

Božidar Grigić

IDENTIFICATION OF THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY – YOUTH AND EMPLOYERS SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE

In recent decades the global number of youth, who acquired international experience during at least a part of their education, has been increasing each year. However, despite the popularity of international exchange programmes there is still an ongoing debate on the benefits of such experience for participating learners. One of the major added value components are the competences which young people acquired abroad and which are also considered relevant and wanted by their employers.

EU documents have been stressing that education and training are key for the attainment of the objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth since the drafting of the Europe 2020 Strategy.¹ 21st century skills without which we cannot imagine the development of the society and a quality life comprise the so-called (generic) competences, including critical thinking capacity, self-initiative, problem-solving, group work, etc.²

To achieve this goal, the European Commission set up a dedicated central programme promoting the development of education and training. During the 2007-2013 period this was the Lifelong Learning Programme, the predecessor of the current ongoing Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020).

In the field of **vocational and professional education** – a field addressed by this study – EU programmes support the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills and vocational qualifications, while trying to increase the number and quality of international trainings, and to improve the employability of individuals and their inclusion in the European labour market. Furthermore, they facilitate the mobility of upper-secondary school students, which served as the basis for our research presented below.³

Increasing significance of mobility in the European and global education area triggered a number of research on the impact of mobility. However, the research focuses on the students' perspective and their opinion on the impact of mobility.⁴ An experience abroad should improve students' competitiveness in the labour market after the completion of studies (participants should learn how to adapt, collaborate, become more independent and self-confident), while staying abroad also has a positive impact on an individual's personal development.⁵ A limited number of research also focuses on employers' perspective; how companies value

¹ EUROPEAN COUNCIL. 2011. Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>

² EUROPEAN COMMISSION. 2012. Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes
EUROPEAN COMMISSION. 2016. New skills agenda for Europe. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15621&langId=en>

³ CMEPIUS. 2012. Leonardo da Vinci poklicno izobraževanje in usposabljanje. Available at: : <http://www2.cmepius.si/vzu/leonardo.aspx>

⁴ MARCOTTE, C, DESROCHES, J. and POUPART I. 2006. Preparing internationally minded business graduates: The role of international mobility programs. *International Journal of intercultural Relations*, 31, 655-668.

TEICHLER, U. and JANSON K. 2007. The Professional Value of Temporary Study in Another European Country: Employment and Work of Former ERASMUS Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11 (3/4), 486-495.

GAJDEROWICZ et al. 2013. Does Students' International Mobility Increase Their Employability? *Ekonomia*, 30, 59-74.

⁵ RIVZA, B. and TEICHLER, U. 2007. The Changing Role of Student Mobility. *Higher Education Policy*, 20, 457-475.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION. 2008. Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/progress08/report_en.pdf

international student mobility, what is their experience with graduates who studied or worked abroad, and how they consider these elements when recruiting their employees. Research shows that employers mostly link mobility with language skills and knowledge of other cultures, but not other competences which are strengthened by international experience, such as responsibility, working in groups, adaptability to change, autonomy, resourcefulness.⁶

The research by Flander (2011) was conducted among employers (144) and it was focused on mobility and its significance during the recruitment process. The results mostly show how employers recognise international experience as an added value of candidates provided that the candidates know how to properly present such experience. Of the surveyed HR officers the majority (83.33%) believes that the candidate's ability is the most important factor in the recruitment process, followed by the degree and work experience in the relevant field (both 61.54%). Other important factors include work practice abroad (69.13%), study abroad (61.54%) and work experience in general (53.84%).

The most important competences sought by over 60% of employers during recruitment (Figure 2) include responsibility, reliability, ability to adapt knowledge to new situations, cooperation, self-initiative and problem-solving ability.

