The **Erasmus** Impact Study

Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions

- Executive Summary -
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The Erasmus Impact Study

Effects of Mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions

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Executive Summary

Key findings

Enhancing their employability abroad is increasingly important for Erasmus students

Top motivations to study or train abroad remain the same as in recent years: the opportunity to live abroad and meet new people, improve foreign language proficiency, develop transversal skills. Just after comes the wish to enhance employability abroad for more than 85% of students.

On average, Erasmus students have better employability skills after a stay abroad than 70% of all students. Based on their personality traits, they have better a better predisposition for employability even before going abroad. By the time they return they have increased their advantage by 42% on average. While 81% of Erasmus students perceive an improvement in their transversal skills when they come back, 52% show higher mem© factors. In all cases, they consider the improvement of skills to be greater than they expected before going abroad.

Transversal skills important to employers are also the skills improved during an Erasmus period abroad

On average, 92% of employers are looking for transversal skills, on top of knowledge in their field (91%) and relevant work experience (78%)

While 64% of employers consider an international experience as important for recruitment, on average 92% are looking for transversal skills such as openness to and curiosity about new challenges, problem-solving and decision-making skills, confidence, tolerance towards other personal values and behaviours.

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More than one in three Erasmus students who did a job placement abroad were hired or offered a position by their host company. Almost 1 in 10 former mobile students who did a job placement abroad has started their own company and more than 3 out of 4 plan to or can envisage doing so. Former Erasmus students are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment compared to those that do not go abroad. The unemployment rate of Erasmus students five years after graduation is 23% lower.

Erasmus students are in better position to find their first job and to enhance their career development

Erasmus students have a more international life and are more likely to live abroad

Former Erasmus students are more than twice as likely to switch employer. 40% of Erasmus alumni have moved to another country after graduation compared to 23% of non-mobile alumni. 93% of mobile students can easily imagine living abroad in the future, compared to 73% of their stay-at-home counterparts. 33% of Erasmus alumni have a life partner with a different nationality than their own compared to 13% of non-mobile alumni. 27% of Erasmus alumni state that they met their current life partner during their stay abroad.

The Erasmus programme is as inclusive as other mobility programmes

46% of Erasmus students have a non-academic family background, the same proportion as other mobility programmes; 62% of those that are non-mobile come from a non-academic background. The main barriers to an experience abroad are a lack of financial resources to compensate for the additional costs and personal relationships.
The Erasmus Impact Study (EIS) analyses the effects of mobility on the employability and competences of students and the internationalisation of HEIs.

The Erasmus Impact Study (EIS) aims to answer two major questions. Firstly, it analyses the effects of Erasmus student mobility in relation to studies and placements on individual skills enhancement, employability and institutional development. Secondly, it examines the effects of Erasmus teaching assignments/staff training on individual competences, personality traits and attitudes, as well as the programme’s impact on the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

EIS uses an innovative methodology by introducing a psychometric-related tool and relating facts, perceptions, personality traits and attitudes.

In order to answer the research questions posed, a quantitative and a qualitative study were conducted. The basic design of the quantitative study was a mixed-methods approach, offering for the first time ever the opportunity to compare perceived development with the real development of students with regard to skills related to employability. To produce sufficient quantitative data, the research team launched five online surveys in 2013, resulting in the participation of 56,733 students (includes mobile students with and without Erasmus experience and non-mobile students), 18,618 alumni (83% mobile with and without Erasmus), 4,986 staff (academic and non-academic, mobile and non-mobile), 964 higher education institutions and 652 employers (of which 55% were SMEs) across the 34 countries participating in the programme (see Annex 1 of the full report). In total, the sample for the study comprises 78,891 individual responses.

To measure real developments in the skills of students and staff after their stay abroad, the EIS used six ‘memo© factors’ developed by CHE Consult which are most closely related to employability: Tolerance of Ambiguity (acceptance of other people’s culture and attitudes and adaptability), Curiosity (openness to new experiences), Confidence (trust in own competence), Serenity (awareness of own strengths and weaknesses), Decisiveness (ability to make decisions) and Vigour (ability to solve problems). These six memo© factors are characteristics of personality traits.

The EIS student survey that targeted students who were internationally mobile during the course of this study consisted of an ex ante and an ex post survey. It was therefore possible to assess the direct outcomes of the experience of mobility and compare the measurable short-term ex ante effects to long-term ex post effects by using the psychometric data from the survey among mobile alumni.

