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YOUNG AND MOBILE: POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME FOR DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

Abstract: *Education policies are taking new dimensions today. One of the most important ones is the international aspect and study mobility. Various strategies and programmes are emerging in the European Union aimed at combining these dimensions and providing an adequate framework for a broader, more inclusive and high-quality education of young people in Europe. The Erasmus programme is one of the options in this context and has reached great popularity among young people in higher education. This paper provides an overview of the effects of youth participation in study mobility within the Erasmus+ programme. A literature review on outcomes at the level of soft skills related to personal development and employability among young people with experience of study mobility concludes certain favourable benefits of the programme at the individual level. The Erasmus+ programme for the period 2021–2027 brings some substantive changes and a significantly larger budget. The programme will have greater coverage as study mobility would be further encouraged, so impacts on young people in the future should be closely monitored and researched.*

Keywords: *Erasmus programme, benefits of mobility, young people, mobility, education*

INTRODUCTION

Today, education and work are highlighted topics in the context of internationalisation, and this context is considered an expected component of the regular educational process and various training and lifelong learning programmes, especially in European Union countries (European Commission, 2020). The former stability and static provision of academic services and professional development have been replaced by the mobility and dynamism of educational processes and their performance, thus providing a wider range of benefits. The European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (hereinafter: Erasmus) is a programme that supports education, training, youth, and sport in Europe (European Commission, 2020), so this programme was selected as an example of the international environment of education that will be discussed in this paper.

This paper will present the specifics of the Erasmus programme and its possible impact on the academic and social development of young people, first and foremost students, who are participating in it. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of youth participation in Erasmus mobility and the possible impact of this programme on educational outcomes, employment, identity creation, and students' personal development components, especially soft skills. To better understand the purpose of international mobility in education as an added value for the overall educational process, we first note a few important remarks on the importance of education for the personal development of young persons.

Education, in the broadest sense of the word, is a constant process of connecting formal, non-formal, and informal education in overall individual development that lasts a lifetime. In a narrower sense, it is a process of acquiring knowledge and building different skills, habits, value systems and rules of conduct (Gvozdenović, 2011). According to the theoretical assumptions of functionalists, education is recognised as one of the most important institutional areas, i.e., segments in society (Lu, 2010).¹ They explain that education has a manifest and latent function – manifest function including socialisation, social control, social position, transmission of cultures and cultural innovation, while the latent function includes social networking, group work and support, political and social integration (Crossman, 2020). Suzić (2005) points out that educational outcomes can be monitored only through the prism of individual personality

¹ Functionalists interpret that one of the functions of education is the acquisition of a certain social position, so one of the methods used during education is social mobility, i.e., creating assumptions that an individual, through education, acquires a certain place in society and acquires social position (Lu, 2010).

development and its competencies, which involve different knowledge, skills, attitudes, abilities, and values. He states that the effects of investing in youth through generations can be observed through changes in society².

Šuran (2018) emphasizes that the curriculum of modern schools is more focused on practical subjects that should prepare young people for the world of work but should also be focused on the cognitive and emotional capacities of everyone to acquire contact skills. Ilišin and Radin (2007) state that, in addition to the above, the social competence achieved through education and maturation contributes to the formation of awareness and patterns of behaviour among young people.³

Nowadays, young people are taking on business, professional, public and family roles with a certain delay. Various reasons may cause it (such as extended schooling, unstable jobs, etc.), and it prolongs their youth status with limited participation in contributing to society (through work or public action). In the last few decades, however, young people have “benefited from the extension of education” because, through various opportunities, including international mobility, they have acquired specific and broader knowledge in certain areas and additional new opportunities for personal and professional affirmation (Ilišin and Radin, 2007, p. 19).

In this context, socialisation is one of the essentials of education, which implies the influence of society on young people, who are exposed to various influences from their environment to prepare for social roles and develop their own individuality (Gvozdrenović, 2011). Therefore, education has a significant role in the overall development of a young person and their contribution to the economic and social development of society, so expectations regarding the outcome of education are multidimensional. First of all, education is expected to contribute to achieving a better quality of life for people, which includes a stable socio-economic status and favourable opportunities for their personal development. Young people also have such expectations from formal education, believing that it will provide them with employment in the desired activity, economic independence, and entry into the world of adults, but also the

² In this context, cognitive style is considered as an outcome of education, and a model of twenty-eight competencies for the 21st century is developed, which this author divides into four groups (cognitive, affective, social, and work-action), and then in each of them lists seven individual competencies in order for young people to be better prepared for their social roles (Suzić, 2001, pp. 292–303).

³ Similarly, Miljković (2017) states that during education, in order to develop the psychological resilience of young people, it would be necessary to introduce Penn’s Optimism Programme more consistently than before, so it can strengthen the cognitive and emotional functioning of young people, personal strengths of their character, and to develop good interpersonal relationships in private and work roles.

acquisition of the necessary competencies and abilities at the level of personal development (Baranović, 2002; Ruiz Lopez, 2016).

On the other hand, Irving and Williams (1999) state that personal development can be planned and structured, while personal growth cannot. Personal growth is a consequence of a person's effort invested in personal development, and it represents the elevation of a person's overall quality to a new level, while personal development is specified through certain characteristics of a person. Personal growth is one of the six dimensions that define psychological well-being and represents an individual's ability to implement certain strategies that lead to the full development of his or her potential (Ryff and Keyes, 1995; according to Páez Gallego et al., 2020). Regarding personal development processes, young people attach great importance to education in regard to interest in education, emotional attitude towards schooling and their transition to secondary and higher education (Bouillet, 2005).

