned, were for professional networking and the acquisition of good practice abroad, followed by the reinforcement of institutional co-operation and the development of field-related competences. In contrast, the least common motivations were receiving an Erasmus+ grant and building up co-operation with the labour market (Figure 2).

Comparing the motivations of mobility instances by participant type (first-time and recurrent participants), the top four motivations, related to networking and the acquisition of good practices, are the same for both groups. Following these, mobility instances of first-time participants were more likely to be motivated by gaining job-related practical skills and meeting new people, while recurrent participants were more likely to be motivated by the sharing of knowledge and skills with students and increasing social, linguistic and/or cultural knowledge, for example.

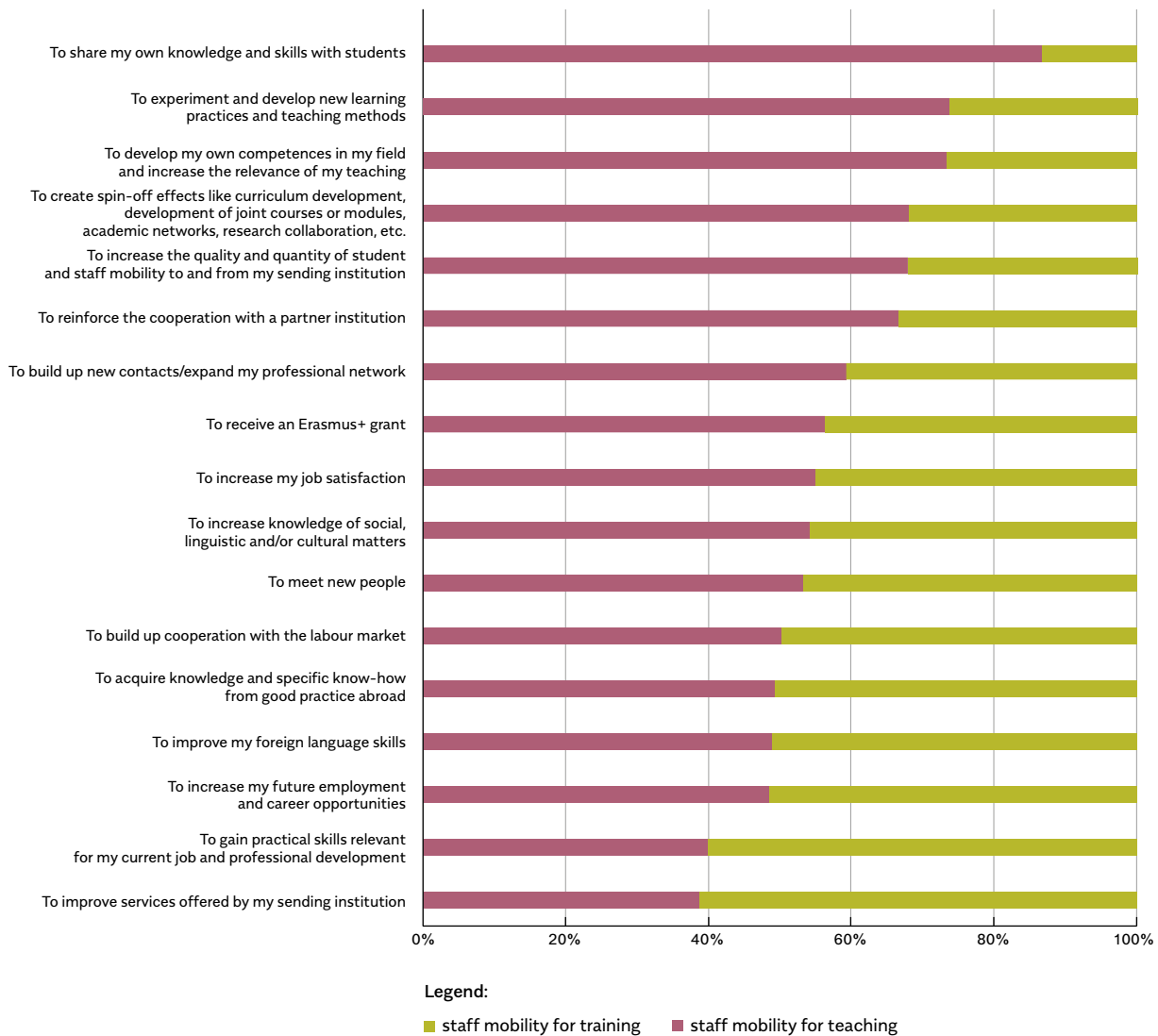
Figure 2. Common motivations for Erasmus+ staff mobility by action type and participant type (ranked by first-time participants)



N = 75,014

Knowing that there was a strong increase of mobility instances for training, which tended to be carried out by first-time participants, the order of these motivations reflects to some extent the different motivations driving staff mobility for teaching and staff mobility for training detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Common motivations for Erasmus+ staff mobility by action type and mobility type



N = 73,690

As shown in Figure 3, the motivations driving staff mobility for teaching and staff mobility for training are markedly different. Sharing knowledge and skills with students was primarily the motivation of mobility for teaching (86.66% of all responses citing this motivation). Other motivations mainly mentioned in staff mobility for teaching were the development of new learning/teaching methods (73.69%), the acquisition of field-related competences relevant to teaching (73.37%) and the creation of spin-off curricula or research collaboration (68.05%). Following these teaching-specific motivations were mobility-related motivations like increasing student and staff mobility (67.86%) and reinforcing co-operation with partner institutions (66.58%).

Motivations more related to staff mobility for training were improving the services of the sending institution (61.28%) or gaining job-related practical skills (60.18%).

Other networking-related motivations were more or less shared by both types of mobility, although they varied to a great extent in the absolute numbers of responses, as shown in Figure 2.

5. Impact

The Erasmus+ staff mobility survey dataset provides very comprehensive coverage of impact indicators on personal and professional development, mobility and internationalisation, organisational changes and societal engagement. The potential of the survey dataset for assessing the perceived impact of Erasmus+ staff mobility is immense, especially if linked to the administrative data, which will allow even more nuanced differentiation by institutional type or professional profile of the participants.

In this report, a contrast approach was adopted to present the most and least visible impacts in relation to the indicated motivations ranked in the previous section. Given the interest of the funders and the policy objective of Erasmus+, a special focus was also placed on the impact of mobilities and internationalisation.

With this approach, there appears to be a clear alignment between the reported motivation and impact. In other words, a substantially stronger impact on personal and professional development, particularly on networking and the sharing of good practices rather than on societal engagement such as co-operation with the labour market or civil society, was noted. Corresponding to the policy objective of the Erasmus+ project, impact on mobilities and internationalisation was perceived as strong on both the individual and institutional level, although other institutional impacts such as organisational changes, tended to be weaker.

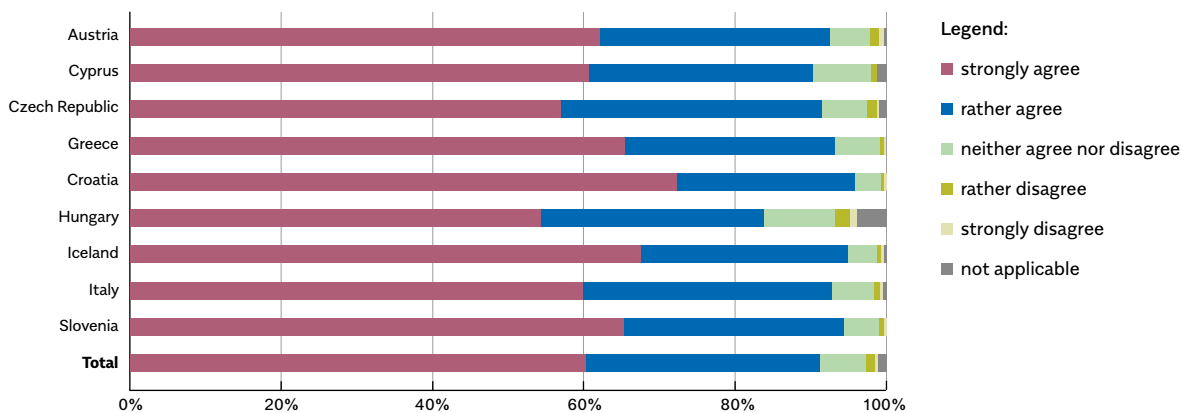
There is some degree of self-reporting bias given that the survey was a mandatory post-mobility report for individual mobile staff members. However, the clear alignment of the impact with the highest- and lowest-ranked motivations and the primary policy objective of the mobility funding programme indicates that the participants perceived their experience largely from their personal perspective and in line with the general policy objectives.

The institutional and societal impact may have to be assessed with a separate instrument and with some time lag after the staff mobility because organisational and societal changes require more time to materialise, and thus cannot be immediately captured in the post-mobility survey. The same is true for long-term personal and professional impact (e.g. career development), which may be more accurately gauged with another survey after a few years, like graduate employability surveys, which have to be repeated at certain time intervals to trace the longer-term impact.

5.1. Impact on personal and professional development

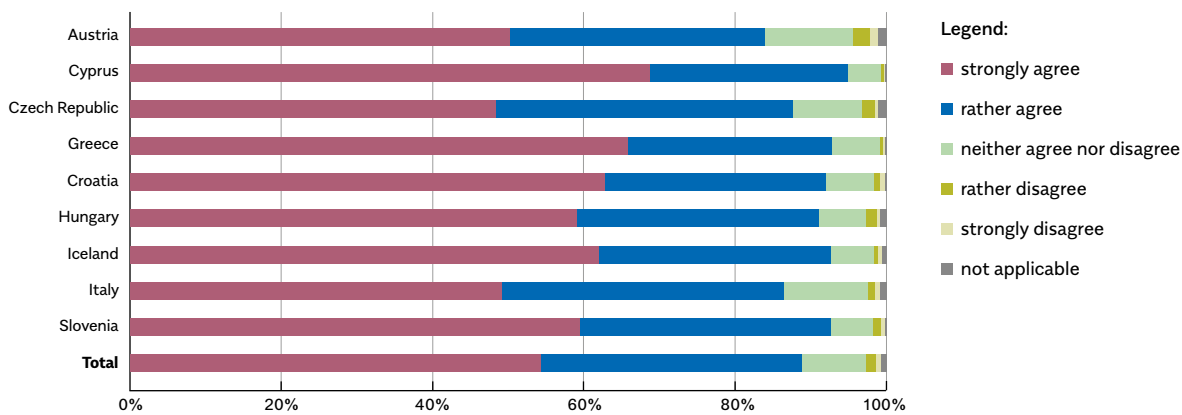
Corresponding to the top two motivations driving Erasmus+ staff mobility in general, an overwhelmingly positive impact was reported on networking and the learning of good practices abroad. Despite slight country differences, some 90% of the respondents, on average, indicated that they “strongly agree” or “rather agree” with the statements that they have reinforced/extended their professional network or learnt from good practices abroad. On average, over 60% and some 55% “strongly agreed” with the two statements, respectively (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Impact on networking – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have reinforced or extended my professional network or built up new contacts”



N = 75,014

Figure 5. Impact on the acquisition of good practices abroad – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have learnt from good practices abroad”



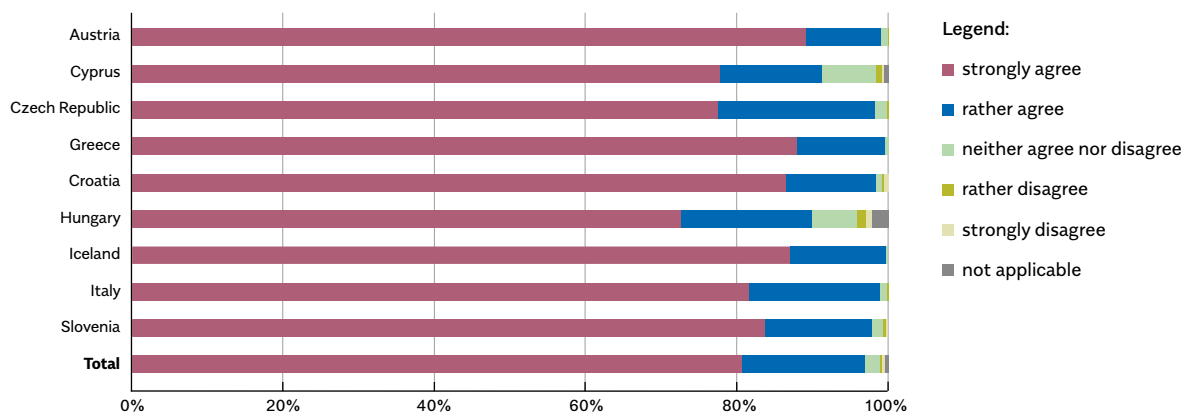
N = 75,014

Differences were observed in the percentage frequency of the different levels of agreement with these two impact statements. For example, Croatian and Icelandic respondents were much more likely to strongly agree with the networking impact, while Cypriot and Greek respondents were much more likely to strongly agree with the impact on the acquisition of good practices. In contrast, the Czechs and Italians were much less likely to report a strong agreement with the impact on the acquisition of good practices. The Erasmus+ Participant Report data alone is not sufficient to explain these differences, but it is important to reveal such country differences so that further research can be designed to find out the reasons for differences at the country level with additional quantitative or qualitative data that could potentially be used to supplement or triangulate the reporting data.

5.2. Impact on teaching and learning

Another overwhelmingly positive direct impact of Erasmus+ staff mobilities was that staff who took part in a mobility for teaching shared their own knowledge and skills with students or other persons. On average, 97% of the responses from mobility instances for teaching indicated “rather agree” or “strongly agree” for this statement (Figure 6). This correlates positively with the top motivation driving mobility instances for teaching purposes shown in Figure 3. However, when it comes to the second most commonly indicated motivation for teaching mobility (to experiment with new teaching methods), the impact was much less evident.

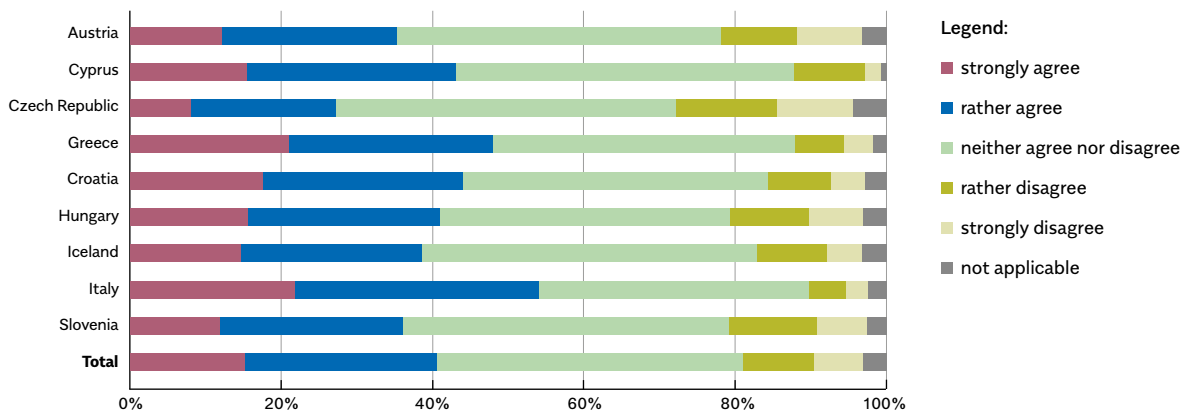
Figure 6. Impact on knowledge and skill-sharing – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have shared my own knowledge and skills with students or other persons”



N = 43,043 (staff mobility for teaching only)

There is an average of slightly over 40% positive responses, counting both “strongly agree” and “rather agree”, for the statement that the mobility “had led to the introduction of new teaching subjects” in the partner institution (Figure 7). However, there is an equally large share of “neither agree or disagree” responses, showing that the respondents were unsure about such an impact.

