

# **Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+**

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Warsaw seminar 2018

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**Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+  
Warsaw seminar 2018**

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the Development of the  
Education System

The research and analysis that have become part of the actions carried out by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FDES) in recent years have two central aims: they are a practical contribution to the realisation of evidence-based policymaking recommended by the European Commission, and they nourish the promotion of the Erasmus+ programme at both national and international levels.

In 2018, within the framework of its research and analytical activity, the FDES continued to carry out a number of national surveys related to the assessment of the impact of the programme on individual participants and institutions, participated in international research networks, and developed its cooperation with experts. Analyses and research results were made available on the Foundation's website. In order to share experience in research and analysis in Erasmus+, we organised an international research and methodology seminar for a second time, which gathered together researchers, representatives of National Agencies and other institutions involved in education, and was a good opportunity for informed discussion and networking.

The present publication reports on the results of the joint work of the speakers and participants of the seminar. I thank every author who contributed to its creation, and I hope you will find it a source of both interesting insight into the role of education research as well as practical tips related to the processes of the implementation of research and the dissemination of its results.

*Paweł Poszytek*  
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## Editors' note

*Theory is when you know everything but nothing works.  
Practice is when everything works but no one knows why.  
In our lab, theory and practice are combined: nothing works  
and no one knows why.*

The above-mentioned quote is quite popular in circles involved in research. It was exactly the same quote that Prof. Jarosław Górniak, from Jagiellonian University, Kraków, used in his opening keynote speech in the seminar on research for and the methodology of evidence-based policy in Erasmus+. This book is a collection of original work based on research and best practices focusing on the issue of research and methodology in Erasmus+. All this effort aims to overcome the obstacle of the quote; we need to know what we are doing in Erasmus+, and we have to make sure it works.

Evidence-based policy making is indeed a major buzz word in European youth and education fields. In fact, the Council of the European Union adopted a Resolution on the new EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and held a debate on its implementation in November 2018. The EU Youth Strategy is expected to develop a cross-sectoral approach by addressing the needs of young people in other EU policy areas. In the officially adopted EU Youth Strategy document, evidence-based youth policy making and knowledge building is presented as a central instrument. In the EU Youth Strategy document, it is stated that:

*The following measures will be used to achieve the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy where appropriate on a local, regional, national, European and global level:*

*Evidence-based youth policy-making and knowledge building: EU Youth Policy should be evidence-based and anchored in the real needs and situations of young people. That requires continuous research, knowledge development and outreach to young people and youth organisations. The collection of disaggregated data on young people is of particular importance to foster understanding of the needs of different groups of young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities. Evidence based policy-making should be carried out with the support of the Youth Wiki, youth research networks, [and] cooperation with international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the OECD and other bodies, including youth organisations.*

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The central role given to evidence-based youth policy making, and the call for such a practice at local, regional and national levels, as well as at the European and global levels, indicates that people from both practice and research circles are expected to invest in evidence production.

Although the emphasis is on evidence-based policy making, we would like to underline the importance of evidence in practice as well. As Ranjit Kumar (2014: 25) states, evidence-based practice is crucial to improving the overall quality of what is being done and delivered:<sup>1</sup>

*Evidence-based practice (EBP) is the delivery of services based upon research evidence about their effectiveness; the service provider's clinical judgement as to the suitability and appropriateness of the service for a client; and the client's own preference as to the acceptance of the service. Research is one of the ways of collecting accurate, sound and reliable information about the effectiveness of your interventions, thereby providing you with evidence of its effectiveness. As service providers and professionals, we use techniques and procedures developed by research methodologists to consolidate, improve, develop, refine and advance clinical aspects of our practice to serve our clients better.*

To strengthen the cooperations of research-policy and research-practice is therefore an uttermost issue, and it is the main motivation for why we have been working as a team to contribute to this cooperation by providing a common ground for people engaged in research in Erasmus+.

In 2018, for the second time, external researchers and representatives of Erasmus+ National Agencies (NAs) gathered in Warsaw to exchange their experiences on the implementation of research activities in Erasmus+ during the annual seminar on research and methodology.

Following the evaluation of the first seminar, bearing in mind the expected usefulness of the event for its participants, the Polish National Agency developed a programme that addressed the issues that had been raised most frequently in evaluation sheets. This time, we had an opportunity to get acquainted with the research activities of other NAs, as well as the methodologies and techniques applied. The role of participants' reports was raised, together with their use for the benefit of research activity. A special session was dedicated to the dissemination and exploitation of research results, which was opened by the representative of the OECD with a speech on OECD perspectives on making use of research results in policy, followed by a workshop aimed at developing a list of recommendations for the dissemination of research results.

<sup>1</sup> Kumar, R. (2014), *Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), London: SAGE Publications Ltd.



In addition, the seminar's participants have also contributed to the present book, which we are proud to present to a wider audience. Let it be an inspiration for those who deal with research on Erasmus+ across Europe and beyond. It is a book that is beyond a collection of seminar presentations. The authors have put genuine effort to make their work useful for a wider audience: practitioners, policy makers and researchers alike.

We would like to thank the seminar participants for their contribution to the event – for their presentations, discussions and professional networking in particular.

We also express our gratitude to the authors of the articles for their personal engagement, timely contributions and professionalism.

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# **Methodology applied in research on Erasmus+**

# Representing Erasmus: approaches to Erasmus+ and consequences for researching the programme

By David Cairns, Ewa Krzaklewska

## Abstract

This chapter looks at different methodological approaches to researching the Erasmus programme, specifically a macro-level analysis of trends in participation, micro-level studies of small groups of students and a meso-level exploration of the programme's institutional level. Taking each of these approaches in turn, we highlight the relative strengths and weaknesses of each position, the ways different audiences use different outputs and challenges for researchers in adopting and combining approaches. We also consider how research on Erasmus has adapted to change within the programme during the current Erasmus+ phase, including a heightened emphasis on non-student mobility.

## Introduction

The European Commission's Erasmus programme, entering its 32<sup>nd</sup> year of operation at the time of writing, supports a wide range of mobility-related projects across Europe, engages with thousands of academic staff members and facilitates international exchange visits for millions of students. The programme is of immense significance: politically, as a symbolic representation of the vitality of intra-European circulation, and instrumentally, in contributing to the personal and educational development of numerous citizens (Cairns et al. 2018). With so much time, effort, political focus and financial resources invested in the programme, there is an obvious need to maintain quality within international exchanges and to maximize the positive impact Erasmus is making in the lives of participants and broader European society. Additionally, we would argue that there is a need for the programme to be effectively evaluated and accurately represented in institutional discourse so that it might remain engaged with a socially inclusive range of citizens. This extends to theoretical considerations that help

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### KEYWORDS

ERASMUS, METHODOLOGY, MOBILITY, STUDENTS

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us appreciate both how Erasmus functions and the methods used in conducting research on the programme, issues that will be explored in this discussion.

As researchers working in academic institutions, a specific concern we have about the success of Erasmus is that representations of the programme are not keeping up with its evolution, especially during the current expanded Erasmus+ phase. This reflection, we believe, applies to much academic research that continues to focus upon the programme's traditional strengths, in particular undergraduate exchanges, but may also apply to institutional branding emanating from inside Erasmus itself. Putting this problem into simpler terms, there is much work taking place within the institutional framework of Erasmus+ that is receiving insufficient recognition due to a failure to effectively manage research and evaluations of Erasmus. Elsewhere in this book, readers can learn more about attempts to better represent a diverse range of activities and target groups within Erasmus+ from our colleagues in the RAY network, but in this chapter we hope to provide some reasons as to why a potential situation of misrepresentation has arisen from the point of view of two academics.<sup>1</sup>

While Erasmus remains a symbol of intra-European student mobility, due perhaps to its success in engaging with undergraduates, it is becoming much more than this, and the more expansive Erasmus+ needs an expanded research agenda in order to produce valid representations. Methodologically, researchers need to focus more effectively on a greater range of mobility actions, including non-student exchanges, and move beyond presenting a series of theoretically disconnected micro-level case studies. How mobility is studied by institutions also needs to be re-evaluated, particularly given the limitations of the statistically-driven evaluation exercises favoured by policymakers and stakeholders. In what follows in this discussion, we will explore these issues, starting with a consideration of the study of Erasmus within the field of mobility research.

## Studying Erasmus

Studying the Erasmus programme is a somewhat different proposition to being a student of Erasmus or an individual involved in the programme's implementation. As a high-profile European taxpayer-funded initiative, Erasmus will inevitably attract a considerable amount of attention from researchers, particularly those in the field of human mobility. The

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see the Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme at [www.researchyouth.eu](http://www.researchyouth.eu) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

traditional elements of the programme, especially undergraduate exchanges, have certainly proved to be a durable research topic (see e.g. Mainworn, Teichler 1996; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Feyen, Krzaklewska 2013) and while researchers' motivations for engaging with Erasmus students may vary, it is worth noting that these exchanges attract attention for extra-curricular reasons. Crucially, it is not just an opportunity for participants to enhance their intercultural skills or employability, but also a means to generate political capital for European institutions, creating the impression that the European Union is explicitly youthful, dynamic and mobile, and addressing social challenges such as unemployment, skills shortages and a lack of foreign language fluency. This dual significance distinguishes these exchanges from other forms of international student mobility, and helps explain why we, as academic researchers, wish to study the programme.

At this point in this discussion, we should declare our own interests in this debate as researchers in the field of sociology. In terms of our experience and, we hope, level of expertise, in regard to the study of various forms of youth mobility, we have over 20 years of combined experience, extending to dedicated empirical studies on Erasmus (see e.g. Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2005; Krzaklewska 2013; Cairns 2014). We are also directly connected to European institutions via our membership of the European Commission/Council of Europe Youth Partnership Pool of European Youth Researchers and various policymaking agencies in our respective countries through our everyday work.<sup>2</sup>

From our experiences of working with the programme, we are aware that collecting quantitative data and internal evaluations about Erasmus participants' experiences is important for sending and hosting institutions, especially as a source of monitoring and feedback. However, as sociologists, our concern extends to the social, economic, political and cultural meaning of Erasmus. This explains why we might favour qualitative approaches, since we need to explore a more expansive range of issues rather than follow existing evaluation criteria so as to be able to inform other colleagues from our discipline. Academic research thus tends to be less structured, and perhaps more extroverted, than work applied to a specific context, with the aspiration of contributing to existing theoretical debates and establishing new lines of inquiry.

The pre-eminence of academic priorities may explain why policymakers in particular complain about the use of theoretical language or a lack of robust statistics in published work. Researchers generally do want to inform policymakers and engage with stakeholders, just not at the expense of neglecting their core responsibilities through making their work too descriptive to be published. This position, of course, points the finger of "blame" at peer reviewers and journal editors, who demand the complexity and originality that is seemingly anathema to non-academic audiences. But the "problem" as it stands is of two different rather than complementary sets of demands from academic "gatekeepers" and the broader non-academic audience, impeding effective knowledge transfer from researchers.

What is mostly missing is a comprehensive and long-term research strategy that could potentially be conducive to producing quality outputs that are useful in programme evaluation. Additionally, there is a need to enhance dialogue about institutionalized research agendas, including mobility researchers in academia in discussions about this strategy. The European Commission should invest its finances strategically to enable the undertaking of high-quality research, so that it might gain a better understanding of how to manage a multi-billion euro programme like Erasmus.

2 It is also worth mentioning that Ewa Krzaklewska, while working as vice-president of the ESN International Office in Brussels, was engaged in launching a wide-ranging study of Erasmus alumni (see Krzaklewska, Krupnik 2005).

## Methodological approaches in Erasmus research

So how do academic researchers approach the task of conducting research on Erasmus? In a previous publication, one of us highlighted two basic approaches to Erasmus prevalent in prior studies, which we will summarize in the following paragraphs (Cairns 2018). The first approach engages with what might be termed the macro level of Erasmus mobility, concerned with quantifying levels of incoming and outgoing movement and cross-national trends in participation. Such work is aimed at (and usually funded by) policymaking agencies and practitioners for evaluation and monitoring purposes, trying to establish how many people participate and what has been learnt during time spent abroad (see also Reechi 2015: 49–77). Such work is hence retrospective in focus and has a top-down view of Erasmus in regard to research questions. That such work tends to be based on descriptive statistics means that much analysis is published in grey area reports rather than academic journals. And with much of this research being essentially self-produced by the European Commission, National Agencies, host universities and even schools, there is limited potential for critical perspectives to emerge, since these parties may be reluctant to admit their own failings.

A second strand of Erasmus research is more closely concerned with micro-level issues, in particular, on students' perspectives on their own mobility. Emphasis also tends to be upon specific issues, often in a research field of personal interest to the author, rather than reflecting institutional goals or policy aims. Many of these studies can be found in peer-reviewed journals, derived from PhD theses. It is, however, notable that few authors subsequently develop careers researching Erasmus, the implication being that the research topic is abandoned soon after graduation or is relegated to becoming a side issue. Given the personal motivation behind much of this work, including many works by former Erasmus students (such as ourselves), outcomes are not taken very seriously by policymakers, who may feel more secure making inferences from macro-level studies, even if there are doubts regarding the robustness of samples or the quality of the analysis.

In addition, a third approach has been developed focusing on what has been termed the meso level of Erasmus, directed towards studying the institutional management of exchanges rather than students or statistics (Cairns 2017; Cairns et al. 2018). Moving away from macro and micro levels is in some ways logical, considering that political interventions tend to be indirect; in Erasmus, policymakers use educational institutions and civil society agencies who they believe will fulfil a multiplier function. The European Commission does not directly interact with students or Erasmus project participants, but believes these intermediary parties can reach groups such as students or target people for project-based interventions. It therefore makes sense to look at the work of the individuals involved in this meditative process rather than the end users, and use their reflections as a means of assessing the efficacy of the programme.

There is also an as yet unexplored potential to develop studies that relate to the impact of Erasmus on meso-level institutions, focusing on issues such as the role of internationalization within universities in areas such as developing student migration as an income stream. And while there are many studies of the development of intercultural skills among incoming students at host institutions (see e.g. Cuzzocrea et al. 2019), another matter relates to what might be termed "internationalization at home," referring to the impact of international encounters on local students and host communities and the participation of former programme participants in organizations such as the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). While these issues have not featured heavily in studies, researchers are now beginning



to consider the idea of incoming students as transnational urban consumers, including their role as de facto tourists and their impact on local housing markets (see especially Melo 2018).

## Methodological issues and theoretical deficiencies

Two particularly pressing issues that need to be addressed in regard to representations of Erasmus are the methodological shortcomings in studying the programme and a lack of theoretical engagement.

Looking at this first issue, methodology, from the point of view of research practitioners, it is particularly difficult to conduct research on human mobility that produces representative evidence. Part of the problem relates to the subject matter itself. Groups such as mobile students are "naturally" transient, meaning that it is near impossible to achieve a representative sample using quantitative approaches (i.e. surveys) due to this being a hard-to-reach population in motion. And while the internet might have become a remedy for the issue, allowing us to spread surveys across borders, online technology has very rapidly become stale due to massive over-use, as well as raising new challenges linked to sample quality control. On the other hand, qualitative research has its own problems. While detailed case study approaches do potentially provide depth, there is an inevitable eclecticism that limits generalizability. The difficulty of reaching the population may also result in convenience sampling, including the practice of academics surveying their own students or incoming students in their institutions or city, thus producing work of a limited scope.

Cost-effectiveness obviously has a bearing on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The high expense of wide-scale quantitative research will inevitably mean dependence on a funding agency. Retrospective approaches (i.e. surveys of former programme participants) are vulnerable to positive and negative self-selectiveness, with those who have particularly good or bad memories of their stays more eager to participate. To the sampling troubles we may add a difficulty of measuring the impact of a mobility experience, which is hard to isolate. The value of a stay abroad may only emerge at a much later point in the course of life (if at all) and/or in conjunction with other experiences. This is especially relevant if some participants undertake several programme initiatives, the impacts of which then become entangled. Qualitative research meanwhile requires sustained effort as well as financial backing; work may take years to complete in the case of longitudinal studies, by which time research agendas might have moved on.

While most of these methodological shortcomings are quite obvious and not rare in other research fields/themes, the lack of theoretical development on youth mobility is more curious. One problem is that human mobility is not neatly situated within one specific academic discipline or research field. Sociologists, geographers, economists, psychologists, political scientists and no doubt many others all have a stake in this issue, as do migration scholars, educationalists and youth researchers. Each group, and perhaps each individual, has their own specific background and set of preferences when it comes to constructing or locating a theoretical framework for their research. Among stakeholders and policymakers, what is more evident is the lack of engagement with the conceptual side of mobility, due perhaps to an over-reliance upon descriptive statistics, extending to what is basically an a-theoretical approach to Erasmus. Even worse, academic jargon is frequently used without reference to its actual meaning or becomes politicized. For example, academic terminology such as "employability", "interculturality" and "social inclusion" has been employed out of context to the extent of being

reduced to buzzwords, often losing sight of what these terms mean outside the specific context of European policymaking.

In research on Erasmus+, theory should be used as a means to clarify the meaning of mobility and to provide points of connection between different studies, not strategically inserted keywords designed to make a generic project proposal appear relevant to the policy goals set out in the call for funding. Concepts should be grounded in evidence, adapted to real life contexts and updated to reflect social, economic and political change. Ideas should also tell us something about the different dynamics of mobility, not only how many people are engaging in Erasmus but why they are participating and what their time spent abroad means for their lives and the communities in which they live in order to show societal impact.

From our point of view as sociologists, we freely admit that we have our own ways and means of explaining research subjects. This explains why in our work we have been particularly concerned with issues relating to social inclusion in Erasmus mobility and marginalization from participating in the programme. Our work as youth researchers also tells us that mobility can contribute to educational development and a subsequent career trajectory, meaning that we want to see more young people and a more diverse range of young people participating in Erasmus+, with this inclusivity adding value to the symbolic and actual relevance of the programme.

### Defining the Erasmus "student"

Despite the advent of Erasmus+ in 2014, researchers still tend to have a rather limited view of the programme, with insufficient emphasis upon non-student mobility practices (as exceptions see RAY network publications; Devlin et al. 2017). In considering why this is the case, we have already noted some of the operational difficulties in engaging with student populations characterized by spatial complexity, and this problem is multiplied when we look at projects supported by Erasmus+ due to the sheer number and diverse character of initiatives undertaken. It may also be the case that academic researchers are more comfortable with familiar and convenient research subjects linked to higher education milieux, and are unwilling or unable to engage with what may be hard-to-reach groups and individuals.

The contingent nature of much non-student mobility may explain why some projects funded by Erasmus+ are being perceived as Erasmus by researchers, particularly those who are working within what might be termed a "migration" framework; that is, they are only interested in mobility that is undertaken for substantial periods rather than short exchanges of a few weeks in duration or less, where there is no prospect of settlement in a foreign country. Non-student or short-term movement in Erasmus+ thus poses a challenge to canonicity within the youth mobility research field. It might also be argued that even where research and policy aims are interlinked, there is room for improvement. For instance, it has been argued that the academic aspects of Erasmus tertiary students' lives are not researched thoroughly enough due to the concentration on the social and cultural aspects of mobility experiences (Courtois 2018). This may be a result of the impact made by policymakers on programme evaluation studies; the Erasmus programme was not designed to improve the quality of students' academic outputs, explaining why this theme remains at the margins.

Adding the non-student population to the agenda might also bring to light different themes for the research agenda. The concentration on undergraduate students in particular has resulted in specific

interests in relation to the programme's impact becoming emphasized, e.g. employability effects or the language dimension of the stay abroad. Extending this agenda to other target groups of the programme would inevitably bring other aspects into the discussion, such as citizenship and social inclusion. And studies on youth workers' mobility (within capacity building actions in Erasmus+ and Youth in Action) point to a need to look at the importance of the programme for their organizations' development (Bammer, Karsten 2018).

More curious is the fact that publicity materials produced by Erasmus authorities fail to adequately represent a wide range of outcomes from participating in various aspects of the programme. Bias relates not so much to socio-demographic background or nationality but rather the fact that Erasmus mobility is uncritically presented as a path to individualized success, via strengthening intercultural skills and employability. Vignettes illustrating epiphanies during an Erasmus exchange may be appealing to policymakers wishing to present a positive image of the programme, but the lack of counterbalancing tales of overcoming challenges while abroad undermines credibility and creates an impression that one is looking at a facade rather than an in-depth account. In reality, it may be that outstanding success is a minority experience, and mobility project participants in particular should not be led to think that they can overcome feelings of exclusion from society through spending two weeks abroad at a training course<sup>3</sup>.

### Future challenges in Erasmus+

In moving this discussion to a close, we can see that there are challenges for researchers in representing Erasmus. Adaptation to the expanded scope of mobility in Erasmus+, including non-student exchanges for work, training and volunteering, is long overdue. Making this adaptation is necessary due to the need to support the "evidence-based" dimension of the programme, producing work that is relevant to policymakers and stakeholders, as well as other members of the research community.

A less prominent issue concerns the place of Erasmus mobility within the broader framework of youth mobility, especially in regard to developing an understanding of how work and study trajectories unfold. It is a fallacy to assume that Erasmus exchanges take place in isolation. This includes exchanges being adjunct to and precursors of other forms of circulation, ranging from relatively short duration leisure-oriented travel to long-term migration. Just as Erasmus can stimulate an interest in other forms of mobility, participating in the programme can be an outcome of prior mobility experience. We cannot therefore study or evaluate the impact of Erasmus without taking into account these considerations.

Finally, we are somewhat perturbed by the lack of recognition given to large-scale societal challenges in the current discussion of Erasmus+, especially the potential impact of Brexit upon the programme and the wider field of intra-European circulation. This development poses a significant threat to participation through potentially eliminating or downgrading a significant destination country and almost certainly limiting the capacity of British people to take part. Clearly, these issues need to be addressed at the European policy level and also integrated into research agendas.

<sup>3</sup> Explorations of negative experiences and difficulties in the Erasmus programme are rare, with the exceptions of Krzaklewska and Skorska (2013) on culture shock and Kapela (2014) on loneliness.

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# Should I stay or should I go? Exploring the impact of Erasmus+ for students and staff in Irish higher education

By Magdalena Staniek

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the effects of Erasmus+ on students and staff in the Irish higher education sector. The corollary objective is to investigate barriers to participation in the Erasmus+ mobilities among students and staff in Ireland. One of the key contributions of this study lies in its approach of using a mixed-method design, which combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In particular, an extensive number of interviews conducted with both student and staff cohorts in relation to their attitudes towards and experiences of Erasmus inform the study. Natural language processing methods are applied to produce a quantitative textual analysis, including a sentiment analysis, on the transcripts of these interviews, providing novel contextual insight into the raw Erasmus mobility data. By contributing new data and an analysis of the experience of both Erasmus+ and non-Erasmus+ students and staff as well as insights provided by the International Officers, the study contributes to the growing scholarly literature about the significance of international mobility in promoting European attachment and identity.

## 1. Introduction

It is well documented that young people who study or train abroad gain language proficiency, acquire greater knowledge in specific disciplines and strengthen key transversal skills, which leads to overall positive effects on employment, career opportunities and the personality traits relevant for potential employers. Today, Erasmus+ is the largest framework of its sort for education, training, youth and sport, and along with its predecessor programmes it represents the EU's landmark effort to promote international education and training. It is evident that, given its sheer size and scope (over 4,000 participating HEIs across 34 countries in 2019), there is a continual need to assess the programme's impacts. The main objective of this study

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## **KEYWORDS**

**ERASMUS+, HIGHER EDUCATION, IRELAND, IMPACT, NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING**

is to empirically examine the effects of the Erasmus programme on its participants in the Irish higher education sector. The substantive focus is on outward mobilities, i.e. on students and staff from Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) who take up mobilities abroad under Erasmus+ KA 103. A corollary objective is to investigate the factors that help explain non-participation in international mobility and to explore whether non-participation has had any potentially tangible consequences on individual attitudes and perceptions pertaining to the personal and professional trajectories of the subjects.

Focusing on higher education students and staff in Ireland, the study provides a conceptual framework for the analysis of the relationships between international experience acquired through Erasmus and the individuals' identity and intercultural attitudes, their competences and skills, and the internationalisation efforts at the institutional level. However, it is imperative to point out that, from a purely methodological standpoint, it is quite problematic to ascertain definitive causal relationships between these factors because we lack reliable longitudinal data that tracks crucial variables, such as pre- and post-Erasmus attitudes, language skills, employment trajectories, etc. over a much longer period of time. In the absence of such tracking data, it is also difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the direction of the causality; for example, we may be wrongly attributing strong European attitudes among the Erasmus participants to their mobility experience, whilst their decision to participate in an Erasmus mobility could be the result rather than the cause of their prior international mindset and a sense of belonging to a greater European community. In fact, this spectre of reverse causality is part of a larger phenomenon in the social sciences as it is almost always the case that we are trying to determine the causal effect of X on Y – this is the core of any scientific pursuit. However, it is frequently the case that there is either implicit or explicit endogeneity present in our efforts to establish causality. Thus, given the structure and the nature of the available data, it needs to be stressed that the present study is by and large an associational work and that any forays into causal interpretation are only tentative and are proposed with a great deal of caution. With this in mind, the parameters of this study are delineated by three broad areas of impact, derived from key national and EU-level strategic priorities and policies and from the existing body of knowledge about international education and student mobility: 1) impact on European identity; 2) impact on foreign language acquisition; and 3) impact on future outlook, employability prospects, and career trajectory.

## **2. Three areas of impact**

### **2.1. Impact on European identity**

One of the key aspects of the internationalisation of the higher education sector in Europe is the promotion of a common European identity. This common European identity is often referred to as "European citizenship" in the sense that it stems from the shared history, customs, culture and values that form the legal and political foundations of the European Union. Thus, over the years, one of the key aims of Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes has been to expand and solidify these foundational ideas of European citizenship, and this is the first dimension of impact in this study. Of particular interest here are questions on whether Erasmus participants engage in meaningful contact with other Europeans whilst abroad; whether they become more interested in Europe and other Europeans; and whether, compared with non-participants in Erasmus, they are more likely to self-identify as European and hold favourable attitudes towards Europe.



## 2.2. Impact on foreign language skills and attitudes

Multilingualism is one of the cornerstones of the European project and a powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be united in diversity. Foreign languages have a prominent role among the skills that will help equip people better for the labour market and make the most of the available opportunities. A lack of language competences is one of the main barriers to participation in European education, training and youth programmes. The opportunities put in place to offer linguistic support for Erasmus+ participants are aimed to make mobility more efficient and effective, and to improve learning performance and therefore contribute to this specific objective of the programme. However, in Ireland, the foreign language competency among learners at all levels remains low. Given that one of the key objectives of Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026 (developed in the context of the Action Plan for Education 2016–2019)<sup>1</sup> is to enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages,<sup>2</sup> foreign language learning is the second dimension of impact investigated in this study.

## 2.3. Impact on future outlook/employability/career progression

Finally, special consideration is also given to impacts of broad significance, such as students' outlook on their future, their career and employability prospects, and the general sense of what they gained or missed as a result of their participation or non-participation in Erasmus+. In regard to staff, of particular interest are instances where their participation in Erasmus+ led to concrete effects in the areas of career development, pedagogy, curriculum development, research, international collaboration, etc. Given that the available evidence regarding the drivers and barriers to international mobility in Ireland is currently very scarce and inconclusive, this study also explores the reasons why students and staff in Irish HEIs go on the Erasmus programme and, conversely, what the barriers to mobility are for both groups. To explore these questions further, non-participants were also asked about their knowledge of the Erasmus+ programme while participants were invited to share their experiences of any challenges or problems related to their Erasmus mobility.

## 3. Research design and methodology

The study is based on a mixed-method design (i.e. combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies), which also includes data on Erasmus non-participants and International Officers from select Irish HEIs. In the full version of the study, an analysis of large-N quantitative data creates a profile of Erasmus participants among students and staff; however, given the limitations of space in this article,

<sup>1</sup> Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026 is a 100-action plan to put Ireland in the top ten countries in Europe for the teaching and learning of foreign languages through a number of measures targeted at improving proficiency, diversity and immersion. Available at [bit.ly/30jHarE](http://bit.ly/30jHarE) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Skills, *Action Plan for Education 2016–2019*, p. 25, Objective 1.6, available at [bit.ly/2kFHGPp](http://bit.ly/2kFHGPp) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

we focus only on the findings from the analysis of the interview material.<sup>3</sup> In this part of the analysis, natural language processing (NLP) methods were applied to the qualitative interview data to produce a quantitative textual analysis (e.g. sentiment analysis) on the transcripts of these interviews. This was done to reveal mechanisms underlying the patterns of participation and non-participation in Erasmus+ and the effects of international mobility on individual participants.

Visual representation of the textual data in the study consisted of value-neutral and polarity clouds.<sup>4</sup> Word frequency charts were also presented to identify the most common words occurring within the interview topics. Furthermore, the text structure of the interviews was examined via affinity mapping, which is a method used to conceptually group semantically similar words or phrases. The purpose of affinity mapping here was to determine whether there is a difference in the text structure of the interviews given by Erasmus student participants vs. non-participants. Bi-grams are shown to represent the interview affinity maps visually for both cohorts. Finally, a sentiment orientation analysis was conducted on each interview feature or topic in this study. The sentiment analysis was performed using the NRC Emotion Lexicon (EmoLex) and the AFINN database. NRC is a list of English words and their associations with eight basic emotions (anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust) and two sentiments (negative and positive).<sup>5</sup> AFINN is a list of English words rated for valence with an integer between minus five (negative) and plus five (positive). All analyses were done in R version 3.5.1.

#### → **Who was interviewed?**

The three subject groups who were interviewed were students, staff and International Officers from select Irish HEIs.<sup>6</sup> Students and staff were each comprised of two sub-groups – those who did participate in Erasmus mobilities under KA1037 and those who did not. Student interviews were conducted in semi-structured focus groups and individual discussions, while staff and International Officers were interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted in person and over the phone over a period of 14 months (April 2017–June 2018). The average duration of the focus group

3 The quantitative component includes a time series dataset on student and staff mobility to provide more insight into the aggregate-level picture of outwardly mobile students and staff in Irish HEIs by revealing trends, patterns and relationships between the variables of interest. This component comprises mostly descriptive statistics about participants' gender, age, nationality, socio-economic status, special needs, and prior participation in Erasmus. Longitudinal trends pertaining to top sending institutions, destinations, and primary languages of instruction whilst abroad are also reported in the study. The full study is available from the Higher Education Authority.

4 The process of categorising words into each group can either be done automatically via built-in classifiers from the NLP lexicon or words can be ascribed manually by a human annotator to an appropriate category depending on the context in which they are used. For example, the word "cheap" is automatically assigned to a negative category by a context-blind algorithm; however, it was necessary to manually re-code it as a positive word because in the context of the interviews its connotation is decidedly positive, referring to affordability. So, aside from binary judgements, we also want to identify particular topics that can determine the most appropriate category for a given word. Also, some words, such as "other," do not readily fit into either category or are so general that they are essentially noise and can be eliminated. Thus, in this study, the analysis of the interviews relied on the combination of NLP and manual coding based on the context and topic information to yield the most valid and reliable results.

5 The NRC Emotion Lexicon has affect annotations for English words. Despite some cultural differences, it has been shown that a majority of affective norms are stable across languages. Thus, it is possible to provide versions of the lexicon in over one hundred languages by translating the English terms using Google Translate (November 2017).

6 The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the explicit permission of all participants and were coded according to standard interviewing procedures. All interview data were anonymised. Care was taken to ensure that the HEIs selected for the qualitative component represented core regional clusters and that they varied in size, resources, and institutional profile.

7 In Ireland, the vast majority of students go on either six- or nine-month long mobilities, with some opting for a shorter duration of three months. The minimum duration of three months for student mobilities under the Erasmus+ programme was identified as one of the barriers to participation in the interviews and will be explored further in the interview analysis section. For staff, the average duration is five days; however, in a few instances, staff went on visits of ten days or more.

discussions was 1 hour and 18 minutes, while the average duration of the individual interviews was 37 minutes. Of the 53 student interviewees, 33 were women (62%) while 20 were men (38%). There were 12 mature students (22%), i.e. individuals over the age of 23, in the student cohort. Of the 18 staff interviewed, 9 (50%) were women and 9 (50%) were men, while the International Officers group was comprised of 12 women (75%) and 3 men (25%).

#### → **What were the main interview themes and questions?**

Student and staff interviews included questions on the three main themes reflecting the three dimensions of impact:

- European identity
- Knowledge of and attitude towards foreign languages
- Future outlook, employability or career progression

Other sub-themes related to the three main themes were also investigated and included questions about:

- International exposure
- Interaction with people in the host country (Erasmus participants only)
- Reasons for deciding to participate/not participate in Erasmus
- Knowledge about the Erasmus programme (non-participants only)
- Problems and challenges (Erasmus participants only)<sup>8</sup>

International Officers' interviews included questions on the following themes:

- Barriers to participation for students
- Barriers to participation for staff
- Impact of Erasmus+ on students
- Impact of Erasmus+ on staff
- Impact of Erasmus+ on the internationalisation of the HEIs

## **4. Results: Erasmus experience and impact on students and staff**

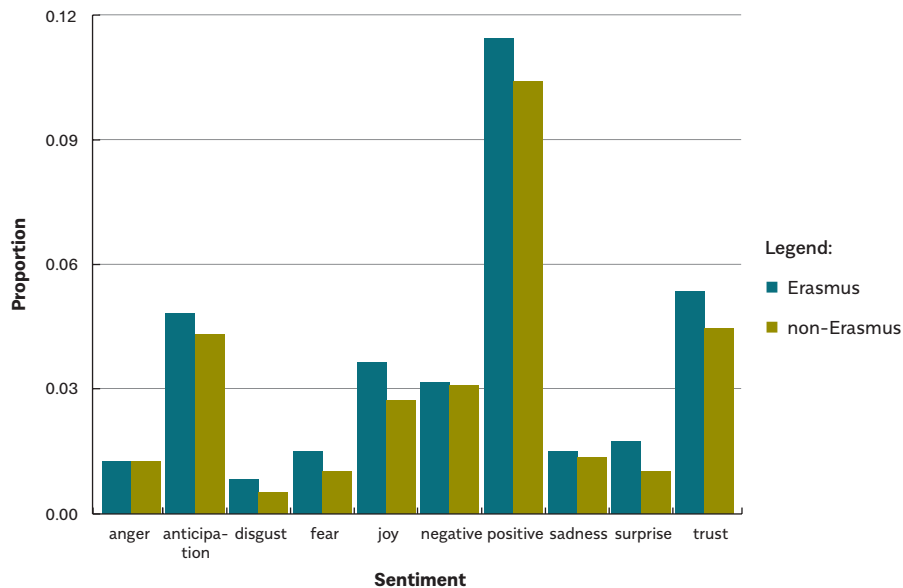
### **4.1. First impressions**

First, a sentiment analysis was performed on the entire corpus of textual data, i.e. all the words in the entire inventory of issues that were covered in the interviews were computationally analysed via text-based sentiment classification methods. Using a built-in AI algorithm for opinion mining, words from the interview transcripts were proportionally grouped into semantic and cognitive categories, after accounting for neutral language, and were assigned to ten sentiment categories, such as positivity, negativity, fear, joy, surprise, trust, etc. Figure 1 clearly demonstrates that Erasmus students tend to use more emotional language overall (most bars are higher) than non-Erasmus students. In

<sup>8</sup> Note that the graphs of the sentiment analysis of the interviews presented in the following pages contain only one bar in the "interaction," "knowledge," and "problems" categories, which corresponds to the single group (either Erasmus or non-Erasmus) that was asked questions about that specific category.

terms of percentage differences, the biggest are surprise (64% higher), disgust (56% higher), and fear (46% higher). The percentage differences in the negative and anger categories are marginal and not statistically significant. Thus, it is evident that, overall, Erasmus participants are more prone to express positivity, trust, surprise, joy, and anticipation, but they also tend to feel fear, disgust, and sadness in greater measure than non-participants. This might indeed be a result of the richness and variety of their international experience through Erasmus+, but it could also be a reflection of some psychological traits of the cohort, and therefore more research is needed in this area before we can make any attributive or conclusive statements.