Within the wider discussion on the benefits of education, the main argument of this paper is related to specific aspects of education practice (student mobility) and its contribution to different aspects of young people's lives. Therefore, the main goal of the paper is to give insights into the benefits of participation in study mobility within the Erasmus+ programme for young people in two relevant dimensions: soft skills and employment. Therefore, this study contributes to the relatively scattered literature concerning the impacts of the Erasmus+ programme on these aspects.

SHORT METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The method used is a literature review close to the systematic literature approach, which is defined as a method of "making sense of large bodies of information and a means of contributing to the answers to questions about what works and what does not – and many other types of questions too" (Petticrew and Roberts, 2005, p. 2). A systematic literature review summarizes the knowledge from a body of literature and uncovers "all" of the evidence relevant to a question, with a focus on research that reports data (Aromataris and Pearson, 2014). The process of a literature review undertaken for this paper follows the phases of collecting, analysing, and synthesizing the literature. It was based on two key steps, preliminary search/identification and selection of relevant papers, followed by analysis. First, we searched for all the papers related to the Erasmus programme from databases in which our faculty library has access to and publicly available databases (like Google Scholar) with the use of different topic-relevant keywords such Erasmus, Erasmus programme, Erasmus mobility, Erasmus experience, Erasmus youth, Erasmus soft skills, Erasmus skills development, Erasmus employability, and many others connected to the

topic of the paper⁴. The criterion for the search was also a time span as we searched for papers from the beginning of the programme until the year 2021 (when the new 2021–2027 programme perspective starts). In the second step, all the paper's abstracts were examined for relevance to the topic, sorted (with duplicates and papers that do not focus on the topic excluded), and those that were relevant for the scope of this paper were selected for review. In the end, 68 literature units were used in writing this paper, but those also included ones that were not only related to the main topics of analysis benefits of participation in study mobility within the Erasmus+ programme on soft skills and employment, but also wider aspects of the paper.

In the first part of the paper, we will provide an initial reflection on the development of the Erasmus programme to set the context and characteristics of youth mobility. After that, the paper will try to assess the benefits of participation in study mobility within the Erasmus+ programme for young people in two relevant dimensions: soft skills and employment. In the discussion and conclusion, the paper provides final remarks about programme characteristics, their role in policy, and young people's lives, as well as future outlooks.

ERASMUS PROGRAMME: BASIC CHARACTERISTICS

How did it all start?

In the European Union, the Erasmus+ programme represents an additional opportunity for the education of young people in an international environment. Since its beginning, the Erasmus programme has predominantly promoted student mobility. The reasons for this lie in the realization that economic, social and political partnerships at the European Union level are based on the foundations of education and research. Therefore, one way to achieve this was to ensure student mobility in these areas, as well as the development of higher education and research that are most important for the development of science and technology (Mizikaci and Arslan, 2019).

The Erasmus+ programme arose from the need to strengthen a European identity in the context of the 1980s, when it was sought to increase the degree of European identification and integration (Adonnino, 1985). It was not until 1984 that the European Council decided to act in order to bring the European Union closer to the citizens and, for this purpose, a committee was created whose main task was to bring the EU closer to the citizenship of the Member States (Adonnino, 1985). The work of this committee and the implementation of its programmes by the European Commission were the beginnings of the development of today's Erasmus, but its beginnings are visible even earlier, in the so-called "Joint Study Programme" (JSP) from 1976. JSP can also be called

⁴ We used a synonyms of the keywords used in previous academic studies.

the forerunner of Erasmus, and its main goal was to strengthen the cooperation of universities from different Member States through the implementation of exchange programmes for students and professors (Pepin, 2006)⁵. JSP provided a framework through which, by upgrades and systematic redesign, the Erasmus Programme was created ten years later (Feyen, 2008).

Although all Member States primarily supported the idea of the Erasmus programme, certain aspects needed to be further elaborated on or changed. Divisions, the problem of harmonization and the impossibility of finding a “common language” (especially between the European Commission and the ministers of education) have almost led to the cancellation of Erasmus (Feyen, 2008). Yet, despite various disagreements and months of negotiations, a partial compromise was finally reached, and eventually Erasmus officially began to exist on July 1, 1987. Erasmus initially involved education, but today it includes vocational training and a variety of European Union programmes⁶, the aim of which is to improve and enhance the quality of education and training, primarily of young people, but also of other age groups within the education system and beyond (European Commission, 2020).

Recent developments

Owing to the integration of different programmes into one, the structure of the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2020, like its previous versions, is comprehensive and complex. Therefore, to facilitate coordination and organisation, all programmes under the Erasmus+ umbrella are divided into 3 so-called “Key Actions”. Key Action 1 (hereinafter: KA1) refers to the mobility of individuals, and it includes: mobility of students and staff, joint graduate study Erasmus Mundus (integrated international study programmes) and loans for Erasmus+ graduate studies (European Commission, 2020)⁷. In addition to student and

⁵ As many as 600 JSP programmes later served as the basis for the Erasmus network and programmes. According to many parameters, JSP covered everything that Erasmus includes (one of the most significant differences was the lack of funding for such programmes / lack of scholarships).

