

## Erasmus Plus Mobilities and the Development of Soft Skills: A Key Driver of Student Engagement in International Experiences

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### Abstract

*Internationalization in higher education serves as a strategic driver of development for both institutions and stakeholders. A key instrument in this process is student mobility funded by the Erasmus Plus Programme, which significantly enhances professional training and personal growth by fostering the acquisition of both hard and soft skills. This paper focuses on transversal competencies, especially soft skills, developed through participation in international study or internship mobilities. Promoting and recognizing these competencies could increase student engagement in international educational opportunities. Furthermore, the paper systematically presents a set of policies at local and national levels aimed at supporting the development of transversal skills among all students. Despite these efforts, the research concludes that the higher education system still lacks a unified methodology for the formal recognition and certification of these competencies.*

**Key words:** Erasmus Plus, internationalization, personal growth, professional training, soft skills

**J.E.L. classification:** I23, J24, O15

### 1. Introduction

The higher education system represents one of the most important levels of education, regardless of the country or region under consideration. Its primary role is to prepare new generations for current and future jobs on the labor market. As early as the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, one of the modern approaches in this sector was the prioritization of professional training, alongside the development of professional competencies (Avdeeva *et al.*, 2017). These trends can be observed in two main directions. One is the traditional approach, where teaching staff focus their activities on the student and their individual needs. On the other hand, the institutional bodies that coordinate university activities can also implement programs designed to support both students and academic staff in their training and development.

In the field of higher education, there are various opportunities designed to meet the personal and professional development needs of all stakeholders. Whether we refer to academic staff, administrative personnel, or students, each of these groups may, at some point, benefit from a form of training or upskilling. Depending on the intended impact, such opportunities can be implemented at the local, national, or international level.

When discussing opportunities at the local or national level, these may arise, among others, from universities themselves or from public authorities (e.g., the Ministry of Education and Research). At the international level, a significant opportunity for professional development for those involved in the higher education sector is offered by Erasmus Plus, the "European Union Programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport for the 2021-2027 period" (European Commission, 2024). The advantage of such international tools for skills enhancement (e.g., Erasmus Plus scholarships) is that they are not limited to technical training (hard skills), but also contribute to the development of non-technical competences, namely soft skills.

In light of these considerations, the following section draws on specialized literature to identify the main non-technical competences that students may develop during Erasmus Plus mobilities. In the same time, it explores the motivations behind students' decisions to apply for such opportunities.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Hard and Soft Skills: Conceptual Framework

In general terms, skills are defined as "the ability to perform a task well" (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021, p. 9). Consequently, the presence or absence of the necessary skills for a given activity can be evaluated based on the outcomes of an individual's actions. According to an official European Union document, skills are further described as "the ability and capacity to carry out processes and use the existing knowledge to achieve results" (European Union, 2018). This more comprehensive definition underscores the foundational role of knowledge in the development of skills. Building upon these definitions, within the context of the labor market, competencies can be understood as "what is required of workers for performing a specific task and describes processes leading to relevant performance in particular situations" (Hurrell *et al.*, 2012, p. 165). Accordingly, employees are able to contribute effectively to the successful execution of their responsibilities, provided that their skills align with the demands of their positions. Therefore, individuals bear the responsibility for self-assessment and for undertaking tasks they are confident in mastering and completing successfully. By possessing the competencies required for their roles, employees can work more efficiently, optimizing both time and effort (Remedios, 2012). Moreover, through the acquisition of competencies and with the support of innovation, employees can make a direct contribution to enhancing the economic performance of their organizations (Hendarman and Cantner, 2018).

One category of skills possessed by every individual is hard skills. These pertain to the execution of concrete tasks and are generally based on knowledge acquired during studies at technical or higher education institutions (Lamri and Lubart, 2023). Examples of such skills include "production processes competence", "marketing competence" and "human resource management competence" (Riyanti *et al.*, 2016, p. 123). Specifically, these skills refer to certain mechanisms, procedures, tools, or various methods that individuals are expected to follow or apply precisely (Azim *et al.*, 2010).

The second category of skills analyzed in this study, which is of particular interest, comprises soft skills. Commonly referred to as "non-technical skills", they can be defined as "non-technical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts" (Hurrell *et al.*, 2012, p. 162). These skills can be considered a support mechanism for the previously described competencies, enabling organizations to fully leverage the technical expertise of their employees (Wesley *et al.*, 2017). Non-technical competencies simultaneously provide added value to both organizations and individuals (Mohammed *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, their absence may limit professional progress (Costantino and Rodzinka, 2022). According to a study, among the most sought-after non-technical competencies are critical thinking, creativity, and complex problem-solving (Costantino and Rodzinka, 2022). To better understand their impact, these skills can be divided into two categories. The first refers to interpersonal skills, emphasizing how a person interacts and communicates with others, while the second group pertains to intrapersonal skills, focusing on self-management and personal regulation (Laker and Powell, 2011). Examples include "self-confidence"; "discipline"; "independence"; "cooperation"; "honesty"; "fair"; "creative and innovative"; "never give up" (Riyanti *et al.*, 2016, pp. 123-124).

