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# Erasmus Mobility Impact On Professional Training And Personal Development Of Students Beneficiaries

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze the participants' views on the impact of the Erasmus program on professional training and personal development of participants, highlighting the effects of the Erasmus mobility on student participants (educational level, professional, cultural, interpersonal, etc.). The participants in this study were 89 students of technical universities participating in the Erasmus mobility. The research involved a survey based on a questionnaire centered on the educational/vocational impact, cultural impact, and the relational impact of the Erasmus mobility on the personal and professional development of students/beneficiaries. The results show that an Erasmus mobility stimulate the acquisition of a social and cultural capital, acquisitions hard to gain in an otherwise normal context of life.

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*Keywords:* mobility, Erasmus programm, impact, personal development, professional training;

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## 1. Introduction

In Romania, the Erasmus program follows the European trends, at least in what concerns the progressive increase in participation, which is revealed by the centralized data related to the chapter Student Mobility, over a period of 12 years (2000/2001 to 2011/2012), according to the Statistics for Romania related to the Erasmus Program. The issues investigated by the studies carried out at the European or national levels observe the main benefits of the program, by showing the common aspects, but also certain differences that require further investigation. A first aspect that catches the attention is the result of the study achieved by Bracht et al. , (2006) which underlines that the Erasmus program has a stronger influence on the career of students from Central and Eastern Europe than on the ones from Western Europe. As for the implication into the program, Krzaklewska & Krupnik, (2007, 2008), based on the monitoring of the international exchange programs (including Erasmus) at the European level by ESN (Erasmus

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Student Network, distinguish between two types of students involved in mobility programs: (1) career oriented students – they usually come from the underprivileged categories groups, as students from low income families, women, students from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, sometimes not even Erasmus students, older students, and their motivation is related to the increase of their academic knowledge, the improvement of their perspectives as future employees, and the practice of a foreign language, and (2) experience oriented students – generally men, Erasmus students, younger students, and the stated reasons are related to the need of new experiences, the need to learn about new cultures, new people, the need to be independent and to live in a foreign country. With regard to professional development, the study of Engel (2010) indicates that 90% of students consider that the mobility has had a positive influence on their personal development, but also on other aspects (we must also draw attention on the less optimistic orientation regarding future professional development) – the obtainment of their first job and the building of a long term career (53%), the obtainment of a job correlated with their academic level (41%). Also, according to the study called “Erasmus. Facts, figures and trends 2011 - 2012” (p.4), students’ mobility influences their personal development and supplies students with a large set of competences and abilities that are strongly capitalized by future employers – foreign languages, intercultural sensitivity, increased adaptability to change and to the entrepreneurial environment. Regarding social and personal development, more than 90% of students who have benefited from an international experience record a certain improvement of their international competences, as, for example, the knowledge of a foreign language, and the understanding of the concept of interculturalness (Engel, 2010). Studies in this field, carried out by Sigalas (2009), Braht et al., (2006) Krzaklewska & Krupnik (2006), Otero & McCoshan (2006), on outgoing and incoming Erasmus students, report a statistically significant increase of communications skills in the language of the host country. We have to mention that, among the objectives of the Erasmus program, there have been included the promotion / learning of European languages and the familiarization with other European cultures, ever since 1995 (The European Council), which is an additional reason to monitor progress in this direction. Otero & McCoshan, (2006) show that a significant percentage of students (65 – 95%) consider that the Erasmus program has had a positive impact on their attitude towards career and aspirations, and has helped in the development of their general knowledge, their personal values, their understanding of persons coming from different cultures or ethnic groups, the improvement of their interpersonal relations and their self-confidence. The study of Valera (Bracht et al., 2006) indicates that Erasmus mobility has had a positive influence on personal development – 89% (total sample), 90% (engineering sciences).

