

The 7th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences
**Exploring Global Perspectives:
The Future of Economics and Social Sciences**
June 13-14, 2024
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

**Erasmus Experiences' Influences on Students'
Entrepreneurship Competences**

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DOI: 10.24818/ICESS/2024/030

Abstract

In a context in which the Erasmus programme has become one of the most important international study programmes and entrepreneurs are highly acknowledged as a driving force of any economy, the present paper aims to investigate the influence of Erasmus mobilities for studies on the development of entrepreneurship competences among participants. The article is based on qualitative field research carried out during the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, following the EntreComp framework. This consisted of the development of semi-structured interviews with incoming Erasmus students at the University of Economics in Bratislava (Slovakia), mainly from both Western and Eastern European countries. The study revealed that, following the students Erasmus experience, the interviewed developed various entrepreneurship competences like opportunity identification, creativity, ideas capitalisation, self-awareness, motivation, perseverance, financial literacy, initiative taking, dealing with uncertainty, teamwork, and learning from experiences. The study sets premises for future research, at the same time, impacting practical policies in mobility areas developed at university level.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship competence, EntreComp, students, Erasmus programme.

JEL Classification: I23, I25, M19.

1. Introduction

In a European context characterised by uncertainty, unfavourable economic perspectives, threats of conflicts (Ioan-Franc et al., 2023) or of those deriving from technological advancement, increased digitalisation, or the development of

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artificial intelligence (Grădinaru et al., 2024), hope resides in its young population. Highly educated young people, with strong humane and ethical values, with a sound sense of responsibility for both societal and environmental concerns, and with skills that cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence, such as entrepreneurship competencies, might represent a proper leverage for an adequate step forward for European societies. Therefore, in addition to ensuring young people convenient access to education, their participation in projects aimed at their personal and professional development should be highly encouraged and supported. The effort acknowledged in this sense is represented by the Erasmus programme (Grosu and Batros, 2022) designed to facilitate the exchange of students between partner universities, mainly in Europe (European Commission, 2023).

In such a context, the present paper aims to investigate the influence of Erasmus mobilities for studies on the development of entrepreneurial competences among participants, focussing on a sample of incoming Erasmus students at the University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia, being based on qualitative field research, as further outlined.

2. Problem Statement

In recent decades, the Erasmus programme has become one of the most important international study programmes, attracting the attention of scholars interested in studying its benefits on participants, in particular, and on society, in general. Over the years, studies have been carried out to investigate the effects of Erasmus mobility on participants' skills and competencies, including those related to entrepreneurship. For example, Stamenovic (2020) investigates the relationship between international mobility and entrepreneurship, the impact of the Erasmus programme on entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, and the effects that these exchanges produce. The study outlines that the Erasmus programme is an important factor in developing mentalities that can influence entrepreneurial characteristics such as the ability to take risks, the capacity for problem solving, maturity, and the ability to function independently (Stamenovic, 2020). In the same line, Engel (2010) reveals that an Erasmus mobility can have a positive impact on different qualities of students that will help them in the future to find a better job or to follow an entrepreneurial career, such as problem-solving capacity, initiative, assertiveness, determination, persistence, planning, coordination, and organisation. In addition, Onderoglu et al. (2010), following a study carried out on outgoing students on Erasmus mobilities – all, students at the same university, with the same cultural background – reveal that an Erasmus mobility can have a significant positive impact on students' entrepreneurial thinking. Overall, the presented studies outline that Erasmus mobilities have a positive contribution to participants' entrepreneurial spirit, helping them to develop essential entrepreneurial skills and competencies. In this context, the present study aims to validate these findings by implementing a novel approach. Unlike previous research, this one addresses the influence of Erasmus programmes on the development of entrepreneurship competences in participants through the lenses of the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework

model (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) – EntreComp; the envisaged entrepreneurial competencies are explicitly approached as described in EntreComp.

3. Research Questions / Aims of the Research

The developed research aims to investigate the influence of Erasmus mobilities for studies on the development of entrepreneurship competences among participants, approached as a set of skills and abilities that individuals possess and/or can acquire and improve to become proactive and to exhibit initiative and entrepreneurial spirit (Floris and Dettori, 2020). In a more specific regard, the target research objectives were to identify the entrepreneurship competences that are most influenced by Erasmus mobilities for studies and to analyse the factors contributing to their development among Erasmus participants.

