

## **An appraisal of the importance of graduates' language skills and ERASMUS experiences**

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the importance of graduates' language skills and their ERASMUS experiences. The research purpose is to establish if the potential benefits of ERASMUS participation in terms of language enhancements warrant that organisations specifically employ ex-ERASMUS students. Academic literature does not give a conclusive answer to the specific benefits of student mobility participation. To test the claims that formerly mobile students are statistically more employable, primary research was conducted on the different perspectives of higher education institutions, businesses and students. Findings suggest that businesses value language skills, but place little emphasis on their origin. Recommendations include conducting research into the importance of languages to graduates and businesses.

**Keywords:** Employability; Language; Students; Employers; Mobility.

**Biography:** Delfina Mattern studied as an undergraduate student at Regent's University London, completing a Bachelor in Global Management with First-Class Honours in 2016, and this research paper is based on the final-year dissertation.

**Acknowledgements:** Special thanks are given to Lorna Dallas-Conte and Àngels Trias-I-Valls for their guidance in this project.

### **List of Acronyms:**

**BAGM:** Bachelor of Arts in Global Management

**BAIB:** Bachelor of Arts in International Business

**CBI:** Confederation of British Industry

**CBR:** Careers and Business Relations

**EC:** European Commission

**EEE4all:** Euro-Education Employability For (4) All

**ERASMUS:** European Regional Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

**EU:** European Union

**HEI:** Higher Education Institution

**IPO:** International Partnership Office

**MEMO:** Monitoring Exchange Mobility Outcomes

**RUL:** Regent's University London

**SCONUL:** Society of College, National and University Libraries

**SME:** Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

**Word count:** 8,568.

## **I. Introduction**

This research paper discusses topics within organisational management. The research question posed in this context is whether enhanced language skills developed by ex-ERASMUS students are viewed as important by various stakeholder groups, particularly with regard to graduate employability. Typically listed employability skills include language skills and cultural/social awareness.

Throughout Europe and the world, students increasingly choose to partake in student mobility programs, such as the European Union (EU)-funded European Regional Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) program. ERASMUS is an inclusive scholarship program, sponsoring students at EU universities as they go abroad and study at universities in other EU member and candidate countries. The research limits itself in targeting primarily ex-exchange students and businesses that specifically employ ERASMUS students, and the research aims to provide an international perspective on the research question by using diverse literature and research samples.

It has been argued that, while at foreign universities, ERASMUS students develop employability skills that are highly important to their later careers and their employers. The aim of this research paper is to determine whether the ERASMUS program provides an endorsement to students' language employability skills, and whether this endorsement is recognised by employers. There are three research objectives:

- (1) To identify how student exchange improves students' language employability skills.
- (2) To identify how ex-ERASMUS students benefit the management of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).
- (3) To identify whether employers are specifically looking for the language skills offered by ex-ERASMUS students.

Students at universities with highly diverse student bodies are particularly impacted by globalisation, the accelerating interconnectedness of economies and cultures (Cuterela, 2012). Students exposed to the cultural effects of globalisation through programs like the ERASMUS program feel the effects of globalisation acutely and, although the ERASMUS program is popular among students, participation in it and effects on later careers have not been exclusively linked (European Parliament, 2014).

This research has potentially important implications for workforce development, as student exchange plays an important part in student life. The research scope includes investigating SMEs at an organisational level, and the aim of the research is to provide an answer applicable to the EU on a student exchange level. A personal reason for investigating this research question is that the author is a former ERASMUS student, who hopes to begin identifying the effects of participation on career progression.

Background context and initial insights into the research topic are developed through section 2, which presents a review of relevant literature. Data collection methods are discussed in section 3, and the research findings are presented and analysed in section 4, focusing on the three stakeholder perspectives: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), businesses and students. Section 5 offers answers to the research question and suggests recommendations. It was anticipated that the data would present a conflicting picture, but that important employability skills for businesses would highlight language skills.

## **2. Literature Review**

In order to acquire diverse and preliminary insights into the research topic, relevant literature is reviewed below. The sources discussed include reports, student accounts and research papers of

diverse origins. This leads to the development of a multi-faceted answer to the research question. Some of the literature analysed below discusses student mobility outside Europe. The research blocks discussed in this literature review include the employability skill enhancement through the student mobility programs in section 2.1, for research objective (1). Research objective (2) is explored in section 2.3. Research objective (3) is investigated in sections 2.1 and 2.2.

## **2.1 Employability skill enhancement through student mobility**

Scholars generally agree that the ERASMUS program affects its participants in various ways and has concrete benefits for students' employability (Parey and Waldinger, 2011; Prodingler et al, 2012; Vaicekauskas et al, 2013; Unlu, 2015). The literature discussed in this section concerns the employability enhancement through participation in the ERASMUS program. This section aims to provide insight into the first research objective.