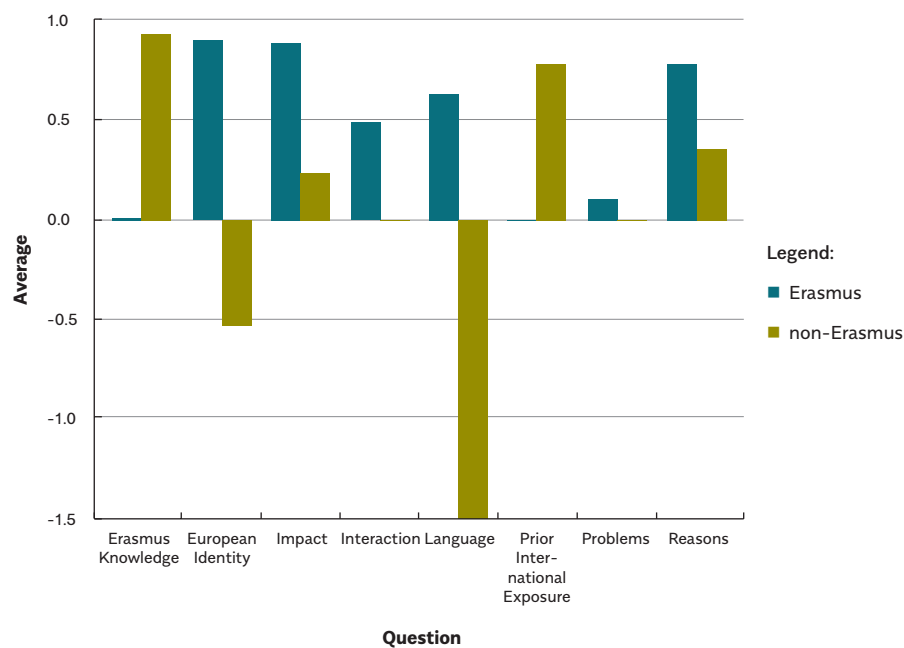
Figure 1. Emotional loading: Erasmus vs. non-Erasmus students



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

The emotional loading per topic in Figure 2 shows the most pronounced differences in the "language" and "European identity" responses: non-participants are decidedly more negative in their knowledge of and attitude towards foreign languages and European identity. They are also considerably less positive about the consequences/impact of not going on an Erasmus mobility than Erasmus participants are about the impact of going on an Erasmus mobility. It is also worth noting that non-participants feel highly positive about their prior international exposure and knowledge about the Erasmus programme, while Erasmus participants feel decidedly more positive about interactions with people from the host countries.

Figure 2. Emotional loading per topic: Erasmus students vs. non-Erasmus students



Source: AFINN score

Additionally, an analysis of the differences between the two groups of student populations was performed using the text structure of the interviews. In this type of analysis, words are linked according to lexical and conceptual relations, thus creating a "word net." While this type of analysis is not specifically sentiment-oriented, it is useful for deriving sentiment-related information, such as the complexity of semantic organisation, diversity of topics, etc. Figures 3 and 4 represent the bi-grams of the interviews for Erasmus and non-Erasmus students, showing the details of the text structure via a visualisation of words that commonly occur next to each other. It can be seen that there is a considerably greater variety, complexity and richness of topics discussed among the Erasmus students (Figure 3) compared to non-Erasmus students (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Text structure: Erasmus students

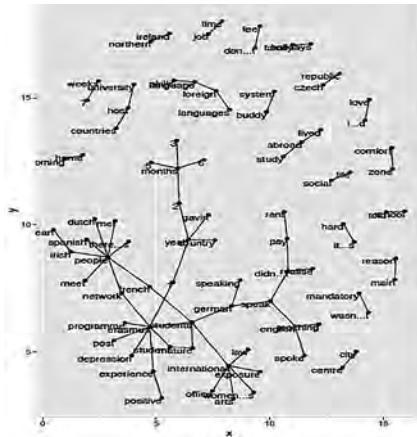
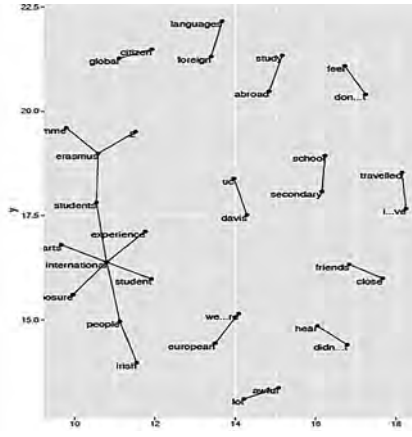
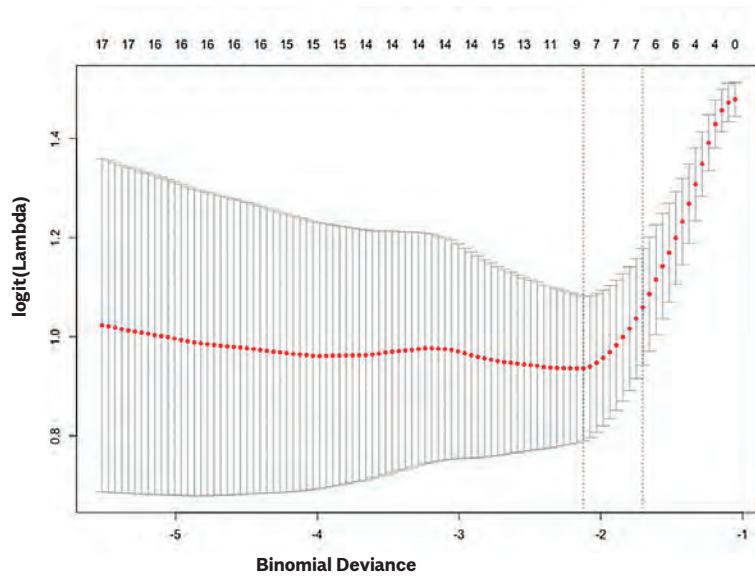


Figure 4. Text structure: non-Erasmus students



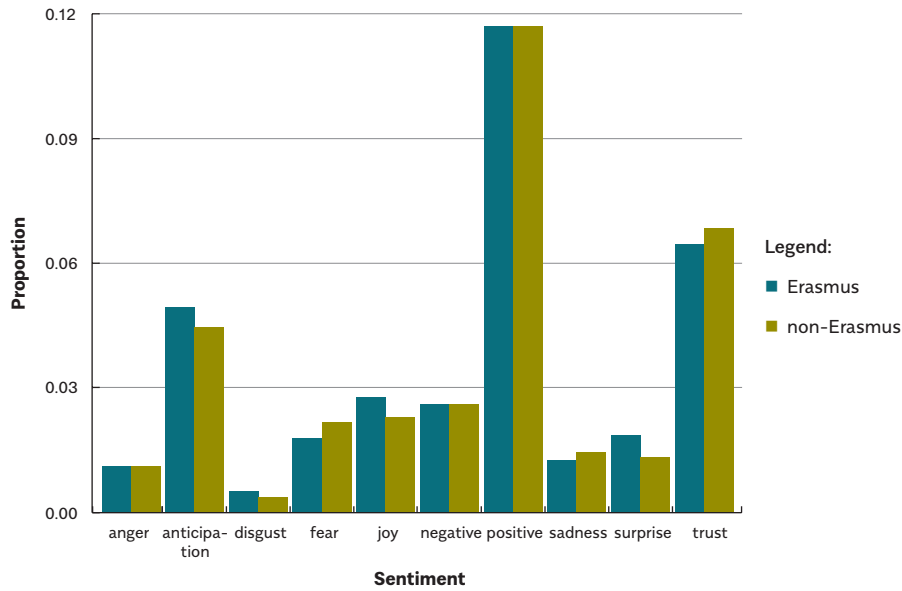
To analyse these apparent differences between the Erasmus and non-Erasmus participants further, we fitted a statistical model to see if it was possible to predict whether the transcript text was from an Erasmus or non-Erasmus interview based solely on word frequencies used in the interviews. Because the model used word frequencies for prediction to avoid overfitting associated with having a large number of predictors (the many different words appearing in an interview), a technique called regularisation was used to shrink the effect of unimportant words. Figure 5 presents the results of the leave-one-out cross-validated lasso regularised logistic regression targeting the optimal area under the receiver operator curve for predicting Erasmus vs. non-Erasmus interview texts. The results indicate that we need an optimal number of nine words to predict with 77% accuracy whether a text fragment comes from an Erasmus or non-Erasmus participant interview. This sheds more light on the Erasmus experience by providing further proof of the differences in semantic orientation and lexical content between Erasmus participants and non-participants.

Figure 5. Lasso Regularised Bag-of-Words Logistic Regression Model



Source: Regression performed on the entire interview data corpus (original data) using R version 3.5.1.

Figure 6. Emotional loading: Erasmus vs. non-Erasmus staff

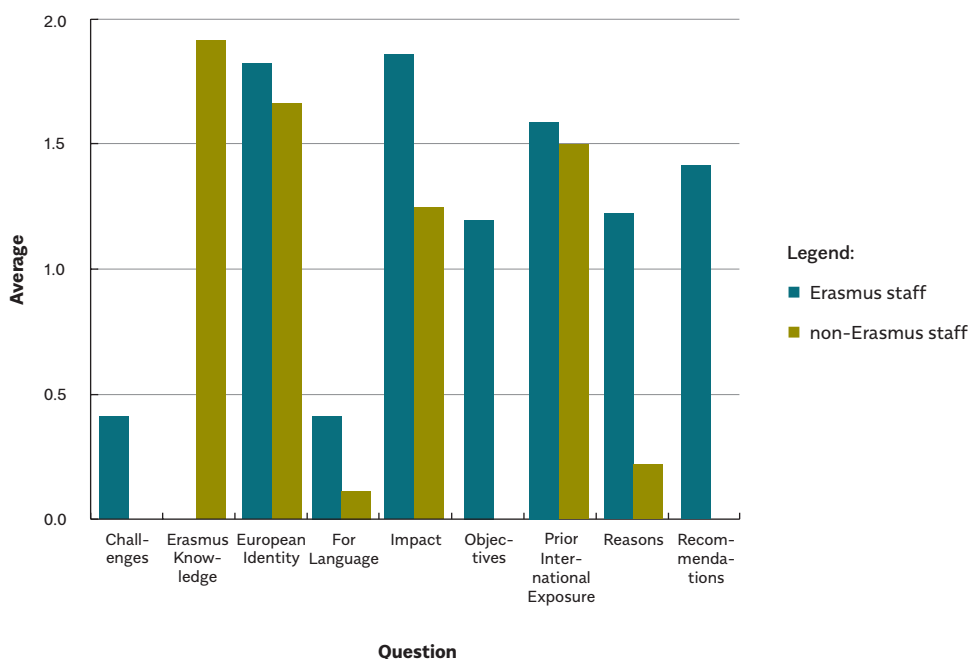


Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

In regard to staff, the word frequency analysis described in the full version of the study reveals that there are no pronounced differences between the Erasmus and non-Erasmus staff as far as most commonly occurring words are concerned. This is corroborated by the results of the sentiment analysis presented in Figure 6, where we can see that there are only marginal differences between Erasmus participants and non-participants in aggregate emotional loading across all interview topics. The most prevailing feelings are positive, with non-participants exhibiting slightly more trust but also more sadness and fear, while Erasmus participants show slightly more surprise, joy and anticipation than non-participants.

However, when analysing emotional loading per interview topic, as shown in Figure 7, the differences between the two groups become more visible: the Erasmus participants feel more positive about their European identity, foreign languages, and their prior international exposure than non-participants. The most pronounced and noteworthy differences in sentiment between the two cohorts pertain to reasons for going/not going on Erasmus and the overall impact of going/not going on an Erasmus mobility on their personal and professional trajectory.

Figure 7. Emotional loading per topic



Source: AFINN score

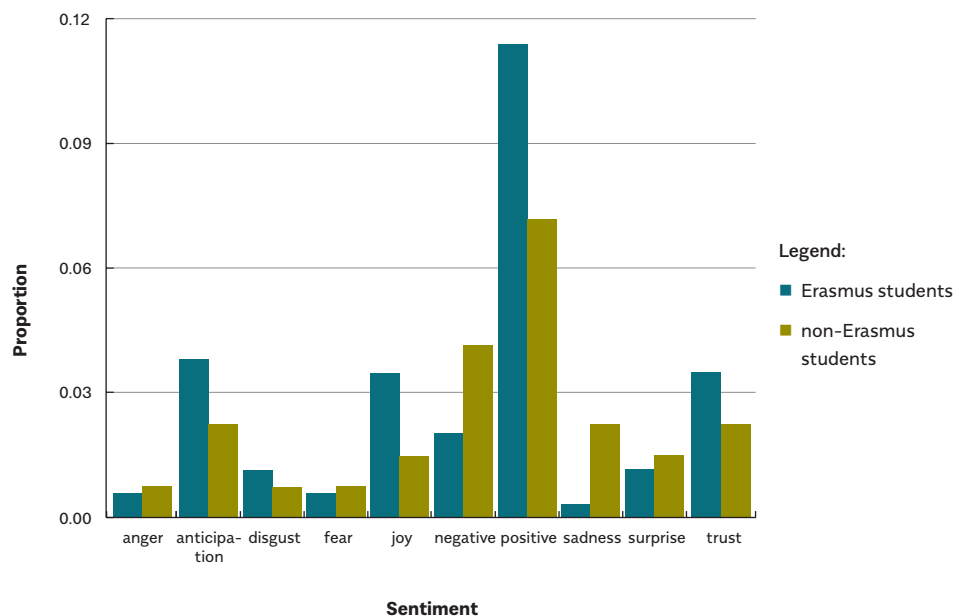
## 4.2. Impact on European identity

One of the key thematic areas explored in the interviews was the topic of European identity. Respondents were asked if they felt more European than national or vice versa, or whether there were any other forms of identity that they felt strongly affiliated with (e.g. sub-national, ethnic, global



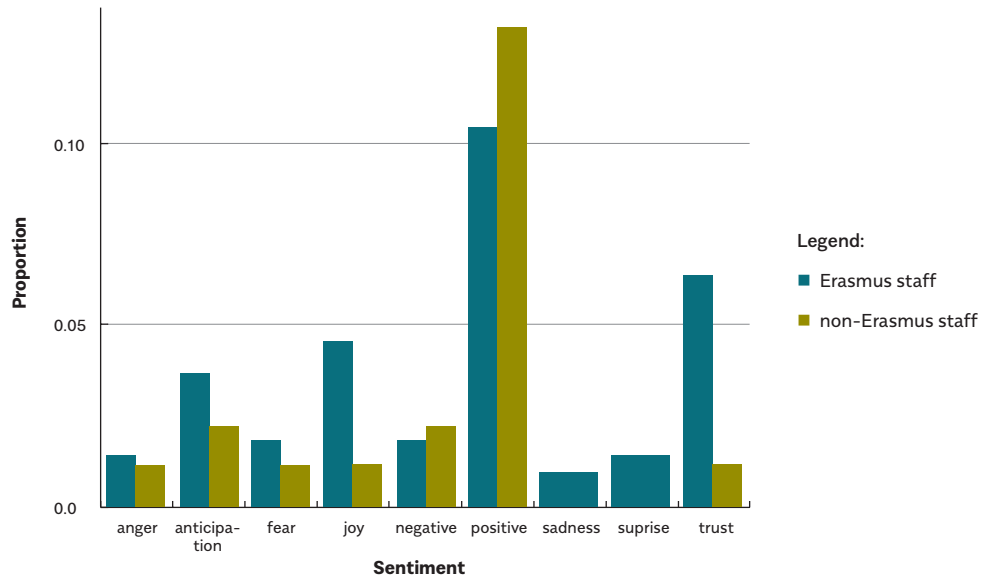
citizen, etc.). The analysis of the interview data failed to provide evidence that Erasmus+ student participants feel more European than non-participants as a result of the mobility. However, the sentiment analysis of the emotional content of the responses reveals that while most students who participated in the Erasmus+ feel more Irish than European, they are significantly more positive about their European identity and significantly less negative than non-participants, as shown in Figure 8. Their responses also contain more feelings of trust, joy and anticipation, whereas non-participants' responses contained more feelings of sadness and marginally more of surprise, fear, and anger on the subject of identity.

**Figure 8. European identity emotional loading**



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

Interestingly, a content analysis of staff interviews presents a rather different picture. Staff participants feel more European than Irish (or, in the cases of the few staff who were not Irish, their own nationality), while non-participants feel equally Irish and European. Some Erasmus staff were decidedly enthusiastic about their European identity and felt that it was reinforced by the aims and the "spirit" of the Erasmus+ programme through a fostering of collaborative exchanges and professional as well as social interaction. A closer inspection of the staff interviews reveals that when they are disaggregated by different emotional categories, the sentiments of the Erasmus participants about their European identity are less positive than those of non-participants; however, it should be noted that Erasmus participants among the staff express significantly more trust, joy, and anticipation, i.e. feelings generally considered as positive, so that on aggregate, they feel more positive about feeling European than non-participants, as Figure 9 demonstrates.

Figure 9. European identity emotional loading<sup>9</sup>

Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

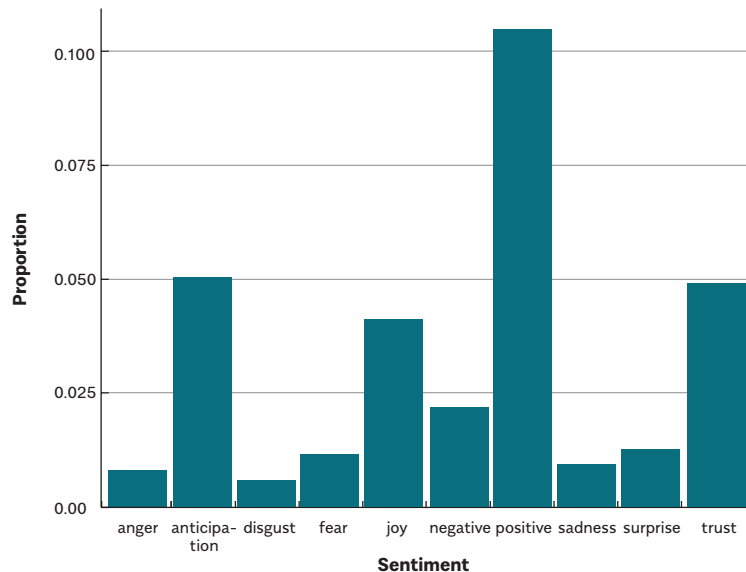
#### 4.2.1. Interactions with people from the host countries

It has been suggested that, for the Erasmus+ participants, the level of interaction with people from diverse cultural and national backgrounds might be positively linked to the level of identification with Europe. Increased interaction with diverse people outside of the host culture can forge a sense of common identity with individuals with whom Erasmus+ participants share common experiences, whereas persons with only limited contact with others outside the host culture would not experience this effect.

Thus, in the interviews, the Erasmus+ participants were asked to discuss the topic of interaction with people in the host countries. Figure 10, representing a sentiment analysis of these experiences, indicates that, overall, Erasmus student participants are mostly positive about their interactions with people from the host countries, while also expressing feelings of joy, trust and anticipation in larger measure than any negative feelings. However, the graphic also shows that some students had decidedly negative experiences with people in the host countries and expressed these sentiments emphatically in the interviews with words such as "hard", "difficult", "intimidating", "complex", and, worryingly, "racist" (this is discussed in more detail in the full version of the study).

<sup>9</sup> The thick teal blue bar for "sadness" and "surprise" represents the content of the interviews by the Erasmus participants, as there was no language either in favour or against that emotion (i.e. no data) in the interviews by the non-participants.

Figure 10. Interactions with people from host countries emotional loading: Erasmus students



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

In sum, the analyses of the interviews reveal that going on an Erasmus mobility does not have a uniform effect of forging a primarily European identity among the participants and, conversely, that not going on Erasmus can stifle these efforts.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it would appear that, in the Irish context, neither a national nor a European identity delimit the group boundaries in any decisive way, and that these identities can be multi-layered and fluid, cutting across other cleavages (e.g. generational, economic, political, etc.) and other forms of self-identification (e.g. religious, ethnic, linguistic, etc.).

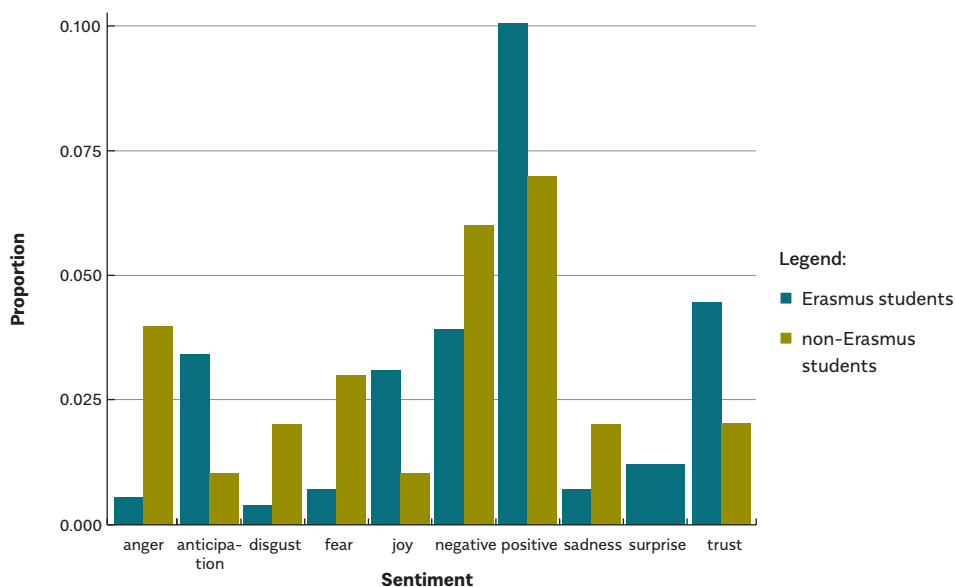
### 4.3. Impact of foreign languages

The second thematic area explored in the interviews pertained to knowledge of and attitudes towards foreign languages. As the promotion of foreign language learning and linguistic diversity is one of the main objectives of the Erasmus+ programme, the interviewees were asked about their level of foreign language competence and their general attitude towards the acquisition of languages other than the two official languages of Ireland. The results reflect a subjective evaluation of the level of foreign language proficiency by students and staff and should thus be treated with caution. Nonetheless, the answers are indicative of the perceptions that Erasmus+ participants and non-participants hold about the importance of foreign languages in their lives and whether or not there are any substantial differences between the two groups.

<sup>10</sup> There is some indication that, for Erasmus staff, there might be a positive link between European identity and Erasmus mobility, and this should be investigated further. It is possible that the difference between the student and staff cohorts in regard to the impact of an Erasmus mobility on their sense of identity is generational, i.e. the students in present-day Ireland are far more likely than the staff were in the past to travel and interact with other Europeans (and non-Europeans) either in person or via social media, so the impact of the Erasmus mobility is less direct for today's young people, for whom going on Erasmus is just one of many ways to experience Europe and the wider world.

The study found that there are distinct differences in regard to the perceived knowledge of and attitude towards foreign languages between students who did and who did not participate in Erasmus+ mobilities (Figure 11). Student participants are decidedly more positive in their responses about their knowledge of and attitude towards foreign languages, while non-participants are decidedly more negative. Feelings of joy, trust and anticipation are also more pronounced among Erasmus participants than non-participants, while feelings of sadness, fear, disgust, and anger are more pronounced among non-participants.

Figure 11. Foreign languages emotional loading<sup>11</sup>

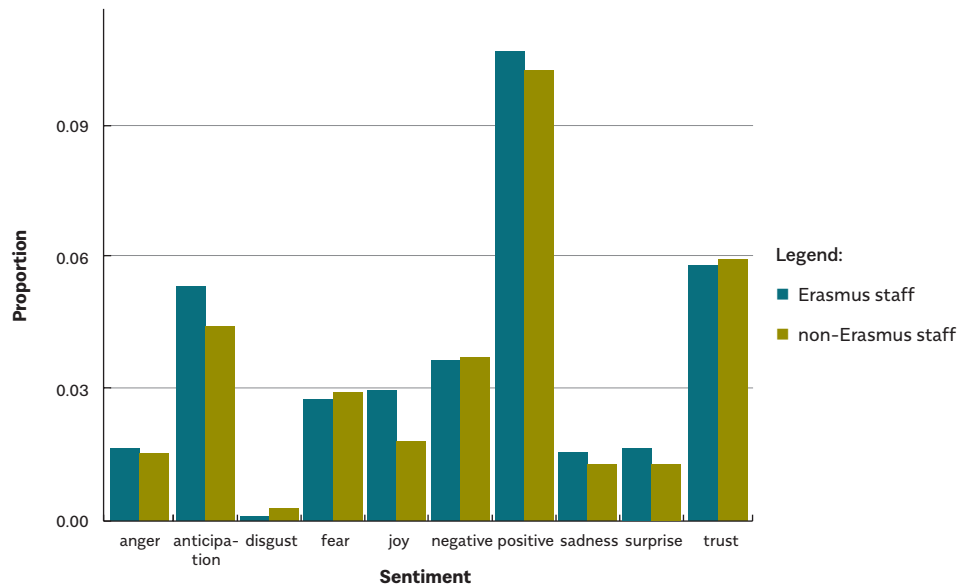


Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

For staff, the differences between Erasmus+ participants and non-participants on the topic of foreign languages are far less perceptible than for the students. All staff interviewees indicated that they have a good or very good knowledge of at least one foreign language, and seven of the staff interviewed were either lecturers in a foreign language or non-native English speakers, for whom English was one of the foreign languages in which they were highly proficient. Figure 12 illustrates that the differences between the two cohorts are only marginal, with Erasmus+ participants only slightly more positive than non-participants. More visible differences exist in feelings of joy and anticipation, with Erasmus+ participants scoring higher than non-participants.

11 The thick teal blue bar for "surprise" represents the content of the interviews by the Erasmus participants as there was no language either in favour or against that emotion (i.e. no data) in the interviews by the non-participants.

Figure 12. Foreign languages emotional loading



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

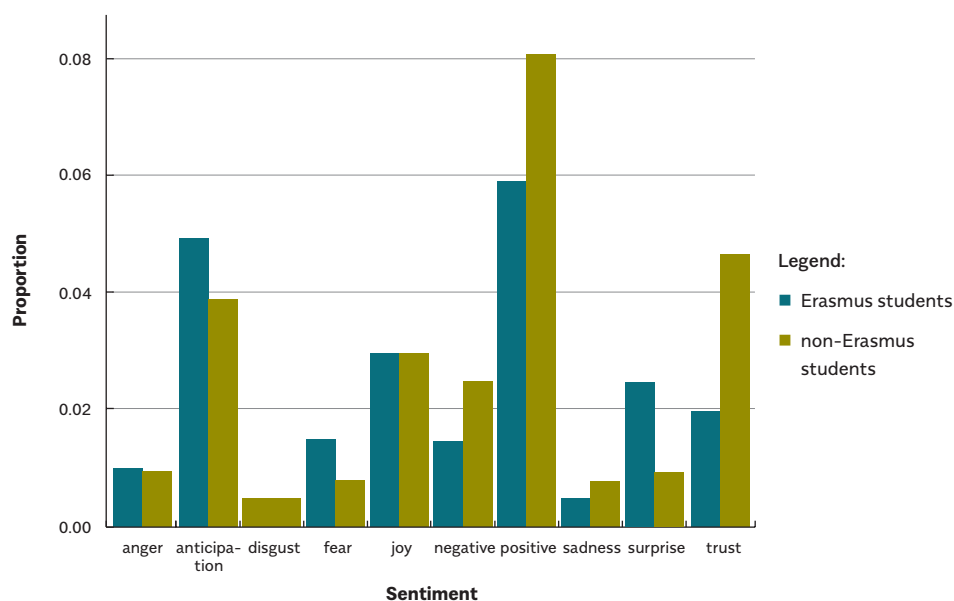
Thus, on a general level, the analyses of the interview data confirm that there is a link between Erasmus mobility and foreign language competence, at least for the students studying in Irish higher education institutions. However, deeper analysis is needed to understand more about this subject. Thus, an examination of prior international experience was carried out in order to provide more insight on the subject of foreign languages acquisition. Here, we can infer the extent to which international experience (other than the Erasmus+ mobility for the participants), such as holiday travel, work abroad, or other types of international visits, might be associated with the learning of foreign languages.

#### 4.3.1. Prior international exposure

In this regard, both groups of students have extensive international travel experience, with continental Europe and the United States being the most popular destinations for holidays and family visits. Interestingly, the sentiment analysis shows that non-participants are considerably more positive about their international experiences, and their responses have more feelings of trust than those of the Erasmus+ participants; however, some of their statements on the subject also contain more negativity (Figure 13). There are about equal amounts of joy and of anger for both cohorts, while Erasmus+ participants tend to feel more anticipation and surprise but also more fear than non-participants. This would indicate that both groups had varied international experiences, with a mixture of positive and negative aspects. It is therefore not possible to discern any associational patterns between prior international experience and knowledge of and attitude towards foreign languages, nor to ascribe the

differences between the two groups of students to their foreign language knowledge and attitude to their international experience.

Figure 13. Prior international experience<sup>12</sup>



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

To sum up, it appears that when it comes to foreign languages, there are distinct differences between students who did and who did not go on Erasmus and that these differences exist irrespective of any other international experience the two groups might have. While these results are only exploratory and therefore not completely conclusive, they could indicate that Erasmus+ has a positive impact on encouraging multilingualism and fostering a positive attitude towards foreign language learning among Irish students. In this way, the Erasmus+ programme can play an important role in supporting the government's efforts to increase foreign language competence among Irish learners.

#### 4.4. Impact on future outlook, employability and career trajectory

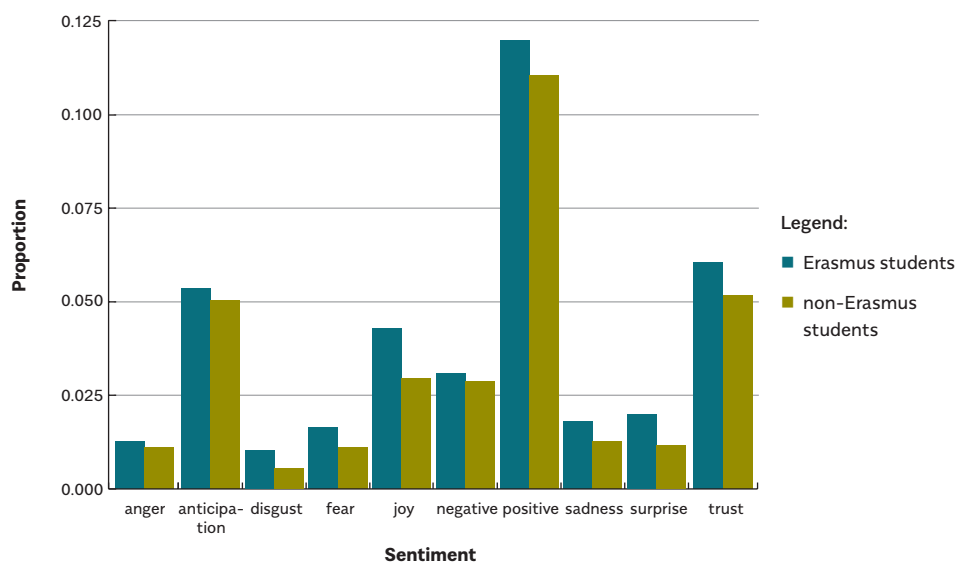
In addition to the gaining of foreign language skills and a better appreciation of a common European identity, the EU Commission and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) promote the benefits of the programme in other areas, such as increased independence and self-sufficiency, employability and cosmopolitan friendship networks. Therefore, the third impact dimension of this study concerns student and staff self-evaluations in the broad areas of skills, employability prospects, career progression, etc.

<sup>12</sup> The thick olive bar for "disgust" represents the content of the interviews by the non-participants as there was no language either in favour or against that emotion (i.e. no data) in the interviews by the Erasmus participants.

where it was felt that the Erasmus+ mobility might have an impact. Non-participants were asked to discuss whether, in their view, not going on Erasmus+ had in any way affected their current situation or if it is likely to affect their future, and whether they feel that they had missed out on or gained anything as a result of their non-participation in Erasmus+.

In the area of impact on skills, employment and career prospects for the student cohort, the sentiment analysis in Figure 14 shows that Erasmus participants tend to use more emphatic language in all emotion categories. Most notably, their responses about the impact of Erasmus mobility on their personal development, career prospects, etc. contain more positivity, joy, surprise, anticipation and trust than the responses of non-participants about the impact of not going on Erasmus. But Erasmus participants also express marginally more negative emotions of anger, sadness, fear, and disgust than non-participants. However, these negative sentiments are proportionally far smaller than the positive sentiments, and an inspection of the interview material reveals that in the case of Erasmus+ student participants, these feelings relate to general concerns about financial independence after graduation, difficulties with fitting back in and re-connecting with friends who stayed behind, and, in a small number of cases, missing out on course content.

**Figure 14. Impact emotional loading**

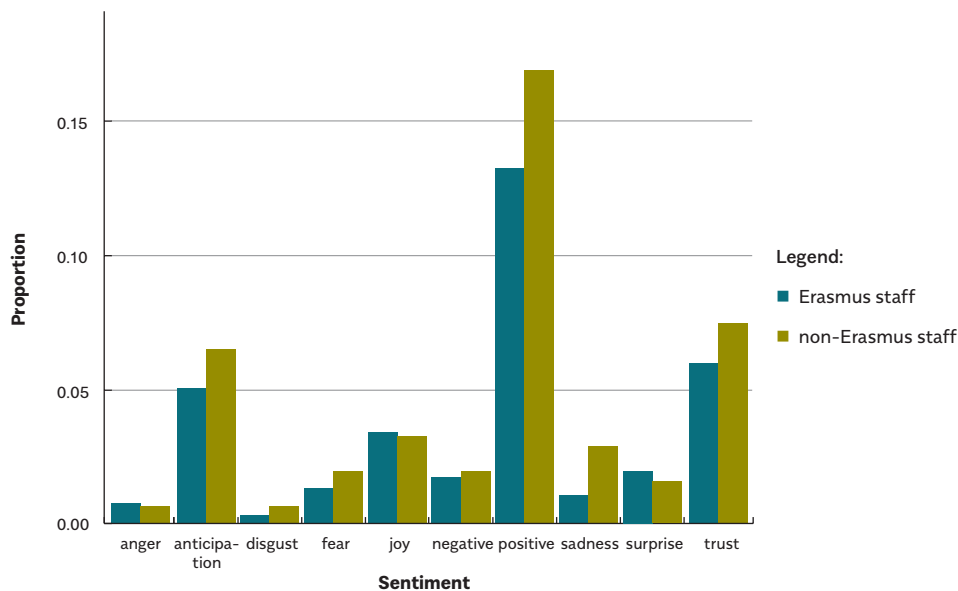


Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

Staff who had participated in the Erasmus+ academic mobility were asked if they felt that the mobility led to concrete effects in the areas of career development, pedagogy, curriculum development, research, international collaboration, etc. Conversely, non-participating staff were asked whether they considered not going on Erasmus had been detrimental in any way to their professional trajectory. As the sentiment analysis of the staff responses indicates (Figure 15), non-participants are highly positive in their assessment of the impact of not going on Erasmus on their career trajectory. Most of them feel

that not having gone on an Erasmus mobility had not affected them in any significant way, and that any negative impact would have been negligible. It is indeed interesting to note that non-participants express more positivity, trust, and anticipation than Erasmus participants, who were generally very positive in the interviews about the effects of the mobility on their professional development and career.

Figure 15. Impact emotional loading



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

In the process of interviewing non-Erasmus students and staff, one of the topics that emerged was the level of knowledge about the Erasmus+ mobility among non-participants. During the discussions with students and staff about the consequences of going or not going on the mobility, the interviewees themselves were very eager to explore and share their reasons for going or not going on the mobility. Furthermore, the discursive and dynamic nature of the interviews also allowed for an in-depth conversation about some of the problems and challenges that the Erasmus+ participants faced prior to, during, or after the mobility. Therefore, interview content pertaining to the knowledge about the Erasmus+ programme, reasons for participating or not participating, and problems and challenges related to the mobility was also analysed.

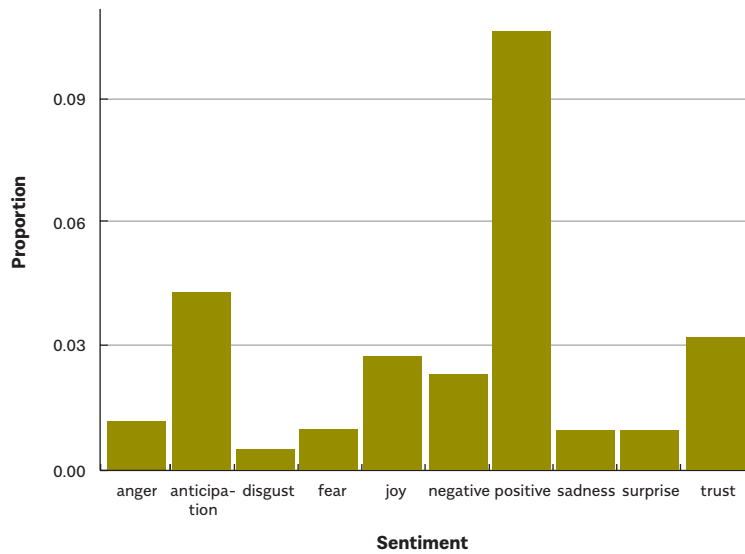
#### 4.4.1. Knowledge about Erasmus+

Figures 16 and 17 indicate that non-participants among the students and staff are, by and large, highly satisfied with their level of knowledge about the programme. The prevailing emotions expressed in the discussions on this subject are positive, while the other dominant sentiments were anticipation, joy, and trust. Staff appear to be even more positive and trusting about the level of their knowledge about Erasmus+ than the students, and there are only minor instances of negative emotions in both groups. We can thus



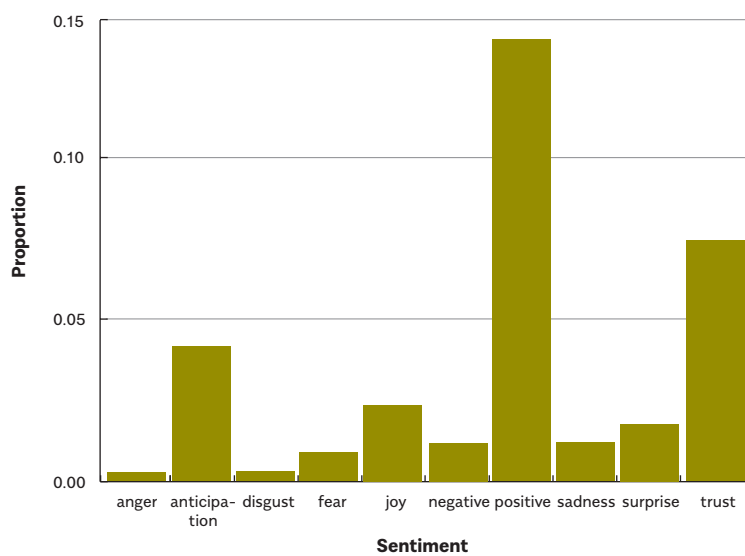
be reasonably confident that students and staff who did not go on Erasmus+ mobility have a more than adequate level of knowledge about the programme and that whatever barriers to participation exist for these cohorts, it is most likely not their lack of knowledge about the Erasmus option.