⁶ Today Erasmus represents the integration of a range of separate programmes from 2007–2013. Like the Lifelong Learning Programme, the Youth in Action Programme, Erasmus Mundus, Alpha and other programmes implemented by the Commission (European Commission, 2020).

⁷ Student and staff mobility has a couple of sub-programmes, depending on the end users. Thus, for example, there is student mobility, which is divided into: university study exchange (at a partner higher education institution abroad) and vocational (student) internship abroad in a company or other relevant workplace. Staff mobility can take place during the teaching period and during the training period. Student mobility as well as staff mobility takes place in countries participating in the programme or in countries that have a contract that allows this type of mobility (partner countries) (European Commission, 2020). As a rule, student mobility lasts from 3 to 12 months (professional practice can last 2 months), and the mobility of teaching and administrative staff usually lasts from 2 days to 2 months.

staff mobility in higher education, KA1 also includes mobility projects for students and staff in vocational education and training. Furthermore, KA1 also includes mobility projects for educators and mobility projects for staff in adult education, both of which include teaching, structured courses or training abroad and work monitoring (European Commission, 2020). KA1 includes mobility projects for young people and people working with young people too. This type of mobility is not necessarily linked to academic status (student or pupil) but includes youth exchanges and the mobility of people working with youth⁸. This paper will focus on the specific part the KA1, students' mobility.

Key Action 2 (hereinafter: KA2), unlike KA1, focuses on cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practice and supports the following measures: strategic partnerships in the field of youth education and training; knowledge associations – European universities; sectoral skills associations; capacity building in the field of higher education; and capacity building in the field of youth (European Commission, 2020). Key Action 3 (KA3) is related to support for policy reform and refers to the following: knowledge in the fields of education, training, and youth; policy innovation initiatives; support for European policy tools; cooperation with international organisations; dialogue with participants and promotion of policies and programmes. These activities are carried out directly by the European Commission or are carried out through special calls for proposals managed by the Executive Agency (Paić, 2017).

Today, Erasmus+ is the European Union's programme in the fields of education (all levels), training, youth, and sport for the period 2014–2020 (European Commission, 2020). The Erasmus+ for the period programme 2021–2027 has similar objectives (European Commission, 2021) but an even higher budget (€26.2 billion for 2021–2027 in comparison to €14.7 billion for 2014–2020) suggesting the importance of the program for the future of the EU.

Given this development strategy, generous funding for student mobility has been provided since the beginning of the Erasmus programme, which has been strongly encouraged. From the introduction of Erasmus in 1987 to 2019, over 4 million students, trainees and academic staff across Europe have participated in the Erasmus mobility programme. During the 2013–2014 academic year, over €580 million was invested in the Erasmus Programme to fund the mobility of approximately 272,000 students, 57,000 teachers, and administrative staff (European Commission, 2015).

The Erasmus programme brings together more than four thousand academic institutions in more than 30 countries and focuses on international mobility

⁸ “Youth exchanges allow groups made up of at least two young people from different countries to meet and live together for up to 21 days. During the youth exchange, participants, with the support of the group leader, jointly implement a work programme (mix of workshops, exercises, discussions, role-plays, simulations, outdoor activities, etc.) designed and prepared before the exchange” (European Commission, 2020).

to better employ young people, and to promote the development of personal skills such as interculturality, adaptability, openness and flexibility (European Commission, 2014). The Erasmus student exchange programme, or KA1 activity, operates in all EU Member States and in several neighbouring regions, with approximately a quarter of a million individuals exchanging each year, creating a working example of cross-border cooperation and a tool to facilitate intercultural learning. The estimated duration of mobility is three to twelve months (Cairns, 2019).

The Erasmus programme contains various objectives and, directly or indirectly, promotes European values, social inclusion and equality. The programme contributes to the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training and the sustainable development of partner countries in the field of higher education and sport (European Commission, 2020) and the former goals of the European 2020 strategy but also the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training and the EU Youth Strategy (Nada and Legutko, 2022). It is considered to be an important part of European higher education area (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2020).

The key role in the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme is played by the European Commission, which manages the budget, determines the priorities, objectives and criteria of the programme, directs and monitors the overall implementation of the programme and its evaluation at the European level (European Commission, 2020). In order for the whole programme to work and be meaningful, the most important element is the cooperation of the various bodies of the European Union and European Commission bodies, as well as the cooperation of the Member States and their bodies and national agencies.

The entrusted national agencies actually form a “bridge” between the Commission and the participating implementing organisations at the local, regional, or national level (European Commission, 2020). Erasmus+ “actuators” can be divided into three stages/tiers. The first level includes the holder of the programme and the ultimately responsible institution – the European Commission. The Commission then coordinates the whole programme and manages it indirectly by delegating most of the duties to the national agencies. The national agencies form the second tier, and they directly manage the implementation of the programme, ensuring that all legal and other rules are respected. The last tier is composed of organisations, institutions, legal entities, and other entities that implement the programme themselves⁹.