In the study “ESN Survey 2005” (Krzaklewska & Krupnik 2006, pp. 20-22), related to the relevance of things acquired by students during international exchanges, the answers of students have been grouped into five categories:

- The acquisition of cultural knowledge and skills (how to communicate and work within an intercultural environment, how to survive in a foreign country, learning things about the host country, acquiring of an open mind, tolerance, etc.);
- Maturity and personal development (determination in problem solving, self-confidence, personal development, etc.);
- Social development, friendship creation, development of communication skills with personas with different backgrounds;
- Academic enrichment (adaptation to a different academic system, career planning);
- Discovering and exploiting of new opportunities (opening towards new opportunities);

The general objective of this study is to analyze, based on the participants’ opinions, the impact of the Erasmus program on the professional training and the personal development of participants, by focusing on the effects of an Erasmus mobility over the participating students (at the educational, professional, cultural, interpersonal levels). In a larger sense, this study aims to showing the positive and negative effects of the Erasmus program, as well as to improving the functioning of the program.

## 2. Method

The participants in this study are students within the Politehnica University of Timisoara (N=89), who have benefited from the Erasmus Mobility Program. Sampling has been balanced with regard to gender (47.2% women and 52.8% men), with an average age of 23, but with a variation between the age of 21 and the age of 46. As for the domain of study, we have recorded a larger participation of students from the following faculties: Architecture

(29%), Electronic Engineering and Telecommunications (16.85%), management in Production and Transports (12.36%), Automatics and Computer Engineering (11.24%), respectively Civil Engineering (11.24%), Mechanical Engineering (8.99%), Chemical Engineering (6.62 %), Electrical and Power Engineering (2.25%) and Communication Sciences (2.25%). Depending on the type of the Erasmus mobility, we observe that 66.29% of students have benefited from an SMP (placement within a company) and 33.71% from an SMS (studies abroad). In order to assess the impact of the Erasmus mobility program on the personal and professional life of students with the Politehnica University of Timisoara, a questionnaire has been drafted, with 11 items focusing on: educational / professional impact, cultural impact, relational impact and psychological – sociological impact (quality of life). Moreover, there have been taken into account the sources of information regarding the Erasmus program and the motivational factors related to the decision to take on an Erasmus mobility.

### 3. Results

An analysis of the sources of information regarding the Erasmus program within the Politehnica University of Timisoara points to the major impact of the internal approach and actions taken in view to promoting the programs through the Department of International Mobility and Cooperation, especially the actions that imply the direct contact with the future beneficiaries and representatives of the program. These actions include the direct meetings with the participants in the Erasmus program (71.9%), the direct meetings with the representatives of the university (66.3%), but also the promotion of the program within the virtual environment (the web page of the University – 51.7%) or actions taken for the promotion of the program within the University (32.6%), as well as by means of promotional materials (30.3). We have to mention that the World Wide Web is a means appreciated by students; the most visited site is the one of the University (51.7%), and there are also other sources on the Internet (28%); it seems that the least popularity is owned by the web page of the National Agency (ANPCDEFP), that is 1.10%. Concerning the factors that have had an influence on the participation of students in the program, we have identified the following: the curiosity related to what is being studied and about the actual working in another country (76.4%), the curiosity related to living in another country (65%), and the need to meet with other cultures (61.8%). Respondents also invoke the need to practice a foreign language (53.9%), the need for professional training and the need for professional and academic opportunities outside their own country (51.7%). About 30-40% of the respondents also consider as relevant factors like: the need for academic training and the need to establish academic and professional contacts outside their own country (37.1%), or the need for independence (32.6 (2007, 2008).

#### 3.1. *The influence of the Erasmus mobility on the professional and scientific development of exchange students*

##### 3.1.1. *Acquisition of scientific knowledge and skills*

The impact of the Erasmus program on the acquisition of scientific knowledge and competences translate into the fact that 24.7% of the responding students consider that the Erasmus program has had a very large influence, 35.9% consider that the impact was large, and 31.4% consider that the program has had a certain impact, even if not very significant. We have to observe that 60.6% of the respondents admit that the Erasmus program has had a large and very large impact on the acquisition of scientific knowledge and competences.

##### 3.1.2. *Acquisition of professional knowledge and skills*

With regard to the professional knowledge and competences, we observe that about 78.6% consider that the program has had a major positive impact on their professional knowledge and competences (27% appreciate a very large impact, while 51.7% talk about a large impact). This result may be related either to the fact that most students have been placed within companies, or to the fact that the relation between theory and practice within the host university curricula has facilitated the recording of a progress with regard to the students' professional knowledge and competences.

### 3.1.3. *Acquisition of foreign language knowledge and skills*

The foreign language skills of students within the Politehnica University of Timisoara have been strongly influenced by the Erasmus mobility (89.9% of students admit a large and very large influence). The obtained result agrees with the European studies regarding this aspect.

