

THE ERASMUS PROGRAM AND ITS EFFECT TO THE LABOUR MARKET

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ABSTRACT

In our work, we deal with the question of what impact the Erasmus programme has on linguistic and personal competences and how it helps the economy forward. We look around this topic in the literature review. We managed to get almost 100 surveys filled out among the participants however, the representatives of the companies proved to be quite passive, with only nearly 30 of them replying. In the form of a survey, we found that it has a positive effect on improving language skills and helping with independence or problem-solving ability. In the quantitative survey we found that companies often prefer other factors than the people in a mobility programme, and they do not show favour toward a mobility student in a job interview, although the skills acquired during the programme help the person. Therefore though indirectly, but the programme has a positive impact on the economy as well.

Keywords: Erasmus program, students, labour market, quantitative survey

1. INTRODUCTION

Open worldview. What is this and how can we get it? Open worldview helps taking the thread of conversation forward. Healthy debates can be conducted by substantiating our thoughts with arguments, and meanwhile, we try to understand the other's aspect as well. We can meet a lot of people in our university years, who have already experienced a lot, and they are ready to give their knowledge to the new generations. If we listen to their thoughts with an open soul, we can gain much more than learning a profession. We can prepare for measurable moments in our lives, even if it is a job interview, a job loss or family issues. We believe, the ERASMUS program means a similar openness - to the world.

In our study, we try to answer the following questions:

- When and how was the Erasmus program established?
- What numerical data characterizes the Erasmus program?
- How participants see the impact of the program?
- What are the competencies and factors that employers prefer in a job interview?

1. 1. The creation and background of the Erasmus

The name of Erasmus is a term with multiple meanings. On the one hand, a tribute to the traveling scientist, theologian and philosopher Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) [1]. However, ERASMUS can also be interpreted as an abbreviation of the European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students, which means that the European community action plan for the mobility of university students [2]. According to Jacques Delors, who is a French politician, and the 8th President of the European Commission, students mobility has been a priority since 1985. In his experience, the issue of European integration was best understood by university students, and he believed that if they are given space and opportunity for the mobility, it could create a true European spirit [3]. During his work (1985-1995), the draft of Erasmus program was developed as part of the "People's Europe" concept. One of the aims of People's Europe was to bring European integration closer to the citizens thus, the Erasmus program fits

perfectly with the ideas and the economic policy interest as well, which would increase students mobility and the flow of skilled workforce.

This would also stimulate integration and economic processes. The draft of Erasmus program was prepared under the supervision of Irish Commissioner, Peter Sutherland and perhaps it is thanks to him that the program has been so successful [1].

At that time, the European Economic Community was still a purely economic association, not a political one, so there was little willingness in them to include the education in their jurisdiction as well. Sutherland decided to launch the initiative at a conference of the European Students Association in Paris, and hundreds of students enthusiastically welcomed it. In 2016, he told to the University College Dublin's newspaper that although it proved difficult, one of the greatest successes of his life was launching the Erasmus program. He knew that the final goal was not just the education, but to expand European integration and developing a new attitude in the EU, which we are still shaping today. Sutherland, who also referred as the "father of Erasmus", sees a need to young people recognize and see a common cultural and value-based system, which shared by the European countries and they do not feel foreign or different from others. Everyone has a sense of nationality. The real aim of European integration is to tame nationalism and make it easier to understand different cultures in a non-hostile way [4]. The implementers of the Erasmus+ program are: European Commission, the national agencies, Euridyce network, Youth Wiki National Correspondents Network, eTwinning Support Services, The School Education Gateway (SEG) and the EPAL /Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe/ [5].