Figure 16. Erasmus knowledge emotional loading: non-Erasmus students



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

Figure 17. Erasmus knowledge emotional loading: non-Erasmus staff



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

#### 4.4.2. Reasons for going/not going on Erasmus+

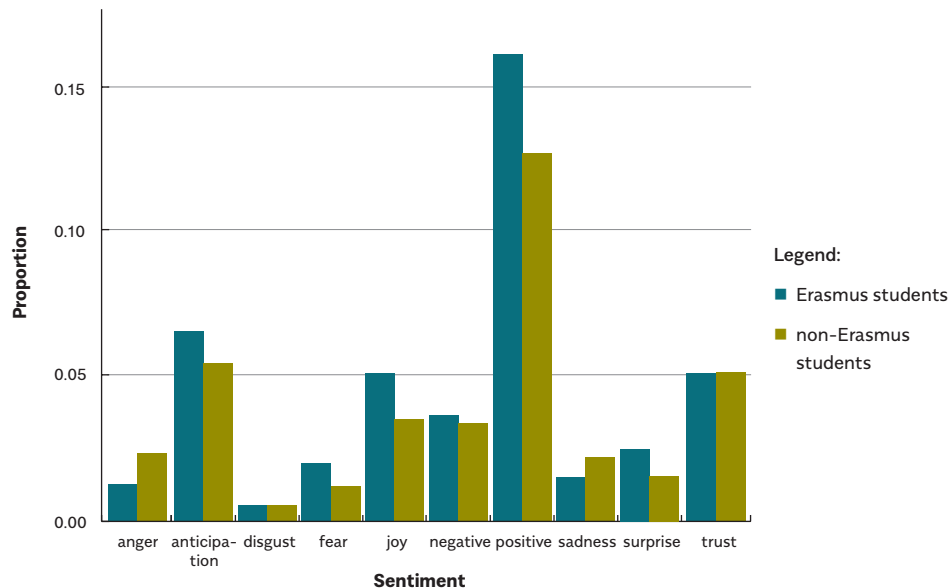
When asked about their motivation for going on Erasmus, most student participants indicated that getting work experience via placement was their key consideration. Other students simply wanted an opportunity to experience living abroad, while for others, international mobility was a mandatory part of their course. Interestingly, "language" features in the five words most frequently used by this group, and indeed several participants confirmed that they hoped to improve their language skills through living or working abroad. "CV" and "culture" were also prominent words, indicating that both concrete motivations (i.e. improving one's CV) and less tangible considerations (i.e. experiencing other cultures) were important factors in the students' decision to participate in Erasmus+.

On the other hand, for non-participants, language seemed to be a key obstacle. This is noteworthy, considering that English is by far the most predominant language of instruction/communication in most Erasmus+ mobilities for Irish students and also given that most non-participants rate their knowledge of the Erasmus programme very highly. This might indicate that although the non-Erasmus students *think* they know a lot about the programme, their actual knowledge might be incomplete in regard to the option to study or work using primarily English. Alternatively, it could be the case that they might be aware of this option but are still apprehensive about the prospect of living in another country where English is not the main language of communication. Almost half of the non-participants expressed a concern that going on Erasmus+ would be a distraction or it would not be financially expedient as they were planning to pursue a postgraduate degree and were either focused on getting the best marks to ensure admission to a Master's programme or were trying to save money to ensure they could afford it.

Other reasons that deter students from going on the mobility are family obligations, losing support from family and friends, the degree structure or learning environment, and financial considerations. Time was also identified as a barrier to mobility. In their responses, most non-participants were in agreement that going on an Erasmus mobility was too "expensive" for them and that "money" was a big obstacle. The duration of the mobility was also a key factor related to affordability – a minimum of three months abroad was simply not a practical option for a lot of students who need to work to support themselves, and a whole semester abroad was even less realistic. This sentiment was echoed by staff and International Officers: when asked what they thought the reasons for the relatively low participation rates of Irish students in Erasmus+ mobilities were, most felt that cost and time were the key barriers and stated that one way of widening participation was to shorten the minimum duration of the mobility. Some non-participants also cited their prior international exposure as a reason why they felt they did not need to go on Erasmus. While course considerations, language, social and financial factors appear to be the main barriers to student participation, for some non-participants, international mobility can be experienced in other ways, such as international travel for a holiday, work, or study.

In terms of the sentiments expressed on this subject, both participants and non-participants are mostly positive when talking about the reasons for going or not going on Erasmus (Figure 18); however, not surprisingly, Erasmus+ participants exhibit more positive feelings and their responses contain more joy and anticipation, but also slightly more fear and surprise.

Figure 18. Reasons emotional loading



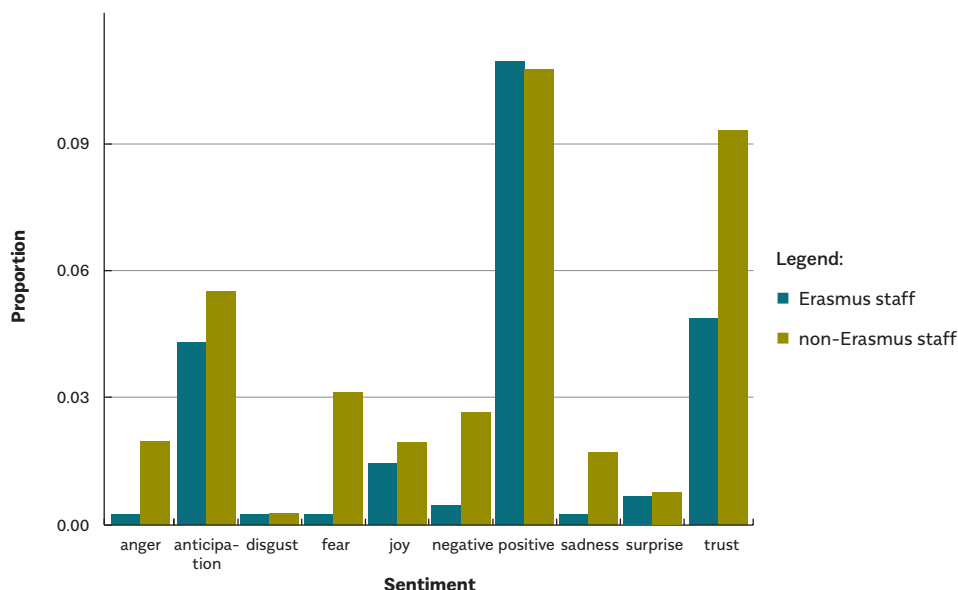
Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

Most of the staff who went on Erasmus mobilities went on teaching visits, and their key motivation was to share their knowledge and ideas with students and staff in partner institutions and to enhance their own teaching practice. Often, an additional motivating factor was to establish new relationships or solidify existing partnerships with host institutions. Several members of staff also underscored the importance of the students as the beneficiaries of staff mobility as one of their main reasons for going on Erasmus. Similarly, for non-teaching staff, the main impetus for the mobility was to broaden their knowledge and expertise in their particular area by observing, exchanging ideas, and participating in various activities at the host institution. Here, the focus was as much on the benefits in terms of the professional development of participating staff as it was about benefiting the home institution.

The primary reason that prevents staff from going on Erasmus mobilities is the shortage of time resulting from a heavy teaching load and family commitments. Nearly all non-Erasmus teaching staff reported that it is extremely difficult to fit the mobility during the teaching term or find a substitute to cover their lectures or labs. Similarly, harmonising the visit with the partner institution's academic calendar outside of the teaching term is equally challenging. Family obligations and other personal commitments also feature highly as the main reasons for not participating in Erasmus+. These barriers to mobility are particularly prevalent among early career staff, which is reflected in low, and declining, levels of participation among this cohort.

Looking at the emotional loading of Erasmus vs. non-Erasmus staff interviews in Figure 19, it is noticeable that there is only a marginal difference between the groups in positive emotions, but non-Erasmus participants display significantly more negative emotions as well as more sadness, fear, and anger in their statements pertaining to the reasons for going or not going on the mobility. On the positive side of the emotional scale, however, their responses also contain significantly more feelings of trust and slightly more anticipation than the responses of Erasmus+ participants.

Figure 19. Reasons emotional loading



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

#### 4.4.3. Problems and challenges

When asked about the challenges and problems that students encountered either prior, during, or after their Erasmus mobility, the key concern was accommodation. This concern pertained to accommodation issues both in Ireland and abroad. Arguably, ensuring a positive accommodation experience is especially important for students on international mobilities, as, in many cases for the students in Irish HEIs, this was their first instance of living away from home for a significant period of time. Even for those students who did not live at home during their studies, the challenges of leaving their "comfort zone" to study or work in a foreign country at a relatively young age were already considerable without having to deal with adverse living conditions.

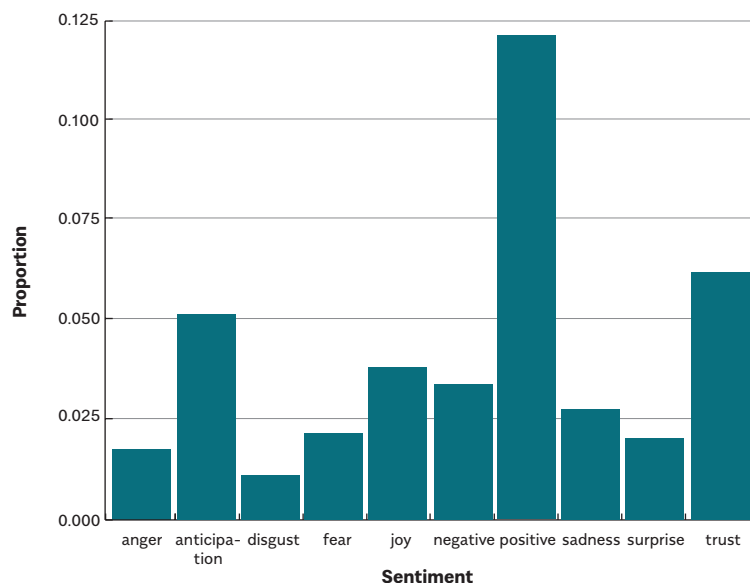
The sentiment analysis of the "challenges and problems" theme in the student interviews (Figure 20), reveals that positive feelings about the challenges of the Erasmus experience were mostly expressed through words such as "nice", "fine", "mature", "honest", "love", "support", and "lucky". The negative sentiments pertaining to challenges and problems were expressed through words such as "hard", "difficult", "expensive", "missed", "bad", "terrible", and "stuck". A close inspection of the interview data corpus reveals that the words "hard" and "difficult" most often refer to the challenges associated with coming back to Ireland. This subject was raised in all focus group discussions, and those who spoke out felt fairly strongly about it: "the stress is doubled on return" and the "worst part of the experience was coming back". All speakers agreed that "it takes time to get back into it"; however, they felt that, in most cases, their home institutions should provide more support during the transition period.

Conversely, a small number of students found the initial period on Erasmus more difficult to cope with. This was especially evident in the case of mature students for whom "the hardest part [was] the beginning". These students described a sense of isolation, feeling different due to their age, and being "stuck" because they did not understand the system. At the same time, they were apprehensive about seeking assistance because they did not want to be a burden to anyone and felt that they might be expected to figure things out by themselves due to their age and presumed experience.

Thus, while the "post-Erasmus depression", i.e. the challenge of transitioning from being abroad to the reality of returning home, might be more prevalent among non-mature students, there is some indication that mature students experience more problems with the initial stages of the mobility. This can be attributed to feelings of isolation and fewer opportunities to integrate with their classmates and a reluctance to seek help due to the age difference.

Another notable challenge experienced by the Erasmus students is the cost. About half of the Erasmus cohort who had experienced financial difficulties whilst abroad attributed these to the high cost of accommodation. While everyone found the Erasmus grant helpful, the level of funding and the distribution of the grant money were other cost-related challenges raised in the interviews.

**Figure 20. Problems and challenges emotional loading: Erasmus students**



Source: NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon

When asked about problems and challenges pertaining to the Erasmus+ mobility, the staff were unanimous that time (or timing) is the most difficult aspect to manage. Academic staff often mentioned a lack or shortage of time in the context of an increasing workload, but few respondents among the administrative staff also found it challenging to take time away from the office and to fit the mobility into their work schedule due to understaffing. The lack of professional recognition by the institutions and the sense that international mobility is not very highly valued by the higher level personnel was

also mentioned in the context of a suboptimal level of support for staff interested in international mobility. Other types of challenges encountered by the Erasmus staff included a variety of logistical and operational issues; however, these were not as prevalent as the aforementioned time- and workload-related challenges. In spite of these challenges, on the whole, the staff were very positive about their Erasmus+ experience, and all of the interviewees were in agreement that they achieved their objectives, are interested in future mobilities, and would recommend going on Erasmus to their colleagues.

## 5. View from the International Office

To get a more complete picture of the impacts of international mobility under the Erasmus+ programme on its participants from the Irish higher education sector, fifteen International Officers representing twelve Irish HEIs were also interviewed. They were asked to share their views about barriers to participation for students and staff and the impact of Erasmus on individual participants and on the institutions at large.<sup>13</sup>

### 5.1. Barriers to participation

According to the International Officers interviewed, the main impediment to participation for staff is time, while for students it is language and finances. Figure 21 presents word frequencies compiled from the IOs' responses. It is clear that the views from the international office regarding the key obstacles to participation are broadly allied with the views of the students and staff. Language and finances were identified as the key factors preventing student mobility. In this regard, several IOs expressed concern that international mobility is not a required part of the course for language students. Ireland's geography and lack of "foreign language culture" were also highlighted as factors contributing to the low uptake of outbound mobilities among the students. Some interviewees also made references to the fact that Irish students, in general, appear to be less inclined than their counterparts in continental Europe to travel very far from home and to leave their "comfort zone" for long periods of time.

However, all International Officers underscore that financial considerations are a major concern for many students in their home institutions. Many IOs pointed out that the cost of the mobility (even with the mobility grant) is often prohibitive for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for some mature students, and for students who are working or living away from home. The financial burden of paying double rent in order to keep their accommodation in Ireland (especially for those living in Dublin, Cork or Galway) or of losing a job for the duration of the mobility is not sustainable for many students. This lack of access to Erasmus+ due to financial reasons is particularly disconcerting in the case of students who already have limited opportunities to travel internationally and who have low exposure to foreign languages and cultures. For these students, the long-term negative impact of not participating in

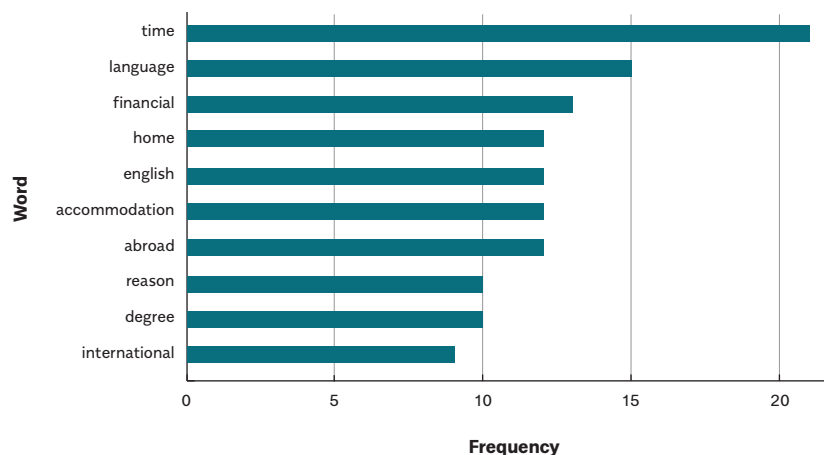
13 As HEIs formulate their respective internationalisation policies within a broader national strategy, International Officers referenced a number of areas where Erasmus+ impacted on their institutional internationalisation efforts. These include maximising the number of students receiving international experience via Erasmus+, expanding partnerships with other internationally recognised institutions worldwide, and promoting cultural openness and diversity. IOs also referenced the need for a more concrete institutional recognition of the Erasmus mobilities to demonstrate the commitment of the institution to its mission to internationalise.

Erasmus might be more significant than for the students for whom the Erasmus programme is but one of many ways to get international experience.

In regard to staff, according to most of the International Officers interviewed, the key obstacle appears to be time. However, other factors, such as logistical and operational challenges, especially for non-teaching staff, can also contribute to low participation rates among the administrative staff. Again, this view is corroborated by the staff themselves who cite these factors as the key challenges and obstacles to participating in Erasmus+ mobility.

Another crucial aspect that could have a bearing on staffs' interest in international mobility is the view that there is little or no formal recognition of it from the institution. Both staff and International Officers agree that this is a considerable disincentive and should be addressed, given that staff mobilities feed directly into the institutional internationalisation strategies and support the government's strategic priorities in the area of the internationalisation of the higher education sector and of the Irish workforce.

**Figure 21. Barriers to participation for students and staff: International Officers**



Source: interview data corpus. A word frequency graph produced in R version 3.5.1.

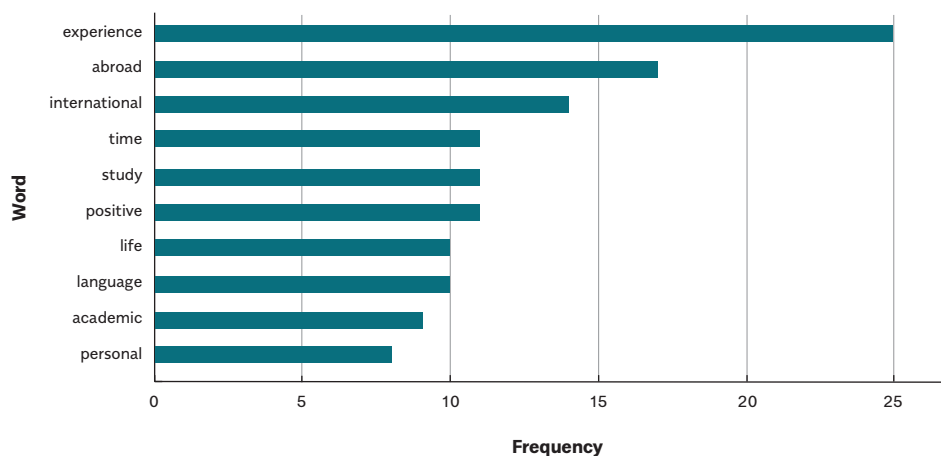
## 5.2. Impact on students and staff

All International Officers were unanimous in their views about the overwhelmingly positive impact of Erasmus, particularly on the students. Several IOs used the word "life-changing" to describe the observed effects of the mobility on the students they sent abroad. Every International Officer interviewed agreed that going on Erasmus is a highly beneficial experience for most of the students, who return with a greater sense of confidence and clarity about their choices and their future, and who also often gain a much-needed lesson in independence. Several IOs also stressed the advantages of having to get by in a foreign country, where more often than not the language of communication is not English (even if the coursework is in English) and either becoming proficient in that language or just being exposed to it, along with other cultural aspects, for a sustained period of time. Aside from these more concrete impacts of

Erasmus+, some International Officers also alluded to the less tangible, but probably equally important, consequences of the mobility, such as feeling good as a result of having done it and feeling more empathetic towards international students and people from foreign countries. The most frequent words associated with the impacts of Erasmus on students and staff are presented in Figure 22.

International Officers were equally positive in their assessment of the impact of Erasmus mobility on staff. The general experience of going abroad and personal interactions with colleagues from partner institutions were considered among the top benefits for all staff, while for teaching and research staff specifically, International Officers identified a range of academic benefits that can contribute to their teaching skills and pedagogy, further their research, and enhance collaborative networks across partner institutions. Several International Officers also pointed to the lasting "ripple effect" of some of the staff mobilities and the reciprocity and mutual benefits for both partner institutions.

Figure 22. Impact on students and staff: International Officers



Source: interview data corpus. A word frequency graph produced in R version 3.5.1.

## 6. Summary of findings and conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which international mobility under the Erasmus+ programme affects the participants' European identity, foreign language competence, and other skills (soft and transversal) linked to employment prospects and career advancement. The study combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies and included the voices of Erasmus+ participants and non-participants among the students and staff as well as International Officers from a wide range of Irish higher education institutions. The main findings are summarised as follows:

- While Erasmus students feel a stronger national identity as their primary identity, non-Erasmus students feel almost equally Irish and European. However, Erasmus students are much more positive about European identity than non-Erasmus students.
- Erasmus students are highly positive in their attitude towards foreign languages, while non-Erasmus students are vastly more negative.



- For the Erasmus students, the overall impact of the mobility is highly positive, with the greatest impacts reported in the areas of growing self-esteem, improving job prospects, maturing, acquiring a new language, feeling more positive about Europe, gaining skills/work experience, and gaining new friends.
- Non-Erasmus students are equally divided regarding the impact of not going on the mobility: 50% regret not going on Erasmus and feel that they missed an opportunity, while 50% report no feelings of regret and do not feel any tangible negative effects (these students feel they have already had or will have other opportunities to travel abroad and maintain that non-participation in Erasmus will not affect their career prospects. Most of them have travelled or studied outside of Europe).
- The primary drivers of mobility among students are gaining international experience, fulfilling course requirements, securing a job after graduation or increasing employability, and having an adventure.
- The primary barriers to mobility for students are cost, language, the duration of the mobility (related to the fear of losing accommodation and/or work), course structure, a reluctance or inability to leave family and friends behind, and a lack of motivation.
- The main challenges for students related to the Erasmus mobility are finding accommodation, a lack of support at the host institution, inadequate information or guidance, excessive paperwork, a demanding workload, and post-Erasmus depression.
- Both Erasmus and non-Erasmus staff feel equally Irish (or other nationality) and European, but all non-Irish staff feel both European and national, while some Irish staff feel primarily Irish. Erasmus staff are slightly more positive about European identity than non-Erasmus staff.
- Most Erasmus and non-Erasmus staff have extensive prior international experience, and approximately 50% of them are fluent in a foreign language.
- Erasmus staff are more positive about their knowledge of and attitude towards foreign languages than non-Erasmus staff.
- Erasmus staff report that the overall impact of the mobility is very positive, with the following main areas of impact: research and other forms of professional collaboration, development of new teaching methods and pedagogies, networking, socialising, and feeling recharged.
- All Erasmus staff report that they achieved their mobility objectives.
- All Erasmus staff are interested in participating in future mobilities.
- All Erasmus staff are satisfied with the level of funding.
- Among the Erasmus staff, about 75% feel that their participation motivated students to consider going on an Erasmus mobility.
- All non-Erasmus staff claim to have an international mindset and support internationalisation efforts in their HEIs.
- Non-Erasmus staff are substantially less positive regarding the impact of not going on Erasmus on their personal or professional trajectory.
- Most non-Erasmus staff report a good level of knowledge about the Erasmus programme and all are interested in possibly applying for the Erasmus mobility.
- The main barrier to mobility for staff is time (especially for junior staff) and, to a lesser degree, getting professional recognition for their participation.
- International Officers report important impacts of Erasmus+ on their institutions' internationalisation efforts, especially in the area of maximising the number of students who receive international experience via Erasmus+, expanding partnerships with other internationally

recognised institutions around the world, and promoting cultural openness and diversity on campus.

### Appendix: Note concerning the main challenges of the study

The principal challenges concern data incompatibility between the national statistics on higher education institutions in Ireland and the official Erasmus figures. The discrepancy in the numbers of Erasmus participants between the two data sources is likely to result from the different data collection times. Also, we do not have reliable data pertaining to some crucial variables, such as students' socio-economic status or ethnicity, because their reporting is optional. These shortcomings did not allow for a more detailed and more extensive large-N analysis of the entire two cohorts (Erasmus participants and non-participants) quantitatively via e.g. logistic regression. Furthermore, the lack of reliable and consistent data on Irish Erasmus participants prior to 2013 prevents a meaningful investigation of long-term trends at this time.

Another challenge pertains to the size of the student cohorts selected for the interviews. The study progressed to the interview stage in Spring 2017; however, due to a number of logistical factors, by the time the onsite visits were arranged, the students were coming up to their end-of-year exams. Thus, it was not always possible to convene sufficiently large groups of students, especially among the non-participants. Also, cognizant of the fact that this was a particularly busy time for faculty and staff, the researcher postponed faculty interviews until the start of the Spring 2018 term, at which point more interviews with students and International Officers were conducted to supplement and expand the existing data set. Ideally, the size of both groups among both participants and non-participants would be equal. Furthermore, the corpus of the interview text would ideally be sufficiently large to allow for a more rigorous quantitative analysis of the textual data.

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# Methodology of a panel study on Erasmus mobility graduates

By **Jadwiga Fila, Agnieszka Rybińska**

## Abstract

This article addresses the issue of the methodology applied in the study on higher education students who benefitted from Erasmus support from the year 2007 onwards. The study covers mobility graduates from Key Action 1: Mobility of Individuals. The research aims at monitoring the educational and career pathways of mobility graduates, with a focus on the potential impact of the mobility programme in those areas.

The paper aims to describe the methods applied and the organization of the longitudinal study. The focus is put on the methodology and theoretical background of the research. At the time of writing the article, one wave of the panel study had been completed, and therefore the article does not present the results and outcomes from the survey.

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 90s, we have been able to observe the phenomenon of an "educational boom" in Poland, as each year more and more people participate in different forms of formal education (OECD 2018). What is more, social awareness about the value of education is rising as well.

Nowadays, having completed higher education is no longer perceived as an achievement. Most often, it is treated as a natural continuation of secondary education. What is more, the fast-growing number of higher education institutions (both public and private ones) makes it more accessible for a wide range of students.

However, in comparison to other OECD countries, Poland is still below the average regarding the number of graduates from tertiary education institutions. While in 2017 the percentage of 25 to 64-year-olds that held a tertiary education degree reached 38% for OECD countries, in Poland it had only gone up to 30%. The observed tendencies are evolving in the

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### KEYWORDS

PANEL STUDY, STUDENT MOBILITY, RESEARCH, PROFESSIONAL CAREER OF GRADUATES, EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

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desirable direction, however – each year, more and more young people<sup>1</sup> in Poland are starting tertiary education (OECD 2018).

According to studies conducted by the OECD (OECD 2017, 2018), academic graduates have much higher chances of getting employment than people with an uncompleted education. In Poland, 88% of people who have completed higher education find employment (OECD 2017), which is even higher than the average for all OECD countries – 84% (data for 2016). This score varies depending on the field of studies – fields such as social sciences, journalism and information studies, arts and humanities, or education give a chance of getting employment that is a bit below the average. Areas that are above the average are the following: ICT, health and welfare, business, administration, law, engineering, manufacturing and construction (OECD 2017).

One of the factors attracting young people to higher education is the possibility of gaining international experience. The Erasmus programme, present in Poland from 1998 until 2013, became commonly known as a synonym for international mobility for students. It offered a unique chance for thousands of students and academic staff to benefit from a period of time spent abroad in a partner higher education institution. The programme continued from 2014 onwards under the name of the Erasmus+ programme.

Since the beginning of the programme in Poland (1998), over 200,000 students have participated in studies or traineeships abroad (Dąbrowska-Resiak 2018a). Each year, about 10,000 Polish students go abroad to complete part of their studies at a foreign university.

## 2. Influence of the Erasmus programme on participants' skills

According to the Erasmus+ Programme Guide (European Commission 2019):

*The specific objectives pursued by the Erasmus+ Programme in the field of education and training are to: improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society, in particular through increased opportunities for learning mobility and through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work [...].*

This shows the importance of improving the key competences and skills among students who will shortly enter the labour market. Not only will it increase their chances of finding better employment, but it may also have a huge impact on the whole society. The influence of participation in

1 Defined as people under 25 years old (OECD 2018).

international mobility programmes is interesting from the individual's perspective as well as from the point of view of the whole labour market. The European Commission investigated this topic in 2014 when the Erasmus Impact Study was carried out. As stated in the report (European Commission 2014), students with international mobility experience have higher chances of finding their first source of employment and have better prospects for their career development. The unemployment rate among students who experienced the Erasmus programme<sup>2</sup> in the 5-year period after their graduation is 23% lower.

It is especially significant that the transversal skills that are improved during a stay abroad are much desired by employers – on average, 92% of employers look for them while searching for an employee. So what counts in the labour market is not only knowledge and work experience but also features such as openness to and curiosity about new challenges, problem-solving and decision-making skills, confidence, and tolerance towards other personal values and behaviours. Those skills are naturally developed during an international mobility. That is why Erasmus students have, on average, better employability after their mobility period than 70% of all students (European Commission 2014).

## 2.1. Research on the effects of mobility programmes

The Foundation for the Development of the Education System in Poland<sup>3</sup> (FRSE) decided to research the influence of international mobility programmes on further education and the labour paths of their participants. The point of interest was whether, according to the students, a stay abroad within the Erasmus programme (either as a student or trainee) had an impact on their professional and educational career after graduation.

In Europe, different types of tracer studies<sup>4</sup> have been conducted, many of which have an international character – e.g. CEREQ research, the CHEERS European graduate survey, HEGESCO and others (Koniewski, Lisek 2017). Although there are many studies from different countries (some of them with a comparative, transnational character), while investigating the influence of international mobility on the career paths of participants, no systematic research of a repetitive character was spotted. That is why the Polish Erasmus+ National Agency decided to conduct a longitudinal study in this field.

## 3. Research area

The aim of the study is the analysis of if – and, if yes, to what extent – participation in Erasmus mobility programme had an impact on the educational and professional pathways of students, in terms of the development of their competences, their choice of educational and career paths, as well as their entry into the labour market.

The main research questions are as follows:

- To what extent (according to the beneficiaries) has the Erasmus programme influenced their educational and professional choices?

2 In comparison to students who did not take part in any mobility programme.

3 The Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ programme.

4 Sometimes tracer studies are also called tracking studies. The vocabulary used here is in line with Cedefop publications (see Schomburg 2016).

- How did the mobility experience influence the development of their professional and transversal skills?
- Did the experience in the mobility programme encourage them to continue their educational career?
- Has the mobility programme changed their situation in the labour market?
- Was it useful while they were looking for their first employment?
- Was the international experience valuable for their future career?

The research area is very broad and, taking this into account, two separate research schemes were applied: a tracer study (cross-sectional) and a panel study (longitudinal). The first was earmarked not only to address graduates with a set of evaluation questions, but also to identify respondents who would agree to participate in the longitudinal study at a later stage. The idea of the longitudinal study is based on repetitive measurements at given time intervals of the same group of respondents, in order to trace changes in their education and career paths.

#### 4. Tracer study – method

Thus, the first phase, being also a separate piece of research, was the tracer study, which up to now has had two editions. It was designed as a quantitative survey, and used an online survey method (CAWI).

The first edition of the tracer was realized from November 2017 to January 2018, and it was addressed to all outgoing Polish students who participated in Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes in the years 2007–2015. The second edition was launched in Autumn 2018 and was addressed to students who participated in an Erasmus+ mobility programme in 2016 or 2017.

The tracer study will be repeated each year in November and, by consequence, new groups of students will be included each year. The online questionnaire will be sent out to those students who:

- completed their mobility programme in the previous year, and
- had finished their studies as of the date of the survey (both conditions need to be fulfilled).

Those students who had not graduated from their studies that year (during which the mobility took place) will be re-contacted the following year. Therefore the survey will cover diverse groups of respondents – Bachelor studies graduates, Master's studies graduates and PhD graduates.

##### 4.1. Database for the tracer study

Every student taking part in an Erasmus programme (study or traineeship) is obliged to fill in a Participant Report on their arrival from abroad. The report is submitted shortly after finishing the international mobility, and it collects a set of administrative information as well as opinions and the overall satisfaction rate about the mobility programme. Participant Reports also collect contact information (email addresses) from participants as well as their agreement to be contacted by the National Agency for research purposes. The email database compiled from Participant Reports was and will be used as a contact list in every edition of the tracer study.

## 4.2. Tracer 2017 – pilot study

For methodology reasons, before the launch of the first edition of the tracer study, a pilot study was completed. The aim of the pilot study was twofold: a verification of the quality of the tracer questionnaire and a technical check on the online data collection tool.

The pilot study was carried out in June 2017 on the total group of 3,000 respondents, of whom 500 took part in mobility studies programmes in each of the given years (2008, 2010, 2012, 2014) and 250 took part in traineeship mobility programmes during the same years (Koniewski, Lisek 2017). The response rate was 6% (173 persons), including 54 persons who had graduated from their studies more than five years before the survey date.

35% of respondents who answered the pilot questionnaire agreed to be re-contacted in the future for research purposes, which means they agreed to be included in the panel study.<sup>5</sup>

## 4.3. Tracer study – final questionnaire

The data collection method applied was the Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI). The final questionnaire (main tracer questionnaire) was composed of 69 questions in total, however not all of them were addressed to all respondents (the questionnaire included a few filtering questions). The response rate reached 7%, which gave 7,100 complete questionnaires. 3,880 questionnaires were partially completed, but they were excluded from the quantitative analysis.

The online survey tool used was *Webankieta*,<sup>6</sup> and the average time for filling in the questionnaire was 20 minutes. The results and outcomes from the first edition of the tracer study are available in the report published by the FRSE (Dąbrowska-Resiak 2018b).

## 4.4. Changes in the tracer questionnaire

One of the purposes of the pilot study – among others – was to test the online questionnaire. Based on the results of the pilot study, the following changes were introduced into the main tracer questionnaire:

1. Open-ended questions were replaced by closed questions with a drop-down list, in order to avoid any recoding of the answers written by the respondent.
  - This change was applicable only for questions with a closed list of possible answers (e.g. "*Which country did you choose for your Erasmus mobility?*").
2. Since many graduates benefited from Erasmus studies or traineeships abroad more than once, to avoid confusion regarding the mobility they were being asked about, questions about the mobility experience were altered and rephrased to refer to the last mobility that the student took part in.
3. The sets of answers were modified in order to cover a broader range of possible answers.
  - The issue with non-disjoint responses was especially important while asking about the field of study. Many students follow individual educational paths or realize interfaculty studies and the answers did not match their needs. On the other hand, the precise field of study was not

<sup>5</sup> The outcomes of the pilot study are described in full by its author (see Dąbrowska-Resiak 2018b).

<sup>6</sup> [www.webankieta.pl](http://www.webankieta.pl)

crucial for the purposes of the research. That is why nine broad fields of studies were ultimately introduced (according to the latest classification of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education). At the end, an open answer ("other:...") was added.

4. The questions with scale-answers were clarified.
  - In the case of some scale questions (e.g. "How much do you agree or disagree with the statement..."), these had to be reformulated as the answers did not differentiate much. That was the case for questions regarding e.g.:
    - ◊ if the student shared his/her experiences about mobility with other students;
    - ◊ the most important personal advantages from the mobility experience; and
    - ◊ satisfaction rates from their current employment.
5. In the case of multiple choice questions, the maximum number of possible answers was limited to three and very similar answers were deleted.
  - Without this limitation, some respondents tended to choose all available answers, which was not desirable from the point of view of further analysis.
6. A question about the moment in which the respondent got their first employment was added (if it was before, during or after the mobility programme).
7. Following the suggestions from the respondents' side, a progress bar was added to the questionnaire.
8. Due to a change in European Union regulations (GDPR), appropriate statements about personal data were updated.

#### 4.5. Tracer study – first step for the panel study

The tracer study is the starting point for the panel study. In the main tracer questionnaire, there is a question on whether the respondent agrees to be contacted by the Polish National Agency in the future for further research purposes. Those graduates who agreed and voluntarily left their email address could be included (if other conditions were fulfilled) in the panel study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Response rate of the two editions of the tracer study

	Year of mobility	Number of students contacted	Response rate	Number of respondents who agreed to be contacted for further research purposes
<b>Edition 1: tracer 2017</b>	2007-2015	101,371	7%	2,563
<b>Edition 2: tracer 2018<sup>7</sup></b>	2016-2017	19,258	12%	723

### 5. Longitudinal study – methodology

The research methodology applied in the second research scheme was a panel method. A panel study is a type of dynamic study where data is collected from the same individuals at given time intervals. Subsequent editions of the survey are called panel waves (Babbie 2013).

7 Data effective for 28 February 2019.



Longitudinal methods require repeated measurements of the same group of respondents at regular intervals. The tools used for longitudinal measurements should be as similar as possible for each measurement. Due to this, it is possible to capture the change dynamics of the characteristics under investigation.