### 3.1.4. *The influence of the Erasmus mobility on the identification of academic / scientific and professional opportunities*

Concerning the role of the Erasmus mobility in the identification of academic and scientific opportunities, opinions are divided, in the sense that 54.5% consider that the impact has been large and very large, about 30% show a neutral position towards this issue, while 16% only see a small impact or no impact at all. As for the influence of the Erasmus mobility on the identification of professional opportunities, opinions vary even more, in the sense that 48.8% consider that the impact has been large and very large, about 33% show a neutral position, 15.9% see a small impact, and 2.3% see no impact at all on their identification of professional opportunities.

## 3.2. *Influence of the Erasmus mobility on certain aspects of the students' personality*

The results obtained within this study confirm the previously mentioned results (Otero & McCoshan, 2006; Bracht, Engel & al., 2006), and emphasize certain aspects of the personality that have been influenced by the participation of students in an Erasmus mobility.

### 3.2.1. *Development of relational skills*

The influence of the Erasmus program on the relational skills has been appreciated as positive by 85.3% of students (44% - very large effect, 42% - large effect), while only 4.5% consider that the program has had no impact on their relational skills (very small effect or no effect at all). The study of Otero & McCoshan (2006) also records that the most significant changes reported by students relate to the understanding of people from different cultures and ethnic groups.

### 3.2.2. *Personal system of values*

The personal system of values is another aspect investigated from the perspective of the influence of an Erasmus mobility. Results indicate that 24.7% of the respondents have a rather blurred perception of this aspect, 46% consider that their system of values has been much and very much influenced, while 29.2% appreciate that this influence has been small or absent. In this context, we have to note the relevance of the Erasmus mobility with regard to the development of the personal system of values.

### 3.2.3. *Self-confidence*

The benefits of the Erasmus mobility with regard to the self-confidence (the increase thereof) have been admitted by 69.6% of the responding students (self-confidence has been increased much for 43% and very much for 27% of the respondents). This aspect indicates that the out-of-the-country experience has had a high contribution to the development of the awareness of personal value.

### 3.2.4. *The feeling of independence*

The Erasmus mobility shows positive effects also on the feeling of personal independence. This feeling has been appreciated as much and very much influenced, in the case of 67.4% of the students, while 20% cannot appreciate this aspect, and 12.4 see no such influence. We have to note the high percentage of respondents (39.3) who consider that their feeling of personal independence has been very much increased by the participation in the Erasmus program.

### 3.2.5. *The feeling of belonging to a group or a community*

With regard to the feeling of belonging to a group or a community, we notice a high level of difference between answers. While 31.4% cannot give an opinion on this issue, 48.3% consider that the mobility has had a large or a very large impact on their feeling of belonging to a group or a community, and 20.2% see a small impact or no impact at all. We assume that this impact is a positive one, generated by the extension of their personal network of social connections, and by the constancy of relations due to the various media of communication, including virtual ones.

### 3.2.6. *Attitude towards work and study*

The contact with the style of life, study and work of students in a foreign country, the example offered by such students, may have an impact on their attitude towards work and study. In this regard, we have to notice that more than a half (52.8%) of the exchange students admits a large and a very large impact on their attitude towards study and work, about 15% see a small impact or no impact at all, and about 33% prefer a neuter position towards this aspect.

### 3.2.7. *Attitude towards the chosen profession*

The attitude towards the chosen profession has been seriously affected for 42.6% of the participants in the Erasmus mobility, about 36% adopt a neuter position towards this issue, and 4% consider that there has been no alteration with regard to their attitude towards their chosen profession.

### 3.2.8. *Attitude towards family*

Family and its values are landmarks in the life of all people, especially in the life of a developing person. With regard to the attitude towards family, we observe very different perceptions of the students, indicating that 25% see no alteration in this aspect, and 17% indicate a small change. 27% adopt a neutral position, and 30.6% admit for a very significant and a significant change, while 42% see a very small impact or no impact at all over this attitude. We have to notice the profound attachment to the original family, which translates either in the deepening of the existing attitude, or by its change in the sense of its capitalization.

