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Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Erasmus JOBS

Report T1.6 - Skills needed by employers

14.1.2021

With the support of Erasmus+

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Introduction

The literature study provided in T1.1 Literature Study Through Desk Research was complemented with a qualitative field research amongst employers in order to find out what are the main skills employers look for when hiring young graduates and whether these skills correspond to those offered by Erasmus students and any other students having participated in a mobility programme.

This field research included a survey completed by employers from companies based in Europe, of various sizes as well as different sectors of the economy. The survey was complemented with interviews with HR managers from several industrial companies.

The results of this qualitative analysis will contribute to a mapping of the transversal skills sought for by employers with those gained by Erasmus+ alumni. Furthermore, it will help identify the main competencies young graduates would need to develop further in order to match with employers' needs.

As one of the main stakeholders in benchmarking the skills needed with those gained by Erasmus+ students, the employers' survey will provide essential data for developing the competence profile.



Sizes and sectors of companies surveyed

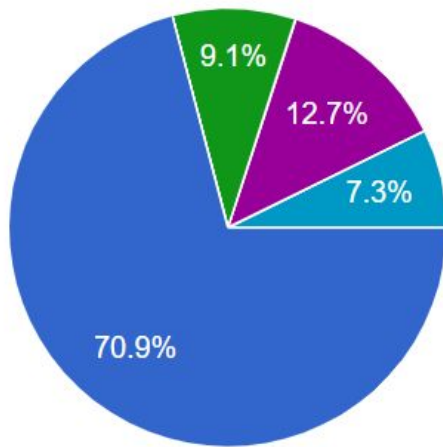
A survey was conducted with 55 companies in order to understand the type of skills companies look for when they hire young recruits. The survey also set out to explore whether the skills gained by young people through their experience abroad on a mobility programme, such as the Erasmus programme, or possibly also whether the skills gained by their active participation in student organisation, gave them an edge on their first job hire.

The survey was completed both online as well as through a series of interviews with HR managers and seniors from 55 companies of various sizes and from various sectors (see graphics below).

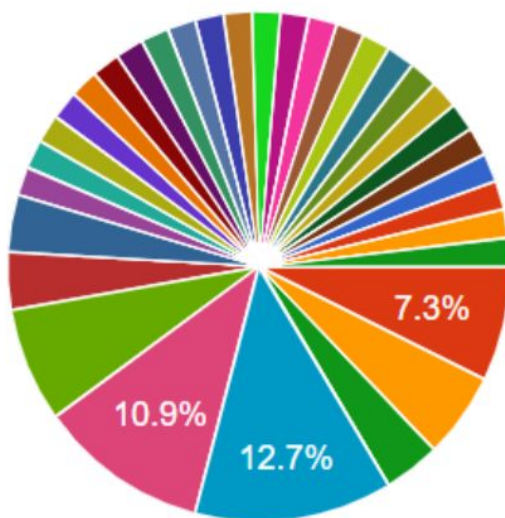
Approximately 70% of the responses came from small companies (with fewer than 50 employees), 13% from small and medium size companies (between 50 and 250 employees), 17% from larger companies based in Europe (with 6% from companies with 250 to 5000 employees and 9% from large companies of over 5000 employees).

These very large companies (over 5000 employees) were mostly industrial companies with headquarters in Europe, members of the EILL (European Institute for Industrial Leadership). These represent a total of approximately 220.000 employees in Europe (see details below).

The graphic below shows the percentages of Small, Medium and Large companies surveyed. The size of the companies was expressed by the number of employees in the companies.



- < 50 employees
- 50 - 250 employees
- 250 - 5000 employees
- > 5000 employees
- 50 - 500 employees
- 500 - 5000 employees



Sectors of companies

- Consulting (Management Consulting) 12,7%
- IT solutions 10,9%
- Chemicals, Plastics & Industrial Gases 7,3%
- Education 7,3%
- Energy, Oil & Gas 5,5%

From the > 250 employees, representing 17% of the responses, the following larger companies were surveyed:



Companies	Number of employees (Europe)	Sector
COVESTRO	17200	plastics company, process industry
MCDERMOTT	70000	construction & maintenance engineering
NESTE	5200	oil & energy
WORLEY	57600	construction & maintenance engineering
AIR LIQUIDE	66000	gas company
MESSER Iberica	5500	gas company
LHOIST	6500	construction
COVESTRO SP	370	plastics company, process industry
TOTAL	228370	



Survey of employers' needs

The survey and interviews of HR managers aimed at identifying the skills which employers look for when they hire young people.