Panel studies are fundamentally similar to trend studies or cohort studies; however, panel studies are the only ones that can show the comprehensive change over time of given characteristics (Babbie 2013). That is why they are the perfect method to track the professional and educational pathways of graduates. As Słomczyński writes, "To map evidence through time, high quality longitudinal panel survey data are essential" (Słomczyński, Wysmułek 2016). This method is not very common in studies focusing on university graduates, as stated by Cedefop: "Most graduate surveys are cross-sectional studies: a population of graduates is questioned at one time point only, such as two years after graduation. Panel or longitudinal studies, in which the same persons are questioned at different times, are rare" (Schomburg 2016).

In an ideal situation, this data should be compared with data coming from a control group, which in this case would be graduates who did not benefit from an Erasmus mobility programme during their studies. Due to the scale of the survey, no control group was introduced. The survey was addressed to all Erasmus programme participants who were listed in the databases available to the Polish National Agency. Introducing a control group in such a survey would require involving graduates from the universities, for whom the FRSE did not have direct email addresses. Therefore, the outcomes of the survey will be limited to an intra-group analysis.

In many countries, panel studies are introduced to track the change dynamics in different fields of interest, most often fields such as politics, religion, values, or careers. Two of the most well-known European panel surveys from the education field are the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS)<sup>8</sup> in Germany and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B)<sup>9</sup>.

The panel format of the data gives a new angle of analysis and brings much more than cross-sectional studies. Not only does it enable scholars to study the differences between people or groups, but also to observe the dynamics of change over time. A great example of how panel data can be analyzed is presented by Słomczyński (Słomczyński, Wysmułek 2016):

*For example, researchers can examine the impact of social and intellectual capital on individuals' economic, political and cultural biographies, or analyze the extent to which individual acts and choices, reflected in their biographies, are shaped by structural conditions.*

The advantages of longitudinal research are also stressed by Menard (1991):

*Although modern statistical methods [...] are becoming better at dealing with the problems of isolating the influence of cohort, age, and period effect on a specific social phenomenon, only longitudinal research allows us to directly identify intra-individual change from one period to another, inter-individual similarities or differences in intra-individual change, analysis of interrelationships in behavioural change, causes of intra- or inter-individual change.*

8 [www.neps-data.de/en-us/home.aspx](http://www.neps-data.de/en-us/home.aspx)

9 [nces.ed.gov/surveys/b&b/about.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/b&b/about.asp)

According to Nowak (2012): "The panel method is the most efficient method to define the relation between two different values over time of the same variable and to define factors correlated with changes of those variables."

## 5.1. Panel attrition

One of the main concerns while conducting longitudinal research is the risk of losing respondents in upcoming panel waves, known as *panel attrition* (Babbie 2013). The causes of this phenomenon may be very complex, e.g.:

- problems with keeping in contact with respondents (email address may be changed);
- respondents growing tired of being questioned may withdraw their participation in the study – the phenomenon of *survey burden* (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska 2009); or
- respondents not perceiving the topic of the survey as an important one.

Regardless of the motivation, panel attrition cannot be fully prevented by researchers, who always have to deal with the situation of a decreasing sample in subsequent panel waves.

There is also a trend to study *panel non-respondents*, meaning the analysis of those who left the panel group in subsequent panel waves. Thanks to the fact that respondents left enough data about themselves in the first wave, such analysis may also bring some insight to the study (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska 2009).

The threat of panel attrition will become real in 2020, when the second wave of the 2018 panel will be carried out. In order to minimize this effect, some measures have been already undertaken to make the first panel group as large as possible. For more details on what solutions have been implemented, see section 5.4 (Sample and data collection) below.

## 5.2. Aim of the panel study

The panel study, thanks to its longitudinal character, makes it possible to trace the pathways of mobility graduates. In an ideal situation, respondents would be re-contacted throughout the total period of five years (a tracer in the first year, and three panel studies later). This seems to be a sufficient time period to observe, on the one hand, a potential influence of the mobility experience on a graduate's choices, and, on the other, to track any change in the evaluation of this experience. The aim of the panel study is to see how the influence of this experience changes over time.

The main research questions are as follows:

- What are the educational and professional pathways of the graduates from a longer time perspective?
- Is the respondent consistent with his/her evaluation of Erasmus mobility over time?
- Which aspects of the Erasmus mobility influenced the graduate's general quality of life?
- How durable are the effects of the Erasmus mobility?
- How useful are the skills gained during the Erasmus mobility in the labour market?
- Did the Erasmus experience help the graduates to get their first employment?
- How does the financial situation of graduates change over time?
- Did the Erasmus experience open participants up to other international mobility experiences?

### 5.3. Organization of the research

The panel study started in 2018 and will be continued every year from now on until the end of the Erasmus+ programme. The first panel wave was launched at the beginning of December 2018. Such a choice enables the inclusion of all students who managed to graduate in a given academic year, including those who have their correction session exams at the end of autumn.

The respondents involved in the panel study are students who participated in the tracer study and met both of the following conditions:

- They left their email address and agreed to be re-contacted for survey purposes in the future; and
- At the moment of the survey, one, three or five years had passed since the termination of their studies.<sup>10</sup>

Using a longitudinal research method in this case will allow subsequent coverage of all cohorts of graduates – Erasmus programme participants – starting with graduates from 2013 onwards. Coming back to the same group of respondents one, three and five years after their graduation means that one student can be contacted up to three times<sup>11</sup> every two years (depending on the year of graduation).

The above statement is true on the condition that the panel study is continued at least until 2022. The panel wave in 2022 will be the first that may cover the same group of individuals three times (in this case, this will be graduates from 2016/17 who will have been questioned in 2018, 2020 and 2022). Table 2 visualizes the detailed scheme of data collection for both studies: the tracer study and the panel study (Koniewski, Lisek 2017).

**Table 2. Data collection scheme for the tracer study and the panel study**

	Survey year												Number of measurements for a given group of graduates	
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023		
Year of graduation	o	-	-	-	-	5								-
2011/12		o	-	-	-	4	5							1 measurement
2012/13			o	-	-	3	4	5						1 measurement
2013/14				o	-	2	3	4	5					2 measurements
2014/15					o	1	2	3	4	5				2 measurements
2015/16						o	1	2	3	4	5			3 measurements
2016/17							o	1	2	3	4	5		3 measurements
2017/18								o	1	2	3	4	5	3 measurements
2018/19									o	1	2	3	4	2 measurements
2019/20										o	1	2	3	2 measurements
2020/21											o	1	2	1 measurement
2021/22												o	1	1 measurement
2022/23													o	-

<sup>10</sup> The termination point is the year of graduation from the studies programme within which the mobility took place.

<sup>11</sup> One student can be contacted up to four times, if the tracer study is also counted.

The "o" symbol indicates the graduation year. The years in the top row indicate the survey year. The numbers in the table show the number of years since graduation. The year of graduation means the year of the termination of studies within which the Erasmus mobility took place. The first tracer measurement is marked in olive (2017), and panel measurements are marked in teal blue (first measurement in 2018).

#### 5.4. Sample and data collection

The first panel wave (launched in December 2018) included graduates from the following years: 2012/13, 2014/15 and 2016/17, for a total of 1,317 persons.

**Table 3. Composition of the sample in the first panel wave**

Graduation year	Number of years after graduation	Number of recipients	% of total sample
2012/13	5	296	22%
2014/15	3	340	26%
2016/17	1	681	52%
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,317</b>	

The division of the sample was not equal between the cohorts – over half of the sample were students who only graduated from their studies one year ago (see Table 3). This dominance is understandable – respondents for whom the Erasmus mobility is a more recent experience are usually more willing to take part in surveys regarding this topic. Knowing the composition of the sample is desirable while looking from the perspective of the future panel waves. The biggest group are graduates to whom the panel survey will be sent again in two and four years' time. Taking into account panel attrition, there is still a high chance of keeping a reasonable number of respondents in the survey.

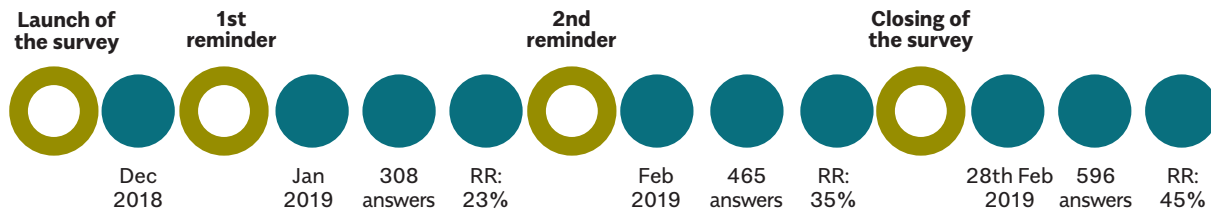
The panel survey data was collected via the online tool *Webankieta*. This tool enables the introduction of unique tokens for every respondent, which is crucial from two aspects:

1. tracking who has already filled in the questionnaire, and
2. linking 2018's answers with the answers of the same person given in further waves of the panel study.

The introduction of the tokens also frees researchers from gathering personal data, such as a personal ID number or name and surname. The invitation to the survey was distributed by a mailing programme – *Freshmail* – which prevents the message from falling into a recipient's spam folder. The text of the message was the same for everyone, however each recipient received a unique, personalized link to enter the CAWI questionnaire. The link to the survey contained the token which will be reused in two years' time to identify the same respondent for the next panel wave. Such identification is very important from the methodological point of view, as the second measurement will be sent out only to those respondents who answered in the first measurement. The token will make them easily identifiable.

In order to reach the highest response rate, two reminders were sent out. The reminders were addressed only to those receivers who had not filled in the survey (their identification was possible thanks to the tokens). The reminder messages were sent one month and two months after the launch of the panel survey (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Response rate in the first panel wave



The total response rate from the panel wave for 2018 reached a level of 45%. The data collection process lasted for exactly 85 days.

However, this does not mean that all 596 questionnaires could have been used in the analysis. 125 of the respondents were students who had not yet completed their studies (due to different reasons: prolonging studies, skipping a year, changing their field of study, etc.), and they were excluded from the panel wave as they did not meet the sample criteria. This means that the actual analysis was conducted on the remaining sample of 471 graduates. In other words, 79% of the respondents who were willing to fill in the panel study were included in the survey.

## 5.5. Panel questionnaire

The panel questionnaire was composed of 59 questions in total, but not all of them were addressed to all respondents (filtering questions). The average time of completion for the panel questionnaire was 24 minutes.

Most of the questions were close-ended, or single or multiple choice with a closed set of answers (often with the open option "other" at the end). Six questions were based on scales. There was one ranking question and three open questions. The sets of questions concerned education pathways, first employment, employment experiences and others.

The panel questionnaire will be used in this form for all graduates in the first panel wave. Obviously, in the second and third waves, questions regarding first employment will be skipped. However, questionnaires used in the following waves of the survey should be as similar as possible in order to ensure reliable data comparisons.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The panel study on the group of Polish Erasmus programme graduates seems to be innovative research. Not many longitudinal studies of this kind have so far been conducted in Europe. However, such a study is perfectly able to show changes to chosen characteristics over time. The panel study method gives vast possibilities for observing the socio-economic paths of the graduates. The characteristics of the longitudinal method are such that it requires at least two waves of the study in order to draw conclusions and to conduct a profound analysis based on comparisons over time. That is why this method is very time-consuming and requires a lot of expertise as well as resources. It is important that

well-established educational institutions in Poland, such as the FRSE or universities, conduct this kind of research as it may give valuable insight in a slightly longer time perspective.

As this article has aimed at describing the methodology used in the survey and the organization of the research, below are the key recommendations drawn from the tracer study and the first panel wave.

**1. Precise questions**

Erasmus mobility graduates very often participate in more than one form of mobility (studies or traineeships). It is very important to indicate precisely which experience they should recall while answering the questions.

**2. Conducting the pilot study**

A pilot study can be treated as a "tester study" for the tool itself as well as for the sampling. After this phase, all necessary changes should be implemented into the invitation form, questionnaire, coding in the database, etc.

**3. Tokens for identifying respondents**

In the case of longitudinal studies which require coming back to the same group of individuals at set time intervals, it is recommended to introduce unique tokens into the online tool. An email address is not the best identifier as it may be easily changed.

**4. Sending out reminders**

In the case of online questionnaires, it has been widely observed that the highest open rate directly follows the distribution of the questionnaire. The peak usually stays for a few hours. Later, the chances of a response gradually decrease. The role of reminders is to draw the recipients' attention back to the message.

**5. Raising respondents' engagement**

As the risk of panel attrition is one of the main threats while using longitudinal methods, it is recommended to introduce solutions which may raise the graduates' willingness to take part in the survey. Some possible solutions may be giving positive drivers and encouragement to participate to the graduates.

A panel study on Erasmus programme graduates may provide a lot of information on the changing dynamics of graduates' further educational and professional paths. Although it takes a few years to gather data from the subsequent panel waves, such research gives a completely new perspective to the subject, which makes it valuable and worth continuing.

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# Extracurricular effects of study abroad experiences

## Introduction

By **Marina Steinmann**

In 2015 the Ministers of Education of the European Union issued their "Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education" (Paris Declaration), in which they made a clear commitment to the fundamental values of the EU and demanded that corresponding measures be supported – not only, but in particular – by the European education programmes.

According to the Paris Declaration, promoting critical thinking and imparting social, civic and intercultural competences should not only be part of school-level education in the future but should moreover be considered the responsibility of every higher education institution and integrated into every degree programme, regardless of the higher education institution's location in Europe or its specialist focus. The Ministers of Education and the European Commission believe the Erasmus+ programme to be both obligated and well placed to take on this societal challenge and contribute significantly to integration and to strengthening the Union and its democratic principles through suitable measures. Beginning in 2016, the Erasmus+ National Agency for EU Higher Education Cooperation within the DAAD designed and coordinated a survey intended to more closely examine the programme's contribution to this effort.

A survey of students at German higher education institutions before and after their stay abroad investigated the psychological effects of study-related visits abroad on the development of personality traits relating to the development goals of the Paris Declaration. The following article presents the methodology and findings of this first part of the study.

A second part of the survey was designed to explore whether the objectives given in the Paris Declaration had any effect on the applications and implementation of projects. The surveys for both project parts were conducted during the 2017/2018 academic year; the collected data were analysed and published in 2018.

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## KEYWORDS

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY, MULTICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, LONGITUDINAL CONTROL GROUP STUDY

**By Julia Zimmermann, Henriette Greischel, Judith Sarah Preuß**

## Abstract

The Paris Declaration (2015) described the promotion of multicultural competencies and intercultural dialogue, as well as the prevention of discrimination, as important educational goals to sustain common values such as tolerance, freedom, and non-discrimination amongst young people in Europe and beyond. The Erasmus+ programme is considered to provide educational measures to reach these goals, e.g. by promoting international student mobility (ISM). In the present research, we address the effects of such study-related stays abroad from a psychological perspective by investigating their impact on students' multicultural development. To that end, we implemented a prospective control group design (N = 3,070 students at German higher education institutions) with three study groups (*controls*, *present sojourners*, and *future sojourners*). All participants were queried twice using online questionnaires. Results from (moderated) latent change models corroborated substantial effects of actual (but not anticipated) international mobility experiences on the development of multicultural self-efficacy, intercultural empathy, and intergroup anxiety. Moreover, both host and international contacts revealed substantial effects on sojourners' development.

The Paris Declaration (2015) conveys educational goals such as the promotion of multicultural competencies and intercultural dialogue, as well as the prevention of discrimination that also reflects the core aspirations of international student mobility (ISM) funded by the Erasmus+ programme. In the present study, we explored the extent to which these goals are met. That is, we investigated the effects of ISM participation on the development of individual characteristics that reflect the educational goals of the Paris Declaration at the psychological level. Moreover, we were interested in the factors that moderate such ISM effects and explored how contacts with both host country members and international students affect the multicultural development of sojourners.

To that end, we implemented an innovative research design, i.e. a prospective control group study (N = 3,070 students at German higher

education institutions) with three study groups (*control students* with no mobility plans, *present sojourners* who participated in ISM during the study period, and a waiting group of *future sojourners* who participated in ISM in the semester following the study period). This extension of previous control group designs with two study groups (control students and present sojourners) not only allowed us to differentiate between the effects of actual and intended international mobility experiences (i.e. *mobility effects versus anticipation effects*), but also to safeguard our findings against potential confounding effects that result from (unobserved) sociodemographic or psychological differences between mobile and non-mobile students. All participants were queried twice over the course of the winter semester 2017/2018 using online questionnaires. In the following, we will first give an overview of the psychological constructs under study before describing the study's methodology and its results.

### **A psychological perspective on the Paris Declaration (2015) and its educational goals**

As a first step, we aimed to match the rather broad educational goals of the Paris Declaration to specific individual characteristics. Importantly, we focused on psychological constructs that are well established in the scientific literature and have been thoroughly assessed and validated in previous studies.

*Multicultural self-efficacy.* As intercultural competencies reflect behavioural attributes that cannot easily be assessed in a questionnaire study (Wolff, Borzиковsky 2018), we focused on a psychological construct that is closely related to behavioural competencies, i.e. the multicultural self-efficacy of students. Multicultural self-efficacy reflects individuals' personal judgement of their abilities to successfully engage in interactions with people who belong to another cultural group than their own (Mazziotta, Rohmann, Wright, De Tezanos-Pinto, Lutterbach 2015). Previous research provided broad evidence for the strong association between self-efficacy beliefs and actual performance (Talsma, Schüz, Schwarzer, Norris 2018). Hence, students with higher multicultural self-efficacy can be assumed to act more competently in interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, i.e. to show higher levels of multicultural competencies.

*Intercultural empathy.* Intercultural empathy refers to people's ability to put themselves in the position of members of other cultural groups; it reflects their understanding of and identification with others' perspectives and emotions (Mealy, Stephan 2010). Hence, intercultural empathy can be considered an important individual prerequisite of engagement in intercultural dialogue.

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*Intergroup anxiety.* Intergroup anxiety is reflected in feelings of uncertainty and awkwardness when coming into contact with people who belong to another (cultural) group (Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Vonofakou 2008). People with high levels of intergroup anxiety are, thus, unlikely to voluntarily engage in intercultural interactions or to advance intercultural dialogue.

*Diversity beliefs.* Diversity beliefs reflect the extent to which (cultural) differences are valued and perceived as beneficial and enriching for societies (Van Dick, Van Knippenberg, Hägele, Guillaume, Brodbeck 2008). Hence, high scores in diversity beliefs are at odds with discrimination or negative attitudes such as racism.

*Racism.* Racism reflects negative attitudes towards members of other (cultural) groups that are justified by the construed superiority of the own group based on natural or biological differences. Racism, thus, predisposes individuals to engage in discriminative behaviours (Zick et al. 2008).

*Intergroup contact.* One of the best-established social psychological theories is the theory of intergroup contact (Allport 1954). It states that contact experiences with members of other (cultural) groups that are characterized by certain contact qualities (i.e. the contact is perceived as being equal, cooperative, pleasant, intimate, and voluntary; see Islam, Hewstone 1993) can improve intergroup relations, i.e. reduce negative attitudes and prejudice. However, previous research has revealed that optimal contact conditions increase the positive effects of contact between (cultural) groups but are not necessarily essential (Pettigrew, Tropp 2006). Against this background, we investigated how both the quantity and quality of sojourners' contacts with a) host country members and b) internationals (i.e. people who are neither from Germany nor citizens of the respective host countries) moderated the sojourners' development in the aforementioned psychological characteristics.

*Sociodemographic characteristics.* Beyond the described psychological constructs, some sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, educational background, migration background, and previous international mobility experiences) were included to control for their potential effects in the analyses.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

We used a sample of students at German higher education institutions (N = 3,070) and implemented a longitudinal control group design with three study groups: control students (N = 1,323) with no mobility plans, present sojourners (N = 1,264) who engaged in ISM during the semester that defined the study period (i.e. the winter term 2017/2018), and future sojourners (N = 483) who had concrete mobility plans for the semester following the study period (i.e. the summer term 2018). Participants were recruited from all over Germany using a variety of means (e.g. the mailing lists of international offices and local Erasmus student initiatives or universities' online social networking sites). In all cases, potential participants received a short invitation that contained a link to the online registration platform. In the registration questionnaire, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information as well as information on their potential international mobility plans for a) the winter term 2017/2018 (present sojourners) or b) the summer term 2018 (future sojourners), as well as their dates of departure and return. Participants without concrete mobility plans were assigned to the *control group*. As a next step, participants received an invitation to the first measurement (T1) depending on their preliminary group assignment (see Figure 1).

That is, *control students* were invited 24 hours after registration (T1) and 22 weeks later (T2). Present sojourners received invitations two weeks before their individual date of departure (T1) and 20 weeks later (T2), whereas future sojourners were invited during the first weeks of the winter term 2017/2018 (T1) and two weeks before their individual date of departure (T2). Hence, present sojourners were queried before their departure (t1) and after several months of sojourn experiences (t2) whilst future sojourners completed both questionnaires before their departure. Information on the sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants is summarized in Table 1. Information on the host countries is presented in Table 2.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample**

Sociodemographic characteristics	Controls	PS	FS	Total
Mean (SD)	23.49 (4.00)	22.28 (2.20)	22.79 (2.85)	22.88 (3.23)
% male	27.4	27.7	24.6	27.1
% born abroad	6.0	5.5	6.6	5.9
% at least one parent born abroad	16.6	17.6	20.5	17.6
% highest educational degree of parents = no degree	1.4	1.7	2.3	1.7
% highest educational degree of parents = apprenticeship	47.6	36.3	41.4	42.0
% highest educational degree of parents = higher education degree	51.0	61.9	56.3	56.3
% previous international mobility experiences	56.0	60.0	63.4	58.8

Key: M = mean, SD = standard deviation, PS = present sojourners (ISM participation during the study period); FS = future sojourners (ISM participation in the semester following the study period).

**Table 2. Top 5 host countries**

Host country	% PS	% FS	% Total
Spain	15.7	14.3	15.3
France	12.2	5.2	10.2
UK	12.2	4.8	10.1
Italy	6.3	8.5	6.9
Sweden	5.5	4.3	5.2

Key. PS = present sojourners (ISM participation during the study period); FS = future sojourners (ISM participation in the semester following the study period).

Note: Amongst future sojourners, Sweden, the Netherlands and Portugal were nominated with the same frequencies.

<sup>1</sup> Questions about financial resources during ISM participation revealed that, overall, 82.2% of the sojourners (both present and future) received funding from the Erasmus+ programme. To check for potential differences between Erasmus+ students and other participants, we repeated the analyses with the subsample of Erasmus+ students. However, the pattern of results remained unchanged. For more detailed information on this issue, please refer to the full project report, available at [bit.ly/31U6vJd](http://bit.ly/31U6vJd) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

## Measurement and analysis

Information on the psychological scales and items that were used to capture multicultural self-efficacy, intercultural empathy, intergroup anxiety, diversity beliefs, racism, and contact experiences are summarized in Table 3.

To analyze our data, we used moderated latent change models (McArdle, Nesselroade 1994; Steyer, Eid, Schwenkmezger 1997). These models allowed us to separately assess information on the initial level in a certain variable (latent intercept) and occurring changes in this variable (latent change score). Both the latent intercept and latent change variables can be regressed on other variables. In the present research, we investigated the effects of present and future ISM participation (i.e. mobility and anticipation effects) by regressing the latent change variables on dummy-coded sojourn status variables that differentiated between a) control students and present sojourners (mobility effects), b) control students and future sojourners (anticipation effects), and c) future and present sojourners (robustness check for mobility effects). The robustness check represents one of the major advantages of the present design. As it can be assumed that present and future sojourners are largely comparable in terms of their sociodemographic and psychological characteristics, comparing their developmental trajectories can help to identify potential confounding effects that result from general differences between mobile and non-mobile students. Similar models were used to investigate the moderating effects of contact experiences on the development of present sojourners. In these models, the latent change variables were simultaneously regressed on four indicators that represented the quantity and quality of a) host country contacts and b) international contacts, respectively. The effects of sociodemographic characteristics were controlled in all analyses. The analyses were carried out using SPSS version 25 (IBM 2017) and Mplus version 7 (Muthén, Muthén 2015).

**Table 3. Overview of measurement instruments**

Construct	Sample item and scale	Reference
Multicultural self-efficacy	I am confident that I am able to establish a good relationship with [people from other cultural groups]. (All six items were rated on a scale from 1 = do not agree at all to 7 = totally agree)	<i>Multicultural Self-Efficacy Scale</i> (Mazziotta, Rohmann, Wright, De Tezanos-Pinto, Lutterbach 2015)
Intercultural empathy	I can easily put myself in the place of [people from other ethnic or cultural groups] when I want to understand their viewpoint. (All six items were rated on a scale from 1 = do not agree at all to 7 = totally agree)	Adapted German version of <i>Intergroup Understanding Scale</i> (Stephan 1999; Mealy, Stephan 2010)
Intergroup anxiety	Please imagine you are in a room with many people who all belong to another cultural group than your own. How would you feel in this situation? Accepted (R)/nervous... (All seven adjectives were rated on a scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = very)	Adapted German version of <i>Intergroup Anxiety Scale</i> (Mazziotta, Rohmann, Wright, De Tezanos-Pinto, Lutterbach 2015; Stephan, Stephan 1985)
Diversity beliefs	It is better for a country if there is a variety of different cultures. (All six items were rated on a scale from 1 = do not agree at all to 4 = totally agree)	Six items from the survey <i>Group-Focused Enmity</i> (GESIS 2013)

Racism	German re-settlers should be better off than foreigners because they are of German origin.	Two items from the survey <i>Group-Focused Enmity</i> (GESIS 2013; Zick et al. 2008)
Contact frequency	In your everyday life abroad, how often do you/did you have personal contact (e.g. talking to each other, collaborating, learning together, spending free time together...) with people from the following groups? → People from your host country → Other international students or people from third countries (i.e. neither from Germany nor from your host country) (Both items were rated on a scale from 1 = (almost) never to 7 = very often)	Own item formulation
Contact quality	How would you (retrospectively) describe your contacts with [people from your host country/other international students or people from third countries (i.e. neither from Germany nor from your host country)]? Equal/voluntary/superficial (R)/pleasant/cooperative (All five adjectives were rated on a scale from 1 = does not apply at all to 7 = totally applies)	Adapted German version of the <i>General Intergroup Contact Quantity and Contact Quality Scale</i> (Islam, Hewstone 1993)

## Results

### ISM effects on sojourners' development

The analyses confirmed substantial effects of actual mobility experiences on the development of multicultural self-efficacy, intercultural empathy, and intergroup anxiety. That is, present sojourners revealed stronger increases in multicultural self-efficacy and intercultural empathy, as well as a steeper decrease of intergroup anxiety than control students and future sojourners. By contrast, no effects were found for the development of diversity beliefs and racism. Also, there was no evidence for anticipation effects, i.e. differences in the development of future sojourners as compared to control students.

### Moderators of development

With regard to both contact quantity and quality, participants indicated higher levels of contact with internationals than with host country members.

Results from the latent change models showed that the quality of international contacts affected development in all three domains. That is, students who reported a higher quality of international contacts benefitted from stronger increases in multicultural self-efficacy and intercultural empathy, as well as a steeper decline of intergroup anxiety. A comparable pattern of effects was found for the quality of host contacts. However, in this case, the effect on intercultural empathy was not significant. Beyond that, two effects for quantity measures were identified: a higher quantity of host country contacts

was associated with stronger increases in multicultural self-efficacy and intercultural empathy. For international contacts, no effects of contact quantity were observed.

## Conclusion

The major goal of the present study was to investigate the extent to which engagement in international student mobility contributed to students' multicultural development reflecting the educational goals of the Paris Declaration at the psychological level. We extended previous findings on international mobility effects on basic personality traits (Greischel, Noack, Neyer 2016; Niehoff, Petersdotter, Freund 2017; Zimmermann, Neyer 2013) by focusing on more specific multicultural characteristics. The present analyses confirmed substantial effects on the development of multicultural self-efficacy, intercultural empathy, and intergroup anxiety. Our design also allowed for robustness checks against the potential influence of (unobserved) third variables. These checks confirmed the pattern of results. By contrast, no ISM effects were observed for changes in diversity beliefs or racism. We may only speculate about the reasons for the latter finding. As previous research pointed to the limitations of self-report measures in addressing sensitive issues such as negative outgroup attitudes, future studies may explore the potential of alternative (indirect) measurement approaches (e.g. IAT measures, see Greenwald, McGhee, Schwartz 1998) to scrutinize these results. As a feature of our design, we were also able to investigate the effects of future mobility experiences. However, no mobility anticipation effects could be identified. This finding corroborated the assumptions of current theoretical approaches which emphasize the importance of day-to-day experiences in changing (cultural) environments for the establishment of long-term changes in individual characteristics (Kolb 1984; Roberts, Jackson 2008; Roberts 2018).

Moreover, in line with our expectations, the analyses substantiated the importance of contact experiences for multicultural development. In line with earlier findings (Pettigrew, Tropp 2006), the quality of the contact was found to be more important than the mere quantity of interactions. Similarly, the findings emphasized the benefits of international contacts. In view of the at times quite critical discussion of such contacts ("Erasmus party crowd"), our results emphasize the potential of these interactions for the adaptive development of sojourners.



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# The impact of student mobility in the VET and Higher Education sectors: a longitudinal study

By Mariola Gremmen

## Abstract

This longitudinal study examines the impact of international mobility on students' knowledge and skills in the VET and Higher Education sectors. The study has a duration of two and a half years, during which ResearchNed, an external research agency, will follow the students. Using questionnaires in pre- and post-measurement phases, ResearchNed will collect information on, among other things, students' background characteristics, knowledge, skills, motivation, and experiences abroad. The study design includes an experimental group of students who are going or will go abroad and a control group of students who do not gain international experiences for study purposes. Developmental differences will be assessed as well as the inclusiveness of internationalization activities. We expect this study to deepen insights into the impact of students' mobility.

## Background

It is important for Erasmus+ projects to have the greatest possible effect and to be as successful as possible. To this end, Erasmus+ National Agencies (NAs) focus strongly on "impact". This term refers to a significant change on an individual, an organization, and society as a whole, which is achieved partly as a result of a project, and can be conscious or unconscious, positive or negative.

The Dutch Erasmus+ agency has developed an impact tool to support E+ applicants in developing coherent project plans and maximizing programme effects. This model (see Figure 1) visualizes the steps within a logical framework and is based on the "Theory of Change". It starts on the right hand side with the impact and systematically works its way back to activities and input on the left hand side. After designing the project, the coherence of the logic and relations between the steps can be checked from left to right.

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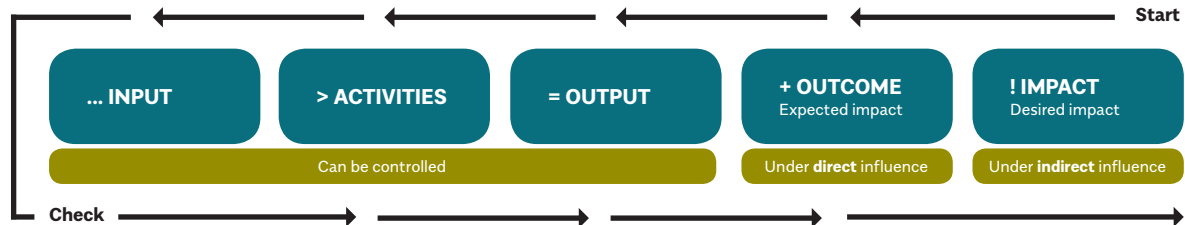
**MARIOLA GREMMEN** PhD, is working as a researcher/data analyst at the Erasmus+ National Agency of the Netherlands. Her main task is to investigate the impact of the Erasmus+ programme on students, staff, and (educational) institutions and organizations. This impact research includes both key actions (student and staff mobilities and strategic partnerships) as well as all educational sectors. Moreover, she also conducts research at CINOP, an independent, (inter)national research, project management and consultancy enterprise that specializes in lifelong learning, vocational education and training, adult education, and employability.

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## KEYWORDS

VET; HIGHER EDUCATION; STUDENTS; KAI MOBILITY; LONGITUDINAL STUDY; IMPACT

Figure 1. Impact model  
(see [impacttool.erasmusplus.nl](http://impacttool.erasmusplus.nl))



**Impact** (*desired impact*) refers to the larger and broader changes which also take place as a result of other players and factors. This concerns the big "dream" and relates to the vision and strategies of an organization.

**Outcomes** (*expected impact*) are changes that are aimed to be achieved when carrying out activities. This does not only mean obtaining new skills, knowledge or behaviours, but also actively using these in new situations.

**Outputs** are products that derive directly from the activities, such as trained professionals or gained knowledge.

**Activities** are the concrete activities that are carried out, such as mobilities to specific countries.

**Inputs** are, for example, the time, money, and people related to the activities

When setting up new activities and projects, organizations have direct control over the outputs. However, they are also responsible for the outcome level, over which they only have partial control. Key to the outcome level is that participants and organizations independently use the gathered knowledge and skills in their own setting and future situations. This includes short- and long-term outcomes, such as having more self-confident job interviews, finding better jobs, or implementing learning programmes within educational practices. Ultimately, outcomes contribute to impact, a broader societal change to which the programme outcomes relate.

In order to assess the impact of Erasmus+ activities and short- and long-term changes, longitudinal studies are needed in which participants are followed for a long time period. Preferably, the information should already have been gathered before they go abroad and then again several times afterwards. Moreover, when comparing changes in people who go abroad with others who do not, changes can be more directly related to the results of internationalization activities.

## Research design and content

The main aim of the study is to assess whether students developed their skills due to their international experiences and to what extent specific personal traits motivated them to go abroad. We did this by examining which types of students had already gone abroad or will go abroad during this study and compared their characteristics with students who did not go abroad. By combining cross-sectional and longitudinal research, we examined the underlying factors and experiences of students. We also compared the differences between students with and without international experiences to examine whether students have equal opportunities for a mobility. In this study, the following sub-questions are answered:

- Which students go abroad (e.g. background information, educational characteristics)?
- In what type of international activity are they participating (e.g. internship, study, time period)?
- To what extent does Erasmus+ include other types of students than students who independently participate ("free-movers")? To what extent does Erasmus+ create equal opportunities for participation for disadvantaged groups?
- What is the impact of experiences abroad on students (e.g. study success, personal development, intercultural awareness, European citizenship)?

## Timeline

The study will last from September 2018 until December 2020. It includes five measurements: (1) autumn 2018, (2) spring 2019, (3) autumn 2019, (4) spring 2020, and (5) autumn 2020.

In the first, **cross-sectional** measurement, students are extensively asked about their intercultural awareness and language skills, as well as (planned) international experiences, and possible interrupting factors such as a low socioeconomic status (SES). With this study, we can assess the extent to which international mobility relates to intercultural awareness and language skills. Another important insight in this study is the inclusiveness of the programme. However, causal conclusions cannot be drawn, since it is only one measurement. Therefore, students are asked to be part of a panel in which they will be followed for two years.

The following four **longitudinal measurements** are aimed at assessing the relations and interplay between intercultural awareness, language skills, and international experiences. These skills are measured several times, and comparisons are made between students who go abroad (experimental group) and those who do not go abroad at all for study purposes and thus do not have an international experience (control group). In this regard, initial differences between students are taken into account, allowing us to investigate the effects of international mobility. Additionally, students are asked about their transition into the labour market in the last measurements.

In order to promote active student participation in this study, the NA articulates about the goal and importance of this study, the anonymity of the participants and the estimated time needed to fill out the questionnaires. When students are unable to complete the questionnaire after receiving it by email, the NA offers a reminder service for students to fill it out at a later, self-chosen moment. In order to decrease the chances of panel attrition, a well-known research pool is used and the importance of having several measures is stressed.

## Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains questions regarding a wide range of topics:

1. *Education*: e.g. study year, level, and language of instruction.
2. *Cultural orientation and social relations*: e.g. statements concerning cultural differences, trust, and their willingness to help others.
3. *Personal skills and international orientation*: statements such as "travelling broadens my horizons", "I would like to learn new languages", and "I quickly feel at ease abroad".

4. *Personal characteristics and well-being*: e.g. frequency of social activities, and statements such as "I'm happy with myself" and "I don't feel proud".
5. *Study attitude*: statements such as "I try to get the highest grades possible" and "I should spend more time on my study assignments".
6. *Study and extracurricular activities*: e.g. study success, and side jobs.
7. *Studying abroad*: if yes, what type of internship, how long for, etc., and also which factors would hamper such an experience.
8. *Labour market*: e.g. developed skills which are relevant for entry to the labour market.
9. *Background characteristics*: e.g. gender, secondary education grades, and financial situation of parents.

## Reports

In total, three reports will be delivered. The first report concerns the cross-sectional study, in which no causal claims can be made, but differences between students can be shown. This can, for example, include questions concerning the goals when going abroad, the way of financing the international mobility, and which type of students are willing to go abroad. The subsequent reports are intended to show developmental changes, such as changes in intercultural awareness.

## Preliminary cross-sectional results

A concept research report on the cross-sectional study is provided by ResearchNed. This first measurement included 4,721 Higher Education students, of whom 62% had not had an international mobility, 25% were Erasmus+ students, and 13% were so-called "free movers". They went abroad with a different type of funding than Erasmus+ or paid for it themselves. Of the total group of participants, 77% were of Dutch origin, 8% were from a first-generation migration background, and 15% were from a second-generation migration background. Whereas 34% of students who did not go abroad indicated having a form of disorder, 26-29% of students who did go abroad reported having one. So there might be a somewhat lower chance to go abroad for students who have disabilities. Moreover, E+ students and free movers indicated receiving support from their parents regularly or often for travelling abroad, whereas students without mobility experience experienced much less support.

