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The impact of international student mobility on subsequent employment and professional career: a large-scale survey among polish former erasmus students

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Abstract

The Erasmus programme contributes to quality improvement in higher education at 3 levels: system (policy), institutional, and individual, and thus enhances employability of university graduates who have taken part in Erasmus mobility. This paper aims to present selected results of a large-scale empirical study on the impact of international student mobility on subsequent employability and professional career. We addressed our questionnaire to 14705 Polish alumni, including all Erasmus programme participants in 2007 and 2008. We have received 2450 completed questionnaires. As the survey was conducted in 2012, the respondents could report their professional career over 5-6 years after the return from a study period abroad. Only 1.6% of the former international student mobility participants mentioned they had never worked, with a vast majority having a white-collar job or even a managerial position. As much as 68.6% reported they had ever worked abroad. We wanted our respondents to estimate the importance of selected factors for their career development and job position. Higher education and proficiency in foreign languages were judged very important by the majority of our study subjects. 1/3 of former international student mobility participants considered international experience to have a very important influence on their professional development and position.

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Keywords: international student mobility; Erasmus; Poland; employability; professional career

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1. Introduction

One of the principal tendencies in current university education is the internationalization process (Bryła, 2012), which includes international student mobility. Poland, next to Turkey, is one of the most dynamic participants of the European student exchange programme Erasmus, even though certain obstacles to international student mobility persist (Bryła & Ciabiada, 2014).

Temporary study in another European country has remained an exceptional and professionally highly rewarded experience for students from Central and Eastern European countries (Teichler & Janson, 2007). The Erasmus programme enhances the employability of graduates by enabling them to participate in an international collaborative project without the need to extend their degree length (James, 2013). The concept of mobile learning encompasses three dimensions: mobility of the technology, learner mobility, and mobility of the learning process and the flow of information (El-Hussein & Osman, 2010). This paper will focus on the second and third dimensions, as it aims to examine the impact of international student mobility on subsequent employability of Polish former Erasmus students on the basis of a large-scale survey. Certain elements of intercultural education may be achieved within international online learning communities (Xiaojing et al., 2010; Taras et al., 2012; Taras et al., 2013), but it seems justified to argue that participation in international student mobility programmes, like Erasmus in Europe, allows to obtain a much wider and more intensive educational and social experience, which will have strong implications for the subsequent professional career. A recent study based on data from 48 countries and regions concludes that countries aiming to attract talents from other countries should pay more attention to attract international students and encourage them to seek working opportunities in local employment markets after finishing study (Wei, 2013).

The Erasmus programme contributes to quality improvement in higher education at 3 levels: system (policy), institutional, and individual, and thus enhances employability of university graduates who have taken part in Erasmus mobility. According to the literature review reported in the European Commission (2008: 38) Erasmus impact study, the Erasmus experience has an effect on the nature of the career but not so clearly on the success of the career. Erasmus graduates are more likely to have jobs that have visible international remits, but the jobs are not necessarily higher in status or income. Employers seem to be more positive about the career effect of the Erasmus than the students themselves. The career effect is, however, not homogenous across the regions. Erasmus has a stronger effect on the careers of students from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries compared to students from Western Europe. The long-term effects of participation in the Erasmus programme include the establishment of an international network of former Erasmus friends, which may have both private and professional character, and is usually maintained by activities in online social media, especially Facebook (Bryła, 2014).

2. Literature review

A Dutch study confirmed that learning environment is important for students' learning as well as their involvement in extra-curricular activities, and that these two elements of university education are determinants of career success (Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008). In a survey among Erasmus students from the University of Oviedo, it was found that job prospects are an important motivating factor to engage in international student mobility, and the overall assessment of the planned stay is acceptable, good or excellent in most cases (Fombona et al., 2013). In a study quoted in (*Internationalisation...*, 2010: 11), it appeared that in the long run (more than five years after graduation), differences start to become measurable: mobile students on average were found in better-paid jobs than non-mobile students; of course, this may have been caused by self-selection, i.e. 'potentially better' students are more mobile.