1.2. Erasmus in numbers

Initially, 11 European countries (Belgium, Denmark, the United Kingdom, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) joined the program (EB factsheet, 2017). Today, 34 countries can participate in all Erasmus + activities and in addition, more than 100 other countries with certain criteria [6]. In the first year, 3,200 students participated in the program already, and in more than three decades, 9 million people can say that they have taken the advantage of the opportunities offered by the Erasmus program. The program gives open doors to high school students, students in higher education and vocational school students, volunteers, youth helpers, teachers and trainers. They can spend their time not only in educational institutions within the framework of the program, but also as an intern in companies, thus help them to find a later job in the labor market[7]. In 2017, the program celebrated its 30th anniversary, and because of it, the European Commission issued a brochure, this gives information about how successful the Erasmus has been. In three decades, 9 million people have already participated in the Erasmus program, which mean:

- 4.4 million students in higher education,
- 1.4 million exchange program,
- 1.3 million students in vocational training,
- 1.8 million teachers or youth helpers
- 100,000 volunteers and
- 100,000 Erasmus Mundus students and participants. (Fig. 1.)

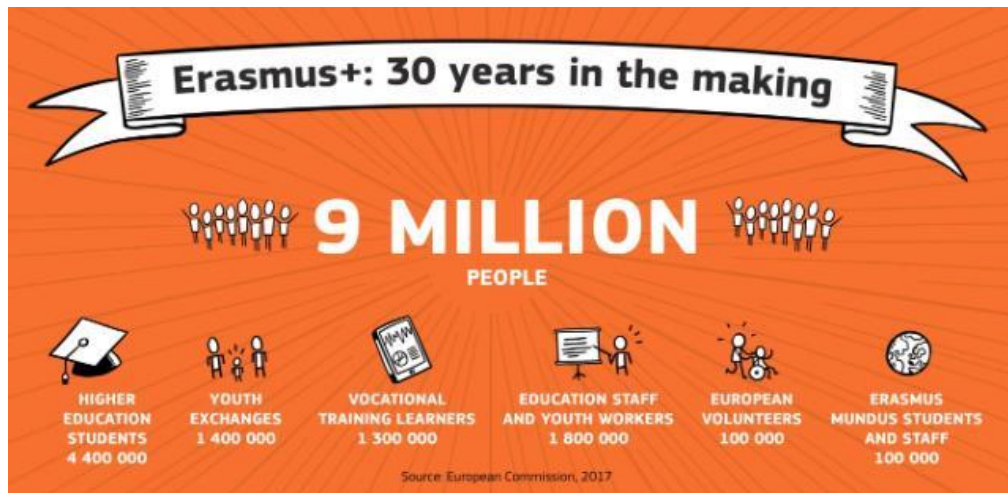


Figure 1. 30 years in Erasmus Source: [8]

1.3. The relationship between the Erasmus and getting a job

According to a 2017 European Commission briefing, participation in the program improve the career opportunities (Fig. 2). Students in the program are twice as likely to be placed in a year after graduation, than their peers who did not take the advantage of mobility. In addition, one-third of students who have completed an internship position within the program get a job opportunity from the company that employs them. According to their survey, Erasmus fellows earn 25% more and whether ¾ of the employers have found that including volunteer work in a CV (Curriculum Vitae) can be an advantage in gaining a position [9].

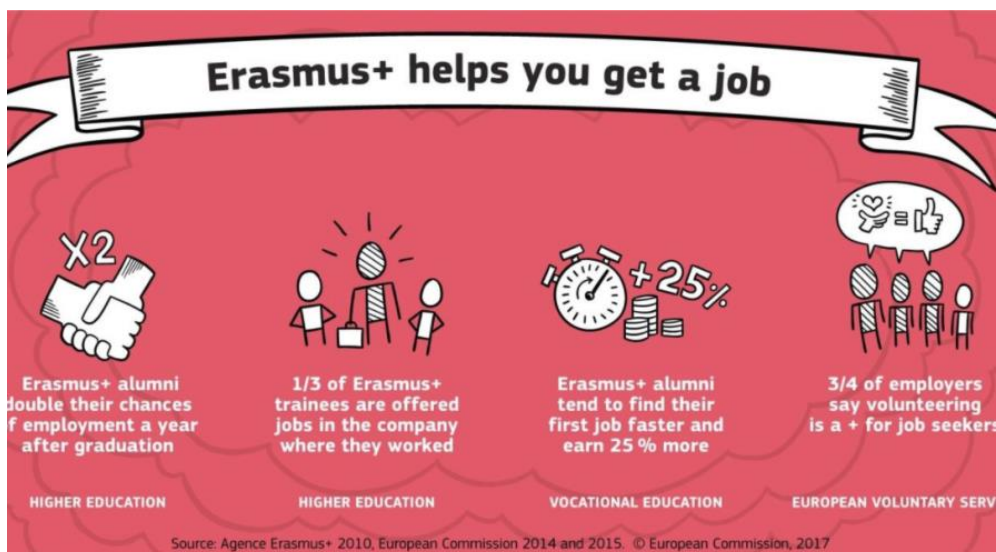


Figure 2. The Erasmus and the getting a job Source: [10]