Parey and Waldinger (2011) offer an early study of participating students from 1989 until 2005, and suggest that ex-ERASMUS students are more than twice as likely to look for work in foreign countries (from 6.5% to 15%). This conclusion is based on surveys of German graduates, and the authors argue that this finding is relatively unsurprising with over one million (1.37 million) students having taken part in the ERASMUS program since its launch in 1987 (Parey and Waldinger, 2011) and Prodingler et al (2012) argue that employability skills such as language and interpersonal skills are important in the labour market. The authors support the Euro-Education Employability For All (EEE4all) program, which is part of ERASMUS+, an extension of ERASMUS that includes work experience. However, with research comprising surveys and interviews of only forty students, Prodingler et al's (2012) conclusion is not representative. Yücelsin-Tas (2013) elaborates on the topic of employability skills by claiming that intercultural tolerance is the primary benefit of the program (Unlu, 2015). Also surveying only forty students, Yücelsin-Tas (2013), offering a Turkish perspective, concludes that 87% of students struggle with language skills. As a result, it is questionable whether the benefits of ERASMUS do indeed include language. Kuhn (2012), Sigalas (2008) and Teichler (2004) oppose the opinions expressed thus far, and adopt a critical view of ERASMUS. These three scholars argue that the ERASMUS program's only purpose is to enhance European citizenship, and go on to say that the program has failed in its purpose, as it targets the wrong audience (Kuhn, 2012). According to Kuhn (2012), the ERASMUS program should target students who could benefit more from enhanced employability skills - students who typically participate in the program already have a more 'European identity', and therefore benefit less.

In summary, scholars agree that the ERASMUS program has some positive effects on participants, although there is no agreement on the nature of these effects. As much of the research was conducted soon after 1987, it provides a useful staging point for where the program is today. The next issue to be discussed is the nature of employability, in other words, whether it is a set of skills to be acquired, a continuing process to go through, or an identity to be developed outside of higher education.

## **2.2 Employability: Skill, Process, Identity**

Some scholars reject the idea of employability 'skills', speaking instead of graduate 'identities' or 'processes' (Holmes, 2013; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2001; Prodingler et al, 2012a; Jones et al, 2008). Different scholars believe that employability may either:

- a) Be a trait developed outside of higher education (Holmes, 2001; 2013; Ahmed, 2009; Tymon, 2013);
- b) Be developed only through student mobility (Deakin, 2013; Jones et al, 2008); or
- c) Be developed primarily through higher education institutions (Wiley, 2014).

According to some scholars, employability is 'a set of achievements, skills and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation' (Wiley, 2014; Tymon, 2013); others reject this definition (Prodingler et al, 2012a). Wiley (2014) argues that

employability cannot be defined as a list of skills, as certain obsolete skills may be included or important skills left out. It is clear, however, that employability is centred on work (Clarke, 2008; Ahmed, 2009).

Holmes (2001) proposes a relatively modern view of employability. Claiming that HEIs have the responsibility to develop employability, he suggests that employers look for a certain kind of behaviour, instead of a certain skillset. Holmes (2013) also contrasts three different perspectives on employability: employability as a process, a possession, or a position, and supports the first, in arguing that it is the most theoretically robust; graduates no longer enter a single long-term job after graduation, but instead go through a long career process. Holmes (2001; 2013) supports option a), in arguing that students develop employability throughout their career. Wiley (2014) examined a survey of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and found that 62% of employers find the IT skills of graduates inadequate, concluding that HEIs should do more to prepare students for the workplace. The limitation of Wiley's (2014) research is in the university-centred perspective adopted by the author. Wiley (2014) therefore supports option c), although it is worth noting that the work was prepared for the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL).

Deakin (2013) offers guidelines on how to encourage students to take part in student mobility, supporting the notion that employability is developed through student mobility and concluding that there are financial and language barriers to student participation (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2015; Yücelsin-Tas, 2013), arguing also that enhanced academic performance and degree results comprise two of ERASMUS' benefits. Jones et al (2008), arguing that employability is not the sole responsibility of HEIs, elaborate on Deakin's (2013) arguments, and point to communication, cultural understanding and entrepreneurship as important graduate skills. This suggests that Jones et al (2008) support b) in employability development. It should be noted that scholars offering primary research (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Jones et al, 2008; Prodinge et al, 2012a) generally support the idea that employability comprises a set of attributes and skills, while scholars advocating an alternative viewpoint (Wochowska, 2015; Holmes, 2001 and 2013; Deakin, 2013) do not use primary research to support their claims.

Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) claim that integrity and honesty are more highly valued by employers than any other skill. This conclusion is based on surveys and interviews of 100 different employers in the UK, the authors suggesting that employability is independent of higher education or student mobility. This indicates that the authors support a) in employability development. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011), similarly to Tymon (2013), suggest that employer needs and graduate skills do not align. This notion is elaborated upon by Tymon (2013), who presents research comprising 400 business undergraduates, and finds that 48% of employers have difficulty finding appropriately skilled workers. Tymon's (2013) findings further support Ahmed (2009), who suggests that emotional intelligence is linked to employability, also indicating that employability is developed outside of higher education (Tymon, 2013).

Scholars disagree on how employability is and should be developed. Notably, few authors discussed here believe that employability is exclusively developed through higher education, and there is further argument on whether employer's needs and graduates skills align – this question will be discussed next.

### **2.3 Benefits to organisations of employing ex-student exchange participants**

The implications of the research are potentially significant for employers and the higher education sector. However, relatively little literature documents any specific benefits; the debate surrounds mostly 'soft' and therefore less quantifiable skills. Arguably, language is the only practical skill developed through student mobility (Prodinge et al, 2012a).

Employers' needs of graduates with 'employability skills' originates from a need to compete in the international marketplace; it is important that graduates possess 'world-class skills' and have a 'global mind-set' (Tholen, 2014; Joint Steering Group for UK Outward Mobility, 2012). Student mobility enables Europe to develop a highly-skilled workforce (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al, 2011; Tholen, 2014).

