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Vocational Education  
and Training

# Léargas Impact Study: Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland



Erasmus+  
Enriching lives, opening minds.



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Erasmus+

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

## **CFE: College of Further Education**

An institution providing education and training that occurs after second level schooling, but which is not part of the Higher Education system.

## **ETB: Education and Training Board**

A local statutory authority with responsibility for education and training, youth work and other statutory functions.

## **EU: European Union**

## **KA: Key Action**

The broad term for the types of activities and projects that can be funded under Erasmus+. The three principal key actions are mobility projects (KA1), strategic partnerships (KA2), and structured dialogue (KA3).

## **Mobility:**

In the context of Erasmus+, 'mobility' means people physically travelling to another country for a period of training, study, job shadowing, volunteering or exchange.

## **NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications**

The ten-level framework for the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications in Ireland.

## **QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland**

Independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland.

## **VET: Vocational Education and Training**

In Ireland, 'VET' generally refers to post-secondary non-tertiary education, leading to a Major award at Level 5 or 6 of the National Qualifications Framework.

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# INTRODUCTION

This study examines the impact of Erasmus+ work placements on Vocational Education and Training (VET) learners from Ireland. These placements are facilitated through Erasmus+ Key Action 102 mobility projects. Research was conducted by Léargas, the Irish National Agency for Erasmus+ in Adult Education, School Education, VET and Youth, during 2017.

The research is based on projects that received Erasmus+ KA102 funding from Léargas in 2014, 2015 and 2016 for mobility projects involving VET learners. The core objective was to analyse the fundamental changes that these work-based placements bring about for VET learners, and the associated impact on their sending organisations.

The study is based on qualitative and quantitative research. To reflect the diversity and depth of experiences of both organisations and participants, the study includes direct quotes from participant reports, final reports and interviews throughout. Participant feedback has been anonymised for data protection, but indicates the participant's sending organisation.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Erasmus+ is the European Union programme for Education, Training and Sport running from 2014 to 2020. Strand KA102 ('Learning Mobility for VET Learners and Staff') provides funding to VET organisations to send their learners or staff to other countries for work-based training or job shadowing. The Erasmus+ Programme Guide states that such projects should:

-  improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society, in particular through increased opportunities for learning mobility and through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work
-  foster quality improvements, innovation excellence and internationalisation at the level of education and training institutions, in particular through enhanced transnational cooperation between education and training providers and other stakeholders
-  promote the emergence and raise awareness of a European lifelong learning area designed to complement policy reforms at national level and to support the modernisation of education and training systems, in particular through enhanced policy cooperation, better use of EU transparency and recognition tools and the dissemination of good practices
-  enhance the international dimension of education and training, in particular through cooperation between Programme and Partner Country institutions in the field of VET and in higher education, by increasing the attractiveness of European higher education institutions and supporting the EU's external action, including its development objectives, through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between Programme and Partner Country higher education institutions and targeted capacity building in Partner Countries
-  improve the teaching and learning of languages and promote the EU's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness.

Table 1 shows the scope of the study. Overall, 36 projects were assessed. This represents just over 80% of the 44 VET KA102 projects funded through Léargas in 2014-2016. The eight remaining projects did not meet the research criteria as they addressed VET organisation staff rather than learners.

**Table 1: Scope of Study**

|  | 2014       | 2015                  | 2016                 | TOTAL        |
|--|------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| <i>Projects funded</i>                 | 16         | 17                    | 11 <sup>1</sup>      | 44           |
| <i>Projects involving VET learners</i> | 14         | 13                    | 9                    | 36           |
| <b>Final reports studied</b>           | <b>14</b>  | <b>12<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>3<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>29</b>    |
| <b>Participant reports studied</b>     | <b>637</b> | <b>468</b>            | <b>170</b>           | <b>1,275</b> |

<sup>1</sup>Fewer KA102 projects were funded in 2016 than 2014 and 2015; contributory factors included several large-scale two year projects being funded in 2015, and the introduction of a new strand of the programme 'KA116, VET Mobility Charter' for experienced VET organisations.

<sup>2</sup>Final reports from some projects were not available as they were not due for submission at the time of research.

Applications for VET KA102 funding are accepted from any VET organisation in Ireland. Organisations can apply once per funding round; in 2014-2016, there was one funding round per year. Individuals cannot directly apply for funding.

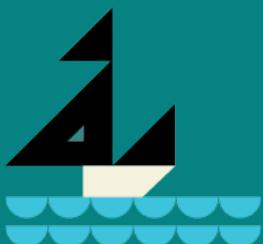
A mobility *project* can last one to two years. However, the amount of time participants spend on a mobility *placement* abroad varies between two weeks and twelve months. VET Mobility projects must involve at least two partners from different Erasmus+ programme countries, one sending and one receiving. The sending organisation applies for funding from the National Agency in its own country, and sets the selection criteria for participants. The receiving organisation is another VET provider, often a College or Training institution. It arranges work placements with local employers and usually has responsibility for sourcing accommodation and providing logistical support. Participants in a mobility placement may be in any year of study or have graduated within the last 12 months.

Figure 1 overleaf shows that the projects studied were carried out in 21 different VET organisations based in 11 of the 26 counties of Ireland: Cavan, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Longford, Monaghan, Sligo, Tipperary, Westmeath, and Wexford. Among these organisations, ten carried out one project, eight carried out two projects and three carried out three projects over the period 2014-2016.

Of the 21 VET organisations which held mobility projects, 20 sent learners who were studying at Level 5 or 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). NFQ Level 5 courses are generally one year long, and Level 6 courses are two years. Figure 2 shows that in the projects studied, 73% of learners were in year 1 of their training at the time of placement, with 25% in year 2. Under 3% of learners reported that they were in later years of study or had graduated.

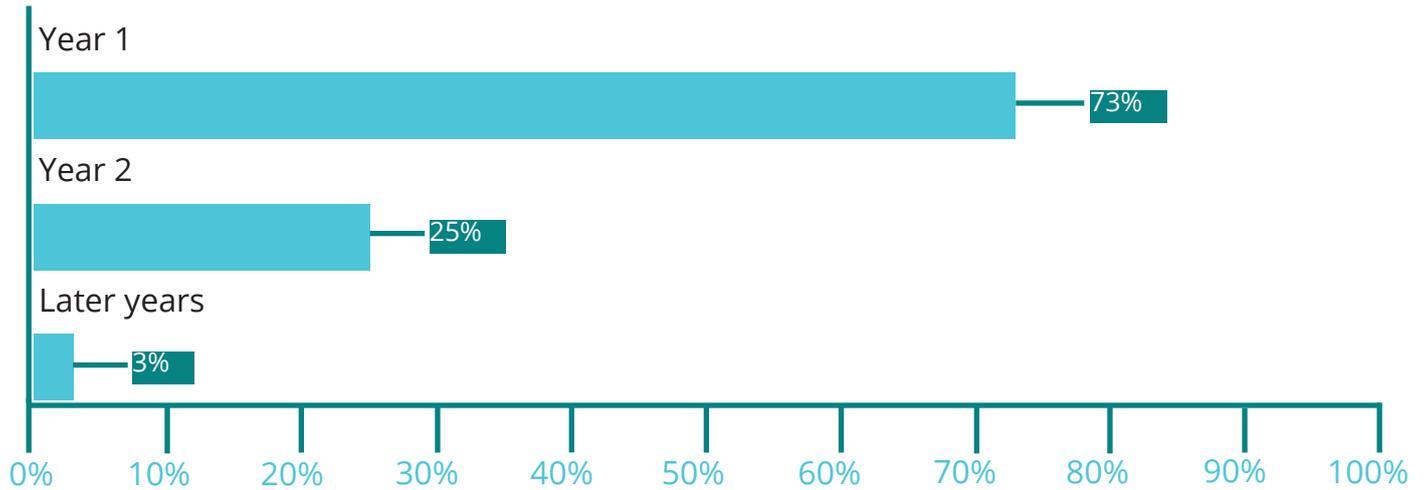
While VET mobility work placements can last between 2 weeks and 12 months, Figure 3 shows that 92% of placements in this study were under 4 weeks in duration. The remaining 8% of placements were between four weeks and three months. Project coordinators cite the logistical difficulties for participants in being away from their families and homes for longer periods as the principal reason for selecting durations under 4 weeks.

Figure 1: Overview of Sending Organisations

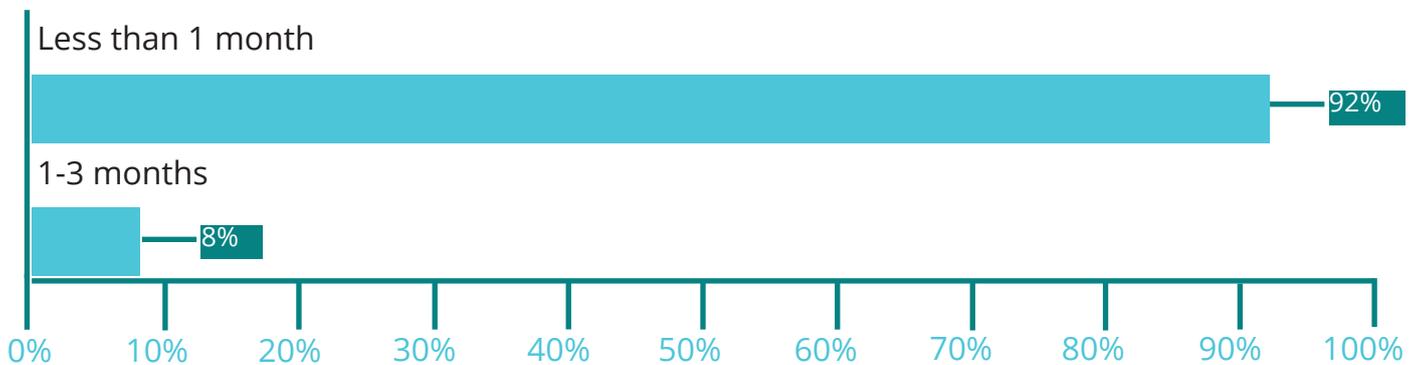


Irish Sending Organisations involved in Erasmus+ VET mobility projects for learners, 2014-2016

## Figure 2: Participants' year of study at time of placement



## Figure 3: Duration of work placements



Participants' personal details such as age, economic status or gender identity are not collected in reports from participant or projects. However, national data from Qualify and Qualifications Ireland<sup>1</sup> can be used to provide an overview of NFQ Level 5 and 6 learners between 2014 and 2016. This data shows that 59% of such learners were under 29 years old. The gender ratio was 60% female to 40% male.

<sup>1</sup> Available from <http://infographics.qqi.ie/>

# METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Analysis was carried out using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Research was based on analysis of participant reports, final reports and interviews with project coordinators.

## **Participant Reports**

The participant report is an electronic survey emailed by the European Commission to each individual participant after completion of their work placement. It is mandatory for participants to complete and submit this report. Analysis is based on all 1,275 participant reports submitted for the 36 projects studied.

Participant reports contain a mix of yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. Multiple choice questions use a five-point Likert-type scale: either 'Strongly agree, Rather agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Rather disagree, Strongly disagree'; or 'Very poor, Poor, Fair, Good, Very good'.

While the participant reports are largely standardised, there is very slight variation in questions between years. It is noted in the text where these changes affected the sample size.

## **Final Reports**

The final report is a comprehensive evaluation of the entire project completed by the sending VET organisation, no more than two months after completion of the project. Analysis is based on 29 final reports: 14 from 2014, 12 from 2015, and three from 2016. Final reports from some projects were not due for submission at the time this research was conducted, and so not available for analysis.

Final reports contain open-ended qualitative questions divided into key areas such as project implementation, activities and learning outcomes.

Submitting a complete final report is a mandatory condition of funding for all sending organisations.