The most prominent conclusions so far are:

1. E+ students and free movers score higher on all items concerning intercultural skills than students who have not been abroad. They are more culturally oriented and have fewer difficulties in social situations. Causal claims cannot be made yet, so it is not certain whether these differences are due to mobility. Hardly any differences were found between Erasmus+ students and free movers.
2. Even larger differences are found for international orientation than for intercultural skills: E+ students and free movers score significantly higher than students who have not been abroad. Again, hardly any differences were found between students who went abroad with or without Erasmus+.
3. E+ students and free movers have a more positive self-image and are more assertive than students who did not go abroad.



4. No differences in study progress are found between the three different groups of students (no experience, E+ experience, free movers). This suggests no selectivity based on current achievement.
5. E+ students travel abroad more often for their studies and free movers more often for internships.
6. E+ students most often travel to Spain, the UK, and Germany. Free movers most often travel to non-European countries, such as the US, Canada, and Australia.
7. Almost all students who went abroad evaluate this as a very positive experience. They developed competences such as language skills, self-confidence, and flexibility.
8. More advanced analyses show that students with parents with a higher education level have a higher chance of going abroad than those with parents with a lower educational level. No differences in sources of finances (other than E+ grants) have been found between student groups. In other words, we cannot conclude (yet) that E+ contributes to the inclusiveness of international mobility, i.e. to the extent that all students have equal opportunities. However, we should and will investigate this more extensively.

## Conclusions and future additions

The first results already show differences between the experimental and control groups, i.e. students with and without international mobility, but causal claims cannot yet be made. In the upcoming years, more advanced analyses will be performed to investigate in more depth the short- and long-term impacts of mobility on changes in students' knowledge, skills, and behaviours. Moreover, the inclusiveness of internationalization can be assessed more accurately by following students over several years, and differences between groups of students can be related more directly to their personal and professional characteristics.



# Strategic Partnership for Innovation in Erasmus+. A study on impact

By **Lorenza Venturi, Paolo Cavicchi, Angela Miniati, Luisella Silvestri**

## Abstract

This article<sup>1</sup> is dedicated to the results of the educational cooperation organised in strategic partnerships – Key Action 2 – that develop innovative learning methods in different European educational systems. The reference universe of the institutions chosen for research consisted of the projects funded in 2014.<sup>2</sup> 11 institutions were researched (out of a total sample of 31 partnerships for innovation in the School and Adult Education sectors): six institutions for the School sector, and five institutions in the Adult Education sector. In the Higher Education sector, all nine contracted partnerships in the first year of Erasmus+ were analysed. The study intends to analyse the impact of the Key Action 2 strategic partnerships for innovation projects, i.e. those projects which were inspired by research and experimented with methods and teaching practices that could be replicated in other contexts and environments.

## Areas of investigation, objectives and tools

"Strategic Partnership for Innovation in Erasmus+. A Study on Impact" is the second study conducted by the Italian National Agency INDIRE (Studies and Analysis Unit). The crux of the research is the quality of innovative practices in European contexts. The survey focuses on strategic partnerships for innovation implemented under Erasmus+ Key Action 2, which aims at enabling organisations to work together in order to improve their provisions for learners and share innovative practices. Under Key Action 2, organisations can apply for two types of projects: 1) **Strategic Partnerships for the Exchange of Good Practices**, the primary goal of which is to allow organisations to develop and reinforce networks, increase their capacity to operate at the transnational level, and share and compare

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## KEYWORDS

QUALITATIVE IMPACT,  
ERASMUS+ STRATEGIC  
PARTNERSHIP FOR  
INNOVATION, VALORISATION,  
DISSEMINATION,  
SUSTAINABILITY

<sup>1</sup> The original version of this study (in Italian) is downloadable from [www.erasmusplus.it](http://www.erasmusplus.it).

<sup>2</sup> In 2014, the Italian National Agency INDIRE financed 16 strategic partnerships for innovation in the School sector (KA201), 15 in the Adult Education sector (KA204), and 9 in the Higher Education sector (KA203)

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ideas, practices and methods, and 2) **Strategic Partnerships Supporting Innovation**. These projects are expected to develop innovative outputs and engage in intensive dissemination and exploitation activities of existing and newly produced products or innovative ideas.<sup>3</sup> The survey focused on the second type of strategic partnership.

Strategic partnerships for innovation offer two approaches: one that focuses on the objectives, the methodologies chosen and the training needs of the specific sector(s), and another that aims to promote collaboration and interaction between different institutions operating in similar fields of education and training. This is a big challenge for European education and learning because it aims to strengthen, renew and share educational practices and policies, in order to improve access for all to the knowledge and development of skills by investing in work and study. The main objective of the study was to analyse the implementation process of partnership activities and to analyse the impact of the results in the short- to medium-term within the strategic partnerships for innovations projects funded in 2014.

### Structure of the study

The present chapter is composed of four sections: the first introduces the framework, the objectives, the methodologies adopted and the instruments used for the survey; the second and third illustrate the results of the study in the School, Higher Education and Adult Education sectors; and the fourth collects the contributions by project coordinators of Italian institutions involved in the survey. The study focused on a qualitative analysis of the impact at the individual, institutional and systemic levels of the **KA2 Strategic Partnerships for Innovation (large scale)** for the School, Higher and Adult Education sectors funded in **2014. 20 projects** were analysed out of 40 strategic partnerships funded in 2014.

In the survey, three subsequent activities have been foreseen:

1. Sampling the projects;
2. Developing the tools for a qualitative impact analysis, i.e. questionnaires and impact visits; and
3. Organising three specific focus groups, one for each sector covered by the survey.

The selection criteria adopted were mainly inspired by the thematic approach. As for the School sector, the privileged themes were **social inclusion, didactic methods for language learning** and the **struggle against**

<sup>3</sup> More details on the Erasmus+ programme can be found in the *Programme Guide*, available at [ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/](http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/).

**school despair**, with the emphasis on dual-training systems (learning and working) and the enhancement of the learners' skills.

Regarding the Adult Education sector, the chosen topics related to **formal and non-formal learning for specific groups, migrants and inmates, social inclusion and innovative methodologies for the enhancement of skills**. In total, 11 partnerships for the School and Adult Education sectors were selected, and all nine funded projects were selected for the Higher Education sector.<sup>4</sup>

## Objectives and tools of the investigation

The study focused on three aspects:

- Impact at the individual/professional level (high impact, positive in terms of the development and improvement of professional and soft skills);
- Impact at the institutional level (high impact, positive in terms of the internationalisation of the institution involved in the partnership); and
- Impact at the systemic level (critical point).

The tools used included questionnaires, impact visits and focus groups (peer discussions). As the first step, a tool for data collection was developed, and in-depth analyses of the aspects related to the dissemination and the impact of results at the individual, institutional and systemic levels were conducted. The total number of collected questionnaires was 19: six for the School sector, eight for the Higher Education sector and five for the Adult Education sector. Secondly, impact visits were conducted with the beneficiaries of the investigated projects. During these visits, the beneficiaries were invited to reflect on some of the most relevant activities linked to the project, with a particular focus on sustainability in terms of the benefits and impact of the results after the conclusion of the project, both within the partnerships and outside them. Other investigated aspects were related to dissemination, valorisation and sustainability, and those issues were addressed to Italian coordinators and partners. This method proved to be very useful and functional for finding out and discussing the strategies (activities, methodologies, measures, initiatives) related to the dissemination, valorisation and impact of the results. After the conclusion of the visits, three focus groups were organised as final research activities (one for each sector), aimed at analysing the strategies put into practice in order to valorise and improve the sustainability of the results (third step).

## Results of the questionnaire on impact and sustainability: school, higher and adult education

The main findings are similar across all the sectors taken into consideration – School, Higher and Adult Education. The institutional impact proved to be important and to have produced relevant changes in terms of administrative and management procedures in both sectors. Moreover, the third sector (consortia, associations, social cooperatives, foundations, etc.) has skillfully explored areas and new

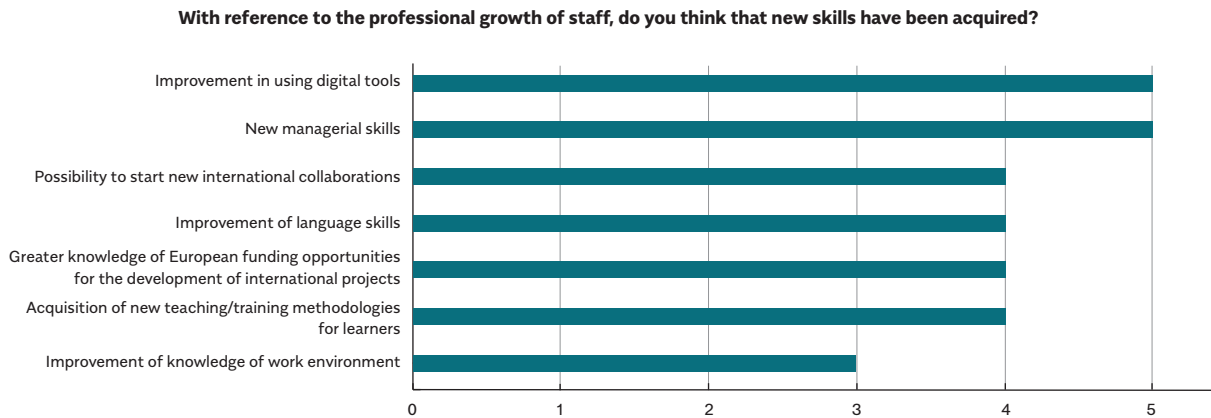
<sup>4</sup> All the partnership projects studied are described on the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform, which collects the contents, results and final products of the European projects: available at [ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects](http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects).

frontiers focusing on social inclusion, multilingualism resulting from migration, flows and methodologies imported from other cultural contexts. For the formal and non-formal adult learning sector, the impact on the institutions has been fundamental and decisive for the growth and development of new educational and training methods and approaches at the local and regional levels. The more companies, local and national authorities that are involved in the design process, the more the projects increase their transferability to other contexts in order to be fully integrated into the system.

Strongly linked to the type of partnership and the level of synergy between the partners, the impact was perceived more at the individual and organisational levels (see Figures 1-6).

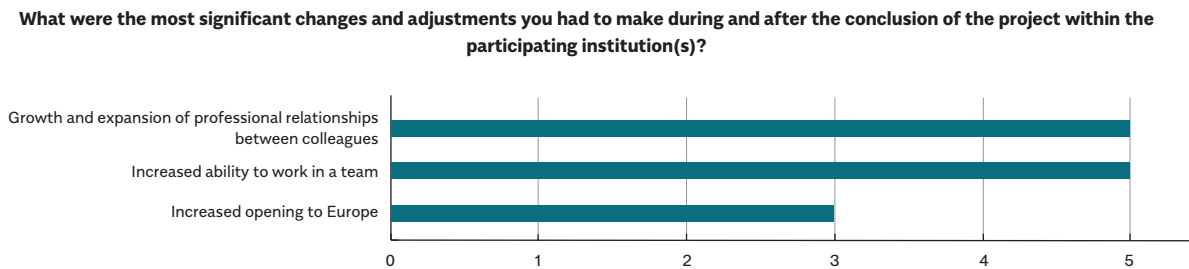
### School education sector – responses to the questionnaire

Figure 1. Impact on staff involved in the six strategic partnerships



Source: SE sector. Online questionnaire

Figure 2. Impact on institutions involved in the six strategic partnerships



Source: SE sector. Online questionnaire

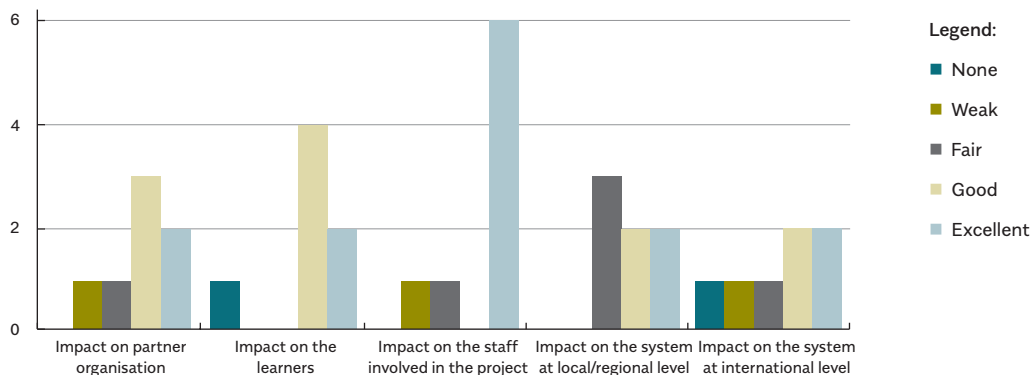
Figure 3. Impact on students involved in the six strategic partnerships



Source: SE sector. Online questionnaire

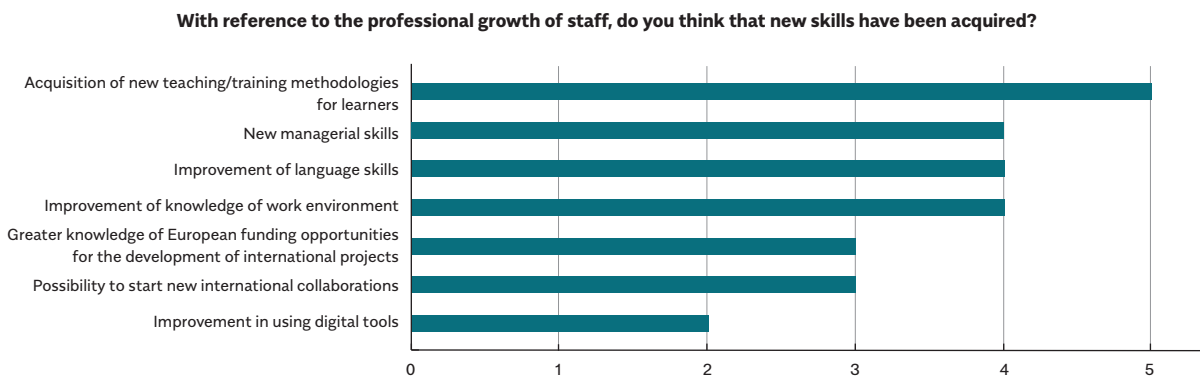
### Higher Education sector – responses to the questionnaire

Figure 4. Impact at the individual, institutional and systemic levels related to the nine partnerships coordinated by Italian institutions



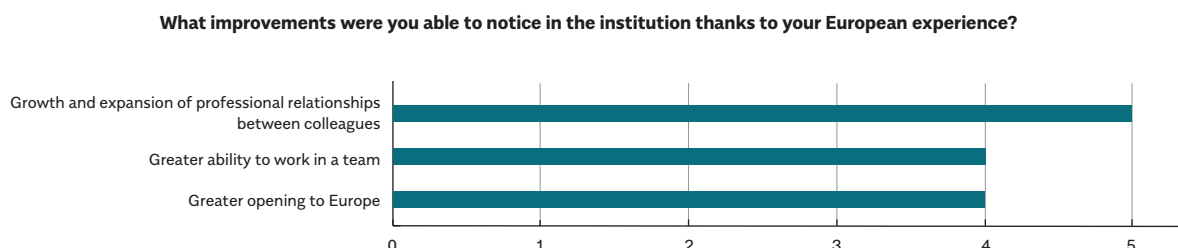
### Adult Education sector – responses to the questionnaire

Figure 5. Impact on staff involved in the five strategic partnerships



Source: AE sector. Online questionnaire

Figure 6. Impact on institutions involved in the five strategic partnerships



Source: AE sector. Online questionnaire

### Impact visit results – from project ideas to shared partnerships results

The impact visits were conducted to investigate partnerships developed by the School and Adult Education sectors; in total, 11 visits were carried out. All the meetings were held not only with the institutes' coordinator but also with the other Italian partner institutes involved. The debate was consistently wide-ranging and keenly subscribed. An initial result shared with the respondents is the idea that *impact* is an essential part of the implementation process – it is necessary to evaluate results and generate new skills and abilities for future improvements.

The most experimental phase of our survey was unquestionably the impact visits, a moment for sharing and discussion with the beneficiaries and their local partners; all the participants welcomed us with great interest and openness. The main result was a mutual willingness to retrace the fundamental stages, the difficulties and the successes of the work on the project, with a view to eventual exploitation.

Talking with the representatives, we gained a greater awareness of some of the concepts and aspects of the processes used to disseminate and exploit the results. The beneficiaries described how the intellectual outputs were produced and talked about the field research and the methodologies adopted and renewed in a European key. During the debate, the representatives had the opportunity to present their experiences, meetings and activities that surfaced during the project, which sometimes had not been envisaged in the work plan but ended up representing added value.

For the Agency, this was an opportunity to observe the projects in the concluding phases of the activity, at a certain distance from the end of the work, a time when it made more sense to speak of the impact assessment and verification of the short- and medium-term results. For the institutions, the meetings were an opportunity to evaluate the work from another viewpoint; in particular, the Italian partners, together with the coordinators, were able to recount their experiences and examine the skills available in depth, as well as their role within the partnership.

**Other aspects that emerged were linked to the peculiarities and differences within each project:** in some partnerships, the role of the coordinator proved to be too specific, whereas in other cases, the partner institutions were less involved or less collaborative. However, at every meeting, we found representatives able to find solutions and strategies to solve and improve the results. During the impact visits, many concepts related to exploitation and impact were examined. The discussions were focused on how and when a particular **impact (benefit) produced transformations and changes for people, practices and institutions, and, ultimately, the systems themselves.** Regarding sustainability, there



emerged a common consideration, namely, the opportunity to continue using the project's results beyond the end of the period covered by the grant. Occasionally, final products may be used and exploited in the long term, including through marketing, accreditation or integration.

Not all the innovative results can be sustainable, and it is important to consider dissemination and exploitation as a progression that goes beyond the duration of the activities in order to involve and inform the policy and other stakeholders.

During the impact visits, it emerged that the partnerships for innovation had produced a multiplicity of strategies and intellectual outputs which, as multifunctional open resources, are easily usable and transferable to other learning contexts, and that the replicability of the results is also ensured by the production of materials and final products in various languages, a guarantee for the dissemination and sustainability of the results. There can be no doubt that the involvement of the local environment and other stakeholders is essential for good dissemination and a sustainable outcome. The domino effect of the dissemination, initiated by multiplier events, as has happened in other dissemination channels, is all the more effective if local, regional and national authorities are involved from the outset.

### **The results of the focus groups – experience exchanges among peers and networking activities: dissemination, valorisation and sustainability**

After the conclusion of the visits, three focus groups were organised – one for each sector, at different times – that aimed to investigate the strategies put into practice in order to disseminate, valorise and improve the sustainability of the results.

The focus groups were structured in two parts, with one session in the morning and another in the afternoon, and divided into three parts devoted to the impact, dissemination and exploitation, and sustainability of the results. In the second part of the day, the round table was opened to all of the Agency's participants from other offices (management, finance, communication, etc.) so that they could actively participate in the debate. Each group was composed of 10 participants and moderated by the Studies and Analysis Unit.

The agenda of the focus groups included an informative presentation by staff from the Italian unit of the **Eurydice network** on activities that had been carried out for years, producing publications in a comparative European key with insights and descriptive analyses to do with educational issues of relevance to the national and international debate. These are a useful channel for all those who wish to learn about and perform research on education systems and policies in Europe and provide information for implementing high quality and innovative strategic partnerships.

The participants involved in the focus group had a peer discussion on the dissemination and exploitation of the innovative results, the so-called Intellectual Outputs, be they tangible or intangible. In general, participants agreed that the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform is functional, but it is not very visible and is not useful to fully exploit the results. It looks like an archive, a repository, and is used only by those who already know the programme. A suggestion that came out during the discussion was to integrate it into the Erasmus+ social media and communications channels so that the results are highlighted and promoted in turn. Another aspect that emerged during the focus group was related to the key role of local, regional and national authorities, since they can amplify the effects of dissemination in the community.

In the focus group dedicated to the Higher Education sector, participants suggested the idea of organising international thematic meetings during the implementation phase of the project, in order to favour "cross-fertilisation" among projects focused on similar topics and to stimulate new synergies. In order to capitalise on the results – and therefore make the best use of European funding – it was suggested to introduce a *premium (or rewarding) mechanism*, launching *restricted calls* addressed only to successful projects which achieved high-quality results, in order to sustain them in transferring the results to a wider audience. Networking, getting to know the local area and creating strong ties with local stakeholders are all fundamental aspects if we want the outcomes to have a full impact on the beneficiaries, especially indirect ones. It is necessary to create contact bridges that can facilitate the dissemination of results with the support of facilitators.

The pool of participants was full of suggestions to increase the sustainability of the projects. The working group highlighted the recurring drawbacks and problems encountered: the prevailing opinion was that a lack of financial support hinders the creation of methods and initiatives to ensure and engender lasting effects/benefits (impacts). The project has a specific contractual duration and often the projects do not have the funds available to ensure the continuity of the results, with the sites becoming obsolete and out of date. It is precisely for this reason that the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform is fundamental to documenting and collecting all the project work from around Europe.

These activities produced an interesting discussion on systemic impact. It represents a critical point, and there is still a lot of work to be done: there is a lack of communication and exchange channels between national authorities and the group of innovators and experts at the heart of European cooperation. The Ministries of Education in Erasmus programme countries should find a common solution to share and put into practice the innovative teaching and pedagogical methods developed within Erasmus+ strategic partnerships. The participants commented that the initiative to organise the focus groups could be structured as an activity of exploitation and exchange between peers on other occasions, including round tables for discussion. Yet another consideration regarding potential strategies and useful initiatives for the sustainability and exploitation of results underlined the need to involve stakeholders in the implementation phase of the project and not only in the dissemination phase. Pivotal for replicability and interest on the part of other sectors are investments in the territory, at local and regional levels, to actively engage both public and private stakeholders, who could encourage the sustainability of the projects. Another aspect that emerged during the debate was the question of policy and the choice of the proper context in which to disseminate and transfer its outcomes.

## Conclusions

*The project only starts when it is finished* (participant, teacher, first focus group)

At the end of the analysis activities, we were more aware and positively encouraged to continue this process of reflection on the quality of the impact and sustainability of results. Two areas of the survey – the School and Adult sectors (although with due distinctions in terms of motivation, areas of interest and educational needs) – showed many points of convergence. In the School sector, managers, teachers and administrative staff all mentioned the importance of creating links with the territory, in particular with the municipalities and School Regional Offices, linked to the Italian Ministry of Education, but also with other schools and other areas of learning. Moreover, they expressed the need to network inside and

outside the institutions. It is clear from the debates that the impact, sustainability, dissemination and exploitation of projects are interconnected and that we cannot separate one aspect from another. These all play an important role when evaluating an application for a strategic partnership project, just as they do in the final evaluation of the finished project. It is appropriate, therefore, to question the results of an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership in consideration of these characteristics, in order to obtain maximum efficiency from European grants while still adopting a realistic approach. This research experience, deeply interesting and significant for the Agency, will continue in the coming years (for the next calls), in order to give an increasingly important value and meaning to the quality experiences at an international level, so that they can be an example and stimulus for those institutions, associations and organisations without experience in the Erasmus+ cooperation.

**Questionnaire used for the investigation on the School and Adult Education sectors**  
**Key Action 2**  
**Strategic Partnerships for Innovation**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE**  
**Project Data**

**Institution**

Latin name

Type of institution

Town

Contact person

Position

Legal Representative

**Partnership Data**

ID

Title

Main topic(s)

Countries involved

**Motivation**

.....

.....

**Intellectual Output(s)**
 Tangible     Intangible

Did you encounter any problems in developing the I.O.?

 Yes     No

If so, what kind of problem(s)?

- Organisational
- Methodological
- Instrumental
- Other

Please specify

.....

.....

In your opinion, can the I.O. be easily transferred to other contexts?

- Yes     No

If so, in what way?

**Multiplier Event**

- Yes     No

- What was the theme of the event?
- How much time did you spend on organising the overall event?
- Did you achieve the goals?
- How did you select the participants?
- What dissemination activities for I.O. have you carried out?

**Further dissemination activities?**

.....

.....

**Impact data**

**Institution**

- What were the most significant changes and adjustments you had to make during and after the conclusion of the project within the participating institution(s)?

.....

- Have you developed new services/businesses/collaborations or managerial/administrative procedures? If so, what are they?

.....

- Have your methodologies and teaching/learning strategies within the institution improved? (from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

- ①                      ②                      ③                      ④

→ What improvements were you able to notice in the institution, thanks to your European experience?

- Increased opening to Europe
- Increased ability to work in a team
- Growth and expansion of professional relationships between colleagues
- None
- Other

→ What proposals/procedures are you planning to introduce in your organisation to facilitate the professional growth of staff and to put into practice the teaching/training methods acquired during the project?

→ In your opinion, to what extent will the project be beneficial for sectoral/professional networks and/or local schools and/or associations, stakeholders and local authorities?

(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

- ①                      ②                      ③                      ④

### Staff

→ In what way will the project activities have an impact (or have already had an impact) on staff, in terms of the people involved, and skills and abilities made available?

→ With reference to the professional growth of staff, do you think that new skills have been acquired? If so, which ones?

- Acquisition of new teaching/training methodologies for learners
- Possibility to start new international collaborations
- Improvement of language skills
- Improvement in digital skills
- Improved knowledge of the work environment

### Learners/students/target groups

→ In which phase of the project did you involve the students/learners?

- Planning
- Implementation
- Monitoring
- Verification of results and/or any educational tools
- Dissemination and valorisation
- At all stages of the project

Has the experience at the European level influenced the personal growth of the students/learners participating in the project?

- Yes    No
- .....

What new skills or competences have been developed?

- Improvement of language skills
- Improvement of digital skills
- Increased knowledge of European funding opportunities for the development of international projects
- Improvement of personal relations

Other:

**Impact on the institution and local community**

What was the impact at the local, regional and national level?

.....

.....

.....

**Impact on partner institutions**

What was the impact on the partnership at the end of the project?

.....

.....

.....

Have you noticed any benefits to the partner institutions?

(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

- ①                      ②                      ③                      ④

Which sustainability strategies of results have you implemented?

.....

.....

Did the intellectual outputs have a significant impact at a systemic level?

(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

- ①                      ②                      ③                      ④

**The "construction" of the impact**

**Project objectives**

Have the project objectives been adequately defined? Are they clear, explicit and measurable?

.....

### Monitoring Activities

At what stage (implementation, dissemination, exploitation) did you plan the monitoring activities and which tools did you use (face to face interviews, questionnaire, evaluation forms, other)?

.....

.....

Who did you involve in the monitoring and evaluation process?

- Teachers/trainers
- External experts
- Legal representatives
- Staff
- Learners/students
- Associated partners
- Other:

What were the results of your monitoring/evaluation?

.....

.....

What possible problems or difficulties emerged from monitoring the activities?

- Lack of time
- Lack of resources
- Problems with partner institutions
- Coordinating problems
- Financial management problems
- Administrative difficulties
- Other:

Have you provided a report on the results of monitoring and evaluation?

.....

.....

The dissemination and exploitation of results are essential elements for the project's promotion.

**Dissemination**

What tools did you use for your dissemination activities?

- Website
- Social channels
- Newspaper/media
- Public events
- Cultural events/seminar
- Brochure
- Performance
- Conference
- Other:

Have you taken part/will you take part in other events (at the local, regional or national level) to present the activities/experiences and the project's results?

.....

Did you use any platforms (beyond the Erasmus+ project results), such as EPALE, eTwinning, or the School Education Gateway?

- Yes    No

**Valorisation**

Which tools or activities did you use for the exploitation of the results?

.....  
 .....

E.g. OER, workshops, seminars, EPALE?

Did you involve any stakeholders in the project? If so, when?

.....  
 .....

Do you think that the results can be adopted and adapted to other contexts/institutions? If so, how?

.....  
 .....

**Sustainability**

Erasmus+ Guide: The quality of the plans for ensuring the sustainability of the project, its capacity to continue its impact and to produce results after the EU grant has been used up.

What initiatives have been implemented for the sustainability of the project?

.....

Would you be willing to write articles, collaborate on publications and participate as an example of "good practice" in other events and workshops organised by the Erasmus+ NA?

- Yes    No



# Research in a small NA: lessons learned so far

By Petra Gillis

## Introduction

A small agency does not always have the means or knowledge to set up fully-fledged research projects. But there are other options to organise research, as this paper demonstrates.

Epos vzw is one of the smaller Erasmus+ National Agencies. It operates within the fields of school education, vocational education and training, higher education and adult education in Flanders, Belgium. Unfortunately, this not only means limited resources but also a limited number of staff. Research and analysis of the current and past situation in order to improve future approaches is one of the topics that everybody is convinced is necessary, but there never seems to be sufficient time or resources for proper research.

Also very important is the fact that people assume a lot based on information from one or two beneficiaries or participants. And before you know it, that information becomes a generally accepted statement. Some information and data needs to be confirmed by research. Measurement is the key to knowledge: it is only once you really know what a significant number of people state that you can act upon it.

Rather than choosing elaborate research, Epos opts for the research and analysis of existing data provided by project beneficiaries and participants with the option of further research on either or both, in terms of its work programme engagements.

As their functions improve it has become a lot easier to use the current tools for the research of data.

## 1. Advantages and disadvantages in terms of research

### 1.1. Advantages

#### **Small is beautiful, but also manageable**

Each year, Epos receives a number of recurring questions from either the cabinet of the Minister of Education and Training or from Members of the Flemish Parliament. Added to that, Epos also needs to provide recurring and updated data for stakeholders. These recurring questions have formed the

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#### **KEYWORDS**

RESEARCH, LIMITED RESOURCES, DATA LAKE, IMPACT INDICATORS, STAFF MOBILITY

basis for a more structural approach to data. Data is collected in Excel and forms the basis for the collection of historical data in such a way that it can be used by all members of staff.

### **Short-term decisions and more freedom**

As research in the agency is small-scale and linked directly to the work programme, the decision on what research needs to be done is taken rather quickly, once it is clear what the agency can do and to what extent it needs support, e.g. for interviews. This small scale also means that the agency does not have to outsource a lot and can opt out or opt in during the research process depending on the outcomes or the surfacing of additional items.

## **1.2. Disadvantages**

### **Small-scale research only**

The limited number of members of staff and limited available funding precludes large-scale research. The agency can cooperate with other agencies to ease the burden where possible.

### **Members of staff have to be on top of other work**

The research and analysis of results is not a full-time job due to the other requirements the agency needs to address being minimal. This means that somebody is responsible for research and results on top of other work.

### **Subcontracting research is not cheap**

Thorough investigations are possible provided there is sufficient funding, but as always, there are more ideas than available funding.

## **2. Research methodology**

Every decent piece of research starts with a kind of business plan. This preparational phase is quite important as it gives insight into the operational questions and forces one to choose and make decisions. To begin with, the aim of the research needs to be defined clearly.

*Tip: Collect studies from other agencies to find out how others operate. What topics do they use? Is it possible to cooperate with other agencies to set up an international research study that will allow international comparisons?*

### **What** needs to be done to achieve the predetermined results?

A Gantt chart can be very helpful as it combines the assignments with their timings and shows the underlying relations between assignments. No matter what type you use, a road map is an essential prerequisite when working on a project such as a yearbook. Not only does it list all the tasks ahead, but it also helps you focus on the main aims and targets, not to mention the fact it also provides the satisfactory feeling of ticking off finished tasks.

**How** will the final outcome be achieved? Which tools are to be used? Does the data need to be processed? Is there already data available that can be re-used?

For example, earlier interviews of participants can be integrated into your research as a human interest approach, should the topic of the interview relate to your research. Do you want to go further than data analysis, e.g. with qualitative research? Epos mostly relies on data available from the Erasmus+ dashboard. This can be extracted directly from the dashboard or by using Mobility Tool+, Business Objects, or ErasmusPlusLink.<sup>1</sup>

**Who** is the person(s) responsible and who will provide support within the agency?

**When** doing your own research and analysis based on the available databases, a thorough knowledge of the databases is very important, as are the necessary skills to work with Excel. The latter is not only necessary to extract data by using a pivot table, but also to organise your own data in the long term. Regular operational meetings with everybody involved allows you to keep each other and the management updated. This also ensures that everybody involved is singing from the same hymn sheet. Keep your road map updated so that even those not closely involved in the research know the state of play.

What is the overall **deadline**? What are the intermediate milestones to be achieved?

Will you organise a **follow up** later on? With what frequency, e.g. yearly or two-yearly? If so, while collecting your data, it is essential to organise it to allow easy updates. So think ahead about not only how you want to visualise your data but also about how you want to update it later on.

### 3. Conclusions

Small-scale research can be summed up in the following operational stages:

#### Selecting topics

When starting a research process, it is important to list the research topics in terms of which are necessary and which are desirable while adding the reasons behind the labels. While discussing the work programme for the upcoming research, topics can be identified and clarified, and can preferably be tackled by several units within the agency. This has the additional benefit of shared responsibility and ownership of the research. A few practical issues go hand in hand with the topics, e.g. what can be organised by the National Agency and if there is a need for external support, and, if so, if there is a budget available for subcontracting.

#### Decisions

The National Agency needs to formally decide which research will be implemented, how it will be implemented, the timetable for its implementation and the appropriate budget. Equally important is clear communication on the decision to all stakeholders. And finally, sticking to the choices and decisions is also important.

<sup>1</sup> Mobility Tool+ allows project beneficiaries to enter all mobilities that occurred during their project. ErasmusPlusLink is the management tool used by National Agencies to manage their projects. Business Objects allows data to be retrieved from the management tool in a structural and predefined manner. The Erasmus+ dashboard collects all data from all projects that were entered into one of the European tools. Queries allow one not only to retrieve one's own data but also data from other National Agencies, which enables comparisons.

### Implementation

Then the operational phase starts. Start by setting up a road map for your study, not only to keep track of all the things that need to be done but also to inform your colleagues of who is doing what, and the state of play so far.

While doing your research, you will encounter difficulties and opportunities. Do not let go of the initial result the research needs to achieve. Add-ons can be great, but not at the expense of losing sight of your goal.

### Dissemination

All that hard work needs to be disseminated: choose your dissemination channels carefully.

## 4. Some case studies

The following case studies demonstrate low-profile research based on the existing data provided in the tools by the European Commission.

### Epos impact indicators

As all National Agencies are well aware, the concept of "impact" is very important in the manuals of the European Commission and almost always refers to the impact created by the beneficiaries through the means of the project. Epos took that interpretation one step further and asked the question: what is the impact of the National Agency in implementing Erasmus+ and nationally funded programmes for internationalisation? What is the added value? What difference does Epos make?

After lengthy discussions, it was decided to use the strategic goals in the mission statement as the key principle for defining impact indicators. One of those goals relates to Epos becoming a hub of internationalisation and cooperation in education and training by 2020. How can this be translated into figures and charts? A number of workshops provided the answer; for example, on organisations:

- How many unique organisations have registered as potential beneficiaries for Erasmus+ projects?<sup>2</sup>
- Which of those have actually applied for Erasmus+ funding?
- And of those that applied, which were funded?
- Are there organisations that have been validated, but have not applied either in Flanders or elsewhere? Can this be explained?
- For e.g. school education, the number of unique PICs for schools can be set off against the number of schools in the region. What is the result of this? And can it be investigated even further if certain types of schools miss out?

Another indicator gives insight into the number of people registered for newsletters and social media, again demonstrating the extent to which Epos is known and visible. This mapping will again assist in identifying missing potential beneficiaries.

<sup>2</sup> Before an organisation can apply for funding under Erasmus+, it needs to be registered in the Participant Portal, which is the official European tool. After registration, the National Agency of the home country of that organisation needs to check the details to find out if the organisation is eligible for Erasmus+ funding as determined in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide. If the organisation is eligible, it will be validated by the National Agency. If it is not, it could be that documents are missing or that the organisation does not fulfil the criteria to participate.

The whole exercise has resulted in a list of impact indicators and the strategic goals they refer to. The indicators are then translated into a number of sub-indicators (see the impact indicator on organisations), for which the data sources and the calculation method are included. Also mentioned are the staff who are responsible for providing that data, and finally the frequency with which the data is collected. Basically, the list originates from the work programme indicators but has been expanded with Epos' own indicators, which are used for both the management of the agency and for informing relevant stakeholders. As Epos already had a mid-year evaluation of the state of play of the work programme indicators, this evaluation now also includes the impact indicators. The overall list shows the indicators' strengths and weaknesses, the items covered, the items still to be done, etc., and is a supporting tool for managerial decisions.

## Epos yearbook

The concept of a yearbook is a recurring theme, as Epos published yearbooks under the previous European education programme "Lifelong Learning Programme" (2007–2013). However, when Erasmus+ started, the agency had other issues to tackle, and although everybody considered it important to disseminate the huge amount of data, there was not enough expertise, time or staff available. The previous work programme, however, resulted in an engagement to visualise projects such as by interviewing beneficiaries, participants, etc. In addition to those interviews, some facts and figures can frame the importance of such projects as well.