## 3.3. *Influence of the Erasmus mobility on certain aspects related to the social life and the interpersonal relations of exchange students*

### 3.3.1. *Interpersonal relations with foreigners*

A significant gain of the Erasmus mobility is the increase and improvement of interpersonal relations with foreigners, which is confirmed by the students' answers. 83% appreciate that the relations with foreigners has been improved. These results agree with the ESNSurvey2007, which reveals that 91% of the students have maintained the relationship with friends they had met during their Erasmus mobility, 50% have maintained relationships with at least 5 friends, and 30% have visited their foreign friends after the exchange period (Krzaklewska et al, 2008). This shows the significance of the social, interpersonal dimension, which is being enriched following an international experience, and this is certainly a benefit of the program.

### 3.3.2. *Relations with Romanians*

With regard to the interpersonal relations with Romanians, we have to observe that a significant percentage (42.7%) of the respondents have adopted an uncertain position, and the rest of the students see things very differently – 33.7% confirm that their relations have changed, and 23.6% consider that there has been no change in their relations (at all or at a very small scale).

Another proof that the Erasmus mobility has a positive impact on interpersonal relations among students is the fact that, within the item regarding the deterioration of interpersonal relations with Romanians, 78.6% admit no such thing, and a very small percentage, about 17% do not express a very clear opinion. We must conclude that, if there is such change, the trend is definitely towards the positive side.

### 3.3.3. *Interpersonal relations with family members and close friends*

In the case of interpersonal relations with family members and close friends, even if there is a certain impact, it is a positive one. The proof resides in the high percentage of respondents (88.7%) that deny any deterioration of such relations, while 80% notice a small change or no change at all.

### 3.4. *Influence of the Erasmus mobility on other aspects of the students' life*

The Erasmus mobility triggers the contact of students with various life styles and diets.

#### 3.4.1. *Eating habits*

Eating habits, impregnated by the specific culture, may be influenced by the eating experiences encountered during an exchange, and, in this sense, we have to mention that some students acknowledge a certain change in their eating habits (much change and very much change 34.8%), about 35% keep a neutral position towards this aspect, and 30.3% consider that their eating habits have suffered little or no change at all.

#### 3.4.2. *Spare time habits*

With regard to their spare time habits, we notice that about 32.6% of the students cannot appreciate whether such change exists, 49.3% see a high or very high level of change of their spare time habits, and 28% admit for a small change or no change at all.

#### 3.4.3. *Future career plans*

According to our results, the Erasmus exchange students questioned seem to be highly influenced (67%), and there is a percentage of 25% who prefer to adopt a neutral position. This aspect may be explained by the fact that the academic and professional experiences acquired abroad are appreciated as a positive factor in view to attaining and professing a certain occupation in the future. On the other side, the mobility may be a life experience in itself, which confirms the actual potential of the student, which may be capitalized in future professional situations.

#### 3.4.4. *Future plan regarding family life*

Concerning future family plans, we have identified two relatively balanced positions. On one side, there is the group that remain strongly attached to the ideas they had before the exchange, and, on the other side, there is the group of students which have changed their position regarding family life. Concerning future family plans, we have identified two relatively balanced positions. On one side, there is the group that remain strongly attached to the ideas they had before the exchange, and, on the other side, there is the group of students which have changed their position regarding family life.

In this context, 38.2% confirm that there has been small change or no change at all with regard to their future family plan, about 25% cannot express an opinion, and 37% admit for a high level of change regarding their future family plans.

### 3.5. *Level of agreement between the Erasmus program and the needs of students and of the university*

Regarding the perception of the efficiency of the Erasmus program in terms of the professional and scientific needs, we observe that a high percentage (73%) of the students have a positive appreciation of their exchange period, 20.2% do not express a distinct opinion, and only 6.7% express discontent. We notice a generally positive impact in terms of the program's efficiency also with regard to personal needs, as 76.4% of the students confirm that the program has met their personal development needs. As for the perception of the needs of the university, in terms of belonging, there is a blurred position for 40.45% of the respondents, while 47.19% consider that the program has met many and very many needs of the university, and 12.35% see a small impact or no impact at all.