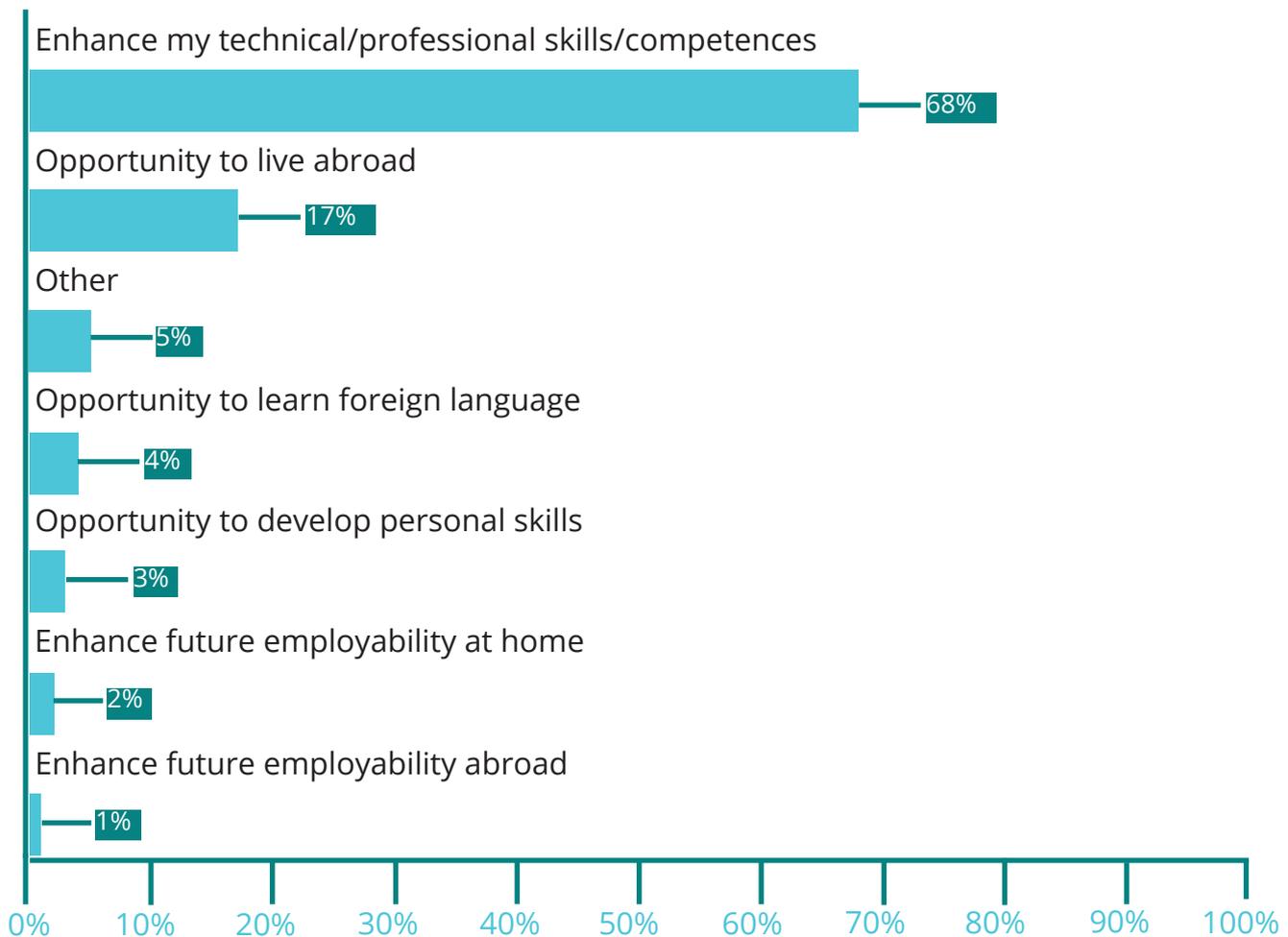
## **Interviews with Project Coordinators**

Individual interviews with project coordinators in sending organisations were conducted by the author either in person or by telephone in late 2017. The interview subjects were selected to ensure a balance between new and experienced coordinators, and urban and rural organisations.

# RESEARCH FINDING: IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Figure 4 shows responses to the participant report question “What were your main motivations for carrying out a learning mobility period abroad?”

**Figure 4: Main Motivation for Placement**

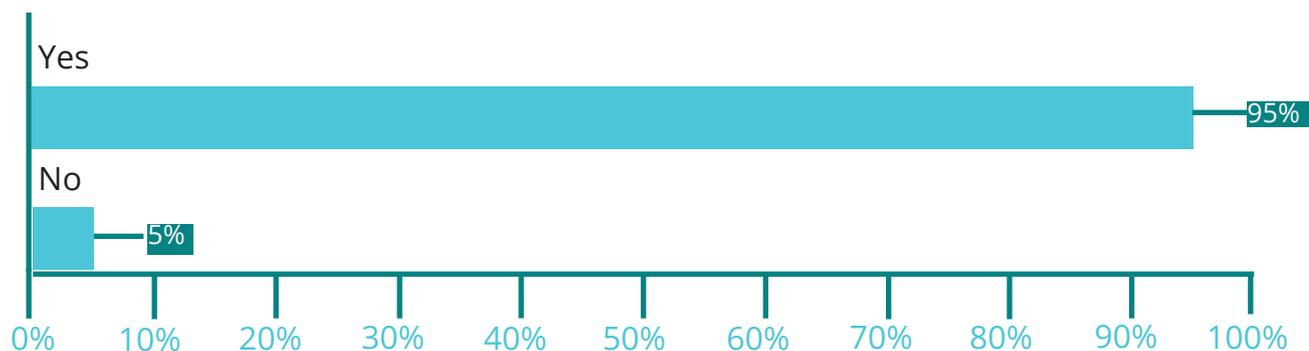


*“What were your main motivations for studying/training abroad?”*

The prospect of enhancing technical/professional skills and competences was the principal motivation for VET learners to take part in Erasmus+ (68%), followed by the opportunity to live abroad (17%). The development of language skills (4%) and personal skills (3%) were less strong priorities. The improvement of skills and competences is therefore considered key to meeting participants’ expectations of the programme and to assessing its overall success.

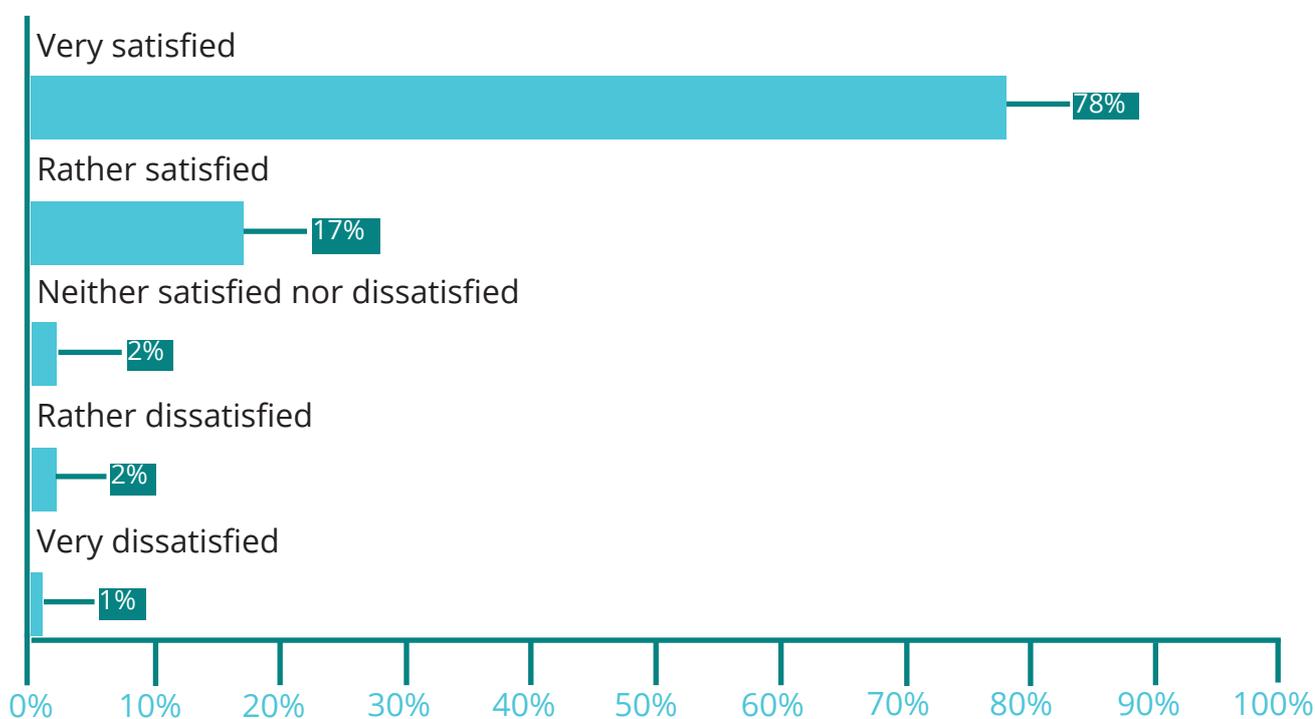
In 2014 and 2015 participant reports, participants were asked the yes/no question “Did you gain knowledge, skills or competences or professional experience that you would not have gained in your sending institution?” The amount of participants who answered ‘yes’ was 95%, as shown in Figure 5. In 2016, participants were asked more generally if they were satisfied with their Erasmus+ experience: 78% were ‘very satisfied’ and 17% ‘rather satisfied’ (see Figure 6). The sum of these two figures is also 95%, so satisfaction levels appear consistent across the different years. This statistically significant level of overall satisfaction with Erasmus+ placements suggests that the experience of living, learning and working abroad brings appreciable added value to individual participants.

## Figure 5: Knowledge, skills and competences



*“Did you gain knowledge, skills or competences or professional experience that you would not have gained in your sending institution?”*

## Figure 6: Overall satisfaction with Erasmus+

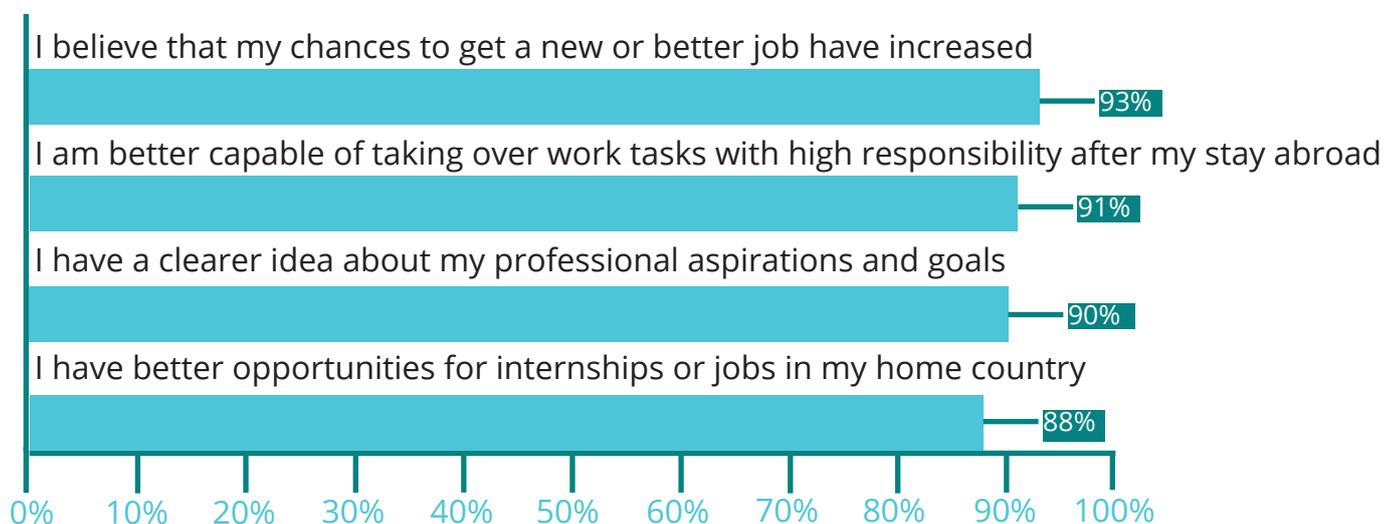


*“How satisfied are you with your Erasmus+ mobility experience in general?”*

## Employability

Figure 6 shows participants' levels of agreement with statements about the effect of the placement on their employability.

### Figure 7: Changes in employability



*"After having taken part in this mobility activity..."*  
Sum of strongly and rather agree.

Participants reported feeling the placements have improved their employability. As Figure 7 shows, 93% strongly or rather agreed that their chances of getting a new or better job had increased as a result of the placement, while 88% felt they had a better opportunity of getting an internship or job in their home country. Furthermore, 90% of participants felt they had a clearer idea of their professional aspirations and goals.

There is considerable evidence from participants and project coordinators that, for many learners, the placement was their first work experience of any kind in their vocational area. This is not surprising, given that over 70% of participants were in year 1 at the time of the placement (see Figure 2). However it does demonstrate that Erasmus+ placements have very strong potential to enhance the career prospects of vocational learners, given that they tend to happen at the crucial early stage of career development.

Participants were not directly asked whether they had gone on to gain employment after their work placement. This is understandable, given that most participants would not have completed their studies and entered the labour market by the time they submitted their participant reports. However, several participants did state that they obtained employment because of their work placement. For example:

"I got a job in a 5 star hotel in Ireland which I love all because of my work placement in Malta in a 5 star hotel. Best experience of my LIFE! Loved every moment! Definitely once in a life time." (2014 Galway Technical Institute participant)

"The host pre-school was fantastic and I learned so much about the curriculum in Sweden, the importance of learning through doing and I even picked up on a lot of the Swedish language. I have since booked flights back in the beginning of June and I will be working and living in Lulea all thanks to this programme and the contacts I made." (2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

Almost three quarters of final reports in this study mentioned individual participants who have received job offers because of their placements. In contrast to participant reports, final reports are submitted two months after completion of a project. This gives VET organisations the opportunity to report on impact over a longer time scale than individual participants can. Here is a small sample of this feedback from final reports:

“Brian was offered a full time job with Anchovy Digital at the completion of the programme. He accepted the job and subsequently was the supervisor for an intern taken on by the company at a later date. Karen was given a freelance job with Bank Media International at the end of her traineeship period.” (2014 Irish Education Partners final report)



**“(Three of the four learners were) offered work for the remaining season with their respective branches of Club Mistral. On completion of these seasons, we were delighted to find out Alex was also offered a full time position with Club Mistral in Karpathos.” (2014 Landon Carver final report)**

“Having participated in the project some Business and Beauty Therapy students were offered summer employment in Tenerife. The Erasmus+ experience is seen as beneficial for students to find their first job after graduation and for their early career.” (2015 Longford and Westmeath ETB final report)

“All four participants have gone on to find paid employment in the community development sector, three within their target field of community based conservation and one within a more traditional community centre supporting disadvantaged families and young people.” (2015 Capacity Ireland Final Report)

Two participants also mentioned that they planned to, or already had, set up their own businesses as a result of contacts they had made during the programme:

“We saw a perfect opportunity to establish a partnership with the centre for the benefit of Irish windsurfers. I’m a windsurfing coach. I want to teach people to windsurf but I also want to do so in consistent conditions. (...) We offer all-inclusive packages for windsurfers travelling from Ireland. (...) The money we spend for equipment rental, accommodation and food will be spent in Karpathos but the profits stay here in Ireland.” (2014 Landon Carver participant)