4. Research Methods

The present paper is based on qualitative research developed in April-June 2023, implying 16 semi-structured interviews with students benefiting from an Erasmus mobility in the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, at the University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia. Interviews were carried out with 16 participants (10 females and 6 males), aged between 20 and 29 years. The countries of origin of the participants represented a cultural mix between well-developed and less developed countries such as Italy, Germany, Spain, Turkey, Greece, United Kingdom (UK), Luxembourg, Romania, and Kazakhstan (Table 1).

Table 1. Structure of the interviewed sample of Erasmus students

Age	Sex	Level of education	Level of interaction with entrepreneurship	Country of origin	Interview type	Sending Date (2023)	Receiving Date (2023)
23	Female	Master	Minimal	Italy	Written	May, 4	May, 4
25	Female	Master	Minimal	Italy	Written	May, 4	May, 11
24	Female	Master	Minimal	Italy	Written	May, 4	May, 11
23	Female	Bachelor	Moderate	Germany	Written	May, 4	May, 12
20	Male	Bachelor	Minimal	Turkey	Written	May, 4	May, 11
21	Male	Bachelor	Moderate	Spain	Written	May, 4	May, 8
20	Female	Bachelor	Minimal	Spain	Written	May, 4	May, 18
20	Female	Bachelor	Moderate	Greece	Written	May, 4	May, 12
20	Male	Bachelor	No Interaction	Germany	Written	May, 4	May, 13
21	Male	Bachelor	Minimal	Germany	Written	May, 4	May, 12
29	Female	Master	Moderate	Kazakhstan	Written	May, 4	May, 12
20	Female	Bachelor	No Interaction	Greece	Written	May, 4	May, 7
21	Male	Bachelor	Moderate	The UK	Written	May, 4	May, 11
27	Female	Bachelor	Minimal	Germany	Written	May, 13	May, 19
25	Male	Bachelor	Moderate	Luxembourg	Written	May, 4	May, 22
24	Female	Master	Minimal	Romania	Written	May, 13	May, 21

Source: developed by the authors.

As the research was carried out at the end of the mobility semester, during the final exams, considering the limited free time of the respondents, the interviews were carried out entirely in the form of written interviews using online means of communication such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and e-mail. The interviews were carried out mainly in English, except one that was in Romanian, based on an interview guide (Table 2) developed in accordance with the purpose and objectives of the research and following the EntreComp framework. The average response time was approximately one week between the date the guide was sent and the date the responses were received, with exceptions where the response time was extended due to the reduced availability of students. Reminder messages and e-mails were also sent during the research period to facilitate its development.

Table 2. Interview guide

No.	Question
1	Please specify the following information: age, sex, level of academic degree, country of origin, and level of interaction with entrepreneurship. For interaction with entrepreneurship, please choose one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Interaction – you have no exposure to entrepreneurship; • Minimal Interaction – you may have some basic knowledge about entrepreneurship, but have not yet engaged in any entrepreneurial activity; • Moderate Interaction – you have had some level of practical experience with entrepreneurship, such as starting a small business or working in a startup environment; • High Interaction – you have significant experience with entrepreneurship, such as founding or running multiple successful businesses; • Expert Interaction – you are recognized as an expert in entrepreneurship.
2	How has the Erasmus mobility influenced your ability to recognize opportunities, generate ideas, and take initiative? Please explain how you developed these competences.
3	In what ways has your Erasmus mobility experience developed your ability to persevere, take calculated risks, and manage ambiguity and uncertainty? Please exemplify the context in which you developed these competences.
4	Have you developed any new competences related to financial literacy, business planning, or marketing during your Erasmus mobility? If so, can you describe them and how have they contributed to your entrepreneurial mindset and skillset?
5	How has the Erasmus experience helped you to build and maintain relationships, collaborate with others, and create value through networks?
6	Have you been involved in any entrepreneurial activities during your Erasmus mobility that have allowed you to apply your competences in a real-world context? If so, can you describe them and the impact they had on your entrepreneurial development?
7	How has your cultural experience during Erasmus impacted your ability to adapt to new environments, understand diverse perspectives, and leverage cultural differences as a source of creativity and innovation?