2. MEANS AND METHODS

When we complained the survey, we wanted to get a comprehensive picture of the opinions of the participants in the program and the employers too, so we decided to create two different surveys for the two different target groups. Moreover, we sought answers to questions such as what language and other competencies can develop during the Erasmus program and how these can be utilized in private life and in the workplace. What are the most important and most beneficial benefits of the program? I am interested in the perspective of both individuals and companies on these issues and the impact of the program on a country's economy. Does it have a stimulating effect or just hinder the country in its development?

2.1. The process and problems of data collection

When we chose the topic, we had already guessed that the number of responses would probably not be high, and unfortunately this was confirmed. The forms were created online, so the target groups were narrowed down to Internet users, but we cannot take this as a problem, because our future respondents are already be online. We found that the number of Erasmus participants in our circle of acquaintances is not high enough to collect 200 responses. Unfortunately, the possibilities of the Internet are also finite, and although we have shared the link in Erasmus-themed Facebook groups („Youth Bridges Budapest Erasmus+ ificsere, tréning & ESC önkéntes lehetőségek”, „EnACT - Empowerment through Nature Authentic Communication and Theatre”) and 42 of our own acquaintances also shared our request, we could receive only 89 responses. Our application to other groups may not have been accepted. We sent our request to Erasmus + Youth and Eurodesk also in the hope that they would have a platform where I could or they could have shared the link, but unfortunately nothing was received from them, just an automatic system message. We realized another problem, when we searched employers. If we take any business for example, people in leadership positions do not devote energy to such issues. We primarily asked people who could see into a company's HR (Human Resource) department. Of course, we also used the possibilities of the internet here too: we sent e-mails to 569 (!) addresses. For the sake of diversity, we searched for contacts on the Business Directory website (<http://www.uzletiszaknevsor.hu/>), because here we can find businesses divided into categories. We tried to select multiple addresses from each area and we sent messages as an encrypted copy to about 50 recipients at a time. Unfortunately, an extremely large number of addresses were already found at the time of sending that these no longer exist, or the message has been marked as spam by the system. In total, 28 responses were received.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Evaluate the responses of program participants

4/5 of our respondents were women, the rest were men, typically between the ages of 21-25. Our most frequently chosen destinations are Spain, France, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Compared to the European Commission's report, the three most popular destinations among the Hungarians are Germany, Spain and Italy [5]. 83% of our respondents participated in higher education in the program as a student, 10% as a high school student, 5% as a student in a vocational school and 2% as a volunteer or youth helper. Among the options that could be marked that they work as teachers or as an instructor, but no one indicated it. From the responses to the duration, we found out that 11% of them spent between 6 and 12 months in the program, 89% are less than 6 months. In the following, participants were asked to rate their language competencies on a 1 to 5 scale. according to the fact, that after the time which spent in the program, their skills got worse, did not change, or developed (Fig 3).

