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# *The Professional Value of Temporary Study in Another European Country: Employment and Work of Former ERASMUS Students*

Ulrich Teichler  
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*Temporary study in another European country supported by the ERASMUS programmes spread from a few thousand participants in the late 1980s to about 150,000 annually in recent years. Such a study period is not only viewed as academically, culturally, and linguistically valuable but is also expected to have a positive impact on subsequent employment and work. Three major studies of former ERASMUS students underscore in many respects the professional value of temporary study in another European country. But former ERASMUS students do not believe that they excel in income and social status during their early career. Moreover, the distinct professional value of temporary study in another country is declining over time. However, temporary study in another European country has remained an exceptional and professionally highly rewarded experience for students from Central and Eastern European countries.*

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**Keywords:** *temporary study abroad; professional impact; Europe; ERASMUS*

## **THE IMPACT OF TEMPORARY STUDY ABROAD**

A temporary study period in another country was exceptional for European students about two decades ago. Since the 1970s, however, several European countries and the European Commission decided to advocate and to promote temporary student mobility to broaden the students' educational experience, to increase their international understanding, and to extend and raise the students' foreign language proficiency and to prepare them for the world of work where such abilities were expected to play an increasing role. These policies were influenced by U.S. activities to send students abroad in the framework of a "junior year abroad" or similar schemes but differed in putting emphasis on the cooperation between departments

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and teachers from various countries to cooperate in curricular matters, thereby enhancing the academic value and increasing the likelihood that the achievements reached during the temporary study period in another country will be recognised on return.

The Joint Study Programmes supported by the European Commission from 1976 to 1986 turned out, as a major evaluation study proved (Burn, Cerych, & Smith, 1990; Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990), to be a successful approach of successfully organizing study periods of half a year or 1 year in another European country and of integrating them as a valuable contrasting period into the curricula of the home institution in many cases. Consequently, the ERASMUS programme was established in 1987 to provide support for temporary student mobility within Europe on a wider scale. The number of participating students increased from about 4,000 in the first year and about 10,000 in the second year to about 150,000 today. And when the ministers of education of most European countries decided in 1999 in the Bologna Declaration to take bold steps toward structural convergence of higher education programmes to eventually reach a European Higher Education Area by 2010, facilitating student mobility within Europe was named as one of the key objectives of this policy.

The ERASMUS programme was assessed from the outset through a substantial number of evaluation studies. Attention was paid in this context to the management of the programme, the cost and funding of student mobility, the study conditions and provisions during the study period, the recognition of achievements during the study period abroad on return, and many other salient aspects (see the publications of the three major studies in Rosselle & Lentiez, 1999; Teichler, 2002; Teichler & Maiworm, 1997). On three occasions, surveys of former ERASMUS students were undertaken to note the impact of temporary study in another European country on the transition to employment and the early career:

- *Study A:* A representative sample of ERASMUS students of the academic year 1988-1989 was surveyed shortly after return and again about 3 years and finally about 5 years later. More than 1,200 former ERASMUS students responded to the final questionnaire (Maiworm & Teichler, 1996). The results reported here are based on the survey 5 years later.
- *Study B:* More than 30,000 former students from 11 European countries graduating in the academic year 1994-1995 were surveyed about 4 years later. As they were asked to state whether they had studied abroad and as formerly mobile during the course of study of four of these countries were surveyed again, this study provided the opportunity to compare the early careers of former ERASMUS students (more than 3% of the students surveyed), other formerly mobile students, and former students not having been mobile during the course of study (Jahr & Teichler, 2002).
- *Study C:* The European Commission recently initiated and funded a study on the professional value of ERASMUS. About 4,600 ERASMUS students of the academic year

2000-2001 provided information in 2005 about their study experiences and their subsequent life course. Besides former ERASMUS students, employers, leaders of higher education institutions, and formerly mobile ERASMUS teachers were addressed with the help of surveys and seminars in 30 European countries (Bracht et al., 2006).

The results of these studies will be presented, compared, and discussed in regard to the competences acquired by former ERASMUS students, their transition to employment, their employment status and remuneration, and the links between study and subsequent work assignments. One has to bear in mind that these outputs are no direct measures of the impact of temporary study in another country. Rather, graduate employment and work of former ERASMUS students are affected by all their potentials and all their learning and experience over the life course and by the ways employers assess and make respond to those competences in the processes of recruitment and job assignment. Yet surveys of former ERASMUS students provide the best possible information to indicate the professional value of the ERASMUS experience.