Source: developed by the authors.

The respondents were contacted through the International Mobility Department of the International Relations Office of the University of Economics in Bratislava, and they were not forced to participate in the research. Their involvement was only on a volunteer basis, and they were informed about the purpose of the research and its way of development. Taking into account the confidential reasons, the identity of the respondents is not revealed. Content analysis was used to process the information gathered during the interviews. Considering the limited number of interviewees, this was accomplished manually, and its results, following an inductive approach, are further presented.

5. Findings

According to the interviewees, the experience gained from the Erasmus mobility has a significant impact on their way of thinking; adding such an experience to their personal portfolio opens new horizons and helps them develop new competences. For example, generally, during the mobility program, students are placed in situations where the ability to take initiative is crucial. *“This was the moment when I had to take the initiative to start talking to the rest of the participants and build friendships.”* (Student from Romania, 24 years old); *“Working in a team, made me aware that taking initiative when everyone around you is sceptical could be really challenging.”* (Student from Greece, 20 years old) As the Erasmus experience is not only about academic activity that takes place during courses and seminars, but also about the free time students spend with people from different cultures and the places they explore, respondents felt that taking initiative was also very common when planning activities outside the academic environment.

When students were asked about their ability to manage ambiguity and uncertainty, they raised the issue of language barriers. However, to overcome this, the solution they found was to enrol in the Slovak language course for beginners offered by the University of Economics in Bratislava. *“I looked for resources to help me improve my language skills and I enrolled in the Slovak language module for beginners.”* (Student from the UK, 21 years old). When dealing with the adaptation to new living environments and the management of unfamiliar situations, students improve their motivation and perseverance as well. During the Erasmus mobility, students are exposed to new cultures, languages, and habits. These experiences help them develop their adaptability, flexibility, and resilience, while improving their motivation and perseverance to succeed. *“Being in a completely different environment improved my ability to adapt to new circumstances as I became more confident in handling unusual situations.”* (Student from Germany, 23 years old); *“Adapting to a new environment was a difficult but rewarding experience. I had to be open, flexible, and patient to adapt to the new country and culture.”* (Student from Italy, 24 years old) Their capacity of dealing with uncertainty relates to their risk-taking ability, too. As during mobility students don't have anyone known to support them when needed, making them manage the risks they take differently. Contrastingly, respondents confessed that they have learned how to act on their own in critical situations and not to be afraid of the unknown.

Erasmus is a beneficial experience in terms of developing self-awareness and responsibility, as well. Brought into the new living environment, where they must take care of all the daily responsibilities on their own, such as weekly shopping, preparing meals, doing the laundry, etc., respondents became more self-aware of their capacities and have been able to become more responsible, especially in terms of budgeting. Managing the budget and allocating it responsibly plays an important role in an Erasmus experience. The respondents revealed that they have learnt to be more responsible in their consumption and limit things that were not absolutely necessary, in order to stay within the proposed mobility budget. *“You must be aware that the Erasmus grant has to help you throughout the whole period, so you have to manage money according to your preferences. If you don’t manage it properly you won’t be able to afford certain activities and expenses.”* (Student from Spain, 21 years old); *“Since I have arrived in my Erasmus mobility, I have developed a new sense of financial literacy because I had to manage my money by myself for several months.”* (Student from Greece, 20 years old) The Erasmus mobility is an opportunity to develop and deepen financial literacy. *“Living away from home, I realized the meaning of money, how much it’s worth and how quickly it’s spent, and I learned to manage my spending.”* (Student from Spain, 20 years old)

Creativity and innovation are other competences that students developed by taking part in Erasmus mobilities for study. According to the interviewees, by embracing diverse perspectives and ways of thinking, they were able to develop a new sense of creativity and became more innovative in their approaches to problem solving. *“I learned to value cultural differences as a source of creativity and innovation.”* (Student from Italy, 24 years old) Especially in team projects, students used the cultural differences between participants as an advantage to generate new ideas. Working on teams in different projects during the mobility period also contributed to the development of teamwork as a competence amid interviewees.

