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Entrepreneurial Traits in High School Students.
Imprints of Erasmus Experiences

Raluca Mariana GROSU¹, Emilia BATROS^{2*}

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Abstract

The present paper aims to analyse the effects of Erasmus programs on high school students in terms of their personal development, being oriented towards three main directions: understanding the motivations behind the application for Erasmus programs; identifying the expectations of the participants before the experience; acknowledging the benefits of participating in Erasmus programs, in strong correlation with the development of skills, with a particular focus on entrepreneurial traits. Based on qualitative research consisting of carrying out interviews with high school students who participated in Erasmus Mobility Programs between 2018 and 2020, the article outlines the benefits of such experiences, emphasizing the development of skills and competencies linked with their entrepreneurial traits. Important acquired and/or improved traits referred to: risk-taking, managerial skills, teamwork abilities, creative thinking, communication skills, motivation, optimism, and networking. The paper brings a novel approach to the scientific literature in terms of the investigated population, high school students from Romanian institutions, enriching at the same time the literature focused on the impact of Erasmus programs on their participants. From a more practical perspective, the paper promotes the positive impact of the Erasmus experience on high school students, aiming to raise awareness among them of the benefits derived from the involvement in this kind of programs.

Keywords: entrepreneurial traits, Erasmus program, high school students, development of skills, Romania, motivations.

JEL Classification: A20, I20.

1. Introduction

Erasmus represents the European Union program based on the promotion of education among young people or people who need greater cultural and educational support. This program has the purpose of helping young Europeans to evolve both

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, raluca.petrescu@com.ase.ro.

² Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, batrosemlia20@stud.ase.ro.

* Corresponding author.

personally and professionally, contributing to the development of participants' abilities and skills. (European Commission, 2021)

In the current context, highly marked by environmental degradation, post-pandemic challenges, and armed conflicts in different regions worldwide, there is an urgent need for young generations with strong values, oriented toward making the world a better place for them and for future generations. Furthermore, under the domination of major trends such as “sustainability” and “digitalization” (Francu, Grosu, 2020; Amicarelli et al., 2021; Aytakin et al., 2021; Popescu et al., 2022), people, especially the young generation, must be more aware of the results and implications of their actions, demonstrating an original, unconventional attitude and mentality toward minimizing their negative impacts on societies. A well-trained young generation, both in terms of their knowledge and skills, with entrepreneurial mindset, competencies, and traits oriented toward sustainable actions will play a crucial role in building and developing competitive societies. Not only should they become entrepreneurs, but they can manifest an entrepreneurial attitude at their jobs either in a public or private institution, or even when practicing a liberal profession. A strong education system, but also involvement in extracurricular activities, participation in Erasmus programs included, might bring an important contribution to the development of a competent young generation. Involvement in Erasmus programs is linked with increased skills and competencies (Iriundo, 2020; Soares, Mosquera, 2020), leading to the development of more conscious, better trained, and skilled people. Romania urgently needs such a young generation that might bring about the mentality shift it needs. Besides the already mentioned worldwide challenges, Romania is confronted, at the same time, with a strong emigration trend, especially of its highly skilled young adults (Petrescu, Bâc, Zgură, 2011; Grosu, Constantin, 2013; Grosu, Dinu, 2016), making it imperious to form a young generation with proper skills to contribute to a better Romania.

In such a context, the present paper aims to analyse the effects of Erasmus programs on the development of young high school students. Therefore, the paper is structured in six main parts, with introduction and conclusions included. The next section presents a series of aspects specific to the literature review, being followed by the outline of a series of methodological aspects and the main results of the research.

2. Problem Statement

The article approaches a topic that benefits from a vast scientific literature, generally composed of studies on how the Erasmus experience contributes to the personal and professional development of university students (Parey, Waldinger, 2011; Soares, Mosquera, 2020). In a more particular case, the literature on Romanian students focuses on different aspects such as mobility flows; Erasmus student experiences as tourists; values and benefits of their participation in mobility programs; intercultural adaptation; etc. (Salajan, Chiper, 2012; Udrea, 2012; Stroe et al., 2015; Tamaş, 2017; Marin-Pantelescu et al., 2022). However, when the nature of the subjects approached is narrowed down from university students to high school

students, the literature in the area is not so vast anymore. The novel approach in our paper consists exactly of the investigated subjects, more specifically high school students from Romania that benefited from Erasmus Mobility Programs.