⁹ Take the Erasmus internship programme in Croatia as an example. The planning, scope and content of the programme is developed by the Commission. The Commission then leaves the management of the programme to the relevant ministry and a national agency such as the Office for International Cooperation of the University of Zagreb, and the final implementers are then individual faculties of the City of Zagreb that have signed agreements for international cooperation.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPATION IN ERASMUS STUDY MOBILITY TO THE PERSONAL OUTCOMES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Before describing in detail, the concrete benefits in terms of knowledge, skills and employability that participation in the Erasmus programme provides to young people, it should be briefly considered why and how young people are involved in this programme. The decision to participate in the Erasmus programme (study mobility) is mainly conditioned by the professional aspects and personal preferences of young people (Souto-Otero et al., 2013). Van Mol et al. (2014) explain that personal motivation to participate in a mobility programme should be viewed through the prism of a person's social environment, personal experience and the macroeconomic situation in the homeland. Jacobone and Moro (2015)¹⁰ find that young people participate in Erasmus more for personal than academic and professional reasons, i.e., more for leisure and cultural activities than for academic achievement¹¹. In their analysis of the motivation of the Erasmus student population, Lesjak et al. (2015) state that Erasmus participants are most often motivated to develop personal and professional skills and take advantage of career opportunities, but on the other hand, they have a strong desire for free time and relaxation (Lesjak et al., 2015) and entertainment (Asoodar et al., 2017). Hadis points out that Erasmus experiences that are often driven by personal development are not pointless in terms of academic and professional development and calls them "playful" motives (Hadis, 2005).¹² Often motivated by them, students choose universities in those countries that have natural beauty, rich culture, art and history and other similar features (Lesjak et al., 2015).

One of the ideas of the Erasmus programme is to make education accessible, especially for students from those countries where young people have limited access to social and economic sources of support. Therefore, it should fulfil the value of the programme through which student mobility has contributed to the development of social inclusion and social cohesion in the European Union and other countries in the region. Notably, students of lower socio-economic status

¹⁰ Longitudinal study on a sample of 505 Italian students.

¹¹ However, respondents who are more oriented towards professional and academic development showed greater satisfaction with the academic dimension (such as achieving academic success or gaining professional experience) while respondents who are more oriented towards gaining personal experience outside the academic field showed greater satisfaction with the social dimension (such as making new friendships or the acquisition of new cultural skills) (Jacobone and Moro, 2015).

¹² As an example, he points out that during the exposure to the culture and lifestyle of the country in which they live during Erasmus, the student develops various interests in terms of new ideas. This further results in greater interest in both academic and professional growth and development upon return to their country.

are largely underrepresented in Erasmus study programmes, so government policies should be geared towards initiatives that encourage this group's participation in international study mobility programmes (Iriondo, 2020).¹³

When looking at the Erasmus programme at a general level, Mizikaci and Arslan (2019) state that the advantages of KA1 activities include strong mobility of young people, economic well-being, the impact of cooperation between corporations and higher education institutions, academic and scientific development of universities, strong labour market development and more significant recognition of certain countries with developed higher education and colleges. Martínez-Usarralde et al. (2017) state that participation in this programme contributes to the development of their social, cognitive, emotional and professional skills and the capacity to recognise the meaning of the social context in which they find themselves and the capacity for active citizenship. The results of the study by Cotren et al. (2015) state that youth participation in mobility programmes improves their skills for organising, presenting, collaborating and directing.

The effect of youth participation in the Erasmus programme is manifested in various ways, which Jacobone and Moro (2015) present in their research on three levels: personal experience, different outcomes (acquisition of language, intercultural skills, academic and professional competencies) and special influences (European and national identity) (Jacobone and Moro, 2015). These potential contributions of participation in KA1 will be considered below through the perspective of contributions to the development of different skills of young people, as well as their employability, primarily looking at the individual level of outcomes.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS: A) DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING PARTICIPATION IN ERASMUS STUDY MOBILITY

Studies show that several different skills of young people are developed and strengthened during Erasmus study mobility. Castello (2019) reported that young people after this experience have a stronger (self) critical approach, a higher level of self-awareness, commitment to academic obligations, communication skills and a sense of interculturality. The outcomes of international mobility have results in the acquisition of personal, linguistic, and intercultural skills and employability, i.e., the professional aspect (Jacobone and Moro, 2015). The Erasmus programme is perceived as a programme during which its participants have the opportunity to develop the ability to adapt to different social situations

¹³ It has also been identified that lack of financial resources and insufficient knowledge of the foreign language of programme are obstacles to the inclusion of high school students in international mobility (MECD 2012, according to Irindo, 2019).

and challenges. The experiences gained during a stay in a foreign country and university increase students' capacity for open-mindedness and strengthen their sense of freedom and autonomy during different phases of their lives, and the need to successfully adapt to different social environments (Martínez-Usarraldea et al. 2017). Ballatore and Ferede (2013) research suggests that Erasmus participants (compared to non-participants) are engaged in more academic and leisurely travel and are more open to international opportunities. During participation in study mobility, students more often use personal responsibility skills because they are exposed to new and sometimes demanding situations (such as making decisions regarding academic plans, placement, paying utility bills on time, medical care, daily meals, laundry etc.) without the direct support of their parents and other family members. These experiences enhance their communication skills and adoption strategies, which are important benefits for students resulting from participation in the Erasmus programme, especially for adapting and achieving personal well-being in new social situations (Martínez-Usarraldea et al. 2017).