## **TRANSITION FROM STUDY TO EMPLOYMENT**

The majority of former ERASMUS students are convinced that the ERASMUS experience was helpful for them to obtain their first job. In all, 71% of the ERASMUS students of the late 1980s (Study A), 66% of those graduating in the mid-1990s (Study B), and 54% of those mobile around 2000 (Study C) stated this affirmatively (see Table 1). The value of the ERASMUS experience for obtaining a first job seems to be on the decline but was still underscored recently by more than half of the former ERASMUS students.

As additional information supplied suggests, a study period in another country makes the job seeker's CV distinct. Moreover, 60% or more of the graduates of all three surveys stated that their foreign language proficiency and more than half of the graduates each noted the international study experience played a major role in their employer's decision to recruit them. The employer survey conducted as part of Study C confirms the student assessment. Many employers state foreign language proficiency (70%), work experience abroad (34%), and study period abroad (30%) of graduates as recruitment criteria. Certainly, the academic knowledge and the personality play more important roles in the employer's recruitment decision, but foreign language proficiency and international experience turn out to be important assets for many former ERASMUS students in their job search.

## **EMPLOYMENT SITUATION**

Former ERASMUS students obviously are excited by their study experience. About twice as many of them as other students decide to continue study on an advanced level after graduation. Therefore, the transition to employment is not complete for all former ERASMUS students about 5 years later.

**Table 1 Perceived Positive Influence of the ERASMUS Study Period on Employment and Work—A Comparison Between Various Surveys of Former ERASMUS Students (Percentage of Employed Graduates)**

	ERASMUS Students 1988-1989, Surveyed 1993	Graduates 1994-1995, Surveyed 1999	ERASMUS Students 2000-2001, Surveyed 2005
	Study A	Study B	Study C
Obtaining first job	71	66	54
Type of work task involved	49	44	39
Income level	25	22	16

Source: University of Kassel, VALERA Survey of Former ERASMUS Students.

Note: Question H1: What impact do you feel that your study abroad experience has had with regard to your employment?

It is by no means certain that temporary study abroad leads to more high-flying careers. But 25% of the ERASMUS students of the late 1980s (Study A), 22% of those graduating in the mid-1990s (Study B), and 16% of those mobile around 2000 (Study C) believed that their study period in another country has contributed to a higher income level than that of formerly nonmobile students (see Table 1). In recent years, the proportion of those believing that the income level was lower even surpassed that of those believing that it was higher.

This might be disappointing for those hoping that temporary study in another country is an entree billet to top careers. But, after all, ERASMUS is a programme providing public support for the additional study expenses in another country and facilitating this study abroad in many respects, thus keeping additional monetary and nonmonetary "investment" in bounds. Such a programme can be viewed as successful if it contributes to European and international competences and to related work assignments rather than promising a higher status and a higher salary.

It should be noted that almost three fourths of the ERASMUS students in the year 2000 believed about 5 years later that their level of income and position corresponded to their level of educational attainment (Study C). The available comparative data for those graduating in the mid-1990s show that formerly mobile students noted such an adequate link between education and occupational status slightly more often than did formerly nonmobile students (Study B).

About 5 years after the study period in another country (i.e., less than 3 years on the job on average), the transition to employment is not completed by all former ERASMUS students, and not all have reached a stable employment situation. The unemployment quota at the time the survey was conducted was 4% (Study A), 3% (Study B), and 6% (Study C). Also, 10% (Study A), 7% (Study B), and 10% (Study C) were employed part-time, and the proportion of those employed on a temporary

contract increased from 27% of the two earlier cohorts (Studies A and B) to 35% of those mobile around the year 2000 (Study C).

Available information suggests that temporary employment of graduates during their early career has increased in Europe in general. We do not have any evidence that international study experience is a cause of the increased proportion of temporarily employed former ERASMUS students of the most recent cohort surveyed.

## COMPETENCES ON GRADUATION

Surveys of former ERASMUS students are by no means a perfect tool of measuring the impact of the study period in another European country on the competences altogether acquired when students eventually graduate. The survey undertaken in 1999 of those graduating in the mid-1990s (Study B), however, allows us to compare a retrospective self-rating of competences acquired at the time of graduation between those who had been mobile in the course of study and those who had not been mobile.

As was to be expected, former ERASMUS students and other internationally mobile students felt 3 times as strong in foreign language proficiency than did formerly nonmobile students. They were also convinced that temporary study in another country was helpful in getting to know the culture and society of the host country and in understanding other cultures and getting along with persons from different cultural backgrounds. Otherwise, they hardly reported a different profile of competences than did formerly nonmobile students. They only viewed themselves moderately stronger as far as working independently, adaptability, and general communication skills are concerned.