On the basis of a project called VALERA (VALue of ERASmus mobility), which focuses on establishing the impact of mobility on the mobile students' and teachers' careers within the Erasmus programme, Oliver Bracht et al. (2006) presented to the European Commission a Final Report on 'The Professional Value of Erasmus Mobility'. There were 5 target groups asked to share their perceptions of the impact of Erasmus mobility: national Erasmus agencies, ministries of education, conference of rectors/presidents/vice chancellors, umbrella organisations of employment agencies, and companies. For the questionnaire's needs Poland was grouped into Eastern Europe country group (together with Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, and Slovenia). The survey shows that formerly mobile students are considered by most experts to be superior to

non-mobile students with respect to various competences. On average, in all 9 mentioned competences Erasmus students are better rated than non-mobile students. Many experts agree that former Erasmus students are in a better situation when it comes to job search. 68% of experts surveyed in East Country Group think that mobile students have a better chance of being taken into consideration as one of the final candidates by employers. More than a half of surveyed (58%) believe that former Erasmus students spend less time on job search than their non-mobile fellows. According to ½ of Erasmus experts, former Erasmus students will get employed sooner than non-mobile students. The interviewed experts believe that participation in Erasmus improves the characteristics of employment and work.

Apart from expert opinions, Bracht et al. (2006: 50-51) investigated mobility from the perspective of students. The questionnaire addressed primarily the career of former Erasmus students after graduation, i.e. the transition to employment, the early employment history thereafter and the actual employment and work situation at the time the survey was conducted. A broad range of indicators of professional success was employed: (a) graduation and job search, (b) initial employment, (c) present activity, (d) employment situation and status at the time of the survey, (e) links between study and work assignment, (f) links between orientations and assessment of the professional situation, (g) international aspects of employment and work (working in an international context, international tasks, European and international mobility).

Furthermore, an employers' survey was undertaken in the study on the professional value of Erasmus mobility (Bracht et al., 2006: 84). The following themes were addressed in it: basic information on the employing organisation and their staff, including their international activities; actual numbers of university graduates recruited and former Erasmus students and other internationally mobile students among them; modes and criteria of recruiting university graduates; perceived competences of former Erasmus students; positions and assignments of former Erasmus students; demands of the organisations with respect to competences potentially fostered by study in another country; perceived match or mismatch with supply and suggestions for the change of European and international activities of the universities. Employers from Central and Eastern Europe attach more importance to their candidates' international experiences than their Western European counterparts. 48% of the surveyed employers in Central and Eastern Europe said that work experience abroad was an important recruitment criterion, compared to 27% in Western Europe. 41% of respondents in Central and Eastern Europe expressed such an opinion regarding a study abroad period, whereas it was shared by only 25% of employers in Western Europe. The most important recruitment criteria in Central and Eastern Europe included: personality (indicated by 89% of respondents), foreign language proficiency (87%), and computer skills (87%) (Bracht et al., 2006: 90). It is worth noting that all these competences are likely to be improved during student mobility. Employers from Central and Eastern Europe appreciating study periods abroad in their selection among candidates were asked to rate the importance of different characteristics of the study period abroad. Actually, they emphasised: the language spoken during the study period abroad (83%), the subject area (67%), length of the study period abroad (58%), the specific host country (55%), and reputation of the host higher education institution (49%).

Over 90% of Polish outgoing Erasmus students believe that the study period abroad may be helpful in their future professional careers (Kolanowska, 2008a: 85). In a study of Kolanowska (2008b: 13), only 14.3% of Polish universities reported they collected information on the impact of the Erasmus study or placement on the employability of graduates. Only 7 universities provided more detailed information on this question. They mentioned that they collected this kind of information with the use of surveys conducted by university career offices, e-mails and talks with alumni, and individually obtained information from former Erasmus grant holders. Unfortunately, the quoted study asked only about the way of collecting the information, and not about actual findings concerning employability of former Erasmus students.