It is therefore not surprising that a certain level of independence is recognised as one of the elements of personal experience. More than 60% of respondents in Jacobone and Moro's research (2015) believe that this aspect is important. Independence proves to be the most important element in the research of Asoodar et al. (2017) on the "successful Erasmus experience".¹⁴ Sigalas (2010) reports that students with experience participating in the Erasmus programme from different countries have recognised that their self-confidence has increased, that they have improved social skills, strengthened skills to adapt to new situations and leadership skills. Corten et al. (2015) compared the development of competencies of internationally mobile students while abroad with their peers staying at their home university and found that mobile students develop more organisational, presentation, collaboration and self-direction competencies.

In his qualitative study, Costello shows how returnees from Erasmus express a desire for new international experiences (Costello, 2019). The same results are obtained by Bammer et al. (2017) in a large British study¹⁵ where respondents significantly agree that, after participation in a certain mobility programme, they can move and engage independently more easily, whether it is a job, volunteering, professional practice or something similar (Bammer et al., 2017).

¹⁴ Their results show that "becoming a more independent person" is the most important aspect for respondents before, during and after the Erasmus experience (Asoodar et al., 2017).

¹⁵ The research was conducted through the online questionnaire during 2015/16 on a sample of 16,373 participants.

In addition to educational requirements, while participating in study mobility programmes students are exposed not only to various challenges of adapting to new living and studying conditions, but also travelling and learning about new cultures, as well as interpersonal relationships in this cultural context (Užpalienė and Vaičiūnienė, 2012, according to Mizikaca and Arslan, 2019). This is especially true for the community of incoming students from different countries and cultures who have gathered at a foreign (host) university and who share academic commitments and new social situations during university activities and informal events. Such experiences, according to student statements, have contributed to increasing awareness of the importance of respecting the diversity of cultures from which students come and increasing tolerance of diversity among people in general (Sigalas, 2010). Therefore, one of the more significant dimensions of personal growth and development during participation in international mobility is the aspect of intercultural competencies, where differences are more frequent and emphasised due to the contacts that take place.¹⁶ Nada and Legutko (2022) show that Erasmus's experience can partly contribute to more internationally oriented aspirations, a better understanding of cultural diversity, or an interest in engaging with new international experiences.

Exposing students to different cultures during mobility through frequent contacts with other Erasmus participants leads to the development of cultural intelligence, and this is an indispensable part of the Erasmus experience (Gökten and Serap, 2018). For example, research with the Erasmus population in Turkey has shown that Erasmus encourages greater sensitivity to other cultures (Turhan, 2016). The already mentioned study by Bammer et al. shows that the perception of certain values changes after Erasmus, so more than 50% of respondents (Erasmus students) believe that even after Erasmus, some values such as equality, individual freedoms, human rights, interpersonal solidarity, etc. have become more important (Bammer et al., 2017). A Romanian study on this dimension of the Erasmus programme¹⁷ showed that more than 85% of students believe that Erasmus has had a positive impact on their interpersonal abilities, and 83% believe that their interpersonal relationship with foreigners has improved (Dolga et al., 2015). Sigalas also (2010) states that young people participating in mobility programmes have gained awareness of the importance of respecting diversity, and have strengthened their tolerance towards different cultures.

¹⁶ A particularly significant theory is Allport's *contact hypothesis*. As early as 1954, Allport argued that direct personal contact between members of different groups under certain circumstances could lead to a reduction in prejudice and the development of intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; according to Sigalas, 2010).

¹⁷ The research was conducted through a questionnaire on a sample of 89 students, students of the Technical University of Timisoara.

Linguistic expression is crucial for the development of intercultural and interpersonal skills during the Erasmus Programme. Learning a particular language in its native language area contributes to greater language comprehension, faster acquisition, and better pronunciation of that same language (Hessel, 2016). Erasmus essentially provides an environment with ideal conditions for the development of language skills. In her research, Dolga points out that almost 90% of young people agree with the statement that Erasmus has had a positive impact on the development of foreign language skills (Dolga et al., 2015). Some Erasmus programmes, such as youth exchanges, are focused and specialised in the development of language skills (European Commission, 2020), by socialising and planning joint activities of participants from different countries. Kratz and Netz (2016) report that 68% of German students with experience of international mobility have achieved a high level of foreign language use. A significant improvement in foreign language competence in speech and writing was also confirmed by Rodrigues (2013) for students with experience of international mobility (Iriondo, 2020).

A potentially significant aspect to be considered is also the role of Erasmus in the development of European identity, which can be considered individual but also societal level outcomes. During the early development of the Erasmus programme, one of the main ideas was to develop a European identity among young people and thus contribute to European integration. This goal is considered to be one of the best and most often defined when it comes to programmes involving studying abroad that show the creation of more positive attitudes towards other European countries and strengthen the sense of belonging to Europe (Jacobone and Moro, 2015). The most relevant study on this topic, that of the European Commission (2019), confirms the thesis on strengthening European identity. Young people very often come into contact with other cultures, which is in line with their results, which show a higher level of European identity among Erasmus students (Souto-Otero, 2019). However, it is important to note that most participants also reflect “pro-European” attitudes before going to Erasmus, which become even more pronounced upon completion of the programme (Souto-Otero, 2019).¹⁸ A

¹⁸ Perhaps the best example of the impact of the Erasmus programme on European identification can be seen in the example of Turkey. As a partner country and a candidate for EU accession, Turkey has a very specific geopolitical position in relation to the Member States of the European Union, and in the case of mobility to Turkey, the intercultural aspect is even more pronounced. This difference in culture can often lead to certain prejudices. Historically, there are various stereotypes of Turkey fostered by European societies (Oner, 2015). The Erasmus programme is of great help in removing such prejudices and stereotypes through student exchanges which serve as a great opportunity to learn more about the culture of the country, which leads to cultural integration that ultimately contributes to the view of Turkey as a European country (Demirkol, 2013; according to Oner, 2015), what is in fact the very core of the European identity.