Two major key principles accompany the yearbook. Firstly, the agency relies as much as possible on data that has already been collected and made available through the European tools and Epos' own data collection or initiatives (e.g. the interviews for the website). And secondly, there is no need to re-invent the concept: a yearbook is a widespread method to disseminate facts and figures, so peeking in on the neighbours helps to determine the agency's version.

Next to the official data to be collected for the work programme and the yearly report, there are of course the continuous and recurring questions of the Cabinet of Education and Training and of the Members of the Flemish Parliament, the recurring presentations of the state of play for stakeholders, etc. All this has already resulted in a rough data file that is constantly being not only updated but also expanded as a result of slight changes in questions or opportunities. A significant number of questions focuses on higher education students, who were originally limited to outgoing students in programme countries. A few years later this was expanded to outgoing and incoming student mobilities with and from partner countries. Our data file not only shows the data for higher education but has since also been expanded first to VET, and later to staff for all fields. It also allows comparisons to be made between the numbers in applications and in final reports.

Finally, the 2014 call was finalised in the 2018 yearly report. All relevant data for the 2014 call is listed in the yearly report and has been checked with Epos' own data files and is considered frozen. This ensures that the data collected earlier corresponds with the data reported. However, the collection method allows the pivoting of data for specific information requests.

All this is just to demonstrate that a lot of information is already being collected and checked, previously by several people but now by one, and is available on a common platform. Part of that data is obligatory, and part is situational. When it comes to disseminating the data, it turned out that a yearbook of another Flemish department was quite inspiring and it led to Epos' own version. Basically, the yearbook will be comprised of three parts: a human interest part, an accessible facts and figures part, and finally a part for all statistical data. Rather than being printed, the yearbook is made available on the Epos website, including

links to interviews and other relevant pages. Paper and online teasers with a QR code lead to the yearbook. This again is a concept seen on social media and can easily be copied for your own use. The existence of the yearbook is thus spread as much as possible and should lead to the yearbook being a reference point for everyone interested in data and background information on Epos, including Flemish Members of Parliament.

This task is more labour intensive than the previous example, but in the end the agency decides on what kind of information has to be in the book. It is not against the law to start small to keep the book manageable and then expand while building your experience and knowledge. The main message, however, is that by using existing data you can disseminate a substantial amount of data to all your stakeholders without fancy bells and whistles.

*Tip: In case you are using the dashboard for the first time, take a close look at the query you use and check the outcome with, for example, the EPL results or MT+ results. For example, you cannot use "learners" in the case of higher education or your results will be wrong. Use "students" instead. Terminology is very important when building your query.*

*Also, regularly check your query fields while working in the dashboard. Switching from KA1 to KA2 can result in a number of fields being deleted. Once you are satisfied with the quality of the data, save your query for further use, particularly if you want to update the data later on as you will need to compare the same data for analysis.*

## **Analysis of the impact of staff mobilities (KA1)**

This research project was one of the first analyses Epos did, and was a result of the theme of the yearly "Grensverleggers" conference, organised by Epos ("Grensverleggers" roughly translates as pushing or extending borders or boundaries). The 2017 theme was staff mobility, and facts and figures on the impact of staff mobility had to be extracted from the participants' reports. The data was ready and available per field and per call in the Business Objects and Mobility Tool+ platforms, and could be extracted to an Excel file. The task seemed simple enough but turned out to be more complicated than expected.

The first finding was that the questions within the same field can differ per call. This obviously obstructs historical comparisons. Small changes to either the questions or the answers have an important impact on the processing of the data. However, not only can the questionnaire evolve within a field, but there are also significant differences between fields. Furthermore, a question in one field can change in the next call, while for another field the question is kept the same. This means any comparison between fields is being hampered. It is clear that such questionnaires need to be finalised at the beginning of the programme, and if the European Commission needs additional information using those reports, the only reasonable option is to add questions.

However, given the state of play of the questionnaires, the results of the analysis were still quite interesting, confirming some assumptions while showing other areas that could be improved. The study indicated that the majority of staff are satisfied with their experience, and would do it again if the opportunity arose. They recommend the experience to their peers. But the results also indicated that the recognition of mobilities was very often informal. The best-case scenario was that the mobility was part of their year programme and thus included in the workload. When the mobility was not recognised even in the year programme, members of staff were less willing to participate again, given the workload accompanying certain types of mobility. The result of the analysis can also assist the National Agency in choosing topics for seminars, etc.



# Participants' reports and their use for research



# What can you know from the people who go? Using Erasmus+ participant reports in research

By Charis Hughes

## Abstract

This article considers the strengths and shortcomings of using participant reports as a data source in research, based upon the experience of doing so in the 2018 Léargas impact study on Erasmus+ international work placements for vocational learners from Ireland.

## Introduction

Léargas is one of the two National Agencies that manage Erasmus+ in Ireland, and is responsible for the Adult Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training (VET), and Youth sectors. In 2017, research into the impact of Erasmus+ work placements on vocational learners from Ireland was initiated. This area was considered strategically important at the time because of an increase in the Erasmus+ budget for VET mobility projects, and because Erasmus+ vocational placements were being considered as a potential tool for improving language learning skills in the Irish Government's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026, "Languages Connect".

The research method included a substantial analysis of Erasmus+ participant reports. This paper focuses on the experience of using this type of data for research purposes, and considers the strengths and limitations of participant reports as a data source.

## Research scope and method

The research criteria were VET mobility (Key Action 102) projects that were funded in Ireland by Erasmus+ Calls for Proposals in 2014, 2015 and 2016, and that involved vocational learners rather than vocational staff. Overall, Léargas funded 44 KA102 projects between the years of 2014 and 2016. Eight projects involved VET staff only, leaving 36 projects that met both research criteria of time and target group.

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### KEYWORDS

ERASMUS+, VET, VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING, PARTICIPANT REPORT ANALYSIS, LEARNERS, IRELAND

In more than 80% of the projects studied, the sending organisation was a College of Further Education. In Ireland, this is an educational body providing post-secondary courses that are not at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Typically, Colleges of Further Education are state-funded and connected to a regional Education and Training Board. As course providers, Colleges of Further Education may choose to integrate a work placement module into a particular course, but it is not a requirement. Consequently, offering international work placements is an optional – as opposed to mandated – activity for these organisations.

The research set out to explore three key questions:

- What are the outcomes of Erasmus+ work placements for vocational learners from Ireland?
- What are the associated outcomes for the organisations that send learners?
- Is Erasmus+ achieving its stated aims for vocational learners from Ireland?

This was the first such comprehensive study that Léargas had carried out after establishing the position of Impact Research Officer<sup>1</sup> earlier in 2017. Given that Léargas, as a National Agency, has access to a wealth of project information in the form of mandatory Participant Reports and Final Reports – and because outcomes for learners was the focus of the project – it was decided to use these data as a primary source for research. Therefore, the chosen research method was a quantitative and qualitative analysis of these reports, supplemented with in-depth interviews with project coordinators to explore the key issues that arose from the desk research. The research for the impact study was carried out in late 2017 and early 2018.<sup>2</sup>

It should be explained that mandatory **participant reports** are designed and generated by the European Commission as part of any KA102 project. They are sent by email to all participants shortly after the completion of their placements. Project coordinators are responsible for ensuring that their participants complete and return their reports before the project end date. The reports themselves take about 15 minutes to complete and contain a mix of question types: yes/no, multiple choice and open-ended. The multiple-choice questions use a five-point Likert-type scale, running from either "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", or "very good" to "very poor". While the questions are largely the same from year to year, there can be variation in question order or phrasing. This variation has to be taken into account when comparing data from different programme years.

The final report is a comprehensive evaluation of the entire project, completed by the project coordinator in the sending vocational organisation no more than two months after the end date of the project. Final reports contain open-ended qualitative questions divided into key areas such as project implementation, activities and learning outcomes.

The research sample size for this study was:

- 1,275 participant reports, drawn from the 36 projects that met the criteria; and
- 29 final reports (final reports from the other seven projects were not yet due for submission at the time of research).

As mentioned above, this desk research was complemented by individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) carried out through semi-structured conversations with five Erasmus+ project coordinators from sending organisations. The Impact Research Officer conducted these interviews, either in person or by telephone,

1 Charis Hughes was appointed to this role.

2 The final paper "Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland" is available at [bit.ly/33PhI55](http://bit.ly/33PhI55) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

in late 2017. The interview subjects were selected to ensure a balance between new and experienced coordinators, and urban and rural organisations. Interview subjects are referred to in this text as project coordinator A, B, C, D and E.

## Project and participant profiles

The 36 projects in the study happened in 21 different vocational organisations across Ireland. Ten of these organisations had only one project between the years 2014 and 2016, while eight others carried out two projects and three carried out three projects.

Over 70% of participants in this study were at the beginning stages of their vocational training at the time of placement. While vocational mobility work placements can last between two weeks and 12 months, 92% of placements in this study were under four weeks in duration. The remaining 8% of placements were between four weeks and three months long. When discussed during IDIs, project coordinators cited the logistical difficulties for participants in being away from their families and homes for extended periods as the principal reason for selecting durations under four weeks.

## Using participant reports as a data source

Participant reports are an extensive data source. Each participant report has almost 80 individual questions. Although most are multiple choice, several are open-ended questions – which some participants answer in great depth. The reports are also mandatory, with fewer than 3% of participants in the projects involved in this study failing to return their reports. Using these reports thus helps to build up a broad picture of participants' experience, as so many viewpoints are represented.

However, some caveats must be borne in mind: generally, the reports are completed shortly after the end of the placements, so participants do not have a long period to reflect on their experience before submitting. The length of the reports may induce fatigue in some respondents: two project coordinators mentioned in their IDIs that the report could take their learners twenty minutes or more to complete. In addition, some questions use formal phrasing and language. For example, the participant report invites respondents to "evaluate" their experience rather than to rate it, and to "specify" information rather than write it. This means that completing the reports can be difficult for those with learning differences, or who speak English as a second language.

Finally, there is the issue of how to use such a breadth of data effectively. It is essential to have a focused research question in mind and to cluster questions together accordingly. In this case, the key area of research interest was the outcomes for vocational learners as a result of their placements. This meant that participant report questions relating to logistical matters, such as accommodation and travel arrangements, did not need to be considered as closely. Conversely, questions relating to the development of specific skills – which can be scattered throughout the participant report – needed to be grouped together. The answers to open-ended questions also needed to be analysed for further information. As an example of this process, the following questions pertaining to the development of intercultural skills were grouped together even though they appear in different sections of the participant report:

- After having taken part in this mobility activity...: I am more able to cooperate with people from other backgrounds and cultures.

- After having taken part in this mobility activity...: I am more tolerant towards other persons' values and behaviour.
- How has the stay abroad changed the way you see your future work?: I would like to work in an international context.
- Through my participation in this activity I learned better how to...: see the value of different cultures.

## Outcomes for vocational learners

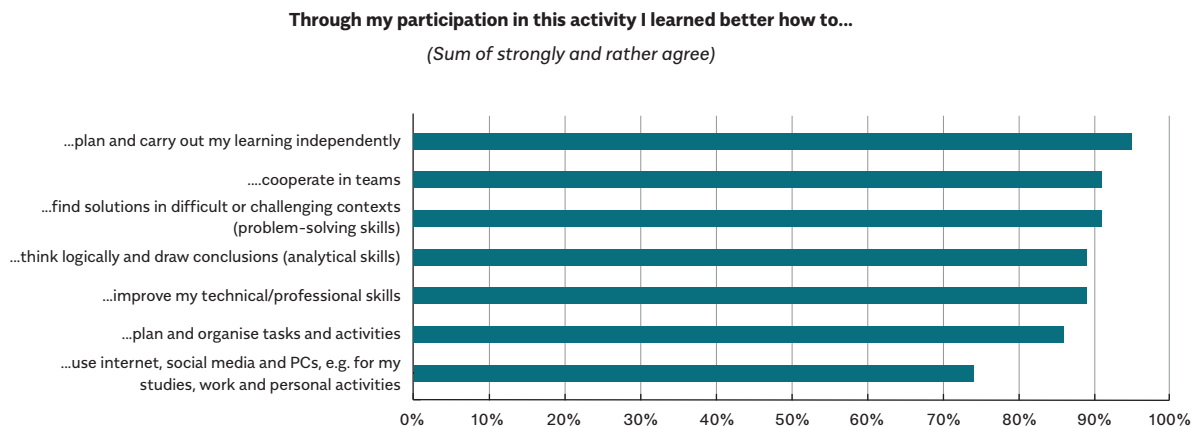
Bearing these limitations in mind, there is nonetheless much to be learned from participant reports. A content analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the reports helped to identify distinct areas of outcomes for learners: professional skills and employability; personal development, such as self-confidence; language skills; intercultural competence; and European identity.

## Outcomes for professional skills and employability

The prospect of enhancing technical/professional skills and competences was the principal motivation for vocational learners from Ireland to take part in Erasmus+ work placements. When asked "What were your main motivations for studying/training abroad?", 68% responded that it was to enhance their technical or professional skills and competences. The next biggest motivation was the opportunity to live abroad (17%), followed by the opportunity to develop language skills (4%) and personal skills (3%). Consequently, the improvement of professional skills and competences is key to meeting participants' expectations of their work placements.

The responses from participant reports to questions relating to professional skills and employability suggest that participants felt the placements had a positive outcome for them in these areas. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Through having taken part in this mobility activity..." on a five-point Likert-type scale, running from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Summing the responses "strongly agree" and "rather agree" shows that 89% of participants felt their professional and technical skills had improved because of the mobility activity.

Figure 1. Professional skills outcomes



In addition, 93% strongly or rather agreed that their chances of getting a new or better job had increased as a result of the placement, while 88% felt they had a better opportunity of getting an internship or job in their home country. Furthermore, 90% of participants felt they had a clearer idea of their professional aspirations and goals.

Qualitative responses contained considerable personal testimony from participants that the placement was their first work experience of any kind in their vocational area. This is not surprising, given that the majority of participants were in their first year of study at the time of the placement. However, it does demonstrate that Erasmus+ placements have a strong potential to enhance the career prospects of vocational learners, given that they tend to happen at the crucial early stage of career development.

Participant reports do not directly ask if learners have gone on to gain employment after their work placement. This is understandable, given that most participants would not have completed their studies and entered the labour market by the time they submitted their participant reports. However, more than 30 participants – just over 2% of the total – mentioned in their feedback that they had obtained employment because of their work placement. For example, a 2014 participant wrote, *I got a job in a 5 star hotel in Ireland which I love all because of my work placement in Malta in a 5 star hotel. Best experience of my LIFE! Loved every moment! Definitely once in a life time.*

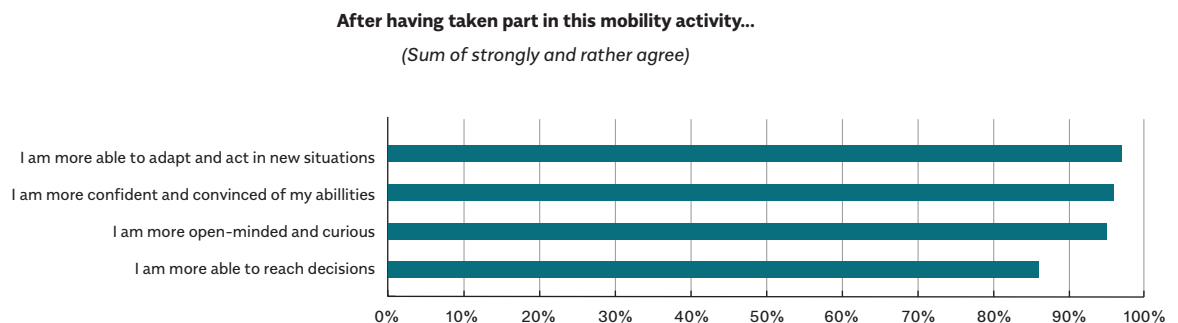
In contrast, almost three quarters of the final reports in this study mentioned individual participants who had received job offers because of their placements. Rather than being submitted shortly after the completion of a placement period, final reports are submitted two months after the completion of a project. This gives VET organisations the opportunity to report on impact over a longer time scale than individual participants. For example, a 2015 final report stated: "Having participated in the project some Business and Beauty Therapy students were offered summer employment in Tenerife. The Erasmus+ experience is seen as beneficial for students to find their first job after graduation and for their early career." This was also reported by four of the five project coordinators interviewed in IDIs, who recalled individual participants who had been offered or had accepted jobs with their host employers after their placements.

This is an example of the limitations of participant reports; they may lack crucial detail due to the short time span between the completion of a placement and the submission of the report. Supplementing participant reports with final reports and IDIs gave a more rounded view of the development of professional skills in vocational learners.

## Personal development

Moving from professional skills to personal development, responses show that participants felt their key areas of personal growth were in confidence, adaptability, and independence. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "After having taken part in this mobility activity...", again on a five-point Likert-type scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Figure 2. Personal development outcomes



In self-assessments of their learning, participants reported the strongest areas of impact as independent learning, cooperation, and problem-solving. Over 90% of participants strongly or rather agreed that they had improved in these areas as a result of their placements. The ability to think logically, express themselves creatively and put ideas into practice were rated slightly lower, with scores between 82 and 89%.

Looking at the development of self-confidence and independence, almost 97% of learners strongly or rather agreed that they were more confident and convinced of their abilities after their Erasmus+ placements. Participant reports, final reports and interviews with coordinators suggest that the increase in confidence came from the experience of travelling to and living in a new environment for the first time.

*It was the greatest experience of my entire life. [...] The biggest thing I took away from the experience was confidence professionally and personally. It made me realise that this is the field that I want to go in. (2014 participant)*

*[What] I will take away from this experience is that it is possible to work abroad and I do not have to be afraid of trying new things and experiencing the different cultures around the world. I would now like to study a new language. (2016 participant)*

More than half the final reports mentioned that the majority of participants lived with their parents, meaning that the time spent on the work placement was the learner's first significant period away from home. This was also reported by all five project coordinators interviewed in the IDIs. The qualitative data from final reports and IDIs emphasised that this departure from the home environment had helped to increase the participants' sense of independence. This extract from a 2014 final report summarised the effects: "By undertaking an international work placement, managing away from home for three weeks and meeting and working alongside many new people, participants have gained increased self-confidence and self-esteem. They have come to realise that they are capable of more than they might have thought, and

this will motivate and encourage them to progress in their career/studies. In this way, the benefits of the project will extend far beyond the technical and other skills acquired."

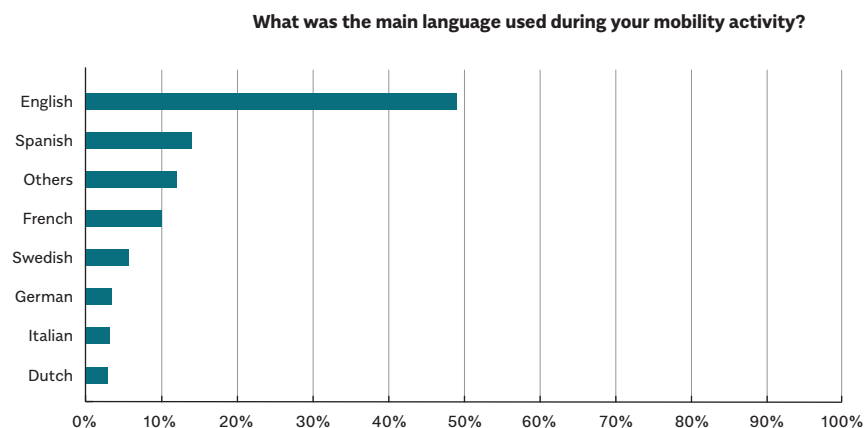
This connection between increased independence and progression in careers or study was echoed by project coordinators in both IDIs and final reports. They stated that the experience of living and working abroad for the first time was personally empowering for participants, which can lead to professional empowerment. For example, a 2015 final report stated: "For some it was their first time away beyond the UK. [...] Many had grown hugely in confidence and were planning on spending the summer abroad on foot of this transformative time."

Again, this is an area where the data from participant reports was strongly complemented by the data from final reports, as vocational project coordinators are particularly well placed to observe changes in confidence and independence in their organisation's learners.

## Language skills

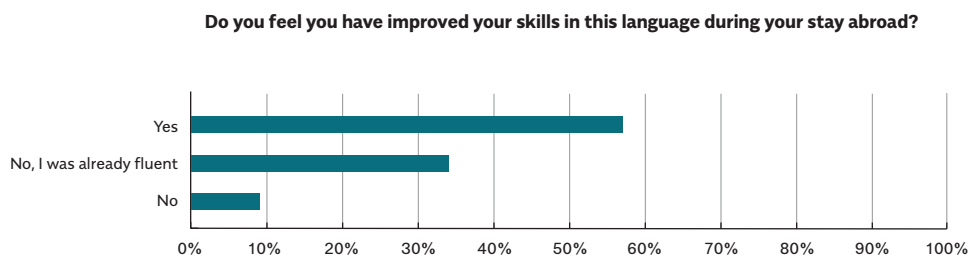
Just under half of the participants surveyed stated that English was the main language of their work placement. This was the case almost without regard to the native language of the destination country. Participants who had placements in Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey, as well as the UK and Malta where English is a national language, reported using English as the main language in the workplace.

Figure 3. Main language used on placement



Participants were then asked whether they felt their language skills had improved as a result of the placement. Almost 60% of learners stated that their language skills had improved. However, analysing these responses is somewhat complicated by the fact that the participant report does not distinguish between this main language of the placement, the main language of the destination country, and the participant's native tongue.

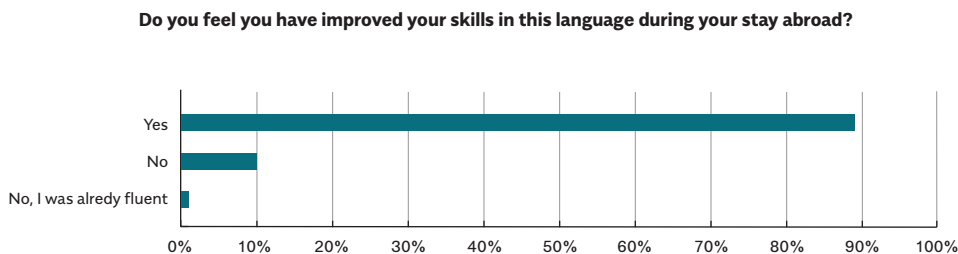
Figure 4. Language improvement



For example, in 2014, just under half of the participants (311 out of 637 total) stated that English was the main language of their placement. Of these 311 participants, 70 stated that their language skills had improved, 20 stated they had not improved, and 221 stated that they were already fluent. However, it is not possible to determine if the 90 people who did not identify as "already fluent" are native or non-native speakers. It might be surprising for a native speaker to develop their English language skills (as opposed to *communication skills*) from a work placement. However, a non-native English speaker could conceivably improve their language skills by conducting a work placement through English.

Consequently, excluding responses from participants whose main placement language was English gives a slightly different picture of the impact on foreign language skills. When English is excluded, almost 90% of participants stated that their language skills had improved.

Figure 5. Language improvement, excluding cases where English was the main placement language



Looking at the qualitative feedback on language skills, participants highlighted that exposure to a foreign language in a working environment had considerably improved their existing skills. For example:

*My knowledge of the French language has improved greatly. The French classes we took before leaving helped with my understanding of both the French language and culture. Upon arriving in Grenoble, I had to use what we learned and put it into action. My confidence grew every day and I was soon able to communicate with people without feeling nervous and embarrassed. (2014 participant).*

However, a greater proportion of project coordinators as well as participants commented that stronger language skills would have enhanced the learners' experience on placement:

*The biggest problem that I think we had was that this year there was no linguistic support. This was a shame as we had a short period of time to learn a new language. The college itself tried as*



*hard as they could to help us by supplying the best alternative that they could which did take the sting out of not having proper support as previous years have. This would be the one thing that I think could be looked at for future projects, it's a shame to have everything else run so well and to fall down with not having proper basic language training for your receiving destination. (2014 participant)*

*Participants felt that more support with language training before the mobility would be very beneficial and give them more confidence to engage with local people. (2016 final report)*

*I feel language skills are improved but it's not such a focus. It's a bonus. (IDI with project coordinator A)*

These comments may seem at odds with the earlier results regarding the improvement of language skills. However, it is notable that several of the languages listed as main placement languages are not widely studied in the Irish education system. For example, almost 10% of participants reported that Swedish or Dutch was the main language of their placement, but neither language is a curricular subject in Ireland. State examination statistics show that fewer than ten students across the whole country studied these subjects to Leaving Certificate level in 2013.<sup>3</sup> It may be that participants started with a very low baseline of knowledge in these languages, which improved greatly as a result of the placements. For example, one learner stated that they had "learnt basic Spanish in 3 weeks" (2015 participant).

Overall, the data from participants and final reports is insufficiently detailed or granular to capture how much language skills improve as a result of these placements. This is an example of an area that needed to be supplemented with interviews from project coordinators, who universally suggested that a greater provision of vocationally-oriented language training would substantially enhance the placement experience.

## Intercultural competences

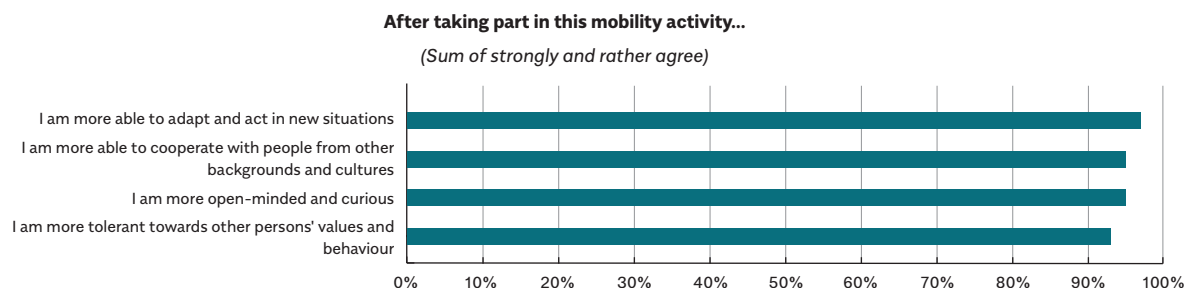
Quantitative and qualitative data shows that intercultural competence was a significant area of development for vocational learners. Although Ireland is itself home to people of many different cultures and backgrounds,<sup>4</sup> organisations highlighted that their own regions tend to be more homogeneous and that participants may not have been exposed to other cultures before. For example, a 2014 final report stated: "Many of the participants come from rural backgrounds in the Border region of Ireland and may have been less aware of the cultural diversity that exists in the Netherlands."

In relation to intercultural competence, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "After taking part in this mobility activity..." on a five-point Likert-type scale, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

<sup>3</sup> See [www.examinations.ie/statistics/?|=en&mc=st&sc=r13](http://www.examinations.ie/statistics/?|=en&mc=st&sc=r13).

<sup>4</sup> Results from the 2016 Irish census found "The total number of non-Irish nationals (ordinarily resident in Ireland is) 535,475, or 11.6% of the population". See [bit.ly/2MrkNNs](http://bit.ly/2MrkNNs) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

Figure 6. Intercultural competence outcomes



The responses show that 95% strongly or rather agreed that they see the value of different cultures more as a result of their placements; 95% strongly or rather agreed that they are more able to work with others from different backgrounds and cultures; and 93% strongly or rather agreed that they are more tolerant of others' values and behaviours.

These results may seem high at a time when people in Europe routinely book cheap flights not only for holidays but also to travel for study and work. However, referring to the final reports made it clear that many of the learners who took part in these placements had not travelled extensively before. Among the statements in the final reports was that their learners had "very limited, if any, experience and knowledge of travelling within the European Union. Certainly prior to this, few of them have travelled independently of family." Indeed, many participants highlighted that they lived with their parents – meaning the time spent on their work placement was not only their first significant experience living abroad, but their first experience living away from the family home.

For learners like these, an international experience can be profoundly transformative. The IDIs with project coordinators, final report statements and feedback from participant reports suggested that the experience influences participants to perceive opportunities outside Ireland. For example, a typical statement from a learner in a small college of around 500 students was, *what I will take away from this experience is that it is possible to work abroad and I do not have to be afraid of trying new things and experiencing the different cultures around the world. I would now like to study a new language.*

In addition, just over 30 participants mentioned in their reports that they had gone on to work in other countries because of their placements, and some had even gone back to work with their original host employers. A 2014 participant who travelled from Dublin to Sweden commented:

*I believe I came back a more independent, sociable and well-rounded person thanks to my experience abroad and I will be forever grateful for the chance I received. The host pre-school was fantastic and I learned so much about [the] curriculum in Sweden, the importance of learning through doing and I even picked up on a lot of the Swedish language. I have since booked flights back in the beginning of June and I will be working and living in Lulea all thanks to this programme and the contacts I made.*

A 2014 participant who had a placement in France stated:

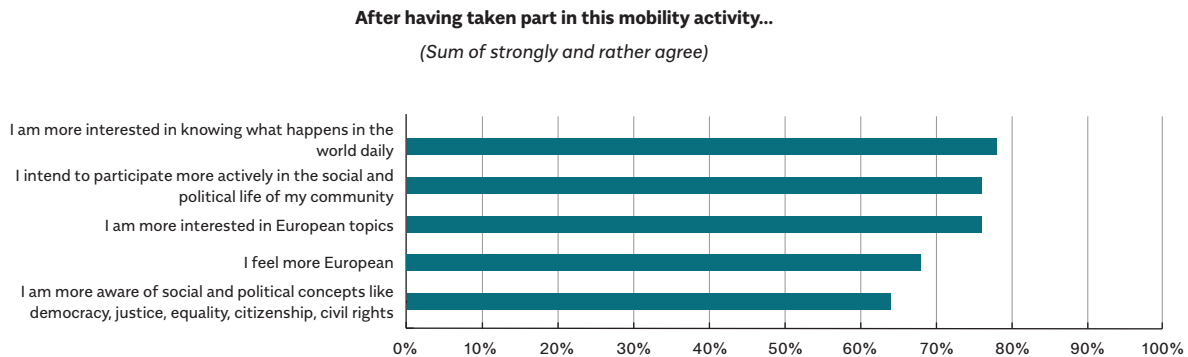
*I had an amazing experience. It was an absolute pleasure working in Lys Noir and United Colours of Benetton. My employers were very helpful and I am still in touch with both. I was offered a year's internship as a result of my Erasmus trip.*

It seems that learners begin to realise that they are capable of surviving – or even thriving – away from their homes and support networks, and meeting and working alongside new people. This in turn builds self-confidence and self-esteem, and helps to expand career horizons.

## European identity

Participants were asked about their sense of European identity and their engagement with social and political affairs by rating their level of agreement with statements following "After having taken part in this mobility activity..." In this area, 76% said they were more interested in European topics after their placements. About 68% felt more European. Nearly 65% were more aware of social and political concepts such as democracy, justice, equality and citizenship.

Figure 7. European identity outcomes



While these figures are not especially low, there is a notable difference between the percentage of participants who strongly or rather agreed that they learned better to see the value of different cultures (95%) and those who reported that they *themselves* felt more European as a result of their participation (68%). Indeed, it was notable that, when answering open questions, participants described their placements as happening in "new", "different" or "foreign" cultures. For example:

*I'd highly recommend the Erasmus+ experience to anyone looking to travel and work abroad. It served as a brilliant way of getting to work in a foreign country with all the challenges that come with that along with the safety net of the Erasmus+ programme protecting you (2014 participant).*

A word frequency analysis of the participant reports showed that while the word "foreign" occurred 788 times in open answers, "European" appeared only 27 times. This occurred most often in the phrase "another European country".

**Table 1. Frequency of use of "foreign" and "European" in participant report open-answer questions**

	2014	2015	2016	Total
"Foreign"	392	241	155	788
"European"	5	3	19	27

Overall, seven participants of the 1,275 surveyed spontaneously mentioned a sense of "Becoming more European" in their qualitative feedback.

*I recommend this internship [...] because it's a good way to find yourself, find good friends for life and be more employable be more European and meet new people and learn loads you will live life like an adult and be more mature after and know who you want to become (2014 participant).*

Again, this was an area where participant report data needed to be supplemented by interviews with project coordinators. Three of the four commented that the absence of pre-departure cultural preparation may have affected the development of a sense of European identity in participants. As project coordinator C put it:

*The loss of cultural preparation before departure, which was funded under the Leonardo da Vinci programme, probably has affected the feeling of EU citizenship. What Europe wanted was as many students as possible taking part, which I understand, but I think there was a bit of a loss there. We do the best we can but the resources are limited.*

## Strengths of using participant reports

Taken as a whole, participant reports can give a rich insight into the varied experiences of participants on these placements. This is partly because participant reports are mandatory, providing the researcher with an almost complete data set. The mandatory nature also helps mitigate against selection bias: while voluntary surveys may attract answers from only a small proportion of learners, or from those who had a very positive or a very negative experience, participant reports capture the variety of experiences of those who took part in the project – whether positive, negative or neutral. This helps build up a very comprehensive picture for the researcher. It also gives the researcher a large enough data set to recognise broad patterns that would not be as evident in a smaller sample. The word frequency method described above to compare the incidence of "foreign" rather than "European" when describing placements is a good example of this.

From a National Agency perspective, the participant reports also have the advantage of being immediately available. When time or resources are limited, they are a rich source of data that can be accessed easily and quickly.

## Shortcomings of using participant reports

The most obvious shortcoming of the participant report is that the researcher did not design it for their specific research purpose. This means that key questions relevant to the research topic may or may not be included.

The participant report is also designed to be used across all the programme countries. This can mean that necessary context can be lost. For example, Q4.1 asks "What was the main language used during your mobility activity?" In 2014, 49% of Irish respondents stated that English – one of our two national languages, spoken by the vast majority of the population – was the main language of their placement. Nonetheless, the follow up question Q4.3 asks, "Do you feel you have improved your skills in this language during your stay abroad?". It received these somewhat surprising answers:

Yes: 23%

No: 6%

No, I was already fluent: 71%

That means that 29% of participants chose an option other than "No, I was already fluent". However, we cannot ascertain from the participant reports whether these respondents were or were not native speakers of English. A non-native speaker of English may well improve their language skills (as distinct from communication skills) by completing a work placement through English. However, this is only an assumption and cannot be confirmed by the data we have.

The survey is quite long, numbering close to 80 questions. The language choice and sentence construction can also be complex. For example, in the question "How would you evaluate the quality of support at your sending and receiving organisations?: The proposed activities were directly related to my training objectives in my home country", the more natural language choices would be "rate" rather than "evaluate" and "linked" instead of "directly related to". Both the length and relative complexity of the report were highlighted by project coordinators in interviews as off-putting to some of their learners. In effect, this means that while some participants give extensive qualitative information in their reports, many choose to answer the "tick box" questions only. There is also the issue of timescale: participant reports are completed shortly after the completion of the placement period, meaning that respondents do not have very much time to critically reflect on their experience.

Finally, a caveat for researchers: even prior to the introduction of the EU General Data Protection Regulation<sup>5</sup> in 2018, participants had a degree of control over how their data can be used. Participants can withhold their permission to be quoted or to be contacted for follow up studies. You must make sure that permission has been given before you use quotes or try to contact participants for follow up conversations or studies.

## Conclusions

Participant feedback is crucial not only to monitoring the quality of work placements, but to helping assess their outcomes. Participant reports are the only "official" system for capturing this feedback from

<sup>5</sup> Introduced in 2018, the EU GDPR regulation seeks to protect all EU citizens from privacy and data breaches. Its official website states that this will mean "a new era for data protection in the EU"; see [bit.ly/2MqNPg0](https://bit.ly/2MqNPg0) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

all the learners involved. Furthermore, participants receive the email request to complete their reports very shortly after the end of their own placement period. This is in contrast with final reports, which are submitted no more than two months after the end of the project as a whole. As some projects can last two years and have several mobility flows within this time period, the distinction is important. It means that participant feedback is generally captured very soon after the completion of a placement, while final reports might not be written until a year or more has passed since the placement. This means that final reports often mention developments in the lives of participants that happened after they submitted their own reports. In this author's view, the use of participant reports for research must at the very least be supplemented with the use of final reports.

However, if a researcher wants to reflect the views and experiences of participants, has a specific question in mind, and can consider information in context, particularly if there are limited resources to carry out purpose-built research, participant reports can be an extremely useful part of the research process.



# What do the participant reports in the Erasmus+ programme tell us about the benefits of VET mobility?

By **Siru Korkala**

## 1. Introduction

This article presents the MIA-Q model, which has been developed for studying the effects of the Erasmus+ programme on learners (here meaning students) and staff. The objective of this exploratory study and the article is to identify and to show the impact of Erasmus+ at the EU and national levels, based on existing data. Nine countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Slovenia) and their National Erasmus+ Agencies participated in the project, coordinated by the Austrian National Agency. Participants' experiences were gathered via a survey filled in by all participants directly after an Erasmus+ mobility period. The first results in this article focus on the benefits of VET mobility projects, but the intention is to include other fields of education in the future as well.

## 2. Methodology of the study

The model is based on themes from the obligatory surveys that learners and staff of KA1 in VET fill in after their mobility. The data includes nearly 60,000 respondents from nine countries (50,000 learners and 9,500 staff). Experts, coordinated by the Steering Group of the TCA "Impact Assessment of E+", distinguished major dimensions in the model which are related to the objectives of the Erasmus+ programme.

