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A Foreign Experience for Life

Follow-up measurement Erasmus+:

Impact on the development of intercultural skills of students in Higher Education

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iii
1 Executive summary	1
2 Introduction	3
2.1 Background	3
2.2 Goal of the study	5
2.3 Design	5
3 Online in-depth Interviews	6
3.1 Response	6
3.1.1 Respondents' background characteristics	7
3.2 Impact on the current life: general feedback in figures	8
3.2.1 Impact on the current personal life	9
3.2.2 Impact on the current professional life	10
3.3 Impact on the current life: a deepening	12
3.3.1 Impact on the current personal life	13
3.3.2 Impact on the current professional life	16
4 Deepening conversations	22
4.1 Response	22
4.1.1 Respondents' background characteristics	22
4.2 Impact of the foreign experience	23
4.2.1 Impact on the personal life	24
4.2.2 Impact on the professional life	25
4.2.3 Expectations, retrospective & impact on the world view	27
5 Synthesis and reflection	29
5.1 Summary	29
5.1.1 Impact on the current personal life	29
5.1.2 Impact on the current professional life	29
5.1.3 Expectations, retrospective, and impact on the world view	30
5.2 Methodological account/discussion	30
5.2.1 Reflection on European goals	32
5.2.2 Reflection on earlier research	33
6 Appendix 1: Tables and figures	35
7 Appendix 2: Deepening Texts	41
7.1 Goals of the Erasmus+ Programme - Background	41

1 Executive summary

Results

Even after the passage of time, the impact of a foreign experience remains tangible in the personal and professional life of former students. With regard to some aspects, the impact of a foreign experience would seem to reinforce students' coming-of-age experience. Personal development and greater self-knowledge, self-reliance, flexibility, social and communicative skills, personal relationships, and an open and interested attitude (towards other cultures) are all aspects that most students develop at that stage of life, regardless of any foreign experience. Also, knowledge of certain languages and cultures, intercultural sensitivity, and an international outlook are aspects (of the personal life) which anyone may acquire, but about which it can be plausibly said they are enhanced by a foreign experience. The same applies to some aspects more relevant to the professional life, such as cooperating and communicating with people from different cultures, having an international perspective, acquiring language skills, and shaping one's career path while at the same time creating an international professional network. Students and former students alike say that also in their professional lives the experience abroad has made a positive contribution to the development of self-reliance, flexibility, an open and interested attitude, acquiring self-knowledge, and job-specific skills. This predominantly positive impact can not be clearly divided into impact either on the personal or professional life: in most cases a degree of interplay is found. Whether the impact is greater on either the personal or professional life was not examined here.

The former students we interviewed within the framework of this study reflected on the impact of their Erasmus+ experience by means of a retrospective. They often did not have any concrete expectations beforehand and embarked on their stay abroad with an open mind. Most of them already had a fairly positive view of Europe and the world: the foreign experience only served to reinforce it. So, their motto was: go on a foreign experience when the opportunity presents itself.

Reflection

In terms of its design, the study consisted of an online questionnaire¹ (N=700) and in-depth interviews (N=11) with students and former students who had earlier taken part in a longitudinal study². In this way, impact could be determined over the years: whereas the previous study was conducted relatively soon after the actual foreign experience, this is now quite some time ago. We do see, however, that most of these earlier results have been confirmed: earlier research² showed that students who went abroad often had a more positive self-image and a larger degree of self-reliance, openness to travel and other cultures, cultural orientation, and a more international and European perspective compared to those who did not go. The study at hand does not contradict these conclusions, but also has not made a direct comparison between those students with and without a foreign experience. We did find that the interviewed respondents for the most part came from internationally oriented families. It was also found in 2020 that students had become more flexible after a foreign experience, had greater confidence in others or were more internationally oriented than students without an experience abroad: here, these effects are confirmed by those who went abroad. Whereas earlier no significant effect on a stronger level of identification as a European was found, our current findings in any case do not contradict the expectation

1 The questionnaire utilised a *mass qualitative* approach which left room for open answers (qualitative) which respondents subsequently assigned to predefined aspects (quantitative). This renders the coding reliable, as it was carried out by the respondents themselves.

2 Korte, de, K., Nas, K., Lodewick, J., & M. Brink (2020). Van inclusie naar Impact: Een meerjarige studie naar de impact van het Erasmus+ programma onder HO-studenten. Nijmegen: ResearchNed (From Inclusion to Impact: a multi-annual study into the impact of the Erasmus+ programme among students in Higher Education).

that a foreign experience has a positive effect on identifying oneself as European even after some years have passed. Many European goals are realised: we definitely found improved skills and competencies in language, communication, professional content, flexibility, self-reliance, an open and interested attitude, and intercultural sensitivity in all its dimensions. The respondents were not explicitly asked about improved digital and green skills, and they were not brought up in passing. As stated, the - possibly reinforced - coming-of-age was identified, as was an even higher appreciation of the advantages and positive aspects of the EU. It also seems like it would be less of a step to go and live and work abroad after having a foreign experience. Not much can be said about the transition to higher levels of education as a goal: the respondents had all been studying at universities or universities of applied sciences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The fact that even after five years or more the generally positive impact of a foreign experience is still felt by the majority of students and former students is reflected in this study, both in the answers given and in the enthusiastic participation figures³, allowing us to draw the conclusion that the impact of a foreign experience seems to be long-lasting. Both in the personal and the professional sphere there still is a continuing positive influence on various aspects. We should add the nuance that students who did not go abroad probably went through a certain degree of development in these areas as well, but that it is probable that the foreign experience has a booster effect, especially on aspects such as intercultural competencies and perspectives. This positive effect needn't be limited to an international context, but possibly also has added value within the national context, comprised of so many different people and cultures, as a whole, and for the outlook on Europe and the world.

In light of the experienced positive impact we found in both the personal and professional spheres of the students and former students' lives after more than five years, it would seem advisable to put this experience within the reach of as many people as possible. In this regard, this study can be helpful in emphasising what these positive effects are. In doing so, it would be a good idea to follow participants in the Erasmus+ programme for a longer period of time, so as to even better determine the impact on various aspects of life, both in the short and the long term. As most of the respondents have said: if the opportunity for a foreign experience presents itself, grab it!

3 It is possible that students and former students with positive experiences are more inclined to participate in follow-up research and that such respondents would give socially desirable answers. Also, a negative experience may yet have a positive impact (for instance, on the personal development). The design of the questionnaire, however, allowed for the diversity of experiences and follow-up questions were asked during the interviews.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

Established in 1987 by the European union, the Erasmus programme⁴ had as its original goal to further cooperation between universities and institutions for higher education across Europe⁵. This primarily meant that an organised and integrated system was created which facilitated cross-border student exchanges. In 2014, the programme was expanded through the amalgamation of a number of different EU programmes aimed at education, training, and youth and sport under the common name Erasmus+⁶, allowing people from all age brackets to gain new knowledge and experiences across Europe.

So, gaining foreign experiences takes centre stage at Erasmus+. The programme offers the opportunity of a mobility experience to, among others, young people, adult learners, students, teachers, and professionals, allowing them to acquire knowledge and experience at various organisations and universities across Europe.⁷ Over the years, the organisation behind the Erasmus+ programme has gained extensive experience with granting subsidies to these groups and has been focused on the expansion of the programme. The first funding period (2014-2020) was followed by a second period (2021-2027) in 2021, with a budget of around 26.2 billion euro⁸. The focus in this latter period is on increasing students' chances of participation in the programme, broadening its target group, and offering partnership projects to organisations in addition to the traditional mobility exchange projects. Here, the emphasis is on the qualitative impact of the mobility experience, with as its goal *"a more inclusive and coherent, green, and digital world"*⁹. The subsidies are used, among other objectives, as an instrument to promote the participation and integration of people in disadvantaged situations and to guarantee equal opportunities. Today, the programme is even more dedicated to reaching people living in remote areas, of different age groups, and with diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds¹⁰. In addition, Erasmus+ now also focuses on international projects and cooperation between institutions. For many years now, this has been making a contribution to international economic growth, employment, equal opportunities, and inclusion in Europe. Front and centre to this policy¹¹ are shared European norms and values, such as social integration and intercultural understanding. Since 2014, more than 13 million students and professionals have taken part in the Erasmus+ programmes in the 33 participating countries.

Earlier longitudinal research conducted by ResearchNed in 2018-2019 into the impact and goals of the Erasmus+ programme among students in higher vocational and scientific education shows that a mobility experience yields many positive experiences^{12,13}. Students who went abroad during their study say that the

4 European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students

5 Erasmus to Erasmus+: History, funding and future. (n.d.). Erasmus+. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/nl/about-erasmus/history-funding-and-future>

6 These were, among others, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius, Grundtvig, Youth in Action and Jean Monnet.

7 Erasmus+ (n.d.). The Erasmus+ programme. Obtained via: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/het-programma>

8 Erasmus to Erasmus+: History, funding and future. (n.d.). Erasmus+. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/nl/about-erasmus/history-funding-and-future>

9 European Commissie (2021). Erasmus+ Programme guide. Consulted via https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-erasmusplus-programme-guide_v2_nl.pdf

10 Part A: General information about the Erasmus+ programme. (n.d.). Erasmus+. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a>

11 Erasmus+ (n.d.). The goal of the programme. Obtained via: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/het-programma/doel>

12 Kurver, B., Nas, K., Korte, de, K. & J. Warps (2019). Buitenlandervaring voor iedereen? Nulmeting naar impact en inclusiviteit van het Erasmus+-mobiliteitsprogramma. Nijmegen: ResearchNed (A Foreign Experience for All? Zero measurement into impact and inclusivity of the Erasmus+ mobility programme).

13 Korte, de, K., Nas, K., Lodewick, J., & M. Brink (2020). Van inclusie naar Impact: Een meerjarige studie naar de impact van het Erasmus+ programma onder HO-studenten. Nijmegen: ResearchNed (From Inclusion to Impact: A multi-annual study into the impact of the Erasmus+ programme among students in higher education).

resulting personal development (such as gaining greater self-confidence) and the acquisition of intercultural skills have had the greatest impact on their current life¹⁴. The term intercultural skills is used here to denote the skills allowing people from different cultures to communicate with each other and bridge intercultural differences in living and working together¹⁵. The students participating in this study also stated that as a result of their stay abroad they had become more flexible, self-assured, and more open to new cultures as they were challenged more to develop skills that are important for active participation in the European society¹⁶. For that matter, the study also showed that assertive students who take a greater interest in Europe more often go abroad as part of an Erasmus+ programme than students who take less of an interest¹⁷.

Over the past few years, internationalisation among young people has also been stimulated by the Onderwijsraad (Education Council of the Netherlands)¹⁸. It seeks to promote greater ‘international competence’ among students, which is to say, possessed of greater intercultural skills and experiencing a broader worldly-wise personal development and socialisation. Earlier studies into intercultural skills have shown that an Erasmus+ programme does in fact have this impact on students. They are said to have a stronger cultural orientation, fewer problems interacting with people from a different cultural background, and take a greater interest in traveling¹⁹. These students also consider themselves to be better equipped for the international labour market and they have better professional language skills because, among other things, they speak multiple languages or have greater fluency at a professional level.

Erasmus+ Impact Tool

The National Agency (NA) has developed an impact tool²⁰ to gain insight into the effects of the Erasmus+ projects on the society and individuals. It allows the NA to measure the effects of the Erasmus+ programme on the students and the society in a systematic manner and to assess to what extent projects’ goals are being realised. This study uses the Erasmus+’s *Theory of Change* (see Figure 1). Its focus is primarily on the *outcome* and *impact* that the Erasmus+ programme has on students and professionals. The emphasis here is on the skills, knowledge, and behavioural changes the student has acquired as a result of the mobility programme, where a distinction is made between the *outcome* on the participant’s personal and their professional life. This primarily involves learning a new language or improving existing language skills and acquiring a more international outlook. In addition, the eventual impact of a foreign experience with Erasmus+ is examined. This involves, among other things, the fundamental changes in the extent to which people are, or believe they are, prepared for the national and international labour market.

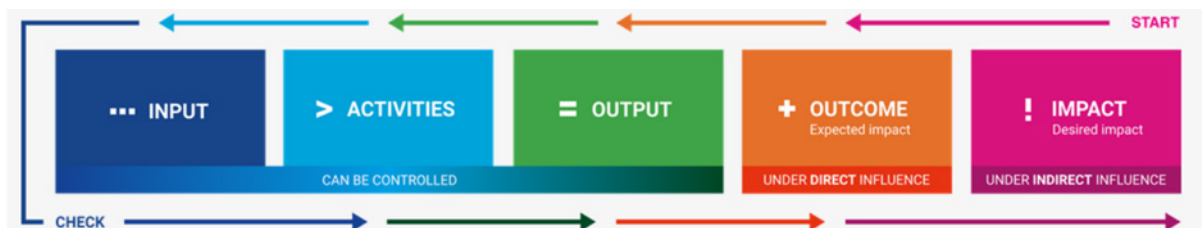


Figure 1: Erasmus+ Theory of Change, source: www.erasmusplus.nl

- 14 This research focuses primarily on the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, behavioural change, and the possibly improved self-confidence. Being open to and able to cope with new cultures as well as proficiency in a new language are also included in the examined intercultural skills from De Korte et al., (2019).
- 15 Messelink, A. (2019). Internationale competenties: Een model over de leeropbrengsten van internationalisering (International competencies: A model of the learning outcomes of internationalisation). The Hague: Nuffic.
- 16 Erasmus+ (z.d.). The Erasmus+ programme. Obtained via: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/het-programma>
- 17 Korte, de, K., Nas, K., Lodewick, J., & M. Brink (2020). Van inclusie naar Impact: Een meerjarige studie naar de impact van het Erasmus+ programma onder HO-studenten. Nijmegen: ResearchNed (From Inclusion to Impact: A multi-annual study into the impact of the Erasmus+ programme among students in higher education).
- 18 Onderwijsraad (2016). Internationaliseren met ambitie. Onderwijsraad: Den Haag (Internationalisation with ambition. Education Council of the Netherlands)
- 19 See Kurver et al., (2019) and Korte et al., (2020).
- 20 <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/impacttool-mobiliteit#outcomeHeading>

2.2 Goal of the study

Supplemental to earlier research and the Erasmus+ Impact Tool, the present study, at the request of the NA, examines the outcome and impact of the Erasmus+ programme on the current personal and professional life of students and former students in higher vocational education and training and in scientific education. The main question here is:

“What is the impact of the Erasmus+ programme on the development of intercultural skills among students in Higher Education in the long term?”