Finnish study also found that the Erasmus+ programme improves the sense of European identity among young people (Eronen et al., 2017). The importance of the acquired perception of students about belonging to the community of citizens of the European Union and a positive attitude towards the EU after the experience of the Erasmus programme is further emphasised. Golubeva et al. (2018) conducted a survey with students from 23 countries who participated in mobility programmes in Hungary and Spain. They conclude that studying abroad is considered a potential means of strengthening the European identity and fostering civic identity by experiencing a different cultural, political and social environment, which encourages intercultural understanding, flexibility, cooperation, openness to change and respect for cultural diversity.

On the other hand, Sigalas (2010) finds that there are no statistically significant data that support the fact that youth participation in the Erasmus programme (KA1) leads to a higher degree of European identity among young people. He cites insufficient contact between young people of different nationalities as one of the potential reasons (Sigalas, 2010).¹⁹ In the research on European identity after the experience of KA1, Oborune (2013) also obtains the results that suggest that the growth of European identity does not necessarily mean a decline in national identity. On the other hand, Pozzoni (2018) in his research states that with the development of European identification, young people feel more connected to their home country and culture (Pozzoni, 2018).

Another interesting element in the development of academic competencies is the diversification of university programmes, learning methods and practices. Geopolitically speaking, the greatest impact of Erasmus on studying is noticeable in students from less developed Member States and partner countries (Souto-Otero, 2019), as for them it is opening new opportunities that are often missing in their own countries.²⁰

¹⁹ He states that contrary to certain assumptions that Erasmus participants often move in international groups, they more often remain in the circles of people of the same nationality. Cristina Cojocaru also referred to Sigalas' research in her work. She argues that its results can be partly explained by the fact that the survey was conducted in the UK which is one of the countries with the highest level of Euroscepticism (Cojocaru, 2019).

²⁰ That is why, but also in an effort to sensitize certain cultures and groups, a large number of Erasmus youth exchanges such as the Youth Exchange or Training Course programmes take place in less developed countries. Italian research on short-term projects such as Youth Exchanges shows how these programmes also lead to positive outcomes on the professional and academic aspects of young people, but also points to certain potential problems such as insufficient distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning / education that is very often used in those short-term Erasmus mobility projects (Merico et al., 2019).

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS: B) CONTRIBUTION OF ERASMUS STUDY MOBILITY TO THE EMPLOYABILITY OF PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS

The question is whether and in what way Erasmus programmes potentially strengthen the employability of young people. In general, universities, governments, employers and students assume that international study mobility has a positive impact on employment benefits (Waibel et al., 2017; Iriondo, 2020). However, several studies have focused specifically on the potential contribution of Erasmus study mobility to youth employability. DiPietro (2015) finds that graduates who have studied at a foreign university have 22.9% greater employment opportunity within three years of graduation. Compared to students who were not part of the Erasmus+ programme, the study shows that programme participants find a job faster after graduation, they are more satisfied with their job and they are more often employed abroad. Employers are also more satisfied with Erasmus students and their competencies. These results are partly supported by several studies (Dolga et al., 2015; Martínez-Usarralde et al., 2017; Costa, 2018; Jansone and Dislere, 2018; Savić et al., 2017; Soares and Mosquera, 2019).

From a student perspective, a recent study (Souto-Otero et al., 2019) shows that Erasmus+ students hold that mobility has helped their careers, especially those students coming from the southern and eastern Member States, as well as those from partner countries.

In addition, some data suggest that (Rodrigues, 2013) participation in international exchange programmes has an impact on the higher amount of salary (approximately 3%) in relation to those employees who do not have this experience, although there are also results that do not find differences in salaries (Netz, 2016). Data on the impact of mobility on salary vary depending on which country the students are from. Positive trends in this regard are recorded by employees in Germany, France, Great Britain, and Scandinavian countries. In Spain, for example, it was found that six years after graduation, Erasmus mobility had the effect of increasing wages between 10% and 12%, so for Spanish people the Erasmus Programme could be considered a good investment (Iriondo, 2020).

The situation is similar with academic competencies that are directly related to professional competencies (some research equates them and some separates them). A study by the European Commission (Souto-Otero, 2019) shows that Erasmus+ participants are more likely to enrol in a higher level of study and that most of them claim that their mobility experience has helped them in further professional reorientation. Kehm (2005) also reports that international study mobility contributes to human development in general and to the understanding of the importance of higher education institutions and opportunities to acquire

knowledge abroad. Croatian research on the topic of the Erasmus programme also points to a positive learning environment. The elements that stand out in particular are subjects in English (where the connection between linguistic and professional aspects is visible once again); individual consultations; extracurricular activities; participation in projects and joint tasks (Vidacek-Hains and Parlaj, 2020). In his analysis, Engel (2010) points out that Erasmus students self-evaluate much better than non-Erasmus students when it comes to international competencies such as knowledge of other countries, foreign language proficiency and intercultural understanding, where they feel more ready for future employment and can provide more specific knowledge and skills (Engel, 2010)²¹.