Even if the effects of the Erasmus Mobility Program on each participant depend on many factors such as the institution from which the participants come, the community in which they live in, the financial state, etc. (Rodriguez Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza, Mariel, 2011), such programs mark the development of their participants, both from a personal and professional perspective. For example, career, adaptability, managerial, personal and teamwork skills, and employability are highly developed due to enrolment in Erasmus Mobility Programs (Soares and Mosquera, 2020). More specifically, skills highly correlated to entrepreneurial traits such as risk-taking, planning, networking, etc. (Salati Marcondes de Moraes, Sadao Iizuka, Pedro, 2018) are frequently encountered in former Erasmus participants.

The motivations and desire of young people to apply in one of the Erasmus programs represent another topic of interest for the paper. Motivations usually arise from students' desire to develop their language skills, to discover new cultures, and to interact with people (Botas, Huisman, 2013).

Another aspect presented in the scientific literature on which this article is based refers to the expectations of the students before the beginning of the program and how they were met during the program. Usually, the expectations of the students are completely exceeded at the end of the project (Jacobone, Moro, 2015).

3. Research Questions / Aims of the Research

The main aim of the paper is to analyse the effects of the Erasmus programs on high school students, especially in terms of their personal development, with a particular focus on entrepreneurial traits. From a more particular perspective, the paper focuses on the following three objectives:

- Analysis of the main drivers for high school students to participate in Erasmus Mobility Programs.
- Analysis of high school students' expectations about the Erasmus Mobility Program, before the experience.
- Analysis of the main skills and competencies, especially in the entrepreneurial area, acquired and/or developed by high school students after participating in Erasmus Mobility Programs.

4. Research Methods

Aiming to reach the established objectives, a qualitative research, based on carrying out semi-structured interviews with high school students that participated in Erasmus Mobility Programs, was developed in March 2021. The research was carried out on high school students from the "Mihail Kogălniceanu" Economics College in Focșani that participated in Erasmus Mobility Programs between 2018 and 2020. Seventeen teenagers who participated in Erasmus Mobility Programs during their high school studies were contacted. However, the interviews were

carried out only with six of them, as the others were highly reluctant to participate in the research, denying their participation. Considering confidentiality-related reasons, the identity of the respondents is not revealed. The ‘findings’ section is codified using codes from R1 to R6.

The interviews were based on an interview guide composed of 11 questions, developed according to the purpose and objectives of the research. The interviews were carried out via Zoom, these being in one-to-one format, lasting, on average, around 35 minutes. Only in two interviews did some small communication barriers occur due to disrupted factors such as pet noise or the sounds of other devices.

The results obtained from this research are presented in detail in the next section. Considering the qualitative nature of the research, it is worth emphasizing that the results are specific only to the interviewed high school students, generalization neither being aimed at, nor applicable.

5. Findings

The interviewed high school students participated between 2018 and 2020, in Erasmus Mobility Programs through internships and through active participation in activities related to environmental awareness and promotion of a healthy lifestyle by practicing sports activities. The basis of the mobilities in which the respondents participated consists of the exchange of experiences between several high school institutions in several European countries, such as Latvia, Bulgaria, Wales, and Spain, for a period of one or two weeks.

The main motivations of the interviewed high school students for their application to these Erasmus programs were related to the desire to have unique experiences, through which they will be able to acquire certain skills and competencies, especially English language skills. Their participation in a multicultural context was highly assessed as the main trigger for acquiring or developing new improved English communication skills. The opportunity to travel to a foreign country was another important reason why they chose to participate in Erasmus programs. For most of them, it was the first opportunity to be on their own, in a place where they no longer had the help of their parents, but a place where they could evolve and step outside of their comfort zone (*“The fact that I was able to visit a foreign country alone, without having my parents close, was a unique experience”* – R2). To participate in one of these projects, high school students needed courage to overcome their fears and cope with the experiences deriving from having contact with a new country; they were risk-takers. In that environment, their mother tongue was no longer relevant, and they had to adapt to these new experiences (*“One of the strengths I valued in the project was my courage. I went to a foreign country for the first time, on my own, without family or friends, where I had to manage and face all kinds of situations by myself”* - R5). Moreover, for some respondents, this was also a way of bonding with their colleagues (*“I like to travel, to speak foreign languages. I like people, in general. That’s why I chose to participate in this project with some of my friends.”* - R4). Another reason for participating in the Erasmus projects was their desire to discover other cultures, to analyse the traditions of the host states, and

to understand in a broader manner the mentality and behaviour of the locals. The interviewed high school students wanted to observe the educational systems in the host countries, also, especially in comparison with the Romanian one (*"We saw different cultures, types of music, food, how to dance, and what traditions each state has. It was very interactive and fun."* - R4). As a general remark, an overall reason why the interviewed high school students applied for Erasmus Mobility Programs was not only to live a memorable experience, but also to evolve both personally and professionally, to participate in interactive activities and projects (*"Before leaving, I was hoping to have fun, to learn as much as possible, and when I arrived in Bulgaria, it was not just that I had fun and spent time with my friends, but also that I learned a lot of new things"* – R4).