The majority of former ERASMUS students of the academic year 2000-2001 asked recently (Study C) to compare their competences to formerly nonmobile persons, however, stated that their level of competences at the time of graduation was higher according to most of the dimensions of professionally relevant competences addressed in the survey. One might believe that they overrate their competence, but also a survey of employers conducted as part of that study suggests that former ERASMUS students are overproportionally strong as far as the majority of professionally relevant competences are concerned.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that former ERASMUS students retrospectively look back with a very favourable eye to their ERASMUS experience. In all three studies, problems are more frequently reported in matters of funding, accommodation, administration, and so on than in academic matters (see Table 2). Moreover, former ERASMUS students believe on average that academic progress abroad was higher than during a corresponding period at home. Though recognition is reported only in the range of 70% to 80% and prolongation of the overall period of study because of the study period abroad is by no means seldom, almost all former ERASMUS students consider the temporary period in another European country a worthwhile activity. Prior studies also have shown that teachers of ERASMUS students consider the

**Table 2 Selected Problems During the ERASMUS-Supported Study Period Abroad—A Retrospective View of Former ERASMUS Students (Percentage)**

	ERASMUS Students 1988-1989, Surveyed 1989-1990 <sup>b</sup>	Graduates 1994-1995, Surveyed 1999 Study B	ERASMUS Students 2000-2001, Surveyed 2005 Study C
Accommodation	22	— <sup>a</sup>	24
Financial matters	21	—	22
Administrative matters	21	—	19
Obtaining credits or credit transfer	—	—	16
Different teaching or learning methods	17	—	15
Teachers meeting or helping students	15	—	13
Taking courses in foreign language	10	—	9
Too-high academic level	8	—	5

Source: University of Kassel, VALERA Survey of Former ERASMUS Students 2005.

Note: Question A12: To what extent did you have significant problems in the following areas during your study period abroad?

a. Question not included.

b. First survey of study A (1 year after study period abroad).

mobile students as on equal terms with home country students during the study period abroad and some of them as a positive selection among all students. Overall, the retrospective assessment of the ERASMUS experience has remained surprisingly constant over the years. The expansion did not dilute the quality, and efforts to redress problems and improve the value of the ERASMUS study period did not have a strong impact.

## LINKS BETWEEN STUDY AND SUBSEQUENT WORK ASSIGNMENT

Altogether, 61% of the ERASMUS students 2000-2001 who were employed about 5 years later stated that they use the knowledge acquired in the course of study to a high extent (Study C). In the survey of 1994-1995, no significant differences could be found between formerly mobile and formerly nonmobile students in this respect (Study B).

The ERASMUS experience was viewed as having had a positive influence on the type of work tasks involved some years later (see Table 1) by 49% of the ERASMUS students of the late 1980s (Study A), 44% of the former ERASMUS students graduating in the mid-1990s (Study B), and 39% of the ERASMUS students around 2000 (Study C). Thus, we observe a decline of the positive influence by ERASMUS

on the work tasks some years later according to the former ERASMUS students' perception.

One of the most visible influences of ERASMUS on the subsequent employment and work is the high rate of former ERASMUS students working internationally or in an international environment. Of the former ERASMUS students in Studies A and C, 18% reported that they were employed in a country different from the country of graduation for at least some time after graduation. The respective proportion was even 20% among former ERASMUS students graduating in the mid-1990s (Study B). This compares to about 3% of highly qualified Europeans employed in another European country than that of their nationality.

An international working environment is indicative for the work situation of former ERASMUS students. The majority of the ERASMUS students in 2000-2001 stated in 2005 (Study C) that understanding of foreign cultures was an important element of their work assignment. Even about two thirds named working with people of different cultures and communicating in foreign languages as important.

Fewer than half of the former ERASMUS students of all the three cohorts surveyed stated that their work tasks were to a high extent internationally visible according to the five areas addressed. Over the years, the percentage of those professionally involved to a high extent in internationally visible job tasks declined (see Table 3):

- For example, frequently using the language of the host country on the job fell from 47% (Study A) to 38% (Study C) within slightly more than one decade.
- Similarly, frequent use of knowledge of the culture and society of the host country declined during that period from 30% (Study A) to 24% (Study C).

Former ERASMUS students even more frequently underscored the importance of their international competences for their current work. Surprisingly, all participant groups stated such a high importance of international competences. The differences documented in Table 4 are certainly smaller than conventional wisdom suggests.