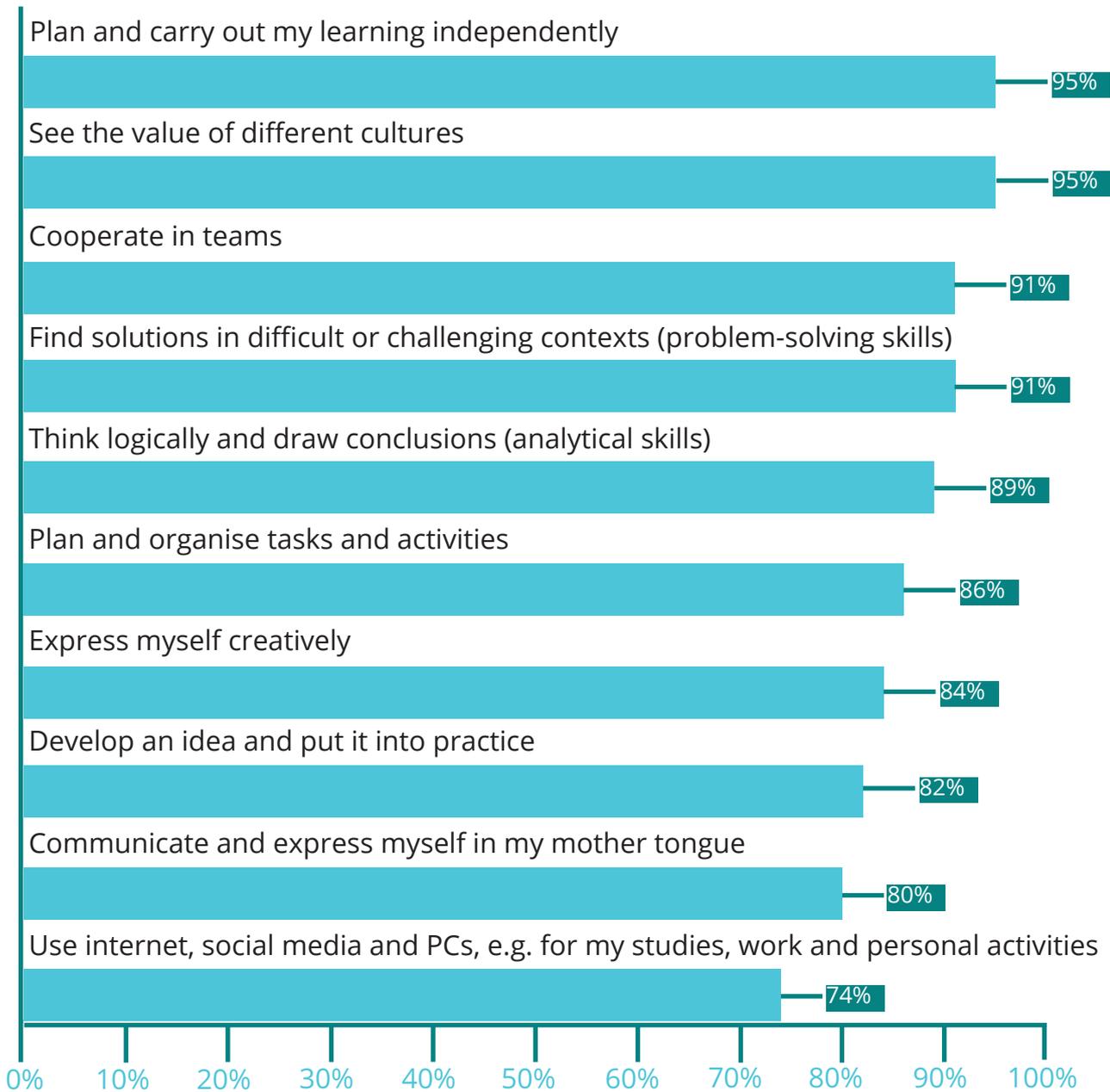
“(My mentor) ...made me believe more in my idea and now with his help I can start my own business!” (2014 Irish Education Partners participant)

In the immediate period after completion then, Erasmus+ placements have demonstrated capacity to increase participants’ employability. This may be by putting them in direct contact with employers they would not otherwise have encountered, or by stimulating their own entrepreneurial skills. Future studies of this VET cohort could examine what impact these early employment experiences have had on their subsequent career paths.

## Professional and Personal Skills

Figure 8 shows participants' levels of agreement with statements about the effect of the placement on their professional skills.

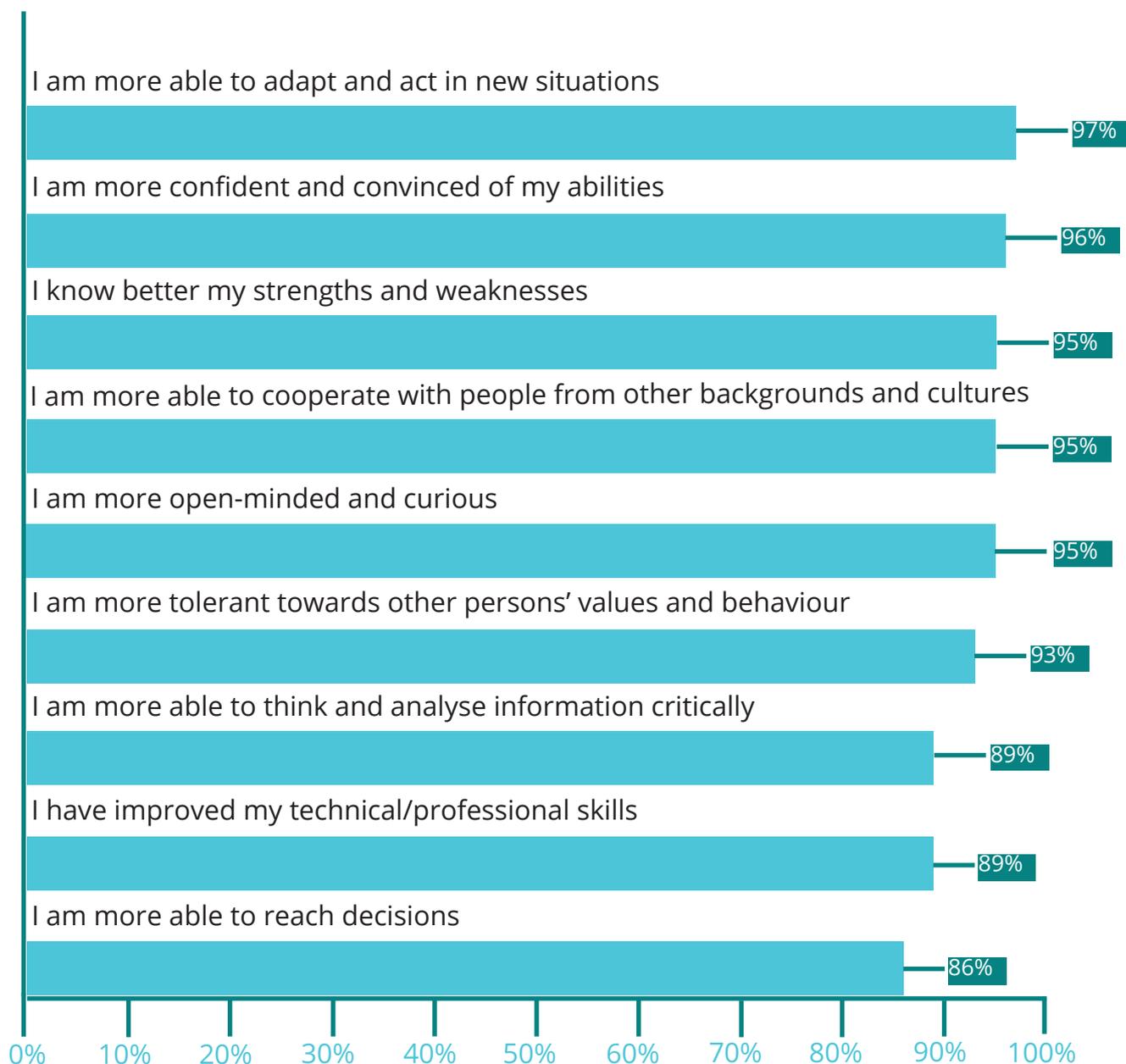
### Figure 8: Changes in professional Skills



*"Through my participation in this activity I learned better how to..."*  
Sum of strongly and rather agree.

Figure 9 shows participants' levels of agreement with statements about the effect of the placement on their personal development.

## Figure 9: Changes in personal development



*"After having taken part in this mobility activity..."*  
Sum of strongly and rather agree.

In self-assessment of their personal and professional learning, participants reported the strongest areas of impact as independent learning, seeing the value of different cultures, cooperation, and problem solving. Over 90% of participants strongly or rather agreed that they had improved in these areas as a result of their placements. The ability to think logically, express themselves creatively and put ideas into practice were slightly lower rated, with scores between 82 and 89%. Just under 75% stated that they had learned better how to use internet, social media and PCs, the lowest scored learning area. This is not an unexpected finding, given that nationally 59% of VET learners at level 5 or 6 are under the age of 29. This suggests many participants would be digital natives for whom these skills would already be well developed.

Figure 9 shows that when reflecting on their personal development, 89% strongly or rather agreed that their professional and technical skills and competences had improved. In qualitative feedback many participants commented on the development of specific skills relevant to their own vocational area. Erasmus+ work placements are designed to connect VET trainees with the world of work and so there must be a strong connection between the kind of work a trainee does and their area of study. While not mandatory, it is strongly suggested that a Learning Agreement be drawn up between the participant and the project partners, defining the expected learning outcomes of the placement. Over 92% of participants stated that such an agreement was in place before they started their placement. Given the number of trainees and destinations involved, there was great diversity both in the type of work carried out by trainees and the workplaces involved. Several project coordinators noted that this breadth of placements would be harder to provide in Ireland, for logistical, economic and insurance reasons.

This point was summarised in the final report on St John's Central College 2016 project: "Many of the Veterinary students in Slovenia commented on the high degree of hands-on experience they were given, experience that is often impossible here due to insurance considerations. IT students in Spain and Sweden also reported being exposed to levels of experience that they would find hard to obtain in Cork." It was also highlighted by Cavan Institute in their 2015 report: "The Animal Management students received opportunities to work in settings that were difficult to gain in Ireland, such as small zoos and marine aquatic centres. The multimedia students had very positive experiences with their placements. Again, these type of placements are not readily available in the Cavan region." In their 2014 final report, Coláiste Íde stated that "In Ireland obtaining quality work placements has become an issue due to the recession."

In their qualitative feedback, several participants highlighted that placements had given them new skills that they would not have been exposed to in the classroom:



**"This was an amazing experience and it has helped so much with my personal and professional development. The professional learning that I got out of it is also extremely valuable as it has shown me a different perspective on childcare. I did not have any experience in a Montessori setting before going to Lulea. I found it to be extremely interesting and it has prompted me to research further into this area of childcare. I feel this will benefit me in my future professional career."**  
*(2014 Inchicore CFE participant)*

"The biggest set of skills we learned was designing a web interface. We learnt new programming languages HTML, CSS and JavaScript and PHP. Learnt quite a lot in the three weeks in coding." (2015 Greenhills CFE participant)

"I have done my placement in a hotel spa and they treated me like one of the staff and I did all the treatments that they would do, from all types of massage to doing a facial. I have new knowledge on how to do different massages and my practical skills have increased so much it will benefit me for the rest of my career." (2016 Longford and Westmeath ETB participant)

In both final reports and interviews, project coordinators noted that the placements enable participants to develop practical rather than classroom skills, and that this helps to focus their attention on both their professional development and career paths. For example:

"(The placement) enables them to determine what employers want from them as an employee, taking into account expertise such as core/key competencies, transferable skills, personal and interpersonal skills, digital literacy, team working." (2015 Moate Business College final report)

"As their teacher I noticed better quality in their work and increased knowledge of their course curriculum. (...) Comparing their work placement to the students that partook in placements in Ireland these participants learned a lot more technical skills and gained a more instructive valuable experience." (2015 Greenhills CFE final report)

Notable individual successes in skills development included a veterinary trainee at St John's Central College who stated that her training period included learning how to run blood biochemistry tests, blood haematology tests and urine analysis by herself:



**"I gained so many new skills and experiences that will reinforce my career as a veterinary nurse. I also have gained huge confidence with my role as a veterinary nurse that I will take with me everywhere I go. When I was back in my own practice, Friday last, the vet commented on my confidence and capability of doing the role of a veterinary nurse. I also know that I can work anywhere in Europe now."**  
*(2016 St John's Central College participant)*

As shown in Figure 5, just 5% of 2014 and 2015 participants reported that they did not gain knowledge, skills or competences or professional experience that they would not otherwise have gained in their sending organisations. Figure 6 shows responses to the question asked in 2016, "How satisfied are you with your Erasmus+ experience in general?". Under 3% of participants stated they were rather or very dissatisfied with their Erasmus+ placements. Focusing on these dissatisfied participants, the most frequent complaint is that they did not have the opportunity to use or improve their skills. Their feedback reflected that there was not a strong enough connection between the work placement and their course of study, or that the work was not sufficiently challenging. For example, a group of trainees in 2014 who reported dissatisfaction with their placements had all been placed in the same hairdressing salon in Glasgow, where they felt they were underused: "It is very unfortunate there was not more work for me to do. (...) I didn't get to practice my weak skills or learn anything new." (2014 Galway Technical Institute participant)

This correlates with the finding in Figure 4 that the prospect of enhancing technical/professional skills and competences was the principal motivation to take part in Erasmus+. Thus when participants did not feel that their professional skills had been developed, they were unsatisfied with the placement overall. Conversely, the high level of overall satisfaction with the placements would suggest that technical/professional skills and competences were enhanced for the vast majority of participants.