Enhanced employability is important to both students and employers, and employers have an inherent positive perception of former student mobility participants (Brooks et al, 2012; Tholen, 2014). Tholen (2014), having conducted semi-structured interviews with Dutch and British undergraduates, supports this argument; the research provides a comparison between student employability in the UK and the Netherlands.

It is suggested that employers are frequently dissatisfied with graduates' skills and general lack of employability (Lowden et al, 2011), although language is cited as a skill needed by organisations (Ahmed, 2009). As language is a skill developed by student mobility (Prodinger et al, 2012a; Deakin, 2013; Yücelsin-Tas, 2013), this constitutes a link between graduates' skills and business' needs. While mobility should be encouraged for various benefits, employers rarely care where such skills or competences were developed (Joint Steering Group on UK Outward Student Mobility, 2012), indicating that, although mobility is capable of developing aspects of employability, it is not the only way to become 'employable'.

Froehlich et al (2014) argue that employability should be maintained and developed by employers, while Wilson (2011) suggests that student mobility plays no role in developing employability; these perspectives are drastically different from previously discussed viewpoints. The ERASMUS program is criticised for targeting students that already exhibit skills supposedly developed by the ERASMUS program (Wilson, 2011; Kuhn, 2012). Wilson (2011) states that students today hold a more 'European' worldview than previous generations, and that the ERASMUS program has therefore not succeeded in its purpose. Wilson (2011) further critiques Sigalas' (2008) research approach, although their conclusions are similar. Using surveys of ERASMUS and non-ERASMUS students from 2007 to 2008, Wilson (2011) concludes that no increased 'Europeanism' could be found among respondents.

Generally, it appears that the skills employers need are not skills that student mobility necessarily develops. An exception must be made here for language, which seems to be a key skill developed through mobility and also required by employers. Sections 3 and 4 will further explore this topic, and provide some insight into why employers would choose to look for ex-ERASMUS participants in particular, and whether language is the key skill needed by employers that ERASMUS can develop. The aim is to test the views of authors in section 2 with the opinions of professionals and students in section 4.

Overall, section 2 has provided some insight into the issue of employability and benefits of mobility for students and organisations. The key points to take forward into section 4 include employers' needs for employable graduates and the skills offered by graduates not necessarily aligning, and language being apparently the only concrete skill developed by mobile students; these perceptions will be evaluated below. Although some of the research has been limited in methodology, each scholar will be evidently important in section 4, where the conclusions drawn in section 2 will be compared to primary data.

### **3. Research Process**

In addressing the questions raised in section 2, the research process described below includes multiple methods of gathering primary data.

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

The research philosophy is phenomenology: Understanding of a phenomenon is gained through the experiences and opinions of people involved in it (Saunders et al, 2012). This approach is appropriate, as the different stakeholder groups investigated are involved with employability. A deductive research approach was used; conclusions were drawn from observations made through data analysis (Saunders et al, 2012). This approach was necessitated by the scope and volume of the research.

The research topic, the importance of graduates' language employability skills and their ERASMUS experiences, was investigated through quantitative and qualitative research methods (Venkatesh et al, 2013), as the research objectives introduced in section 1 implicate several viewpoints. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data increases the diversity of the data; the varying perspectives and research methods employed provide a more well-rounded response to the research question. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used to increase the diversity of the data. This multi-method approach is known as triangulation (Modell, 2009).

### **3.2 Quantitative Data**

Quantitative data collection, using a survey, facilitated some statistical analysis (Venkatesh et al, 2013). The inclusion of students' perspectives permitted a more reliable answer to the research question. The analysis of secondary statistical data, a comparison between Bachelor in International Business (BAIB) and Bachelor in Global Management (BAGM) students at Regent's University London (RUL), was included to provide a statistical connection between students' and business' perspectives.

Each potential survey respondent was directed towards an electronic link to access the online survey instrument (SurveyMonkey, 2015). The survey comprised eleven questions (see Appendix), as survey length can affect response rates (Jin, 2011). The survey included multiple-choice, open-ended and Likert-scale questions (Hartley, 2014).

The survey generally fulfilled research objective (1), which otherwise relies on literary analysis; the survey was used only for student respondents.

The sample included students of multiple nationalities, some of which have been or are mobile. There was no other intentional segmentation, although the survey distribution was done with the help of university staff (Tuma et al, 2011). The lack of differentiation between different groups of students is a clear weakness. There was no control group for the research. This prohibited a comparative analysis. To account for this limitation, students were asked about past participation in student mobility. The sample size was another limitation: the sample is not wholly representative for European students.

Neither the response rate, nor the sample size, can be estimated, since the survey was distributed through the Careers and Business Relations (CBR) and International Partnership Office (IPO) departments at RUL, although the volume and data validity was dramatically increased using university staff to distribute the survey (Bezzina and Saunders, 2014). It can be expected that the response rate was relatively low, due to the online-based nature of the survey (Jin, 2011; Nulty, 2008). Respondents were expected to be aged 18-28. The sample of the secondary data set comprised RUL students from 2013 to 2014. The time frame comprised one month, in order to acquire enough responses and coding was used in the analysis (Behr, 2015).

### **3.3 Qualitative Data**

The collection of qualitative data included interviews, to investigate the perspectives of higher education institutions and employers (Venkatesh et al, 2013). The views of HEI and employer representatives could not be easily analysed through surveys, and were therefore investigated through semi-structured interviews; this resulted in a richer data set (Baker and Edwards, 2012).