### 2.2. The Erasmus Plus Programme in the context of Higher Education sector

One of the major challenges in the field of skills development is their potential degradation, which stems from the lack of a systematic effort to continuously enhance and adapt them to the dynamics of everyday change (Costantino and Rodzinka, 2022). A key actor capable of addressing this issue is the higher education system. By its very structure, it has the capacity to support the strengthening and adjustment of both hard and soft skills among students. These two categories of competencies can be developed through standard academic activities, such as lectures, seminars, or laboratory work, as well as through extracurricular engagement. The latter may include, among others, the following types of initiatives: organizing and participating in conferences, workshops, business incubators, or competitions; engaging in volunteer work; and taking part in international study or traineeship mobilities.

International mobilities, the latter initiatives mentioned, are most frequently accessed through the Erasmus Plus Programme. Currently, no fewer than 33 countries are involved in such international exchanges, of which 27 are European Union Member States, and six are third countries associated with the programme: North Macedonia, Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Liechtenstein, and Türkiye (European Commission, 2024). Additionally, there are other third countries not associated with the programme, whose participation is subject to specific regulatory conditions (European Commission, 2024).

This programme targets a wide range of sectors, including: higher education, school education, vocational education and training, adult education, youth, and sport (European Commission, 2024). In the field of Higher Education, according to preliminary data, between 2014 and 2024, more than 4,192,000 individuals participated in an Erasmus Plus mobility in European Union Member States or in third countries associated with the programme, whether students, academic staff, or administrative personnel (European Commission, 2025). Moreover, according to the same source, over 61,880 projects were funded in the Higher Education sector through the Erasmus Plus Programme during the same period, with a total budget exceeding EUR 15.5 billion and involving approximately 101,290 organisations (European Commission, 2025).

Through the opportunities it offers, the Erasmus Plus Programme enables students to undertake, for a limited period, academic activities abroad at various partner higher education institutions or internships within organisations active in the labour market, regardless of their profile, such as enterprises, research institutes, laboratories, NGOs, or other relevant workplaces (European Commission, 2024). These scholarships support participants in developing both major categories of skills, hard and soft, thus preparing them for integration into the labour market upon graduation.

### **2.3. The Erasmus Plus Programme and the development of students' soft skills**

Individual students may be motivated by distinct factors when deciding to apply for an Erasmus Plus mobility. For example, a study conducted by a Portuguese university identifies several key motivations, including "achieving distinction from national peers", "meeting the requirements of national employers", "enhancing the possibility of an international career", and "developing career-oriented skills" (Soares and Mosquera, 2019). These motivations highlight the importance attributed to enhancing students' employability following the completion of their mobility experiences. Furthermore, these drivers also reflect students' aspirations to secure employment within an international professional context.

Another study, conducted among students at a Romanian university, highlights a series of factors that influenced the decision to participate in an international mobility program or could motivate students who have not yet benefited from such an opportunity. Among the key determinants are: "aspiration to study in an international language", "opportunity for personal and professional development", "enhancement of career opportunities", "improvement of language skills", "gaining cultural experience", "experience living in a foreign country", and "desire to step out of the comfort zone" (Drugă, 2024). These motivations underscore students' desire to develop both hard and soft skills through international scholarships. Thus, the impact of the Erasmus Plus program can be recognized, as it combines these two dimensions through the opportunities it offers.

Considering the aforementioned aspects, it is essential to also address the soft skills that can be developed through international student exchanges, alongside technical skills. An international mobility program is regarded as high-quality due to its added value, namely its contribution to the development of non-technical skills (Confalonieri *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the following paragraphs will present some of the soft skills that can be enhanced as a result of Erasmus Plus experiences.

According to Soares and Mosquera (2019), students can develop a range of essential competencies through participation in such programs, including 'career-orientation skills', 'adaptability skills', 'managerial skills', 'personal skills', and 'teamwork skills'. Once abroad, students are required to adapt to a new personal and academic environment, collaborate with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, independently manage the planning of various activities, and, importantly, focus on academic tasks that broaden their horizons for future career opportunities.