So, the impact model consists of six dimensions, each measured by a set of questions from the learners and/or staff datasets. For each dimension, a dimension score is calculated. In addition, a composite programme score is calculated from the six dimension scores. The dimensions are: competence, employability, innovation, European citizenship, professional development and system improvement.

All survey questions used in the model have an identical five-point response scale with values from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All scores are based on the calculation of unweighted means across these

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### KEYWORDS

PARTICIPANT REPORTS, VET MOBILITY, MIA-Q MODEL

scales. All scores will consequently have a value between 1 and 5, with 3 as a balancing point between positive and negative responses. The higher the score, the more positive are the respondents.

For all dimension scores based on data from only one of the two datasets (learners or staff), the scores are calculated in the following way:

**Step 1:** For each respondent, the mean score across all relevant questions is calculated.

**Step 2:** The dimension score is calculated as the mean of all the respondents' mean scores from step 1.

For dimensions composed of data from both datasets (Innovation and European Citizenship), the mean score for each population (learners or staff) is calculated first, following the two steps above. Then the dimension score is calculated as the unweighted mean of these two means. Consequently, learners and staff have the same weight in the calculation of these dimension scores.

**Step 3:** The programme score is calculated as the unweighted mean of all the dimension scores from the steps above.

This means that all six dimensions carry the same weight in the calculation of the programme score.

**Step 4:** All scores are firstly calculated per country and year as described above. The corresponding transnational scores are calculated as the unweighted mean of the national scores.

This means that all countries carry the same weight in the calculation of the transnational scores.

The *competence and employability* dimensions refer to learners only and *professional development* and *system improvement* to staff only. The innovation and European citizenship dimensions refer to both learners and staff.

## 2.1. Competence

The Erasmus+ programme formulates several key objectives regarding competence. The competence dimension includes the following statements.

Through my participation in this activity I learned better how to:

- ... think logically and draw conclusions
- ... cooperate in teams
- ... plan and organise tasks and activities
- ... find solutions in difficult or challenging contexts
- ... plan and carry out my learning independently

After having taken part in this mobility activity:

- ... I improved my technical/professional skills/competences
- ... I am more able to think and analyse information critically

Thanks to this mobility experience:

- ... I believe that my chances to get a new or better job have increased
- ... I have better opportunities for internships or jobs in my home country



## 2.2. Employability

Employability is one of the keywords of European strategies. The aim of the Erasmus+ programme is to enhance students' opportunities to become employed. The employability dimension includes the following statements.

Thanks to this mobility experience:

- ... I have a clearer idea about my professional career aspirations and goals
- ... I believe that my chances to get a new or better job have increased
- ... I have better opportunities for internships or jobs in my home country
- ... I am more capable of taking over work tasks with high responsibility after my stay abroad

## 2.3. Innovation

Innovation is also a keyword in European strategies. In this survey, the dimension focuses on new teaching/training methods, approaches and subjects at the sending institutions (staff). There is only one question regarding innovation in the survey for students.

My participation in Erasmus+ had the following impact on my sending institution:

- ... has led to the introduction of new teaching/training subject(s) (staff)
- ... has led to the use of new teaching/training methods/approaches/good practices at my sending institution (staff)
- ... will lead to the introduction of new teaching/training subject(s) (staff)
- ... will lead to the use of new teaching/training methods/approaches/good practices at my sending institution (staff)

Through my participation in this activity I learned better how to:

- ... develop an idea and put it into practice (learners)

## 2.4. European citizenship

The Erasmus+ programme defines European citizenship as follows: To raise participants' awareness and understanding of other cultures and countries, offering them the opportunity to build networks of international contacts, to actively participate in society, and to develop a sense of European citizenship and identity. The following statements for learners and staff were selected.

After having taken part in this mobility activity:

- ... I am more aware of social and political concepts like democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights (learners)
- ... I am more interested in European topics (learners)
- ... I feel more European (learners)

My participation in Erasmus+ had the following impact on my sending institution:

- ... has led to the internationalisation of my sending institution (staff)

## 2.5. Professional development

Relevant questions to be answered concerning professional development are, for example: *Does participation in a KA1 mobility action provide staff with opportunities to enhance personal skills or to develop and share innovative ways of teaching across Europe by improving their pedagogical competences?*

We decided to focus on staff for this theme and included questions with three different sub-topics: personal, pedagogical and organisational issues. The selected questions are as follows.

Personal issues: By participating in this Erasmus+ activity I have developed the following competences:

- ... cultural awareness and expression
- ... I have increased my social, linguistic and/or cultural competences
- ... emotional skills (e.g. having more self-confidence, etc.)
- ... interpersonal and social competences

Pedagogical issues: By participating in this Erasmus+ activity I have developed the following competences:

- Analytical skills
- I have improved my knowledge of the subject taught/trained in my professional area
- I have gained sector-specific or practical skills relevant to my current job and professional development
- I have improved my competences in the use of Information and Communication Technology tools (e.g. computer, internet, virtual collaboration platforms, software, ICT devices, etc.)

Organisational issues: By participating in this Erasmus+ activity I have developed the following competences:

- A sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- I have enhanced my organisational/management/leadership skills
- Practical skills (e.g. planning and organising, project management, etc.)
- I have reinforced or extended my professional network or built up new contacts

## 2.6. System improvement

This topic is rather difficult to describe and to evaluate via responses of the participant survey. However, relevant questions to be answered were, for example: *Does participation in a KA1 mobility action provide learners and staff with tools or competences to enhance the mobility system or tools or competences to enhance the internal school system?* The following statements for staff were selected.

Thanks to this mobility activity:

- ... I have built cooperation with players in the labour market
- ... I have reinforced the cooperation with the partner institution/organisation

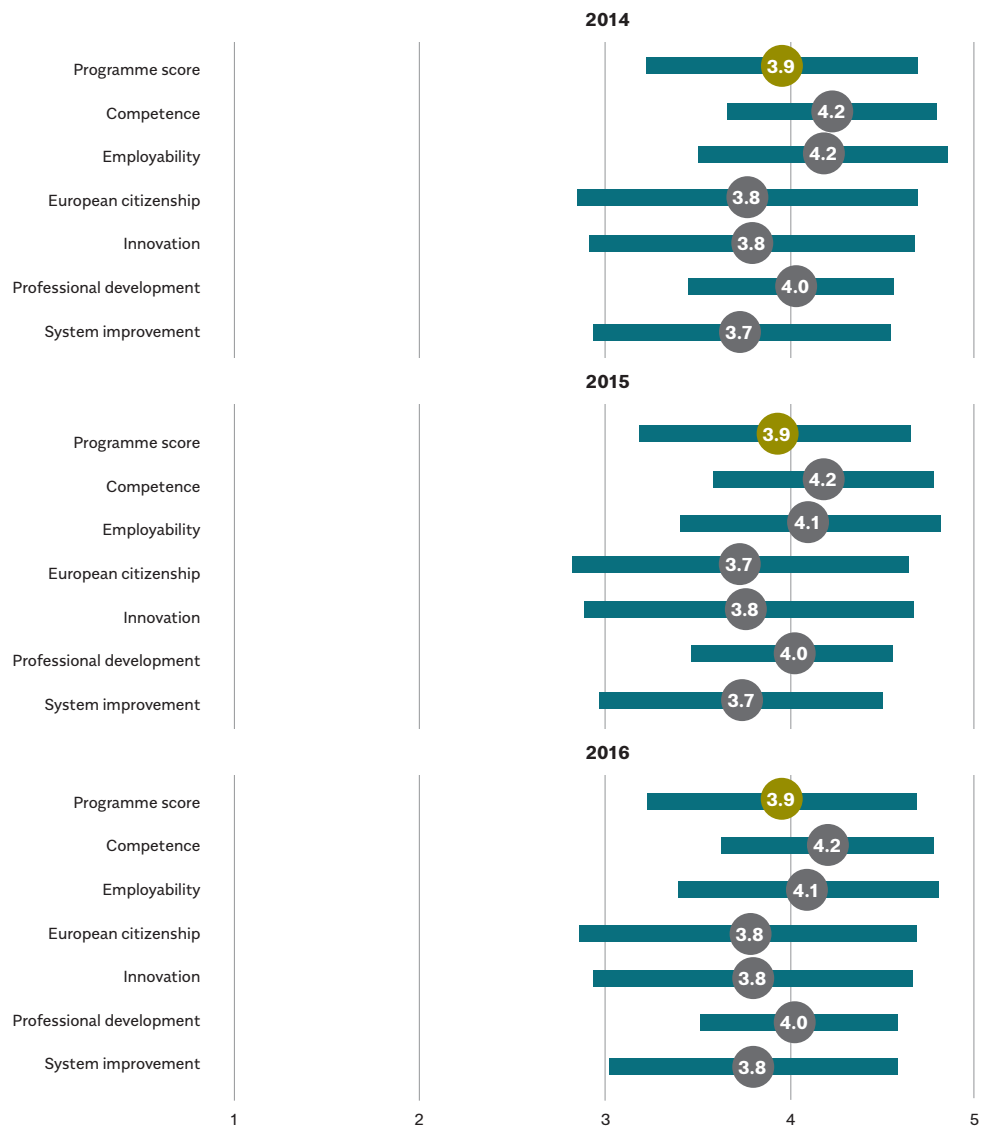
My participation in Erasmus+ had the following impact on my sending institution:

- ... has led to new/increased cooperation with the partner institution/organisation(s)

### 3. The analysis of the data

The answers given by participants in a VET mobility are observed through the MIA-Q model. The average values of the answers given by participants to the different groups of statements in different years are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. VET indicator scores 2014–2016. Experiences of respondents in the survey measuring the effectiveness of international mobility periods in the Erasmus+ programme



Key: 1 = completely disagree, 3 = average, 5 = completely agree

Source: Oivind Skjervheim, ideas2evidence.

### 3.1. No great differences between participating countries

Based on these analyses, both learners and staff evaluated that the programme generally has a very positive impact. The average score was 3.91 out of 5. In particular, the theme of competence had quite a high value: 4.2 out of 5. This means that learners think that the mobility experiences had a great impact on their competences. Also, the theme of employability got a value of 4.2 out of 5. According to this result, participation in a mobility positively affected the participants' ability to succeed in their working life.

Professional development was considered substantial by staff when asked about the impact of the mobility period, especially regarding their personal development. Another important outcome for participants was networking between different organisations.

The positive impact of the programme is quite similar across the participating countries. National scores vary only between 3.78 and 4.23 out of 5. This means that there are no great differences between countries participating in the survey. In addition, results do not differ substantially between different years of the answered questionnaires.

### 3.2. Positive impact especially on the professional development of staff and competences of learners

When looking into the specific statements, the theme of competence entails three statements with especially high scores. Thanks to their mobility experiences, learners think that they:

- ... are more open-minded and curious about new challenges (4.4 out of 5).
- ... are more able to adapt to and act in new situations (4.3 out of 5).
- ... have learned how to cooperate in teams better (4.3 out of 5).

Regarding employability, learners think that thanks to their mobility experience they:

- ... believe that their chances to get a new or better job have increased (4.2 out of 5).
- ... are more capable of taking over work tasks with high responsibility after their stay abroad (4.1 out of 5).

The theme of innovation includes statements for both learners and staff. Learners improved in how to develop an idea and put it into practice (3.9 out of 5). For staff, participation in the programme leads to the use of new teaching/training methods/approaches/good practices within their own organisation (4.0 out of 5).

Staff rated changes in their professional development highly as well. By participating in this Erasmus+ activity, staff members have:

- ... developed their cultural awareness and expression (4.4 out of 5).
- ... developed their interpersonal and social competences (4.4 out of 5).
- ... increased their social, linguistic and/or cultural competences (4.3 out of 5).
- ... reinforced or extended their professional network or built up new contacts (4.4 out of 5).

As for system improvement, the statement regarding networking got high scores. Thanks to this mobility experience staff members:

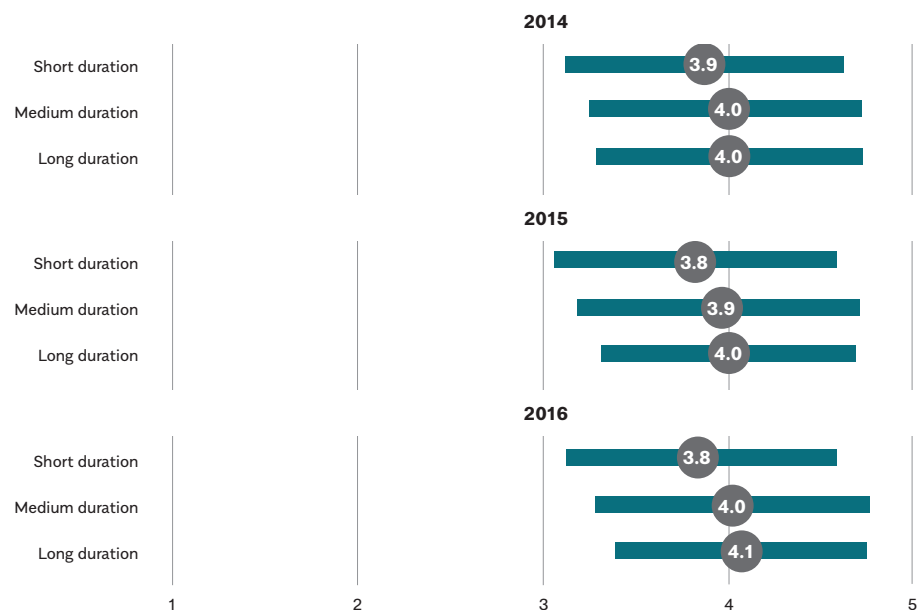
- ... have reinforced their cooperation with partner institutions/organisations (4.2 out of 5).

Finally, awareness of European citizenship was strengthened among participants:

→ After having taken part in this mobility activity, learners are more interested in European topics (3.9 out of 5).

When scrutinising the themes considering the background variables, it can be observed that the duration of the mobility period influences the scores. The positive assessment of the effects of mobilities is stronger when the mobilities had a longer duration (Löffler 2018).

**Figure 2. Programme score indicator by duration 2014–2016. Experiences of respondents according to the duration of the mobility**



Key: 1 = completely disagree, 3 = average, 5 = completely agree

Source: Oivind Skjervheim, *ideas2evidence*.

When considering the respondents' age, both younger and older learners alike benefit from participation in mobilities. Both groups were most positive concerning changes in competence and employability. Older staff felt the effects on their professional development and system improvement even more strongly than younger ones (Löffler 2018). No gender differences were found: both female and male participants were very positive about the impact of mobility programmes on their further development. This applies to both learners and staff (Löffler 2018).

#### 4. Conclusions and usefulness of the model

The MIA-Q model was developed to gain insights into the effects of Erasmus+ mobilities on learners and staff. This goal has been achieved, but there are several limitations to our research. First, the data collection, as in many studies, was subjective, reflecting participants' views on changes. Thus, the indicators reflect participants' opinions. Nevertheless, due to the high response rates and consistency within and across countries, the data of individually perceived or expected effects of mobilities can be reliably analysed. Participants experienced a positive impact of mobilities on several of their attitudes and behaviours.

Second, the visualisation is meant to provide a global assessment on the impact of mobility programmes across many participants. Therefore, individual differences in answers to statements are not considered. Country and other background variables were also not used to highlight the differences in the "performance" of the programme, but rather to clarify different levels of satisfaction and positive assessments of mobility (Löffler et al. 2018).

However, this exploratory study on the experienced effects of Erasmus+ mobilities on learners and staff provides a first step in showing impact on an international level. Supplementary and more detailed mechanisms and success and failure factors can be assessed by additional qualitative and quantitative studies within National Agencies. The MIA-Q model seems useful for analysing participant reports in the VET sector, and adaptations to the model will be made to conduct cross-national research in adult education as well.

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# Results of the evaluation of the improvement on the quality of education by supporting professional development of staff of school and adult education

By Gamze Ceylan Topaç

## Abstract

The present article is about the evaluation of Erasmus+ KA1 School Education Staff Mobility and Adult Education Staff Mobility granted projects within the 2015 call. The research question of the study is whether participation in mobility projects leads to any change or impact on staff in terms of personal development, professional development, and on participating institutions or organisations in terms of capacity enhancement. The study was conducted in collaboration with a research team consisting of academicians.<sup>1</sup> The mixed research method, referring to collecting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data within the same study, was used to provide a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the research question. The Participant Reports from Mobility Tool, semi-structured individual interviews, semi-structured focus group meetings and institutional capacity building questionnaires were used as data collection tools in the study. According to the study, participation in Erasmus+ KA1 School Education Staff Mobility projects and Adult Education Staff Mobility projects have led to a profound impact on staff in terms of personal development, skills and competences, and it has also contributed to strengthening the institutional capacity of participating organisations as well as more internationalisation through building new partnerships, collaborations, and networks.

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## KEYWORDS

EVALUATION, IMPACT ANALYSIS, ERASMUS+ SCHOOL EDUCATION STAFF MOBILITY, ERASMUS+ ADULT EDUCATION STAFF MOBILITY, PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted by the Turkish National Agency in collaboration with the research team, the members of which are Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pervin Oya Taneri, Research Asst. Emrah Altun, Research Asst. Y. Emre Ayna, Research Asst. Gülsevım Evsel, and Research Asst. Feyza Korkmaz Sağlam. The full report is available online at [bit.ly/2KXswzM](http://bit.ly/2KXswzM) [accessed on 20.08.2019].

## Introduction

The term "impact" is described as a factor which causes positive or negative changes to beneficiaries, based upon an intervention such as a project or programme (European Commission 2013: 103). In a similar vein, Leeuw and Vaessen also identify the impact as being positive or negative, expected or unexpected, subordinate or very important long-term changes which emerged directly or indirectly after the intervention (Leeuw, Vaessen 2009: 7–9).

Impact analysis refers to the assessment and evaluation conducted through a comparative analysis of positive or negative, expected or unexpected long-term impacts which occur directly or indirectly from an intervention, project or programme. Within the scope of the impact analysis study, comparisons are made between the pre-intervention and post-intervention situations or between the groups affected by the intervention and not affected by the intervention (Austrian Development Agency 2009: 10). Impact analysis studies, in essence, are considered as studies based on the cause and effect relationship. In this kind of study, it is generally investigated whether participating in the programme has an impact on the dependent variable or not. The difference between the value of the dependent variable in the absence of the programme and the value of the dependent variable after participation in the programme indicates the net impact of participation in the programme (Khandker et al. 2009: 22–27).

Evaluation and impact analysis studies, as important programme management tools, provide a comprehensive overview of the work by revealing the impact that results from participating in the projects. To achieve true and significant success in project management phases and processes, evaluation and impact analysis studies are of critical importance. Moreover, the evaluation and impact analysis studies are seen as a crucial necessity for the funding organisations – National Agencies, for instance – to identify areas in which success has been achieved or needs to be improved as well as to determine and implement necessary measures and improvements. In addition to contributing to the process management in the National Agency, sharing the results of these studies with key actors who actively work in the decision-making mechanism contributes to shaping policies in the field of study. To this end, the European Commission (EC) also asserts that the findings obtained from evaluation and impact analysis studies are vital evidence-based feedback for shaping future policies and also contribute to further development of research-based policies (European Commission 2013: 2).

Community Programmes, for instance, are designed by the European Commission in line with the identified needs and problems within the scope of project cycle management and logical framework. Besides, the EC specifies programme priorities, objectives, and indicators aimed at carrying out the measurement of objectives. After the project's implementation, the EC expects National Agencies to clarify some issues such as whether the expected outputs and results have been achieved or not, what kinds of problems were faced by beneficiaries from the application phase to the final report phase, and what kinds of expected and/or unexpected impacts have occurred. Consequently, evaluation and impact analysis studies are one of the major topics in many meetings, workshops or conferences organised by the EC and encourage National Agencies to share a similar approach with regard to conducting these studies. To that end, the Turkish NA has given priority to conducting evaluation and impact analysis studies related to the Erasmus+ Programme since 2014 and has carried out several studies related to education and youth projects. One of these studies is the "Evaluation Report of the Improvement on the Quality of Education By Supporting Professional Development of Staff of School and Adult Education".

The Erasmus+ School Education Staff Mobility and Adult Education Staff Mobility activities are aimed at increasing the quality of all forms of learning and teaching activities by providing school education



staff and adult education staff with professional development opportunities abroad. 387 granted projects in the school education sector and 126 granted projects in the adult education sector are the target population of the research.<sup>2</sup>

## Research rationale

The improvement of the competences of staff such as teaching, training or language proficiency, creating more opportunities for personal and career development, a broader understanding of practices, policies, systems and interconnections in both formal and non-formal education, and keeping the motivations of staff high at work are some of the expected outcomes within the scope of Erasmus+ staff mobility projects. Furthermore, capacity enhancement with regard to modernisation, internationalisation and a better quality of work and activities in favour of students, pupils, and adult learners are expected to be associated with participating institutions or organisations in the school and adult education sectors (European Commission 2018: 29). In a similar vein, the quality-oriented transformation based on the equal opportunity principle, the improvement of personality, skills, and competences of individuals in accordance with the needs of the labour market within the lifelong learning approach, is one of the main targeted policies in the education sector (Presidency of Turkey Strategy and Budget Office 2013: 31). Therefore, the objectives of staff mobility projects in the school and adult education sectors are matched up with Turkey's national priorities and policies. In this context, revealing the impact of Erasmus+ education and youth mobility projects is conceived as important in terms of their contribution to the national objectives and priorities as well.

The main aim of the research was to carry out the evaluation and analysis of the potential effects and impact of participating in projects on both staff and participating institutions through scientific research methods and techniques.

The research questions within the scope of this study are as follows:

1. What are the general characteristics of Erasmus+ School Education and Adult Education staff mobility projects?
2. What is the demographic distribution of participants (age, gender, city) of Erasmus+ School Education and Adult Education staff mobility projects?
3. What are the effects of Erasmus+ School Education and Adult Education staff mobility projects on staff?
4. What are the effects of Erasmus+ School Education and Adult Education staff mobility projects on institutions?

The specific objectives of the research are:

- to find out the potential effects and impact of Erasmus+ School Education staff mobility projects and Erasmus+ Adult Education staff mobility projects on staff in terms of two main impact areas: personal development and professional development,
- to explore the impact of projects on participating institutions or organisations from a capacity building perspective, and

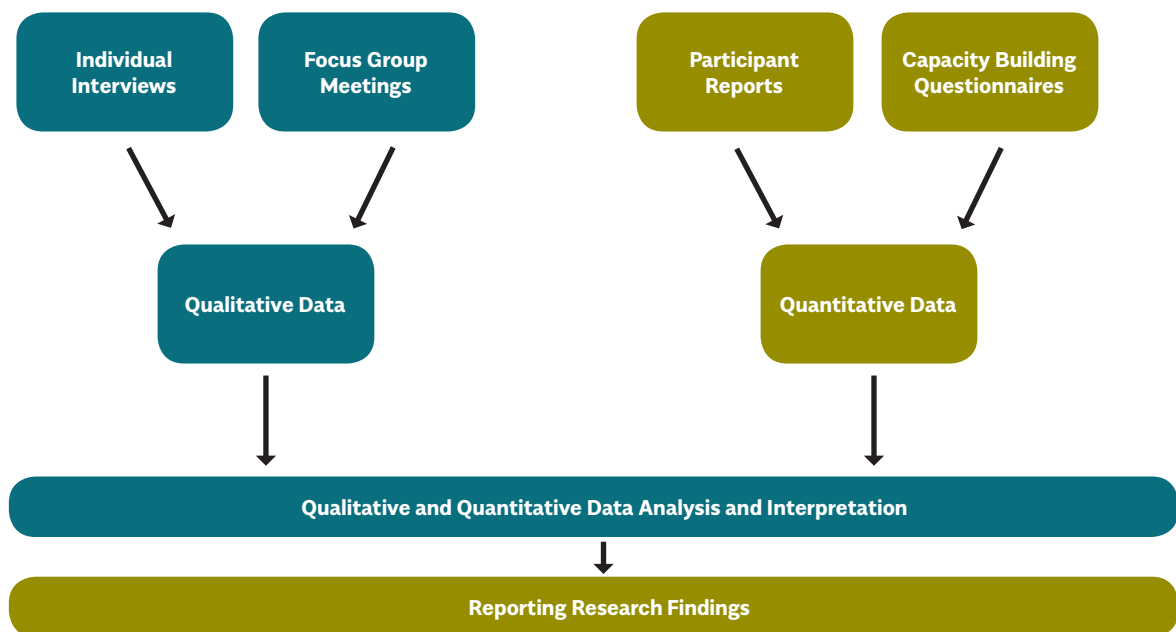
<sup>2</sup> The projects originate from the 2014, 2015 and 2016 calls.

→ to share the findings obtained from evidence-based research with policy-makers in the school education and adult education sectors in order to show the effectiveness of these projects, obstacles faced by participants or weak points to be improved.

## Methodology

A mixed research method based on a qualitative and quantitative data analysis was used in the research (Figure 1). The reason behind preferring the mixed research method was to achieve a broader perspective and a better understanding of the research problem, even though both qualitative and quantitative methods have their own advantages and disadvantages. Quantitative data provides close-ended and objective information, while open-ended and subjective information is obtained from qualitative data. The interviews and focus group meetings enable the evaluator to get more detailed information and have a good grasp of its understanding rather than relying only on survey results. The quantitative data, which was collected through Participant Reports and capacity building questionnaires, was supported by the qualitative data obtained from individual interviews and focus group meetings. In this way, the mixed research method allowed us to carry out a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis.

Figure 1. Research Design Scheme



Data obtained from Participant Reports, individual interviews, focus group meetings and capacity building questionnaires was categorised into three main impact areas: personal competence development, professional competence development and institutional capacity development. For the quantitative data analysis, 5,459 Participant Reports were extracted from the database (namely, Mobility Tool) and the capacity building questionnaires were implemented with 225 project managers or contact

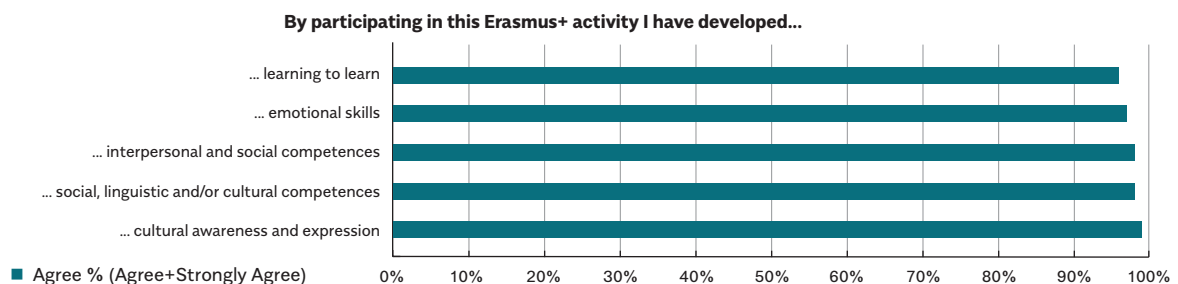
persons. 12 semi-structured focus group meetings were held face-to-face with the staff who participated in projects in June 2017, and 24 semi-structured individual interviews were held face-to-face or via Skype or the telephone with project managers or contact persons for the qualitative analysis in June 2017.

## Main findings

The research was carried out to cover both school education and adult education projects. However, for the purpose of this article, only the results from the school education projects are presented in the current section on the main findings.

The main findings related to personal competence development, professional competence development, and institutional capacity development are based on the data collected from 5,459 Participant Reports in the school education sector. Data from Participant Reports indicates that the vast majority of staff in the school education sector stated very high satisfaction levels with their mobility, excluding two issues: the duration of the mobility and dissemination activities. They declared that the duration of the mobility is not long enough, and they agree that the duration of the mobility should be extended. Concerning dissemination activities, the data obtained from focus group meetings and individual interviews reveals that they faced some challenges in terms of the sustainability of dissemination activities. Furthermore, the findings from focus group meetings and individual interviews are also consistent with the findings obtained from Participant Reports. The participants declared that participation in mobility projects had a profound impact on their cultural, social, emotional and linguistic skills and competences as well as basic skills and competences, despite the difficulty in assessing net impact shortly after the mobility. Concerning professional development, nearly all participants stated that their mobility experience is seen as effective in terms of increasing their knowledge of approaches, methods, and systems related to their working area. Also, they think that their mobility experience has provided them with an opportunity to discover good practices in other countries. According to Participant Reports from the school education sector, regarding personal development for instance, the five most improved skills and competences are as follows: cultural awareness and expression (98.59%), social, linguistic and/or cultural competences (97.82%), interpersonal and social competences (97.56%), emotional skills (96.96%) and learning to learn (96.23%) (Figure 2). Also, the findings show that the projects have a significant impact on staff in terms of the spirit of entrepreneurship, self-confidence, cultural sensitivity, and innovation.

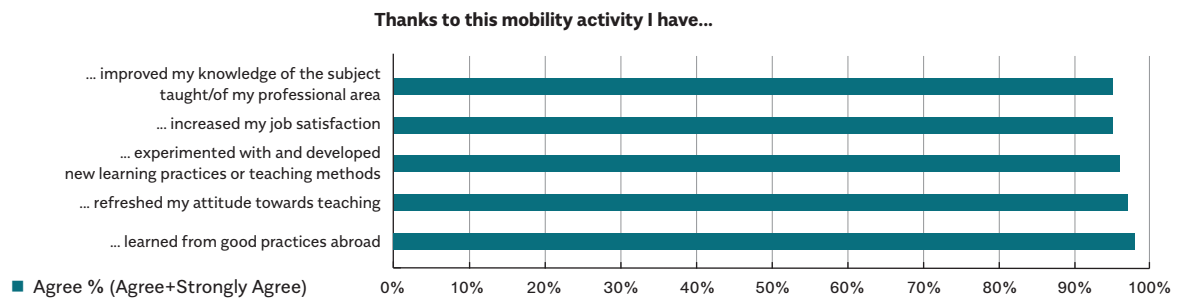
**Figure 2. Impact on Personal Competence Development**



Source: Participant Reports, 5,459 respondents

The results of the Participant Reports from the school education sector reveal that learning from good practices abroad (97.58%), a refreshed attitude towards teaching (96.57%), experimenting with and developing new learning practices or teaching methods (95.55%), increased job satisfaction (95.18%) and an improved knowledge of the subject taught/professional area (95.16%) are the five most improved areas with respect to professional development (Figure 3).

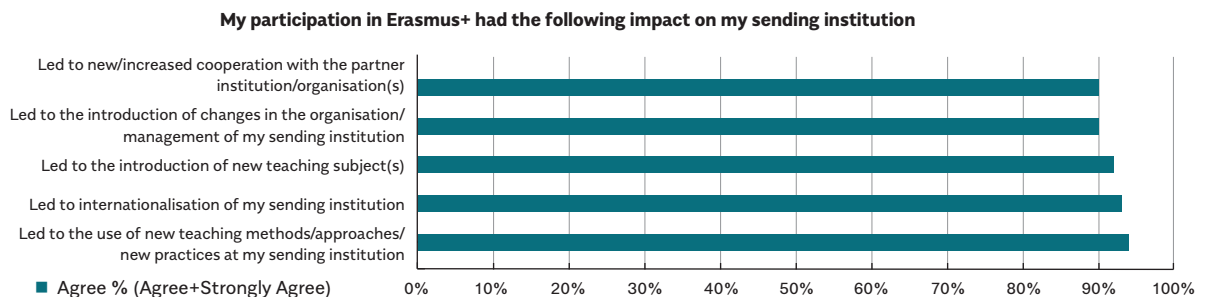
**Figure 3. Impact on Professional Competence Development**



Source: Participant Reports, 5,459 respondents

Apart from their contribution to the personal and professional development of staff, projects directly or indirectly make a great contribution to the capacity enhancement of the participating institutions or organisations. From the institutional capacity development perspective, using new teaching methods/approaches/practices at the sending institution (94.28%), the internationalisation of the sending institution (92.97%), the introduction of new teaching subject(s) (91.78%), the introduction of changes in the organisation/management of the sending institution (90.18%) and new/increased cooperation with the partner institution/organisation(s) (90.07%) are indicated as the five most improved areas in Participant Reports (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Impact on Institutional Capacity Development**



Source: Participant Reports, 5,459 respondents

In addition to analysing the Participant Reports, the capacity building questionnaire was also used to carry out a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis. The capacity building questionnaire was implemented with 225 respondents who are the project's contact or otherwise authorised person at the institutions. The findings from the capacity building questionnaire support the results from the quantitative data obtained from the Participant Reports. Participants indicated that the capacity of their institutions to operate at a European and international level increased, and that the projects had had a crucial impact on developing international collaborations with partners from other countries. Besides, they also declared that these mobility projects contributed to the introduction of new learning and teaching approaches to sending institutions, in line with the findings obtained from Participant Reports.

## Conclusions

The research results obviously indicate that participation in mobility projects in the school education sector has a significant impact on both the personal and professional development of staff as well as the capacity building development of participating institutions or organisations. According to the research, participation in projects not only contributes to personal and professional development but also fosters the capacity enhancement of institutions or organisations in many different ways, such as internationalisation and modernisation, developing new partnerships or cooperation with other similar institutions or organisations, and the development of management skills. Furthermore, staff have been encouraged by their managers to participate in such mobility activities, and there is also increased awareness about European funding mechanisms from managers in institutions and organisations. In this way, it has paved the way for the introduction of new teaching and learning methods or approaches to sending organisations or institutions by staff who participate in mobility projects. This research can be considered as a good example of an evaluation study, in that many methods were used together, and in order to confirm the results in the long run, it could be valuable to apply other methods like using ex-ante and ex-post evaluations together or a longitudinal analysis.

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# Dissemination and exploitation of research results



# Picture This! Communicating impact through the UK Erasmus+ logic model

By Steven Murray, Jennifer Millman, Rebecca Marrow

## Abstract

Impact assessment in the UK Erasmus+ National Agency (NA) aims to gather evidence about the benefits and the impact of Erasmus+ in the UK. This article examines how the UK NA's interactive online logic model was designed and developed to support impact communications with stakeholders. The interactive logic model is available at [bit.ly/31Sk8sh](https://bit.ly/31Sk8sh).

## Introduction

The purpose of impact assessment in the UK Erasmus+ National Agency (NA) is to gather evidence about the benefits and the impact of Erasmus+ in the UK. The insight gained is then used in strategic resource planning and in our communications with stakeholders, beneficiary organisations, the media and the general public.

This article looks at the UK NA's attempt to communicate information about impact to stakeholders using an interactive online logic model. It explains the underpinning logic model framework, provides an overview of the development and features of an interactive sunburst diagram version of the model and considers how effective the approach has been.

## UK Erasmus+ logic model

To give structure to our impact assessment activities, the UK NA developed a logic model as a framework. We use this to build a hypothesis of how Erasmus+ activities lead to change that is relevant to UK policy priorities and beneficial to UK individuals, organisations or society. A logic model is a simple visual way of presenting the relationship between the

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was a Senior Consultant in the United Kingdom Erasmus+ National Agency (NA). He was involved in qualitative and quantitative research and evaluation that aimed to understand the impact of the Erasmus+ programme in the UK. He led the conceptual development of the UK Erasmus+ Logic Model and provided overall direction and content for the interactive sunburst diagram. He is currently Business Intelligence Manager at Birmingham City University.

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### KEYWORDS

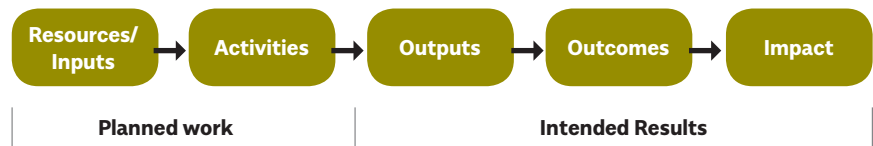
ERASMUS+ IMPACT,  
COMMUNICATING IMPACT,  
INTERACTIVE LOGIC MODEL,  
WEBPAGE ANALYTICS,  
EVALUATION

**JENNIFER MILLMAN** is the Senior Digital Communications Manager in the United Kingdom Erasmus+ National Agency (NA). She oversees all the digital communication activities that take place across the Erasmus+ UK website, social media and email marketing channels. She inputted into the creation of the UK Erasmus+ Logic Model, advising on best practice for web design and functionality, with the Erasmus+ UK audience in mind.

**REBECCA MARROW** is a Digital Assistant for the Communications team in the United Kingdom Erasmus+ National Agency (NA). She is involved in the promotion and dissemination of Erasmus+ in the UK. Her work includes creating content for the Erasmus+ UK website and social media, email marketing and supporting the UK NA at events. She was responsible for collating digital analytics data and advising on its analysis and interpretation.

problem you aim to solve, the resources available, the activities you plan and the changes or results you hope to achieve (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

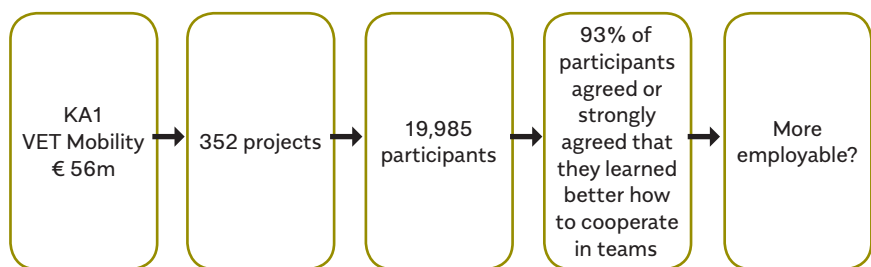
Figure 1. A simple logic model



The UK Erasmus+ logic model helps the National Agency to explain why the programme is needed and how it will contribute to improving provision in the UK education, training and youth sectors. It draws links between the UK’s priorities in areas such as improving the quality and duration of apprenticeships, improving the basic skills and employability of young people, and the activities of the Erasmus+ programme.<sup>2</sup>

An extract from the UK Erasmus+ logic model is shown in Figure 2 for Key Action 1 (KA1) vocational education and training (VET) mobility projects. It shows how the inputs (€56m) provided almost 20,000 mobility placements for studies or work across 352 projects. A wide range of perceived outcomes were reported by participants. This included an improved ability to work as part of a team, which was reported by 93% of participants who responded to the participant survey at the end of their mobility.