The students’ responses show that once they are in a foreign country without connections, they seek to connect with people and develop friendships. The fact that they are all away from home, makes students more open and receptive to forming new friendships. *“Living and studying abroad often requires students to engage with other people, which can help develop interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy, and respect.”* (Student from Italy, 25 years old). The Erasmus mobility is a great opportunity to meet new people, from very different cultures, whom participants would not have had the opportunity to meet in other circumstances, this way, developing their networking skills. *“Erasmus mobility is the best way to build international relationships from an early age. In all my life, I have never had the opportunity to meet so many international people in such a short time and establish contacts at a very close level.”* (Student from Germany, 20 years old) Spending so much time together, so many experiences, so many emotions, Erasmus students support each other, understand each other, and share the good and bad moments of this experience. One reason why Erasmus students are willing to form close bonds with other participants is their desire to belong and empathize. In a new environment, students want to feel understood and heard, and they tend to express their feelings

more freely than they normally would. Furthermore, respondents felt that during the experience they noticed a change in their empathy towards others and were able to interact differently, improving their networking skills and teamwork competences as well. *“During the Erasmus programme, I had the opportunity to meet and interact with people from different backgrounds and fields of study, which taught me how to communicate effectively, respect other people’s opinions and empathize with other people.”* (Student from Italy, 24 years old) Although cultural differences can be an impediment to forming new relationships, the students interviewed felt otherwise. *“Cultural differences don’t matter, on the contrary, they connect us.”* (Student from Germany, 20 years old) The respondents that differences between students have a greater impact on building a bond than similarities between them. *“I have realized that people from different cultures offer new perspectives that can enhance a project, rather than being alone with your mindset and ideas.”* (Student from Kazakhstan, 29 years old)

The Erasmus experience helped students face new problems and discover new opportunities. Respondents reported that when they arrived in the new environment where they were going to spend the next four months, they discovered new needs that they were not aware of in the past. *“When you go on an Erasmus experience, you leave your comfort zone, your home, your country and you realize what is like to live alone.”* (Student from Spain, 20 years old) When they became aware of the needs, they started to identify new opportunities, as well. *“There are different businesses in my residence designed to meet the needs of Erasmus students: hairdresser, massage, ethnic restaurants, etc.”* (Student from Spain, 20 years old)

In terms of new ideas generation and capitalisation, respondents specified that certain courses they took at the University of Economics in Bratislava, such as Change Management, Corporate Social Responsibility and Cost Control, had a considerable impact on their ability to generate new ideas and put them into practice in their daily life or even at the workplace. Furthermore, the business models identified in the host country can be translated into ideas that are worth implementing in the country of origin. For example, one of the interviewees was very surprised when he first arrived in Bratislava and realized how common vending machines for soft drinks and snacks, but also for traditional Slovak products (e.g., cheese) are. Different from how this type of commerce is developed in his country of origin, the Slovak business model, might be replicated in the British environment, according to the interviewee: *“This gave me the idea to own a vending machine in the future and sell items in London with a high demand for London’s culture.”* (Student from the UK, 21 years old) Erasmus mobilities are also an opportunity to generate new business ideas for the host country. Respondents mentioned that they identified some business opportunities in Slovakia, based on the tested, successful business models in their origin country, that they already discussed with their Slovak peers. Furthermore, during the mobility period, the interviewees realised how beneficial is to carry out market research in the process of business idea generation and business planning. *“[...] I came to the conclusion that I will carry out online surveys and try to get as many responses as possible and then make a calculated decision on whether*

or not it is financially viable to put my idea into practice.” (Student from the UK, 21 years old) In the same line, another student emphasised that due to the Erasmus experience he was able to understand the needs and demands of young people in terms of relaxation and entertainment, making him want to capitalize his idea into a business in the future. *“I think that if I set up an entertainment organisation, I’d do a pretty good job because now I know what students want most and I can meet the demand.” (Student from Turkey, 20 years old)*

During the Erasmus experience, some of the interviewees had the opportunity to attend to different entrepreneurship-related classes, as well, that led to the development of their knowledge in the field. Management, marketing, production, and financial related information was acquired. At the same time, practical skills were developed mainly targeting business idea generation and pitching, and there was involvement in business simulation, as well, increasing this way, students’ capacity of learning from experiences. Overall, such classes left interviewees with a clearer image of what running a business implies. In such a context, in the interviewing process, students were asked if during their Erasmus mobility they had been involved in entrepreneurial activities that helped them apply their acquired knowledge in a real context, but no positive response was received.