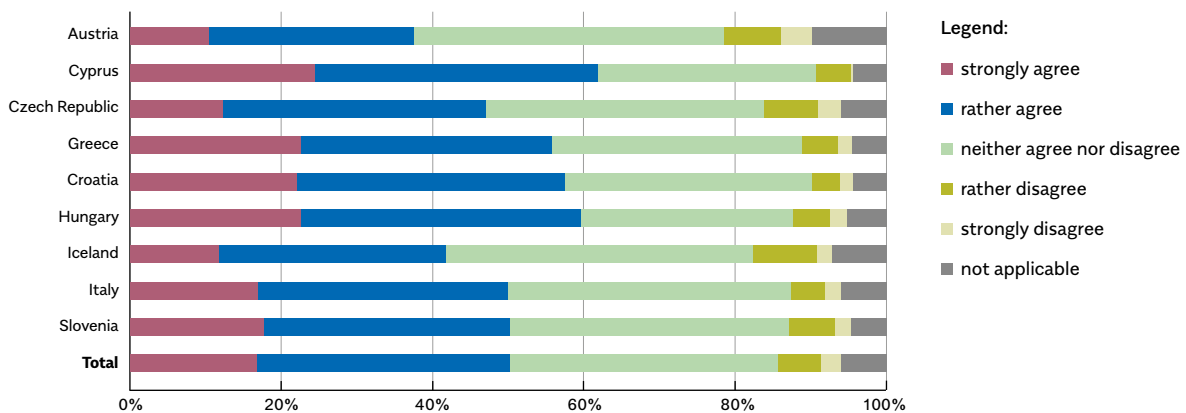
Figure 7. Impact on the introduction of new teaching subject(s) at the partner institution – distribution of responses to the statement that the mobility “Has led to the introduction of new teaching subject(s)”



N = 43,168 (staff mobility for teaching only)

Relatively speaking, a stronger impact on the innovation of teaching practices at home institutions was felt by the respondents, with over 50% of them opting for “strongly agree” or “rather agree” in response to the statement that the mobility led to the use of new teaching practices at the sending institution (Figure 8). However, there remains a substantial average share (over 35%) of “neither agree nor disagree” responses.

Figure 8. Impact on the use of new teaching practices at the sending institution – distribution of responses to the statement that the mobility “Has led to the use of new teaching or training methods, approaches, good practices at my sending institution”



N = 43,402 (staff mobility for teaching only)

Though less than impressive when compared to the direct impact on knowledge and skill-sharing during the mobility period, such longer-term and broader impacts on innovations in teaching methods in the receiving and sending institutions may be better gauged through an institutional survey or with a time lag considering that such changes may take time to materialise.

Again, country differences were observed, especially in the impacts on the introduction of new teaching subjects. For example, Italian and Greek participants were much more likely to report a strong agreement with the introduction of new teaching subjects at the partner universities, while Austrian, Icelandic and Czech participants were much less likely to indicate their strong agreement with regard to the impact on new teaching practices at the sending institutions. Additional country-level analysis may help explain such country differences by looking into more detailed mobility patterns (e.g. top mobility destinations might be just across the border and thus share a similar teaching or learning language and culture) or the organisational cultures of the partner and sending institutions.

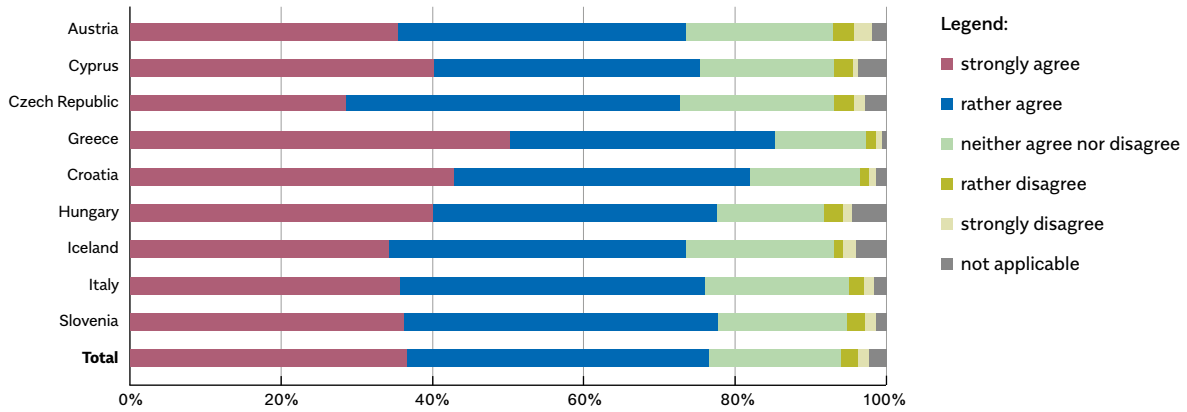
5.3. Impact on mobility and internationalisation

Despite the uncertain responses given on institutional impact in general, impact on the quality of mobility, internationalisation, institutional co-operation and the motivation of non-mobile students was generally positive, with more than 70% responses on average.

From the perspective of the sending institution, 76.5% of all responses indicated “strongly agree” or “rather agree” in response to the statement “I contributed to increasing the quality and quantity of student or staff mobility to and from my sending institution” (Figure 9). A slightly lower average of 72.6% indicated “strongly agree” or “rather agree” in response to the statement that the mobility “Has led to the internationalisation of my sending institution” (Figure 10). Similarly, around 73% of the responses indicated “strongly agree” or “rather agree” in response to the statement that the mobility “Has led to new/increased co-operation with the partner institution or organisation(s)” (Figure 11). When it comes to the perceived impact on the receiving institution, the impact of staff mobility on motivating students to take part in a mobility was just as strong, with 75.7% indicating that they “strongly agree” or “rather agree” that the mobility “Has enhanced the motivation of non-mobile students to study or do a traineeship abroad” (Figure 12).

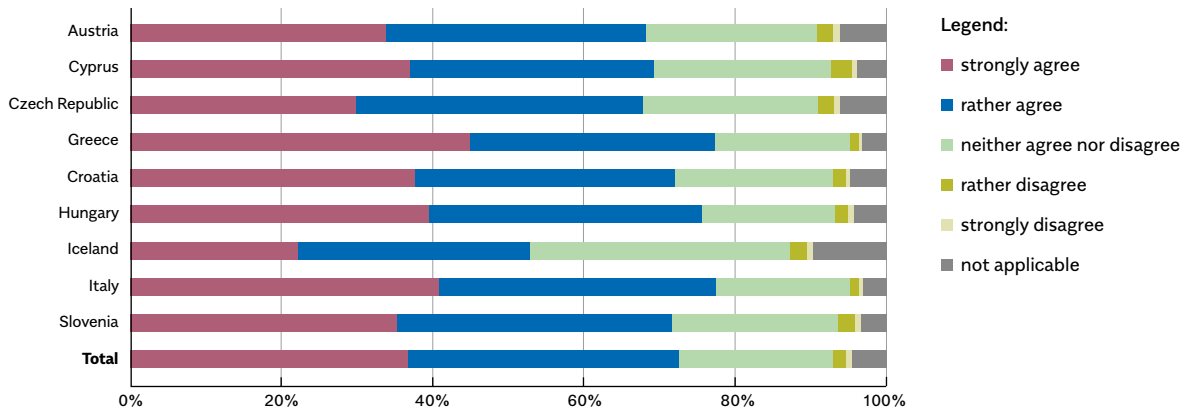
The general analysis here shows a stronger positive impact on the mobility of individuals than internationalisation or institutional co-operation from a process or institutional perspective, although the impact on internationalisation and mobility was largely positive compared to other organisational changes. The average share of “strongly agree” for all these statements ranges between 30–38%.

Figure 9. Impact on the quality of mobility at the sending institution – distribution of responses to the statement: “I contributed to increasing the quality and quantity of student or staff mobility to and from my sending institution”



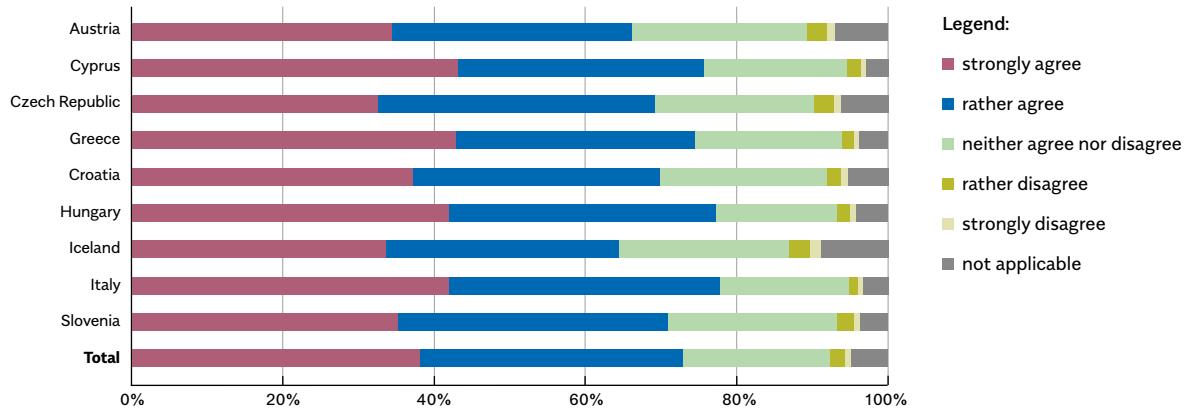
N = 75,014

Figure 10. Impact on the internationalisation of the sending institution – distribution of responses to the statement that the mobility “Has led to the internationalisation of my sending institution”



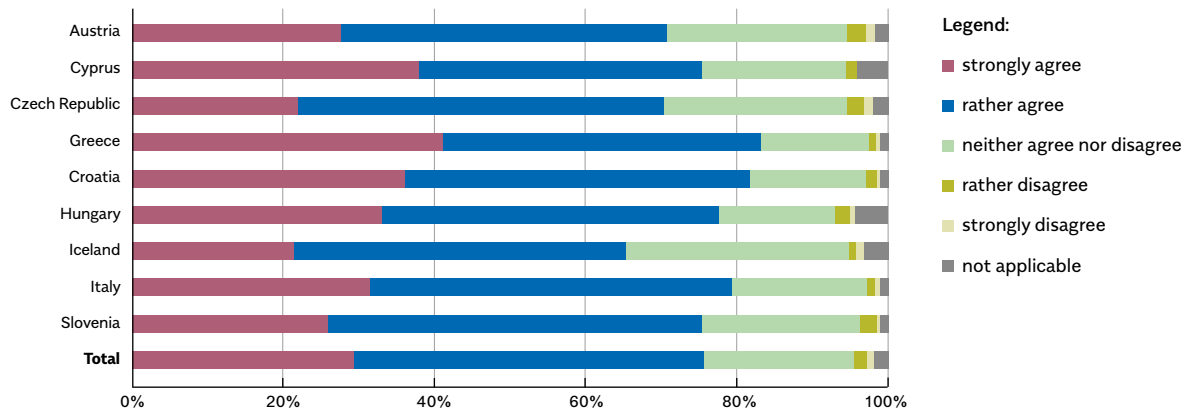
N = 74,721

Figure 11. Impact on the co-operation with the partner institution or organisation – distribution of responses to the statement that the mobility “Has led to new/increased co-operation with the partner institution or organisation(s)”



N = 74,721

Figure 12. Impact on the motivation of non-mobile students to take part in a mobility – distribution of responses to the statement that the mobility “Has enhanced the motivation of non-mobile students to study or do a traineeship abroad”



N = 74,721

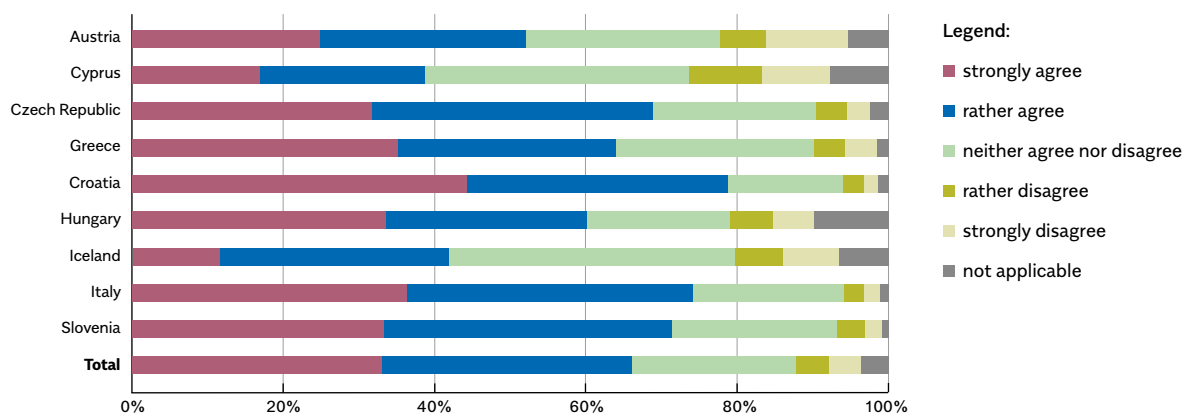
A general observation on the country differences is that Greek participants were much more likely to indicate their strong agreement with the statements about the positive impact on internationalisation, while the Czech and Icelandic participants were less likely to indicate their strong agreement with the same statements. It is beyond the scope of the original design of this exploratory study to examine the reasons behind such differences, but from the data on the top destination countries (Lam & Ferencz, 2021), one may infer that the concentration of outward mobile staff in neighbouring countries (so-called just-across-the-border mobility) such as Slovakia (16.6%) and Poland (10.6%) for the Czech participants, could be a reason that needs further investigation.

5.4. Impact on foreign language acquisition and intercultural learning

Regarding other impacts on international learning, some countries (Cyprus, Austria) showed significant differences between the acquisition of foreign language skills (Figure 13) and increased social, linguistic or cultural competences (Figure 14). There are noticeable country differences in terms of the perceived impact on the acquisition of foreign language skills (Figure 13), but a largely positive impact across the board on increased social, linguistic or cultural competences. More than 80% of the responses indicated “strongly agree” or “rather agree” in answer to this question, although some country differences were observed.

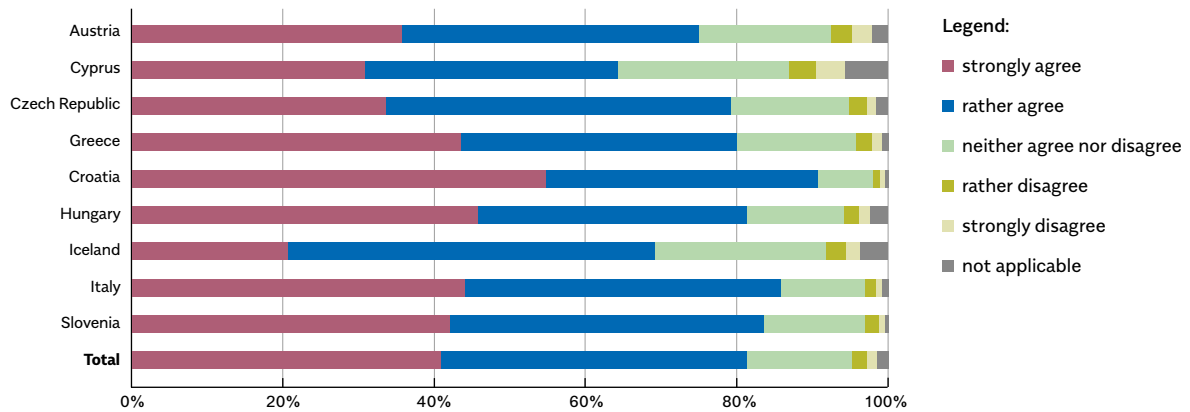
One possible reason for this could be the destination countries sharing similar languages due to “just-across-the-border mobility” (in the case of Austria) or historical ties (in the case of Cyprus). While foreign language improvement was less significant in these cases, mobility towards other “systems” may still generate benefits in terms of social and cultural competences. More detailed analysis should be conducted on the national level in this direction. The two survey questions in the Erasmus+ Participant Report may also be improved by removing the duplication of the “linguistic” aspect in light of this observation.