These competences match the competences identified in a study, carried out by the Finnish national agency CIMO. During 2012 and 2013 CIMO conducted a research among employers with the aim to understand their view and understanding of international mobility with candidates for employment. Upon the analysis of results the experts identified the so-called hidden competences.⁷ These are competences which are intensively developed by mobility participants and which the employers look for in candidates, but they fail to link them to international mobility. Authors of the Finish study demonstrated their findings by linking characteristics which the employers usually look for in candidates for employment (e.g. productivity, curiosity and resilience) and competences developed by individual participants during international experience. Productivity is thus strengthened by cooperation, adaptability, reliability, self-confidence, self-knowledge, problem-solving capacity and persistence. Development and strengthening of curiosity are fostered by cultural knowledge, tolerance, cooperation, interest towards new issues, adaptability, networking ability and empathy. While resilience was positively linked with the interest towards new issues, self-confidence, self-awareness, persistence and empathy.⁸

In 2013 the European Commission conducted a study on the impact of international mobility within the Erasmus programme on a very large number of respondents. The study thus included over 50 thousand students with and without international experience, over 18 alumni with or without international experience, 4986 members of teaching staff, 964 HEIs and 652 employers. The results of the survey comply with the findings of the two previous studies, since employers usually seek the following competences: self-confidence, curiosity, decisiveness, calm, vitality and tolerance.

Alumni considered that the most important competences for a successful career include communication skills, adaptability, problem/challenge-solving ability, team work ability and the ability to plan and organise. Moreover, the students marked all these competences as those, developed during mobility.

⁶ GARAM, I. 2005. Study on the relevance of International student mobility to work and employment. Finnish employers' views on benefits of studying and work placements abroad. CIMO. Available at: http://www.cimo.fi/instancedata/prime_product_julkaisu/cimo/embeds/cimowwwstructure/15626_relevance_of_student_mobility_summary.pdf.

⁷ "Hidden competences: skills and knowledge that result from international experiences are the kind of competences that the labour market needs to be able to face future challenges successfully. But often in recruitment we seem to be incapable of recognising these competences; they are hidden." (CIMO, 2014: 31)

⁸ CIMO. 2014. Hidden Competences. Facts and Figures. Available at: http://www.cimo.fi/instancedata/prime_product_julkaisu/cimo/embeds/cimowwwstructure/32427_Faktaa_1_2014_Hidden_Competences.pdf

CMEPIUS Study 2015

Since the data show that international mobility affects the competences and employability of students, it can be foreseen that the comparable forms of international mobility also have a similar impact at lower levels of education, i.e. upper-secondary school students who complete their traineeship abroad. Therefore CMEPIUS performed a study among students to identify the effects of international mobility on their competences and employability.

The research consisted of two parts. The first part was a study among upper-secondary school students which was based on a methodology comparable to the ones applied in the above-specified studies for students (CIMO, CMEPIUS).

The second part of the research took the form of a focus group with employers, while both HE and upper-secondary students were also included to facilitate the comparison of effects of mobility.

The survey was conducted in the first half of 2015 among students who participated in mobility between 2005 and 2012 within the scope of the Lifelong Learning Programme, a sub-programme of Leonardo da Vinci, i.e. persons attending vocational education and training. The survey was completed by 466 respondents which constitutes a 23% response rate.

Analysis

In the first part of the questionnaire we were interested how mobility participants try to “cash-in” their experience when seeking employment. We found that 66% of respondents described their international experience in their CV. However, those who stated that they did not do that, provided the following most common reasons: they do not have a CV, since they have not begun looking for a job yet; this experience is irrelevant for the position/field where they seek employment; they do not consider the experience sufficiently important to mention; or that they failed to acquire experience abroad due to the bad quality of traineeship.

72 % of all respondents stated that they enclose certifying documents on the completed traineeship abroad to their job application. Those, who do not enclose such certifying documents, do not do so because they consider the experience irrelevant for the job vacancy, because they did not start looking for a job yet, or because they failed to receive a certificate on the completed traineeship abroad.