This question has been broken down into the following subjects: intercultural skills, impact of the programme on the personal and the professional life in retrospect, and the expectations at the time.

2.3 Design

In order to answer the research questions, in-depth online interviews were conducted via questionnaires (a mass *qualitative approach*) and deepening conversations were held in the form of interviews. The first part of this report examines the outcomes of the in-depth interviews conducted online (questionnaire research): see chapter 3. The second part presents the results of the deepening conversations (interview research): see chapter 4. Finally, chapter 5 includes the summary, synthesis, and the reflection. Appendix 1 (chapter six) includes the results from chapter 3 in the form of tables.

3 Online in-depth Interviews

3.1 Response

For the purpose of this study, 1,375 respondents who in the earlier study²¹ indicated they would be agreeable to participate were successfully approached. The questionnaire was open from 23 October till 12 November 2023. A reminder was sent twice to prompt the respondents to fill in the questionnaire (after all). A total of 700 respondents (51%) filled in the questionnaire. The research population consists of graduates of higher vocational and scientific education who spent a minimum of one period of one month (or less) abroad during their studies. This is why the respondents who did not go abroad (N=29) and respondents who only went abroad during their MBO (Vocational Education and Training) (N=27) were removed from the research population. Also, those respondents who submitted incomplete questionnaires were left out of the analyses (N=95), as the core data on impact are missing for this group. Respondents who did not give their explicit permission to process the results were also excluded (N=5). This led to an eventual number of 566 respondents (40%).

Method

For this part of the study, we used a *mass qualitative* approach. It allowed us to gather and analyse qualitative information from a larger number of respondents than would have been possible within budgetary limits using traditional interviews. To this end, the qualitative and quantitative techniques were integrated: by first asking the respondents to state in their own words what the foreign experience had meant for their current personal and professional life, and next by making them state to which of the aspects presented to them this primarily referred to, robust results were collected from large numbers of respondents. The aspects²² were selected in consultation with the NA and based on the earlier ResearchNed studies into the impact of the Erasmus+ programme. A short explanation was included with some of these aspects. Next, the respondents indicated whether the impact of the ticked aspects on their personal and/or professional life had been positive or negative. Table 1 shows in brief what the question on the impact of the current personal life looked like; it is comparable to the one regarding the impact on the current professional life.

Table 1: Mass qualitative approach of impact on current personal life

<i>What has your foreign experience meant for your current personal life? Or, in other words: what would you be missing today if you hadn't had the foreign experience? Try to put this into words as precisely as you can below</i>
<i>[large response field]</i>

21 Korte, de, K., Nas, K., Lodewick, J., & M. Brink (2020). Van inclusie naar Impact: Een meerjarige studie naar de impact van het Erasmus+ programma onder HO-studenten. Nijmegen: ResearchNed (From Inclusion to Impact: A multi-annual study into the impact of the Erasmus+ programme among students in higher education).

22 Professional skills, flexibility with regard to new situations, social skills, affinity with the country, living/working abroad, working for an international business/organisation, social contacts, intercultural competencies, open and interested attitude, (general) knowledge of language, culture and communication, skills pertaining to communicating and collaborating in international contexts, international orientation, engagement with and awareness of societal and global developments, awareness of international developments in and pursuit of trade and occupation, personal development, self-reliance, social skills and other aspects.

<p>You have just elucidated what this period abroad has brought you for your current life. [Repeat answer]</p> <p>Which of the aspects of your personal life listed below does this specifically refer to? <i>(Multiple answers possible. Some of the answer options come with an explanation. Place your cursor over the response options to view it.)</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Professional skills ⊙ Flexibility with regard to new situations ⊙ Social skills ⊙ Affinity with the country ⊙ I live/work abroad ⊙ I work for an international business/organisation ⊙ Social contacts ⊙ Intercultural competencies [<i>i: Knowledge, attitude and skills allowing you to successfully interact with people from other (linguistic and cultural) backgrounds</i>] ⊙ An open and interested attitude ⊙ (General) knowledge of language, culture, and communication ⊙ Communicative and collaborative skills in international contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ International orientation [<i>i: Awareness of and engagement with international themes, bodies, and perspectives</i>] ⊙ Engagement with and awareness of social and global developments. ⊙ Awareness of international professional developments and practices ⊙ Personal development [<i>i: This concerns individual competencies (attitudes, knowledge, and skills) which you have acquired or developed further during your stay abroad</i>] ⊙ Self-reliance ⊙ Social skills ⊙ Other aspects

The quantitative data concerning, for instance, background characteristics of respondents and outcomes with regard to measured impact, after cleaning have been made transparent by means of various statistical analyses and are discussed in paragraph 3.1.1 and 3.2. The corresponding tables are included in Appendix 1 (see chapter 6).

Based on the divisions made by the respondents, their open answers have been subdivided into aspects that were ticked as being applicable to the answer given (taking into consideration the distinction between impact on the personal and the professional life). The respondents often indicated multiple aspects which their answer pertained to: impact on the personal life pertained to eight aspects on average, compared to an average of six for the professional life. The distinction between impact on the current personal and professional life in many cases proved to be somewhat theoretical, or, in the words of one respondent: “much from the personal life translates into the professional life.” In paragraph 3.3, we clarify how the open answers were analysed.

3.1.1 Respondents’ background characteristics

At the time of their foreign experience, most of the respondents (66%) were studying at a university, whereas 30 percent were in higher vocational education and training (appendix 1, tabel 7). The remaining respondents were following a mix of programmes. The majority (97%) have since completed their programme; just under 3 % are still studying (Appendix 1, tabel 8). Of the respondents, the majority identified as women (70%, 28,5% as men) and a small group of 1.5 percent identified as ‘different’ or answered “I don’t want to say” (appendix 1, table 9).

The largest group of respondents (69%) spent one period abroad (appendix 1, tabel 10); over 20 percent two periods, the remainder (10%) spent three or more periods abroad. More than half of the students and former students (54%) spent a total of about six months abroad (appendix 1, tabel 11). Around 15 percent spent around three months abroad and an almost equally large group between six months and a year. More than 10 percent spent a total of longer than a year abroad during their studies.

During this period, three quarters of the respondents went abroad within Europe, just under 200 respondents outside of Europe (see Figure 2 and Appendix 1, figure 6). Outside of Europe, most people went to the United States (n=38), Australia (n=29), Canada (n=19), Japan (n=15) and South Africa (n=12).

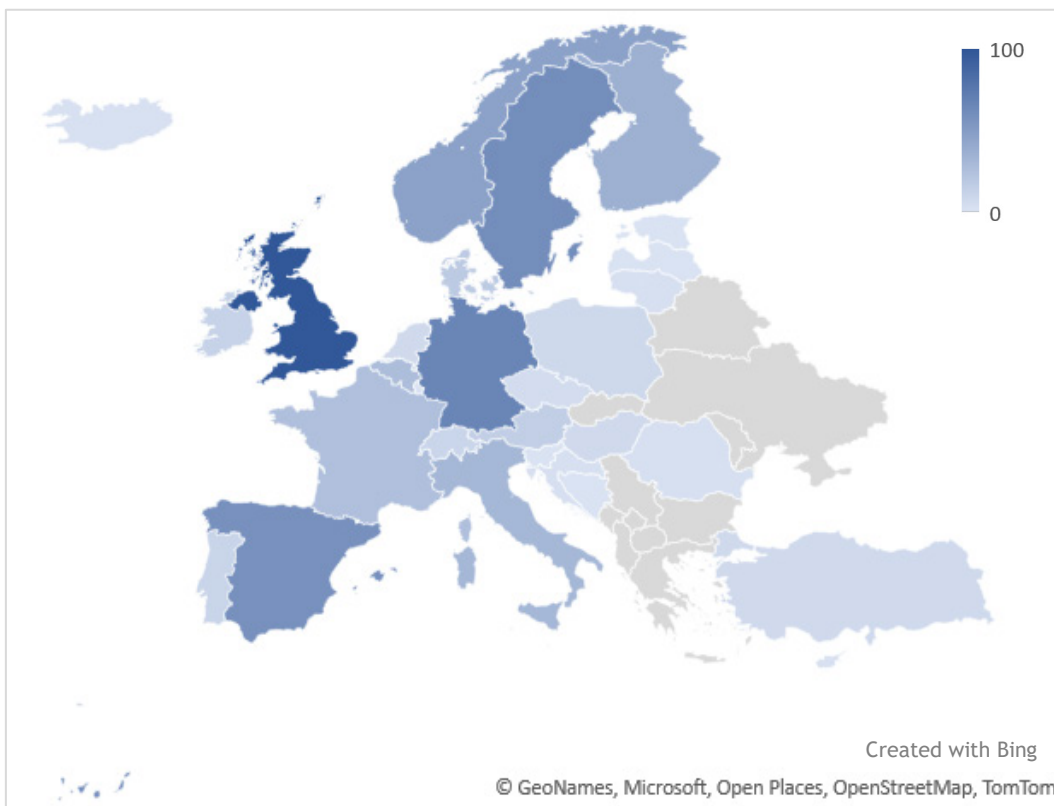


Figure 2: In which country did you stay during your period abroad? If you spent more than three periods abroad, select the three most recent stays. (multiple answers possible) (N=791)²³

The majority of respondents (55%) went abroad for their studies via Erasmus+ (appendix 1, tabel 12); a smaller number of the respondents (15%) went on an internship, either in combination with studying (11%) and a graduation thesis (3%) or not. The majority (46%) of the students and former students financed their stay abroad via an Erasmus+ grant in combination with their own means (appendix 1, tabel 13), over ten percent used only the Erasmus+ grant (some in combination with another grant at 2%, or another grant and own means, 5%). Just under 20 percent of the respondents funded their foreign experience without a grant. Seven percent used just their own means, and an equally large number used their own means in combination with a different type of grant.

3.2 Impact on the current life: general feedback in figures

The respondents used a scale ranging from one (very negative) to ten (very positive) to grade the impact of their then foreign experience on their personal life today. The overwhelming majority (97%) of the respondents state that their stay abroad has a positive to very positive impact on their personal life today (figure 3). On average, they scored an 8.4 on the impact scale. For verification purposes²⁴, we tested some links between background characteristics and the stated impact on the personal life. We then see that,

²³ More foreign stays were ticked than the total number of respondents as over 30% of the students went abroad for more than one period.

²⁴ Bivariate analysis

firstly, the longer the period the students and former students spent abroad, the higher their score on the personal life impact scale (see appendix 1, table 3 and appendix 1, figure 7). There is no significant difference in the average scores of men vs women. The respondents who went abroad for multiple goals, on average experienced a stronger impact on their personal life compared to those who went abroad for just one goal (see appendix 1, table 4). Bivariate testing shows that this connection is significant. There is, however, also a connection between the length of the foreign experience and whether or not it involved multiple goals/activities. When we check²⁵ for the total duration of the foreign stay, the connection between one or multiple purposes and the impact on the present-day personal life disappears. This is why the impact of a combination of goals for a foreign experience on the personal life is explained by the duration of the foreign experience.

The same question was asked regarding the impact on the current professional life. Here as well, around 90 percent of the respondents state that the then foreign stay has a positive impact on their professional life today. On average, the respondents scored a 7.5 on the impact scale. Here as well, we looked at the connections between some of the background characteristics and the level of impact^{Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.}, and, in general, the longer the period the students spent abroad (in total), the higher the grade they awarded to the impact on their current professional life (see Appendix 1, table 4 and figure 8). As regards the impact on the professional life, men reported a slightly stronger/more positive impact compared to women (significant). When looking at the difference between respondents who went abroad for just one compared to multiple goals, we found that the respondents who went abroad for multiple goals experienced a significantly^{Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.} stronger impact on their current professional life. As we found earlier that there is a connection between the duration of the foreign experience and the number of goals the respondent had for their stay abroad, we checked here as well for the total length of the stay. The check showed that students and former students who had been abroad for multiple goals experienced a significantly²⁴ higher impact on their professional life (as opposed to the impact on their personal life), regardless of the total length of their stay abroad.

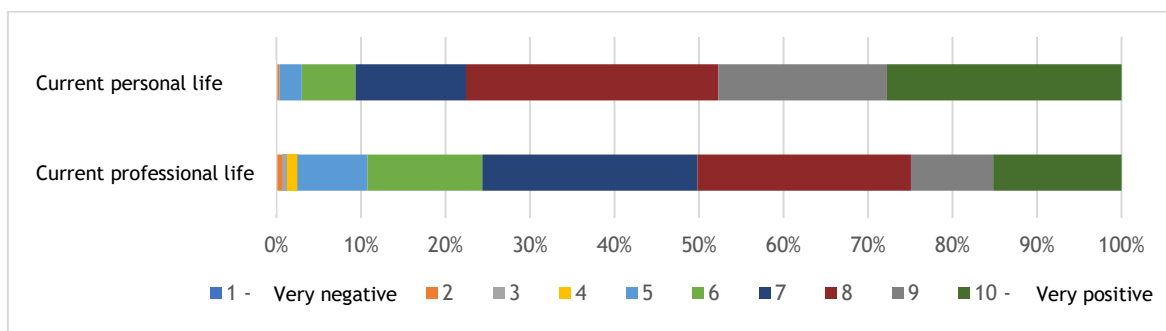


Figure 3: When looking back on the time you spent abroad for your study, what has been the impact of that period on your life today? (N = 566)

3.2.1 Impact on the current personal life

As clarified earlier, the respondents first gave an open answer to the question of what their foreign experience has meant for their current personal life. Or, in other words, what would they be missing today if they hadn't had the foreign experience? Next, they were asked which on a list of aspects this specifically pertained to. Here, multiple answers were possible. On average, the respondents selected eight aspects. Only in a negligible number of cases did respondents state that an aspect has had a negative impact on their current

²⁵ Linear regression analysis

personal life (see figure 4). When the respondent did not name the aspect in their own story, this was regarded as no impact. Respondents who did tick an aspect on the list were asked whether the impact had been either positive or negative.