In addition to the innovative memo© approach of measuring the real effects of mobility, EIS also used the more traditional method of measuring perceptions. This is important for a number of reasons: firstly, it allows for a comparison with former studies; secondly, it offers the possibility of comparing the perceptions of groups which could be analysed using the memo© factors (students, alumni and staff) and others who could not (HEIs and employers); and, thirdly, it allows for a direct comparison between the real and perceived development of students.
EIS also went beyond the classic perceptional surveys of staff mobility by introducing a psychometric analysis of the memo© factors for academic and non-academic staff and comparing the results to the perceptional data (especially those provided by the HEIs in the institutional survey).

The results from the quantitative study then provided the basis for the qualitative study, which aimed to provide more insights into questions that arose from the quantitative study and to confirm or reject the quantitative findings. For this purpose, focus group meetings were held in eight countries: Bulgaria (BG), Czech Republic (CZ), Finland (FI), Germany (DE), Lithuania (LT), Portugal (PT), Spain (ES) and the United Kingdom (UK). The team had designed an innovative methodology that combined various qualitative methods for the various target groups. The qualitative study was conducted through a series of site visits to each of the selected countries, supplemented by online, telephone or face-to-face interviews.

Employability and competences of students greatly benefit from mobility, often more than what they had expected, but sometimes less than they might have thought.

The analysis started by exploring the reasons that students gave for going abroad, as well as the main reasons for deciding against a mobility experience. Over 90% of the mobile students wished to experience living abroad, to develop skills such as adaptability, and to improve their language abilities. All of these aspects played a major role when analysing the skills and the career development of mobile students. On the other hand, only 14% of non-mobile individuals did not go abroad because they were not selected by the programme; in other words, Erasmus is a rather non-selective mobility programme. For more than 50% of non-mobile students, the reasons for not going abroad were uncertainty about additional costs, personal relationships and lack of financial resources. This could be explained partially by the fact that 62% of the non-mobile students are from a non-academic family background, while this applied to 46% of Erasmus students.

We considered it especially important first and foremost to confirm the relevance of the six competences measured by the six memo© factors selected. On average, 92% of the 652 surveyed employers confirmed the importance of these competences with regard to employability. The share of employers who considered experience abroad to be important for employability also nearly doubled between 2006 and 2013 from 37% to 64%.

Having confirmed the relevance of the skills related to employability, EIS analysed the impact of mobility on these skills. One of the most striking findings was that mobile students, in general, and Erasmus students showed higher values for the six personality traits than non-mobile students - even before going abroad. In this respect EIS confirms previous research that claimed that individuals with predispositions such as openness and adaptability are more likely to go abroad. Once, they had gone abroad, mobile students also increased their advantage on the memo© values over the non-mobile students by 118% for all mobile students and 42% for Erasmus students. On average, the gain of mobile students might look rather small to non experts in terms of absolute memo© values. Previous research, however, shows that personality traits are generally rather stable and subject to little and slow change. The absolute changes observed for Erasmus students were of the same intensity as other major life events, such as leaving their parents, which is quite remarkable, and in line with changes observed in comparable research. However, more important than absolute values, the most important conclusions that could be drawn from such analysis related to the trends observed when comparing groups before and after mobility. After their stay abroad, the average Erasmus student showed higher memo© values than 70% of all students and the top 10% of Erasmus students had higher average values than the top 95% of all students.
Moreover, the majority of students increased the employability skills as measured by the memo® factors for 51% of all mobile students and 52% for Erasmus students. On the other hand, approximately 81% of Erasmus students were of the opinion that they had experienced an improvement in relation to these factors. This also shows the value of comparing perceptions with real measurements when analysing the impact of mobility.

EIS also observed the impact of mobility on other skills related to employability that could only be analysed based on the statements of respondents. More than 90% of the students reported an improvement in their soft skills, such as knowledge of other countries, their ability to interact and work with individuals from different cultures, adaptability, foreign language proficiency and communication skills. In addition, 99% of the HEIs saw a substantial improvement in their students’ confidence and adaptability. Given the observed difference between perceived development on the memo® factors and the measurable difference, these results have to be considered, however, with some caution.

In the interviews during the qualitative study, students first and foremost perceived Erasmus mobility as a defining period in their personal and professional development, leading to greater maturity and personal enrichment, not least due to the challenges they experienced. Teamwork skills and attributes such as self-confidence and resilience were felt to have improved significantly after exchanges, as had communication skills, language and presentation skills, interpersonal and intercultural competences, problem-solving skills, planning and organisation skills, critical thinking, openness, creativity, cultural and ethnic tolerance, self-understanding, better understanding of others, responsibility and adaptability. Moreover, job placements were especially highly valued by students, alumni and employers because they enabled further professional development and the acquisition of a relevant work experience.
Mobility strongly influences one’s career as well as one’s social life.