According to a study conducted by Nada and Legutko (2022), the following elements were identified as transformative factors for students participating in Erasmus Plus experiences: 'self-confidence', 'independence', 'discipline', 'spontaneity', 'courage', 'adaptability', 'self-efficacy', 'openness', 'Europeanness', and 'communication skills'. Following such mobility experiences, beneficiaries often become more willing to apply again or to pursue other challenges they had previously overlooked. Moreover, an Erasmus Plus scholarship can foster a sense of belonging to the European community, alongside a desire to understand and promote its values in the future.

Another study highlights the advantages reported by students who have participated in international mobility programs. These include: 'acquisition of independent living skills'; 'acquisition of valuable future work skills'; 'cultural understanding'; 'English language skills progression'; 'easy adaptation to new environments'; 'global perspective development'; 'growth in maturity and confidence'; 'improved critical thinking abilities'; 'integration into a multicultural environment'; 'international network building'; 'preparedness to become a global citizen'; 'self-evaluation and self-improvement'; and 'teamwork skills enhancement' (Diem *et al.*, 2023). These strengths increase graduates' chances of securing employment suited to their qualifications. Furthermore, the reported benefits demonstrate that such mobility experiences have a positive impact on the personal development of the participants.

Last but not least, some authors have highlighted a range of entrepreneurial skills, often classified within the non-technical competences, that students develop through participation in Erasmus Plus mobility programs. These include: 'creativity'; 'opportunity identification'; 'ideas capitalization'; 'self-awareness'; 'motivation'; 'teamwork'; 'financial literacy'; 'initiative taking'; 'dealing with uncertainty'; 'perseverance'; and 'learning from experiences' (Grosu *et al.*, 2024). The acquisition of these skills through international experiences not only contributes to increased employability but also fosters students' interest in starting their own businesses or utilizing financial tools for saving and investment.

The existence and promotion of such a framework of non-technical skills could positively influence prospective students to apply for Erasmus Plus mobility opportunities. Additionally, it may enhance the business community's interest in recruiting students who have benefited from international scholarships during their studies. Consequently, beneficiaries may gain a competitive advantage over other candidates for available positions within companies.

### **3. Research methodology**

Observing the diverse range of skills that can be acquired through Erasmus Plus experiences dedicated to students, the need arises for higher education institutions to recognize and certify these competencies. This is important because the skills mentioned in the previous section significantly contribute to the personal and professional development of mobility participants.

Furthermore, considering that students' socio-economic situations vary notably from one individual to another, universities should also focus their strategies on developing and promoting educational policies, adapted at the local or national level, to support the development of transversal skills.

In this context, the aim of this research is to identify and present a set of actions that higher education institutions can implement to support the development and recognition of non-technical competencies acquired by students through curricular and extracurricular activities during their university studies. Additionally, the research seeks to determine the key actors (departments; structures) involved in this process.

To achieve these objectives, a qualitative approach will be employed, based on an analysis of relevant specialized literature, with the goal of identifying the most effective solutions and courses of action. The findings of this investigation will be presented in the following section in a structured manner.

#### 4. Findings

Irrespective of the country under consideration, the economic system plays a pivotal role and demands a workforce that is adequately prepared to ensure the efficiency and productivity of professional activities. Success in workplace performance depends on both technical and non-technical competencies (Lamri and Lubart, 2023). Consequently, recruitment authorities should implement evaluation strategies that comprehensively assess these dual skill sets during the personnel selection process. The adoption of such policies has the potential to enhance competitiveness among firms, thereby ultimately benefiting consumers through improved quality of goods and services.

Considering the aforementioned aspects, higher education institutions play a crucial role in the development of competencies. Through the education and training of students, companies can benefit from a workforce that is not only quantitatively sufficient but also qualitatively skilled. It is well recognized that the economic development of each country relies on key pillars, such as its youth (Veličković *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, in the current context, where Artificial Intelligence is rapidly advancing, it is assumed that members of Generation Z, who possess a high level of digital literacy (Giray, 2022), will adopt new technologies more quickly and easily in their professional activities (Andrei *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, it is advisable for universities to offer study programs and opportunities that are increasingly attractive, encouraging students to engage with them proactively.

Nevertheless, a series of challenges may arise that could hinder such a process. These range from technological developments, which for some academic staff represent a test of their capabilities, to the low number of individuals in each country who are eligible and willing to pursue an undergraduate program. Universities may therefore face at least two unfavorable scenarios: either the human resources are inadequately prepared, or the number of students is insufficient for the university to operate effectively. Consequently, two additional critical issues confronting the higher education system may be exacerbated: ensuring the quality of the educational process and the development of relevant competencies among graduates to facilitate their integration into the labor market (Gheorghiu *et al.*, 2021). Beyond these challenges, there are broader events that humanity has faced in recent times, such as various economic crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war between Russia and Ukraine, among others. Given these contexts, the survival of higher education institutions may prove to be a complex mission.