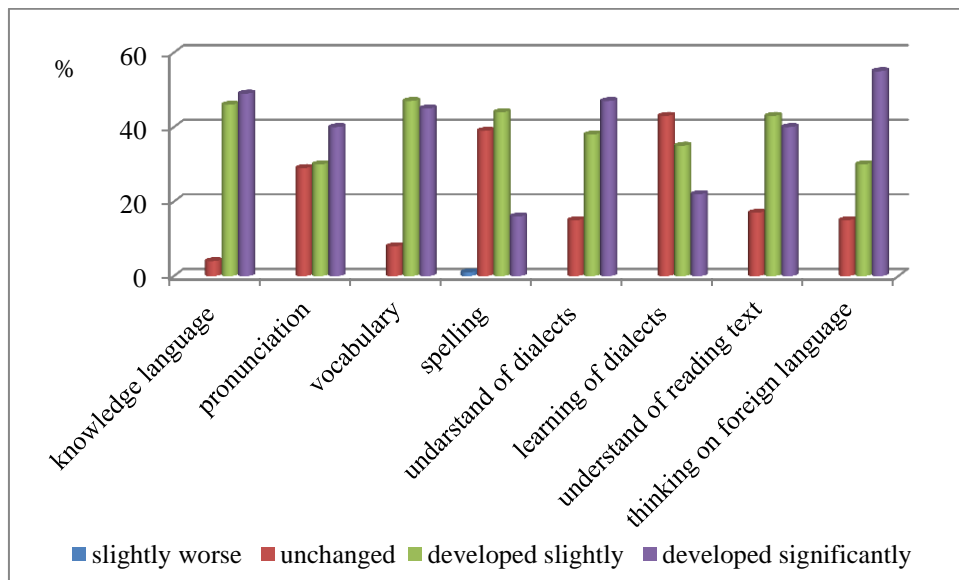


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents based on changes in each area of their language competence (%), N=89

Taken together, only 19% of applicants showed no significant improvement in any skills, and there was only one person who felt that she or he had not developed in any area.

Not only the language but also other skills have greatly improved, according to the respondents. 70% of the participants said that the program is significantly improved their independence, because in a new environment they have to solve everything independently, for which they may have received assistance so far. Basically, it can be said that according to the opinion of research participants, the cultural awareness, communication skills, problem-solving skills, responsibility, teamwork skills and tolerance have also improved as a result of mobility. According to mobility practitioners, the most useful factors in the program are primarily getting to know another culture and improving language skills. The former was found useful by 93% of respondents and the latter by 91%. This is followed by the less professional benefits such as “Experience for Life”, “Travel Opportunity”, and “Making New Friends”. Closely following the former benefits is that the applicant can get to know the education system of another country, which can also add a lot to her or his experience. The independence slipped to seventh place with 64%, but it is still high. Last but not least, with a relatively small percentage, which means 24%, 19% and 15%, the “Bridging the gate between countries”, “Getting to know the economies of other countries” and “Getting to know the strategy and structure of other companies” close the line. These described terms are shown in Fig. 4.

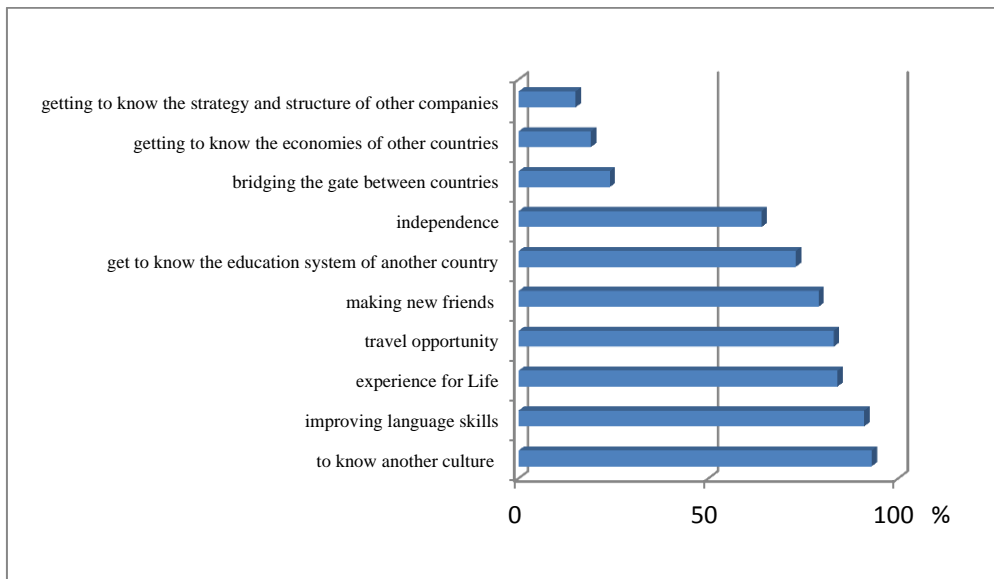


Figure 4. Distribution of respondents based on agreement with each factor and their importance (% , N=89)

The other part of the questionnaire was completed by those who are already working - 34 of those surveyed indicated this. They are typically located in highest proportion in marketing, education research, and finance area; however, health, beauty, agriculture and tourism are also represented at the fills. The questions and the answers are presented together with the opinions of the employers, compared to them.