Interviews were conducted with three people: the Director of a SME and senior employees from CBR and IPO at RUL. Due to the diverse student body at RUL, two persons representing higher education were interviewed. The interviews allowed the forming of an answer to the research question, and fulfilled the research objectives. The interviews had different open-ended questions, tailored to the specific individuals (Mojtahed et al, 2014; Smyth et al, 2009).

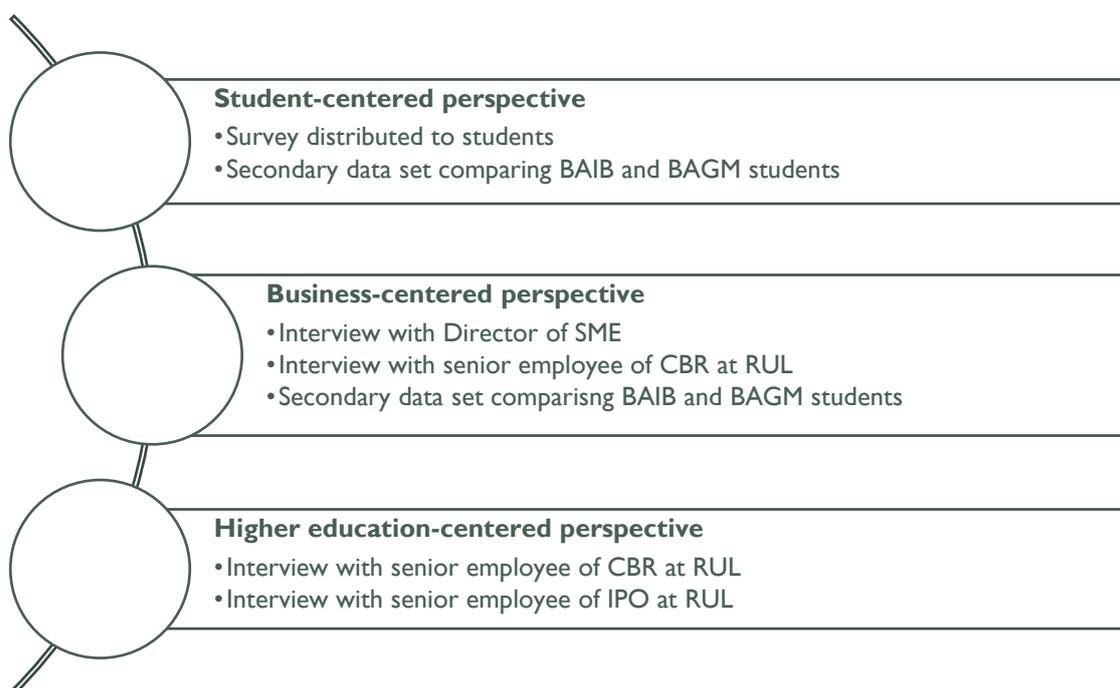
By interviewing three different stakeholder groups (SMEs, IPO and CBR), data validity was increased (Jick, 1979) and triangulation was used (Modell, 2009). Interviewing a single person per stakeholder group is a limitation of the research; it decreases the statistical significance of the qualitative research

(Baker and Edwards, 2012). Bias was furthermore invited through the sampling strategy by interviewing individuals supportive of student mobility.

Answers were recorded within three weeks for each individual. The data was analysed by comparing it to academic literature (Folkestad, 2008). To ensure confidentiality, no specific details of the work of any interviewee were discussed.

#### 4. Presentation of Findings

The following sections will aim to establish whether the ERASMUS program does have a significant effect on students' subsequent careers and skill sets, and whether the program has any other effects, as claimed by Brandenburg et al (2014). The scholars conducted extensive research in a report commissioned by the European Commission (EC) and were cited by the IPO interviewee. Figure 1 illustrates the three perspectives being explored in this section, and how they were investigated.



**Figure 1: Different perspectives investigated through primary research.**

##### 4.1 Secondary data

The first data set to be analysed is a statistical comparison between student groups at Regent's University London. Data of BAIB and BAGM students is compared on various measures.

To distinguish the two groups, it is noteworthy that BAIB students have a compulsory two-semester long (one year) study abroad element in their program, whereas BAGM students have the option to go abroad for one semester. The partner universities students can choose also include universities outside of Europe, and as a result, the data analysis yields results that are applicable to student mobility in general, as opposed to only being applicable to ERASMUS. BAIB students must complete at least one compulsory language component, and fittingly, at least one of their study abroad semesters must be in that language. BAGM students, on the other hand, do not have a language component. BAIB students also have a compulsory thirty weeks of internships to complete. BAGM and BAIB share many courses and the degrees are academically similar, with the difference being that the BAIB program is seven semesters long (3.5 years), whereas the BAGM program takes six semesters (three years).

It was expected that businesses looking for language-educated graduates would naturally choose BAIB graduates, who gain up to two new languages and have international experience by the time

they graduate. Interestingly, there are some differences in Mobility Rate between BAIB and BAGM students. BAIB students are 1.6 times more likely to be mobile post-graduation than BAGM students, indicating that BAGM students are more likely to return to their home country than BAIB students if that home country was not the United Kingdom. 63% of BAIB students are mobile post-graduation, whereas only 38% of BAGM students are mobile post-graduation.