Erasmus+ has thus brought unique opportunities to Irish VET trainees. Erasmus+ work placements provide real-world experience that could not be obtained in a classroom, and in many cases this happens in working environments that are not available in Ireland. This represents a substantial expansion of the horizons of VET trainees. Going beyond the physical boundary of Ireland has also allowed learners to go beyond the boundaries of the Irish VET system, and given them access to new opportunities. This is a real example of the EU concept of 'European Added Value': collective value additional to the value created by actions of individual Member States.

## Self-confidence and Independence

Looking at the development of self-confidence and independence, Figure 9 shows that almost 97% of learners strongly or rather agreed that they were more confident and convinced of their abilities after their Erasmus+ placements. Participant reports, final reports and interviews with coordinators suggest that the increase in confidence is directly related to the experience of travelling to and living in a new environment for the first time.

Many participants had not travelled extensively before the placement. The 2015 final report from Longford and Westmeath ETB states that "(trainees') self-confidence developed as some students had never been abroad". This was also noted by Inchicore CFE in 2014: "Many of our participants have very limited, if any, experience and knowledge of traveling within the European Union. Certainly prior to engaging in the mobility, they did not have any experience of the countries listed in this report nor will many of them have travelled independently of family."

In addition, many participants mentioned that they lived with their parents and the time spent on work placement was their first significant period away from home. The independence developed as a result was highlighted in a 2014 final report from Monaghan Institute:



**"By undertaking an international work placement, managing away from home for 3 weeks and meeting and working alongside many new people, participants have gained increased self-confidence and self-esteem. They have come to realise that they are capable of more than they might have thought, and this will motivate and encourage them to progress in their career/studies. In this way, the benefits of the project will extend far beyond the technical and other skills acquired."**  
*(2014 Monaghan Institute Final Report)*

It is noteworthy that some coordinators mentioned that support from the family or communities of participants can be very helpful to those who have not travelled or lived abroad before. Inviting families to information evenings, or otherwise including them in the preparation process, can be beneficial for nervous or anxious participants:

"IEP has come to realise that parents/guardians of participants played an important role in many aspects of the programme for some participants. (...) The involvement of families is not for all participants, but for some participants having family members fully behind the programme helped to encourage the participant to complete the programme. In fact one participant, soon after arrival in his destination country, was looking to come home. Family intervention got the participant over that initial nervousness with coping with something new." (2016 Irish Education Partners final report)

The connection between increased independence and progression in careers or study is echoed by other coordinators. The experience of living and working abroad for the first time is personally empowering for participants, which can lead to professional empowerment:

“The fact that they were effective in challenging work placements (state penitentiaries, working with autistic children, working with orphans with special needs etc.) in foreign countries and dealing with linguistic barriers encouraged participants to feel secure in their belief of their suitability in their chosen career.” (2015 Moate Business College final report)

“For some it was their first time away beyond the UK. (...) Many had grown hugely in confidence and were planning on spending the summer abroad on foot of this transformative time.” (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

Participants themselves also highlighted this connection between the increase in their confidence and independence, and the development of their career plans:



**“Erasmus+ helped me realise I could live and study abroad which is a big benefit for me as it was a big question I had for my future.”**  
(2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

“It was the greatest experience of my entire life. (...) The biggest thing I took away from the experience was confidence professionally and personally. It made me realise that this is the field that I want to go in.” (2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

“All in all I feel much happier as a person and have surprised myself in all good ways. (...) I have gained a lot more confidence in myself as a person, both my personality and also my ability in dealing with challenging situations. I have also developed a greater appreciation for certain things in my own life and have a greater value for the people in my life.” (2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

“(What) I will take away from this experience is that it is possible to work abroad and I do not have to be afraid of trying new things and experiencing the different cultures around the world. I would now like to study a new language.” (2016 Moate Business College participant)

Notable individual examples from final reports include a participant in the 2016 Moate Business College project who had never before been away from her family for longer than three days:

*“(The participant) had applied to Athlone Institute of Technology (a local higher education institution) for the 2016/17 academic year because she felt that she would be too nervous moving any further away from her family. She had been very quiet during the first few days of the mobility and this had been noted by the accompanying persons who actively encouraged the group to involve everyone in activities, discussions etc. However, she blossomed so much during the mobility that on her return she decided to change her CAO (third-level education) application and switch to Galway-Mayo IT (a higher education institution much further from her home) and pursue a course there.”*

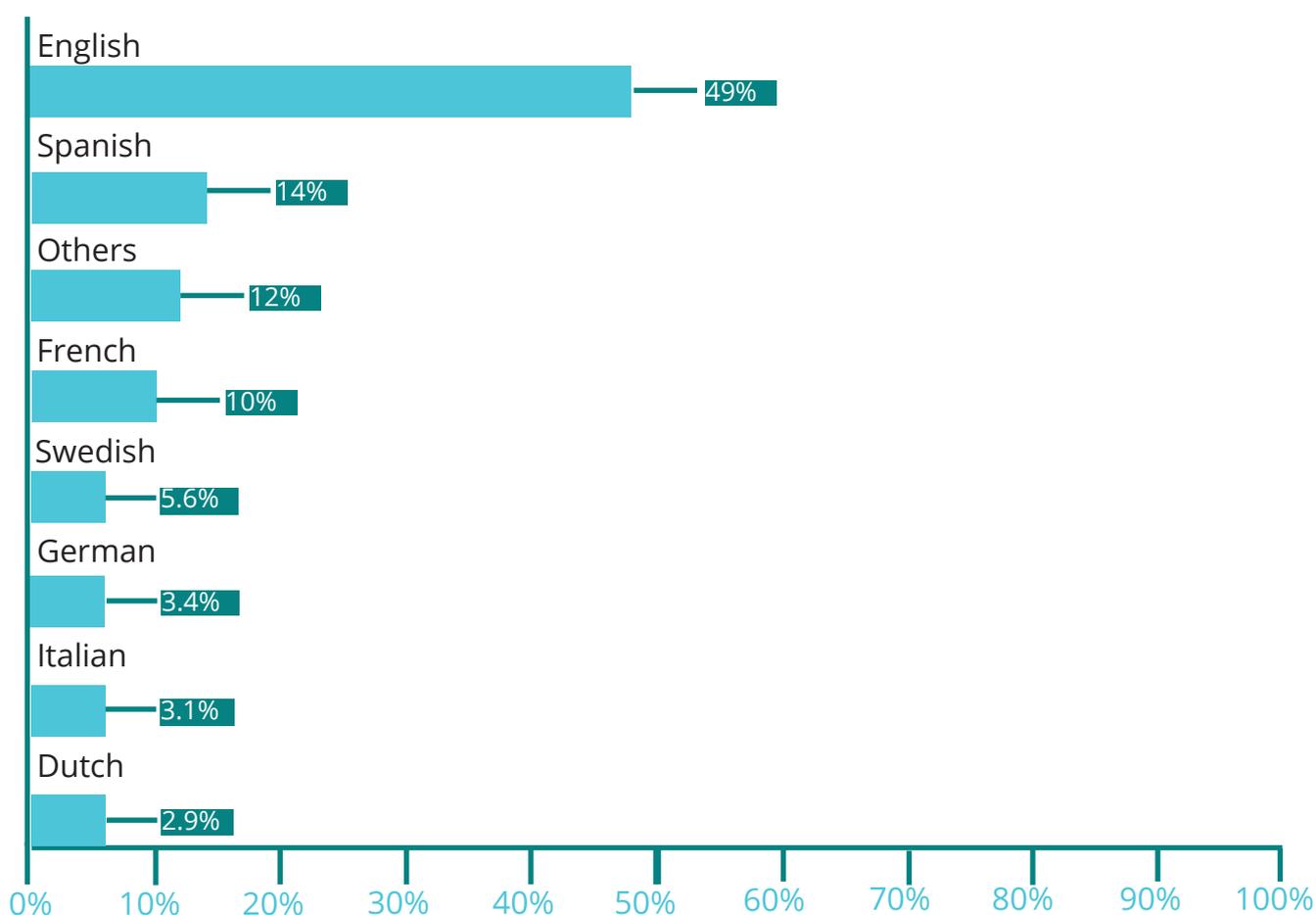
Other final reports that commented on the development of self-confidence and independence as a result of placements include those from St John’s Central College (“students often have a greater degree of maturity and added commitment to their areas of study having completed the project”) and Greenhills CFE (“The greatest impact on the student participants was that they were more confident in their abilities. They were more engaged and focused in class.”).

There is then considerable evidence that Erasmus+ work placements help encourage participants not only towards new professional opportunities but towards some of the markers of adulthood. The experience of leaving the home environment and operating without the daily support of family and previously established friendships shows participants that they are capable of being self-supporting. Erasmus+ placements are by definition geographically distant from the participants' home places, helping to reinforce this development.

## Language skills

Figure 10 shows the main language used by participants during their work placement.

**Figure 10: Main language used**

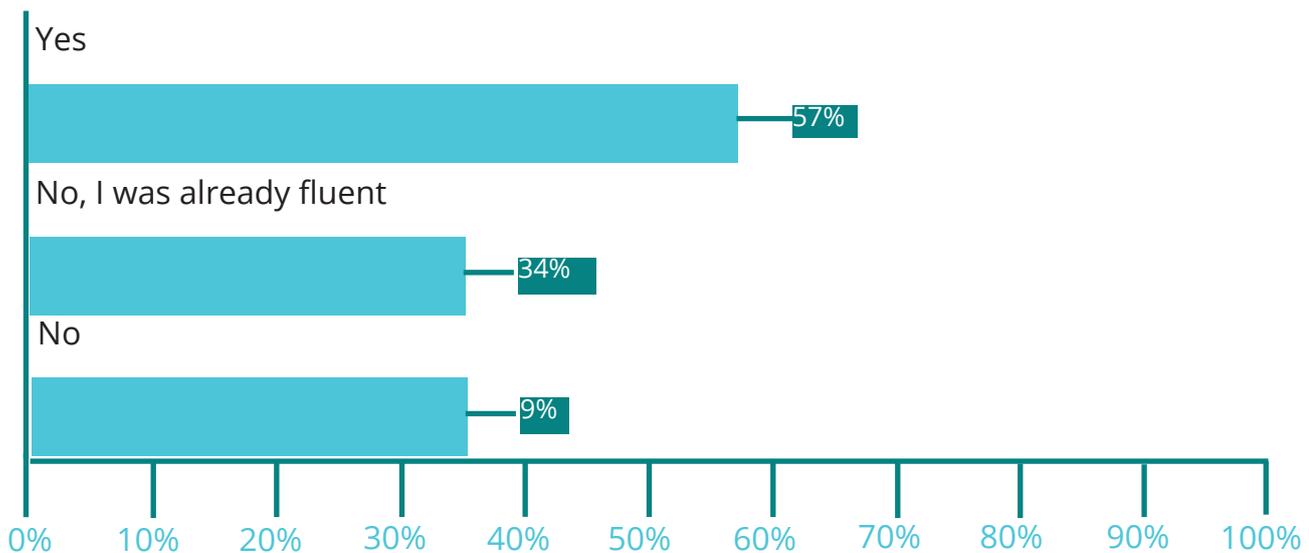


*“What was the main language used during your mobility activity?”*

Just under half the participants surveyed stated that English was the main language of their work placement. This was the case almost without regard to the destination country. Participants who had placements in Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey, as well as those in the UK, reported English as the main language in use. The one exception to this was Germany, where all participants reported that German was the main language of placement.

Figure 11 shows participants' perception of the effect of their placements on language skills.

## Figure 11: Changes in language skills



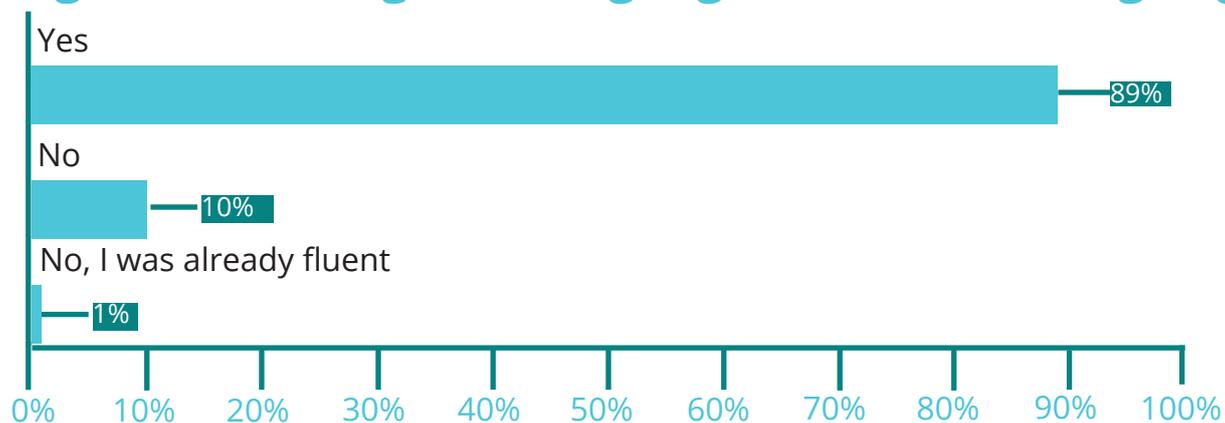
*"Do you feel you have improved your skills in this language during your stay abroad?"*

Responses to this question are somewhat complicated by the fact that the participant report does not distinguish between the main language of placement, the main language of the destination country, and the participant's native tongue.