In an article for *Dziennik Gazeta Wyborcza*, Prof. Barbara Kudrycka, Polish Minister of Science said: "*Studies at another university, in another city or country allow to get rid of complexes, believe in yourself and get to know your own value. A better educated and more mobile students are beneficial to themselves and the economy*" (Grabek, 2011). Mr Jan Truszczyński (General Director for EU Education and Culture in the European Commission since October 2009) in the interview with Mr Roman Gutkowski from EurActiv said: "*Scientific studies have shown that students who went on scholarships abroad, after completing their studies are more likely to find a good job quickly, and a few years after graduation they earn more than their fellows who had no contact with other than their own university, with a different foreign language, with a different culture than his/her own. Even young people who*

learn in vocational schools and had the opportunity to participate in a few-week internship abroad, take advantage of it, which pays off in the future” (Truszczyński, 2011).

In a case study developed by Vossensteyn et al. (2010: 102), there are some interesting opinions of Erasmus participants from Poland. One of them perceives the participation in Erasmus mobility as a kind of investment in the professional career: *“Students that are motivated to take part in the Erasmus programme know that they are investing in their careers and that is the great drive and incentive for them to go to study abroad. They are aware of the fact that they are investing in themselves”*. The relationship between participation in the Erasmus and the financial benefits acquired is stressed by a participant who claimed that: *“We found that internships of all kinds are highly valued by potential employers, and an internship abroad is definitely an ‘added value’ to a graduate’s diploma”*. According to Bótas & Huisman (2013), Polish students' participation in the Erasmus programme has a positive impact on their academic achievement, cultural, social and linguistic capital, but, at the same time, it has a negative impact on degree completion as they get highly paid jobs, which prevent them from fully developing their cultural capital.

3. Sample characteristics

We invited to take the survey all Polish students who had filled in their evaluation forms on the website of the Foundation for the Development of Education System regarding their Erasmus mobility for studies in 2007 (5942 study subjects) and 2008 (6635 study subjects). We added to the sample all graduates from the Faculty of International and Political Studies of the University of Lodz (2128 study subjects) in order to create a control group of internationally immobile students and some representatives of various age cohorts. Thus altogether we addressed our questionnaire to 14705 Polish students through the Internet professional survey service called *moje-ankiety.pl* in November and December 2012. We received 2450 completed questionnaires. Therefore, the response rate amounted to 16.7%, which may be considered a very good result for this kind of research methodology, taking into account the length of the questionnaire and the associated time and effort required to fill it in.

2369 of our study subjects studied abroad for at least a semester or trimester, whereas 81 did not take part in such mobility. Out of the 2369 study participants who had had a study period abroad, 82.6% studied abroad once, 14.5% twice, 2.1% three times, and 0.7% more than 3 times.

27.7% of our respondents in the former international student mobility sample were males, and 72.3% were females. In the control group, there were 79.0% of females and 21.0% males. This result may be due to several factors, including the higher participation of women in university education and their higher propensity to take part in surveys.

We have obtained answers from former Erasmus students representing 115 Polish higher education institutions. Therefore, our sample is very diverse and resembles very well the general population of all Polish outgoing Erasmus students. Unsurprisingly, the ranking is led by the biggest state-owned universities. The top 5 include: University of Warsaw, Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, University of Lodz, University of Wroclaw, and the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. The third rank of the University of Lodz stems partly from its remarkable performance within the Erasmus programme and partly from the extension of our sample to other age cohorts from the Faculty of International and Political Studies. It is also worth noting the high positions occupied by technical universities, including the Technical University of Lodz, which was the 6th regarding the number of respondents. We were unable to identify the home university of almost 6% of our respondents due to incomplete data, ambivalent abbreviations, mistakes, and deliberate refusal to provide the information.

22.3% of the internationally mobile Polish students in our sample took part in their mobility at the Bachelor level of studies, 78.2% at the Master level, 4.6% at the doctoral studies level, and 4.1% said it was another level of studies (including 5-year studies leading to a Master, engineer studies, medical studies, non-degree studies, postgraduate studies, MBA, MFA, after completing studies in Poland, study sessions/certificates, a language course, a college, secondary school, a thematic Socrates course, a summer school, a research scholarship).