3.2. Description of employers' responses

Thus, a very small number of responses were received from employers. Almost half of the respondents were the owners and managers of the company, in addition, the heads of administration, heads of secretariat and HR managers answered our questions. About one-fifth of the enterprises operate in the capital city, 43% in county seat, 21% in city and the rest in smaller settlements. A significant proportion of them (68%) are small and medium-sized enterprises, while a quarter of them are medium-sized undertaking. In terms of scope of activities, we tried to gain broad insight into the opinions, we received returns from agri-food enterprises, IT companies, logistics service companies and from hospitality enterprises too. Regarding the specific issues, we obtained the following results.

About 25% of the respondents stated that they were indifferent to foreign relations. Accordingly, 32% stated that the prospective employee's language skills were a paramount importance, and 36% did not consider them. The possibility of participating in the Erasmus program is regularly raised by 7% as a question in job interview only. Only 1 company representative said that this fact was considered as a decisive factor when somebody wants to fill a position. In comparison, about 2/3 of the participants in the program indicated that they have talked about the Erasmus program participation and half of them feel that this factor mattered when they selected for the job. We asked the employers and employees too about the importance of the new and the emerging competencies developed during the Erasmus.

For the company representatives, the language competence (75%), the development of independence (71%) and learning about the culture of another country (50%) are the three most important factors. In comparison, in the group of the program participants the problem-solving ability (74%), the development of communication skills (68%) and the aforementioned language competence and independence (62% - 62%) were in the top three. Interestingly, other values are considered useful by employers than participants. The difference is outstandingly high in the opinion of problem-solving ability, and about applicants could learn about the strategy and structure of other companies. For the latter factor, in front of the 43% corporate importance, only 15% of former students considered it as an important factor. On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that the employer has no benchmark for how the applicant may have had problem-solving skills before the program, they can only compare it with another employee. Furthermore, a person who has not done an internship abroad they cannot know the structure of other firms, they can only gain insight into the education system, so for them it is not as authoritative as for a leader.

4. CONCLUSIONS

According to the participants, the most important factors of the Erasmus program are that they can meet with other cultures, they can improve their language skills, gain a lifelong experience, they have an opportunity to travel and meet new friends, learn about another country's education system and become more independent. For 32-32% of companies the applicant's language is important or partially important, only 4% think it is decisive and 25% said that participation in the program can be a crucial factor in hiring a new employee. 50% of participants thought that the Erasmus program had contributed to get a position, and 56% said that the program was useful for finding a job. What is the reason of this difference of opinion? On the one hand, the already employed participants work in quite different areas than the responded companies, thus, such factor may be more important in the former areas than in other fields. Furthermore, in the first phase of the questionnaire we asked the mobility practitioners not only about language but also about the acquisition of other competencies, so it is possible if we consider these that they came to the conclusion that they developed several competencies, which although not directly, but contributed the acquisition of a position. In our opinion and based on a review of the literature, the Erasmus program has opportunities that we need to use in a long time run. Hungary has several indicators that indicate we are lagging the European average. Great educators in the education sector who are open to the innovation should be better valued because their goal is to develop with their students. Companies sometimes have too high expectations of interviewers, (for example 5 years of work experience), thus depriving the recent graduates from the opportunity instead of appreciating their energy invested in higher education and language learning. Unfortunately, new entrants in the labor market often lose motivation because their work is less valued because of the lack of professional experience. Yet young people who practicing mobility want to experience most of their tasks and works, because that is why they dared to spend several months in a completely foreign place with foreign language speaking. In our opinion, if companies knew more about Erasmus mobility, as an opportunity and a huge advantage, they would appreciate it better having such an experience.

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