For example, in 2014 just under half the participants (311 out of 637 total) stated that English was the main language of their placement. Of these 311 participants, 70 stated that their language skills had improved; 20 stated they had not improved; and 221 stated that they were already fluent. However it is not possible to determine if the 90 people who did not identify as 'already fluent' are native or non-native speakers. It might be surprising for a native speaker to develop their English language skills (as opposed to *communication* skills) by taking part in a work placement. However, a non-native English speaker could quite conceivably improve their language skills by conducting a work placement through English.

Consequently, excluding responses from participants whose main placement language was English gives a slightly different picture of the impact on foreign language skills. When English is excluded, almost 90% of participants stated that their language skills had improved.

## Figure 12: Changes in language skills, excluding English



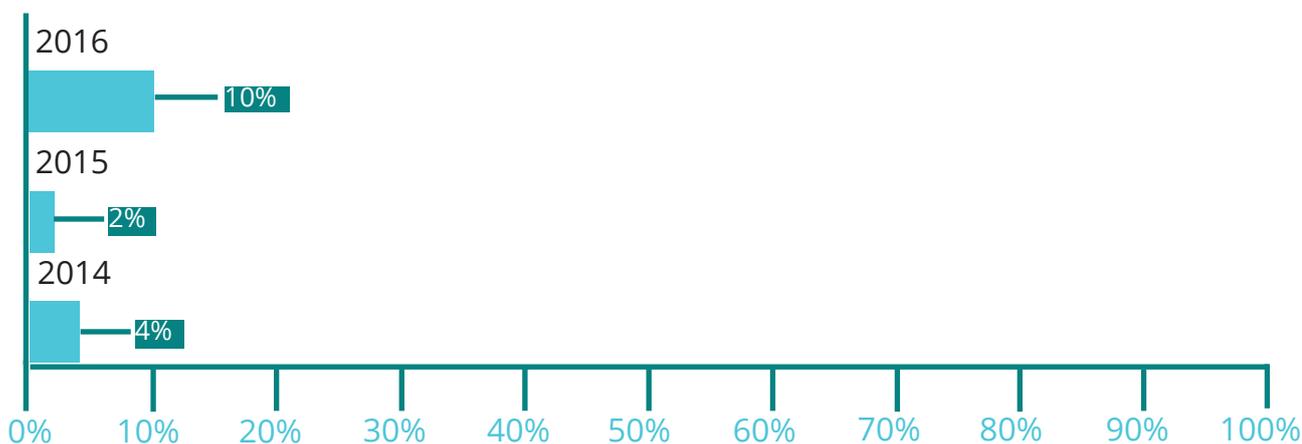
*"Do you feel you have improved your skills in this language during your stay abroad?"*

Moving on to the *degree* of improvement in language skills, there is not yet sufficient data to give a complete picture. Erasmus+, in contrast to its predecessor programme Leonardo da Vinci mobility, does not offer organisations a separate budget for cultural and language preparation of participants. Overall, 40% of respondents stated that they had received language training before their placements, but this was largely either self-study or informal preparation from the sending or receiving organisation. Projects were not required to submit evidence of a 'before and after' assessment of language skills developed through these methods.

Erasmus+ has a dedicated Online Linguistic Support (OLS) tool, which has the capacity to assess participants' language skills before and after placement. However in the early years of the programme it was only offered to learners who had mobility periods of 30 days or more. As shown in Figure 3, 92% of mobility periods for learners from Ireland last less than one month. Consequently, very few participants indicated that they had received language training through OLS.

Figure 13 shows the number of participants who received language training through OLS relative to the number of participants overall.

**Figure 13: Use of OLS tool**



*“What kind of support did you receive?”*

Percentage of answers choosing ‘Erasmus+ Online Language Service’

Looking at the quantitative data for use of OLS, in 2016 only 17 of 172 participants used the tool. In 2015 the total was 9 out of 470 participants and in 2014 it was 28 of 640. This represents fewer than 5% of participants overall, and is not an adequate sample size to show the impact of the OLS tool on language skills in this cohort. The use and impact of the OLS tool is an area that should be studied further in future.

Considering qualitative feedback on language skills however, several participants highlighted that exposure to a foreign language in a working environment had considerably improved their existing skills. For example:

“My knowledge of the French language has improved greatly. The French classes we took before leaving helped with my understanding of both the French language and culture. Upon arriving in Grenoble, I had to use what we learned and put it into action. My confidence grew every day and I was soon able to communicate with people without feeling nervous and embarrassed.” (2014 Galway Technical Institute participant)

However, a greater proportion overall of project coordinators and participants commented that stronger language skills would have enhanced the learners' experience on placement:

"The biggest problem that I think we had was that this year there was no linguistic support. This was a shame as we had a short period of time to learn a new language. The college itself tried as hard as they could to help us by supplying the best alternative that they could which did take the sting out of not having proper support as previous years have. This would be the one thing that I think could be looked at for future projects, it's a shame to have everything else run so well and to fall down with not having proper basic language training for your receiving destination." (2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

"(There was) a language issue in Spain as some of the participants had not been studying Spanish and CI did not apply for funding for language preparation. The comments in relation to the language issue were: "It is essential to be able to speak the language of the country in which you are attending the Erasmus+" and "Ensure a course in Spanish or whichever language is applicable before leaving on the Erasmus+ programme." (2015 Cavan Institute final report)

"Participants felt that more support with language training before the mobility would be very beneficial and give them more confidence to engage with local people." (2016 Moate Business College final report)

"Lack of language can be an issue e.g. Ashling worked as a Holiday Rep for the Tourist information office, and was involved in event planning in a Flamenco bar. She had difficulties with communication with her employer, citing language barrier and misunderstandings." (2015 Tipperary ETB final report)

"(For) the students who worked in Hungary (...) language was more of a barrier than was expected." (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

"The biggest issue for me in terms of arrangements was that my first placement fell through due to my lack of knowledge in the Dutch language, which meant I could not work on the computers that much." (2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

On an organisational level, very few projects have identified the development of language skills as a core objective of their projects. One project coordinator stated in an interview that in her experience of VET placements "Language skills are improved but it's not such a focus. It's a bonus."

These comments may seem at odds with the responses in Figures 11 and 12 regarding improvement of language skills. However it is notable that many of the languages listed as main placement languages, such as Finnish, Hungarian, Dutch and Albanian, are not routinely taught in the Irish education system. It may be that participants started with a very low baseline of knowledge in these languages, which improved greatly as a result of the placements. For example, one participant stated that they had "learnt basic Spanish in three weeks' time" (2015 St John's Central College).

Overall, the data from participant and final reports is insufficiently detailed or granular to capture the degree to which language skills improve as a result of these placements. However, feedback from both participants and coordinators suggests that greater provision of vocationally-oriented language training would substantially enhance the placement experience. This was a funded element of previous EU mobility programmes such as PETRA and Leonardo da Vinci, and should be strongly considered by the EU for inclusion in future

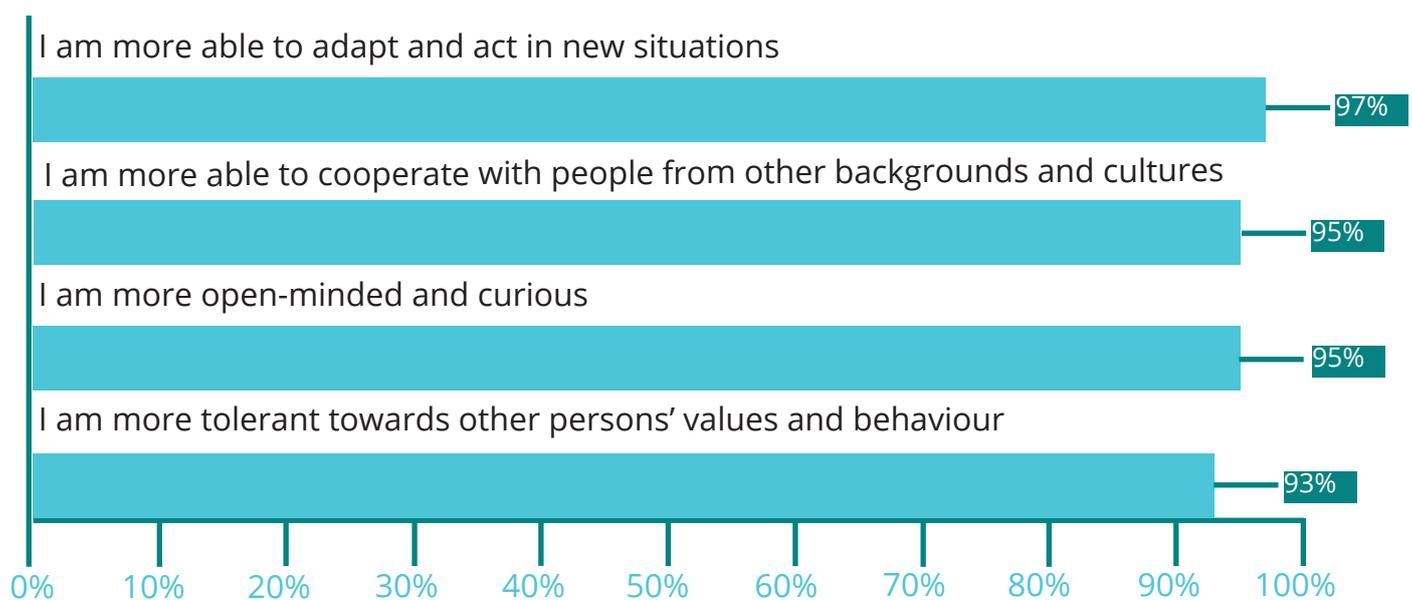
mobility programmes of this type. In the interim, Irish VET organisations should consider how best to meet this need of their learners. This may be through increased use of the OLS tool, or of other online programmes such as VOCAL<sup>1</sup>. VOCAL is an online language tool developed by a European partnership with Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation funding. It offers vocationally oriented language and culture training specific to 13 of the EU Member States.

Not only would language training of this type enhance the experience of learners on placement, it would respond directly to the Irish government's recent languages strategy, 'Languages Connect'. One of the challenges to language learning in Ireland that is identified in the strategy is "Lack of awareness of the opportunities that foreign languages offer for careers and mobility"<sup>2</sup>. Language training in preparation for a mobility placement would be an ideal place for this challenge to be directly addressed.

## Intercultural awareness

Figure 14 isolates the responses to questions relating to intercultural skills and awareness.

**Figure 14: Changes in intercultural awareness**



*"After having taken part in this mobility activity..."*  
Sum of strongly and rather agree.

Intercultural awareness was a significant area of development for trainees; 95% strongly or rather agreed that they see the value of different cultures more as a result of their placements; 95% strongly or rather agreed that they are more able to work with others from different backgrounds and cultures; and 93% strongly or rather agreed that they are more tolerant of others' values and behaviours.

Although Ireland is itself home to people of many different cultures and backgrounds, some organisations highlighted that their own regions tend to be more homogeneous and that participants may not have been exposed to other cultures before: "Many of the participants

<sup>1</sup> Vocationally Oriented Culture and Language - an online programme available at [www.vocalproject.eu](http://www.vocalproject.eu).

<sup>2</sup> Languages Connect' p.7. Available at [https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/jfs\\_languages\\_connect\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/jfs_languages_connect_strategy.pdf)

come from rural backgrounds in the Border region of Ireland and may have been less aware of cultural diversity that exists in the Netherlands.” (2014 Monaghan Institute final report)

Project coordinators also noted that the intercultural impact of projects is not restricted to those who travel. In their final report on their 2014 project, Coláiste Dhúlaigh described a sustained intercultural impact in the college and wider community:

“The enthusiasm trainees brought back on their return affected their classmates and tutors. Through their presentations and stories trainees brought a wider variety of experiences which broadened the mind of all. In addition participants shared their cultural observations which gave whole class groups an insight into other cultures and helped develop their intercultural awareness and tolerance of others. It allowed staff and students to become more aware of being a foreigner when they are abroad, giving them an opportunity to be empathetic to foreigners here in Ireland. It led to greater interaction between Irish students and international students within our college community and planted the seed to running an international culture day.

(...)Immigration during the Celtic Tiger years has changed the profile of our student community from a solely Irish to a multi-cultural background. Participants’ profiles show that there has been an increase in participants from mixed cultural backgrounds this year. The involvement in mobility has helped the college to be more aware of cultural diversity and to embrace the students with different ethnic backgrounds and to treat them equally and with respect. Not only does this impact positively on the increased diversity in our student population, integrating members of other cultural backgrounds more into our college community, but carries internationalisation outside the college into the wider community thus fostering intercultural awareness, mutual understanding and respect for each other within Irish society as a whole which has seen a change from a mainly homogeneous to a multi-cultural society over the last 20 years.