Figure 13. Impact on foreign language skills – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have improved my foreign language skills”



N = 74,014

Figure 14. Impact on social, linguistic or cultural competences – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have increased my social, linguistic or cultural competences”

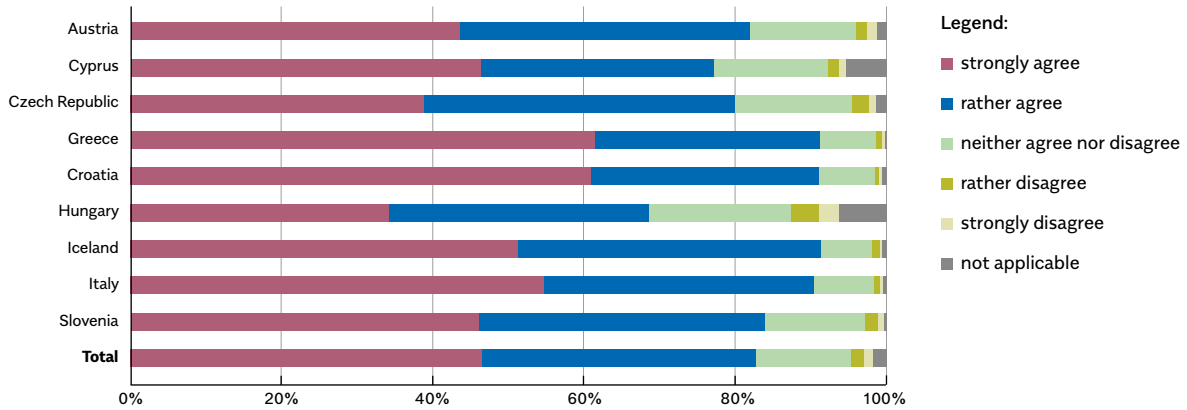


N = 74,014

5.5. Impact on job satisfaction and career opportunities

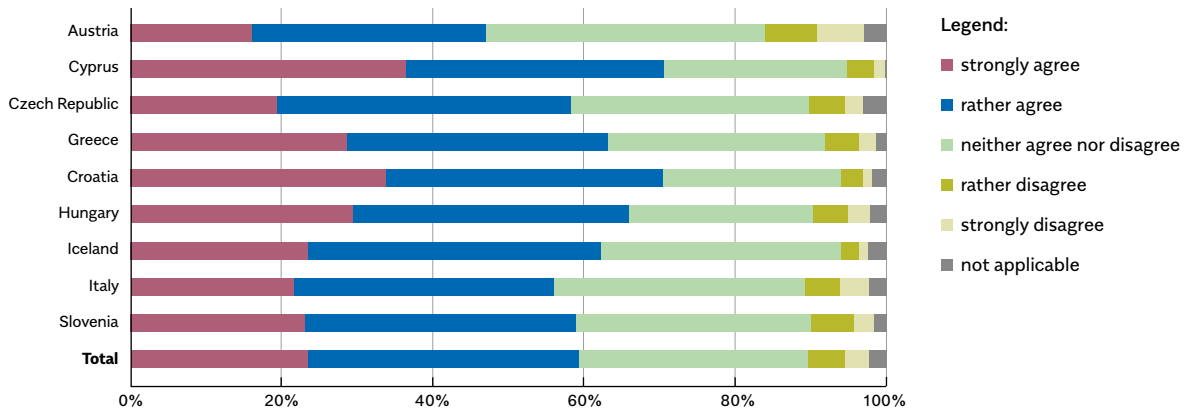
Comparing the impact on job satisfaction (Figure 15) with the impact on employment and career opportunities (Figure 16), the mobile staff felt more strongly about the former (around 46% strongly agree) than the latter (about 24%). This positively aligns with the ranking order of motivations observed in Figure 2 as a substantially higher number of responses indicated “job satisfaction” as a motivation than “career opportunities”. While this shows a clear difference felt by the mobile staff between a short-term, immediate impact on job satisfaction and a long-term impact on career change, it should be noted that career changes may not have been captured immediately by the post-mobility survey. This speaks for the need for a repeated survey a few years after the initial one to track longer-term impacts as well as the need for a unique staff ID across institutions and countries to track such changes.

Figure 15. Impact on job satisfaction – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have increased my job satisfaction”



N = 74,014

Figure 16. Impact on employment and career opportunities – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have enhanced my employment and career opportunities”



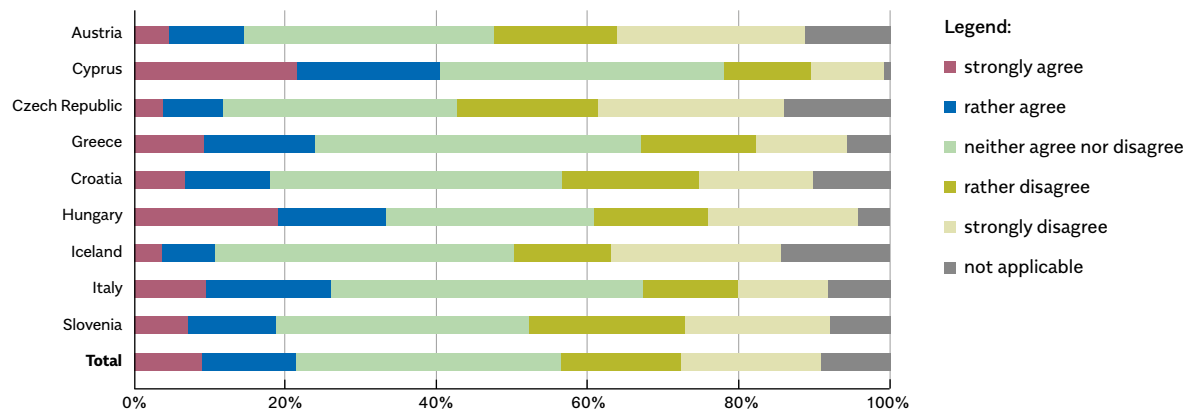
N = 74,014

Noticeable country differences were observed among those who indicated a strong agreement with the statement on increased job satisfaction. Greek and Croatian participants were much more likely to indicate that they “strongly agree” with this statement than Hungarian and Czech participants, for example. In terms of enhanced career opportunities, Cypriot and Croatian participants were more likely to indicate that they “strongly agree” with this statement than Austrian and Czech participants. Again, reasons may vary from country to country, but a closer look into the country of destinations, profiles of the participants and motivations driving the mobility may be able to provide additional insights.

5.6. Impact on co-operation with players in the labour market and civil society

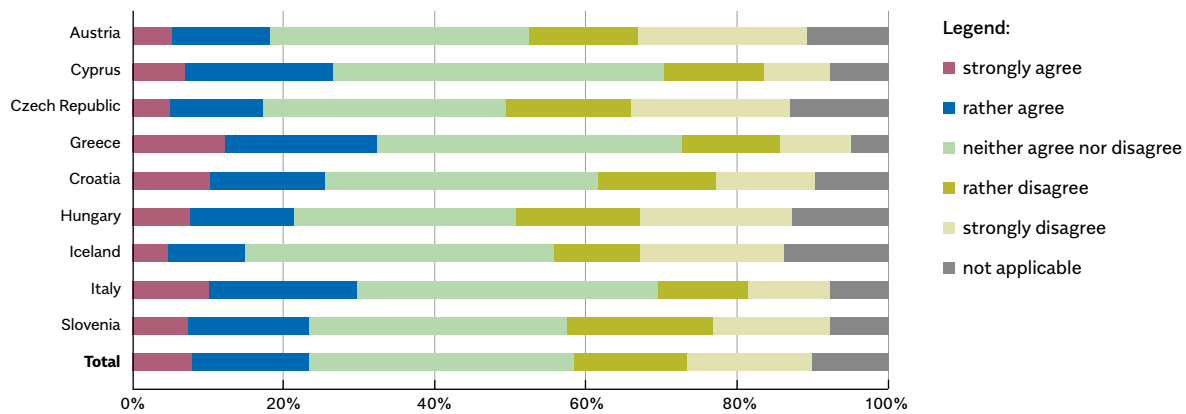
Finally, in terms of broader impact, great uncertainties were reflected both in the impact on co-operation with players in the labour market (Figure 17) and in civil society (Figure 18), with large shares of “neither agree or disagree” responses across the board (30–45%) and small shares of positive responses, counting both “strongly agree” and “rather agree” (about 20% on average), in most countries. This mirrors the ranking order of the motivations indicated in the responses in Figure 2 as well. The country differences should be further examined in relation to the motivations as co-operation with the labour market appears to have motivated more mobility instances in southern European countries than in other countries.

Figure 17. Impact on co-operation with players in the labour market – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have built co-operation with players in the labour market”



N = 74,014

Figure 18. Impact on co-operation with players in civil society – distribution of responses to the statement: “I have built co-operation with players in civil society”



$N = 74,014$

In short, most findings of this exploratory study show the evident alignment between the most and least mentioned motivations and the self-reported impact. A stronger impact was reported on short-term and personal or professional development as opposed to long-term or institutional impact in general. Having said that, the self-reported impact on mobility and internationalisation was largely positive at both the personal and institutional levels.

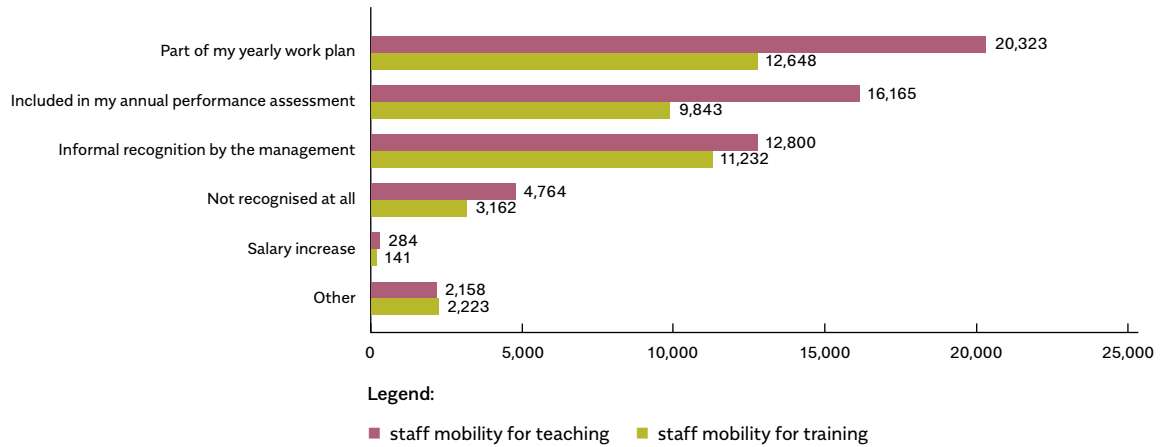
6. Recognition

6.1. Forms of recognition received

As shown in Figure 19, among those who responded to the question about forms of recognition received after the mobility period, the most frequently mentioned was recognition as part of the participant's yearly work plan. This applies to mobility instances both for teaching and for training. For training, informal recognition by the management was the second most mentioned, while for teaching mobility, the second most mentioned form of recognition was inclusion in the participant's annual performance assessment. This shows that mobility for teaching had a slightly more formalised form of recognition. In both activity types, salary increase was a rare option.

Overall, most of those who responded to the question reported that there was some form of recognition. Only a small number of them said the experience was not recognised at all.

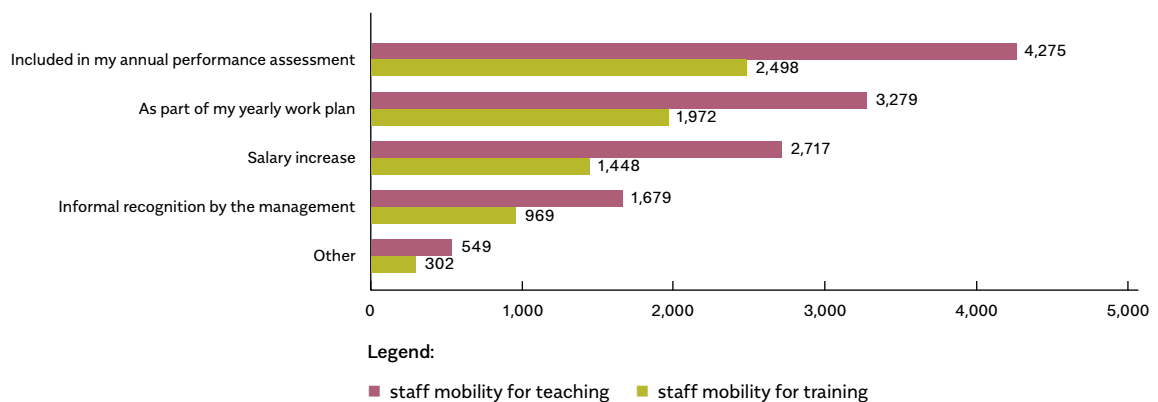
Figure 19. Forms of recognition by activity type



N = 74,867

Only a very small fraction of all respondents answered the question of how they would like to see their mobility experience recognised. Among those who responded, formal recognition was preferred over informal recognition by participants of both teaching and training mobilities, as shown in Figure 20. The most frequently mentioned form of preferred recognition was its inclusion in an annual performance assessment and, related to that, directly or indirectly, a salary increase, which was mentioned more often than informal recognition. Although indicative, it is a rather clear signal that not only would recognition be appreciated, but formal recognition would be preferred.

Figure 20. Forms of recognition desired by activity type



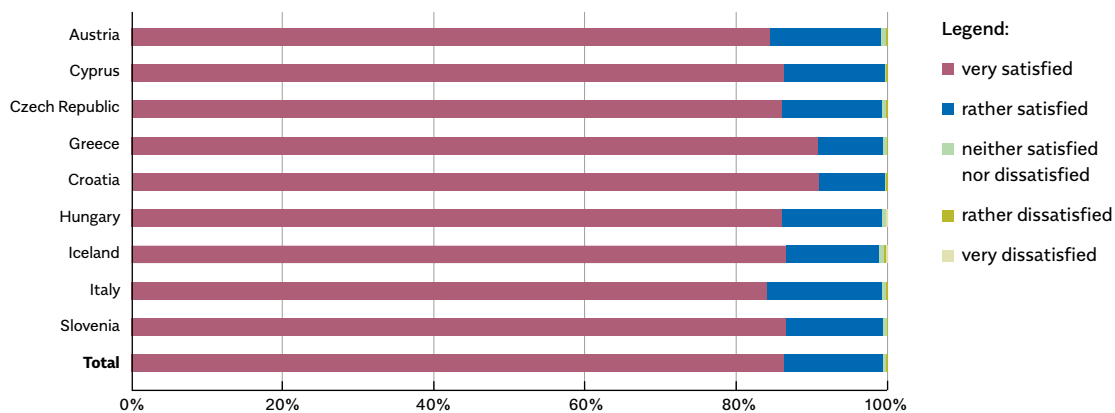
N = 14,915

7. Satisfaction

7.1. Satisfaction with the overall mobility experience

Over 99% of the responses said that they were “very satisfied” or “rather satisfied” with the overall mobility experience, as shown in Figure 21. However, the shares of “very satisfied” and “rather satisfied” varied across the nine countries. Over 90% of the responses from Greece and Croatia stated that they were “very satisfied” with the overall experience. However, only 83.93% from Italy and 84.39% from Austria shared the same opinion, while the others fell in the range of 86–87%.

Figure 21. Satisfaction with the overall mobility experience

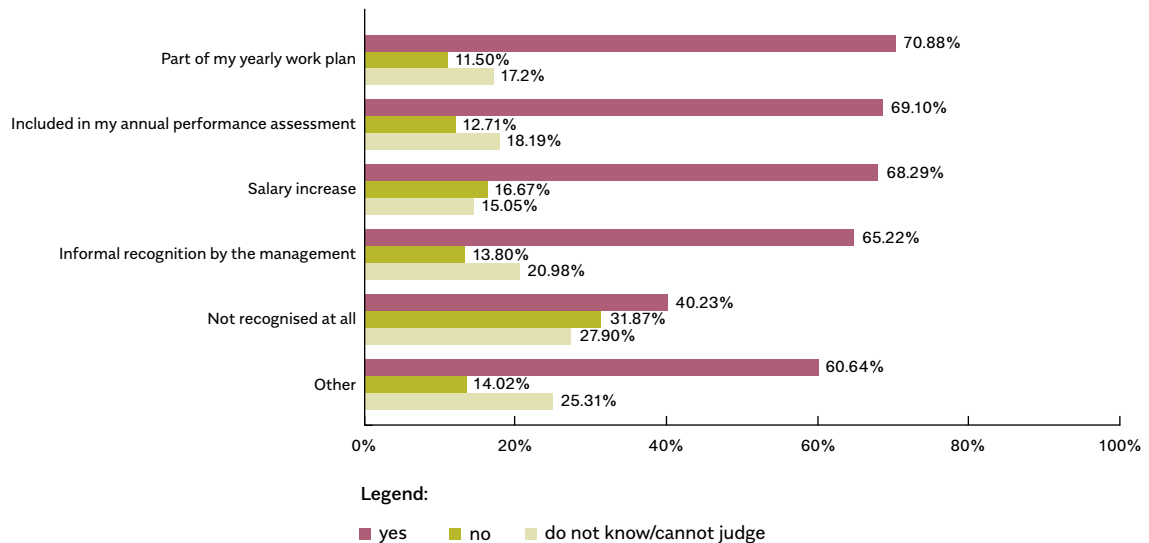


N = 74,866

7.2. Satisfaction with recognition received

With regard to satisfaction with the different forms of recognition received, whether formal or informal, there were only small differences in the percentages, which ranged between 65.22% and 70.88%. What is worth noting in Figure 22, is the high share of unsatisfied respondents (31.87%) who mentioned that their mobility experience was not recognised at all.