BAGM students appear less likely to work after graduation, but, confusingly, more likely to find employment requiring a university degree – this is suggested by the lower Graduate Employment Rate of BAIB students. 51% of BAGM students are working post-graduation, compared to 67% of BAIB students, while the BAGM Graduate Employment Rate is 82% compared to 68% for BAIB. This difference, which suggests that BAGM students are more likely to find skilled work, is countered by claims made by some scholars – arguably, formerly mobile students are statistically more likely to be employable after graduation (Di Pietro, 2013). Interestingly, Brooks et al (2012) claim that students may feel their job search is impeded by being mobile; it is argued that mobile students are less able to establish business contacts and build work experience. This conclusion is not entirely applicable to this research problem, as BAIB students also have a compulsory work experience component in their program.

A way to explain the difference in Working and Graduate Employment Rate may be found when looking at the propensity of students to continue studying. Notably, BAGM students are twice as likely to continue studying as BAIB students are (36% for BAGM and 18% for BAIB). This difference is significant enough to suggest that the additional components of the BAIB program, the internships, the language and study abroad, could have an impact on students' outlook after graduation. It is possible that BAIB students feel more ready for the workplace than BAGM students, likely due to increased confidence or their past work experience.

Interestingly, BAGM students have a higher average salary than BAIB students, despite the additional program components of BAIB students and their respectively greater experience. It is uncertain whether the estimates include students who have completed a postgraduate degree, and if postgraduate students were included, it is possible that the BAGM students who went on to do a postgraduate degree skew the estimate in their program's favour. On the other hand, if the estimate includes only students with an undergraduate degree, it could be argued that the BAIB program, with its elements of study abroad semesters and work experience requirements, gives students no concrete benefits in their later careers. Interestingly, however, this potential implication of the research is contradicted by multiple scholars in section 2 and also by every interviewee and most survey respondents. It is therefore prudent to assume that the Average Salary estimates include students from both programs who have a postgraduate degree.

BAGM students are also more than twice as likely to be unemployed than BAIB students are (9% for BAGM and 4% for BAIB). It is possible to suggest, due to the minimal differences between the programs, that BAGM students, if unable to find employment (graduate or not), and choosing not to continue studying, are less employable than BAIB students; this supports the notion that student mobility enhances employability and leads to career benefits.

In summary, there are some critical observations to be made about the differences between BAGM and BAIB students; regarding the actual employability of BAIB students, it is questionable whether business are in fact looking for the skills exhibited by BAIB students, who should arguably have skills that employers need. In the following sections, some critical analysis regarding students' perception of their own employability and employers' needs in connection to employability will be conducted.