The interviewed high school students did not have high expectations before the start of the project, as this was the first experience of this kind for all of them. All expectations were based on a unique experience, in which students were placed in an international context, in which they were constrained by circumstances to do more by themselves. High school students knew that they would communicate with other people in a language other than their mother tongue, but thought that it would be too much of a challenge and they would not be able to connect with students in those countries, given the circumstances in which they were placed. Therefore, they had the opportunity to discover how open-minded and friendly foreign students were, giving them the opportunity to acquire beautiful memories and unforgettable experiences (*"I wanted to strengthen my relationships with my friends and colleagues and make new ones, with whom I can create real connections and with whom I can still communicate even after the end of the project"* – R1). They wanted to discover other cultures, to feel what life was like among the locals and to walk in the shoes of a person living in that area. This way, they could improve their knowledge of the host country and to compare that culture with their origin one (*"I expected a new world, to communicate with different people, to learn about a culture that is in a way closer to us, but at the same time different from many points of view"* – R3). The interviewed high school students were very excited before the project and did not expect to participate in so many different and interesting activities (*"Before the start of the program I was excited. [...] I did not expect to visit different places every day, or to have such interesting and interactive activities"* – R2).

All these expectations were fulfilled, even exceeded. The reality of the mobilities compared to the expectations of those who participated was much more beautiful and completely satisfying. One of the things that impressed the respondents was the connection with the students from the host countries. They did not expect them to be so sociable and open to relations with foreign students, especially because they did not come from a country well known to all participants. The students from the other participating countries were very kind and friendly to the respondents, showing teamwork skills. That was because all the activities they performed were carried out in teams with students from different countries and no groups were set up per country, to avoid creating discomfort or causing no communication between the participants (*"I got along very well with everyone, I communicated with all the*

groups from the other countries that participated. They did not form small groups and collaborated on all activities with students from each country.” – R6). In addition to the activities they carried out in the project, the interviewed high school students developed stronger relationships with the foreign students. For example, in their spare time, the students from the host countries carried out fun and interesting activities, on their own, which led to a smoother integration of the Romanian participants in the environment specific to the host country (*“What impressed me the most was the behaviour among young people in Bulgaria, different from that of Romanians. They do not take into account how close the relationship is with those around them or how well they know people. They make everyone feel welcome. I liked that people were open-minded and open to activities with us.” – R4).*

Moreover, the respondents did not expect to have the opportunity to participate in activities such as cultural visits or admiring the surroundings (*“When we had a free day, our coordinating teacher took us on trips to important cities like Liverpool or Manchester, organizing visits to museums and zoos.” – R1).* All respondents were pleasantly surprised to have the opportunity to participate in various interactive activities, not only activities in which their knowledge was consolidated but also activities in which they could relax and create close links with the other participants, this way developing their networking skills (*“The reality was not as I expected; it was much better than I thought it would be, because I thought it would be a very rigid program. I was expecting to spend more time in class, learning and sharing experiences, but I was pleasantly surprised that we also had the opportunity to visit places, to learn about them, both historically and culturally” – R5).* Another aspect that exceeded the expectations of the students was the level of knowledge they gained from this experience, as well as the degree of endowment of the host institutions. Given that the countries in which the participants carried out the activities are developed countries, the receiving institutions were benefitting from high-quality equipment, offering more opportunities for students, especially when compared with the institutions from which they were coming.

The main strengths of the program from the perspective of high school students were related to the development of communication and social skills. The fact that they interacted with many students of similar ages and nationalities helped them open up and be able to communicate more easily with those around them (*“I acquired important communication skills; even if my mobility was only for a week, given that I was in an international context, the circumstances forced me to get out of my comfort zone, even if I am quite shy. If you are an introvert and want to change something, an Erasmus project would be a great choice for this.”-R4;* *“I was not as good at speaking English, but due to the international context in which I was placed, I managed to improve and expand my English vocabulary.” – R5).* Along with social skills and openness to new relationships with people of other nationalities, which the high school students acquired during the program, they also developed teamwork skills. They were encouraged to work in teams, especially groups with students from each country (*“I developed teamwork skills, which I am not a fan of. In general, I was lonelier, I like working alone, but I had experiences*

who needed to make this compromise, to gather my strengths to work with my colleagues.”– R2). Most high school students also managed to improve their self-confidence, gain some courage to experience more situations, and adapt to a new environment (“Without this experience I was doubting myself, I could not speak English and not even speak in public. After the Erasmus project, I managed to gain confidence and I learned not to be afraid to participate in extracurricular activities” – R1).