Figure 22. Satisfaction with the form of recognition received



N = 74,867

The findings above deserve further investigation from a university management perspective, as does the relationship between recognition and a strategic approach to internationalisation adopted by the sending university, described in the full report (Lam & Ferencz, 2021).

8. Limitations and potential further research

Intended as an exploratory exercise to examine the potential of the large amount of underused Erasmus+ administrative and Participant Report data, the findings in this study have revealed more questions for further research or actions rather than answers.

On the added value of comparative analysis, this exploratory study has pointed to similarities as well as differences between participating countries that can help deepen the understanding of staff mobility patterns and country differences, if supplemented with additional qualitative data.

It seems reasonable to expect that extending such an analysis to the entire programme level would provide an even more complete and insightful picture on the perceived impact of the Erasmus+ and that more in-depth analysis of the national datasets on the one hand and comparisons across programme countries on the other could be done at regular intervals for a more longitudinal perspective.

On the potential of the dataset for further research, the analysis shows that this potential is immense and that it could be further maximised through:

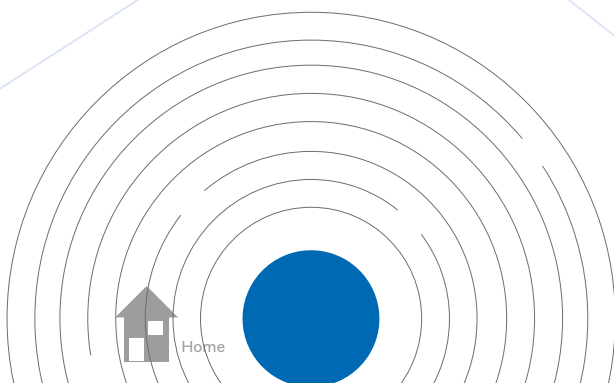
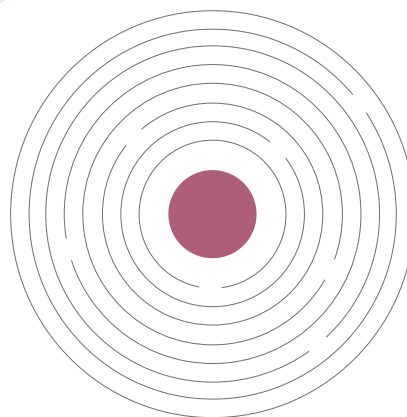
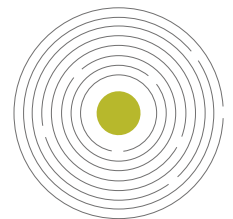
1. A number of methodological improvements in the current Erasmus+ Participant Report survey such as the following:
 - As a general comment, the Erasmus+ Participant Report questionnaire could be fully revised from the perspective of future data analyses and their intended use. Essential questions such as “Why is this data collected? Which data are absolutely necessary to have and why? How will this data be analysed and used – and for what purpose?” would help maximise the analytical potential of future datasets;
 - The analysis also showed the difference between shorter-term and longer-term impact assessments. The respondents reflected on their impressions of impact at the time of the survey, i.e. just after their mobility experience (short-term). For a longer-term impact perspective, either on the host institutions or the career development of the staff, a repeated survey a few years after the mobility experience would be needed. To be able to track such impact across datasets, a unique staff ID across institutions and countries would have to be introduced;
 - There are seemingly contradictory findings on the respondents’ overall satisfaction with the experience and with the recognition received, which may be explained in relation to the expectations of the mobility participants before embarking on the experience surveyed. The survey did not include such data, however. A question about the expectation of recognition *before* embarking on the mobility period may provide data for another layer of analysis, in addition to the forms of recognition received or desired *after* the mobility;
 - A further step could be to streamline the number of response options given in the areas of motivation and impact (and better align the two).
2. Linking survey data collected via the Erasmus+ Participant Reports to other administrative or survey datasets (at national and EU levels). For future studies on the impact of staff mobility, a more centralised approach to extracting both the survey and administrative data from one system, subject to compliance with private data regulations, would allow for more efficient and in-depth correlation analysis while preserving the anonymity of the survey respondents.
3. Supplementing this dataset with new types of data collection (e.g. tracer studies, to look at perceived personal or professional impact a few years after the mobility experience, and qualitative data collection through interviews and case studies in staff’s institutions to better understand the contextual factors that enable wider professional and institutional impact such as enhanced co-operation and mobility, etc.).

Such methodological refinements would ensure that the “right” kind of data is being collected and would help to give a more nuanced picture of the longer-term and institutional-level impact of the programme.

References

Lam, K. H. Q., & Ferencz, I (2021). *Erasmus+ Staff mobility comparative data analysis*. Brussels: Academic Cooperation Association. Retrieved from https://aca-secretariat.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/TCA-Report-16-March-2021_FINAL-1.pdf

Disclaimer: This study was produced by the Academic Cooperation Association with the support of Erasmus+ Transnational Cooperation Activities funding of the Erasmus+ national agencies from Austria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Changes in the work of Croatian teachers after their participation in mobility projects

By Đurđica Degač

Abstract

The participation of educators, teachers, professional associates and principals in the Erasmus+ mobility projects is expected to have an impact on their future work, on the work of their colleagues and on the education institutions in which they are employed. With this assumption, qualitative research including mobility participants within the school education field was conducted in 2019 with the aim of examining how they transferred information, knowledge and skills after their mobility to their colleagues, how they implemented changes in their work with children and students, and what the obstacles are that they encountered in the process. In addition, it was examined how participation in mobility projects affected their professional and personal development, and what the particularly relevant results of their participation are from their perspective. Thematic content analysis was applied in the analysis of the answers. Participants transferred acquired knowledge and experience to various bodies within the education institution, but also outside it. The transfer of knowledge in work with children and students was achieved indirectly by amending official documents of education institutions, improving working conditions, raising the quality of work and creating a positive working environment, but also by implementing new content, approaches, pedagogical methods and techniques in direct work. Obstacles reported by participants in applying and transferring knowledge are diverse and relate to material constraints, working conditions, financial and time constraints, high teacher workload, organisational difficulties, a lack of motivation among colleagues and management, an unwillingness to change from a negative perception of mobility, language barriers, difficulties faced by principals with transferring knowledge, difficult integration of changes within the education system and insufficient autonomy of schools and teachers. The results of the qualitative analysis provide deeper insights into possible areas of impact, but also provide a basis for further quantitative research.

ĐURĐICA DEGAČ

is a PhD candidate in sociology. She worked in the Department for Coordination and Quality Assurance of the Erasmus+ Programme at the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes in Croatia. In 2018–2019 she was the National Co-ordinator of the Eurydice Network. Since 2020 she works as an Assistant in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Zagreb (Croatia). Her specific areas of interest include sociology of education, sociology of science and social science methodology.

KEYWORDS

MOBILITY, TEACHER, PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Introduction

Employees in the fields of early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education can develop their knowledge and skills by participating in professional development activities within the Erasmus+ Programme in other European countries. It is expected that teachers participate in lifelong learning and continue their professional development after they become fully qualified teachers because that "is an important way for teachers to maintain and improve their teaching skills, keep up with the most recent developments in the field of education and their own taught subjects, as well as keep up with the needs of students in rapidly changing societies" (European Commission, 2019, p. 30). Professional development activities carried out within mobility projects include different types of activities such as structured courses, teaching activities, job shadowing or observation periods at schools or other relevant organisations. Under the assumption of the aligned European Development Plan, which proposes a strategic plan for the development of education institutions in the national and European contexts and has implemented mobility projects including professional development activities, it is expected that certain changes will be visible in the institution afterwards. Changes that can be manifested refer to, e.g. the application of new content and methods of work with children and students and to changes in the work of both employees who participated in mobility projects and their colleagues. It is expected that after the end of the mobility period, individuals who participated in the Erasmus+ Programme will transfer the acquired knowledge to children and students and to other employees, which will then strengthen the work of the institution and the quality of teaching and learning.

The Department for Coordination and Quality Assurance of the Erasmus+ within the Croatian Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes conducted qualitative research using a questionnaire with open-ended questions for Erasmus+ mobility participants, especially for those involved in school education. The aim of the research was to examine how participation in the mobility projects affected the professional and personal development of educators and teachers, and what the particularly relevant results of their participation are from their perspective. Furthermore, it was examined how they transferred the acquired knowledge and skills to the collective and in their work with children and students, and whether they encountered obstacles in these processes. Ultimately, the aim was to gain a better insight into the impact of professional development activities at the individual level of direct participants, but also at the institutional level and at the child/student level. An additional purpose was to improve the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme in Croatia for school education.

Previous research for Croatia regarding learning mobility and the implementation of EU programmes and projects has also emphasised some of the dimensions and elements presented in this article (AMEUP, 2017; Ančić & Brajdić Vuković, 2017; Milanović-Litre, Puljiz & Gašparović, 2016), except the main focus in this article is on qualitative data. For example, previous empirical evidence based on the evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Programme in Croatia indicated some of the changes which occurred after implementing EU projects such as the use of new pedagogical methods, the development of professional knowledge, skills and language competencies, increased capacity for project management, the reputation and recognition of the institution in the local community and impact of projects on children and students (Milanović Litre et al., 2016). Similar changes have also been indicated with regard to the implementation of Erasmus+ in Croatia (Ančić & Brajdić Vuković, 2017) as well as Erasmus+ at the EU level (European Commission, 2018). The impact of teachers' mobility on their professional development and careers, but on students as well, has been highlighted in EU-related publications and publications based on international research on teachers such as Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS OECD),

but what is indicated is that only a small percentage of teachers in Europe have been to other countries with the purpose of professional development (Eurydice, 2018; 2021; Markočić Dekanić, Markuš Sandrić, & Gregurović, 2019).

2. Research questions

The general aim of the research was to get qualitative insights into five thematic areas regarding teacher mobility within Erasmus+ mobility projects:

- How has participation in mobility projects affected the personal and professional development of teachers?
- How have teachers transferred information, knowledge and skills after their mobility to their colleagues?
- How have teachers implemented changes in their work with children and students?
- What are the obstacles teachers encountered in the process of transferring their knowledge or implementing changes?
- Which are the particularly relevant results of their participation from teachers' perspective?

The focus was mainly on teachers and educators, who present the majority of participants in school education mobility projects, but the perspectives and experiences of principals and professional associates (such as pedagogues, psychologists, education and rehabilitation experts and librarians) are also included in this article.

3. Methods and data

The research, using an online questionnaire with open-ended questions, was conducted in October and November 2019. Given the fact that participants did not provide detailed and unambiguous answers in all cases, only qualitative analysis was conducted. Thematic coding and analysis were conducted according to the five key questions or thematic areas. Participants' responses were coded and analysed in the MAXQDA software.

In the research, all mobility participants who participated in mobility projects for school education staff within Erasmus+ from 2016 to 2018 were contacted. The sample included all participants who realised their mobilities before 2019. Out of the 531 participants who received an invitation, 261 (49.2%) of them completed the questionnaire. Among them, 15.3% of participants were employed in early childhood education and care institutions (ISCED 0) and 84.7% in primary and secondary education institutions (ISCED 1–3). Participants who completed the questionnaire were educators, teachers, professional associates and principals.

High ethical standards were ensured while organising and implementing the research. All participants were contacted directly at the e-mail address they provided in the Erasmus+ Participant Report after their mobility, and were informed about the research topic and data protection. Personal information which can specifically identify the participant, such as their name or the name of the institution in which

they are working, were not provided. If participants provided specific information about their project activities and project results, this information has been used in quotations and illustrations without elements from which a specific person can be identified.

All of the data provided in the results section cannot be generalised to all cases, and it is possible only to treat it in a qualitative manner.

Since the research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of distance teaching and learning, in some cases, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital tools was perceived as a novelty in education and not a common situation.

4. Results

4.1. Dimensions of personal and professional development

In their responses on how their participation in mobility projects affected their personal and professional development, the participants provided diverse explanations and examples, within which we identified several major themes. The themes, which are explained in the following parts of this subchapter, are: new professional roles and recognition of work; increased (professional) knowledge and insights (including the use of ICT); developed awareness of one's own work, knowledge and competencies in comparison to colleagues from other countries; strengthened competencies and skills and greater awareness of values; increased self-confidence and motivation; new perspectives on work and increased creativity; and new contacts and friendships and enriched personal experience. All explanations and examples provided for themes are based on what at least one participant explicitly mentioned in their responses. Differences between personal and professional development were not explicitly emphasised.

New professional roles and recognition of work

After their mobility, but also after a longer period of participation in Erasmus+ projects, participants were able to attain new professional roles and jobs or job offers. Participants mentioned that they got additional work, e.g. as project evaluators, and they evaluated textbooks and teaching material for which their previous participation in Erasmus+ was useful. Some mentioned that they became trainers in education courses and some became ambassadors for different programmes and associations. It was mentioned that participation in Erasmus+ and in other project activities within schools could contribute to their advancement in the education system, as one teacher mentioned: "[The] Erasmus+ Programme will bring me additional points for advancement, which also makes me very happy". Participants could also receive awards for their work from the relevant ministry or the National Agency, which had a positive impact on their satisfaction both professionally and personally. Additionally, those who were initially inexperienced in project work became more willing to be involved in other projects and to have a greater role and responsibility. That means that some participants evolved into project co-ordinators and were working in areas outside of their primary expertise while managing projects. Experience in project work could lead, as one participant mentioned, to being the person in the school who is most informed about the programme and its rules. Participation in Erasmus+ could encourage participants to launch eTwinning projects, or it could encourage active participation in other school projects and activities.

Increased (professional) knowledge and insights (including the use of ICT)

The exchange of knowledge and experience contributed to the participants' professional and personal development, specifically the acquisition of new knowledge and the broadening and deepening of existing knowledge. Participants were introduced to new methods and materials for working with children and students as well as different approaches to teaching and learning, and they gained knowledge on teaching in other education systems. For example, some increased their knowledge related to the development of new and more appropriate curricula and programmes for children with disabilities, they gained knowledge on new teaching methods for students with autism, they learnt how to use musical instruments when working with children and how to use them in different activities, they learnt new art techniques and possibilities of applying them in working with children, they gained new knowledge on the use of digital tools, applications and programmes, and they obtained new knowledge on developing entrepreneurship skills and increasing the financial literacy of students, as well as on how to manage stress and how to raise awareness of teamwork and problem-solving.

Since the largest area of my work involves working with both students and teachers, I watch day by day what kind of situations they both face. Because of that I wanted to further educate myself in order to help and motivate both teachers and students in my work by transferring knowledge to them of the best ways to deal with stress, the importance of teamwork and problem-solving, encouraging creativity and motivating them to develop an entrepreneurial spirit. The participation in the project also affected me in the sense that I deepened my knowledge on the mentioned topic, especially of the steps that can help me to cope with stressful situations better and to avoid them.

[professional associate, ISCED 2–3]

Developed awareness of their own work, knowledge and competencies in comparison to colleagues from other countries

By examining the work of educators and teachers from other countries, participants concluded that their level of knowledge is not inferior to that of their colleagues from the rest of Europe, which contributed to the positive valorisation of their previous work and practice. They also confirmed that the quality of their work is adequate and that they are on a good track as experts. The participants pointed out that after their mobility, it was possible for them to see where there is room for improvement, what their strengths are, and what needs to be improved.

I got an insight into classrooms and the way colleagues from foreign countries work. I noticed that there are aspects that we have in common, problems that we all share. I realised that we need to appreciate some characteristics of our work and improve others.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Strengthened competencies and skills generally and developed a greater awareness of values

After participating in mobility projects, some point out that they have further developed their language and communication skills, professional competencies, digital competencies, management and organisational competencies, presentation skills, social competencies, analytical skills and soft skills. Language competencies were particularly emphasised, because they had had to communicate in a foreign language, and afterwards, some mentioned that they enrolled in foreign language courses to improve their

knowledge. Greater awareness of values refers in particular to (inter)cultural awareness, tolerance and diversity within the European Union, greater emphasis on togetherness and mutual respect.