The impact on the current personal life was most often felt in the area of the personal development experienced by the participants: 84 percent of the respondents said so (figure 4). Self-reliance (80%), (general) knowledge of languages, culture, and communication (67%), flexibility (65%), social skills (64%) and an open and interested attitude (63%) are often mentioned as aspects of the personal life impacted by the foreign experience even today. With regard to the personal life, least often mentioned is the impact of the foreign experience on living and working abroad (15%), working for an international business (16%), awareness of international developments and pursuit of a profession (20%), professional skills (26%) or other aspects (3%).

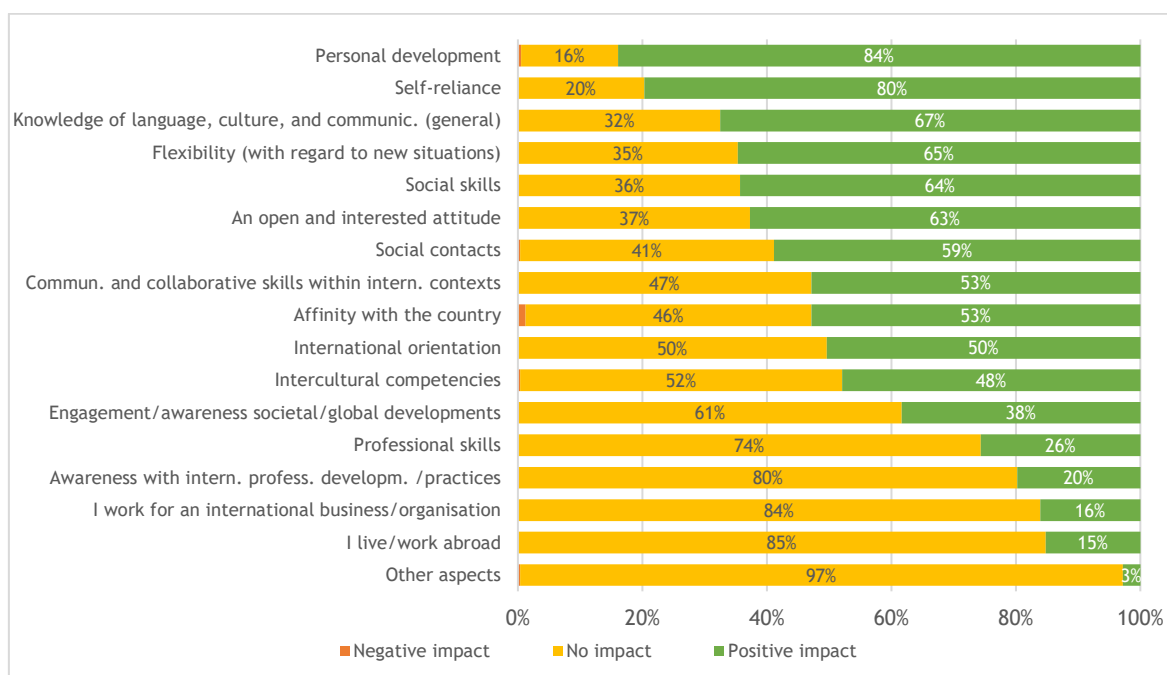


Figure 4: Impact of the then foreign experience on the personal life today, aspects²⁶ sorted by percentage of positive impact (N=566)

3.2.2 Impact on the current professional life

As was the case with regard to the impact of the foreign experience on their current personal life, the respondents stated in open answers what their foreign experience has meant for their current professional life (what they would be missing today had they not had the foreign experience). Here as well, they subsequently indicated which from a list of aspects of the professional life today this pertained most strongly to. Multiple answers were possible. On average, the respondents selected 6 aspects. In just a negligible number of cases respondents indicated that an aspect has had a negative impact on their current professional life. When the respondents did not name the aspect in their own story, this is regarded as no impact.

26 Aspects abbreviated in the figure pertain, in full, to (in order of most to least occurring); ‘personal development [i: This concerns individual competencies (attitudes, knowledge and skills) which you acquired or developed further during your stay abroad]’, ‘flexibility with regard to new situations’, ‘skills for communicating and collaborating in international contexts’, ‘international orientation [i: awareness of and engagement with international themes, organisations and perspectives]’, ‘intercultural competencies [i: Knowledge, attitudes, and skills enabling you to successfully interact with people from other (language and cultural) backgrounds]’, ‘engagement with and awareness of societal and global developments’ and ‘awareness of international developments and pursuit of a trade/profession’.

Respondents who did tick the aspect on the list were subsequently asked whether the impact had been either positive or negative.

Of the respondents, 65 percent continue to experience the impact of their foreign experience on their professional life because of the acquired skills in communication and collaboration in international contexts (figure 5). Self-reliance (51%), professional skills (50%), flexibility when confronted with new situations (47%), an open and interested attitude (46%), and personal development (45%) were also often mentioned as aspects of their professional life on which the foreign experience still has an impact today. An affinity with the country (16%), living and/or working abroad (16%), social contacts (22%), working for an international company (24%) as well as other aspects (5%) were mentioned least often as aspects on which the foreign experience continues to have a (positive) impact on the professional life.

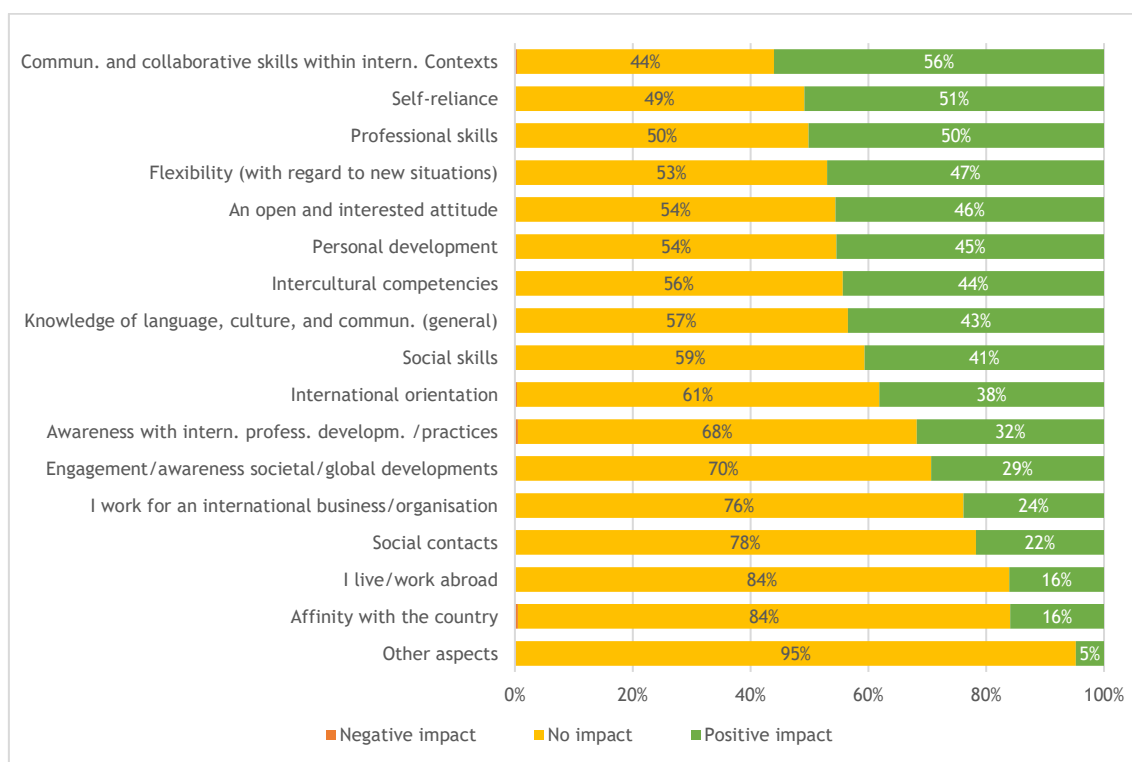


Figure 5: Impact of the then foreign experience on the current professional life, aspects²⁷ sorted by the percentage of positive impact: (N=566)

There are few big differences between the aspects mentioned with regard to the impact on someone's personal and professional life: self-reliance and flexibility are both considered important aspects. We do see, however, that in the personal life aspects related to social contacts or attitudes towards cultures more often had a positive impact compared with more 'work-related' aspects such as professional skills and working for an international business. These aspects did have, as was to be expected, more impact on the respondents' professional life.

27 Aspects which were abbreviated in the Figure, in full pertain to (in order of most to least occurring); 'skills for communicating and collaborating in international contexts', 'flexibility with regard to new situations', 'personal development [I: This concerns individual competencies (attitudes, knowledge and skills) which you acquired or developed further during your stay abroad]', 'intercultural competencies [I: Knowledge, attitude, and skills enabling you to successfully interact with people from other (language, culture) backgrounds]', 'international orientation [I: awareness of and engagement with international themes, organisations and perspectives]', 'awareness of international developments and pursuit of a profession' and 'engagement with and awareness of societal and global developments'.

3.3 Impact on the current life: a deepening

As was already clear from the above outcomes, the majority of respondents finds that the experienced impact on the current personal and professional life is positive. And yet, 20 respondents experience a negative impact on their current personal life (see below) with regard to some of the aspects, and 17 students and former students say that they are experiencing a negative impact on their current professional life. This is a very small minority, but this group as well will be briefly discussed in the paragraphs below.

The open answers they provided were thematically analysed to obtain clarity about how the respondents understand certain influential aspects. The open answers, which were evaluated in their entirety, will be discussed in the two following paragraphs. As clarified in paragraph 3.1, the respondents themselves linked the open answers to the suggested aspects. The 566 open answers were recorded in an Excel database and allocated to the 17 different aspects. This means that there were on average more than 30 open answers per aspect to be included in the analysis.

Via filtering, a key aspect was awarded to each open answer in the order of least to most often mentioned aspect. The researchers subsequently analysed the open answers per key aspect awarded. During the analysis, they focused on elements from the open answers pertaining to the aspect mentioned. Answers which were clearly linked to a different aspect were re-awarded. This soon proved to be the right working method, as on nearly all aspects saturation soon occurred with regard to the interpretations mentioned. Per aspect, quotes and clarifications were collected in a document.

As stated, the difference between impact on the current personal and professional level was sometimes a little contrived: *“Much about the personal life in the previous question translates into the professional life.”* In order to be as clear as possible about these differences, the researchers examined the same aspects for both the personal and the professional life.

The content-based analysis showed that the different aspects were not mutually exclusive. For this reason, the findings per aspect were subsumed into a few overarching themes. In the Table on impact on the current personal life (see Table 14), we can see that the aspects of ‘personal development’ and ‘self-reliance’ show a high level of correlation with all other aspects. These aspects were mentioned most often, but almost never as the only one. As to the aspect of ‘knowledge of language, culture, and communication’, 88 percent of the respondents also ticked ‘awareness of international developments in trade or profession’; 80 percent also ticked ‘professional skills’, ‘affinity with the country’, and ‘engagement with and awareness of societal developments’, ‘Intercultural communication’, ‘living and working abroad’, ‘open and interested attitude’ and ‘international orientation’ were also selected by more than 75 percent of this group. Of the respondents who said their foreign experience had affected their flexibility, 81 percent also experienced impact on ‘awareness of international developments in trade or profession’. ‘Professional skills’, ‘social skills’, and ‘working at an international company’ were named by more than 75 percent. The aspect ‘open and interested attitude’ also correlates strongly²⁸ with some of the other aspects, to wit, ‘engagement’ and ‘awareness of societal developments’ (80%), ‘professional skills’ (79%), ‘working at an international company’ (78%), other aspects (78%), ‘awareness of international developments in the profession’ (77%) and ‘international orientation’ (76%). Impact on ‘social skills’ strongly correlates with ‘flexibility’ (76%) and ‘social contacts’ (75%).

28 In the reflection (§5.2.2), we discuss, among other things, earlier research which showed that students who go abroad probably already have other personality traits compared to those who choose not to.

As regards the impact on the professional life, the correlation between the different aspects is generally a little less pronounced (Appendix 1, tabel 15). The aspect 'knowledge of language, culture, and communication correlates strongly with 'affinity with the country' (81%), and the aspect 'social skills' with 'social contacts' (76%).

Based on the above information and further content-related considerations, the researchers arrived at a classification which is briefly clarified in the paragraph below. The information collected per aspect is included in the overarching themes below.

3.3.1 Impact on the current personal life

The overwhelming majority of the respondents are positive about the impact of their foreign experience on their current personal life. What exactly they mean by that is discussed below. As there is much overlap between the open answers given about the different ticked aspects, the original 17 aspects are discussed under five overarching themes: positive impact on personal development, social development, knowledge and skills, intercultural development, and an international outlook. In addition, the general negative impact is also discussed.

Positive impact on personal development

Under this theme, we include the clarification on the aspects of personal development (84%), flexibility (65%), and self-reliance (80%).

As people found themselves in new situations, they **learned much about themselves**: *"I became an adult there"* and *"I know better who I am and what I want."* The foreign experience often engendered personal growth, in self-confidence and self-worth, self-reliance, ability to cope/independence, problem-solving skills, flexibility, and assertiveness (and for some also in spirituality). *"I proved to myself that I can cope when abroad, in a foreign language, and conquer my nerves"* and *"Life and submersion in another culture was a really great experience. To discover who I am in different surroundings and a different culture enriched my personal development."* The respondents now also undertake activities they might not have engaged in before, or certainly not by themselves, learned to better form their own opinions, make choices, and prioritise what they find important in life and: *"I don't think there's anything more valuable than that."*

In addition, many developed an understanding for other ways of living and thinking and are now able to switch faster between different **cultures**. The stay abroad has often also had a positive effect on their **ability to adjust** to other cultures and different situations. They now have a greater appreciation for the differences between people and cultures. Some have developed an understanding and awareness of how simple one can live. Some also came to the realisation that *"people have more similarities than differences."* One respondent adds that the image you have or is shown by the media *"is not the real image and people in other parts of the world are not so different from us in their desires and dreams."* A broadening of the world view is therefore often mentioned in this context: *"some realisation that there is more than just the place where you grew up, live, went to school, etc."*

Because of their foreign experience, some of the respondents have grown **fond of traveling** and curious to discover even more of the world, in turn giving them satisfaction, pleasure, and gratitude, which also contributes to a better quality of life.