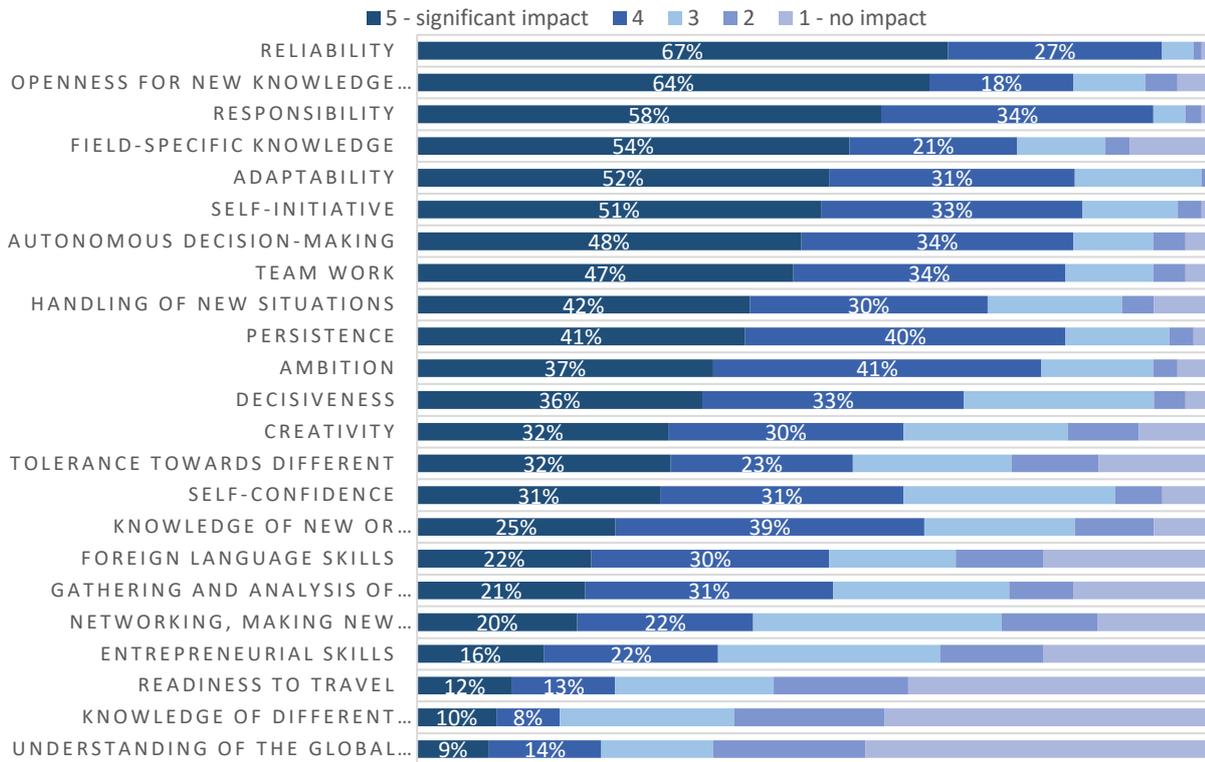
The majority of surveyed students stated that during the job interview employers did not ask them about international experience. However, despite the fact that employers usually do not ask candidates about their international experience, candidates mention them during the interview (63%). However, still over a half of respondents believe that their experience abroad did not contribute to their recruitment or that the employer was not interested in this experience. At the same time we could, nevertheless, still observe a high percentage of those who believe that their international experience partially helped them get the job (41%).

A total 61% of all respondents answered that no one assisted them with inclusion of international experience in their CV or job application. Only 18% of respondents received support from the professional counsellor at school, while others were assisted by their family members, friends, and – in a very low percentage – employment service counsellors. This clearly highlights the field which should receive special attention in the future.

To acquire information on the development of competences we further included in our analysis the respondents, who stated that the listed competences had a significant impact on the employer’s decision to employ them, and compared them with their perceived extent of the impact of international mobility on the development of these competences.

Figure 1: Impact of competences on the employer during recruitment

WHICH OF YOUR COMPETENCES DO YOU BELIEVE HAD THE GREATEST EFFECT ON THE EMPLOYER'S DECISION TO RECRUIT YOU?