Additionally, public speaking skills, critical thinking, creative thinking, or organizational skills, were also developed in the case of the interviewed high school students. Due to the multitude of activities that the project made available to the participants, they managed to develop their creative and artistic side (“I improved my skills, I was more organized with my own time and money, because I had a limited budget that we had to manage” – R3).

In addition to skills and competencies, the interviewed high school students also improved their knowledge, related to both the specific topic of the mobility and the culture of the receiving country. The variety of activities they performed during the program, referring to the topic addressed in the project, was another strength of the participation in Erasmus programs.

Involvement in the Erasmus program positively marked the personal development of the interviewed high school students. Many entrepreneurial traits, especially in the soft skills area, were developed or improved, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Entrepreneurial traits of high school students, acquired or developed after the Erasmus experience



Source: developed by the authors.

Considering the general experience of mobility, the respondents want to participate in another Erasmus program, because they want to have as many memorable experiences as possible, to travel, and to observe as many cultures and traditions as possible. They consider the Erasmus projects to be a great opportunity for young high school students, and they encourage all those who have the opportunity to apply to do so. Some respondents said that it would be a great opportunity for them to participate in other types of Erasmus projects than the one in which they have participated. Projects on other topics for a longer period of time, as well as study programs for one semester or even one year, during the university degree, were highly mentioned as potential options for future applications.

6. Conclusions

The present research aimed to analyse the effects of Erasmus programs on high school students, especially in terms of their personal development, oriented toward three main directions: understanding the motivations behind the application for Erasmus programs; identifying participants' expectations before the experience; and acknowledging the benefits of participating in Erasmus programs, strongly in correlation with skills development, with a particular focus on entrepreneurial traits.

The motivations behind the application of the interviewed high school students to the Erasmus Mobility Programs were related to the desire to participate in extracurricular activities and the opportunity to be placed in a multicultural context in which, restricted by the circumstances, they can push their limits and improve themselves. The difference between the perspective of high school students before and after Erasmus mobility is considerable, because they did not expect the program to bring them such a large amount of information, and the way the activities are performed would be so varied and interesting. Given the complexity of the program and the opportunities it brings to the interviewed high school students, several positive aspects were observed in the research. The involvement in Erasmus mobilities strongly impacted the interviewees in a positive way, especially in terms of their personal development. Most of them managed to develop language and communication skills through interaction with other participants, as well as through the development of activities, due to the international context in which they were placed. They were given the opportunity to manage themselves in another country, where they could no longer receive help from parents or friends. In this sense, by placing them in these circumstances, young people managed to gain more self-confidence, teamwork skills, and even a better way of organizing both their time and resources.

To carry out the activities and complete the project in a more memorable way, high school students were advantaged by certain skills and competencies, such as the English level, which helped them better interact with foreign participants. In addition, their communicativeness, sociability, and creative skills helped them, because they needed to create better connections with other students to complete a unique and transformative exchange of experience.

The Erasmus experience was strongly perceived by all interviewed high school students as transformative, with positive marks on their personal development, directly contributing to the development of their entrepreneurial traits. All of the interviewed high school students strongly promote and encourage participation in such programs among other high school students, as well. Even they are willing to have other Erasmus experiences in the near future.

The present paper, even with a strong limitation, deriving from the nature of the employed research, related to the narrow sample of interviewees and their concentration in the same area of investigation (the same high school), has two major contributions, to both theory and practice. On the one hand, the paper adds value to the scientific literature by investigating an under-researched group of subjects, beneficiaries of Erasmus programs, respectively, high school students, most of the studies in the field being focused on university students. Furthermore, the area of investigation is also less studied. Through the investigation of Romanian high school students, the paper enriches the literature in the field. Additionally, the paper draws important starting points for future research, establishing the setup for developing quantitative pieces of research, representative at the national level, for a more complex and comprehensive approach to the investigated phenomenon. Considering the qualitative nature of the present research, the outlined results are specific only to the investigated sample, and their generalization is not applicable. However, the paper promotes, among other aspects, the positive impact of the Erasmus experience on high school students with the aim of raising awareness among them of the benefits derived from the participation in this program. From a practical perspective, the paper has the potential to give high school students a perspective on the worth of their involvement in Erasmus programs. At the same time, the paper might stimulate the motivation and desire of high school students to apply for Erasmus programs.

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