In addition to skills, the EIS also analysed the impact of mobility on working life and career. Job placements seem to have a specifically direct effect in that more than one in three students who did an Erasmus work placement was offered a job by their host company and they also seem to foster entrepreneurship: almost 1 in 10 students on a job placement started their own company, and more than 3 out of 4 plan to or can envisage doing so. Mobility also affects employment rates. Former mobile students are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment compared with those not going abroad. Even five years after graduation, the unemployment rate of mobile students was 23% lower than for non-mobile students. Of the employers questioned, 64% report that graduates with an international background are given greater professional responsibility more frequently, a proportion that has increased by 51% since 2006. Of the Erasmus alumni surveyed, 77% held positions with leadership components 10 years after graduation, and Erasmus alumni were 44% more likely to hold managerial positions than non-mobile alumni 10 years after graduation. This difference was restricted to the lower and middle-management levels, while at the top management level no differences in favour of mobile alumni could be observed.

Student mobility also promotes job mobility in the future. Of the mobile students, 93% (compared with 73% of the non-mobile students) could envisage living abroad and 95% of mobile students (compared to 78% of non-mobile students) wished to work in an international context. 40% of mobile alumni had changed countries at least once since graduation, 18% more than among non-mobile alumni. Former Erasmus students are also more than twice as likely to change their employer as non-mobile alumni. Additionally, mobility is linked with attitudes towards Europe. More than 80% of the Erasmus students felt a strong bond with Europe.

Mobility also affects the social life of students. At the time of the survey, 32% of all mobile alumni and 33% of the Erasmus alumni had a life partner of a different nationality than their own, nearly three times more than among the non-mobile alumni (13%), and 24% of mobile alumni and 27% of Erasmus alumni had met their current life partner during their stay abroad.

The internationalisation of HEIs benefits substantially from mobility, but services and recognition can still be improved.

Apart from the effects on individual students, EIS also analysed the possible impact of mobility on the HEI itself, its staff, teaching and curriculum, its cooperation, its services and the strategic aspects of internationalisation. At a general, a majority of HEIs consider Erasmus to be the most relevant strategic asset of any educational programme offered to students. Of the various Erasmus actions, study mobility is considered the most important in relation to internationalisation by 83% of HEIs and for their international profile (80% of HEIs). The participants in the group meetings and interviews confirmed that the Erasmus programme made a valuable contribution to the internationalisation of students, staff and HEIs themselves. This became even more evident in the case of new or private universities, for which Erasmus was the “umbrella” strategy which supported and encouraged their internationalisation.

With regard to the impact on the staff of HEIs, mobile staff had statistically significant higher values than non-mobile staff for five out of six memo© factors. They were also found in a 10% higher quantile than the non-mobile staff, indicating a relevant difference between both groups. Moreover, 85% of mobile staff felt a strong bond with Europe, compared to 69% of the non-mobile sample. This seems to indicate that an international mindset is strongly linked to the experience of mobility itself.
Moreover, staff mobility also seemed to have an influence on the development of competence, as 78% to 96% of staff with experience of Erasmus staff mobility actions claimed to have improved in all areas of competence, with social competences benefitting most from experience of mobility (93% to 96%). More than 70% of the staff agreed that the most important aspect of mobility was the increase in their knowledge of good practices and skills to the benefit of their home HEI. Of the academic staff, 81% observed beneficial effects on the quality of teaching and on multi-disciplinary and cross-organisational cooperation in teaching, 92% saw effects on international cooperation, and 69% observed a positive impact on research opportunities.

The perception of HEIs’ top management strongly coincided with the staff perspective: more than 90% regarded staff mobility as an effective means of achieving major objectives, such as the motivation of students to go abroad, internationalisation at home, the promotion of new pedagogical methods, motivating other staff to go abroad and the enrichment of their course offerings. In this context, Intensive Programmes were considered to be a particularly effective instrument by HEIs and staff (both more than 90%), especially with regard to the internationalisation of the curriculum, raising awareness of internationalisation and increasing research cooperation.

The qualitative study largely confirmed these findings. In many countries, the Erasmus programme currently seems to represent the only possibility for teachers to travel abroad. There was strong consensus among interviewees confirming the positive impact of the Erasmus programme on the development of teaching methods and cooperation in research. Several academic staff members stated that their stay in a different national and academic context forced them to reflect on, revise and further develop their teaching methods. However, academics also voiced a general complaint concerning the lack of academic, institutional and curricular recognition of staff exchanges.