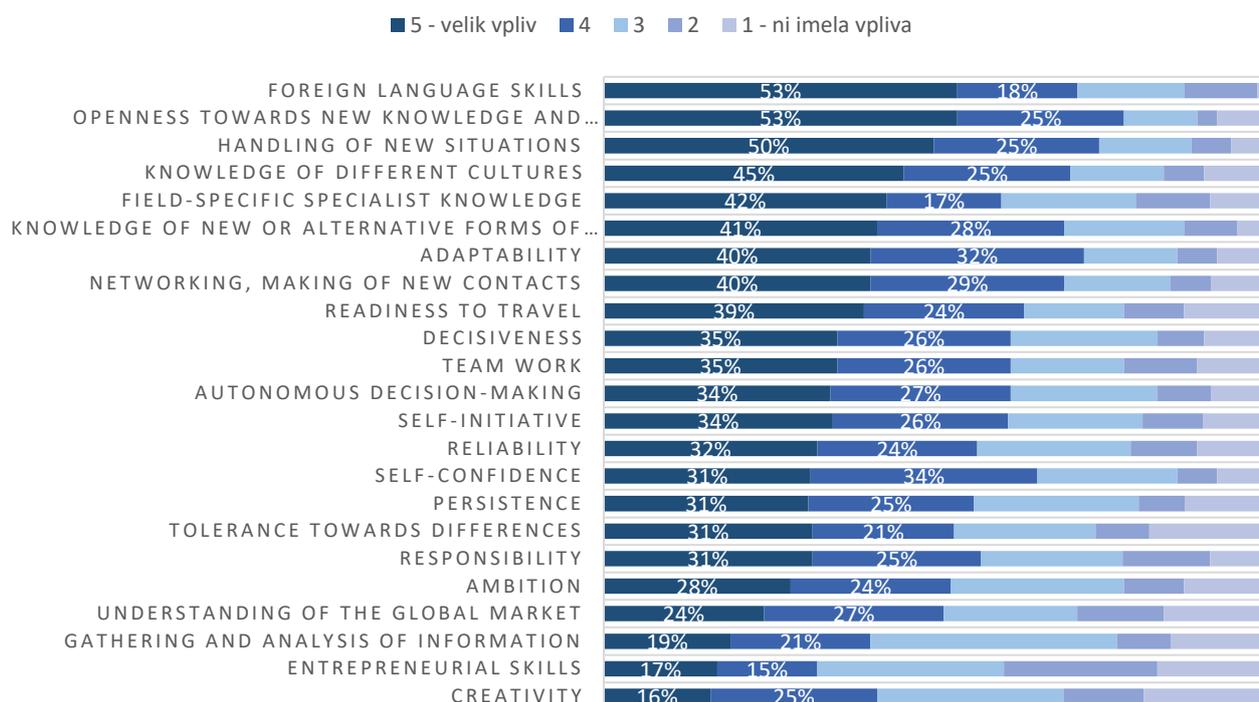


The question “Which of your competences do you believe had the greatest effect on the employer’s decision to recruit you?” was answered only by the employed respondents. The results are visualised in Figure 1. Respondents answered that the following competences had the greatest impact on their recruitment: *reliability, responsibility, self-initiative, adaptability, openness towards new knowledge and experience, autonomous decision-making and team work*. However, upper-secondary school students believe that other essential competences with an effect on their employment also include: *ambition, field-specific specialist knowledge and handling of new situations*.

However, when we asked respondents to assess the impact of international mobility on the development of their competences they stated that the competences most affected by the international mobility were: *openness towards new knowledge and experience, handling of new situations, adaptability, foreign language skills and knowledge of different cultures*. International mobility, however had also a significant impact on the following competences: *networking and making of new contacts, knowledge of new or alternative forms of work and self-confidence* (Figure 2).

Figure 12 Impact of international mobility on development of competences

WHICH OF YOUR COMPETENCES DO YOU THINK WERE MOST AFFECTED BY INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY? – EMPLOYED



In the next step we analysed the answers of respondents who assessed that **the listed competences had a significant impact on the employer's decision to recruit them**, and we compared them with the respondents' answers to the question on **the extent of the impact of international mobility on the development of these competences**. The results in Table 1 reveal that 67% of respondents assessed that the **openness towards new knowledge and experience** had a significant impact on the employer during the recruitment process. 65% respondents of these 67% believe international mobility had a significant impact on their openness towards new knowledge and skills. **Reliability** is a component which two thirds of respondents believe has a significant impact on the employer's decision to recruit a candidate. 42% of those two thirds believe international mobility had a significant impact on the development of their reliability. While 58% of respondents stated that the **responsibility** competence has a significant impact on the employer's decision to recruit a candidate, 42% of these respondents believe international mobility had a significant impact on the strengthening of their responsibility. We wish to highlight a few other competences which had a significant impact on the employer's decision (about 50%, whereby the equivalent percentage of respondents believe they acquired these competences through international mobility): field-specific specialist knowledge, adaptability, handling of new situations. **On the basis of findings we can conclude that, according to upper-secondary students with international experience, generic competences⁹ usually sought by employers are also significantly developed during international mobility. Therefore it is essential that upper-secondary students know how to properly present their international experience to potential employers.**