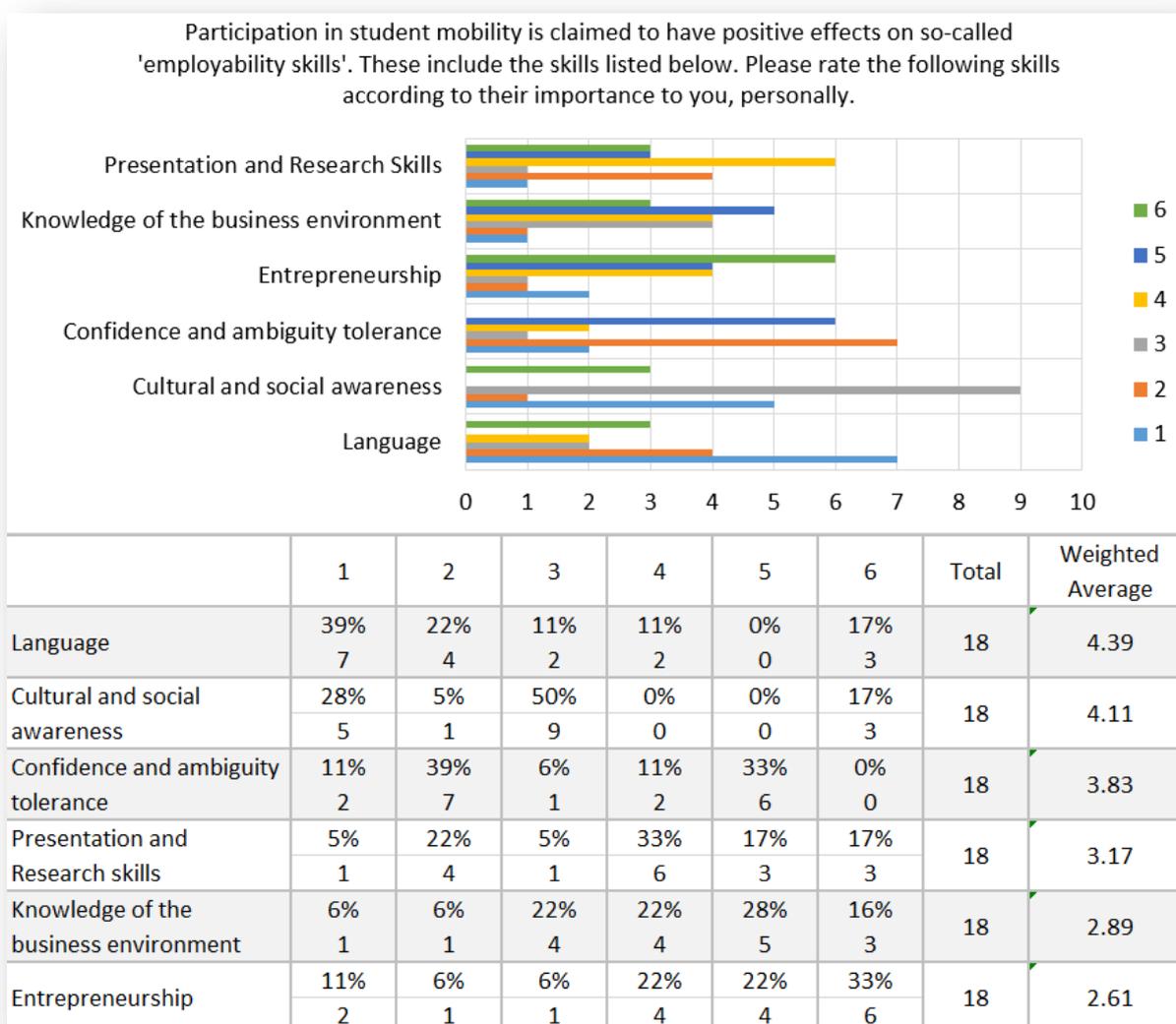
## **4.2 Quantitative data**

There were 23 respondents to the survey, which was lower than expected and has impaired the validity of the survey data. To put the data obtained through the survey into perspective, Di Pietro (2013) offers some insight into study abroad effects on Italian graduates' employability. Using a much larger sample of 33,015 Italian graduates, Di Pietro (2013) suggests that graduates are statistically more likely to find employment after graduating. This suggestion is contrary to the data discussed in

section 4.1, where BAIB students are in fact less likely to find graduate level employment. However, Di Pietro (2013) also argues that employers prefer mobile graduates to graduates without the mobility experience, reinforcing claims made by the SME interviewee and the IPO interviewee in section 4.3. Although Di Pietro (2013) does not specifically discuss language skills, soft skills such as confidence and interpersonal skills are a significant advantage of mobile graduates over non-mobile graduates.

This is indeed reflected by both survey and interview data. Interestingly, survey respondents rated Language, together with Confidence and Ambiguity Tolerance as the two top priorities for them regarding employability skills that are developed through student mobility. Di Pietro (2013) concludes his research with the argument that mobile graduates are 24% more likely to be employed than non-mobile graduates. This claim is not reflected in the data from section 4.1, and cannot be deduced from either survey data or interviews. While Di Pietro’s (2013) research focuses on a limited sample of Italian graduates in 2004, some of his arguments are supported by data found in this study, which concerns UK students.

Regarding the survey, as illustrated in Figure 2, respondents are generally in favour of the claim that student mobility enhances employability skills. This, however, is most likely due to the fact that the majority of respondents have taken part in student mobility. Even more notable than students favouring student mobility as a way of developing employability is their rating of various employability skills, as developed through student mobility.



**Figure 2: Survey responses to Question 9 and weighted averages using Likert scale: 6 points for 1, 5 points for 2, 4 points for 3, etc.**

As outlined in Figure 2, respondents generally placed Language as their top priority, with Cultural and Social Awareness and Confidence and Ambiguity Tolerance on second and third place, respectively. Figure 2 shows a clear picture of the rankings that respondents chose. It is clear from the percentage of respondents who put Language most frequently in first place, Confidence and Ambiguity Tolerance in second place and Cultural and Social awareness in third place, that students recognise the importance of these skills in particular. Interestingly, each of these is, according to the interviewees, critically important.

It is clear from the above that the supposed 'disconnect' between employers' needs and graduates' skills is not as large as claimed by Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) and Ahn (2014).

### 4.3 Qualitative data

To formulate a comprehensive answer to the research question and evaluate the data's validity, the interview data is compared to information gathered from section 2 and sections 4.1 and 4.2.

The senior employee of CBR argued that businesses are looking particularly for language skills, and that these are developed through student mobility. Claiming that student mobility develops language capabilities to a greater extent than language classes, the CBR-interviewee also argued that employers care less about 'soft' skills than about language. Furthermore, employers give little or no importance to how language skills were developed; businesses do not differentiate between native speakers and former student exchange participants. This argument is supported by the survey data. Most survey respondents placed Language as the first priority for student mobility participants. Interestingly, Confidence and Ambiguity Tolerance was overwhelmingly placed second, supporting an argument made by the senior employee of CBR at RUL, which is that self-confidence and ambiguity tolerance are developed through student mobility. The argument regarding the relative lack of importance given to the origin of language skills is also supported by scholars in section 2: employers are not looking specifically for skills exhibited by former student mobility participants (Proding et al, 2012a).

It is clear from the above that student mobility is less important to employers than previously suggested (Brandenburg et al, 2014). Employers are not looking specifically for people exhibiting flexibility, self-confidence and cultural awareness; it is safe to assume that employers want graduates to display these qualities, although they are not defining aspects of employability. Furthermore, the claims made by the CBR-interviewee indicate that mobility is not as important in the development of a highly-skilled workforce as previously claimed (Rodriguez Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza and Mariel, 2014; Tholen, 2014).

To relate this observation to the research question, the ERASMUS program plays a relatively minor part in developing concrete skills needed in the workplace; skills other than language do not contribute actively to organisational management. This line of argument is contrary to claims made by the SME-interviewee and the IPO-interviewee in their respective interviews.

The arguments made by the senior employee of the CBR department at RUL can be put into perspective using academic literature. The claims echo Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) in arguing that employers look more specifically for language skills than any other specific employability skill developed through student mobility. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) suggest that employability skills as a list of skills are in fact relatively unimportant to employers. Instead, honesty and integrity are valued more highly. Interestingly, at no point in the interview did the CBR-interviewee suggest that honesty and integrity were as critically important as language, although his interview did not focus on soft skills. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) base their claims on one hundred surveys and twenty interviews of one hundred employers of various sizes, concluding that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to employability is flawed. This is somewhat at odds with the interview, in which it was suggested that language is universally important. It should be noted that Hinchliffe and Jolly's (2011) research is geographically limited to East Anglia, whereas the senior employee of CBR at RUL deals with international

employers in various regions. This indicates that language may not be as important to employers in the UK as it is to international employers.