As the qualitative study also showed, it was commonly understood among all interviewees that the impact of academic staff mobility was likely to be higher than that of student mobility with regard to the outreach that could be achieved, both in relation to students and staff, abroad and at home.

Another aspect of the analysis was the effect of mobility on the activities of HEIs in the area of cooperation. Of the HEIs surveyed, 98% expected that collaboration with partner institutions would be improved. Furthermore, 54% agreed that cooperation structures within the Erasmus programme depended on personal relationships. Of the staff, 81% also saw an impact on multilateral Erasmus projects and 77% observed an effect on the initiation of and 73% on participation in research projects, while the HEIs also observed positive effects on joint courses.

Mobility depends on the accompanying services, but may also have an impact on such services. EIS therefore analysed this sector as well. The most important aspects in this regard were mobility windows and 90% of the HEIs estimated that such windows were important, while 69% had yet to implement them. Moreover, 72% of mobile students considered the existing study structures/programmes to be suited to international mobility. In addition to this, for 96% of the HEIs, recognition of ECTS was the most important aspect of the organisational framework with regard to student mobility. Of HEIs, 90% declared that they recognised credits from host institutions abroad and 86% of mobile students were convinced that their study programme recognised ECTS credits from a host HEI abroad. With regard to pre-departure information, a substantial discrepancy between the institutional and individual perspectives could be observed. Only 68% of mobile students in relation to study abroad and 49% in relation to job placements abroad stated that every student interested in studying abroad received adequate information and guidance.
The focus group meetings and interviews confirmed that the large number of outgoing and incoming Erasmus students created a critical mass of demand for new and improved support services in many institutions. While the Erasmus programme undoubtedly led to the development of an internationalisation infrastructure at many universities, expectations with regard to the type and quality of HEI support services still differed vastly between countries.

While support services for students were considered very relevant to HEIs, in general the organisational framework for staff mobility seems at present to be less developed. Although 89% of HEIs considered financial support for academic staff mobility important, only 67% had implemented such support and a minority of HEIs had more concrete incentives in place the moment that the survey was held. A third of the HEIs claimed that a reliable substitution of teaching staff abroad was ensured and only 25% stated that they provided a top-up grant. The qualitative study again confirmed these findings. Many teaching staff expressed the feeling that their involvement in such activities would not be highly valued at their home HEI. In some countries, the lack of capacity for support services may even be a bottleneck in the further expansion of mobility programmes.

The main challenge in reaching the target that 20% of higher education students should be mobile during their studies by 2020 will be to motivate the students who are less likely to go abroad. As the memo© factors showed, the willingness to go abroad is predetermined by the predispositions of the individuals. In order to make more non-mobile students become mobile, a change of their mind-set will therefore be necessary. For this internationalisation at home will be essential and this will depend on the experience and knowledge of academic and non-academic mobile staff. It is therefore of the utmost importance that staff mobility be included among the top priorities of the internationalisation strategies of HEIs.

**Measuring effects and competences requires other methods in addition to satisfaction surveys.**

The study, in general, and the differences between the self-perception of students and the memo© findings, in particular, showed the extent to which the memo© approach based on the combination of facts, perceptions, personality traits and attitudes is superior to other traditional surveys and simple inquiries on perceptions and opinions when it comes to measuring outcomes and the impact of mobility. The results also suggest that an annual assessment of the memo© values would allow for a deeper analysis and a proper comparison of different lengths of stay, as well as a monitoring of the new approaches implemented by the Erasmus+ programme. It seems advisable also to produce country analyses analogous to the European-wide analysis.

Overall, the impact of the Erasmus programme on students, staff, curricula and the entire academic community is substantial at both individual and institutional levels. The study highlights the potential of the Erasmus programme and consequently the respective potential of its successor, Erasmus+, as a contributor to social equality within countries, especially through its positive impact on the employability of young graduates.

In the qualitative study, many participants, however, stated that the bureaucracy surrounding the programme could be improved. In summary, students asked for more money, more job placement opportunities and more integration. Academic staff asked for more formal recognition and better support for their mobility. HEIs were keen to achieve greater homogeneity in the processes and to reduce the bureaucracy. However, all the stakeholders made a common request: Erasmus should be expanded and more attention should be paid under Erasmus+ to the quality of mobility, rather than to its sheer quantity.

The main challenge of Erasmus+ will be to maintain the momentum of the Erasmus programme while dealing with the aspects of improvement that need to be addressed.