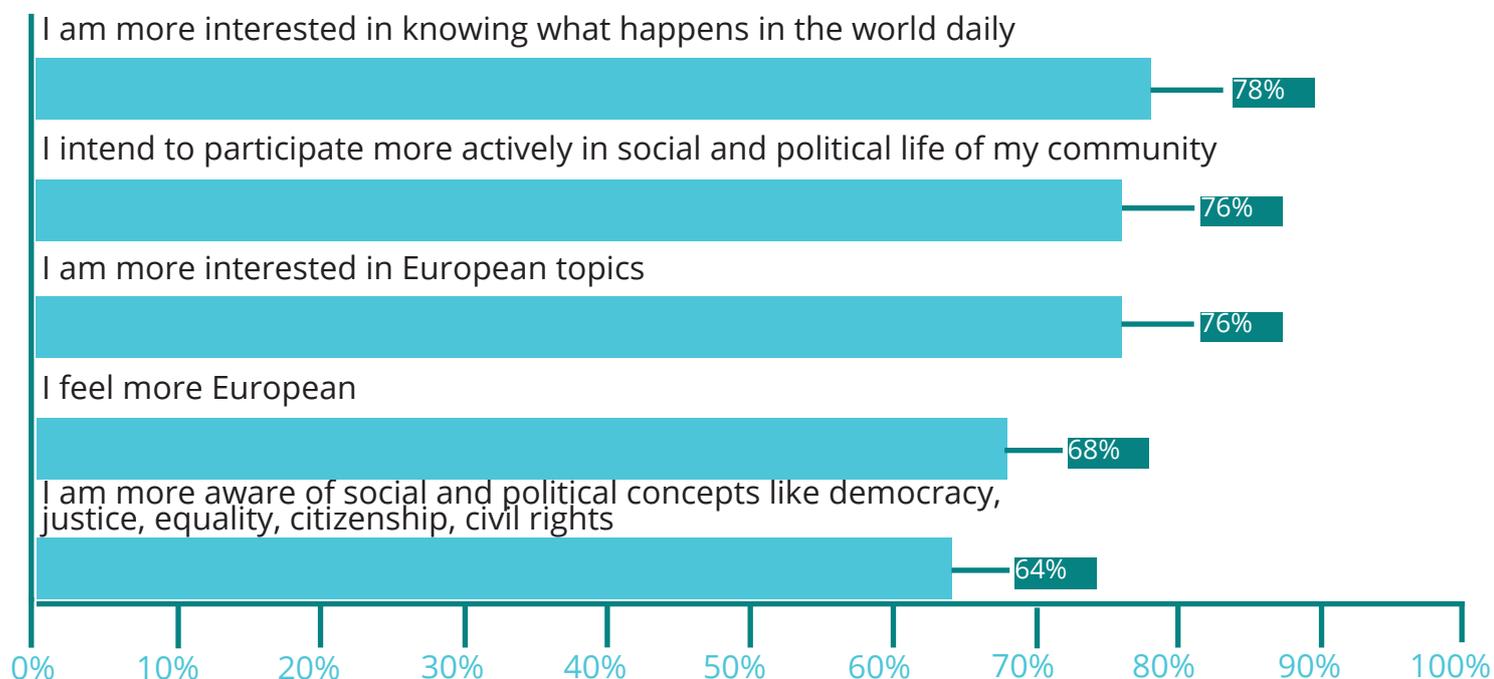
The project impacted on the wider community, because participants did not only come from the local community but from further afield. The experiences told to their families and friends and the welcome they received abroad increased knowledge of other cultures and intercultural awareness with them as well.”

This is a powerful real-world example of how mobility placements can become a catalyst for reflection on intercultural relations, not only among those who directly took part but also in the wider population of the sending organisation. As discussed in the section on self-confidence and independence, many participants do not have experience of living and working in a different culture before their Erasmus+ work placement. Consequently, many participants may not have prior knowledge of how it feels to be ‘outside’ the main culture of a country. Working with these participants to develop their empathy for those who may consider themselves ‘outside’ in Ireland is an opportunity for organisations to strengthen intercultural relationships and help to build a society that is more aware and respectful of diversity.

## European Identity and Values

Figure 15 isolates the responses to questions relating to European identity and values.

### Figure 15: Changes in European identity and values



*"After having taken part in this mobility activity..."*  
Sum of strongly and rather agree.

As Figure 15 shows, 76% of participants said they were more interested in European topics after their placements and 68% felt more European. Nearly 65% were more aware of social and political concepts such as democracy, justice, equality and citizenship.

While these figures are not especially low, there is a notable difference between the percentage of participants who strongly or rather agreed that they learned better to see the value of different cultures (95%), and those who reported that they *themselves* felt more European as a result of participation (68%). Indeed, many participants in their reports emphasised that their placements were in 'different' or 'foreign' cultures. For example:

"I had a chance to go every day to different class rooms to talk to the students about Ireland. They made me feel so special and unique because they show so much interest in learn about different culture. I use the computer to show them some of the beautiful places in Ireland."  
(2014 Galway Technical Institute participant)

"I'd highly recommend the Erasmus+ experience to anyone looking to travel and work abroad. It served as a brilliant way of getting to work in a foreign country with all the challenges that come with that along with the safety net of the Erasmus+ programme protecting you."  
(2014 Galway Technical Institute participant)

These learners are absolutely accurate that the countries and cultures they worked in were different and foreign. However, it is striking that very few mention any sense of shared identity with these cultures or countries. A word frequency analysis of the 1,275 submitted participant reports shows that participants were 29 times more likely to use the word ‘foreign’ rather than ‘European’ when describing their experiences.

**Table 2: Word frequency analysis ‘foreign’/‘European’**

|            | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | Total |
|------------|------|------|------|-------|
| ‘Foreign’  | 392  | 241  | 155  | 788   |
| ‘European’ | 5    | 3    | 19   | 27    |

Overall, just seven of these 1,275 participants surveyed mentioned a sense of “Becoming more European” in their qualitative feedback. For example:

“I just found the whole experience amazing. (...)I explored Seville and the surrounding areas of Andalusia and met lots of interesting people. I broadened my outlook on life generally and feel a real commitment to the whole European project. I think these experiences should be available to everyone in Europe which I think will help in uniting Europe. There wasn’t anything really negative except that it was too short, I would have liked a six months placement.” (2016 Capacity Ireland participant)

It should be noted that there is no evidence in participant reports of *negative* attitudes towards Europe or its values. Indeed, many participants highlighted the realisation that they could work in another European country as a particular benefit of participation (see participant quotes in the section on self-confidence and independence). However, it does appear that developing a greater sense of European citizenship was not central to the experience of most participants on placement.

It may be then that the ‘different’ and ‘foreign’ aspect of the placements emphasises the differences between the host country and Ireland, rather than fostering a sense of shared European identity between the nations involved.<sup>1</sup>

In an interview, one project coordinator commented that this may be connected with cultural preparation: “The loss of cultural preparation before departure (*which was funded under the Leonardo da Vinci programme*) probably has affected the feeling of EU citizenship. What Europe wanted was as many students as possible taking part, which I understand, but I think there was a bit of a loss there. We do the best we can but the resources are limited.”

So in the specific area of *European* rather than intercultural awareness, the reported impact on participants is less emphatic. This is a significant result given the current European context. The social and political climate of Europe has changed appreciably since Erasmus+ was designed in the early 2010s, most notably with the decision of the UK to leave the EU in 2016 and growing anti-EU sentiment in countries such as Poland and Hungary. As fostering European values and identity becomes a stronger priority for the EU, there is a robust argument for introducing more formal preparation and training around European values and European citizenship into any successor programme to Erasmus+. There may be an opportunity to connect a future programme with the ‘European Values Instrument’ or ‘EU

<sup>1</sup> Other possible factors include that VET mobility learners may have limited contact with others outside the host culture. In his 2016 study of 1500 Erasmus+ and non-Erasmus+ Higher Education students from Germany, Florian Stoeckel argues that “For individuals to embrace a European identity they need to interact with a nationally diverse set of people with whom they share experiences, rather than only with individuals from a host country. Under these conditions, social interaction can attach a personal meaning to a transnational collective identity. Indeed my findings suggest that only interaction of (Erasmus+ HE) students with other international students contributes to a European identity, while contact with hosts does not have the same effect.” Available from [http://florianstoeckel.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/9/3/22935142/online\\_stoeckel\\_2016\\_contact\\_and\\_community\\_pops.pdf](http://florianstoeckel.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/9/3/22935142/online_stoeckel_2016_contact_and_community_pops.pdf)

Values Fund' that the European Commission have proposed to run in the period 2021-2027.

In the meantime, organisations sending learners on VET placements might consider how they will develop appreciation of cultural diversity and European values in their participant groups. The mission and principles of the European Solidarity Corps<sup>1</sup>, could act as a starting point for a group discussion or learning exercise about identity and values.

## OTHER AREAS OF IMPACT

Several other areas of impact outside the scope of professional competences emerged during this study, and are briefly discussed here.

### Progression to third-level education

A significant finding highlighted by project coordinators in both interviews and final reports is that those who have taken part in Erasmus+ placements are more likely to progress to Higher Education courses than those who have not.

The project coordinator of Moate Business College commented in an interview that "90% of our Erasmus+ trainees go on to Higher Education, compared to 65-70% of our general college population. The rate is definitely higher in the Erasmus+ population. I think they are more willing to spread their wings and look outwards. Sometimes the other students are less willing to look outside the midlands for opportunities."

The 2015 final report from Coláiste Dhúlaigh stated that "as in previous years, nursing students have successfully applied to study in England" and attributed this to "the experience abroad helped them to prepare for studying in another country and being away from home."

It is difficult to establish Erasmus+ experience as the key differential factor here, because Erasmus+ participants are not chosen at random from the general cohort of learners but selected by their sending organisations through a competitive process. Indeed, many sending organisations use high levels of motivation and attainment as selection criteria for Erasmus+ participants, so it is reasonable to expect that such learners would progress well in their education in any case.

However there is evidence that, in addition to increasing independence and willingness to 'look outwards', Erasmus+ placements have a more direct role to play in progression. Admission to UK universities in particular is dependent on a personal statement given during the application process, and an interview. Both participants and coordinators highlighted that "during interviews with these colleges, previous participants have noted that there has always been a positive discussion around their experiences on the project." (2015 Moate Business College final report)

Some participants noted that their positive experience of work in their vocational area had confirmed their choice of occupation and motivated them to take it further. For example:

"The whole experience in this workshop was incredibly enriching since I never had been in contact with such cutting-edge technology. This experience boosted my already existing desires and intentions to start studying a level 8 honours degree in Mechanical Engineering in Cork Institute of Technology." (2016 St John's Central College participant report)

This confluence of an increase in independence, affirmation of career choice, and a 'unique selling point' in entrance interviews points towards a connection between Erasmus+ participation and progression to higher education. However, further study would be required to investigate the strength of this connection in comparison with a non-Erasmus+ cohort of learners. This is an aspect that should be considered in any future VET tracer study.

## Academic attainment

Several project coordinators attribute an increase in academic attainment to participation in VET mobility work placements. Interestingly, these improvements were not confined to those who had travelled: coordinators reported that the placements led to a sense of 'healthy competition' among the class as a whole, which raised academic standards for the group.

"The participants are often more prepared for the course and tend to do better in their skill demonstrations, assignments and exams. This can generate healthy competition in the class leading to a stronger group graduating at the end of the year." (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

"The participating organisation benefited greatly due to the competition between students, thus increased examination results and classroom attendance." (2015 Longford and Westmeath ETB final report)

One organisation also investigated the question of whether taking part in a work placement had any negative impact on the academic attainment of participants: Moate Business College tracks "professional and educational progression (...)after the mobility to determine if the mobility had a beneficial effect on the participant or if there was any detrimental effect due to the break in the college routine"and did not find evidence of negative impact.

There is some evidence then that Erasmus+ placements contribute to increased academic attainment, by raising overall levels of motivation and promoting competition among learners. This is an issue that could be investigated further in a future study of this VET cohort.

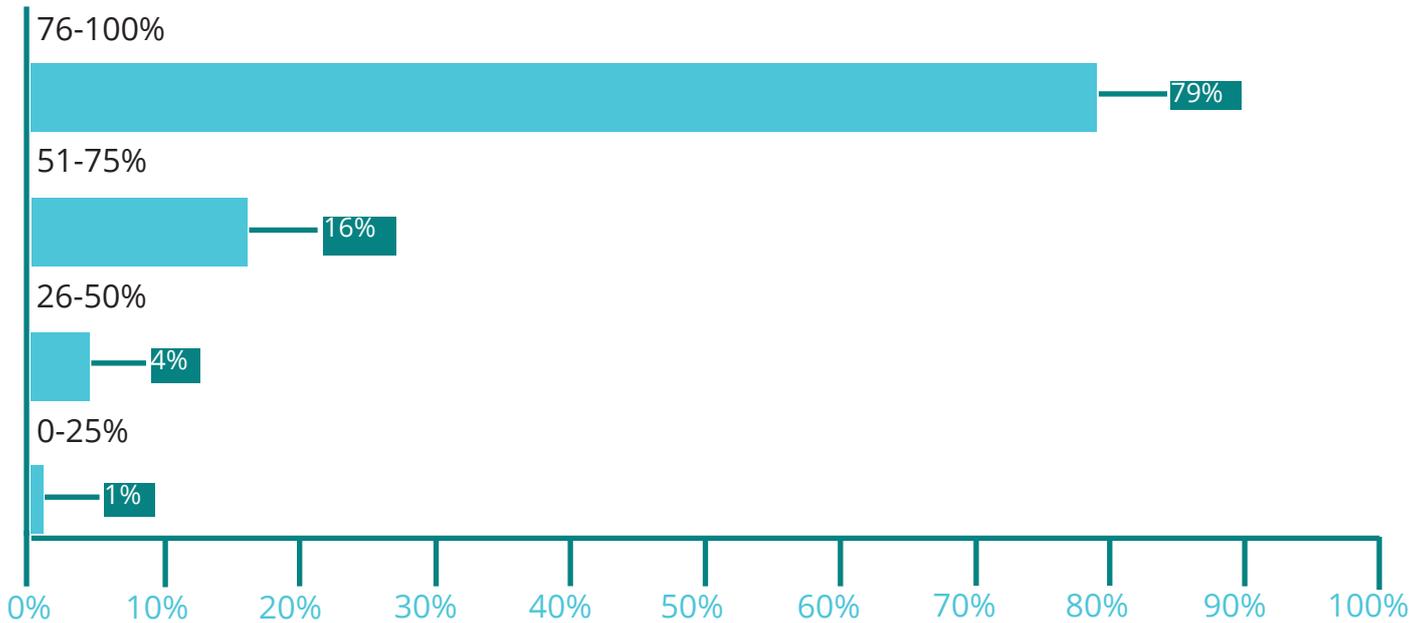
## Social Inclusion

A unique aspect of Erasmus+ is that travel, accommodation and living costs associated with the work placements are funded by the European Union. This enables learners to take part in the placements without excessive need to supplement costs from personal finances. This is particularly important in the VET sector, where a higher proportion of learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds relative to Higher Education<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 16 shows the extent to which the Erasmus+ grant covered the overall costs related to participation in the programme. (2016 introduced a fifth answer option to this question: "I am not aware/don't know". As this option was not available to all participants, I have removed it from the data set and responses are based on a sample size of 1,268 participants).