Our respondents reported having taken part in international student mobility, which lasted (for the first time) usually a semester (62.9% of answers). Less than 1/3 of the study subjects studied abroad for a year, and only 2.2% spent there more than one year. As far as the second and third-time mobility is concerned, its duration tends to be longer, but these are relatively rare cases.

The main destination countries for the student (first-time) mobility of our study subjects were: Germany, Spain, France, Denmark, UK, Portugal, Finland, Belgium and Italy (**table 1**). In total, 37 host countries are represented in our sample, as it concerns not only Erasmus mobility, but all kinds of student mobility. Nevertheless, Erasmus accounts for a vast majority of destination countries mentioned by our respondents.

Table 1. Our respondents by international student mobility host country

Host country	Rank	Number of respondents	%
Germany	1	261	11.02
Spain	2	181	7.64
France	3	173	7.30
Denmark	4	150	6.33
UK	5-6	108	4.56
Portugal	5-6	108	4.56
Finland	7	100	4.22
Belgium	8-9	95	4.01
Italy	8-9	95	4.01
Sweden	10	81	3.42
Netherlands	11	78	3.29
Czech Republic	12	69	2.91
Turkey	13	60	2.53
Austria	14	52	2.20
Greece	15	42	1.77
Slovakia	16	39	1.65
Hungary	17	29	1.22
Norway	18	28	1.18
Lithuania	19	21	0.89
Slovenia	20	20	0.84
Bulgaria	21	19	0.80
Ireland	22	13	0.55
Latvia	23	8	0.34
Estonia	24-25	6	0.25
USA	24-25	6	0.25
Cyprus	26	5	0.21
Canada	27-29	3	0.13
Romania	27-29	3	0.13
Russia	27-29	3	0.13
Iceland	30-32	2	0.08
Malta	30-32	2	0.08
Switzerland	30-32	2	0.08
Belarus	33-37	1	0.04
China (Hong Kong)	33-37	1	0.04
Japan	33-37	1	0.04
Syria	33-37	1	0.04
Ukraine	33-37	1	0.04
Not identified	x	502	21.19
Total	x	2369	100.00

Source: own research

4. Selected results

We wanted to know the current job position of our study subjects who had taken part in international student mobility. It turned out that a vast majority of them (almost 2/3) had a white-collar job, with additional 8% holding managerial positions. There were 7% of self-employed in our sample. Blue-collar workers constituted 2.2%, which stems from the fact that we investigated only university graduates who were highly qualified and attractive on the labour market. There were 2.4% of trainees. Less than 5% reported unemployment, which is a very good result taking into account the situation of their age cohorts on the Polish labour market. Almost 6% were not active on the

labour market as students or full-time parents, and 5% considered their job situation did not fall in any listed category, but taking into account their detailed answers, they could usually be added to the remaining categories, especially white-collar workers, self-employed, and not active on the labour market. A few performed voluntary jobs or reported working on the basis of civil law contracts instead of classical labour law arrangements (usually because of the desire of employers to avoid high obligatory social security contributions). The professional situation of respondents from the control group turned out to be even slightly better, which might be a bit surprising, but we must take into account their high competencies, including proficiency in foreign languages.

Only 1.6% of the former international student mobility participants mentioned they had never worked (compared to 2.5% in the control group). Therefore, most of those who were unemployed or inactive at the time of our survey had had some professional experience, which may be considered a very positive phenomenon. The most dangerous is long-term unemployment and lack of activity. Some spells of these are inevitable.

Which may be a bit surprising, as much as 68.6% reported they had ever worked abroad. This may be an indication of the link between international student mobility and international professional mobility. Perhaps, a considerable share of the responses concerned simultaneous working and studying abroad. In the control group, this figure was also rather high – 53.1%, probably because it comprised only graduates of international studies, who had a much higher command of foreign languages than the average Polish student.