In addition, the broader Erasmus programme offers a range of mobility programmes, some of which are directly related to work or internships in the profession (European Commission, 2020). The aim of these programmes is to provide a framework for the advancement, growth and development of the youth and organisations, and to diversify in terms of greater opportunities for youth employment. Evaluation during the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 in Finland showed that professional growth at the level of organisations and at the individual level in this period is associated with Erasmus+ activities (Eronen et al., 2017). In this aspect, professional internship programmes are especially important, because they guide young people and additionally specialize them in the field of their profession. Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that as many as 70% of trainees stated that studying and doing an internship abroad gave them an additional impetus within their profession. A large proportion, as many as 83% of trainees, stated that professional practice helped them acquire the competencies needed to work in the profession (Dwyer and Peters, 2004). While certain personal aspects, such as language or intercultural competences, are adopted actively and passively, professional and academic aspects require a much higher degree of engagement and involvement. Nevertheless, despite the need for a higher level of activity, a large number of young people claim that Erasmus experiences have a positive impact on these aspects (Bracht et al., 2006). In their research, Jacobone and Moro emphasise the positive effects on aspects such as: knowledge of professional subjects and understanding, as well as abilities regarding employment (Jacobone and Moro, 2015).

²¹ The VALERA study shows that employers believe that young graduates who have attended student exchanges are superior when it comes to international competencies, soft skills and professionally related abilities (Engel, 2010).

DISCUSSION – KEY ASPECTS OF THE ROLE OF ERASMUS IN YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES

Education policy is an area in which the Member States of the European Union have significant autonomy, which they delegate to supranational bodies (Feyen, 2008) very rarely and only to a limited extent. The European Commission is becoming increasingly important in creating and implementing education policy pursued by public, as well as private bodies of Member States, expanding the scope of its influence vertically and horizontally (Ceri Jones, 2017). Education can be considered as a part of social policy, which brings with it issues of different aspects of coordination between beneficiaries of two systems, which can include certain benefits and financial aspects. For example, for Erasmus students, these are subsidies. Subsidies were the main dispute point between the European Commission and the Member States when planning the implementation of Erasmus (Feyen, 2008).

Nevertheless, despite the difficult goals, Erasmus seems to have become a successful programme within the EU. Therefore, this paper looks at different aspects of how it, as an integral part of the education system, affects the lives of young people through the development of their skills and strengthening their employability. The European Commission emphasises the important role of young people in the future of Europe and states that ensuring economic well-being and maximizing opportunities for young people to participate in employability systems is a significant step in developing successful, socially inclusive societies whose aim is a better future (European Commission, 2009).

The basic idea of the Erasmus programme was to strengthen links between European citizens by promoting student mobility and, in the field of career development and mobility, to connect future workforces in the European labour market, thus contributing to the development of a European identity in the European Union (Van Mol, 2014). For four decades, the European Union has focused on the integration of Member States’ higher education institutions in order to improve the quality of a highly skilled workforce, promote stronger cultural integration and foster a sense of European identity. Erasmus student mobility plays a key role in achieving these goals and is highly dependent on financial support coming from the European Union budget, so the more generous it is, the more fluid the mobility will be (Gonzalez et al., 2011).²²

²² Another way to increase student mobility, these authors argue, is to involve new higher education institutions from the neighbouring countries through contractual cooperation and through promoting Erasmus programmes by presenting Erasmus students’ experiences to their home university colleagues who do not yet have the experience for the purpose of sensitizing them to consider it and make a decision to study in one of the countries of the European Union for one to two semesters (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

When it comes to motivation to participate in Erasmus, young people often point out personal reasons, for example, leisure (Jacobone and Moro, 2015). Nevertheless, this paper shows that different segments of personal development are connected and that development in one area can very often result in development in another area, as Hadith (2016) points out in his paper. The perspective of the Erasmus programme focuses on the personal development of the individual, which can be achieved not only through the professional aspect, but also through a form of entertainment aimed more at intercultural rather than academic and professional elements. Taking as a frame of reference the explanation of personal growth and development of Irving and Williams (1999), it can be said that, in the context of Erasmus, personal development occurs on many levels and through a number of aspects. For example, we have three different aspects, such as linguistic development, personal development in terms of communication and interaction and personal development in a higher level of independence. The Erasmus programme connects this set of elements of personal development in a unique way, which favourably contributes to the overall personal growth of the individual. Wider benefits of the programme recognized in this paper related to soft skills and employability can promote social mobility as one of the important functions of education from the functionalist perspective (Lu, 2010).

In addition to personal growth and skills development, it is important to mention the influence of the environment, i.e., the sociological aspect, which is especially important in the context of Erasmus (KA1). While the psychological approach is focused on the individual and his “ability” as the primary source of personal growth and development (Páez Gallego, 2020), the sociological approach is as important because it emphasises the environment and shows how significant it is owing to the constant interaction of the individual with it.