Regarding professional development, I have improved my organisational and managerial competencies, acquired new knowledge and skills that I can apply in my work. Regarding personal development, I have further developed intercultural competencies, language competencies, and I learnt to be more patient...

[educator, ISCED 0]

Increased self-confidence and motivation

Some mentioned that they were more confident in themselves and in their own work after their mobility and that they had freed themselves of certain fears, and they pointed out that they now have more self-confidence because they are aware that they can manage in a new environment, with unforeseen situations and in a foreign language. Being aware that their work is not lagging behind their colleagues' work from other countries also contributed to that confidence. Self-confidence and the motivation to participate and implement projects were also highlighted. Regarding motivation, the mobility period motivated them to work more, learn and develop in a professional sense. After their training, some mentioned that they had more enthusiasm for the job, were more confident in approaching new challenges and were additionally motivated for further training, to apply new methods and to engage in areas in which they would not otherwise participate:

Mobilities within Erasmus+ have brought me multiple benefits. They have boosted my self-confidence. The motivation to work upon returning from the mobility was at a very high level [...]. I am motivated to write articles and to participate in conferences or congresses, which has not been the case before.

[teacher, ISCED 1]

Obtained new perspectives on work and increased creativity

It was pointed out that gaining a broader view of education, especially education in other countries, provided a new perspective and expanded horizons beyond everyday experiences. Training and gaining insight into other teachers' work and other methods could contribute to the development of creativity, to new ideas for teaching and working with children, and to providing an incentive to teach outside of the usual way of working.

I believe that a person learns while she is alive, and I gladly attend all available training on a professional and personal level. It is suitable not only for us to learn something new, but also to look at things from a different perspective and to "wake up" in certain fields where we are stagnating at the moment.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Participation in a mobility project has broadened my horizons and given me a new perspective on myself as a teacher in the EU, but also on our school as a quality institution with good connections, even internationally.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Gained new contacts and friendships

During their training, some participants connected with colleagues from other countries and expanded the circle of people with whom they can collaborate on future projects and exchange knowledge and experiences. Friendships could also develop during mobilities and project work, as one participant mentioned: "I have personally gained many acquaintances out of which some deep friendships were created".

A network of schools and colleagues from all over Europe has been created, with whom I maintain contacts and participate in various activities after the mobility and thus exchange experiences.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Participating in the project affected my professional growth and development because I gained a lot of new contacts with colleagues in foreign countries and their schools.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Enriched personal experience (travelling, meeting new people and cultures)

This is an additional dimension of mobility that has left a special impression on participants' personal development because they became acquainted with other cities, countries, people, ways of life, cultures and traditions, and they saw historical sights.

On a personal level, I got to know first-hand the different cultures and historical civilisational heritage of European countries.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

4.2. Transfer of information, knowledge and skills to colleagues

With the aim of improving the teaching process and work in education institutions and achieving a greater impact for projects, it is expected that participants, after their mobility, will transfer the newly acquired knowledge and experiences to their colleagues. As indicated in their responses, participants did transfer their knowledge and experience to various bodies within institutions, but could also inform colleagues working in other education institutions. The recipients of this information were members of the main professional and pedagogical bodies inside and outside institutions, as well as colleagues (informally) within institutions, independently of formal bodies. Participants transferred their experiences at staff meetings, sessions of professional councils, conferences, within official documents of the institution, workshops and courses; they also used presentations and lectures, distributed prepared materials and informed the general public and colleagues using promotional and information materials. Informal communication between colleagues as well as participation in demonstration lessons proved to be important for some of them.

While analysing the data, several themes emerged addressing primarily to whom information, knowledge and skills were transferred and in what way. Regarding the former, we identified the types of recipients as formal groups or bodies or colleagues of participants to whom information was transferred informally. Second, different methods were used while transferring information to different recipients.

Types of formal bodies to which information was transferred

Participants mentioned that after their mobility, they transferred information to the main professional and pedagogical bodies, teachers' councils, expert councils inside and outside the institution, teams and working groups, including principals if they were not the participants in question. Several types of formal bodies could be identified from their answers, such as general professional bodies, usually including all employed staff or mixed staff based on their field of work, expert bodies connecting staff with similar expertise or teaching areas and formal bodies aimed at addressing specific issues. The type of information transferred to formal bodies was mostly general with presentation and shared materials, but in some cases, it was more detailed and practical and included explaining specific methods and tools to colleagues. Furthermore, in certain institutions, there is an obligation to present information to colleagues after a mobility. The transfer of information during meetings of the main professional and pedagogical bodies was also used to encourage teachers and other staff to participate in activities provided within Erasmus+. In some institutions, the transfer of information during formal meetings is only the first step in transferring knowledge to colleagues. Afterwards, participants implemented workshops or gave detailed explanations of everything necessary to interested colleagues working in a similar field.

One big lecture was held at the teachers' council after the mobility, and then practical workshops were held at the meetings of all expert councils in the school, which teachers continue to use in their work with students. Collegial observation of teaching was also organised by teachers who participated in a mobility when they applied new methods. Thus, the collective had an insight into both the theoretical and practical parts.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Teams and working groups with specific objectives that were established before participants implemented their mobilities, as well as those established under the influence of the acquired knowledge, served as important formal bodies within the institution and aimed to target specific issues.

Previously, the team for the prevention of violence and inappropriate behaviour, which consists of the principal, pedagogue, shift managers and six teachers, was established in the school. I held a workshop and introduced the team to the content of the structured course. During the workshop, we met and discussed certain methods of approaching peer violence and inappropriate behaviour, as well as ways we can apply these methods in our school. The task of each member of the team is first to try to apply the acquired knowledge in their classes, and pedagogues and managers in their daily contact with students.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Informal transfer of information to colleagues

Participants mentioned that they also transferred information to their interested colleagues informally, which means not via formal bodies in their education institutions. They organised informal workshops or working meetings, shared working materials for teaching, specifically advised colleagues on what could be useful in their field of work, and also had a role in motivating colleagues. Workshops held by mobility participants could be conducted for a longer period of time in order to transfer knowledge more adequately and thoroughly. Interested teachers could visit demonstration lessons and could prepare

teaching materials together with mobility participants who are teaching related subjects, which is a useful learning process for teachers who did not participate in mobility projects.

Specific methods of transfer

Participants used different methods of transferring information with consequent differences in depth of content. As mentioned, for the main professional and pedagogical bodies consisting of the entirety of an education institution's staff, some prepared presentations, lectures and materials and informed colleagues via staff meetings including about more general information on mobility experiences and knowledge acquired, while with formal expert bodies or interested colleagues in institutions they implemented workshops and courses, gave presentations and lectures, and distributed prepared materials. One different method of transferring information, which is a form of impact or change as well, is the integration of changes into official documents of the institution, which was practised by principals as well as other staff.

We held two-week workshops where I shared with them [other educators] the knowledge and skills learnt during mobilities. In particular, this included the use of ICT tools and technology in kindergarten, for which one dissemination activity was not enough, so we decided to hold several workshops continuously to maintain the quality of dissemination and to transfer as many methods as possible to as many colleagues.

[educator, ISCED 0]

4.3. Changes in working with children and students

In addition to the transfer of knowledge to colleagues, an important aspect affecting changes in education institutions is the implementation of changes in one's own work, which applies to indirect and direct work with children and students.

Indirect results

Mobility participants could amend official documents of education institutions, improve working conditions or raise the quality of school work and create a positive working environment.

In order to transfer knowledge to students, some teachers and principals mentioned that they developed a new curriculum or school strategy, that is, the official documents of kindergartens and schools were changed. For example, based on new insights and knowledge about the application of ICT when working with children, changes were introduced in the curriculum. In some cases, before implementing changes, parents and students were consulted.

At parent-teacher meetings, I showed students and parents the activities I had participated in. They liked them, so I suggested similar activities for the next school year, for which I made a plan in the school curriculum and afterwards successfully completed them.

[teacher, ISCED 2-3]

Changes in the indirect work with students could be introduced through new ideas and the motivation of principals as well. Principals and professional associates can contribute to the work of the institution

by improving working conditions, raising the quality of work and creating a positive working climate. The importance of this aspect is emphasised in other research as well (Markočić Dekanić, Gregurović & Batur, 2020). The contributions by the non-teaching staff could be improving the organisation of the workspace and modifying it according to the existing possibilities or arranging and equipping classrooms based on insights from other education systems, e.g. equipping classrooms with digital technology such as smart boards, smart cubes or tablets.

Principals and professional associates can also work on improving the school climate, which indirectly affects the work with students, and this can be achieved by changing the school environment by digitising certain aspects of work (having a digital magazine or menu made available on a daily basis through a QR code). Changes can also be integrated by setting up working groups that contribute to the development of work programmes with students, and there could be an increase in the number of activities and opportunities for students as well as in the support provided to them in the institution.

In every project in which I have participated so far, I have implemented newly acquired knowledge in my daily work. Being a professional associate, I implemented everything I learnt at the school level. In the first project, it was to encourage creativity (I introduced new methods and techniques in working with potentially gifted students within extracurricular activities and in some parts of the prevention programme), in the second one, emotional literacy (I created and implemented a special programme) and in the current one, professional guidance (I created and I am implementing a career guidance programme from the first grade). I think that I have significantly raised the quality of my work, but I want to emphasise that all this is the result of my own enthusiasm and hard work – I created all these programmes during the holidays!

[professional associate, ISCED 2–3]

Direct work

When it comes to the direct implementation of new content, approaches, methods and techniques when working with children and students, educators and teachers come into focus. After the mobility period, participants could change their working approach and refresh the teaching process with new ideas, and they could create and apply new material for evaluation purposes. Some increased their use of information and communication technologies and tools, applied new content, transferred and developed values in children and students, sought to develop their competencies, applied new approaches, methods and techniques, introduced changes in the planning of education activities, and applied modified criteria for evaluating the progress of children and students.

The greater application of ICT is present in direct work but also in participants' preparation for work. Some pointed out that activities which include digital technology are useful when working with preschool children and students because the use of technology makes the teaching process more dynamic and makes it easier for students to remember the content; the use of digital tools awakens creativity in students and the ability to find a solution in different situations. They pointed out that they started to use digital tools, computers and mobile phones for learning purposes, not just for entertainment. Various tools and applications were used, from tools aimed at creating videos and publishing them online to quizzes, programming tools, augmented reality applications, QR codes, stop motion animation and virtual classrooms for co-operation with students and content sharing. Participants also pointed out that some of the ICT-related knowledge acquired during the mobility was useful when it came to the

education reform School for Life¹, i.e. in their opinion, they had some advantages in terms of acquired knowledge because they already used everything mentioned within the reform in their work. The application of ICT took place within regular classes, but also within extracurricular activities with students:

Block programming is a positive way of programming intended for students in lower and higher grades in primary schools due to its simplicity, accessibility and clarity of code. The programme for which I trained is used for the creation of mobile applications using block programming and is very interesting to students. I included extracurricular activities in the programme, and students were able to learn how to make simple guessing games or mazes on the Android mobile phone operating system.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Educators and teachers could apply new content in their work such as information about the countries in which they were on mobility, and some used folk literature in their teaching and introduced students to special legends. In addition, they sought to develop values in children and students such as raising awareness on tolerance regarding the acceptance of all cultures, religions and lifestyles and respecting diversity. This was driven by the intercultural dimension which they experienced during their mobility period in another country. Furthermore, they also highlighted the development of competencies in children and students, e.g. creative and critical thinking, entrepreneurship and managerial competencies, communication skills, social skills with an emphasis on strengthening assertiveness and self-confidence, and learning how to learn. By changing the approach, some participants tried to develop students' entrepreneurial skills:

As far as the entrepreneurial skills are concerned, I became aware of the most important things, on which I insist when working now. Namely, it often happened that we implement different projects and activities, and after they are finished, the results are not well placed. Now I know that each activity must have its own end product that will be communicated to the public – other students, the school, the local community – through posts on the school website or in the press. This way, students also understand the importance of their work.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

After their mobility, participants could implement new methods, techniques and approaches. Some educators implemented new practices such as structured music lessons in the nursery, applied Waldorf education, structured outdoor activities and new art techniques such as action painting and other techniques aimed at expressing different emotional states in children. Some teachers working with children in primary education implemented new practices and methods in all lessons; they mentioned that they applied pedagogical approaches such as the inverted classroom, placed greater emphasis on public speaking, problem assignments and outdoor learning, and also implemented methods of work in which students helped each other to overcome difficulties. In lower secondary education, some teachers applied

¹ The pilot phase of the experimental programme School for Life (*Škola za život*) was implemented in the school year 2018/2019 in selected schools (48 primary and 26 secondary schools). In the pilot phase, the reform was implemented in first grade (ISCED 1 and ISCED 3) and fifth grade (ISCED 2) in all teaching subjects and in seventh grade (ISCED 2) in biology, chemistry and physics. In the school year 2019/2020, the curricular reform was implemented in all schools in the mentioned grades. A frontal implementation of the curricular reform is ongoing in the school year 2020/2021. More information is provided on the official website (<https://skolazazivot.hr>) and on the Eurydice website (bit.ly/3AsX9ER).

content and language integrated learning methods, and they mentioned that they were more open to trying different teaching methods and were frequently testing new approaches and adapting them. New methods could be integrated into both obligatory and elective lessons as well as extracurricular activities. As mentioned by teachers, some methods needed to be adapted in order to be more suitable for the local context and their work, and they stopped using some methods because they proved not to be adequate.

I apply some of the learnt methods in teaching as much as possible or I adapt them to the class in which I work by using “parts” of the learnt methods since they are not completely applicable to Croatian conditions. I use them on appropriate occasions and not every day.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

I tried most of the methods and approaches we covered on mobility and assessed which ones are best suited for my students. Some methods were very well accepted and led to an increase in students’ motivation and their activity during lessons, while some turned out to be less appropriate for the age I teach.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Project-based learning, research-based learning and problem-based teaching and learning are particularly prominent approaches and methods that participants began to use after their mobility. At the higher levels of education, research-based teaching and learning was implemented, and this included project assignments, students researching independently and independently coming to conclusions, with fewer solutions provided by teachers, teachers using problem tasks, experimental work and new projects and workshops being developed based on the acquired knowledge. Some of the experiences of the participants are quoted in the following paragraphs.

After the course, I applied the learnt methods in my work with students through mini-projects during teaching as well as during the preparation of students for various projects that the school is working on in collaboration with the local community. An important thing I have learnt and I use in teaching is the evaluation of student projects – about a year after my first mobility, the same things I learnt now appear in the online learning system Loomen as an important component of the education reform.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

From the fragment above, it is evident that certain methods that participants have integrated into their work were also a part of the education reform in Croatia. Furthermore, participants mentioned that they now put a greater emphasis on students’ exercises and practical work. More emphasis has also been put also on learning through play. The methods that teachers used after their mobility could be focussed on workshop learning, collaborative learning and teamwork.

After returning from mobility, I incorporated soft CLIL [content and language integrated learning] in the teaching process, which the students liked because they loved to explore and learn new expressions from biology in English. Teaching was more dynamic, through numerous activities and a lot of work in pairs and groups with a lot of practical work, which was the result of learning.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Participants also used an individualised approach in order to systematically evaluate student development and progress and to provide students with a more active role in the learning process through individual work. The individualisation of the approach implied a greater emphasis on individual students and their development and the adjustment of the curriculum and, in certain cases, the development of an individualised curriculum. Encouraged by their mobility experiences, some made changes in the planning of educational activities and some implemented changes in criteria for evaluating progress in which they mentioned an individualised approach, systematic evaluation, more elaborated criteria for evaluation, greater emphasis on formative evaluation, and applying new materials for evaluation and evaluation as learning.

Changes could also be implemented in working with students with disabilities and gifted students. Some participants implemented changes by applying knowledge through workshops with gifted students in which they used quizzes and games which were created with the help of ICT. Some especially modified their work with students with difficulties and lower-achieving students and afterwards observed that these students had improved by the end of the school year. Changes in work with gifted students and students with disabilities were implemented by professional associates as well:

During the mobility, I realised the exceptional value of patience and a relaxed “therapeutic atmosphere” in working with students with disabilities, and I practise the same in my own work (I am primarily a school psychologist, not a clinical one). The simplest digital tool is a 3D pen which we use to practise attention and motor skills. I have included many activities [...] in my work with gifted students, and we also conducted a one-year project on multicultural competencies.