Again, the professional value of the ERASMUS period in another European country seems to be somewhat on a decline. The data evidently show that knowledge and understanding of the host culture and society have had a lesser professional value in recent years. That does not exclude, however, the possibility that the international experience keeps a transfer value of understanding by contrasting cultures and societies to those at home.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The temporary study period in another European country undertaken in the framework of ERASMUS certainly turns out to be professionally valuable. The majority of former ERASMUS students believe that their knowledge of understanding of foreign cultures and societies in general or specifically of the host country is important. Their

**Table 3 ERASMUS-Related Work Tasks of Former ERASMUS Students—A Comparison Between Various Surveys (Percentage of Employed Graduates)**

	ERASMUS Students 1988-1989, Surveyed 1993	Graduates 1994-1995, Surveyed 1999	ERASMUS Students 2000-2001, Surveyed 2005
	Study A	Study B	Study C
Using the language of the host country orally	47	42	38
Using the language of the host country in reading and writing	47	40	38
Using firsthand professional knowledge of host country	30	25	25
Using firsthand knowledge of host country culture or society	30	32	24
Professional travel to host country	17	18	14

Source: University of Kassel, VALERA Survey of Former ERASMUS Students 2005.

Note: Question F6: To what extent do the responsibilities of your work involve the following? Scale of answers from 1 (*to a very high extent*) to 5 (*not at all*).

international experience seems to have been helpful for most of them in getting employed for the first time. A substantial proportion, even though less than half, consider their work tasks to be linked to their study experiences and are strongly involved in visibly international activities. Both the majority of former ERASMUS students and employers believe that internationally experienced students turn out to be superior in many professionally relevant competences than formerly nonmobile students. Last but not least, students mobile during the course of study are by far more frequently internationally mobile during the first few years of their career than are those not mobile during the course of study.

Two findings, though, suggest more cautiously assessing the overall professional value of the ERASMUS experience. First, former ERASMUS students do not believe that their status and income are superior on average to those of formerly nonmobile students. Second, the professional value of the ERASMUS experience turns out to be more modest for recent generations than for those having studied in another European country some time ago. We have reasons to believe that ERASMUS offers to a lesser extent an exclusive experience now than some years ago and that visibly international work assignments grow to a lesser extent than does the proportion of internationally experienced graduates.

The data presented above referred to all ERASMUS students of the various cohorts analysed. An analysis taking into account differences by country, field of

**Table 4** Relevance of International Competences as Perceived by Former ERASMUS Students (Study C) by Field of Study (Percentage Important, Responses 1 and 2)

	Field of Study Area							Total
	HUM	SOC	BUS	ENG	MNAT	MED	OTH	
Professional knowledge of other countries (e.g., economical, sociological, legal knowledge)	52	46	52	37	31	32	47	45
Knowledge or understanding of international differences in culture and society, modes of behaviour, lifestyles, etc.	68	56	60	48	40	50	58	57
Working with people from different cultural backgrounds	69	61	71	65	60	67	69	66
Communicating in foreign languages	72	63	74	71	66	61	72	69
Count (n)	930	570	684	530	357	226	273	3,570

Source: University of Kassel, VALERA Survey of Former ERASMUS Students 2005.

Note: HUM = humanities; SOC = social sciences; BUS = business studies and economy; ENG = engineering; MNAT = mathematics and natural sciences; MED = medical sciences; OTH = other. Question F4: How important do you consider the following competences for doing your current work? Scale of answers from 1 (*very important*) to 5 (*not at all important*).

study, gender, period of ERASMUS-supported study in another country, and other variables shows that the picture is by no means homogeneous. One variable, however, clearly stands out: Former ERASMUS students from Central and Eastern European countries substantially more often report a high professional value of temporary study than do former ERASMUS students from Western European countries. In the Central and Eastern European countries, study experience in another European country is still a more exclusive experience, ensuring a higher professional reward.

An overall judgment about the absolute professional value of ERASMUS mobility can hardly be given, but the results of the presented studies allow the conclusion that the impact is stronger for the career horizontally than vertically. ERASMUS students view the study period abroad as leading to international mobility, international competences, and visibly international work tasks while hardly promising career enhancement as compared to formerly nonmobile students. Interestingly, the employers surveyed more often believe that ERASMUS also contributes to general career enhancement. As they view temporary study in another country as desirable, they might tend to overrate its impact. Moreover, employers and other experts might state a positive impact in general when they assume that this might be advantageous only for some former ERASMUS students. Thus, the methods of asking experts about the value for the ERASMUS students in general might lead to an exaggerated result.

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