⁹ There is still no consensus on the standard definition of generic competences. However, different definitions share the following: general competences are competences which are applicable in different working and life context. These are competences which are not specific to any profession or job, but are generic – in the sense that they are important for success in different professions. (YOUNG, J. and CHAPMAN, E. 2007. Generic Competence Frameworks: A Brief Historical Overview. Education Research and Perspectives, 37 (1), 1-24.)

As an example you can check the following link for competences listed as generic by the Tuning project:
<http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/competences/generic.html>.

Table: 1 Links between the impact of competences on the employer during recruitment and the impact of international experience on the development of this competence.

Competence	Percentage of answers: Competence had a significant impact on employer during recruitment	Percentage of answers: International experience has a significant impact on the development of this competence
Reliability	67%	42%
Openness towards new knowledge and experience	64%	65%
Responsibility	58%	42%
Field-specific specialist knowledge	54%	54%
Adaptability	52%	61%
Self-initiative	51%	49%
Autonomous decision-making	48%	45%
Team work	47%	41%
Handling of new situations	42%	68%
Persistence	41%	56%
Ambition	37%	53%
Decisiveness	36%	53%

On the basis of this research in October 2015 CMEPIUS also organised a focus group with the aim to share experience and to prepare proposed solutions for better communication and dissemination of international experience between mobility participants and employers. Participants of the focus group included upper-secondary and HE students with international experience, international mobility coordinators, career counsellors and HR officers from Slovenian companies, who shared their experience through group discussions between mobility participants and employers. All participants agreed that despite research confirming the effects of international mobility on the development of generic competences usually sought by employers, the international experience on its own does not guarantee that the relevant individual actually developed these competences. **The period after mobility is key, since the developed competences must be confirmed, while mobility participants need to be taught how to recognise as well as present the newly acquired competences.** During group discussions we could observe that initially mobility participants had problems when describing and defining their experience and acquired competences. However, when we provided them with a list of competences they were much better at explaining which competences they acquired and how. Thus the first proposed solutions from the focus group referred mostly to **different certificates**, which would include a list of developed competences, e.g.: internal certificates where the mentor grades the level of developed competence, questionnaires with the list of competences and languages, and Europass CV – Competences section. Later the focus group ideas extended to various **events for raising awareness** of stakeholders on both sides on the contribution of international mobility: simulation of job interviews with employers, mobility projects' dissemination events for employers, networking events for HE and upper-secondary students with international experience, and other solutions mainly based on improved links among the education sector, labour market and the economy. Participants of the focus group also highlighted the importance of self-reflection before and after mobility, career centres' role and administrative overload of mobility coordinators.

Findings

On the basis of our findings we can conclude that in the opinion of upper-secondary school students with international experience generic competences, **which the employers usually seek in candidates, are developed by international mobility** to a greater or lesser extent. However, when we compare our results

with the results of research presented in the beginning of the report (Flander 2011, IMO 2014, European Commission 2014) it is easy to see that our findings match the findings of the above-specified studies. **Competences, which employers usually look for in potential candidates include reliability, adaptability, cooperation, self-initiative or interest in new challenges, and problem-solving ability; all of which are also developed to a significant extent during mobility.** Nevertheless, it is true that employers as well as mobility participants often tend to forget this. **Therefore we must increase our focus on the training of mobility participants so that they learn how to properly present their experience to their potential employers** in order to maximise the benefits of their international experience. However, to achieve this it will be crucial to ensure cooperation of all stakeholders: education institutions and mobility coordinators, national agencies, career centres, employers and mobility participants. By recognising their own abilities and competences upper-secondary school students can be more successful when seeking employment and in their future careers, while the effects of international mobility will live up to their full role.