The director of the SME provided a unique insight into how exactly ex-ERASMUS students benefit businesses. Similarly to the IPO-interviewee, the SME-interviewee expressed an overwhelmingly positive view of ex-ERASMUS student; ex-ERASMUS students were more independent, mature and 'outward-looking' for their age than their non-mobile peers.

Similarly to the senior employee of the CBR, the director of the SME cites language as an important advantage of ex-ERASMUS students; this is also supported by the IPO-interviewee. For example, a graduates' German language skill allowed the SME to communicate more effectively with a German partner. However, it was suggested that cultural awareness and understanding, not language, are the most important benefits to businesses that ex-ERASMUS students can provide.

Overall, the interview conducted with the director of the SME suggests that businesses in general accept that there are benefits of employing ex-ERASMUS students, and that these in particular include language skill and cultural understanding.

The IPO-interviewee provided some information on the general purpose, history and effects of the ERASMUS program. Interestingly, it was argued that the purpose of the ERASMUS program has fundamentally shifted since the program's launch in 1987 (Wochowska, 2015). The IPO-interviewee elaborated on the history of the ERASMUS program, stating that it was originally intended to promote closer cultural integration and encourage communication; later, staff mobility and student placements were included. In the early 2000s, when unemployment was high in certain parts of Europe, the rationale behind expanding the ERASMUS program was that high unemployment in some areas could be countered by mobile graduates.

Although the IPO-interviewee conceded that the formation of a common cultural platform has not been entirely successful, she maintained that the ERASMUS program has proven effective in developing flexibility, ambiguity tolerance, courage and self-confidence; this claim is supported by multiple authors, survey answers, and the other interviewees.

Interestingly, the IPO-interviewee used an article by Brandenburg et al (2014) to support her arguments. According to it, the ERASMUS program drastically enhances existing 'employability skills' and also develops new skills. Introducing so-called 'Monitoring Exchange Mobility Outcomes' ('MEMO') skills, which include a list of skills whose nature is somewhat ambiguous – vigour, curiosity and decisiveness are among them, Brandenburg et al (2014) offer a Europe-wide study of students, HEIs and employers, encompassing approximately 80,000 individual responses to the authors' multi-method research approach. Due to its commissioned nature, the article's results should be viewed critically; however, the conclusions made by Brandenburg et al (2014) are based on comprehensive research, and some of their results are reflected in survey responses of this research. Similarly to several survey respondents, who argue that they do not yet have an indication of the effects of participating in the ERASMUS program on their later careers, Brandenburg et al (2014) offer no indication as to how exactly the 'MEMO' factors could impact graduates' careers.

Another article was cited in support of the arguments made by the IPO-interviewee. Mellors-Bourne et al (2015), who adopt a positive view of student mobility and its effects, were used by the IPO-interviewee to support the argument that student mobility develops employability, and leads to higher salaries in graduates' later careers – this claim is not denounced by data in section 4.1. The claims were further supported through the use of documents from a conference about international student mobility held at RUL earlier in 2015 (IPO, 2015).

There are some similarities between the opinions expressed by the interviewees. The interviews are overall clearly in support of not only student exchange in general, but the ERASMUS program especially. It is suggested in all three interviews that students who participate in student exchange, and particularly students who participate in the ERASMUS program, are more employable and hold

skills desirable to employers that are not normally found in non-mobile students. In this, the interviewees agree with some of the literature laid out in section 2, particularly in section 2.1.

However, the varying interviewees disagree on exactly what skills are desirable by employers and how useful these respective skills are to employers. Although the CBR-interviewee claimed that language was the only measurable skill, the IPO-interviewee and the SME-interviewee indicate that other skills play an even more important role in developing employability, and in helping graduates find employment. The argument that certain 'MEMO' skills are drastically enhanced among mobile students, that mobile students are statistically more likely to find employment and better employment than their non-mobile peers (Brandenburg et al, 2014; Di Pietro, 2013) is potentially false, according to the CBR-interviewee. In this, his perspective is in stark contrast to the perspective adopted by the IPO-interviewee, who cites the article by Brandenburg et al (2014) as well as several press releases to illustrate the exact argument that the CBR-interviewee opposes (EC, 2015; European Commission, 2014; Tucker, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

The data has not been entirely clear on what the precise benefits of employing ex-ERASMUS students are. Data that could be collected was sometimes limited and frequently contradicted academic literature or other data. There is some difficulty in assessing the benefits of the ERASMUS program concerning businesses, as many of the benefits to students are intangible. 'Soft skills' are not easily measured, and the scope and aim of this research dissertation did not include quantifying to what extent participants develop certain skills. Furthermore, some skills may develop differently in different individuals, creating additional difficulties in measuring the ERASMUS program's ability to develop these skills. However, it is possible to, in general terms, answer the research question introduced in section 1, whether graduates' language employability skills in the context of ERASMUS experiences are important. Generally, the answer to the research question is yes.