This paper presents mostly the broader aspect of the personal growth and development of individuals in the context of Erasmus and the international environment. Erasmus symbolises great opportunity for the youth and their education. However, some research (Cairns, 2017; Ballatore and Federe, 2013; Costa, 2018) show that socioeconomic opportunities are an important factor in Erasmus participation and can be a significant barrier to the participation of young people with lower economic status. As some of the objectives of the Erasmus+ programme are directly or indirectly related to values such as solidarity, equality and generally, improving the quality of young people’s academic opportunities (European Commission, 2020), and although there are financial adjustments to scholarships for countries with high economic

standards, this aspect may be called into question²³. In addition to financial opportunities, various studies have shown that other aspects of the educational, economic and other life contexts of young people also play major roles in their participation in the Erasmus programme. Erasmus participants have a greater degree of European identity before they participate in a mobility programme, as does multiculturalism and other elements that are additionally influenced by the experiences of young people with Erasmus (Oborune, 2013).

In addition, wider aspects that pose a challenge to Erasmus students' mobility (some explicated in Lopez- Duarte at al., 2021; Juškevičienė et al., 2021) should be further explored, as should the performance of the different countries regarding the students' mobility (Breznik at al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The Erasmus programme was designed at a time when the European identity was very vague and the trust in the institution that spreads it was extremely questionable. One of the primary goals of Erasmus was therefore "Europeanisation", i.e., the spread of European identity (among young people), which research shows that mostly succeeds (Eronen et al., 2017; Souto-Otero, 2019). Published documents show that the experience of international mobility within the Erasmus programme contributes to the educational, cultural and personal development of the programme participants (Eronen et al, 2017; Souto-Otero, 2019). From the analysis shown in this paper, it is clear how Erasmus significantly affects the individual lives of young people.

This impact is exerted directly and indirectly and can take various forms, from personal development through the acquisition of and work on certain skills and competencies to cultural advancement and professional and academic orientation. Personal growth and development have been analysed through various elements of the paper, and the analysis shows that language skills, interculturality, a greater level of independence, academic and professional competencies and a sense of belonging to Europe form very important parts of the personal development of the Erasmus population. Research also shows that such personal development processes can lead to other positive consequences, such as strengthening the opportunities of young people in the labour market or strengthening further education (Waibel et al., 2017; Iriondo, 2020).

We can also conclude that the Erasmus experience creates not only a kind of "snowball effect", but also the so-called "virtuous circle". Namely, the motivation and desires of an individual's nature, such as the desire for greater independence, for example, can encourage young people to participate in the

²³ Ballatore and Federe conclude that therefore the outcomes of Erasmus can be seen simply as an additional uplift and development of the majority group of young people or as they call them "elite" (Ballatore and Federe, 2013).

Erasmus programme. Achieving the expected results and personal growth and development upon return from Erasmus leads to empowerment and thinking about new participation in international and other programmes, which again leads to an even greater degree of individuality and independence. Erasmus mobility “culture” and what it creates is vital for economic development, social inclusion, motivation for further education, as well as intercultural openness, tolerance (Souto-Otero, 2019) and many other areas within the social policy through which the European Union is “activating” a young population. In addition, the Erasmus programme can have a “catalyst” effect.²⁴ This allows young people to make strides with positive consequences, whereby these positive outcomes can indirectly affect people in the immediate vicinity of young people with mobility experience (Oner, 2015).

This paper is a small contribution to clarifying the outcomes of the Erasmus+ programme. Future monitoring and research on the effectiveness of the program may challenge the reach of some of the positive outcomes that this paper partly highlighted. They need to be closely monitored and researched in the future as the scope and funding of the programme are widening, and can have a significant impact on both individual and societal levels, shaping European identity and policies (especially educational), enhancing labour market inclusion and shaping the individual life trajectories of participants.

²⁴ So often family and acquaintances and other young people who interact with an Erasmus participant also indirectly receive the positive impact of a person with mobility experience (Oner, 2015). This influence is spread mostly by transferring the acquired experience of the participants to others.

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MLADI I MOBILNI: POTENCIJALNE KORISTI ERASMUS PROGRAMA U RAZLIČITIM ASPEKTIMA ŽIVOTA MLADIH

***Sažetak:** Obrazovne politike danas poprimaju nove dimenzije. Jedan je od najvažnijih aspekata međunarodni aspekt i korištenje mogućnosti studijske mobilnosti. U Europskoj uniji nastaju različite strategije i programi usmjereni na kombiniranje ovih dimenzija, pružajući odgovarajući okvir za šire, inkluzivnije i kvalitetnije obrazovanje mladih ljudi u Europi. Program Erasmus jedna je od mogućih opcija u tom kontekstu, a danas je stekao veliku popularnost među mladima u visokom obrazovanju. Ovaj rad daje pregled učinaka sudjelovanja mladih u studijskoj mobilnosti u okviru Erasmus+ programa. Pregledom literature o ishodima na razini mekih vještina povezanih s osobnim razvojem i zapošljivošću među mladima s iskustvom studijske mobilnosti, dolazi se do zaključaka o određenim koristima programa na individualnoj razini. Program Erasmus+ za razdoblje 2021. – 2027. donosi značajne promjene i značajno veći proračun. Program će imati veću pokrivenost kako bi se dodatno poticala studijska mobilnost. Stoga bi utjecaje na mlade u budućnosti trebalo pomno pratiti i istraživati.*

***Ključne riječi:** Erasmus program, koristi mobilnosti, mladi, mobilnost, obrazovanje*