Positive impact on social development (individual 'soft Skills')

Included under the heading of social development are elements that were - among others - allocated to the aspects 'social skills' (64%), 'engagement with and awareness of societal and global developments' (39%), 'an open and interested attitude' (63%), and 'social contacts' (59%).

Here as well, many respondents say that they have become more **open** and **enterprising**: They have less trouble talking to strangers, are more open, more often go to parties or restaurants on their own, and **easily make contact** with other people. These contacts often prove to be lasting. They have learned to *"Cope well with the unknown and challenge yourself."* The foreign experience also kindled a **curiosity** about the rest of the world and travel, while at the same time making it easier to find one's bearings in **new surroundings**.

Acquired **knowledge of other cultures, cultural sensitivity, and respect for others** also contribute to greater involvement in and awareness of developments in society; *"Insights into another culture in the broadest sense, from everyday activities to how other political systems work and the organisation of the society. I have found these insights to be highly valuable, as they teach you to put your own background and customs into perspective."* This leads to greater insight into the world and new perspectives. A concrete example of greater social engagement is the following: *"While abroad for my studies, I became active for the first time as a volunteer for an LGBTQ+ organisation. I have continued this work after my return, a choice that has benefited me greatly for many years now, both personally and professionally."* The experience has also sparked a greater awareness of and collaboration with other cultures, as a result of *"being taken out of your Dutch bubble."* Opening up to other people and cultures allows the respondents to more easily adjust.

In addition to all the afore mentioned effects, **social contacts** also continue to have a positive influence on the personal life. The stay abroad has led to international friendships, and many of these friends are still in touch today. *"On a personal level, I have made many contacts across Europe, a number of whom I still meet sometimes."* Some of the respondents say that as a result, as mentioned earlier, they are now better able to *"present themselves in new social groups"* and *"have more contact with other cultures, which makes you more open to other people."* In addition, some of the respondents met their partners during their stay abroad.

Positive Impact on Knowledge and Skills ("hard Skills")

Impact on knowledge and skills includes those aspects which can be defined as "hard skills." By hard skills (as apposed to soft skills), we mean measurable skills, whereas soft skills involve people their (sometimes a little more vague) social and personal skills. Within the framework of this study, the hard skills, in our view, include the aspects 'general knowledge of language, culture, and communication' (68%), 'awareness of international developments in trade and profession' (20%) and 'professional skills' (26%).

As to the professional skills, many of the respondents said that **self-reliance** and the ability to work independently are acquired skills that often prove useful even today. The acquired **self-confidence** and **self-knowledge** also have a positive impact on the professional skills. *"It's given me much insight into who I am and my abilities, introduced me to other ways of studying, working, and living, made me happier and more self-reliant."* And *"That period has become sort of a benchmark in my life that I can always fall back on. A period that has enriched my frame of reference."*

Language skills often improved as well. Many learned a language or improved existing language skills, with English and Spanish being mentioned the most. In this regard, respondents say that the foreign experience has brought about *"greater ease in speaking the language outside of working hours."* This element to, was often linked to having a greater understanding of cultures as well as being more open to them. The respondents often apply this knowledge in their own lives: *"I incorporate this cultural knowledge in the education of my own child."*

The students and former students also include **flexibility** in the work situation and **substantive insights** into other systems and working methods in their professional skills. Differences in the working culture and in facilities affecting the professional practice were also noted by the respondents; *“Appreciation for the equipment and funding in Dutch laboratories. The structure the Dutch have. Proper managing of expectations.”* An understanding for the **intercultural context**, for others, is even now still being incorporated into a more open attitude: *“The intercultural working method, and to see how things can be done differently in a different country.”*

Positive impact on intercultural development (‘soft skills’ in group dynamics)

‘Intercultural competencies’ (48%), ‘affinity with the country’ (54%), ‘communicative and collaborative skills within international contexts’ (53%) as well as the aspects already discussed earlier of ‘an open and interested attitude’ (63%) and ‘general knowledge of language, culture, and communication’ (68%), were subsumed into the category ‘intercultural development’.

Under **affinity with the country**, the respondents named aspects such as learning about new cultures as well as enjoying European nature. One of the respondents said that their *“love for other countries wouldn’t have been as strong”* without the foreign experience,” another stated that the country they visited now held a certain attraction. A final example from a respondent takes the consequences of the affinity they developed even further: *“My stay abroad has made me feel more strongly connected to the country I visited. I also identify with the people from that region to a much larger degree. In addition, I can better empathise with other people who come to the Netherlands from abroad.”*

Improved communication skills in international context can actually be divided into three categories; knowledge and an understanding of **other cultures**, learning to speak one or more foreign **languages** or improving existing language skills, and building an **international social network**. **Intercultural understanding** has already been mentioned repeatedly: the foreign experience has in many cases served *“to come into closer contact with new cultures and thus gain a greater understanding of other people.”* Many of the respondents worked together with people from different countries and cultures and formed friendships during their stay abroad, which has given them greater insight into and an open mind toward other cultures and perspectives; *“Literally look across the border; intercultural experiences open your mind to other perspectives, better able to understand other cultures, made friends, learned social interaction in another culture, which also helps in your own.”*

Additional remarks on communication in the international context included *“I have developed a much more open mindset, with a more extensive knowledge and understanding of other cultures. I now see international contacts/experiences primarily as a way of self-development, and still actively look for them,”* and *“I have noticed that I can cope in a different, unfamiliar situation. I have made foreign friends, some of whom I still see today. And I’ve learned other languages well. These experiences and different perspectives are still quite valuable.”*

Positive impact on an international outlook

The elements ‘international orientation’ (50%), ‘working for an international company/organisation’ (16%) and ‘living or working abroad’ (15%), point to an international mindset among the students and former students.

Here, **intercultural understanding** makes a repeat appearance: respondents say that their foreign experience has made them open up to and have a better understanding of other cultures, which helps them in their current jobs at international companies; primarily because it makes communicating with people from different backgrounds easier: *“You become more open towards other cultures, more tolerant and*

understanding of people with a different background. It has made for easy collaboration with my foreign colleagues in my current job at an international research institute.” In addition, the respondents say that they have become more open-minded, and their world view has become less narrow. These insights are then applied to their own lives: *“I would have been less culturally sensitive and less well able to respect the contextual characteristics of various groups.”* *“It gives you a new perspective on your own life and helps you interpret and put into perspective everything that you come across.”* In addition, one of the respondents says that having a broader world view and taking an interest in foreign languages and cultures gives one a *“global outlook on politics and social issues, the climate, etc.”*

Living abroad also results in a greater **knowledge** of international/European policymaking, knowledge of international organisations and diplomacy, or the business community in a specific country.

For some, the foreign experience also contributed to more **internationally oriented interests**; *“Without my foreign experience I wouldn’t be doing volunteer work for an international organisation in the Netherlands.”*

Negative impact on the personal life (general)

Around 20 respondents said they also experienced a negative impact on some aspects of their personal life. Some of them experienced social **isolation** during their foreign experience and felt **lonely**, making them unhappy. This did not mean that the experience was by definition not educational, but it was sad. Also, some respondents missed their families and friends. It sometimes happened that the students and former students experienced an **uncomfortable relationship** with their **mentor**, which continued to negatively affect them for a long time, and, in some cases, even led to a study delay. In another case, the foreign experience meant that the student needed to borrow (more) money, incurring a **higher student debt** in the process, which, under the current repayment scheme, had an added adverse impact. It also holds true for the personal life that the foreign experience has made some respondents realise **they are at their best** in the **Netherlands**.

3.3.2 Impact on the current professional life

The overwhelming majority of the respondents are positive about the impact of their foreign experience on their current professional life. What this has meant exactly is clarified below. There is some degree of overlap with the aspects mentioned above with regard to the impact on the current personal life. Also, one of the respondents said: *“(…) In addition, there are probably details which have had an impact that I’m not aware of.”*

Positive impact on personal and professional development

Under this theme, we include the clarification of the aspects ‘personal development’ (46%), ‘flexibility’ (47%) and ‘self-reliance’ (51%). The experience in collaborating with fellow students has made a positive contribution to the development of flexibility, specifically for the professional life. *“My own foreign experience combined with the perspectives of other internationals here in Denmark makes my professional life much easier, specifically in the interaction with colleagues who have a different (professional) background than I. I cannot imagine my current professional life without my foreign experience, as I now live and work in the country where I had that experience.”* Interacting with **different cultures**, as has been said often before, not only has advantages on a personal level but specifically also in a professional setting: people are also used to a different work ethic and the experience makes it *“easier to communicate with foreigners on the shop floor”*. Intercultural communication has been made easier: *“I have a greater understanding for people from a different background. I believe I also have more patience with the fact that everybody is wired differently.”*

Self-reliance is a generic characteristic, which proves useful in multiple ways. The respondents indicate that their time abroad has helped them work **more independently**: *“I think that the foreign experience has caused an increase in self-reliance and assertiveness that is appreciated in the professional life”* and *“In addition, I’m highly self-reliant and because of this experience now able to take care of a lot of things myself which helps me get ahead professionally as well”*. So, the ‘demonstrable’ self-reliance and resilience is highly appreciated during job interviews and in a professional context.

Self-reliance is linked to **flexibility, self-confidence**, and the ability to **adapt to different circumstances**: *“My two foreign experiences have taught me great self-reliance and also how best to adjust to the culture of the country you’re staying in. Without these experiences I wouldn’t be able to adjust to different situations as quickly as I can today.”* Also, the awareness that you can ask for help and don’t have to solve everything by yourself helps respondents get ahead in their careers.

For many respondents, the foreign experience forms a valuable addition to their CVs (both because of the experience in itself and its substance: for instance, a scientific publication resulting from the foreign internship), just like the acquired **language skills** and the professional jargon. One of the respondents added: *“I think it’s a nice talking point during a job interview. (...) the farther you progress in your career, the less important it gets. It is primarily of importance during the early stages of your career”*. During job interviews, people are often highly interested in the foreign experience, it is a great talking point during job interviews: *“interesting topic of conversation or click during job interviews.”* *“It was regarded as a plus on my CV and allowed me to show that I would very much like to work in an international environment”*; *“In any case, the fact that I did and completed my whole Masters abroad is already a gold star on my CV, especially at major international organisations”* and *“The fact that I speak English at a professional level has opened many doors for me, for instance, in terms of the jobs I can apply for”*.

In some cases, the experience has determined the **career path**, for instance, by fostering enthusiasm for a specific branch of research, or by ‘sticking around’ for a PhD. Or the experience opened doors that otherwise would have remained shut: *“I’m currently doing my PhD abroad. I moved to South Africa in early February for my PhD. I also have, I believe partly thanks to my intercultural experience abroad, worked for an exchange programme in the Netherlands for a number of years. I don’t think that I would have been at this point in my professional life without my foreign experience.”*

Positive impact on social development (individual “soft Skills”)

Under social development are included elements which, among other things, are allocated to the aspects: ‘social skills’ (41%), ‘engagement with and awareness of societal and global developments’ (30%), ‘an open and interested attitude’ (46%), and ‘social contacts’ (22%).

When people have good, professional **fluency**, particularly in English, this will benefit them greatly in professional environments.

When people are used to **other cultures** and **work ethics** (cultural insight) and openminded towards them, this will contribute, as stated before, to a good social interaction in a work environment, also due to the realisation that there are other ways of thinking about and looking at developments, etc. Learning to work together with other cultures, being more open to this, and being able to communicate with different kinds of people are frequently cited as examples: *“At the moment, I’m working at an internationally oriented company. And my time abroad during my internship has taught me much about how other cultures work and communicate and how to express myself better in English. Today, this helps me to build better work relationships and be a connecting factor.”* People also have greater understanding for other cultures on the

shop floor: *“I work at a company where nearly everybody is from a different country, so having an understanding of different cultures facilitates effective teamwork.”*

The acquired **ability to adapt** and cope with new situations are also valuable attributes in the professional environment. The experience of frequently **communicating with strangers** and easily **making contact** with people, which are common to a stay abroad, proves useful in current work situations as well.

The fact that the foreign experience has given the respondents greater **self-confidence** also positively affects the current work environment. This is also linked to the self-knowledge many respondents have gained during their studies. They know how to behave in certain situations and can apply this knowledge at work.

The foreign experience has not only enlarged their network socially but also professionally: *“it gave me the leg-up for building a professional network that still benefits me today.”* So, many of the respondents have made **connections** during their time abroad; *“Communicative skills; and the network of friends, former and current fellow students, and colleagues is still active and useful.”* Respondents find that their international **network** has expanded. This may have practical consequences, for instance: *“I’m still in touch with the people I did my internship with. For instance, I exchange teaching materials and there is a possibility for a student exchange at school.”* It can also create job opportunities or provide inspiration while looking for a job. Some of the respondents have a different angle on how having social contacts has helped them professionally: *“This goes to show how I have matured emotionally, which helps me to better handle similar changes in my career, such as moving house for a better job, or obstacles in networks or in the contact with colleagues”.* So, having social contacts can also facilitate easier contacts with international colleagues or companies as a result of being more experienced in this respect. So, the experience with other cultures and work ethics has a positive impact still today: *“I have an extensive international network, and in addition a large network in the Netherlands with internationally minded people within my field. I can better empathise with people who work differently.”*

Positive Impact on Knowledge and Skills (“hard Skills”)

Under impact on knowledge and skills are subsumed those aspects which can be defined as “hard skills.” By hard skills, as compared to soft skills, we mean those skills that are measurable, whereas soft skills involve the (sometimes a little more vague) personal social skills which define someone as a human being. In our opinion, the hard skills comprise the aspects of ‘general knowledge of language, culture, and communication’ (43%), ‘awareness of international developments’ and the ‘pursuit of a trade or profession’ (32%) and ‘professional skills’ (50%).