Figure 2. Extract from the UK Erasmus+ logic model (2014–2016)



1 For more information on logic models, see the *W.K. Kellogg Foundation logic model Development Guide* at [bit.ly/1a264hA](http://bit.ly/1a264hA) [accessed 23.04.2019].

2 A more detailed version of the UK Erasmus+ logic model can be found at [bit.ly/2KK7lwX](http://bit.ly/2KK7lwX) [accessed 23.04.2019].

## Impact assessment on the UK Erasmus+ website

The main platform for hosting information about programme impact is the UK NA Erasmus+ website. The main purposes of the website are to give information to prospective applicants to support them in their application and to provide guidance for current programme beneficiaries to support the delivery of their projects.

Information about the impact of the programme in the UK is spread across several related webpages. So, although impact information is linked, exploring it in depth requires the user to navigate back and forwards through different webpages. The key webpages are:

- *Programme impact (evaluation and research)*: [www.erasmusplus.org.uk/programme-impact](http://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/programme-impact)
- *logic model*: [www.erasmusplus.org.uk/erasmus-uk-logic-model#445](http://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/erasmus-uk-logic-model#445)
- *Programme statistics*: [www.erasmusplus.org.uk/statistics](http://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/statistics)
- *Impact and evaluation resources*: [www.erasmusplus.org.uk/impact-and-evaluation](http://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/impact-and-evaluation)

The UK National Agency wanted to improve the user experience by linking key information on these webpages together, reducing the need to navigate multiple pages in search of content and making the experience more interactive.

## Sunburst diagram – towards an interactive logic model

Our solution was to try and develop an interactive version of the UK Erasmus+ logic model for our logic model page. As the model provides the theoretical framework for our impact assessment activities and draws on research and evaluation evidence and statistics, it seemed a logical place to draw and link content together.

In developing an interactive model, we had some key feature and design considerations:

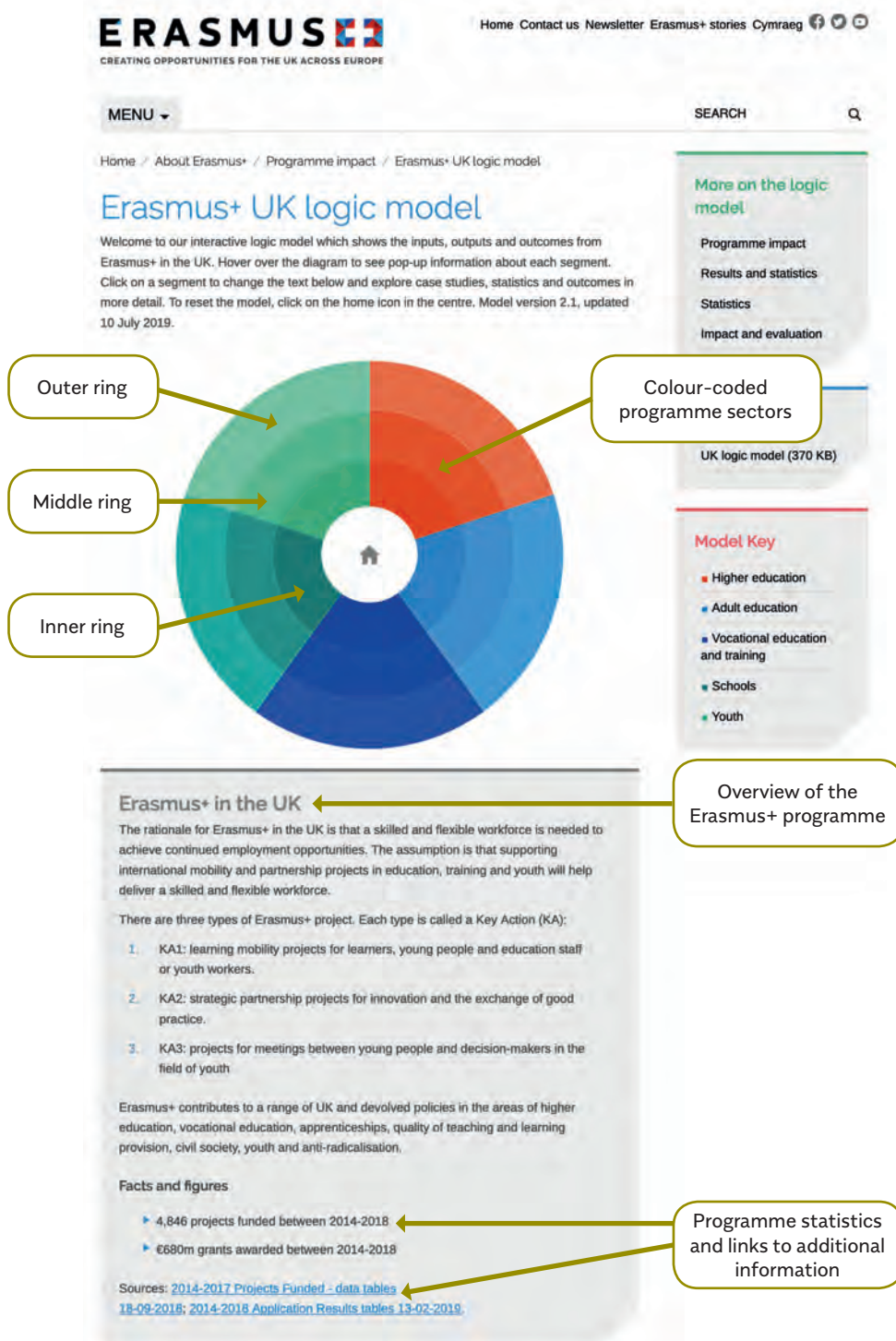
- It should cover all Erasmus+ UK Decentralised Actions;
- Content should be on a single page with no need to navigate backwards and forwards;
- Navigation should be simple and intuitive with no complex drop-down filters; and
- Functions should be suitable for desktop, laptop, tablet and mobile.

We decided on a sunburst diagram with four layers, or rings, representing different stages of the logic model. The diagram is accompanied by a short amount of text underneath, which is tailored to each segment and which changes whenever the user clicks on a segment.

### Home page

This provides an overview of the programme and the three decentralised Key Action types. It gives statistics on the overall funding awarded (inputs) and projects (activities). A reference section provides links to the published statistics tables on our statistics webpage (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Sunburst logic model home page



### **Inner ring**

These five segments provide sector overviews with sector-specific statistics on funding awarded and projects. The reference section provides links which aim to drive visitors to the published statistics tables on our *Statistics* webpage.

When the cursor hovers over the segment, a short hover text teaser appears showing key facts about the sector (number of projects and total funding awarded). This aims to give the user an idea of the content before they click on the segment.

We chose to make all segments the same size rather than proportional to the funding allocated per sector because we wanted to give equal weight to the outcomes in each. Otherwise, the sunburst would be dominated by the higher education sector, which receives the largest share of funding.

In UK NA publications, a specific colour is used for each programme sector, and those were also applied to the sunburst diagram to ensure consistency with other NA publications and materials.

### **Middle ring**

These segments provide information about the different types of output, which in the case of Key Actions 1 and 3 is types of mobility. They differ by each sector to reflect the different activities that can be funded under each Key Action. The segment text gives an overview of the type of mobility, the activities that it entails and its duration. Additional segments can be added to reflect new types of programme activity or when new data becomes available (e.g. Key Action 2).

When the cursor hovers over the segment, the short hover text teaser appears showing key facts about the specific activity (number of mobility placements).

The reference section provides links to the published statistics tables on our *Statistics* webpage for more detailed investigation.

In this section we decided to include links to Erasmus+ case studies relevant to the specific sector and activities as well as to the general case studies page.<sup>3</sup> The case studies and webpages are developed by the National Agency communications team, so this link allows us a route to drive user visits further on to our communications and press room content.

<sup>3</sup> The case study page is titled Erasmus+ stories, available at [www.erasmusplus.org.uk/stories/sector](http://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/stories/sector) [accessed on 8.05.2019].

Figure 4. Sunburst logic model sector activity/output pages (middle ring)

**ERASMUS+ UK**  
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UK ACROSS EUROPE

Home Contact us Newsletter Erasmus+ stories Cymraeg

MENU SEARCH

Home / About Erasmus+ / Programme impact / Erasmus+ UK logic model

## Erasmus+ UK logic model

Welcome to our interactive logic model which shows the inputs, outputs and outcomes from Erasmus+ in the UK. Hover over the diagram to see pop-up information about each segment. Click on a segment to change the text below and explore case studies, statistics and outcomes in more detail. To reset the model, click on the home icon in the centre. Model version 2.1, updated 10 July 2019.

★ / Adult education / AE - staff mobility for teaching or training

**More on the logic model**

- Programme impact
- Results and statistics
- Statistics
- Impact and evaluation

**Key documents**

- UK logic model (370 KB)

**Model Key**

- Higher education
- Adult education
- Vocational education and training
- Schools
- Youth

**AE - Staff mobility for teaching or training**

Staff mobility for teaching or training can be in any area of non-vocational adult education. Placements can include any or all of the following: teaching or training assignments; structured courses or training courses abroad; or job shadowing. The placements support professional development of adult education abroad at any relevant organisation active in the adult education field. Placements can be 2 days – 2 months in duration.

**Facts and figures**

- 1,196 staff placements for teaching or training 2014-2016

Sources: [2014-2016 Key Actions 1 & 3 Outputs Funded - Placements \(actuals & estimates\) data tables 18-09-2018](#); [more programme statistics](#)

**Project stories**

- [Royal National Lifeboat Institution](#)
- [Supporting staff working with vulnerable people](#)
- [Supporting integration of non-EU migrants](#)
- [More project stories](#)

Overview of the activity type

Programme statistics and links to additional information

Related case studies

### **Outer ring**

This final layer of the sunburst deals with the outcomes of the activities. The text includes a short description of the outcome and its relevance to UK policy priorities.

When the cursor initially hovers over the segment, the short hover text teaser appears with a short statement about the outcome.

A source section provides a link to the specific data source the information is drawn from – usually a research or analysis report. These sources are often held on our Programme Impact webpage and are intended to help us drive visitors to that page. By providing a link, we also aim to show that the outcomes claimed are evidence-based.

The reference section here provides a link to a relevant UK Government policy or strategy to support any claim made for policy relevance.

As with other levels, new segments can be added to the sunburst diagram when more outcomes' data is available. When data about a much larger number of outcomes is available, we intend to group outcomes into themes (e.g. employability, soft skills) to prevent the outer layer becoming overloaded and to maintain ease of navigation.

Figure 5. Sunburst logic model outcomes (outer ring)

The screenshot shows the Erasmus+ UK logic model webpage. At the top, there is the Erasmus+ logo and navigation links: Home, Contact us, Newsletter, Erasmus+ stories, Cymraeg, and social media icons. Below the logo is a 'MENU' dropdown and a 'SEARCH' bar. The main heading is 'Erasmus+ UK logic model'. A brief introduction explains the interactive nature of the model. A central sunburst diagram is shown, with a home icon in the center. To the right, there are three sidebar sections: 'More on the logic model' with links for Programme impact, Results and statistics, Statistics, and Impact and evaluation; 'Key documents' with a link to the UK logic model (370 KB); and 'Model Key' with a legend for Higher education (red), Adult education (orange), Vocational education and training (green), Schools (blue), and Youth (purple). The 'Teamwork' outcome section is highlighted with a yellow box and contains the following text: '93% of participants (2014-2016) agreed or strongly agreed that they learned better how to cooperate in teams'. Below this, it states: 'This outcome indicates improved team-working skills. The Employer skills survey 2017 indicates that a lack of team working skills is a factor in 37% of all skill-shortage-based job vacancies.' It also includes sources and a reference link. Three yellow callout boxes with arrows point to specific elements: 'Overview of the outcome and policy relevance' points to the 'Teamwork' heading; 'Link to evidence source' points to the source link; and 'Link to external policy or strategy' points to the reference link.

**Loud and clear or communication breakdown? Has the Sunburst worked?**

To try and assess the effect of the changes made, we examined some before and after webpage analytics data for the *logic model* webpage, related webpages and file downloads.



We wanted to understand whether the revised *logic model* page had achieved the following:

- An increase in the number of *logic model* webpage views;
- Improved user engagement with the *logic model* page;
- An increase in the number of document downloads; and
- If the *logic model* page was helping drive visitors to other, related webpages.

The model went live on our website on 4 February 2019 as a soft launch with no external communications. A message was circulated to senior NA staff and within the communications team, but the intention was to allow a short period of time to see how the model functioned and to address any technical issues before wider communication.

The official public launch was announced via the UK NA e-newsletter, published on 14 February 2019. This was supported through social media posts and internal messages to UK NA staff, the European Commission and other NAs.

### Page ranking

The most immediate effect we observed was on the ranking of the webpages. The UK NA monitors the popularity of webpages by ranking them in order of the number of page views.

By this measure, there was a marked increase in the ranking of the *logic model* page in the four weeks after the official public launch to 54<sup>th</sup> place, compared to 105<sup>th</sup> place in the four-week period before relaunch (Table 1 below). The Statistics and Programme Impact webpages also saw a small increase in ranking.

**Table 1. Change in webpage ranking positions**

Web page	Ranking position 1-4 weeks before official launch	Ranking position 1-4 weeks after official launch	Change in ranking position
logic model	105	54	↑ 51 places
Statistics	64	57	↑ 7 places
Programme Impact	77	74	↑ 3 places

### Page engagement

The average amount of time spent on a webpage is an indicator of user engagement. What counts as a "good" amount of time varies by the type of page and the information it contains. For example, a contact page may have a low average time spent as users are able to find the information they need quickly and then move on elsewhere. We have also examined the page bounce rate. The bounce rate measures the proportion of visitors that enter the page and then leave within a set period without viewing another page, i.e. they "bounce" and do not navigate on to other pages (Table 2).

The *logic model* page is designed to be more interactive and to encourage the user to explore the model, and our aim was a high average time spent per user. We hoped to encourage users to navigate from the *logic model* page on to other pages which would hopefully result in a lower bounce rate. But, as we were also intending to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the programme on the UK on the page, it could increase the bounce rate as users would find all they needed and would not navigate onwards.

In the four-week period immediately after the relaunch, the average time spent *decreased* from 3mins 17secs to 2mins 29secs. We have attributed this to the communications method used to highlight the relaunched page. The Erasmus+ newsletter and social media channels are generic in nature – subscribers are interested in the Erasmus+ programme generally and not necessarily in programme impact specifically. So, an initial decrease in the average time spent on the page was not surprising, as we anticipated some initial visitors to click on the link out of casual interest before moving on.

Looking further forward to 5–8 weeks after the relaunch, we can see that the average time spent increased to 4min 30sec. At this stage, we expect that the majority of users are visiting the page out of genuine interest in programme impact, and this is reflected in the high average time spent per user.

The bounce rate initially increased from 53% to over 70% in the four weeks after relaunch. This could be explained by casual visitors arriving via the newsletter and social media. In weeks 5–8 after the relaunch, the bounce rate decreased to 62%, perhaps as fewer casual visitors arrived at the page. Further investigation of the bounce rate is needed to determine whether the origin of traffic to the page affects the proportion of bounces or whether other factors are influencing the rate.

**Table 2. Logic model webpage user engagement**

Web page	1-4 weeks before official launch	1-4 weeks after official launch	5-8 weeks after official launch
Average time on page (min:sec)	03:17	02:29	04:30
Bounce rate	53.3%	70.6%	62.1%

### Page views and referrals

In the period immediately after the official relaunch, the *logic model* page saw a large increase in the number of page views compared to the period before. However, this was not the case for the *Statistics* or *Programme Impact* pages, which both saw decreases (Table 3).

**Table 3. Change in webpage views**

Web page	Views 1-4 weeks before official launch	Views 1-4 weeks after official launch	Change in no. of views
logic model	203	522	↑ 319 views
Statistics	542	506	↓ 36 views
Programme Impact	400	308	↓ 92 views

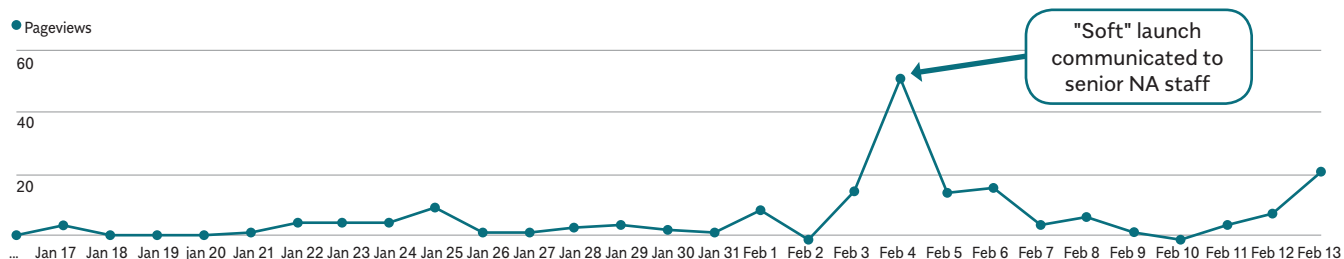
After the official relaunch, the *Statistics* and *Programme Impact* pages both saw small increases in the number of views via the logic model page. Referrals to the Statistics page increased from 5 to 12 views and to the Programme Impact page from 20 to 31.

When reviewing daily page views, peaks in *logic model* page views are clearly associated with specific communication or promotional activity. This indicates that these activities are successful in the short-term (Figure 6), but it is not clear whether the volume of visits will be sustained over a long period without further content updates to the sunburst diagram.

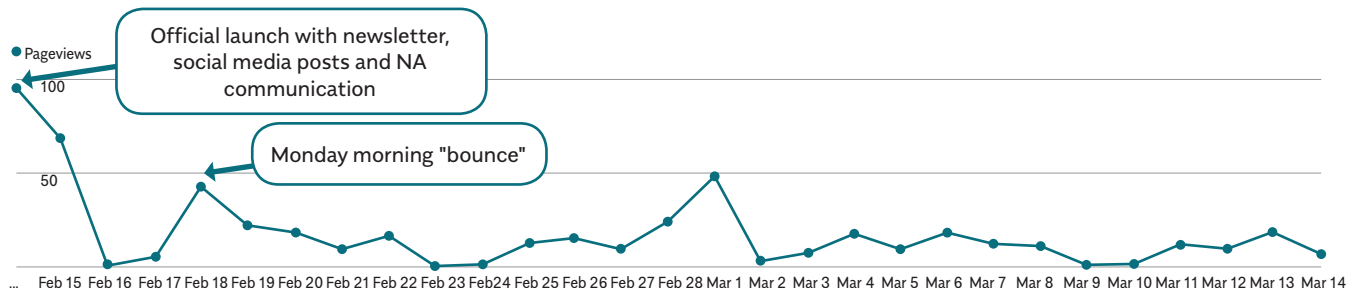
Over the period, there was no clear peak in the *Statistics or Programme Impact* pages as a result of referrals from the *logic model* page. The only identifiable peak on the *Statistics* page was linked to a minor newsletter item about new programme statistics.

**Figure 6. Logic model webpage views before (top) and after (bottom) official relaunch**

1–4 weeks before relaunch

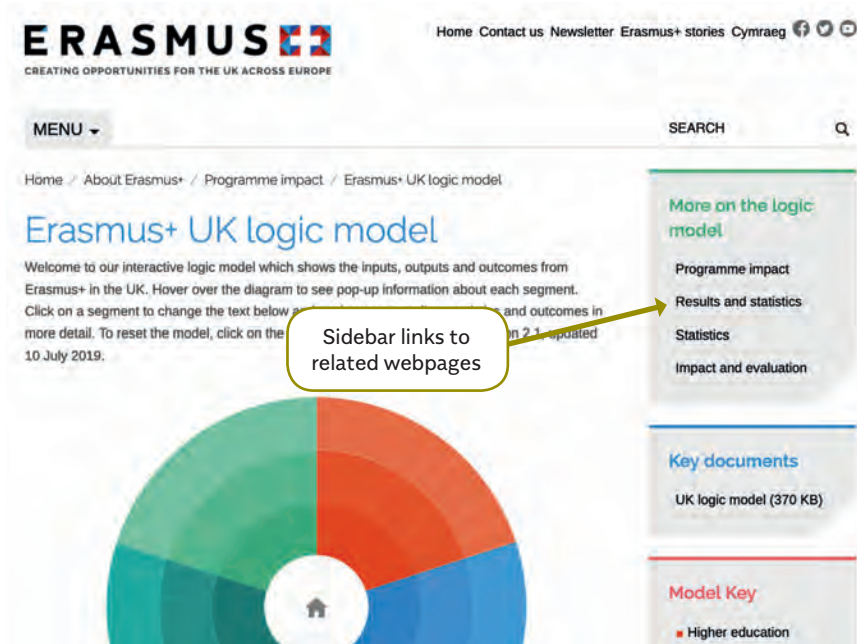


1–4 weeks after relaunch



One possible explanation for the level of referrals from the *Logic Model* page to related webpages is in the way that the connections are made. The only direct links to the related pages are via the links sidebar titled "More on the logic model" (Figure 7). All other links are directly to document or file downloads, and in these cases, a click will register as a file download and not as a webpage visit.

Figure 7. Logic model page sidebar with links to related webpages



### File downloads and case studies

The sunburst diagram includes links to four key documents (statistics tables or research reports) and to 29 project or participant case studies.

Total downloads of the four key documents decreased from 152 to 141 in the four weeks immediately after the relaunch, but 40 of these downloads were directly from the new sunburst *logic model* page. So, although total document downloads have not increased, the interactive sunburst logic model has been responsible for 28% of file downloads.

It is possible that there is a seasonal effect on downloads which accounts for higher volumes of downloads in the early part of the year. For example, projects or applicants may be accessing statistics to support the completion of their final reports or applications.<sup>4</sup>

During the period 1–4 weeks after the launch of the sunburst diagram, only three of 489 case study views were directly via the interactive sunburst diagram. It is clear that the new model is not currently directing significant user traffic to the case study homepage (*Erasmus+ Stories*) or individual pages. It is not clear why this is the case, but explanations proposed suggest that the term "case studies" is

4 The first KA1 application deadline of the year was 5 February 2019, subsequently extended to 12 February 2019.

unappealing and could be revised to "Erasmus+ stories". As the case study links appear at the bottom of the dynamic text, it could also be that users simply do not see them unless they scroll down the page.

## Conclusions

Overall, the UK NA is happy with the look and feel of the sunburst diagram. Reactions from colleagues within the UK NA and other NAs have been positive. In particular, they have reported that the diagram is intuitive and easy to use. Future developments will include additional segments covering Key Action 2 and other participant outcomes.

In terms of page views and interactivity, the sunburst diagram seems to have been successful as both the number of page views and average time spent on the page have increased. More analysis is needed to understand the dynamics around the page bounce rate and whether the improvements have been sustained over time. There has also been some success in driving downloads of key programme statistics and research report documents, but more analysis is needed to understand seasonal trends in downloads.

The sunburst diagram has been less successful in driving an increase in visits to other related areas of the UK Erasmus+ website. In particular, we intend to try to improve onward visits to the project case studies (*Erasmus+ Stories*) and to review the availability of links directly to the *Statistics* and *Programme Impact* pages.

## Acknowledgements

Technical development of the sunburst diagram was undertaken by Mark Hammond at Ecorys UK.



# Effective dissemination of research results. Group work session outcomes and recommendations

By Magdalena Górowska-Fells, Beata Płatos, Anna Maria Volpe

This paper presents the results of a brainstorming activity on the dissemination and exploitation of research results held during the second Warsaw seminar on research and methodology in Erasmus+. During the session, the participants discussed the challenges they face in the context of disseminating the results of research and worked out some recommendations for the effective communication of research results. The session included a message by Anna Maria Volpe, Communication Adviser for the European Commission Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, A7 Eurydice, which featured some practical tips on how to plan communication activities and promote research results to the wider public. The key points from the message are included throughout the article and in the section devoted to the formulation of a communication plan.

## Challenges in communicating research results

### Researcher perspective

Making the results of research public is a challenge. The process of publicizing research results is complex and time-consuming. It implies identifying and reaching relevant target groups, which are diverse when it comes to the type and level of information they need (e.g. academics, policy makers, students, the general public). Each target group requires a message expressed in a different way and, what is more, the message needs to vary in terms of length and content and often needs to be translated in order to make the research results accessible internationally. Effective communication requires expertise – should this be the task of a researcher?

### Communication adviser perspective

Planning and implementing research is time-consuming. But once the research results are drafted in the form of a report, article or study, the authors-researchers want to share them with others. There might be, however, a tendency to think that the publication of results is a sufficient step: the report is released and it can be found online or on the library shelf

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**ANNA MARIA VOLPE** is a communication advisor for the Eurydice and Youth Wiki networks, and has been a journalist since 2011. She graduated from the Louvain School of Journalism, having previously obtained Bachelor and Master's degrees in International Relations, with studies and research in Italy, France and Canada. She has worked as a radio and TV journalist in Italy, where she has covered, inter alia, local politics and culture, and has also approached human rights and geopolitics for the written and online press.

by those who are or should be interested to read it. It might not be enough, however, for our potential users to be aware of the report's existence. On realizing this fact what usually happens is the researchers start contacting their users, send emails or notifications, but this may be too late as other reports are published in the meantime, and theirs is no longer new, interesting or valid. This is the point at which the researchers realize they need good promotion and communication techniques. Without implementing promotional knowledge, reports will not get to the recipients they are intended for, and a lot of effort that is put into the preparation of research results reports will be wasted.

### Success stories in practice

Despite the fact that the successful communication and dissemination of research results is a challenging task, there are examples of activities undertaken by the researchers participating in the session that proved successful, i.e. the right target audiences were provided with the right message. The tools they used to disseminate their research results had some common characteristics, which can be summarized as follows:

- a concise format ("fact express"), having a maximum of 4-6 pages or a short 1-2-page summary of key research findings, including recommendations;
- a visual rather than only textual presentation of information, e.g. the use of pictograms;
- an objective, non-judgmental discourse;
- the use of different channels for dissemination (including Facebook, Instagram, etc.) and a congruence between channel and target group, and message and target group;
- the identification of key recipients to whom the message was to be delivered preceding all other actions;
- the involvement of stakeholders in the process of production of end results;
- getting feedback from recipients and responding to it quickly;
- setting standards for communication between the research unit and the communication unit in bigger institutions.

### Dissemination and exploitation of research results: recommendations

In the final discussion of the session, the participants worked out a list of further recommendations on how to disseminate research and its results so that the process is effective. **Two of the most important conclusions were,**



**firstly, the need to differentiate between the types of results to be disseminated and, secondly, to profile the process of their dissemination accordingly into being either primarily promotional (communication) or more instructional (advocacy).** The objectives of dissemination should define the characteristics of the communication plans and the actions they require, which have been described as follows.

#### **Advocacy plan: communicating the need for change**

It is crucial to:

- identify the proper target groups to be addressed, e.g. ministries, parliamentary committees, institutes;
- contact journalists and opinion makers specializing in the topic of research;
- prepare policy briefs that have a concise format, include recommendations, and are written in adequate language.

#### **Communication plan: communicating the results of research**

It is important to:

- simplify and prioritize the results by focusing on selected issues, not making the message too general, presenting only actionable results to practitioners, and leaving the details to the research community;
- identify a pool of people who are to be contacted on a given topic each time the research is produced;
- meet journalists and identify local ambassadors; and
- involve stakeholders/practitioners in developing the research agenda and let them participate (intermediate feedback).

Overall recommendations for the exploitation of research results also included the use of:

- infographics; printed outputs;
- different communication channels including social media, comics, YouTube, and radio/TV;
- conferences and workshops;
- innovative, creative ways of dissemination (e.g. gift box with a recording that includes the most important quotes);
- short, sharable videos, with people in them and a personal approach (appeal to feelings – action).

What was emphasized as one of the most important conclusions in the discussion was the need for researchers to cooperate in the promotion process with other professionals, e.g. data analysts, communication officers, IT officers, and the European Commission. Without involving professionals in the process of communication and letting each of them do their job alone (researchers – doing the research, graphic designers – preparing comprehensive infographics, PR professionals in cooperation with researchers – preparing communication to the general public, etc.), dissemination cannot be efficient.

## Effective communication plan: some tips on how to create and use this practical tool

One of the important steps to take in order to start implementing an effective dissemination of research results is to create a communication plan. A communication plan is a road map for getting your message delivered to your audience. It is an essential tool for ensuring that a clear, specific message with measurable results is sent on time to the right audience.

Writing a communication plan can be time-consuming, but in fact, in the long run, it helps to save time: if you follow your road map, you do not have to reflect too much on the dates and actors of the process as everything is there, on paper. If you know how to proceed, the preparation of a communication plan will be quick and will align your actions for a certain period of time (e.g. one year).

There are six steps to take in order to create an effective communication plan:

- Brainstorm
- Focus on the objectives
- Identify your key audiences
- Identify your communication channels
- Establish a timetable
- Evaluate the results

Brainstorming helps to gather and analyze all the relevant information. The best way to collect information is to talk to other people and consult with others about your ideas: your colleagues, if you work in a team, or other researchers or PR specialists. Brainstorming will help you to define what is important and clarify your goals.

The next step towards creating a communication plan is to focus on the actual objectives. You have to define the results you want to achieve and decide what actions you will undertake in order to achieve them. You can visualize the outcomes of your plan's implementation, e.g. building a solid reputation on social media, increasing the stakeholders' commitment and participation, or getting better visibility in the press. These objectives will vary from one institution/researcher to another. Having a clear knowledge of what you want to achieve is an important step towards your success.

The objectives that you set and the planned actions should be SMART:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Time-focused

For example, if you want to build a solid reputation on social media, you need to plan a social media campaign. At this point, you have to decide which social media platforms you will focus on (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). You should reflect on how many followers you would like to attract, and consider if this result is achievable and realistic. You need to compare data and think about how much time you will need to collect the estimated number of followers.

Once you have identified your goals and the desired results, you can continue by identifying your key audiences. You need to know to whom you are delivering your message. Once you have listed all the groups of users you want to reach, you should adapt your message to their needs, preferences and

expectations. The task is easier if one group of recipients is targeted at a time, e.g. decision makers or other researchers. If you have an obvious target audience, you can go beyond it and try to reach those whom you did not take into consideration at first. Once the message is formulated, you can adjust it to different recipients and different types of media. It is good to make the definition of the target group as precise as possible, as then the probability of communication success becomes higher.

Identify your communication channels and establish a timeline. It is always good to choose several communication channels, still having the target audience in mind. Getting the same message from different social media or other sources will only reinforce it. It is worth catering for both traditional promotional means (dispatch hard copies of your report to key users, send emails or newsletters with links to the publication) and social media (Facebook, Twitter). You can try to use photos and videos, which work well on social media. Your communication can also be supported by direct contact with journalists, organizers of promotional events (seminars, conferences, press conferences, etc.) or participating in events to present your research results.

Planning your communication activities should be done in parallel with the production of the survey, and once the product is ready, the promotion process should start. In fact, it might be useful to start the promotion campaign slightly before the publication of the report, as it elicits interest and ensures that once the report is out, potential readers are already aware of its existence.

Evaluation of results. It is important to measure your communication results and understand whether you have achieved your communication objectives. In order to measure results, you have to collect information on the number of dispatched copies, emails, social media posts, etc. You can collect information on the number of views, downloads, likes and shares on social media and articles published with the use of your survey results, and use web analytics for, for example, the project/survey website. A good way to measure the results and impact of your findings is to launch a survey and find out if you have reached your audience. This is an important step that concludes the communication plan.

## **Conclusion: making the results of research visible – future developments**

As a response to the problem of insufficient access to data on research and the need for a platform to exchange information and help build the knowledge and capacity voiced during NA directors meetings and this session on the dissemination and exploitation of research results, the Polish Research Unit (operating within the NA structure) has been progressing with an initiative aimed at mapping ongoing and concluded research on Erasmus+. In the first half of 2019, a pilot tool on the visual mapping of research was developed and the process of data collection was initiated. The tool is planned to become operational by the end of the year.



# Seminar programme

## Day 1 – November 28, 2018

**18:00**.....Ice breaking meeting at the conference venue

**19:00**.....Welcome dinner at the conference venue

## Day 2 – November 29, 2018

**8:15-9:00**.....Registration

**9:00-9:20** .....Welcome address by Paweł Poszytek, Director General,  
Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE),  
Polish National Agency of Erasmus+

**9:20-10:20** .....Jarosław Górniak, Jagiellonian University in Kraków  
Keynote speech

Method matters: on the importance of relevant evidence for policy solutions

**10:20-10:30**.....Coffee break

**10:30-12:30**.....Session 1 INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO METHODOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Chair: Mateusz Jeżowski, FRSE, Polish National Agency of Erasmus+

→ Helmut Fennes, Institute of Educational Science, University of Innsbruck  
and Andreas Karsten, Youth Policy Labs, 10 years of Researching Youth in Action:  
methodological insights from RAY

→ David Cairns, ISCTE-University of Lisbon, and Ewa Krzaklewska,  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków,  
Representing Erasmus: Methodological approaches to Erasmus+  
and consequences for programme representation

→ Marina Steinmann, German Academic Exchange Service: DAAD,  
Eva Feldmann-Wojtachnia,  
Ludwig-Maximilian University, Survey on objectives of the Paris Declaration (2015):  
Effects of student mobility and on its role for Erasmus+ projects

→ Magdalena Staniek, Higher Education Authority: HEA, Ireland, Should I stay or should  
I go? Natural Language

Processing approach to analysing Erasmus+ experience of students and staff in Irish HEIs

→ Angela Miniati, Agenzia Nazionale Erasmus+: INDIRE, Italy, Analysis of the impact,  
valorisation and sustainability of KA2 Strategic Partnerships for Innovation

**12:30-13:30**.....Lunch

**13:30-15:00**.....Session 2 PARTICIPANTS' REPORTS AND THEIR USE FOR RESEARCH

Chair: Michał Pachocki, FRSE, Polish National Agency of Erasmus+

→ Dorota Rytwińska, FRSE, Polish National Agency of Erasmus+,  
Influence of Erasmus+ mobility on higher

→ education students' competences and attitudes

→ Charis Hughes, Léargas, Ireland, Strengths and shortcomings of using participants'  
reports in research: What can you know from the people who go?

→ Siru Korkala, Finnish National Agency for Education: EDUFI,  
Usefulness of participants' reports in studying and analyzing outcomes  
and learning effects in Erasmus+

- Gamze Ceylan, Turkish National Agency Of Erasmus+, Pervin Oya Taneri, Çankırı Karatekin University, IPA human resources development operating structure study on the evaluation of results in the project staff improving the quality of education by supporting professional development of staff of school and adult educations

**15:00-15:15** .....Coffee break

**15:15-17:45** .....Session 3 MARKET RESEARCH METHODS USED IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: PRACTICE AND POSSIBILITIES

Workshop provided by the Polish Association of Market and Opinion Research

**19:00**.....Dinner

### **Day 3 – November 30, 2018**

**9:30-10:00** .....Opening speech: Claire Shewbridge, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development,

OECD perspectives on making use of research results in policy

**10:00-11:00** .....Session 4 DISSEMINATION AND EXPLOITATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Chair: Özgehan Şenyuva, Pool of European Youth Researchers of the Youth Partnership

- Marina Galstyan, Youth Studies Institute in Armenia, Monitoring and evaluation of the 2013-2017 Strategy of State Youth Policy of the Republic of Armenia: methodological aspects and results

- Branko Ančić, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb,

Why is it important to experience ERASMUS+? A glance from Croatian society

- Mateusz Jeżowski, FRSE, Polish National Agency of Erasmus+,  
Dissemination of research results in theory and in practice

**11:00-11:15** .....Coffee break

**11:15-13:00** .....Group work on list of recommendations for dissemination and exploitation of research results

Chair: Özgehan Şenyuva, Pool of European Youth Researchers of the Youth Partnership

- Anna Maria Volpe, EC, EACEA, How to create an effective communication plan? Message from Eurydice Network

**13:00-13:15** .....Closing

**13:15** .....Lunch

**Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE)** operates as the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme implemented in the years 2014-2020. FRSE is also responsible for other European educational and information initiatives in Poland: eTwinning, Eurodesk, Eurydice, Europass, ECVET 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-EECA Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre. Since 2014, FRSE has been involved in the implementation of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development.

The Foundation organizes many educational events including competitions promoting projects' results. It coordinates the European Youth Week and coorganizes 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)*.

[www.frse.org.pl](http://www.frse.org.pl)