## 4. Discussions and conclusions

Career is an important aspect of a young person's life, as a coronation of the educational effort made all through the period of study. In this context, the Erasmus exchange may be a strong point in itself, in the sense that it may help to increase the level of employability, and it may turn into an advantage in the labour market competition, as an element that most employers appreciate as positive. Also on the positive side, we have to mention the results of our study, which show that 70.8% of the inquired students consider that the Erasmus program has had a positive influence on their career, and 62.5% appreciate that the exchange has had a significant influence on their personal life. We observe that, in the case of the students within the Politehnica University of Timisoara, factors related to career development or academic factors do not list as a priority of students who access mobility programs; the accent has moved to factors that relate to the international experience – the need to meet with new experiences, the need to learn about new cultures, the need to meet new people, etc. The main factors identified as highly significant are: *the curiosity related to what is being studied and about the actual working in another country (76.4%), the curiosity related to living in another country (65%), and the need to meet with other cultures (61.8%)*. These results suggest a new analysis of the position occupied by the Romanian students within the classification achieved by Krzaklewska & Krupnik (2007, 2008), which reveals either that parameters like age, gender, geographical position of the country have to be re-assessed, or there has to be accepted the variant that young Romanians have moved towards a Western European mentality. A short analysis of the skills that have been strongly affected following an Erasmus mobility reveals influences like: *language skills (89.8%), relational skills (85.3%), professional knowledge and skills (78.6%), scientific / academic knowledge and skills (60.6%)*. With regard to personal development, we have noticed the following influences – *self-confidence (69.6%), personal independence (67.4%), attitude towards the profession (67%)*. Moreover, there have been identified three aspects about which students do not express a solidary orientation, namely: the attitude towards family, future plans for family life, and eating habits. In the case of the attitude towards family, we have to mention that 42% of students see no influence on their attitude, and 30.6% admit for a change in their attitude. As for future family plans, 38.2% confirm small changes or no change at all, about 25% cannot adopt a clear position, while 37% confirm that their attitude has change much or very much. In the case of eating habits, the situation is unclear, as 34.8% indicate that their eating habits have been much and very much modified, about 35% adopt a neutral position, while 30.3% consider that there has been a small change or no change at all. These results may be explained by the fact that young Romanians are and remain strongly attached to the values of their original family. An additional argument is represented by the actual data of this study – as, in the case of interpersonal relations within the family and with Romanian friends and acquaintances, the Erasmus exchange has a real impact, which is usually positive. The proof resides in the high percentage of respondents (88.7%) that deny any deterioration of such relations, while 80% notice a small change or no change at all. This reserve, manifested in terms of the attitude towards family values, is not encountered in the case of the profession, where, even if there is no such strong alteration, future plans are decidedly affected by the experience abroad. This aspect may be influenced by the fact that the experience itself has brought, for most students, an increase of their *self-confidence* and their *personal independence*. In terms of interpersonal relations, we have to mention another gain of the Erasmus exchange program that is the increase / the improvement of interpersonal relations with foreigners, which is confirmed by the positive appreciations of the students (very small percentage of the undecided

or neutral positions); 83.1% of the students confirm that their relations with foreigners have been improved. A comparative analysis of the Erasmus program in terms of the *personal and professional needs* of students indicates that their expectations are generally met, during their experience abroad. We notice that the program has met the needs of 76.4% of the exchange students, but only 65.2% have felt a very large or a large influence on their personal life. The Erasmus program has met the professional and scientific needs of a large percentage of students (73%), and the experience abroad seemed to influence their academic and professional life under the following aspects: attitude towards the profession 42.6%, identification of professional opportunities 48.8%, attitude towards work and study 52.8%, identification of academic opportunities 54%, academic / scientific knowledge and skills 60.6%, future career plans 67%, influence of the mobility on the career 70.8%, professional knowledge and skills 78.6%. Moreover, the Erasmus program meets personal needs of a high percentage of the students (76.4%) and influences their personal development as follows: influence of the mobility on the personal life 65.2%, personal independence 67.4%, self-confidence 69.6%, relational skills 85.3%, and language skills 89.8%. The overall study has revealed that the exchange students inquired appreciate that their language skills, professional, academic and relational skills have been highly influenced by the Erasmus mobility, with some reasonable reserves justified by the European recession that affects the possibility to identify scientific and professional opportunities. Generally speaking, the Erasmus program enjoys a positive appreciation of the exchange students, and this level of satisfaction has been expressed by 91% of the respondents.

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