Some of the respondents say that because of their time abroad their (English, Spanish, and German) **language skills** have improved, which makes it easier for them to network in an international setting today. It also affects their responsibilities at work: *“I was able to specialise in languages and fields that have an added value for my current job.”* Knowledge of the **culture** and **way of communication** in an international setting also helps the respondents in their professional life: *“A high level of cultural alienation in my study has made me more patient with different styles of communication”* and *“Knowledge about how other countries, people, cultures do their thing and where this comes from. It has given me a broader understanding.”* The respondents are better able to empathise with colleagues or people they work for. The **interaction with different cultures** during the foreign experience has led to many respondents developing **interpersonal skills** which also prove useful on the (international) shop floor, as work cultures can be quite different: *“(…) my time abroad during my internship has taught me much about how other cultures work and communicate, and how to better express myself in English. Today, this helps me build better work relationships with others and to be a unifying factor.”* Even specific skills that are not unique to a foreign internship, such as archiving and writing skills, are useful to the respondents in their future careers.

A number of the respondents have also acquired **subject-specific** knowledge abroad which has proved useful in their current professional life, for instance, through experience in other, foreign laboratories. Skills were also acquired, and qualifications obtained which were required for the current position. People have acquainted themselves with developments in their fields: *“The differences between political structures and how they effect research are now less unexpected.”*; *“Insight in forms of funding for academic positions and career paths in different countries.”* In other words, respondents indicate that the foreign experience has provided *“Knowledge of field-specific subjects from an international perspective”* and greater knowledge about specific places/countries, such as, for instance, the Global South.

Also, a broad field-specific knowledge was acquired within an international context: In addition to the field-specific knowledge, the foreign experience also gives people a **vision framework**: their foreign experience allows them to compare their current professional life to the situation during the foreign stay; they have developed an international vision on Dutch issues: *“Even though I work with Dutch policies today, I do find that I am quicker to see the whole picture both in and outside of Europe.* The experience allows them to compare the home country to the country of the foreign experience on a specific topic, which makes for people being able to see more options. A concrete example of greater insight into international developments: *“It has changed my view on European projects in underdeveloped countries. It all sounds so idyllic when a European project sinks wells and starts educational pathways for disadvantaged youths in an underdeveloped country, but if the culture is not taken into account, it will not end in success.”*

Positive impact on intercultural development (“soft skills” in group dynamics)

‘Intercultural competencies’ (44%), ‘affinity with the country’ (16%), ‘communicative and collaborative skills in international contexts’ (56%), and the already previously discussed aspects of ‘an open and interested attitude’ (46%) and ‘general knowledge of language, culture, and communication’ are included under the header ‘intercultural development’.

There are many similarities between this aspect’s positive impact on the personal and the professional life. The **cultural** and **language skills** which the respondents acquired during their foreign experience, also have a strong positive impact on their ability to land a job in both the international and the Dutch labour market. For instance, greater confidence in speaking a second language; *“I was facing a threshold to speak French, and it’s completely disappeared. I have almost no uncertainty anymore in speaking the French language. As I’m actually speaking and writing French at work, this benefits me greatly.”* And a greater knowledge of and understanding for other cultures; *“I work with international colleagues a lot, including colleagues from the UK, so this makes it easier to communicate with them because you also learned a little about the culture.”*; *“Doing proper research together with other researchers. Learning to bridge language barriers by means of gestures, drawings, using a common language (for instance: English). “In my current job at an international research institute, it makes for easy collaboration with colleagues with different backgrounds.”*; *“I have learned about the kind of impact cultural differences have during the execution of activities. At first glance, it often seems like there’s a large degree of agreement on a certain subject with colleagues from a different background, but there is a strong element of interpretation involved. How you interpret something is to a large degree determined by your cultural background.”*; *“Being able to work with other cultures is one of my stronger suits professionally.”*

Here as well, **social contacts** are an important factor: *“I perform well in international environments, so I’m often deployed when an international client is involved as I’m confident I can handle myself in unfamiliar circumstances and surroundings. In addition, I still have some international contacts from that period, so I’m a little bit more aware of developments in the international market.*

A small number of the respondents said that their foreign experience has had an impact on their **affinity with the country** in question, which still affects their professional life today. An even smaller number provided a clarification: **appreciation** of a specific country, also from a more professional perspective, was mentioned. Respondents also said to have gained greater insight in what their profession means to people in another country and how their profession is perceived (also with regard to the home country). In the current professional life, this provides **opportunities for comparison** when looking for alternative approaches/solutions.

Positive impact on an international outlook

Three aspects can be classified under the header “international perspective.’ These are aspects which for a number of the students and former students make a positive contribution to their current professional life. These aspects are (with between brackets the percentage of respondents who experience a positive contribution to their current professional life from this aspect): ‘international orientation’ (39%), ‘working for international company/organization’ (24%), and ‘living or working abroad’ (16%). They are proof of the development of an international mindset.

Mentioned repeatedly was how it was the foreign experience that made students decide to **pursue a career (and live) abroad**. *“I work for the European Union, and for me this interest was definitely fostered by my time abroad. In addition, the EU likes hiring people who have already lived in another country in the past and speak multiple languages.”* Some respondents still **live and work abroad**, or still wish to do so at some point in the future. This is not always linked to one specific country, though in some cases it is. The increase in **self-reliance** also makes it easier for respondents to (temporarily) stay abroad again or go work for an international company.

Also, valuable skills were gained which further the **international career perspective**: *“Open-mindedness and flexibility which help me work together with colleagues from all kinds of countries.”* and *“It has also helped me improve my German language skills, which means that I’m now able to work at an Austrian company without any problems.”*; *“Professionally, I’m now much better able to put things into perspective. I have a better idea of how such organisations do things differently in different places, and that brings me many advantages in my current professional life.”*

Respondents say that their foreign experience enables them to better interact with international colleagues or people from **different cultures**: *“I have worked together with other cultures before: which comes in quite handy in my current job”* and *“It is easier for me to interact and create a bond with foreign colleagues”*. And a former student explains: *“The cultural aspects of temporarily living abroad teach you other norms and values that stay with you throughout your career. It has opened doors and resulted in opportunities I could not have imagined before.”* In some cases, the foreign experience also changed their own ‘work mindset’: working in an international context became **self-evident**, as did working remotely. The experiences abroad may affect not just your job opportunities, but also your experience at an international company: *“I work in an international work environment and over there it is great to have had an international experience.”*

Negative impact on the professional life (in general)

As stated before, 17 of the students and former students said they had experienced a negative impact on their current professional life. Analysis shows that the qualification ‘negative’ in practice also means neutral/not positive. In this regard, it was mentioned a number of times that the experience **has not been helpful in their current jobs**: *“The internship I did was not very helpful for my professional development.”* One of the respondents, for instance, said they did a lot of highly appreciated work, for which they could unfortunately not receive an honourable mention or credit because it was conducted under assignment. Or that the experience could have also been had in the Netherlands. In some cases, the foreign experience

resulted in a **delay**, for instance, due to a combination of activities, or because going abroad did not fit their study plan, which resulted in a longer study. The effects of which, in combination with the Corona epidemic, sometimes made themselves felt for a long time. For one former student, the study abroad proved to be a **bad match**, which resulted in their *“going through a depressing period”* and eventually giving up on the programme. Some respondents learned that they prefer to work and live in the Netherlands or in a comparable **culture**: in some cases, because of the work ethic and how things are arranged in other countries. In others due to social considerations: *“My ties to my country and the people here are simply too strong for this.”*

4 Deepening conversations

4.1 Response

In the month of December, deepening conversations (interviews) were conducted with those respondents who had indicated they were interested. To this end, a selection²⁹ was made from among the questionnaire respondents in consultation with the National Agency. We eventually made appointments and had conversations with 11 people from this group.

Method

During these conversations, we delved deeper into the extent to which the various skills (competencies and attitudes) have influenced the current personal and professional lives of the respondents, what more they had expected to gain in retrospect and to what extent these expectations were met. The interview guidelines for these conversations were based on the research questions, supplemented with progressing insights resulting from the analysis of the open questions as well as input from the NA. The outcomes of these interviews are explained in this chapter on the basis of the abovementioned themes from the interview guidelines.

4.1.1 Respondents' background characteristics

As mentioned above, a first selection²⁹ was made from among the respondents, in consultation with the NA Erasmus+. As shown in the four tables below, we eventually spoke with six men and five women, the majority of whom (6) had spent about six months abroad. Most of the respondents (6) had completed their university education; most of them (7) went abroad, among other things, to study. The respondents therefore provided a robust complement as well as context to the data from the questionnaire research.

Tables 2a to d: Background characteristics of interviewed students

Educational level	n
HVET	4
University	6
HVET/University	1

Gender	n
Male	6
Female	5

Activity	n
Study	4
Thesis research	1
Internships	1
Internship, study	1
Internship, thesis research	2
Internship, study, thesis research	2

Length of stay	n
About six months	6
Six months to a year	1
Longer than a year	4

Supplementary to the already mentioned activities undertaken by the former students, we see that for some of the interviewees these formed part of the **curriculum**, whereas for others the activities were part of the electives (minor) of their bachelor's or master's degree. For some, the foreign experience was really an extra component that did not easily fit the programme. The **motivation** for the **foreign experience** and

²⁹ The selection took place based on, consecutively: Utilisation of Erasmus+ (either with or without the use of own funds), having graduated, programme while abroad either HVET or SE. Next, a division was made based on the characteristics of gender, length of stay, educational level, and structure/activities during the foreign stay.

the **exact location**³⁰ varied: in some cases respondents were curious about the country and its language and culture, whereas others pointed to a good offer, or because it was easier to enrol in a desired programme, still others did not particularly care where they went as long as they could go! Sometimes students deliberately did not go to a specific place because, for instance, the workload was expected to be high, or because it would be too far away from family and friends. Others became enthused by the positive experiences of others. For most of the former students **obtaining an Erasmus+ grant** was not a deal breaker: If they hadn't received one, they would probably still have gone abroad. That said, almost everybody said that the contribution from Erasmus+ was definitely a positive one: it gave people some financial peace of mind, enabled them to focus on the study and/or internship, and provided time and room for exploring and experiencing other cultures: *"I love adventure in any case, but Erasmus+ certainly contributed to the experience, because it provides a kind of safe environment to have one in"*. For a number of the respondents, it would have been really difficult to make ends meet without the Erasmus+ grant, especially in some locations. The respondents couldn't say much about any possible further organisational contributions by Erasmus+: *"Apart from the finances, Erasmus+ (as an organisation) did not have much of an impact."* This, by the way, shows that it is not always clear to the students what the possibilities of the E+-programme are: not just a financial contribution, but also transferring credits through ECTS, the possibility of a tuition-free study period, et cetera.

Also notable, but not surprising in light of the earlier research (see chapter 5), is that most of the interviewees are already quite **internationally oriented** because of the trips they made with their parents, vacations within Europe during which they became acquainted with many other languages and cultures at the camp site, or because parents and relatives already came from different places around the globe; *"It's in our family"*. The foreign experiences of siblings are also often mentioned as a factor which makes it easier, or even easier, to take the step themselves. Just a few said that their families were not really internationally oriented, even though in those cases the parents did support the decision to go abroad.

4.2 Impact of the foreign experience

In this paragraph we delve deeper into the impact of the foreign experience with Erasmus+ on the current personal and professional life of the former students. In addition, we examine the total, broader impact on the students and former students and how it relates to their expectations in retrospect. Just like in the previous chapter (chapter 3) with the outcomes of the questionnaire, we see much overlap between the impact of the stay abroad on the personal and professional life.

This answers the research questions as set down in the tender and we discuss the aspects which came to the fore during the research and the consultations with the NA. The sub-questions are answered in the three following sub-paragraphs. It is good to bear in mind that the experiences of the 11 interviewees presented below serve to illustrate the earlier outcomes. In the final chapter (chapter 5) we reflect on the outcomes of the different parts of this research.

30 The former students often had multiple foreign experiences, but the majority of the experiences with an Erasmus+ grant took place in France, Finland, Italy, Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Sweden.

4.2.1 Impact on the personal life

Skills/competencies

Starting over in another country, managing your own affairs without being able to count on your friends and family for support and thus being left to your own devices requires a high level of **self-reliance**. According to the interviewees, they further developed that skill during their foreign experience. Many of them have become more **assertive**. *“I have learned to dare stand up for myself, or to speak up when I don’t agree with something.”* **Confidence** in themselves and a good

“I now find it easier to approach people, because I used to do that in Sweden a lot. It felt awkward at first, but at some point you think: we are all in the same boat. You internalise it, so I now do it a lot more often in the Netherlands as well.”

Semester in the minor programme & Master’s in Sweden (SE)

“You can’t scare me, you drop me in a country of which I don’t speak the language and I will build something in no time. I can articulate what I can do and when I need support. I’m up for it.”

Internship in Italy (HVET) & Master’s in France (SE)

outcome has increased substantially for many since taking the initial step to go abroad for a period during their study, in the knowledge that you will once again succeed in finding your way as you have already done it before. It also became less daunting to face new challenges or problems: *“I did receive help from new people right away, so it was immediately a moment of realization that*

things can in fact be resolved. So, it doesn’t really have to be such a disaster when things go wrong.”