However, one potential solution to address this unfavorable situation is the process of internationalization. This represents one of the most important policies that universities should adopt to ensure their effective functioning. By developing and implementing robust internationalization strategies, stakeholders in this sector can contribute to strengthening the educational process, facilitating cultural interaction, fostering global academic networks, and, not least, preparing students for integration into a globalized society (Duhnea and Moraru, 2025).

The instrument through which these objectives can be achieved is represented by international student mobility (Doda *et al.*, 2024). Despite existing challenges, students increasingly demonstrate interest in international experiences in various forms (Duhnea and Moraru, 2024). However, to be attractive, universities should enhance their institutional image by implementing measures that consider the following aspects: academic reputation; ranking positions in international league tables; language programs; connections with various industries; career development opportunities for students; and financial incentives or scholarships (Gutema *et al.*, 2024).

Recognizing the importance of non-technical skills in the development of local economies, alongside the promotion of international mobility, universities should adopt programs that support the development of these competencies among students (Bardales-Cárdenas *et al.*, 2024). Such initiatives could also be implemented at the national level, thereby avoiding the emergence of language barriers. Participation in these sessions would contribute to students' personal development while simultaneously enhancing their employment prospects compared to peers who do not benefit from such programs (John, 2009). Moreover, through the integration of policies of this nature, the evolving role of higher education institutions in fostering entrepreneurship and innovation among students becomes increasingly evident (Jurgelevičius and Raišienė, 2024).

Thus, in addition to their traditional missions of teaching and research, universities, by contributing to economic development through innovation and knowledge transfer, will further establish themselves as entrepreneurial institutions (Tripa *et al.*, 2025).

These represent several formal methods that national authorities, together with higher education institutions, can implement. One informal approach that could be proposed is the organization of extracurricular events within student dormitories. These environments serve as true learning and living communities (Confalonieri *et al.*, 2016). In such settings, student groups may experience less pressure from academic staff. By providing the ideal framework for experiential learning, students can practice and develop various non-technical skills, such as adaptability, creativity, communication, responsibility, empathy, among others.

Last but not least, Career Counseling and Guidance Centers within universities can play a crucial role in leveraging soft skills. By participating in mentoring and counseling sessions organized by these centers, students can be supported in identifying a professional path that aligns not only with their vocational profile and the technical skills acquired during their academic studies but also with the transversal skills developed throughout their educational journey. This approach significantly reduces the risk of graduates investing time and resources in unsuitable positions that do not reflect their true level of preparation or professional aspirations. These situations could have led to demotivation, job instability, and, in some cases, frequent career reorientation during the early years of employment. Considering that, procedurally, there is no common framework through which higher education institutions formally recognize these competencies to support graduates' employability (Cinque, 2016), participation in career counseling and guidance activities may constitute a viable alternative to facilitate appropriate professional integration.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper highlights that, through the tools at their disposal, higher education institutions can make a significant contribution to the development of both students' technical and non-technical skills. Depending on the level of interest and engagement of universities, programs can be promoted that support the balanced development of both categories of competencies.

A strategic component in this regard is represented by the opportunities offered through the Erasmus Plus Program, which facilitates international study and internship mobility. Access to such scholarship by students contributes not only to the deepening of theoretical knowledge but also to the development of a valuable set of transversal competencies, such as adaptability, independence, teamwork, intercultural communication, spontaneity, and others.

However, despite the positive impact of these experiences, a significant challenge remains in the lack of standardized methods for recognizing and validating the non-technical skills acquired. While established evaluation systems such as grades and diplomas exist for technical competencies, similar tools for non-technical skills are still underdeveloped. Therefore, it is imperative that educational authorities and involved institutions prioritize the development of clear methodologies for identifying, measuring, and certifying these abilities.

The present paper has primarily focused on the policies that universities can adopt to promote the development of non-technical skills, particularly through international mobility programs. For future research, we intend to design and administer a questionnaire targeted at students who have benefited from Erasmus Plus mobility experiences, aiming to identify and verify the skills developed throughout these programs. Additionally, a focus group will be conducted with students who have not yet participated in such mobility programs, in order to analyze their perceptions and motivations regarding the opportunity of international mobility.

In conclusion, given the increasingly complex role of universities in preparing future generations of professionals, it is essential for these institutions to encourage student engagement in both curricular and extracurricular activities, conducted at local, national, or international levels. By integrating these complementary experiences, conditions can be created for a comprehensive education that harmonizes technical and non-technical skills, thereby contributing to the adaptability and long-term success of graduates in a globalized labor market.

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