During their Erasmus experience, the respondents identified a multitude of changes in their lifestyle, their skills, and the way they approach problems. The interviewed students consider that they have learnt a lot from the Erasmus experience, and this helped them to obtain a range of competences that could not have been acquired or understood in the same way through other activities. *“Everyone who goes on Erasmus comes back changed, with skills to adapt to change and cope with adverse circumstances that not everyone can have.” (Student from Spain, 20 years old)*

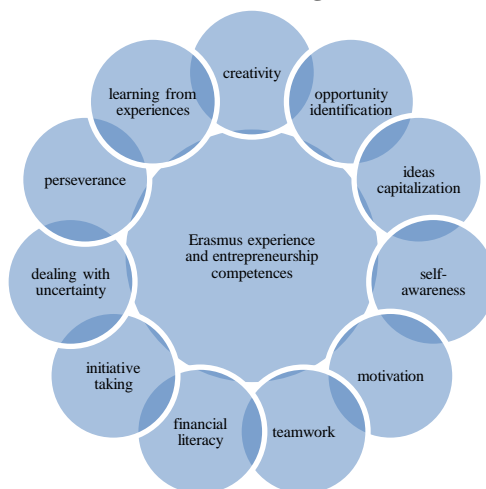
6. Conclusions

The developed research revealed that the experiences to which students are exposed during an Erasmus mobility influence the development of their entrepreneurship competences. For example, the interviewees who participated in this study perceived improvements in their ability to take advantage of new opportunities and capitalise on their ideas and enhanced their financial literacy. The mobility has helped them to become more financial aware, learning to prioritize their needs, and to properly manage their budget. In the direction of ambiguity and uncertainty, students gained confidence in managing unforeseen situations. By eliminating fear of the unknown, interviewees opened their horizons to new opportunities and gained the courage to explore them, while developing their perseverance and motivation. Other skills where improvements were observed after the mobility period were the degree of self-awareness and the ability to take initiative. Students were put in different situations where taking initiative was essential for the smooth running of activities, many of which were developed in teams, improving this way their teamwork ability, as well. Furthermore, the Erasmus programme is a great opportunity for participants to develop their creativity and

to be innovative, especially when dealing with different situations involving people from different cultures, with different backgrounds. Overall, according to the interviewees participating in this study, during Erasmus mobility, they have learnt invaluable lessons from the experience, while at the same time, acquiring a high level of independence and responsibility.

Considering the previously presented information, to provide a clearer image on the entrepreneurship competences – according to EntreComp – developed by the interviewed students following an Erasmus experience, an illustrative summary is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Entrepreneurship competences developed by the interviewed students following the Erasmus experience



Source: developed by the authors.

The present paper brings a contribution to the enrichment of studies in the area of “Erasmus’ influences on participants” advocating the positive effects the program has on students’ personal and professional development, focusing on their entrepreneurship competences’ enhancement. However, this has some limitations in regards the number of interviewees, the fact that only incoming students to the University of Economics in Bratislava were interviewed, and the fact that only one university was subject to investigation. Expanding the research to more universities and countries, and to investigating a larger sample of both incoming and outgoing Erasmus students might represent viable future research directions. Also, comparisons among countries in the area of the investigated topic are worth exploring in future research. There is an imperative need for stimulating students to enrol in mobility programmes as these have enormous positive effects on their development. Such a transformative experience on students will make a great impact on their origin country, upon return, especially for less developed European countries confronted with massive waves of emigration and ageing population (Grosu and Constantin, 2013; Dragusin et al., 2015; Grosu and Dinu, 2016). Thus, future

research directions can also investigate the impact on the long-term Erasmus programmes they can have on their participants and on the origin countries, focussing on the labour market insertion, business development, or economic contribution, especially in less developed countries. Furthermore, from a more practical perspective, the present study could establish important guidelines for university representatives in designing coherent strategies aimed at strengthening their mobility policies. As demonstrated in the present study, Erasmus mobilities positively influence the development of competences in participating students, and these should be part of any university's advancement strategy.

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