<sup>1</sup> See for example 'HIDDEN DISADVANTAGE? A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group' by McCoy, Byrne et al; HEA, 2017 p.113: "Differentiation in the sector of HE that young people enter into is prominent, with school leavers from more advantaged backgrounds much more likely to enroll in university courses than any other institute (Institutes of Technology, Colleges of Education or Others)."

## Figure 16: Contribution of Erasmus+ grant to overall costs of participation



*“To what extent did the Erasmus+ grant cover your overall expenses related to your mobility period?”*

To a large extent, participants found the Erasmus+ grant sufficient to cover their costs of participation in the mobility placement. Overall, 79% reported that the grant had covered 76-100% of their costs and a further 16% reported it had covered 51-75% of their costs. Only 5% of participants reported that the grant had covered less than 50% of their costs. In these cases, learners reported supplementing costs with their own savings, loans from family, or state/regional grants.

Both coordinators and participants mentioned that it would not have been possible for some learners to live and work in another country without the funding that Erasmus+ provides:

*“For most this experience would not have been possible due to their socio-economic backgrounds. The project afforded them an opportunity which would otherwise have been unobtainable.”* (2015 Rathmines CFE final report)

*“I would definitely recommend Erasmus+ and encourage anyone who asks me about it to go. It is a great opportunity, especially for people like me who otherwise would never get such a chance to live and work abroad any time soon.”* (2014 Inchicore CFE participant)

*“(Erasmus+) is an excellent opportunity for students to see how other European people live, work, socialise and integrate. This is especially true for students from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds who would never get such an adventure and experience.”* (2014 Ballsbridge CFE participant)

*“Not only did I get the chance to gain experience; I had funding to support me to do so. At home I would have to work a second part-time job to fund an internship.”* (2014 Irish Education Partners participant)

The fact that Erasmus+ is highly structured, with travel and accommodation arrangements made by a central project coordinator in the sending organisation rather than by the

participants themselves, also appears to encourage participation by those who would not otherwise do so. This is especially noticeable among 'non-traditional' vocational trainees, such as those from older age groups or who already have their own families.



**“Those participants who were older and had a family were delighted with the work placement as for some finances would have impeded them previously but this project allowed them to become involved.”**  
*(2015 Enniscorthy CFE final report)*

“I’d highly recommend the Erasmus+ experience to anyone looking to travel and work abroad. It served as a brilliant way of getting to work in a foreign country with all the challenges that come with that along with the safety net of the Erasmus+ programme protecting you.” (2014 Galway Technical Institute participant report)

Templemore CFE identified a participant who was particularly apprehensive to take part in a work placement “as she was leaving behind three teenage children and as a single mother was very worried. She was also the most excited to be leaving on an adventure of her own.”

The participant herself reported that “the programme was of great benefit to me both on a professional and personal level. It gave me the confidence and courage to step outside my comfort zone and to be part of an educational programme on an international level.”

In 1997, the Irish government adopted a definition of poverty and social exclusion which states “People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.”<sup>1</sup>

The provision of funded, structured work placements has provided opportunities to VET learners who would not otherwise have had them, either for financial reasons or because their personal situations would not facilitate them to travel and work independently. Thus Erasmus+ has contributed directly to social inclusion by giving people access to the financial resources and support structures that enable them to participate in activities “considered the norm for other people in society”.

<http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/What-is-poverty-and-social-exclusion.aspx>

# IMPACT ON VET ORGANISATIONS

Although the focus of this study is the development of competences in VET learners, the impact of Erasmus+ placements also transfers to the organisations that send learners on placement. This happens both because staff members are closely involved in coordinating and running the project, and because the project itself can spark enthusiasm in the wider organisation. The mobility period often becomes a special 'event' in the organisation's calendar. This section considers the key areas of impact that learner placements bring about for sending organisations.

## Connection with employers

The nature of Erasmus+ placements leads to connection between VET organisations in the host countries and local employers: both must work closely together to monitor and deliver the placements. However, sending organisations also develop and deepen connections to Irish employers because of the projects.

In many cases, particularly in projects organised by Colleges of Further Education, there is a reciprocal arrangement in place. This means that the Irish sending organisation also acts as a receiving organisation for learners from partners:

"(Due to a reciprocal exchange with the partner organisation) the project gave Rathmines College an opportunity to build relationships with employers who operate in a multicultural and multi-linguistic environment and who are looking for employees with a high level of competence in European languages." (2014 Rathmines College final report)

"The positive experience of Irish nursing homes with foreign trainees from partner colleges helped our college to secure placements for our own trainees and vice versa." (2014 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

"The reciprocal nature of our cooperation leads to the development of contacts with employers both in Ireland and in our partner countries. This contact helps to keep the college up to date with developments in the vocational sector and ensures good cooperation between employers and the college in terms of course development." (2014 St John's Central College final report)

"Irish host companies also benefit from this with the nursing homes very happy with the students from Sweden and Finland. The patients loved having them and it enhanced the atmosphere of the organisation." (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

Two coordinators also highlighted that these links with employers could increase employment opportunities for Irish graduates in the future:

"(The host employer) became aware of the standard of education and training in the Irish system and were very impressed. This has encouraged them to consider employing an Irish graduate to work full time in their company." (2015 Greenhills CFE final report)

"In particular, this work helped to develop links between VET providers and the 'world of work' and the value of this as a mechanism for addressing the skills shortages experienced by employers in the Ecology, Conservation and Community Development sectors." (2016 Capacity Ireland final report)

Reciprocal arrangements between sending and receiving organisations, while not a requirement of the programme, thus demonstrate a huge capacity to build networks between Irish VET organisations and local employers. This is a crucial relationship for any vocational organisation that seeks to provide relevant and practical training to its learners.

## Establishment of international networks

VET mobility projects are founded on partnership between sending and receiving organisations to provide quality mobility placements for VET learners. However, the partnership model also has the effect of introducing a direct connection between organisations that work in the vocational training area, but within different cultures. While exchange of good practice is not a direct aim of VET mobility projects for learners, there is substantial evidence that it happens on an informal basis.

“The readiness of staff to invite tutors and students from partner colleges into the classrooms to join in, to give presentations and to allow them to observe training methods increased intercultural awareness and tolerance of others and gave students a holistic experience of learning.” (2014 Coláiste Íde final report)

“Trainees from abroad who were on placement in the college were invited to join in college activities like sightseeing trips and thus involved the whole college community in the international programme and increased intercultural exchange.” (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

“Following consultation and through cooperation we can learn from our Swedish counterparts where they have encountered difficulties and how they set about solving these. Through constant communication it is hoped that this cooperation will be strengthened in the years ahead thereby providing both educational institutions with a competitive edge in meeting the needs of their learners. (...)The sharing of ideas and experiences are valuable learning tools and it is not always necessary to reinvent the wheel.” (2015 Enniscorthy final report)

This kind of informal exchange of good practice is not only beneficial to the organisations involved, but can lead to the development of a more international ethos in the organisation in general.

## Change in VET systems

There is considerable evidence that involvement in a VET mobility project has resulted in organisations changing their own systems and curricula to better meet the needs of VET learners. Specific changes identified by coordinators included the structure and documentation of work placements, changes to the content of their vocational courses, and the development of a new qualification:

“This approach will be incorporated into my teaching in the work experience module including a more detailed structured approach to how to complete the work placement and I will encourage all students in the future to seek this standard with their future placements. I have presented to the teachers of work experience the knowledge of how a good work placement can happen and I have documented the process.” (2015 Greenhills CFE final report)

“In the longer term it is hoped that feedback from both participants and staff will contribute to reshaping the curriculum to reflect experiences gained in Europe.” (2014 Ballyfermot CFE final report)

“(The experience) fed back into the college, by discussing options with management on how to introduce more practical skills into the course work and also the design and layout of classrooms with more practical elements.

(...)The students working in the hotels had less to do and it was remarked that a better knowledge of spreadsheets may have been beneficial. It is now being considered that maybe spreadsheet methods should be included in the first year of the course.” (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

“We have now incorporated in our software development course the new language of PHP for the benefit of all future students. This will also equip our future students with this knowledge in order that the work experience with Gamgroothendal in the Netherlands will be more fruitful. (...)We have also incorporated the knowledge gained of the European business market into our business courses.” (2015 Greenhills CFE final report)

“The UK-based lead partner has developed a new ‘European Community Development’ qualification at Level 3, which has recently been approved by Ofsted and the ECVET for Community Development partners, including Capacity Ireland and organisations in Italy, Romania and Spain will be working to secure recognition and accreditation for equivalent versions of this qualification in their own countries. For our part we will be engaging with Quality and Qualifications Ireland and NARIC to investigate possibilities for taking this work forward in Ireland.” (2015 Capacity Ireland final report)

In the same way that the work placements can show learners what is needed of them in the workplace, the experiences that learners have on their placements can show sending organisations what is needed in the vocational and education training system. By being open to this feedback and responding to the needs of learners, VET organisations can use mobility projects to improve their own systems and course provision.

## Attraction of new learners

VET providers routinely use the availability of Erasmus+ work placements as a ‘selling point’ not only for the courses involved, but for the organisation itself. Several coordinators stated that this has resulted in an increase in popularity of their courses, and can be a deciding factor for learners when selecting their course options:

“An additional cohort is being taken in this year due to additional applications received. (...) One factor in this increase is the good experience provided by this mobility and earlier ones in recent years.” (2014 Ballyfermot CFE final report)

“As the project has been running for a number of years the College has found that students are aware of the international mobility opportunity when they are enrolling in the College. Past participants have told their friends about the opportunities in the College and this has acted as a strong promotional tool in attracting prospective students. In September, students are asking their tutors about the programme before information has been formally disseminated to potential participants. This achievement is a significant strength for the College as it demonstrates to the necessary parties that Ballsbridge College has an international element embedded in its curriculum and that it strongly believes that all

students should consider Europe as an open labour market and not just Ireland.” (2014 Ballsbridge CFE final report)

“The mobility attracts potential students to the college and makes VET more attractive for learners. At interview many mention the involvement in international mobility as an important factor when choosing our college (...) The success of our college and our mobility programme can be measured by the high number of applications to our courses and the awareness of potential trainees at interview stage of the international exchange programme that we offer. They would have heard about it by word of mouth from previous participants or their families and friends and from course pages on our website.” (2014 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

“It has been used as a means of promoting our courses that have a mobility attached to them at our Open Day and Higher Options events in the RDS. The participants who have benefitted from the experience are called on to give talks regarding their own personal experience, thus promoting the positive impact that the project has had on them.” (2015 Coláiste Íde final report)

“At the interview stage many mention the involvement in an international placement as an important factor when selecting our college.” (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

“Promoting our involvement with Erasmus+ and the opportunities that we are able to offer as a result helps to increase interest and recruitment to our training courses. Furthermore, once students are enrolled on the course, the possibility to participate in an Erasmus+ mobility can be an important motivating factor that helps to increase retention and attainment rates.” (2015 Capacity Ireland final report)

In the eyes of prospective learners then, providing opportunities through Erasmus+ appears to add real value both to a course and to an organisation. This in turn makes the course or organisation more attractive to the next generation of learners. This can be a valuable asset for a VET organisation seeking to attract learners and establish a competitive advantage relative to other VET providers.

## Involvement in other European programmes

Several coordinators mentioned that involvement in Erasmus+ VET mobility projects has encouraged the organisation to take part in other European projects and programmes.

“Overall there was positive feedback from accompanying tutors and we are going to extend into staff mobilities and expand mobilities into different areas in the Helsinki Vocational College.” (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

“The success of the mobility projects has given rise to renewed interest in our staff and has led to the four members participating in a staff mobility project during Easter 2017.” (2015 Coláiste Íde final report)

“There was greater interest from other teachers to get involved in the Erasmus+ programme and further enquiries were made to expand the programme not only in the Further Education but for the Secondary School also.” (2015 Greenhills CFE final report)

It can be concluded then that exposure to the VET mobility programme increases the willingness of organisations to get involved in other European projects. This in turn can become a direct benefit to staff and other learners in the organisation. Here again, Erasmus+ adds value to the overall VET system in Ireland.

## Increased staff motivation

The increase in motivation that the placements bring about in participants, as discussed in the section on self-confidence and independence, also seem to occur in the staff group involved in the project. Staff development is not a core aim of VET mobility projects for learners. In this project type the staff of the sending organisation travel only as accompanying people for the participants, rather than to take part in job shadowing or training. Nonetheless, many coordinators reported an increase in motivation among the staff involved.