These experiences contribute to making it easier to step out of the comfort zone. In addition, in many cases respondents acquired a degree of self-knowledge, someone said, for instance: *“Funny to become aware of your own personality in a different context/culture.”* All of the interviewees have gone through a certain degree of **personal development**, irrespective of whether or not this was the result of a conscious approach. *“This experience was primarily a test for myself, you go to a foreign country and then how do you deal with things that do not work out. I did not expect this beforehand, but it turned out that way.”*

For many, making new contacts is much easier now, but in addition to **social skills**, **intercultural skills** were also frequently mentioned. During the foreign experience, the interviewees learned much from other people and cultures. For some, this was primarily about the culture of the specific country they were in, particularly when it was very different from the Dutch culture. Others experienced cultural diversity primarily through interacting with many different internationals. *“Because of this multicultural group you learn super much from other people and cultures.”* Somebody, for instance, learned to: *“be open and have respect for other people and cultures. This resulted, for instance, from interactions with international house mates; Mexican, Egyptian, Jordanian.”* Another respondent experienced the negative consequences of not being aware of cultural customs: *“For instance, it is quite normal to bring a gift when you visit people. I didn’t do that the first time, and you do notice that*

“It helped me use body language more. I became more expressive; paid more attention to whether my posture was right. So that even when my Japanese was not good, people would at least understand that I meant well.”

Over six months studying in Japan (HVET)

“As a Dutch person you do of course have certain cultural patterns. We are clearly quite direct. You need to learn how to handle this, because it is easily perceived as rude; either present something more subtly or be more reticent.”

Semester in the minor programme & Master’s in Sweden (SE)

immediately.” In addition to knowledge about and experience with other cultures, a number of people also said that they have become more aware of their **own cultural patterns** and how these can be interpreted in different contexts. *“I found out that, as a Dutch person, I’m really very direct, without ever realising it when talking to other Dutch people.”*

Closely related to the above is a **broader view on the world and cultural differences**. Respondents now look with less of a coloured view at both other cultures and their own. *“Maybe I can now appreciate certain aspects of the Dutch society more, or rather see that they do things better in Sweden.”* *“Life abroad is not necessarily always better or worse, it’s different.”* A broader view also makes for greater self-awareness: *“I also think that I didn’t understand what made me ‘Dutch’”. The difference between what makes me Dutch and other cultures. You don’t discover this during a one-week vacation, but rather when you actually live in that society. I’m more aware of my own culture.”*

“Through Erasmus+ you learn about multiple cultures and get a more global perspective. (...) There is most than just stew and sausages.”

Internship in England (SE)

Social Life

Some deliberately sought contact with local students, others were easily absorbed into an ‘Erasmus bubble’ or a network of internationals; most everybody within that bubble has since started looking for new contacts. In both cases most people became part of an **international social network**. A number of the interviewees are still regularly in touch with friends made during the period of the foreign experience and look them up every once in a while (even when that is sometimes difficult due to the great distances involved); *“There still is contact with a small, steady circle of friends where people also attend each others weddings”*. There are also former students who have no or hardly any contact with people from the time of their foreign experience because, for instance, people have drifted apart or due to the physical distances, because people went back to their old lives or simply did not feel a strong need. Two of the interviewees found their **partner** during their foreign experience. Some of them are currently **living** abroad as a direct or indirect consequence of the foreign experience; *“it’s had a lot of impact, as I’m currently living in Germany, which was made possible by the internship.”*

4.2.2 Impact on the professional life

Skills/Competencies

“You quickly start speaking English with people from abroad. (...) it is easier to talk to people in English; the threshold is lower and you have gained the self-confidence that you can cope (...) plus the realisation that you’re not being taken to task for your second language not being perfect.”

Minor in England (HVET)

In addition to **language skills**, which improved strongly for many, the interviewees have also acquired **field-specific knowledge**. For instance, someone working in the field of visual communication learned that label design is quite a different profession in Japan compared to the Netherlands: this has made a huge contribution to their own design skills and working methods. People also ended up in different circles where field-specific subjects took centre stage and were discussed, for instance, in the field

of microbiology. This knowledge, as well as the realisation that there may be differences of opinion on content and form, contributes to the current substantive professional development. **Professional qualities**, such as *“thoroughness of investigation, giving presentations and many tips from the professor”* were definitely affected.

The experience abroad can also be decisive for the current job: *“the right master’s in Sweden did in fact contribute to landing a job in the Netherlands that I enjoy.”* In addition to field-specific knowledge, **position-specific knowledge** may also be involved. By having to manage all kinds of things in another country, you also develop project-based skills: *“That is something I enjoy, which is why I’m now becoming a project manager.”* So, former students acquired much field-specific **knowledge** as well as knowledge about their own interests and performance. For some, the acquired field-specific knowledge and experience has since become less relevant, primarily because they are now working in a different field. Being introduced to and acquiring **other working methods** has also benefitted the interviewees; *“I’ve started to take a closer look at my learning process. (...) more of a sense that I now have that all kinds of*

things can be interesting.” (...) *Abroad, I’ve become more aware of my way of thinking and that I can let go of it and think in a different way*”. Sometimes students were offered informative insights in office politics’: *“Politics plays a role in every place of work. There are people who want one thing and others who want something different and that is the same everywhere. I believe that had I stayed in the Netherlands, maybe I wouldn’t have found out about this, (...) because here I was the only Master’s student.”*

“Japan gave me a context radar. So, I can adapt myself to the culture, but sometimes also the other way around.”

Over 6 months of study in Japan

For most of the interviewees, the main benefit is to their soft skills: they have learned a lot in the social sphere. Some, for instance, gained a greater **understanding** of the situation of other internationals at work: you know what problems people can encounter and try to be considerate. There is also a greater awareness and knowledge of **intercultural and human differences**. You learn to better assess what

kind of person somebody is, their background, and how best to approach them. This benefits the cooperation. With regard to intercultural sensitivity,

someone said their experience was that Spanish people are very sociable, which sometimes makes them (seem to) work a little less hard. Another person said they realised that it is customary in Dutch culture to *“speak up and speak your mind,”* but that this is certainly not the case everywhere: so, you learn to take that into account. So someone said they realised that you cannot always say something like a *“blunt Dutch person”*, but have to take a more nuanced stance instead: *“Especially this directness is something you*

do learn to handle differently”, With the passing of the years, you learn that *“I can say this to these people, but not to those”*. You become *“aware of your own culture.”* This awareness of differences also makes it easier to approach other people, both formally and informally: the **communicative skills** have definitely also improved and that helps in the working life as well. Being able to work **independently** and starting your own business are also things that keep recurring in conversations with the interviewees as examples of things that have improved as a result of the foreign experience, just like acquiring organizational skills through having to manage everything yourself while abroad. Also, it is easier to adapt to a new working environment when you’ve already *“thrown yourself in at the deep end”* by going on a foreign experience.

“Because you’re not only working with the same people who will understand you anyway, you become more inquisitive: what do people actually mean to say? How do we feel about something? It allows you to create more clarity for everybody. That way you make better use of the richness of everyone’s actions and thoughts.”

Internship in Italy (HVET) & Master’s in France (SE)

Experience abroad also shows that you are **open to new experiences**, which does have its advantages when applying for a job. In this regard, most of the respondents perceive their foreign experience as a welcome addition to their **CV**.

Professional Life

Interviewees said that they had drawn on their **international professional network** while looking for a job and/or house, especially when this was in the foreign country they had visited before. These are often other Erasmus+ students and other people they met over there (for instance, via European youthwork). After all, they have built up many contacts with people with the same interests and these contacts are still maintained in the later professional career: *“I’m still in touch with my internship coach (...) and an external HR consultant”*. Others still maintain these contacts at a lower level (for instance, via LinkedIn) but could easily mobilise this network. In some cases, the foreign contacts have directly resulted in a **job**: *“I’m currently doing a PhD at the research group where I also did my internship,”* or people have stacked one foreign experience on top of another, particularly in their professional life. For one interviewee, the experience suddenly made a major international company an option where this had not been considered before. Or going abroad for work has become less big of a step: *“The experience was so positive that the*

idea of going back never left me.” Not everybody benefits from the network they built up: some are now working in a different sector.

4.2.3 Expectations, retrospective & impact on the world view

We asked the interviewees to look back on the **expectations** they had as students for acquiring skills during their foreign experience: what were these expectations and where they fulfilled? It turned out many former students went abroad with an open mind, or even somewhat impulsively, as they did not have any expectations or specific goals prior to their foreign experience, and: *“There was no profound line of thought behind it. It was, however, really great fun.”* Interviewees primarily wanted to see and experience much, and eventually everybody saw mostly the advantages of the experience.

“I’ve also experienced what it’s like to have a long-distance relationship, so that’s a takeaway as well.”

Internship and thesis research Sweden (SE)

So, there was a strong effect, especially in terms of **personal development**, even when most people did not know exactly what to expect beforehand; *“You learn many things you did not expect and end up in the strangest places, (...) and learn much about the goodness of the people around you in the process”*. People did *“sort of expect that it would be a personal test, but it was more difficult than initially expected.”* Not everything was just as clear-cut; sometimes it was difficult to get to know other people, especially for long-term contacts. One of the interviewees, however, advises young people going abroad today to write down their expectations, so you can later compare them with what you have actually done and learned.

With regard to **career opportunities**, the foreign experience has helped people make choices in terms of content or potential workplace, as was the original intent: *“It has made me go abroad again afterward for further study and to do an internship. (...) working abroad is something I would like to do later.”* A former student with multiple foreign experiences said that during the second experience education and professional advancement took priority, the social aspect was to follow as a matter of course; and this expectation was in fact fulfilled. So, there were expectations with regard to the career, for instance, the hope of finding a spot to do a thesis research but *“I also wanted to know whether I would actually enjoy studying abroad.”* Someone else said: *“I went to find out what I enjoy (they had selected a broad scala of subjects for this purpose), and it worked.”* People also expect that the effect of the foreign experience will have a long-term beneficial effect: *“here, you find a specific type of people: highly motivated and with a specific mindset, (...) people who want to be the best in their field. (...) This will probably have quite a big impact in a couple of years.”*

“What I also found out is that mouse research is not my thing.”

Internship and thesis research in Sweden (SE)

“I do regard myself as a true EU citizen, in other aspects as well, such as free travel. I have realised how important that is and how much I appreciate it.”

Master’s internship and thesis research, England (SE)

And finally, we asked the question what the impact of participation in the Erasmus+ programme had been on their **view** of the EU and the world. The answers paint a positive picture of the EU: *“nice to be part of the EU and how many rights we derive from that”* and I am *“more of a proponent of an even further integrated EU.”* Partnerships are viewed as important for the EU; *“learning from each other and recognising that there are plenty of similarities and that they unite us, instead of focusing on our differences.”* People believe that the Erasmus+ programme will continue to have a positive effect on how Europeans think about the European Union. At the same time, they have come to understand that *“there are many differences between EU countries and how far apart they are in terms of cooperation (on themes and on learning from each*

“Because of the convenience you experience it as if there were a European passport.”

Internship in Italy (HVE) & Master’s in France (SE)

other).” Someone provides further clarification: “there are still so many classes and segmentations

“Great that in Europe you can go as you please. No hard borders.”

Minor in Engeland (HVE)

depending on the level of English fluency, passport, etcetera.” Erasmus+ definitely contributes to getting to know each other as Europeans, discovering cultural differences, and has promoted a broader form of European identity: “I feel more connected to the EU” and someone else says “I have become more positive about the Netherlands and the EU.”

On the other hand, it also became clear that this does not hold true for everyone: “I noticed that Dutch people maybe feel more European than, for instance, Swedes; they feel more Scandinavian.”

“There is always a way to come into contact with another person. It’s really not that hard. If you are simply open to it and listen to what someone else has to say you will automatically make contact.”

Internship and thesis research Sweden (SE)

The foreign experience gives people the courage to keep taking the next step: “You take ever

bigger steps which makes the world grow ever smaller.” In this way, the world becomes more of an “organic whole” of which you acquire an ever-better image through getting to know different

“The freedom we have as European to move, migrate, and travel freely is fantastic.”

Internship in Italy (HVET) & Master’s in France (SE)

countries and the people who live in them: “Life is bigger than where you were born and raised.” A foreign experience brings you more than a holiday: you actually live somewhere, you really look at the country differently, its society, systems, and politics. This also creates “awareness of your own cultural traits” which gives you a greater understanding of your home country, also because you are looking at it from a different perspective. The curiosity about other countries and cultures is also fuelled. In addition, we become aware that as world citizens we all want about the same, “for instance, simply a good article, you just want to have a good time, enjoy the company of your friends. In the end, you’re all looking for the same things, but maybe you find them in a slightly different way.”

“Erasmus+ does make you accept more quickly that some have other cultures, and you appreciate this. I’m from a small village, internationalism wasn’t exactly instilled in me.”

Third year internship in Finland (HVET)

Almost everyone would recommend others to have a foreign experience, it is highly educational and enriches your life. “Now is your opportunity to go. (...) you can experience what it’s like to live abroad, without it having lasting consequences”.

5 Synthesis and reflection

In paragraph 5.1 below, we present a summary of the results from both the questionnaire research and the deepening conversations. Next, we explore the methodological account (5.2), including the limitations of the research and we reflect on how the outcomes relate to the European goals and earlier research.

5.1 Summary

For this research, we chose to focus on the impact of the foreign experience of students and former students on various aspects of their current personal and professional life. This impact for the most part has proved to be positive in both areas. Also, the differentiation we used (personal versus professional) was not always evident: most people thought there was an interplay between the two. Even so, we have chosen to present the results on the basis of this division, because it fits best with the research design.

5.1.1 Impact on the current personal life

The (positive³¹) impact on the current personal life manifested itself most often in the aspects of personal development, self-reliance, language skills, culture and communication, flexibility, social skills, and an open and interested attitude (towards other cultures). Respondents indicated, with regard to **personal development**, to have learned much about themselves, to have become more enterprising and assertive, and have greater self-confidence. They also became more interculturally sensitive and are better able to deal with the differences between cultures and people; they also developed greater cultural self-knowledge. Communicative skills also improved as a result: respondents are now better able to empathise and adjust to others (more ‘open minded’) and find it easier to make contact. The knowledge they acquired about cultures, cultural and intercultural sensitivity, and respect for others translates into greater engagement with and awareness of developments in the society: people were taken out of their own bubble. In addition, the respondents also became more aware of their **own culturally determined conduct**. These aspects of personal development and intercultural sensitivity recur in the European goals (see § 5.2.1). To many of the respondents, **international friendships and relationships** are another positive outcome of the foreign experience, just like the **language skills** they acquired. Students and former students alike say they now have a more **international outlook**: some of them use this in their own lives: they put things into perspective, interpret things differently, and have a more global view on politics and social issues compared to before their foreign experience.

