

## HOW STUDENTS DEVELOP THEIR COMPETENCES THROUGH ERASMUS MOBILITY: ERASMUS CASE IN HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** *The Erasmus Program is an European Union (EU) student exchange programme established in 1987. Erasmus+ is the new program combining all the EU's education, training, youth and sport programs, which was started in January 2014. The program built on the 1981–1986 pilot student exchanges, it was formally start of the academic year 1987-1988, 3,244 students to participate in Erasmus in its first year. In 2006, over 150,000 students participate to the Program. In the past twenty years, over two million students have benefited from Erasmus grants. Hacettepe University is one of the important and leading players in Erasmus+ Program in Turkey. Hacettepe is well aware of benefits of work experience for the students such as: Future employability with better conditions and gain improved competences.*

*With this research, 456 Erasmus students of Hacettepe University benefiting the Erasmus Mobility asked to evaluate how they developed their soft competences during their Erasmus period abroad such as; Team work, ability to organize their work, problem solving skills and analytical skills. When we look at the some of the findings;*

- *They feel that they developed their analytical skills,*
- *They believe they feel more competent about foreign language after the program*
- *They think they are more interested in world issues.*
- *They believe they are more sensitive to the other cultures.*
- *They developed their adaptation ability to the new environments.*

*The results of this study showed that international student mobility in Hacettepe had a positive impact on the developing their competences.*

*This research, may be important in two aspects: The students and their families may benefit from the outcomes of the study to when they are questioning to the participating the Erasmus Program or any other international exchange. And, It is thought that the findings of the research may be beneficial for both university and Program stake*

*holders by leading to the development of the program and the preparation of the students for the international exchanges. Depending on the research results it can be recommended that a similar research can be administered in the different universities at both national and international sample*

**Key words:***Erasmus Program, Student Mobility, Competences, Higher Education.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Erasmus Program is an European Union (EU) student exchange programme established in 1987. The program built on the 1981–1986 pilot student exchanges, it was formally start of the academic year 1987-1988, 3,244 students to participate in Erasmus in its first year. In 2006, over 150,000 students participate to the Program. In the past twenty years, over two million students have benefited from Erasmus grantsThe Erasmus programme was introduced in 1987.

Its name not only reminded of the Dutch humanist and theologian Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466-1536), but also served as an acronym for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. Erasmus aimed to increase the quantity of European higher education activities including broaden their scope. It rapidly became the most visible of the various newly emerging European educational programs. Erasmus is established as the largest student mobility program (Bracht et al., 2009).

Program was integrated as a sub- program first under Socrates and then Lifelong Learning and now Erasmus+. Erasmus+ is the new program combining all the EU's education, training, youth and sport programs, which was started in January 2014. With the help of the program many European higher education institutions put great emphasis on international mobility and internationalization activities.

Erasmus was started to increase the number of student mobility between European States, to have pool of graduates who are experienced in intra-community cooperation. Besides, it was helpful to strengthen the cooperation between European higher education institutions. Erasmus supports both student and staff mobility, which also helps to improve the quality of the higher education institutions and their European dimension (Maiworm,

2001).

Erasmus mobility includes two dimensions of student mobility; academic and placement.

The Commission regards “mobility as the core element in research development”, and considers it either at transnational (movement between countries) or interregional or intersectorial levels (movement between academia and industry), “essential in order to take a maximum advantage of available resources. Mobility is not an end in itself, but an instrument by which research results can be optimized” (EC, 2001).

Many students prefer to join the program to improve their both personal and professional competences, which leads better employment. The “push” to make a move is the need to acquire new skills and techniques to secure a position in science. Paradoxically in some cases access to research grants abroad seems to be working better than schemes to get internal funding at home. In other cases, scientists exercise their mobility to advance their postgraduate education, which lacks a structured scheme in their home country (Morano - Foadi, 2005).

The effects of the international mobility activities changes considerably for individual students of both universities, ranging from clearly positive effects in terms of progress in competencies and personal growth to considerable negative or adverse effects indicating that the experience had hardly been beneficial for the student. (Stronkhorst, 2005). Student mobility is the key to increase the highly educated graduates. Student mobility across countries exposes students directly to the different European cultures and supports them to develop their multi-cultural skills. These skills are seen as indispensable in a European Union that strives for full economic integration while preserving the diversity of its cultures. Besides, increasing student mobility is hoped to kindle a competition between countries to attract the most able students. Since university education in Europe is mostly publicly funded, the dimension in which such competition takes place is quality. Hence, it is hoped that higher mobility raises university quality. This would increase the productivity of graduates further (Mechtenberg and Strausz, 2008).

Erasmus Program plays a vital role for Turkish Universities as well. From the beginning of its implementation in Turkey there is an increase in number of incoming and outgoing students and university staff. The program is administered by the national state and Turkish National Agency was founded in 2002 to implement the program to disseminate the program and to

increase the participation. According to Turkish National Agency (2015) there are more than 74,000 students participated the program since 2004.

Hacettepe University participated Erasmus in 2004, and more than 4,600 student joined the mobility to go abroad. Hacettepe University is one of the important and leading players in Erasmus+ Program in Turkey. It is well aware of benefits of work experience for the students such as: Future employability with better conditions and gain improved competences.