[professional associate, ISCED 2–3]

Participants introduced changes in extracurricular activities with students as well, e.g. through eTwinning projects, activities in strategic partnerships within the Erasmus+ Programme, other school projects and special groups such as a film group and a press section. Extracurricular activities for students could be implemented by employees other than teachers.

I work as a professional associate, a librarian, not in the direct teaching process. I participated in mobilities in which the focus was on photo and video creation. When working with students, I used the same methods of teaching which I learnt during the seminars. I continuously teach students in documenting all school events and editing the material recorded during school events.

[professional associate, ISCED 2–3]

Special teams with students could also be implemented, such as anti-bullying teams where students resolve possible conflicts between students through meditation.

Although different knowledge was transferred to work with children and students, some participants mentioned that due to current inapplicability, they did not implement new content or new methods. For example, one participant pointed out that his training was related to robotics, and the institution in which he is working does not have robots that could be involved in the educational process, although certain preparatory actions have been made. In the experience of some participants, knowledge is integrated into manuals developed within other institution’s projects, but such changes have not been implemented in their work with children or students yet.

4.4. Obstacles in knowledge transfer or the implementation of changes

In some cases, transferring knowledge was not an easy assignment due to various external obstacles affecting the implementation of changes. Obstacles which could emerge while transferring knowledge to colleagues or in implementing changes in participants' work with children or students were diverse, from ones referring to financial, organisational, material, human or time resources and capacities to difficulties in transferring knowledge due to a lack of motivation or negative attitudes on the part of colleagues and management, difficulties in working with children and parents, translation difficulties and language barriers and difficulties in aligning changes with the Croatian education system.

Lack of material, financial, organisational, human and time resources and capacities

Material constraints and constraints in working conditions are manifested in early childhood education and care in issues such as there being insufficient space for implementing new programmes, which some participants mentioned, institutions not being adequately technologically equipped for the purpose of developing digital competencies in children (the same issue is emphasised for schools) and working conditions related to a high number of children per group and per educator.

The obstacle that is the most imposing is the number of children in educational groups, which varies considerably from country to country in terms of the presence of a large number of adults working with children. For example, [on my mobility, there were] 3 educators and 1 assistant working with a group of 24 children aged 5 and 6, which are ideal conditions if we consider that in our country there is usually one educator alone for 20 or more children. I think that because of such overcrowded groups, the quality of educational work with children is lost.

[educator, ISCED 0]

Financial constraints are closely related to the material constraints of education institutions which, according to the experience of some participants, do not have sufficient financial resources to purchase equipment, especially digital technologies. Licences for programmes, tools and applications that would be used in the teaching process can be expensive, and some founders of institutions are, based on the experiences of the participants, reluctant to support their procurement. Unfortunately, free-of-charge programmes have limited possibilities and are not fully applicable in the teaching process. In schools, teachers also experience issues related to time resources. For example, participants mentioned teaching plans and programmes that do not provide sufficient time for certain types of work such as detailed exercises with students and special activities with students.

I did not encounter any major obstacles, except that I had a lot of materials and ideas and little time because I had to process the entire teaching plan and programme, which is filled in a way that does not leave much room for special activities that require a lot of time for their quality execution.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Other issues that teachers experienced are related to organisational issues, especially those regarding their business obligations and workload. Some mentioned that teachers' "schedules are overcrowded", which makes it difficult to implement changes. Some experienced difficulties in organising workshops

and sessions for experience exchanges due to organisational and workload issues. Others mentioned “frequent” sick days of employees, staff changes, shift work and working in several locations, which is difficult to co-ordinate, especially if school collectives are small. If teachers work in multiple schools, that also poses a difficulty in organising meetings and joint activities.

Lack of motivation and uninformed colleagues, and management and unwillingness of colleagues with a negative perception of mobility to change

At the early childhood education and care level, some participants mentioned that it is difficult to encourage other colleagues to make changes and to motivate them, especially if eTwinning and Erasmus+ projects are not supported by the principal and the staff. Participants also experienced difficulties in changing negative attitudes or assumptions while implementing changes. Some participants working in schools experienced similar obstacles. They mentioned that their colleagues and principals were not familiar with the Erasmus+ Programme, that some did not find projects interesting, and that not all of them were motivated enough to change to learn new things, and the participants identified this as resistance to change. It was also mentioned that some colleagues participate in workshops “because they have to, not because they are interested”. In the end, some teachers had a negative perception of projects and mobility in the sense that they perceived mobility as travel and leisure.

Obstacles in transferring knowledge to the collective are the lack of interest of the collective and the management, which shrugs its shoulders at that lack of interest. I believe that every school from which teachers go to mobility should organise intra-school dissemination – there is a possibility that it was carried out (on paper) as well as a lot of things in education. Personally, I neither implemented nor attended any dissemination implemented by my colleagues.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Often when I try to transfer newly acquired knowledge, the collective reacts as if I am bragging, they perceive mobility and project work as pure travel and leisure. [...] Newly acquired knowledge is sometimes too advanced, so it is perceived as avoiding “real work” in class with students.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Difficulties in working with children and parents

Some teachers experienced difficulties in implementing changes because of students’ lack of foreign language knowledge, their overload and lack of motivation, along with their lack of time resources, and they could be, as mentioned by some participants, unprepared for critical thinking, new ideas or in-depth insight into a particular issue. At lower levels of education, educators experienced some issues with parents, but they did not specify the issues in question.

Translation difficulties and language barriers

Translation difficulties may arise because some information participants learnt during the mobility can, according to their experiences, be difficult to translate into Croatian. There may also be language barriers and resistance from their colleagues if they offer them materials in a foreign language, and the same issue is manifested with students whose language skills impact implementing changes. In order to make materials more accessible, some participants translated them for their colleagues.

Difficulties in aligning changes with the Croatian education system

Participants working in schools mentioned that it could be difficult for them to reconcile what they have learnt with the education system. In the experience of some, certain knowledge can be transferred into the Croatian education system, but sometimes this is not possible due to legal restrictions, the focus of the education system on content, and also the challenges that the teaching plan and programme as well as the curriculum pose to implementing changes, especially at ISCED 3 level, which is necessary for the State Matura exam. Furthermore, participants mentioned the lack of autonomy that both their institution has and they have as teachers in introducing innovations in teaching, as well as the lack of flexibility they have in planning their work according to students' needs.

4.5. Particularly relevant results

The results mentioned by the participants partly overlap with previous research, especially when it comes to the results referring to personal and professional development and working with children and students. The responses of the participants were initially grouped in three categories: institutional level, teacher/educator level and child/student level. It is important to mention that the results could be the output/impact of other projects and of long-term experience of prior participation in Erasmus+ or eTwinning because some participants have experience not only of mobility but also of other roles within projects in which their institution has participated.

Table 1. Key results organised by levels of impact

Institutional level	Teacher/educator level	Child/student level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → increased visibility and reputation → increased quality of work → positive changes in arrangement and purchase of new equipment → collaboration and networking → launching new projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → acquisition and application of knowledge and skills and exchange of experience → familiarisation with new technologies and their use in teaching → possibility to compare their own work with the work of colleagues in other education systems → increased motivation → improved competencies → increased quality of work and security → professional achievements → launching new projects → dissemination of knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → transferred knowledge, new methods and approaches → increased motivation → practical work → transferred experiences of mobility → enriched and increased number of activities

Institutional level

Participants highlighted the increased visibility and reputation of their institution. For example, one educator pointed out that their institution is recognised as an institution in which innovative pedagogical methods are introduced to encourage creative and critical thinking in children. In some schools, there has been an increase in the number of children and parents interested in enrolling based on the school's project activities. Participation in Erasmus+ led to the development of the institution and to an increased quality of work, which means that there is more understanding of certain methods of work in teaching and learning, changes have been implemented in the school curriculum, and working groups have been established to increase the quality of work and to disseminate knowledge so that teaching staff who are not directly participating in projects can also implement changes. New extracurricular activities were launched in some institutions and participants noticed positive attitudes towards mobilities, and the capacities of the participating institution and project team were also mentioned as interesting results. Positive changes in the arrangement and purchase of new equipment were also emphasised on the institutional level. Some kindergartens started to use new materials in their work with children, and some used more natural materials without plastic toys. Some schools purchased equipment, especially when it comes to digital technologies and devices such as smart boards, smart cubes and tablets. Other schools arranged special EU corners, spaces that are inspired by mobilities and are used as focal points for Erasmus+ and similar activities. Collaboration and networking were highlighted as results both at the institutional level and at the teacher level. Participants acquired international contacts for new project collaborations and, in some institutions, the bond with the local community was strengthened. Based on the experience of participating in mobility projects, new projects could be launched in institutions, and there was more interest and motivation on the part of colleagues to participate in them.

Teacher/educator level

Educators and teachers, but also principals and professional associates, mentioned that, for them, especially relevant results were the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills and exchange of experience. In their work, as previously mentioned, they applied new teaching and learning methods and learnt how to plan their work better, how to use new methods in their work with children, etc. For them, another important result was their familiarisation with new technologies and their use in the teaching process, which refers to ICT and digital materials in their work with children. Some participants gained knowledge of working with specific tools and applications (e.g. AdobeSpark, LearningApps, Powtoon, Animoto, Prezi, Padlet, Quizizz, Learningapps, Wordwall, Picture Story, Seesaw, Voki, PicCollage, Movie Maker, Socrative, CreateBook, Nearpod). As they mentioned, the application of these tools and applications modernised their teaching process and made it more interesting. For example, some participants created websites and started using virtual classrooms to collaborate with students (even before distance teaching and learning was enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Furthermore, as participants mentioned, for some of them, it was important to get a chance to "compare their own work and the work of their institution with partner institutions and the work of colleagues in other education systems". That provided insights based on which they saw the advantages of the Croatian education system as well as its disadvantages:

I became aware of the fact that education in richer countries has its advantages (their own TV and radio programmes, better-equipped classrooms), but at the same time, the problems we deal with on a daily basis are identical and universal. That is a reassuring fact.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

Furthermore, some pointed out an increase in motivation as a positive result. After their mobility, they were more motivated to participate in projects, in lifelong learning activities and in other forms of training. Improved competencies such as language competencies, communication skills, professional competencies, organisational skills, and digital competencies were also mentioned. Participants increased the quality of their work and gained more security in their work, which means that they organised their activities better and planned their lessons better, confirmed their own knowledge and competencies and valued themselves professionally more. Professional achievements were also highlighted, such as becoming an eTwinning ambassador. As at the institutional level, launching new projects and disseminating knowledge were particularly important for participants.

Child/student level

Results on this level refer to knowledge transfer, new methods and approaches in work. Special workshops for children and parents on the early childhood education and care level are implemented, there are more activities implemented outside the institution, and new activities and approaches are recognised by parents. At the primary and secondary school level, participants implemented different approaches in their work with children with disabilities and gifted students, there is a greater emphasis on the individual approach and ICT is used more, as are learning by playing and innovative methods. Increased student motivation is also recognised as a result because, as some participants mentioned, students were more motivated due to introduced novelties in teaching, and more interestingly conceived teaching. According to the participants, the atmosphere for work is stimulating and students are more creative and independent in their work, especially if they themselves participated in Erasmus+. The motivation of students is also increased by the application of ICT during lessons and because of the use of new methods. Participants mentioned students' practical work such as puppets and sets for drama groups, digital school newspapers, videos, brochures, leaflets, posters, models, etc.

Especially valuable is the project assignment "Make a model of a bridge over the river Kupa", which must be done in a completely STEM way by combining the knowledge acquired in mathematics, physics and art. Students have to make an exact scaled-down model of the bridge (they have to calculate the measurements themselves), the bridge has to be able to withstand a specific load (again, they determine it themselves) and it must be aesthetically pleasing.

[teacher, ISCED 2–3]

The transferred experiences from mobilities to students were also highlighted, though it was unspecified within which projects the experiences were realised. Participants noticed a greater interest and motivation in students, and they stated that students are more willing to be involved in new activities and that they enriched their experience in that way. In addition, it was stated that enriching

and increasing the number of activities with students is an important result, and this is manifested in extracurricular animation activities, special programmes for gifted students, reading clubs, museum groups, sign language workshops, etc. Based on their participation in such projects, in some cases, the relationship between teacher and students improved, as did their relationship with parents.

5. Summary and concluding remarks

The research conducted into the field of school education within the Erasmus+ Programme has provided insights into the personal and professional development of participants after professional development activities in mobility projects, into their participation in mobility projects, into their knowledge transfer to the collective and into their work with children and students, and it has also provided information on obstacles that can emerge during knowledge transfer to colleagues and students. The report presented the perspectives, attitudes, personal insights and experiences of mobility participants employed in early childhood education and care, primary education and secondary education, and it included both teaching and non-teaching staff. Multiple themes which emerged while analysing the data were presented, but since this was qualitative research, we cannot indicate the magnitude of the mentioned themes.

Their participation in mobility projects affected the personal and professional development of mobility participants in different ways, from gaining new professional roles and jobs based on their project experience and gaining recognition for their work to enriching their personal experience with travel and by introducing themselves to new cultures and people. Other themes identified based on what the participants mentioned are increased (professional) knowledge and insights (including the use of ICT); improved awareness of their own work, knowledge and competencies in comparison to colleagues from other countries; strengthened competencies and skills and developed awareness of values; increased self-confidence and motivation; new perspectives on work and increased creativity; and new contacts and friendships.

The results mentioned above are related to participation in mobility projects from the perspective of mobility participants. Participants identified certain aspects related to their personal and professional development as being particularly relevant, and the same applies for certain elements of knowledge transfer to children and students. Key results participants mentioned were categorised as belonging to the institutional level, teacher/educator level or child/student level. At the institutional level, the key results identified are increased visibility and reputation, increased quality of work, positive changes in the arrangement and purchase of new equipment, collaboration and networking and the launch of new projects. At the teacher/educator level, the key results identified are the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills and exchange of experience, familiarisation with new technologies and their use in teaching, the possibility to compare their own work with the work of colleagues in other education systems, increased motivation, improved competencies, increased quality of work and security, professional achievements, the launch of new projects and the dissemination of knowledge. At the child/student level, the key results are transferred knowledge, new methods and approaches used, increased motivation, practical work, transferred experiences of mobility, and an enriched and increased number of activities.

The acquired knowledge and experience were transferred into work with students in different ways (indirect and direct) and for different purposes. Some participants (mostly principals) indicated changes in the indirect work with students such as amending official documents (curriculum and annual plans and programmes), some principals encouraged other employees to implement new knowledge, and others improved working conditions and contributed to raising the quality of work in the institution and creating a positive climate. When it comes to the direct implementation of new content, approaches, methods and techniques in working with children and students, educators and teachers are key actors. Participants indicated changes in their working approach, and they enriched their teaching process with new ideas. Some created and applied new material for evaluation purposes, others increased the use of information and communication technologies and tools, applied new content, transferred and developed values in children and students, sought to develop students' competencies, applied new approaches, methods and techniques, and introduced changes in the planning of education activities. In short, different types of changes in work with children and students were implemented.

In order to ensure the project had a greater impact, mobility participants transferred their knowledge to colleagues (inside and outside the institution). The acquired knowledge and experience were transferred within educators' and teachers' councils, class councils, professional councils inside and outside the institution and teams and working groups, but also to colleagues informally (as indicated by the participants). For the purpose of knowledge transfer, various methods were used, from simply informing colleagues during formal meetings to organising longer workshops and holding demonstration lessons in order to adequately transfer the knowledge.

Different types of obstacles could emerge while transferring knowledge to colleagues or in implementing changes in work with children/students. Obstacles that were mentioned by at least one participant include a lack of material, financial, organisational, human and time resources and capacities; a lack of motivation, uninformed colleagues and management, and the unwillingness of colleagues to change their negative perception of mobility; difficulties in working with children and parents; translation difficulties and language barriers; and difficulties in aligning changes with the Croatian education system. In order to explicitly state the magnitude of each one, it is necessary to conduct quantitative research.

The results of the analysis presented in this article provide deeper insights into possible areas of impact, but also provide a basis for quantitative research in the future.