5.1.2 Impact on the current professional life

To this day, many continue to experience a (positive³²) impact from the period abroad on their professional life. Aspects of the personal development which are particularly relevant to the professional life on which a positive impact is found still today include self-reliance, professional skills, flexibility, and an open and interested attitude. For many, the main benefits manifest themselves in the soft skills. They are not only better able to **cooperate** and **communicate** with (international) colleagues, but also better at interacting with **different cultures** in a professional environment. These characteristics are closely connected and

31 A few people experienced a negative impact of their foreign experience on the personal life. This involved matters such as loneliness, high student loans, and the fact that people did not have a good experience (shop floor relationships) abroad. This has made for some people feeling more comfortable in the Netherlands.

32 A few people experienced a negative impact in the professional life as well: the experience did not contribute to their current position, or they experienced a delay. For others, the study was not a good fit (which had negative mental health implications) while others noted that they would prefer not to work in an international environment.

ensure that people are better able to adapt to different circumstances at work. In this regard, it is helpful that people should have greater **self-knowledge** about, among other things, their performance. Networking and communicating are also easier, also in an international setting. Students and former students are often more patient and have a greater understanding for other cultures in the workplace: this results in new norms and values which carry over into your career (different work mindset). They have also acquired a substantive **international outlook**; they are better able to compare their own situation to situations in other countries. Naturally, the experience is also a great addition to their **CV**, yields improved **language skills**, professional jargon, and **field-specific knowledge and skills** (for instance, experience in a foreign laboratory, information on international politics, micro-biology or the field of design). **Job-specific** knowledge and skills were also acquired. In some cases, the foreign experience was the **deciding factor** for the later **career path**, for instance, as the result of a thesis research or having worked in a specific country. Of course, the acquired **international professional network** comes in handy; international connections are maintained and may prove useful for the current professional life, for instance, through being able to exchange course materials or by creating job or housing opportunities. For some, the foreign experience has made living and working abroad a more realistic option.

5.1.3 Expectations, retrospective, and impact on the world view

In the interviews, we reflected with the former students on the expectations for their foreign experience that they had at the time and which of those were fulfilled. A number of the respondents had few concrete expectations and went abroad with an open mind. Others had expected it would be a personal test, but sometimes found the foreign experience more difficult than expected. With an eye to their career, the foreign experience has helped (some) of the people make choices, with regards to content or a potential place of work. Asked about the influence of the foreign experience on the world view, there often was an affirmation of an already positive view of Europe and the world, even though at times some of the still existing differences within Europe became more apparent. Most of the respondents grew even more positive about the advantages and the positive aspects of the European Union and realised they were acquainted with just a small part of the world: learning more about that world enriches you in many ways. Nearly everyone strongly recommends others to have a foreign experience when the opportunity presents itself.

5.2 Methodological account/discussion

For the purpose of this research, we drew up a large-scale questionnaire which was distributed among a large number of students and former students involved in previous research as well as conducting in-depth interviews with (former) students and former students. Our questionnaire was based on a mixed methodology, namely the *mass qualitative* approach. That is to say, that students and former students were first asked to give an open answer to the question what the impact of their foreign experience (qualitative approach) had been. Next, they could indicate which aspects the open answer pertained to on the basis of a pre-structured list (quantitative approach). The major advantage of this approach is that qualitative information can be collected from among a large group of people -- and thus reveal a diversity of forms of impact in which everyone can recognise themselves -- because the answers are immediately coded (by the respondent). And what is more, the coding is more dependable because the respondents categorise their own answers, instead of a researcher doing this. In total, 1,375 students and former students were approached for the questionnaire³³, and more than 50 percent actually filled it in. Even though we could not determine the exact representativity of the group of former students with a foreign experience, our approaching a large group of people and the resulting high response percentage ensured that the stories of

³³ This group had stated in earlier research their willingness to participate in follow-up research. In this previous research, a representative sample was taken from the HE student panel of ResearchNed (at the time a panel of more than 60,000 HE students who in previous research had indicated they could be approached for future research).

diverse groups (for instance, in terms of their parents' financial background) could be included in the research.

In order to further explore the stories around impact and provide some background information, an in-depth interview was subsequently conducted with a number of post-graduate students. These former students were selected from among the group of participants in the *mass qualitative* study who had made use of the Erasmus+ resources and stated their willingness to be interviewed.

Furthermore, it is important to reflect on a number of points:

- Our core finding is that the impact of an experience abroad during the years of study is almost entirely positive. Just a few people mentioned a negative impact. It is possible that students and former students with positive experiences are more often inclined to participate in a follow-up study into the foreign experience. It also cannot be ruled out that some respondents gave a socially desirable answer, primarily with regard to the personal development, as a foreign experience is 'supposed' to be positive in this respect (for instance, because of image considerations and the investment made in terms of time and money). Furthermore, someone might interpret a negative experience as positive impact because it has contributed to (for instance) personal growth. Our open (and confidential) design of the questionnaire, in which we explicitly asked whether the impact had been positive or negative, did ensure that we created room for people to relate a diversity in experiences as best we could. There was room within the in-depth interviews to go deeper into the experiences.
- Where comparing students and former students with and without a foreign experience is concerned, one of the students offers an apt nuance: *"The impact cannot be captured in quantitative Figures. The acquisition of many of the skills mentioned is also a normal feature of this life phase, of becoming an adult and self-reliant; going abroad serves to amplify this effect."* It is very well possible that this does not apply to all aspects: the impact of a foreign experience on aspects such as working in an international environment, intercultural sensitivity, feelings of world and EU citizenship, and on other international competencies may very well be stronger when experienced during a stay abroad. The current research does not allow us to make any definitive statements on the subject.
- As stated before, there is an overlap between the impact on the personal and the professional life. The two dimensions are difficult to separate, often also because it would seem that personal development carries over into the professional life. Conversely, a consequence of the stay abroad, such as a career in a foreign country, in turn can have a great impact on the personal life. We saw that an average of six aspects which impact the professional life were ticked, versus eight impacting the personal life. And yet, we cannot say on the basis of this research that the impact on the personal life is greater than on the professional, simply because we did not examine which is more important. However, some distinctions can be made. In this research, we first asked about impact on the personal and only second on the professional life: (a number of the) respondents gave a more extensive answer to the first question, and in answering the second questions respondents often referred back to their answer to the first. It is also possible that the impact on the personal development is experienced as more constant, whereas effects on the professional life merge with subsequent developments experienced due to successive positions held. Future research could focus on the relevance of this distinction: for instance, if people with a foreign experience make different professional choices.

5.2.1 Reflection on European goals

This paragraph comprises a reflection (in blue) on the European goals³⁴ for Erasmus+ on the basis of the findings of this research.

The expected yields of outcomes under Key action 1 (learning mobility, see Appendix 7 for more background information) are found in different areas; here, we want to emphasise the results at the individual level (not on the organizational and systemic/policy level). The objective is to bring about a positive change among learners³⁵ and staff³⁶ in the form of improved **skills and competencies**. Language, digital, green, and soft skills are mentioned in this context. *We absolutely find that students and former students see an improvement in their language and other hard skills (communicative, field-specific, flexibility, self-reliance), but soft skills are quite frequently mentioned by the respondents as well. They said, for instance, they had become more open and enterprising, more congenial, more inquisitive about their environment, and acquired greater intercultural and cultural sensitivity, greater intercultural awareness, insight in different work ethics, and greater adaptability (particularly in the communication with strangers). They also acquired greater (cultural) self-knowledge. The respondents were not explicitly asked about digital and green skills, but these skills did not emerge from the respondents' own stories either.*

Another goal of the programme is an improved *personal development*, greater awareness of **EU values** and *improved positive interactions* with people from *different backgrounds* (including intercultural awareness and the creation of a European network of contacts). *In the field of personal development, the respondents unanimously agree that they have grown enormously: something they would have expected to occur in this life phase anyway, but they believe this effect has been given a boost by the foreign experience. This involves (once again) aspects such as gaining self-knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, adaptability, and flexibility). When asked about their world view and the EU, the interviewees almost without exception said they were now more or even more aware of the advantages and positive aspects of the European Union and its shared values; they feel a stronger or even stronger bond with the EU. Also acquired were learning outcomes connected to the programme's³⁷ four horizontal priorities. The programme as a whole (so, not just Key Action 1) is hoped to contribute to the employability, entrepreneurship, and the innovative capabilities of learners and young people at the individual level, to thus ensure a better *transition to higher levels of education* and the *willingness to work across borders* or move abroad within the context of *labour mobility*. Not much was identified by the respondents regarding a transition to higher educational levels. They were, after all, already studying at HVET or SE institutions. We did see that for some the step of going abroad to study or work after a foreign experience is much smaller than others, and that they (no longer) experience working for an international organization as *energating or difficult*. In the medium and long term, respondents expect a contribution to a **larger capacity** of employable personnel and greater **possibilities for career development**. In addition, the programme is to result in the development of a **European identity** and a sense of belonging, foster active participation in the **democratic life**, increase the awareness of the **shared values of freedom and***

³⁴ European Commission (2023). Commission staff working document. Commission delegated regulation on supplementing the Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council with provisions on the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Erasmus+ programme. Brussels, 2023

³⁵ To wit: students, interns, pupils, schoolchildren, adults, and young people

³⁶ To wit: (teachers, trainers, youth workers, sports staff

³⁷ I. Learning about environmental, climate, and sustainability issues, and adopting more sustainable practices, II. A better understanding of diversity in the society and a greater commitment to the fight against discrimination, III. Learning about civic and EU values, IV. Learning about new and useful ways of applying digital technologies and employing them for study or work.

tolerance and to ensure a deeper knowledge of the **EU** and its **policies**.³⁸ As already referred to above, based on the conversations we conducted with former students, we can in any case conclude that the foreign experience has had a positive effect on their European identity and appreciation of the shared values of freedom and tolerance. We did not discuss substantive knowledge of the EU and its policies (even though greater knowledge of international policymaking was named by a few respondents). The former students would definitely recommend others to have this experience.

5.2.2 Reflection on earlier research

The focus in the earlier longitudinal study³⁹ (three measurements between November 2018 and January 2020) was on the impact of Erasmus+ on the personal and intercultural skills of students in HVET and SE, which compared students with a foreign experience to those without⁴⁰. Discussed were the changes in both old and newly acquired skills, knowledge and behaviour, and the (possibly) improved self-confidence of the student. With regard to the eventual impact, attention was paid to, among other things, fundamental changes concerning active citizenship and improved employability on the labour market. The respondents were not asked about the level of impact as was the case in this research; no comparison with regard to the level of impact across time can therefore be made to, for instance, determine whether the impact on the personal or professional life has either diminished or increased with the passing of the years. A supplement to a possible follow-up study would be the use of an identical line of questioning, so as to allow for an exact determination of developments over time (for instance, with regard to impact). Below, we discuss some of the conclusions from the previous research compared to the outcomes of the current research (reflection in blue).

At the time, the results showed first of all that with regard to nearly all skills and attitudes there were significant differences between the two groups of current and former students (foreign experience vs no such experience) right from the zero measurement: even before their departure, many of the former and current students who go abroad are likely to have a more positive self-image, greater self-reliance, and a greater level of openness toward travel and other cultures. Even prior to their stay abroad, this group already has higher perceived values for their cultural orientation and international and European outlook compared to those who have had no foreign experience. **These findings are not contradicted by the results from the current research. For obvious reasons, this research has made no comparison between students and former students who went abroad and those who did not, but it did become clear, specifically from the interviews, that former students often came from an internationally oriented home situation, varying from parents who are fond of traveling to siblings who had already had a foreign experience. The group we spoke with may be small but does not contradict the findings from 2018-2020.**

With regard to a more flexible attitude (students indicating significantly lower values for openness to travel and other cultures prior to the foreign stay compared to after the visit) and confidence in others and an international outlook (in terms of considerations to live or work elsewhere than the familiar Dutch home situation), a significant effect of the foreign visit was actually found: after a foreign stay the students often proved more flexible, had greater confidence in others, or were more internationally oriented than students without a foreign experience. **All three of the above-mentioned effects were frequently identified by both the respondents from the questionnaire research as well as the interviewees as being positive**

38 European Commission (2023). Commission staff working document. Commission delegated regulation on supplementing the Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council with provisions on the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Erasmus+ programme. Brussels, 2023

39 Korte, de, K., Nas, K., Lodewick, J., & M. Brink (2020). Van inclusie naar Impact: Een meerjarige studie naar de impact van het Erasmus+ programma onder HO-studenten. Nijmegen: ResearchNed (From Inclusion to Impact: A multi-annual Study into the Impact of the Erasmus+ Programme among Students in Higher Education).

40 Included under foreign experience were both 'free movers' and students with an Erasmus+ grant.

effects of the foreign experience. A positive effect of a foreign visit on the extent to which a student identifies as European was not found, nor any other possible effects on personal skills. The former students we spoke with, said they felt more or even more Europe-connected than before. Again, this concerns a small number of former students, but in any case, the findings do not contradict the expectation that a foreign experience has a positive effect in and of itself on the extent to which students identify as European, even after several years. We posited earlier that students who are more self-reliant or have a more positive self-image would probably experience the step to go abroad as less big than those who possess these skills to a lesser degree. We cannot say much about these findings from 2018-2020 based on the current research.