Business view language skills as highly important. This has become apparent primarily through the interviews. Claims made by the interviewees indicate that businesses look specifically for graduates with language skills. Although two interviewees articulated this need as one filled specifically by the ERASMUS program, the CBR-interviewee argued that businesses place relatively little emphasis on the origin of graduates' language skills. The survey data also supports this conclusion. Students frequently named language as the most important skill learned through student mobility. This indicates that students are aware of business needs regarding language skills, contradicting claims made in section 2.

Although it is not certain whether language skills are indeed the only concrete skills required by businesses, the research suggests that language is universally recognised by students, HEIs, and businesses as critically important. The secondary data set has shown a propensity for students with additional language skills to go abroad after graduation; although this implies that language skills may be important to students, it does not necessarily indicate that businesses abroad recognise these language skills.

In light of the continuing process of European integration, it is considered unlikely that the trend for graduates to need certain skills to compete in the labour market is going to cease. In aggregate, possessing employability skills is likely to have a significant impact on graduates' careers. It is one of the primary purposes and effects of the ERASMUS program to develop employability (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al, 2011).

Following on from the research aim and objectives introduced in section 1, the aim and each objective have been completed comprehensively through the survey and interviews, as well as the literature review in section 2. The answer to research objective (1) is therefore that student mobility enhances language employability significantly, and that relatively little emphasis is placed on how language skills were acquired. The literature suggested that the needs of businesses are frequently left

unmet by graduates. Research objective (2) was completed primarily through the interview of the director of the SME. The interview established that language skills were a specific benefit, suggesting also that other benefits include cultural and social awareness, confidence and language skills. Research objective (3) was completed comprehensively through the interviews with the CBR-interviewee and the SME-interviewee. Literature discussed in section 2 claims that HEIs do not prepare students adequately for the workplace, and that therefore businesses struggle to find appropriately skilled graduates.

It should be noted that the relative lack of other data to complete research objective (2) limits the validity of the claim that employing ex-ERASMUS students does indeed benefit SMEs in particular. Although the SME-interviewee answered an emphatic yes on this issue, the sample was too small to provide a representation of SMEs in general. This limitation is reflected in the recommendations.

The literature review presented in section 2 questioned the relationship between employability and student mobility. The implications to be drawn out of section 2 are that student mobility in general does enhance graduate employability, although there is some debate on the development of employability. The literature discussed also suggested that businesses' needs are not always met by graduates' skills. Students indicated that Confidence and Ambiguity Tolerance were highly important skills, frequently placing this second in rankings behind Language. This finding was reflected by the IPO-interviewee and the CBR-interviewee, who suggested that participation in mobility fundamentally changes students' outlook. This claim was also supported by the secondary data set; BAIB students were significantly more likely to continue being mobile than BAGM students were.

Interestingly, several academic literature sources discussed cultural tolerance as an effect of the ERASMUS program, and claimed that the ERASMUS program failed to develop any significant level of cultural understanding (Sigalas, 2008). While this claim was discounted by other academic writers (Yücelsin-Tas, 2013; Unlu, 2015), cultural competence appeared to be less important for interviewees and survey respondents. It should be noted that developing a common cultural platform and promoting a sense of 'European citizenship' was the original purpose of the ERASMUS program; this indicates that the purpose has practically changed.

It should also be noted that the ERASMUS program is still expanding. Interviews indicated that there is a goal to expand ERASMUS participation so that 20% of all students take part in the program by 2020.

## 6. Recommendations

Following on from this initial research, and bearing in mind its research limitations, it is recommended that further research is undertaken to

- Explore why employability skills such as language, confidence and ambiguity tolerance and cultural awareness are important to employers.
- Determine more comprehensively if language developed specifically through student mobility advances graduate careers.

The research suggests that it is important to stress skills such as languages to graduates, regardless of whether they are developed through student mobility or in other ways.

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## Appendix: Survey Questions

The questions posed to every survey respondent are shown below.

1. What institution do/did you study at and what degree do/did you study?
2. What is your age group?
  - Options: 18-20 / 21-24 / 25-27 / 28+
3. What is your sex?
  - Options: Male / Female / Prefer not to say
4. What level do you study at?
  - Options: Undergraduate – first year / Undergraduate – second year / Undergraduate – third year / Undergraduate – fourth year / Postgraduate / No longer study
5. Do you believe that employability skills (confidence, ambiguity tolerance, entrepreneurship, language, presentation and research skills) are developed primarily through student mobility programs or through another way, and if not through student mobility, how?
  - Options: Primarily through student mobility / Primarily NOT through student mobility
  - Comment box
6. Have you or are you currently taking part in a student mobility or student exchange program, ERASMUS or otherwise?
  - Options: Yes / No
7. At what institution and in which country did you take part in student mobility?
8. If you have taken part in student mobility, do you think the experience has been positive, and what effects do you think the experience has had on you?
  - Options: The experience was positive / The experience was negative
  - Comment box
9. Participation in student mobility is claimed to have positive effects on so-called 'employability skills'. These include confidence, cultural and social awareness, knowledge of the business environment, entrepreneurship, presentation and research skills and language. Please rate the following skills according to their importance to you, personally.
  - Language
  - Confidence and ambiguity tolerance
  - Cultural and social awareness
  - Entrepreneurship
  - Knowledge of the business environment
  - Research and Presentation skills
10. The participation of students in student mobility programs enhances employability and has positive effects on students' long-term careers. Do you agree with this statement?
  - Options: Strongly agree / Agree / Agree somewhat / Disagree somewhat / Disagree / Strongly disagree
  - Comment box
11. In the workplace, have you found a direct application of skills you learned while on student mobility? Please elaborate.