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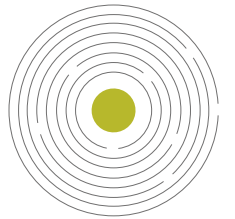
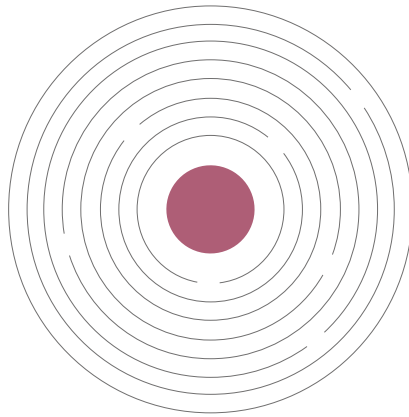
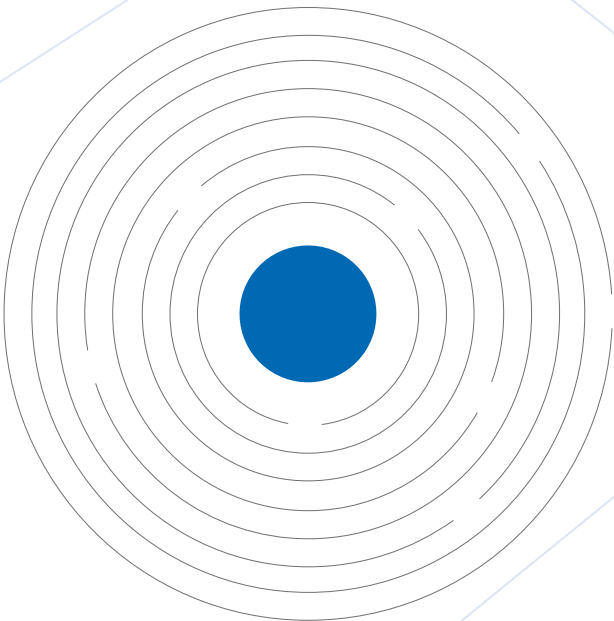
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Strategic partnerships in the Erasmus+ Higher Education field in Poland

By **Jadwiga Fila**

1. Introduction

The Erasmus+ Programme provides a wide variety of possibilities for institutions to co-operate with partner institutions from foreign countries. Realising international projects has become a very common way of developing knowledge and skills and spreading research networks, especially within higher education institutions. Strategic partnerships are one of these possibilities. Projects lasting from two to three years, focussed mostly on didactic activities and involving a minimum of three foreign institutions, have become quite popular in Poland within the last few years.

The Foundation for the Development of the Education System in Poland recently conducted a study on this kind of international projects. The aim of this study was the analysis of the beneficiaries' experiences and impressions after running these projects. The purpose of the study was to prepare recommendations for future beneficiaries of strategic partnership projects or similar projects in the upcoming edition of the Erasmus+ Programme. The main research issues and topics were as follows:

- How and by whom were the projects initiated?
- How were the partnerships created? How were the partner institutions searched for?
- How were the projects organised, and what were their aims and methods of working?
- To what extent were the result and outcomes sustainable?
- Were the actions undertaken during strategic partnership projects continued after the project had ended?
- How did the institution authorities perceive the project, and was their attitude rather supportive or neutral?
- How did the higher education institutions find the co-operation and support from the National Agency? Did it change at different stages of the project?
- What are the strong and weak points of strategic partnership projects in general?

JADWIGA FILA sociologist specialising in data analysis and social research. She graduated from the Jagiellonian University and has conducted a number of research projects (both qualitative and quantitative) in the field of education. Currently, she works as a research officer at the Foundation for the Development of the Education System. Her latest research focusses on adult education and the impact of international mobility on students in higher education.

KEYWORDS

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS, ERASMUS+ PROJECT, HIGHER EDUCATION, INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

2. Strategic partnerships

Strategic partnerships in the field of education, training and youth are one of the activities supported by Key Action 2 under the Erasmus+ Programme. Key Action 2 – “Cooperation for Innovation and the exchange of good practices” – also included:

- knowledge alliances,
- sector skills alliances,
- capacity-building projects, and
- IT support platforms such as eTwinning, the School Education Gateway, the European Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) and the European Youth Portal.

According to the Erasmus+ Programme Guide “Strategic partnerships aim to support the development, transfer and/or implementation of innovative practices as well as the implementation of joint initiatives promoting co-operation, peer learning and exchanges of experience at European level (European Commission, 2020, p. 100). Strategic partnership projects could therefore be of two types:

- supporting innovation (aiming at developing innovative outputs and their intensive dissemination and exploitation), and
- supporting the exchange of good practices (aiming at reinforcing networks, increasing organisations’ capacity to operate on a transnational level, and exchange ideas, methods and practices).

Strategic partnership projects can be realised in all Erasmus+ sectors: School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Higher Education, Adult Education and the Youth. While the horizontal priorities are common for all types of projects, there are also field-specific priorities unique for every sector, which need to be followed. In the case of the higher education sector, every project should aim to achieve at least one of the following objectives:

- promote the internationalisation of higher education institutions,
- tackle skills gaps and mismatches,
- reward excellence in learning, teaching and skills development,
- build inclusive higher education systems,
- foster students’ civic engagement and social responsibility,
- support the implementation of the European Student Card initiative,
- consolidate and further develop higher education data tools and data sources, and
- foster effective, efficient and sustainable system-level funding and governance models.

According to the general rules of the Erasmus+ Programme, strategic partnerships target co-operation between organisations established in programme countries¹. However, it is also possible for organisations from partner countries² to be involved in those projects (as partners, not as project leaders).

Strategic partnerships in higher education can be created by a minimum of three institutions from three different countries. The organisations involved could not only be higher education institutions such

1 Programme countries can fully participate in all key actions of the Erasmus+. The list of programme countries is available in: European Commission, 2020.

2 Partner countries are countries from other regions of the world that can participate in Erasmus+ projects under certain conditions. The list of partner countries is available in: European Commission, 2020.

as universities or academies but also schools, education centres, associations, foundations, enterprises of all types, public bodies at all levels, research institutions, cultural organisations, non-governmental institutions, social partners, labour market representatives, etc.

Projects last for a minimum of two years, sometimes up to three years, and are managed by the leader institution (also called the applicant institution) that applies on behalf of all participating organisations involved in the project. The budget of the project is quite satisfactory, with the maximum possible grant awarded equal to EUR 450,000 for a 36-month project³.

Strategic partnerships in higher education institutions are mostly teaching-specific, so they aim at changing and updating didactics rather than conducting purely scientific research. There is a broad range of activities that could be realised in such projects, e.g.:

- develop new educational methods (to stimulate creativity, develop entrepreneurial skills, etc.),
- prepare teaching materials and tools,
- create new educational programmes (courses, modules, paths, including joint programmes),
- introduce a wide variety of forms of education (e.g. e-learning),
- create and implement co-operation strategies between institutions,
- create quality standards in education,
- strengthen university–business co-operation,
- conduct research studies regarding field education,
- provide student and staff mobility (long-term, short-term, blended mobility).

3. Strategic partnerships in Poland between 2014–2019

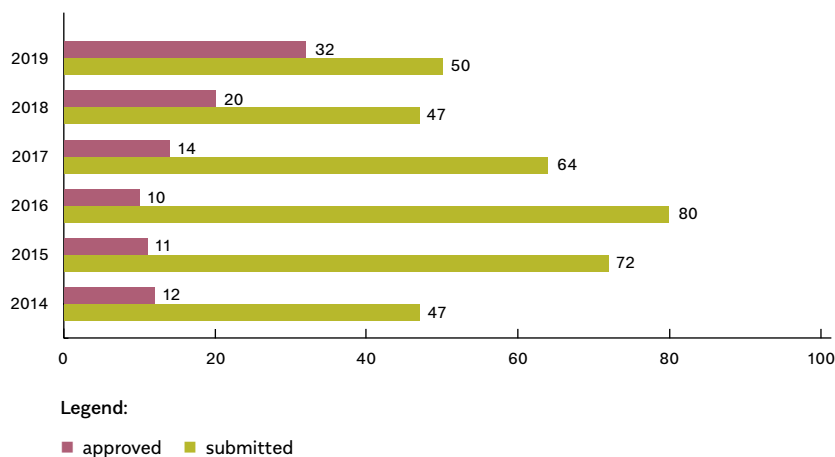
Polish institutions submitted a total of 360 applications for funding strategic partnerships to the National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme. During this period, 99 projects were approved, with the total amount awarded reaching nearly EUR 26 million.

The smallest number of proposals (47) was submitted in the calls in 2014 and 2018, and the highest number (80) was submitted in the 2016 call. The ratio of proposals approved for funding was ranging from 13% to 26% between 2014 and 2017. In subsequent years (2018–2019), an upward trend was observed, as they reached the level of 43% and 64%, respectively.

Strategic partnership projects run by Polish higher education institutions covered a large range of different topics and areas. Many useful educational outputs such as programmes of study, teaching and training materials, were produced as a result of the projects. The main topics and areas of strategic partnerships approved for funding in Poland in 2014–2019 were varied. The most frequent were related to creating innovative study programmes or educational materials. Other common topics were: developing information and communication technologies/new technologies/digital competences, reinforcing international co-operation between institutions, working on the quality and relevance of higher education in partner countries, reinforcing entrepreneurship among students and developing distance learning.

³ The grant is of a variable amount, defined by multiplying EUR 12,500 by the duration of project (in months).

Figure 1. Number of proposals submitted and approved for funding in subsequent calls under Key Action 2 in the field of Higher Education



N = 360

In Poland, more than three-quarters of the projects approved from 2014 to 2019 focussed on learning, teaching and training. They improved the knowledge and skills of more than 5,000 higher education institutions staff and students. Polish institutions co-ordinated strategic partnership projects in which a total of 540 organisations participated, mainly from Europe, but also from other parts of the world. The most represented were partner institutions originating from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany. Over 70% of partner organisations involved in the projects were purely higher education institutions. In this period of five years, 56 distinct Polish applicant institutions played a leader role in the projects.

4. Survey methodology

The Foundation for the Development of the Education System in Poland – the Polish Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agency – decided to conduct a survey on the strategic partnerships in the Higher Education sector – specifically, projects where the leaders were Polish higher education institutions.

The aim of the survey was to collect beneficiaries' opinions on the implementation of strategic partnerships by their institutions. The survey questions concerned, i.a. the initiation of the project, finding partners for co-operation, the course and implementation of the project and the project's outcomes. The respondents were also asked about the sustainability of the developed solutions and their assessment of the project's impact on their home institutions as well as about the strengths and weaknesses of the formula of strategic partnerships.

The study had two phases – a quantitative and a qualitative. Both were conducted in the first quarter of 2020.

The quantitative part was an online survey (CAWI) with a questionnaire addressed to all project co-ordinators from Polish higher education applicant institutions. We were aiming to question every co-ordinator who had already completed their strategic partnership project. Therefore, the questionnaire was sent out to all co-ordinators of the projects from call years 2014, 2015 and 2016. What is more, project co-ordinators from call year 2017, whose partnerships had already been completed, were also included. The Table 1 shows the survey sample in the quantitative part of the study.

Table 1. Number of project co-ordinators in subsequent years

Call year	Project co-ordinators
2014	12
2015	11
2016	10
2017	6
Total	39

In total, 39 project co-ordinators were invited, of whom 23 answered the online questionnaire (response rate: 59%). The online tool was composed of 42 questions, mostly close-ended, and the average time needed to complete the questionnaires was 35 minutes.

The second complementary phase of the survey had a qualitative character. The aim of this part was to get an in-depth perspective on selected issues. The main fields of interest were the projects' effects and their sustainability and utility, not only for project participants or beneficiaries but mostly at the level of the entire institution.

The survey technique applied was individual in-depth interview (IDI). From the group of completed projects (39), nine were chosen to participate in this phase. For each chosen project, two interviews took place: one with the project co-ordinator (the same person who had previously filled in the online questionnaire) and the other with the institution authorities' representative (medium- or top-level management). As such, the qualitative part of the study was based on 18 IDIs. Every interview lasted at least 45 minutes, and due to the pandemic situation of COVID-19 at the time, a large number of interviews were conducted over the phone.

The aim of such a composition of the qualitative sample was to broaden the perspective in each case. It was not only the co-ordinators' insights that were important: due to the fact we also had a chance to talk to institution authorities' representatives, we could see the potential impact of strategic partnerships on the entire institution.

5. Surveyed projects

The quantitative part of the survey had a comprehensive character – all project co-ordinators who met the requirements (their strategic partnership projects must have already been completed) received the online questionnaire. According to their responses, the most common priority of the projects was the

modernisation of the higher education system. Another popular priority was the popularisation of the internationalisation of their institutions.

Considering projects included in the qualitative phase of the study, we can notice the variety of project topics. These included purely didactic projects (aiming at preparing new courses, curricula or learning materials) as well as more general projects tackling issues such as climate change, social problems, international issues, interpersonal skills or co-operation between science and business. In the majority of cases, the strategic partnership project was the first of its type realised by the surveyed institution.

6. Main findings

6.1. Idea for the project

One of the first topics surveyed was the source of the idea for the project. The respondents were asked where the idea for the partnership originated from. What they claimed most often was that the idea to implement a strategic partnership project came from the co-ordinators themselves or from their close surroundings.

*This was an initiative of people in the department where the co-ordinator worked.*⁴

[manager]

Therefore, it was usually a bottom-up initiative, and the implementation of the project was not imposed by the university authorities in any way. The co-ordinators themselves were usually also responsible for writing and submitting the whole grant application, so they were usually fully involved in the process from the very beginning.

The co-ordinator was given freedom in project implementation. It was he who developed the idea, organised the team, submitted the proposal and contacted partners. The dean merely gave him the "green light" to launch formal action.

[manager]

Considering that strategic partnerships were mainly teaching rather than research-oriented, the projects themselves directly addressed the needs of those involved in the teaching process. Co-ordinators often spoke about initiating a project in response to immediate requirements of the students and the university environment, e.g. the labour market. In the quantitative study, 22 co-ordinators stated that their project was implemented in response to the real needs of the university.

The idea for the project resulted from our experience. We all have at least ten years of work experience, so we know what is really lacking, what solutions need to be prepared. This was our motivation for launching the strategic partnerships.

[project co-ordinator]

⁴ All the citations come from the respondents who participated in the survey. For more see Fila & Rybińska, 2021.

That is why the two main pillars of the projects were developing an educational offer at the university and establishing or expanding a network of international co-operation. Specific motivations to establish and implement strategic partnership in the context of the two main pillars:

Pillar 1: Developing an educational offer at the university	Pillar 2: Establishing/expanding a network of international co-operation
→ expanding the teaching offer and making it more attractive	→ internationalisation of study programmes, enabling students to study at universities abroad
→ developing a high-quality study programme adapted to the needs of the labour market	→ establishing international co-operation focussed on the development of innovative teaching methods
→ bringing higher education programmes closer to reality, a more practical approach to teaching (skills, not just knowledge) and drawing on the experience of entrepreneurs	→ establishing a permanent co-operation with international partners
Common for both pillars:	
→ obtaining funding for the implementation of an innovative teaching idea in co-operation with a foreign partner	

6.2. Establishing partnerships

Running international projects is a multidimensional activity, where many factors may determine their success or failure. Issues like the type of its activity, scope, and objectives are all very important, but definitely another of the most important factors (mentioned by survey participants) is the right selection of partner institutions. Many respondents stressed that a necessary (though of course not exclusive) precondition for a project to run well is the right choice of partners. The selection of partners for the project was neither a spontaneous nor random decision. This was always a deeply analysed issue, as the potential success of the whole project depended on it.

I selected the partners with the best possible potential for co-operation for the project. I did not rely on luck – I thought long and hard about each institution.

[project co-ordinator]

It is worth noticing that, according to the study, the task of finding appropriate partners usually rested on the shoulders of the co-ordinators. Interviewees claim that one of the main reasons for starting strategic partnership activities was a wish to establish co-operation with foreign institutions. However, this does not necessarily mean that co-ordinators were always looking for new partners for every project. Interestingly, respondents indicated the need to develop co-operation with already tried and prior partners (16 indications) or with new partners (15 indications) almost equally often. In the surveyed cases, quite often, co-ordinators already knew the institutions they were inviting to participate in the strategic partnership project well. Leaders were most likely to carry out joint projects with entities with which they had had previous positive working experiences. For some of them, it seemed too risky to work with people and institutions they had not met before. That is why the majority of survey participants stated that previous project experience and knowledge of the partner institution's staff was one of the most important criteria while looking for partners.