6 Appendix 1: Tables and figures

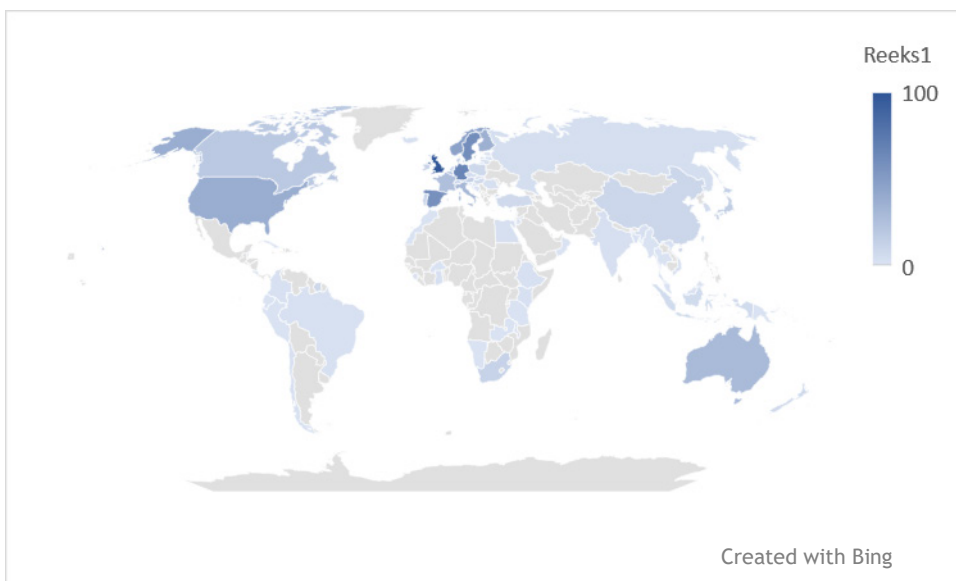


Figure 6: Which country did you stay in during your period abroad? If you spent more than three period abroad, choose the most recent three. (multiple answers possible) (N=791)

Table 3: Impact on the personal life x (total) duration of the stay abroad (N=566)

	Average
One month or less	7.05
About three months	7.91
About six months	8.28
Six months to a year	8.94
More than a year	9.27
Total	8.40

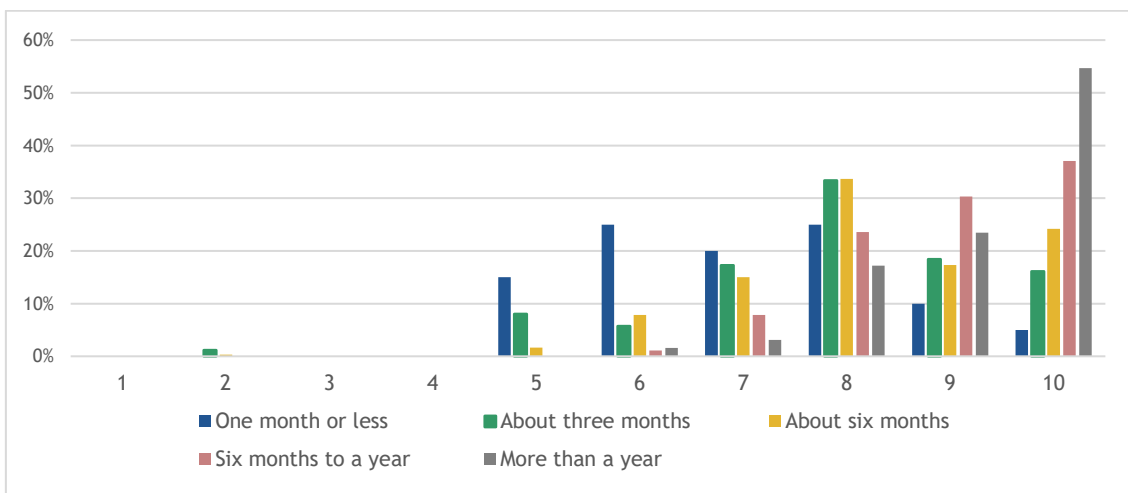


Figure 7: Spread of impact on the personal life x (total) duration of the stay abroad (N=566)

Table 4: Impact on the personal life x goal of the stay abroad (N=524)

	Average
Multiple goals	9.0
One goal	8.2
Total	8.4

Table 5: Impact on the professional life x (total) duration of the stay abroad (N=566)

	Average
One month or less	6.20
About three months	7.18
About six months	7.30
Six months to a year	8.15
More than a year	8.44
Total	7.51

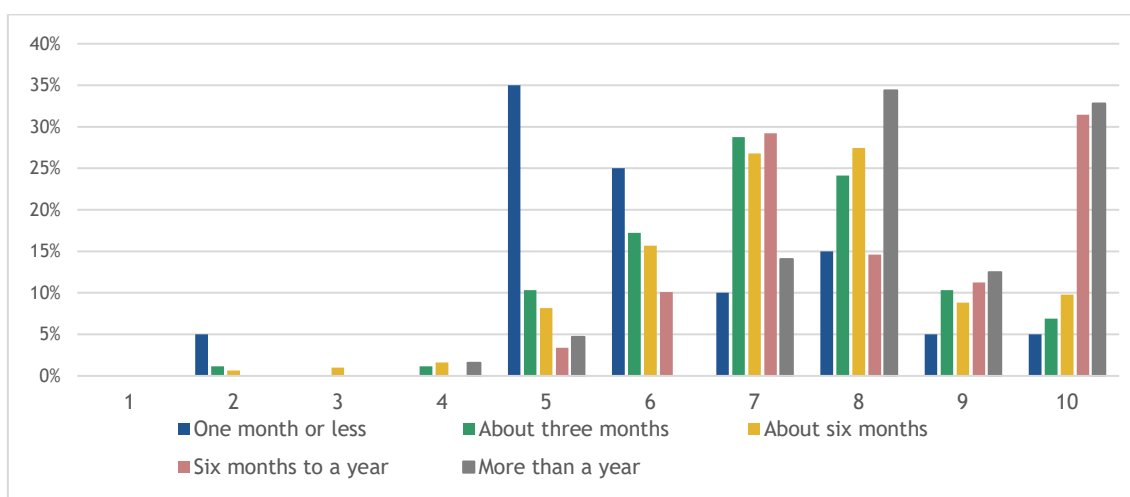


Figure 8: Spread of impact on the professional life x (total) duration of the stay abroad (N=566)

Table 6: Impact on the professional life x goal of the stay abroad (N=524)

	Average
Multiple goals	8.4
One goal	7.3
Total	7.5

Table 7: Where you following a programme at a VET institution, university of applied sciences or university? (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
VET and HVET	8	1.4
VET and SE	1	0.2
HVET	165	29.2
HVET and SE	20	3.5
SE	372	65.7

Tabel 8: Have you completed a study at a university or university of applied sciences? (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
Yes	546	96.5
No, still studying	15	2.7
No, terminated my studies early.	5	0.9

Tabel 9: I am a... (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
Man	162	28.6
Woman	396	70.0
Other than the above	5	0.9
I do not want to say	3	0.5

Tabel 10: Did you spend one or more periods abroad during your studies? (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
Yes, one period	393	69.4
Yes, two periods	118	20.8
Yes, three or more periods	55	9.7

Tabel 11: What was the total duration of your stay abroad during your studies? (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
One month or less	20	3.5
About three months	87	15.4
About six months	306	54.1
Six months to a year	89	15.7
More than a year	64	11.3

Tabel 12: Where you studying or doing an internships? Or where you conducting thesis research? (multiple options possible) (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
Internship	84	14.8
Internships and studying	65	11.5
Internship, studying, thesis research	18	3.2
Internship and thesis research	21	3.7
Studying	313	55.3
Studying and thesis research	14	2.5
Thesis research	9	1.6
Other	42	7.4

Tabel 13: How did you finance your stay abroad? (N=566)

	Number	Percentage
<i>No information</i>	1	0.2
Erasmus+	65	11.5
Erasmus+ and other type of grant	10	1.8
Erasmus+, other type of grant and own means	30	5.3
Erasmus+ and own means	260	45.9
Other type of grant	12	2.1
Other type of grant and own means	41	7.2
Own means	38	6.7
No grant	109	19.3

Tabel 14: Correlation matrix aspects' impact on the personal life (%)⁴¹

N=		professional skills	Flexibility	Social skills	Affinity with the country	living/working abroad	Working for intern. Company/organisation	Social contacts	Intercultural skills	Open and interested attitude	Knowledge of language, culture, and communication	Skills related to communicating in an international context	International orientation	Engagement and awareness intern. developments	International professional developments	Personal development	Self-reliance	Other aspects
145	Professional skills	100	31	29	31	37	52	30	36	32	30	33	33	39	58	28	28	44
366	Flexibility	78	100	76	67	67	76	69	71	74	68	74	73	74	81	68	72	72
365	Social skills	72	76	100	68	65	68	75	69	74	70	72	70	73	74	68	70	67
306	Affinity with the country	66	56	57	100	63	57	64	60	60	64	58	64	64	65	55	55	61
86	Living/working abroad	22	16	15	18	100	31	16	19	15	17	19	20	16	23	16	14	28
91	Working for international company/organisation	32	19	17	17	33	100	15	20	20	18	23	23	19	27	17	18	22
335	Social contacts	70	63	69	70	63	56	100	68	68	65	63	67	69	71	62	62	67
273	Intercultural skills	67	53	52	54	59	59	55	100	55	56	62	62	63	65	50	49	56
356	Open and interested attitude	79	72	72	70	62	78	72	72	100	71	74	76	80	77	65	67	78
383	Knowledge of language, culture, and communication	80	71	74	80	78	75	75	79	77	100	75	77	80	88	69	69	72
299	Skills related to communicating in an international context	68	60	59	57	65	76	56	67	62	58	100	66	63	72	55	56	61
285	International orientation	65	57	55	60	65	71	57	65	61	57	63	100	62	70	53	52	56
218	Engagement and awareness societal developments	58	44	44	45	40	46	45	50	49	45	46	48	100	61	41	42	56
113	International developments trade/profession	45	25	23	24	30	33	24	27	24	26	27	28	32	100	21	21	39
478	Personal development	92	89	89	86	87	91	88	88	87	86	88	89	91	88	100	90	78
451	Self-reliance	86	89	87	81	76	87	83	81	85	81	85	82	87	82	85	100	78
18	Other aspects	6	4	3	4	6	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	5	6	3	3	100

41 The cells marked in green indicate a correlation of 75% or higher.

Tabel 15: Correlation matrix aspects' impact on the professional life (%)⁴²

N=		professional skills	Flexibility	Social skills	Affinity with the country	living/working abroad	Working for intern. Company/organisation	Social contacts	Intercultural skills	Open and interested attitude	Knowledge of language, culture, and communication	Skills related to communicating in an international context	International orientation	Engagement and awareness intern. developments	International professional developments	Personal development	Self-reliance	Other aspects
285	Professional skills	100	61	61	68	69	70	72	63	58	58	58	67	68	70	62	57	36
267	Flexibility	57	100	65	61	51	58	66	57	65	55	56	59	65	59	61	63	54
231	Social skills	49	56	100	57	40	42	76	48	56	48	48	48	53	43	57	56	54
93	Affinity with the country	22	21	23	100	25	24	38	24	23	30	22	27	30	29	24	23	29
91	Living/working abroad	22	17	16	25	100	33	24	19	14	21	18	21	19	27	16	17	18
135	Work for international company/organisation	33	29	25	34	49	100	31	34	26	32	31	37	34	32	26	26	21
123	Social contacts	31	30	40	51	33	28	100	29	31	30	26	30	32	30	34	30	36
251	Intercultural skills	55	54	52	63	52	63	59	100	54	58	54	62	61	58	57	52	39
259	Open and interested attitude	52	63	62	63	40	50	66	56	100	54	55	61	65	56	62	61	46
246	Knowledge of language, culture, and communication	50	51	52	81	57	58	60	57	51	100	55	55	57	53	50	50	54
319	Skills related to communicating in international context	65	67	66	74	65	74	67	68	68	71	100	68	72	66	62	65	46
218	International orientation	52	48	45	63	49	60	54	54	51	48	47	100	56	60	51	47	39
167	Engagement and awareness societal developments	40	41	38	54	35	42	44	41	42	39	38	43	100	49	38	38	25
183	International developments trade/profession	45	40	34	57	55	44	44	43	40	39	38	50	54	100	37	36	39
258	Personal development	56	59	64	67	46	50	72	59	62	52	50	61	59	52	100	63	46
288	Self-reliance	58	67	70	70	53	56	70	60	68	58	58	61	66	56	71	100	43
28	Other aspects	4	6	6	9	5	4	8	4	5	6	4	5	4	6	5	4	100

42 The cells marked in green indicate a correlation of 75% or higher.

7 Appendix 2: Deepening Texts

7.1 Goals of the Erasmus+ Programme - Background

The general goal of the Erasmus+ programme is to support the educational, professional, and personal development of people by means of life-long learning via education, training courses, youth and sport, both within Europe and beyond. The programme thus contributes to sustainable growth, high-value jobs, social cohesion, the stimulation of innovation, and the strengthening of the European identity and active citizenship, as well as to the further development of the European Education Area, the implementation of strategic European cooperation in the field of education and training, and the promotion of cooperation, in particular on the sports component of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. The specific goals (and thus the structure) of the programme are:

- To foster the learning mobility of both individuals and groups, and the promotion of cooperation, quality, inclusion & equality, excellence, and creativity and innovation at the policy and organisational level in the field of education and training;
- To foster non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among youth, and the promotion of cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the policy and organisational level in the field of youth;
- To foster the learning mobility of sports personnel and the promotion of cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the policy and organisational level in the field of sport.

Actions are undertaken on each specific goal, which are grouped in three core actions with regard to different types of interventions:

- Key Action 1: learning mobility;
- Key Action 2: cooperation between organisations and institutions;
- Key Action 3: support for policy development and cooperation.

In this research, the focus was on activities undertaken under Key Action 1, i.e., learning mobility.

The expectation is that activities under Key Action 1 will have positive and long-lasting effects on the participants and organisations involved. Participants are given an opportunity to improve their foreign language skills, often also via e-learning. Activities under this heading include short- and long-term group or individual stays for students, young people, staff members, mobility projects, and accreditations.^{43,44}

43 European Commission (2023). What are the objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme? Consulted on 19 December 2023 via <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme/objectives-features>

44 European Commission (2023). Commission staff working document. Commission delegated regulation on supplementing the Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council with provisions on the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Erasmus+ programme. Brussels, 2023