“As the project coordinator I gained the knowledge and skills required in organising a European work placement and was very proud of what we had achieved through the success of the programme. I was motivated to continue and expand the programme and to encourage other teachers to get involved. I was enthusiastic to promote the value of broadening the area of opportunity for our students to live and work abroad giving them a sense of European citizenship and identity. I had seen the positive results of this placement abroad and the great value it would bring to our organisation and stakeholders.” (2015 Greenhills CFE final report)

“Staff who had accompanied the groups for the first time came back with great enthusiasm and fresh ideas. They were very impressed by the partners and how supportive they were. They found the different education systems very interesting. (...) “The Irish students return with such enthusiasm for their chosen vocation and such strong practical knowledge and skills. This has an impact, not only on the students themselves, but also on the tutors teaching on the course, the other students on the course and the community who ultimately benefit from enthusiastic students.” (2015 Coláiste Dhúlaigh final report)

Taking part in a project that delivers a high quality work experience for learners, and seeing the benefits this brings to them, is an understandable point of pride for staff of VET organisations. There is also evidence that staff can develop their own skills through their involvement. Both elements can increase staff motivation, and bring benefits to the sending organisation as a whole.

# WHAT MAKES A GOOD QUALITY PROJECT?

## Clear Communication

Establishing and maintaining a clear system for regular communication is key to an effective project. This system needs to encourage and enable communication not only between sending and receiving organisations, but also between organisations and participants. This kind of communication builds trust between all parties involved, and also helps to identify and effectively address challenges as they arise. Several coordinators mention situations they feel could have been resolved if they had been aware of them. These ranged from a participant withdrawing from their placement due to homesickness, to a participant being placed with an employer whose business was not closely related to the course of study. Systems of communication vary between projects, but keeping to a regular schedule of online or telephone meetings and designating a mentor or contact person for participants have proved essential.

## Authentic participant feedback

Participant feedback is crucial not only in monitoring the quality of work placements, but in helping a VET organisation to improve its systems and course provision. However, the only 'official' system for capturing this feedback is through the EU participant report. While some participants give extensive qualitative information in this report, many choose to answer the 'tick box' questions only (as this author can attest!). Experienced coordinators have often devised their own systems of getting authentic and extensive feedback from participants, which perhaps more fully reflect their experience. Suggested methods include keeping work placement diaries, holding debriefing sessions, or carrying out 'hopes, fears and expectations' exercises at the beginning and end of the placement period.

## Customised work placements

Participants' assessment of the success of the work placement depends largely on the type of tasks and duties that they carried out. There needs to be a very clear connection between a participant's work duties and their course of study, and tasks need to be pitched not too far above or below the participant's level of learning. The evidence from project coordinators is that it is not sufficient to supply partners with broad details of the sectors or courses participants will be drawn from. Vocational courses are not standardised across Europe, so a childcare learner in Ireland may have very different coursework than a learner in Spain. Instead, sending organisations should inform their partners of the profile and competences of participants. This enables the partners to select suitable host employers, who in turn should be informed of the participants' competences so that they can plan suitable work.

"The success of the project was greatly assisted by our supplying the host partners with as much information about the participants as possible to enable them to secure good quality work placements. Outlining the tasks and duties that each participant would be required to do, together with a copy of the Learning Outcome Agreement between us and the host partners, greatly assisted all involved." (2015 Coláiste Íde final report)

## Mutual exchange of placements

There is no formal requirement for mutual or reciprocal exchange of placements in Erasmus+ VET. In other words, an organisation can act as a sending organisation without obligation to receive learners from their partner organisation. However, a substantial number of project coordinators in interviews and final reports highlighted the role of reciprocal arrangements in building trust and solidifying relationships with partners. Mutual exchange helps organisations develop understanding of both the sending and receiving sides of the project. It also helps them to build networks with local employers, who host the learners on placement. This connection with world of work is crucial for any vocational organisation that seeks to provide relevant and practical training to its learners.

## Involvement of family or community

Final reports, interviews with project coordinators and participant reports all show that many participants have limited experience of being away from their home and families. Many participants also mention feeling homesick at some point in their placements. Involving the families or communities of participants in the work placement, through initiatives like information evenings or 'send-off' parties can bring an extra level of support to nervous participants. It also has the added benefit of raising awareness of the opportunities available through Erasmus+ within a local community.

## Integration with QCI work experience module

VET Organisations that award qualifications at NFQ Level 5 or 6 have the option to integrate Erasmus+ placements into the QCI Work Experience module. This module covers key workplace skills including working independently, meeting deadlines, handling criticism, timekeeping, communication, and health and safety. It also supports learners in developing their Curriculum Vitae and letters of application.

Coordinators who have used this module report that in addition to the benefits for the learner, the module complements the placement very well and adds more structure to the placement. As part of the work experience module, supervisors must assess how the learner has demonstrated key competences in the work place. This not only provides an evaluation structure for the sending organisation, but strengthens the relationship between VET organisations and employers.

## Peer-to-Peer Promotion

The peer voice is exceptionally powerful in sharing information and encouraging participation in Erasmus+. Many project coordinators reported inviting previous mobility project participants to speak to prospective participants about their experiences, either in person at open days or information events, or online through social media groups. Encouraging peers to connect with each other this way not only brings the authentic voice of the learner to the project, but also allows them to pass on practical advice. Peer-to-peer promotion of Erasmus+ is also recommended in the Irish government's recent languages strategy 'Languages Connect': "Consider ways to encourage students in FET and HE to further avail of opportunities on the Erasmus+ programme. Mechanisms (...) may include presentations from former Erasmus+ students to post-primary school students outlining the benefits of overseas mobility, to enable them to consider it in choosing courses."

# CONCLUSIONS

Between 2014 and 2016, more than 1,200 vocational learners from Ireland travelled to countries across Europe for work placements funded by Erasmus+. The vast majority of placements (92%) were less than one month in duration. Learners came from vocational organisations across Ireland, and almost three-quarters were in their first year of study. The overwhelming evidence from this research is that these relatively short-term placements improved the professional competences, intercultural skills, and personal confidence of these learners. The placements also had associated benefits for the vocational organisations that arranged them, particularly in establishing closer connections with employers, increasing international connections, motivating staff, and attracting new learners.

Among the key aims of Erasmus+ are to “improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society” through learning mobility and through “strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work”. The results of this research indicate that Erasmus+ work placements are addressing this goal, and bring significant added value to vocational learners from Ireland in the process.

## Erasmus+ placements have increased professional competences and opportunities for vocational learners

Erasmus+ work placements give VET learners from Ireland practical, real-world experience in their vocational area which is not available in the classroom. This experience directly increases their professional opportunities for several reasons:

- Erasmus+ placements are often the first vocationally-related work experience that VET learners have, so the placements significantly develop their skills;
- the placements provide access to diverse industries which may not exist in the VET learners’ local areas;
- European employers are able to offer placements that their Irish equivalents are unable to provide due to insurance and other concerns.

VET learners reported significant improvement in their own skills and competences due to the mobility placements, particularly in some of the key skill areas for employability: independent learning, team working and problem solving. It is not surprising then that participants also reported feeling their chances to get a new or better job had increased because of their placements. In many cases VET learners received offers of employment or went on to work with their host employers; or found relevant work in their local areas.

In addition, Erasmus+ placements have made learners aware of the wider opportunities that exist for them to live and work outside Ireland, and participants have resolved to explore these opportunities in the future.

Finally, the fully funded and highly-structured nature of Erasmus+ placements makes opportunities available to learners from Ireland who might not otherwise have been able to avail of them, either for financial reasons or because their personal situations would not facilitate them to travel and work independently. This is a direct and significant contribution to greater social inclusion in Ireland.

## Erasmus+ has increased intercultural skills

Erasmus+ work placements have also proved very effective in developing the intercultural skills of participants. Working and living in another country has helped them to see the value of other cultures, made them more open to working with people from diverse backgrounds, and more open-minded towards the views of others. These effects have been amplified by many sending organisations in Ireland, who have built on the learners' experience of being 'different' in another country to develop appreciation of the different cultures within the organisations themselves. In this way, Erasmus+ work placements have made a contribution towards a more cohesive society in Ireland.

## Erasmus+ has contributed strongly to the personal development of vocational learners

Erasmus+ work placements have helped to develop a strong sense of self-confidence in participants. This comes not only from their experience of the workplace, but also from the discovery that they are capable of living away from their familiar home environment. This is particularly important for the many participants who have not lived independently from their families before, or who have not travelled outside of Ireland. It is notable how many learners remark that they would consider working or living in Europe in the future, and that they would not have thought this before the placement. There is evidence that Erasmus+ work placements help encourage participants not only towards new professional opportunities, but also towards some of the markers of adulthood such as learning to live independently.

## Erasmus+ has had a less emphatic impact on language skills and European citizenship

Almost half of the Erasmus+ work placements studied were carried out through English, although the participants were based in 17 different countries. This indicates that often English was the main language of the work placement even when it was not the main language of the destination country. Among learners who used a foreign language in the work place, almost 90% reported that their language skills had improved. However it is difficult to assess how significant this may be, without knowledge of the learners' baseline skill level in these languages. It is also notable that a significant number of learners reported that they struggled with language issues during their placements.

It is further notable that the percentage of learners who reported feeling more European as a result of their placements was far lower than those who felt their overall intercultural skills had increased. Few learners mentioned developing a sense of European citizenship or identity because of the placements.

## Erasmus+ has benefitted the vocational system in Ireland

The 95% satisfaction rate with Erasmus+ placements indicates that Irish vocational organisations are to be congratulated on the high-quality experiences they have provided for their learners. Both new and experienced vocational organisations have formed strong partnerships and established good communication with their learners. However, the wider vocational system in Ireland has also benefited. Vocational staff involved in the projects have learned from each other and exchanged good practice informally. They have become familiar

with the vocational system in other countries. This not only expands the knowledge base within the vocational system but is a source of motivation for individual staff members.

In addition, vocational organisations have become more aware of other opportunities available through European programmes, such as staff mobility training and adult education. Involvement in one European programme has encouraged them to take part in others. In this way, Erasmus+ has led to a more international ethos in vocational organisations in Ireland and enhanced the international dimension of education and training.

## Organisational involvement in Erasmus+ is attractive to learners

Erasmus+ mobility placements have played a direct role in improving Irish vocational systems by developing close relationships between vocational organisations and employers, both at home and abroad. Employers have been made aware of the vocational skills and training of local graduates, and organisations have changed their course offerings to more closely match the needs of the workplace. Consequently the placements have helped vocational organisations better prepare their learners for the world of work.

The prospect of an Erasmus+ placement is an attractive one for potential students, and VET organisations extensively advertise these opportunities at open days, career fairs and in prospectuses. This in turn makes particular vocational courses and organisations more attractive to learners, and has potentially added to the overall attractiveness of a vocational career path in Ireland.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Fund language preparation in successor programme

Feedback from both participants and project coordinators strongly suggests that greater provision of pre-departure vocational language training would substantially enhance the quality of Erasmus+ VET mobility placements. It would also connect with Irish national policy in the area of languages, which emphasises the need for awareness of the opportunities that foreign languages offer for careers and mobility. Funding for language preparation should be strongly considered by the EU for inclusion in any successor programme to Erasmus+.

## Support cultural preparation, with an emphasis on European values, in successor programme

Erasmus+ is widely considered one of the most successful EU programmes, and is frequently identified by citizens in Eurobarometer surveys as one of the key positive results of the European Union<sup>1</sup>. As such it presents a powerful opportunity to develop a sense of European identity and shared European values among those who take part. However, the evidence is that this sense of 'being European' has not taken deep root in the minds of participating VET learners. This is troubling, given that fostering a sense of shared European values and identity - and combatting radicalisation - is currently an urgent priority for the EU.

<sup>1</sup> For example, the Autumn 2016 Standard Eurobarometer 86 report on European Citizenship states "After the nature of the Erasmus programme was explained, 86% of respondents said their opinion was positive, with 48% even answering 'very positive'. Only 5% are negative about this programme and 9% expressed no opinion."

There is a strong argument for reintroducing a cultural preparation component into any successor programme to Erasmus+, which could tie in with other proposed initiatives such as the EU Values Fund or European Values Initiative.

## Establish a network for VET organisations in Ireland

There is a clear appetite among Irish VET organisations, expressed in both interviews and final reports, for a network where they can exchange information with each other. This desire is particularly pronounced among Colleges of Further Education, which have similar structures and would therefore face similar challenges. It is also apparent in organisations that have carried out mobility projects for several years, and feel that they have valuable learning and experience to share. Specific areas mentioned include: exchanging information about partners; discussion of joint problems; and internationalisation strategies.

It is particularly encouraging that many organisations see this kind of network as an opportunity for them to share knowledge with others, rather than as a forum to seek advice. Two colleges that operate under City of Dublin ETB mention that an informal network of this type already exists between them. Other coordinators mention providing informal advice and support to affiliated colleges and training boards that are considering making Erasmus+ applications. Léargas should consider how a more official network could be established and managed, both to support new applicants and to assist the development of more experienced organisations.

## Carry out follow-up studies

This study has revealed several areas where Erasmus+ appears to have contributed strongly to the professional development and future careers of VET learners. Participation in work placements has led directly to VET learners getting jobs with their host employers, and in some cases setting up their own businesses. There is also evidence of connection between Erasmus+ participation and increased academic attainment, and progression to higher education. These connections need to be more fully researched if we are to understand the longer-term impact of Erasmus+ VET mobility placements on learners. It is recommended that a follow-up study of VET learners be carried out, to trace their paths since their placement and explore questions of study progress, transition to work, use of learned competencies, current occupation, and bonds to European programmes such as Erasmus+.



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