Our partners have proven themselves in previous co-operation. The contact was not accidental or anonymous – the teachers knew each other from previous academic exchanges.

[project co-ordinator]

Such an attitude may cause the phenomenon of a closed circle of partnerships, which means that leaders of the same group of institutions will co-operate with each other repeatedly within different projects. On the one hand, this may narrow down the pool of potential co-working organisations, but on the other hand, it may ensure the quality and smooth course of the project.

As one of the co-ordinators emphasised in an interview, good and effective co-operation cannot be based solely on the general institutional knowledge of both organisations. Individual and interpersonal contacts, experiences, relationships and friendships are crucial, he believes. The collaboration does not link two impersonal institutions but specific people directly involved in the project. How they interact with each other, share information, communicate and engage in joint activities determines the success of the entire project.

The quality of the co-operation does not depend on the institutions but on the people, the experts assigned to the project. The fact that an organisation employs many specialists means nothing. What is important is their approach to work and their commitment to the project.

[project co-ordinator]

A lot depends on the ability of individuals to work together.

[manager]

Building up a base of potential partner institutions is the know-how and the resource of every co-ordinator. According to the study, such a base of contacts is built on a continuous basis by establishing new liens and maintaining existing ones as part of the day-to-day work at the university. Activities like participation in scientific conferences, seminars, international staff exchanges, summer schools, co-operation in inter-university teams and groups are the most common ways to make and maintain valuable acquaintances and professional contacts. It is worth underlying the fact that such networking is part of the everyday work of a skilful project co-ordinator, regardless of whether the institution is currently looking for partners for a specific project or not. That is so that, later, at the point of looking for a partner institution during the course of a project's realisation, a list of potential contacts is ready. In the study, the overwhelming majority of the respondents had no problems finding a partner (11 survey participants found this task "easy" or "very easy", 10 considered it as "moderately difficult"). Only two people said that this stage was "quite complicated". The use of professional contacts and previous co-operation experience helped to run the partner selection process smoothly.

6.3. Financing the projects

Financing the projects is the issue that is usually of deep concern, especially to institution authorities. The Erasmus+ principles state that a project's budget is the result of two components – the grant received and the contribution of the applicant institution. Therefore, no project is fully sponsored by the Programme. However, the strategic partnership projects mainly dealt with teaching issues and therefore

did not bring direct financial profits to the universities. What is more, the units had to cover a part of the costs, as per the rules of European grants' funding. That is why the co-ordinators claimed that they sometimes found it difficult to convince the unit or university authorities to carry out such a project.

According to the study, the most common financial contribution by the institution towards the project was around 10 to 20% of the project value (6 indications out of 14). Four people each indicated amounts below 10% and above 20%.

Another important issue related to finances that was often recalled by the respondents was the disparity in lump sums between different groups of participant countries. Erasmus+ strategic partnerships are divided into four groups of countries differentiated by the level of remuneration paid to project implementers. The differences are mainly motivated by the differences in the costs of living in each programme country; however, according to the co-ordinators, the differences are excessive, especially regarding the staff producing intellectual outputs under the project. The biggest controversies and objections were caused by the inequalities within the same staff profile between countries in different groups. The differences could even reach the level of one-third of the highest rate in the lowest case (for the same position and workload). Poland was classified in group 4, where the funding was at the lowest level.

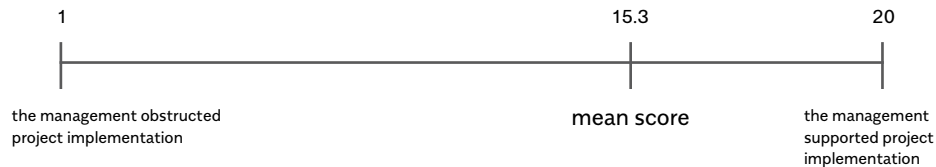
According to the co-ordinators, the current differences have a huge negative impact on project activities and people's motivation. They stated that it is difficult to motivate some project participants to work hard when others receive higher remuneration (sometimes a few times more) for similar activities. Their recommendation was to flatten the daily rates for producing intellectual outputs between the countries to make the remuneration more adequate to the reality.

6.4. Higher education institutions authorities' view on projects

One of the key issues analysed in the survey was the attitude of university management towards strategic partnership projects. That is why the research methodology in the qualitative part was based on two parallel IDIs in every institution surveyed – one with the project co-ordinator and the other with a member of the management of a given teaching unit (dean, vice-dean) or the university authorities (rector, vice-rector, chancellor). The co-ordinators were asked about the involvement of their superiors in the project's implementation, while the management representatives were asked more about the institution's attitude towards such projects as strategic partnerships.

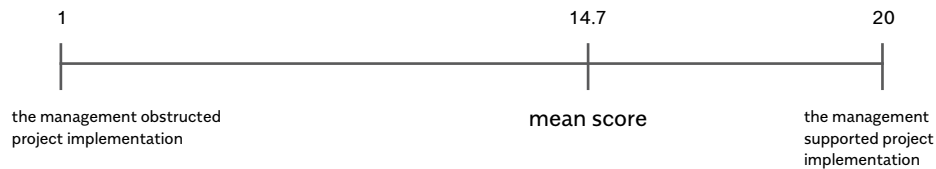
In the quantitative survey, co-ordinators rated the involvement of the unit's management slightly better than that of university authorities, although the differences were small – both responses oscillated around 15 points on a 20-point scale.

Figure 2. Participation of the teaching unit's (e.g. department) management in the implementation of the strategic partnership



$N = 23$

Figure 3. Participation of university authorities in the implementation of the strategic partnership



$N = 23$

The interviews conducted as part of the qualitative study revealed that the higher education institutions underestimate strategic partnerships. According to the co-ordinators, this may be mostly due to the fact that the projects, being neither science- nor research-oriented, are not at the centre of management's attention and therefore cannot be considered as a priority.

However, those representing university leadership held a slightly different perspective on this aspect. According to them, the role of teaching projects carried out in international contexts was appreciated despite the lack of a research dimension to the activities. Such projects were mostly recognised for their contribution to a greater internationalisation of the higher education institution, and the contacts established abroad could lead to further projects later on, including research ones.

Strategic partnership projects were almost entirely run by their co-ordinators. The participation of university authorities was neither observed nor expected in the studied cases. This situation slightly changed when the project was close to finalising. In the final phase of the projects and even after their completion, at the stage of the dissemination of the outcomes, the management was usually more present. This was visible, e.g. through the introduction of a given topic or new courses to the study programme, which had to be approved by the university authorities. What seems not to be very surprising is that the management of a university unit was more involved in the projects than the top authorities, according to the co-ordinators.

7. Results and outcomes

Although the strategic partnerships mainly focussed on teaching, their outcomes were broader in scope. Project leaders paid particular attention to making sure that the products developed with partners could be used in different ways at their home universities (which was appreciated by the management of these units). The co-ordinators emphasised that their outcomes were of the greatest value in teaching-oriented projects. Outcomes taking the form of new publications, learning paths, learning modules and courses are ready-made solutions that can be introduced to existing education systems. The most common project outputs were teaching materials for new courses or modules as well as syllabuses for entire programmes. Apart from these hard outputs, there were also many soft outcomes (related, e.g. to the development of inter-university co-operation and to the increased internationalisation of the university).

Another issue surveyed was the support given to project implementers (e.g. the co-ordinator) by university authorities. It often happened that the top authorities were not aware that such a project had taken place, which is the result of a multitude of projects being run simultaneously by the university. However, the situation differed with persons managing a particular university unit (e.g. a dean or the head of an institute) – in their case, knowledge about the progress of projects was higher, especially at the stage of the dissemination of its results. According to the study, in the surveyed projects, all planned outcomes and results were reached, and in one in four projects surveyed, the number of produced outputs even exceeded the plan.

The sustainability of the outputs of the examined projects was very high. In almost all cases (in seven out of ten cases, on average), the co-ordinating institutions continued to use the outputs after the project. Some co-ordinators attached particular importance to making the outcomes available as soon after the project ended as possible.

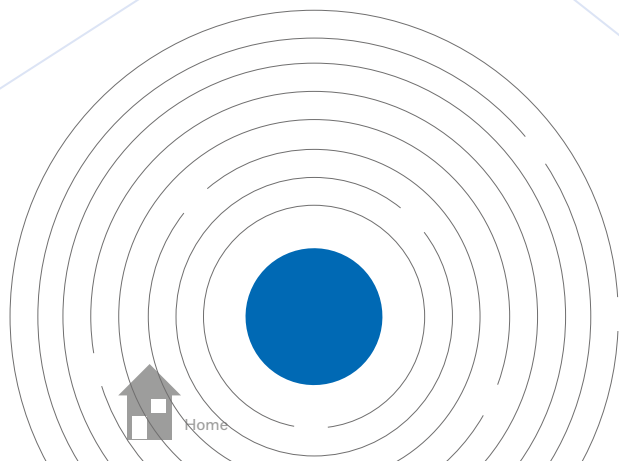
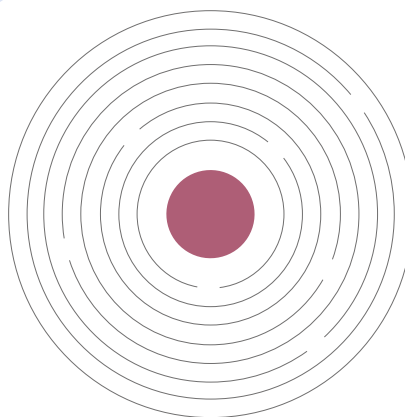
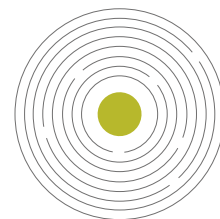
8. Conclusions

Strategic partnerships, according to the survey, are a very successful type of project that provide results and outcomes of high sustainability. The examined projects, which required a lot of time and work on the part of the implementers, have produced very concrete, positive outcomes and sustainable outputs. All the projects examined achieved their objectives and often went further than planned. Most often, the higher education institutions chose strategic partnership projects because they wanted to expand their teaching offer or increase the level of internationalisation. Both of these motivations were reflected in the projects – the strategic partnerships mainly focussed on teaching activities and were co-implemented mostly by foreign institutions. The results and products obtained in the course of the projects were mostly publications, learning paths, learning modules and courses, and syllabuses for entire teaching programmes. According to the participants of the survey, an extremely important factor for the success of the project was the selection of partner institutions. That is why this stage of the project was considered as the crucial one. It is worth noticing that the specifics of strategic partnerships and their didactic nature may also bring benefits in other areas of the university's operation than those in which they were originally applied. Additionally, as a result of those projects, universities were often encouraged to look more widely for sources of funding for further international projects. The added value of such projects also included the establishment of contacts that could be used in subsequent initiatives.

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ONLINE RESEARCH SEMINAR PROGRAMME

18th November 2020

- 10:00–10:15**.....Opening and welcome – Agnieszka Rybińska (FRSE – Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Poland), Özgehan Şenyuva (Middle East Technical University, Turkey)
- 10:15–11:00**Thematic session 1 – ERASMUS+ IMPACT ON THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR
- Božidar Grigić (CMEPIUS – The Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes, Slovenia), Queenie K. H. Lam (Academic Cooperation Association, Belgium) – *Impact and trends of the Erasmus+ Mobility projects for higher education staff – results of comparative and longitudinal analysis*
 - Petra Gillis (EPOS Vlaanderen, Belgium), Magda Kirsch (Educonsult, Belgium) – *Impact of work placement in higher education*
 - Jadwiga Fila (FRSE – Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Poland) – *Strategic partnerships in higher education – research on projects under Erasmus+ Programme*
- 11:00–11:15**.....Coffee break
- 11:15–12:00**Thematic session 2 – LEARNING MOBILITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LABOUR MARKET
- Chair: Michał Pachocki (FRSE – Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Poland)
- Marina Steinmann (DAAD – German Academic Exchange Service, Germany) – *The relevance of international experience for the career success of university graduates on the German labour market*
 - Michał Pachocki (FRSE – Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Poland) – *Tracing VET graduates with foreign mobility experience. Results from transnational research*
 - Søren Kristensen (Techne, Denmark) – *Long-term effects of learning mobility – a tracer study of Danish VET-students*
- 12:00–12:15**.....Coffee break
- 12:15–13:00**.....Thematic session 3 – YOUTH PROJECTS AND LEARNING MOBILITY PROJECTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON INITIAL AND PRIMARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS
- Marina Eva Feldman (Center of Applied Policy Research, University of Munich, Germany) – *The understanding of solidarity of young people in the ESC. Solidarity projects as potential and space for social and community involvement*

- Đurđica Degač (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia)
– *Changes in the work of Croatian educators and teachers after their participation in the Erasmus+ learning mobility projects*
- Laurence Liégeois (Agence Erasmus+ France, France) – *The effects of school exchange partnerships and eTwinning projects on the pupils and the organisations in France*

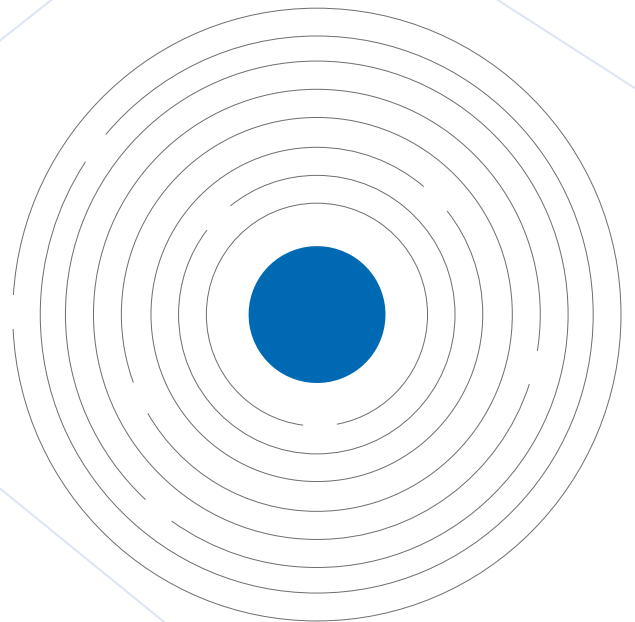
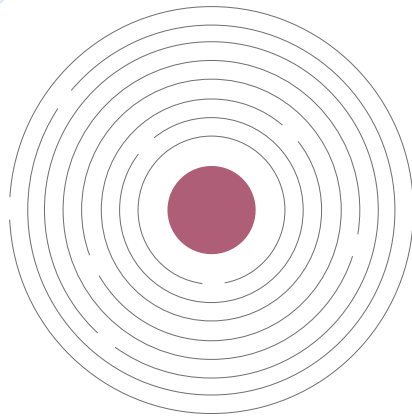
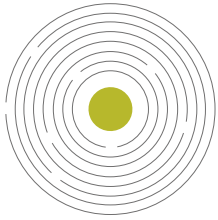
13:00–13:30Research Hyde Park

13:30–14:00Lunch break

14:00–14:45Thematic session 4 – TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY RESEARCH IN TIMES OF COVID-19

- Ewa Krzaklewska, Karolina Czerska-Shaw (Jagiellonian University, Poland) – *Coping with im/mobility – the experiences of international students in Kraków during lockdown*
- David Cairns (University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal) – *The COVID-19 pandemic and international students: consequences for researchers, stakeholders and policymakers in the mobility field*
- Siru Korkala (Finnish National Agency for Education, Finland) – *Virtual international co-operation and know-how in upper secondary school*

14:45–15:00Closing – Agnieszka Rybińska (FRSE – Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Poland), Özgehan Şenyuva (Middle East Technical University, Turkey)



Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE) operates as the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps in the years 2021-2027. FRSE is also responsible for other European educational and information initiatives in Poland: eTwinning, Eurodesk, Eurydice, Europass, EVET and EPALE.

The Foundation also supports cooperation with countries in the East via the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund, the Polish Ukrainian Council of Youth Exchange and SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre. Since 2014, FRSE has been involved in the implementation of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development.

The Foundation organises many educational events including competitions promoting projects' results. It co-ordinates the European Youth Week and co-organises events in the framework of European Day of Languages. It also conducts research and has a publishing house which issues, among others, such quarterly magazines as *Języki Obce w Szkole (Foreign Languages at School)* and *Europa dla Aktywnych (Europe for the Active)*.

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