Table 2. The duration of fixed-term job contracts among former Polish international student mobility participants (in months)

Descriptive statistics	Value
Mean	21.334
Standard Deviation	18.593
Variance	0.872
Minimum	1
1 st quartile	12
Median	12
3 rd quartile	24
Maximum	120
Skewness	1.887
Kurtosis	4.734

Source: own research

Among those who worked, 50.8% had a permanent job contract, 28.1% a fixed-term contract, and 21.1% another type of contract. The average duration of fixed-term contracts amounted to 21 months, and the median was 12 months (**table 2**). The duration of fixed-term contracts ranged from 1 month to 10 years. However, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents with such a contract had it for 2 years or less. The other types of contract included: contracts to perform a task (civil law contracts), temporary job agency, research grant, medical traineeship, doctoral scholarship, self-employment, freelancing, apprenticeship, traineeship, teleworking, probation period, substitute job, undeclared work. In the control group, the share of those with permanent job contracts was a bit lower at 43.2%, which indicates a lower level of job stability than among former international student mobility participants. The average duration of fixed-term contracts in this group was 18.8 months (a bit less than in the main sample), while the first quartile, median and third quartile were the same as among former international student mobility participants.

We asked our respondents to define the scope of operations of their organisations (where they worked). It turned out that the majority of former international student mobility participants were engaged in organisations with an international remit of activities (53.6% compared to 17.1% having a national scope, 9.5% - regional, 11.0% - local, and 8.8% - not applicable). This may suggest certain association between the international student mobility and the selection of the future career path. There may be some additional factors influencing this result, especially the self-selection bias. Those students who take part in international mobility tend to know foreign languages better, and therefore, are more attractive for companies having an international scope of operations. Nevertheless, we may infer certain connection between these two elements. If former Erasmus students do not work abroad, they may still make use of their skills in an international organisation located in their country of origin. In the control group, the respondents who had not engaged in international student mobility defined the scope of operations of their organisations as follows: local – 13.6%, regional – 12.3%, national – 22.2%, and international – 48.1%. Even though

the control group was composed of former students of international relations, it turned out their organisations were less international compared to former international student mobility participants representing all possible fields of studies. If we examined graduates from other fields of studies who had not taken part in international student mobility, this difference would probably be much more pronounced, which suggests a link between the international student mobility and the level of internationalisation of the future employer.

We were interested in the self-perceived congruence of the respondents' work with their education level. Over 2/3 (67.1%) of the study subjects believe the most appropriate education level for their job is Master, whereas only 6.1% consider that higher education is not appropriate for the job they perform. It is worth mentioning the relatively high share of doctoral qualifications felt as the most appropriate (8.7%), which suggests good quality, highly demanding jobs in our sample. The relative share of Bachelor (11.9%) and Master requirements may result partly from the Polish tradition of university education. Only recently was the division into two levels of studies introduced. Previously, we had the model of continuous 5-year university education leading to a Master degree (with some minor exceptions like medicine, which lasts 6 years). In the control group, there were following perceptions of the appropriateness of education level for the current job: below higher education – 11.1%, Bachelor – 11.1%, Master – 65.4%, doctoral – 9.9%. Therefore the distribution of answers was quite similar to that in the main sample.

We wanted to get to know if the field of studies of our respondents was congruent with their job. The majority of the study subjects (52.6%) felt that their own or related field of studies corresponded well with their work. 1/6 (17.9%) believed that exclusively their own field of studies was appropriate. 12.2% reported that a completely different field of studies would be better, and 11.6% considered there was no particular field of studies appropriate for their work. These results indicate a rather strong congruence between the field of studies of our respondents and their subsequent professional career. It confirms a generally traditional view of one's career path, where early specialisation choices matter. However, there is also a considerable segment of respondents who either had difficulties in finding an appropriate job or perhaps got a job on the basis of other competencies than formal university education. The share of jobs with strictly predetermined education requirements turned out to be rather low, which suggests a certain level of flexibility on the part of employers and the importance of additional criteria in the recruitment process. In the control group, 6.2% of respondents indicated that only their own field of study was the most appropriate for their current job, which was significantly less than in the main sample. It may suggest that proportionately more former Erasmus students perform jobs dependent on their university education choices. 45.7% replied that it was their own field of study or a similar one, 25.9% believed that it should be a completely different field, and 19.8% thought there was no particular field of studies necessary for their current job. The share of answers in the last two categories was much higher than among former international student mobility participants. It may indicate a weaker fit between the university education profile and current professional career among those who did not engage in international student mobility.