King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) stated that the experience of living and studying abroad can have important effects on an individual's identity formation in the post-national context of European integration, and sponsored mobility such as Erasmus at an early adulthood age have a long lasting influence on those individuals' future especially in Europe. The Erasmus experience allows students to become immersed in another culture, make new friends, and acquire a working knowledge of another language and to develop skills to contribute employability (UKSEC, 1998). According to Harzing (2004) the most important work goals of the students are interesting work, good pay and good interpersonal skills in many European countries.

Although organisations (including universities) have a role to play in supporting employability, both employees and employers now see primary responsibility for employability resting with the individual (Van Buren III 2003; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). When we look at the other side of the coin, employers are becoming more demanding for hiring new graduates as the competition in the global business world increases day by day. This also led universities to have an international perspective by embedding international elements into their systems such as international curricula, mobility programs, and international teachers. These applications may result to have graduate outcomes with knowledge and understanding of cultural issues, as well as the capacity to manage international relationships and a culturally diverse workforce (Crossman and Clarke, 2009).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The population of the study is all Hacettepe University Erasmus outgoing students in the academic year 2012-2013. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher himself. In order to develop the scale, the researcher conducted a literature review and gets the expert opinion for the questions. For construct validity, a pilot study was conducted and an exploratory factor analysis was used.

456 from 481 Erasmus outgoing students have attended the survey from Hacettepe University. They participated in the program in the 2012-2013 academic year. 382 students have benefited from the study mobility and 72 were part of placement mobility program under Erasmus. In the first part of the survey students were asked some demographic questions and their experience about Erasmus. In the second part of the survey they questioned about their perceptions on personal and social gains at their Erasmus experience. 5-item Likert scale was used for these quantitative questions. : (a) 1,00-1,80: strongly disagree, (b) 1,81-2,60: disagree, (c) 2,61-3,40: partially agree, (d) 3,41-4,20: agree and (e) 4,21-5,00: strongly agree. The arithmetic means, standard deviations and the other values computed from the data were used to analyse the answers.

## **FINDINGS**

The 456 Erasmus outgoing students from different departments have participated in the survey. The results of the demographic questions revealed that 132 of the participants were male and 324 of the participants were female. It shows us that the number of female students is higher than the male ones.

The four most popular countries among Hacettepe students to go abroad are; Germany, Poland, Italy and France. 58% of the students stated that it was their first time traveling abroad. Top five motivation to participate the program of the students are; Meeting new people, learning a new language, living abroad, travelling and, better career opportunities.

When we look at the second part of the survey students were asked about their perceptions on social and personal gains from their Erasmus experiences.

25% of the participants were strongly agreed and 45% participants agree that they developed their analytical skills. Only 4% and 1% of the participants agreed that either they developed very little or none when they are abroad.

67% of the students strongly agreed and of them 28% of them agree that they have learnt about respecting to the different cultures. Only 2% of them was not agreed on developing this competence. Similarly, 66% of the students strongly agreed and 28% of them agreed on that they improved independently thinking skills. Only 2% of them agreed on developing this competence.

When we questioned about being more innovative and open minded, 71% of the participants believed in that they developed this competence at their Erasmus period. Only 1% of them agreed that they developed that competence very little. 50% of the students stated that they improved their foreign language very good level, 40% of them said that they developed in good level. 1% of the students said that they did not develop their foreign language in the foreign country.

50% and 36% of the students stated that they are more interested in world issues now. Only 1% of them said that their interest is the same about the world issues, as before the experience. When we look at the adaptation ability to the new environments, 74% of the students stated that they developed that competence in very high end. Less than 1% stated that they did not develop this competence when they were living abroad.

When we questioned about project management skills, 27% of the students agreed that they developed this skill "very much", 41% of them developed at "much" level. 2% of the students stated that they did not develop this skill at all. When we asked them about the main problems at the hosting country, top three answers were; financial, culinary and meteorological issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of the Erasmus program is develop the quality of higher education and strengthen European dimension. This might be a topic for another research but the results of this study showed that Erasmus student mobility in Hacettepe University had a positive impact on the developing their competences. One may say that, female students are more interested in to participate international mobility than male students. For most of the students Erasmus program is an important opportunity to go abroad. This may be because of the financial support of the program. Students stated in the survey that they developed their analytical skills, feeling more competent about foreign language, more interested in world issues, more sensitive to the other cultures and developed their adaptation ability to the new environments. As Stronkhost (2005) states at his research from their period abroad, the majority of the students indicated that they were satisfied with their international experience after returning home. This also supports the outcomes of this research.

Another important discussion revealed from this study is the difficulties that they encountered abroad. These are financial issues, culinary and meteorological adaptation. Sending institution may apply some pre departure

trainings to prepare their students to the new experience. This research, may be important in two aspects: The students and their families may benefit from the outcomes of the study to when they are questioning to the participating the Erasmus Program or any other international exchange. And, It is thought that the findings of the research may be beneficial for both university and program stake holders by leading to the development of the program and the preparation of the students for the international exchanges.

Depending on the research results it can be recommended that a similar research can be administered in the different universities at both national and international samples.

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