The former international student mobility participants were asked how many times they had changed their jobs. 29.8% reported no changes, because either they kept the same job throughout their career or they were not employed at all. More than ¼ (25.9%) said they had changed their job once, 18.3% twice. More than 1/5 had already changed their job three times or more (11.2% - 3 times, and 12.2% more than 3 times). Therefore, we observed a significant level of professional mobility in our sample, especially that the respondents were fairly young. The link between student mobility and subsequent professional mobility is not clear, but our results confirm the co-existence of both phenomena in our sample. As far as graduates who did not take part in international student mobility are concerned, almost 1/5 (19.8%) mentioned they had never changed their job. It was a smaller share compared to the main sample, which may support the hypothesis that Erasmus (and other kinds of international student mobility) leads to a higher level of job security in future careers. In the control group, 30.9% of the respondents reported having changed their job once, 19.8% - twice, 16.0% - three times, and 12.3% - more often.

We wanted our respondents to estimate the importance of selected factors for their career development and job position (**table 3**). Higher education and proficiency in foreign languages were judged very important by the majority of our study subjects. 1/3 of former international student mobility participants considered international experience to have a very important influence on their professional development and position. Almost 1/5 specified Erasmus mobility for studies as a key factor in this regard. Objective qualifications were much more important than informal support from one's family or friends in obtaining the job position. Other mobility programmes and Erasmus

mobility for a work placement had a smaller influence, partly because of our sampling method. The respondents were free to provide additional determinants of their career. They mentioned: activity in student organisations; ambition; good quality secondary school; willingness to continue a family business; personality traits; self-confidence; professional experience; chance; thirst for experiences; interests; passions; proficiency in Excel software; qualifications as an accountant; working abroad for a few months several times; contact with the employer during one's studies; contacts established during one's studies; professional skills; marriage which led to emigration; situation on the labour market – the employers look for those who stay in Poland and are faithful to their company; self-learning; negative experiences from one's previous job; traineeship; money; joining one's partner; field of education; persistence in reaching one's goals; testing oneself; postgraduate studies; interpersonal abilities; additional trainings; improving one's competencies; specialisation as a legal advisor; voluntary jobs; technical skills; participation in the Work&Travel programme in the USA; respect from the employer abroad; knowledge of the industry. The other factors were considered very important by less than 3% of the study subjects.

Table 3. The self-reported determinants of one's career or job position in our sample (fractions)

Reason	R	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	NA
Higher education	1	0.579	0.165	0.095	0.064	0.012	0.007	0.033	0.017
Foreign language proficiency	2	0.560	0.157	0.108	0.065	0.014	0.012	0.046	0.013
International experience	3	0.332	0.198	0.173	0.149	0.017	0.014	0.068	0.023
Erasmus mobility for studies	4	0.194	0.191	0.203	0.198	0.030	0.027	0.095	0.029
Family/friends	5	0.116	0.097	0.137	0.149	0.035	0.030	0.176	0.202
Other mobility programmes	6	0.064	0.039	0.051	0.098	0.019	0.013	0.074	0.538
Erasmus work placement mobility	7	0.060	0.039	0.050	0.092	0.013	0.011	0.072	0.556
Other factors	8	0.027	0.005	0.001	0.016	0.003	0.000	0.011	0.191

Notes: R – rank; 7 – very important; 1 – not important, NA – not applicable; fractions of all those who took part in international student mobility (2369 study subjects)
Source: own research

5. Conclusion

The results of our large-scale survey among Polish former international student mobility participants confirm certain implications of this element of university education on their subsequent employability and professional careers. It concerns both the quality of their jobs and the scope of operations of their organisations. Erasmus mobility contributes to the acquisition of multiple skills and competencies, which are highly valued by future employers, but also constitutes a valuable social and cultural experience. The utility of international student mobility in the university education process is hard to overestimate, not only from the perspective of subsequent transition to work.

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