In the first question directly related to skills, employers were asked to name the three main skills they deem most important when they hire a young recruit. This enabled them to express spontaneously the main skills that came to their mind, prior to risking to 'lead' them in their responses through the next question, where we asked them to rate a series of transferable skills we listed ourselves.

They were also asked an **open question relating to the importance (or not) of having had an international experience**, such as an Erasmus experience.

Employers were **then asked to rate skills** that we had listed, based on the hand on the survey carried out in the first phase of the project, with the skills Erasmus+ students believe they have gained through their Erasmus experience, as well as based on the skills identified in the EILL Entrepreneurial skills report.

A question was also asked to understand if these transferable skills were generally considered as **common skills, or if they varied for different sectors or roles** to be fulfilled in the company.

Once information was gathered regarding the competencies needed - whether being skills or attitudes - the survey tried to understand if these **had to be proven or if employers rated the potential of the candidates above their proven capabilities**.

The survey also gathered information regarding the **recruitment processes**.



1. Main skills required by employers

Top three skills required

Question: 'What are the top 3 (soft) skills you look for, when you hire new graduates?'

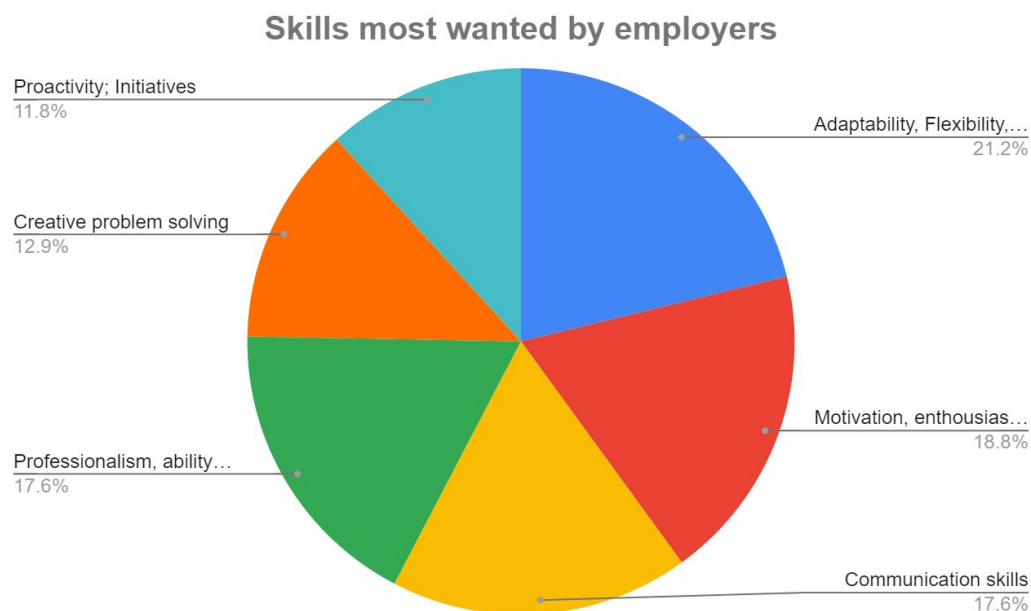
The top three transferable **skills mentioned spontaneously by employers** were in order:

1. Adaptability, Flexibility, Agility (21,2%)
2. Motivation, enthusiasm, passion, positivity, drive, dynamism (18,8%)
3. Communication skills (17,6%) and Professionalism/responsibility/commitment/Work ethic/Ability to deliver (17,6%), both in thirist place

These were then followed by:

4. Creative problem solving (12,9%)
5. Proactivity; Initiatives (11,8%)

Teamworking skills / ability to collaborate and Language skills (particularly English) were also regularly mentioned.





Importance of an International experience

Question: 'Does prior international exposure matter to you when you consider hiring the person? (e.g. Erasmus experience abroad). IF so, what skills do you believe are learnt through such experiences?'

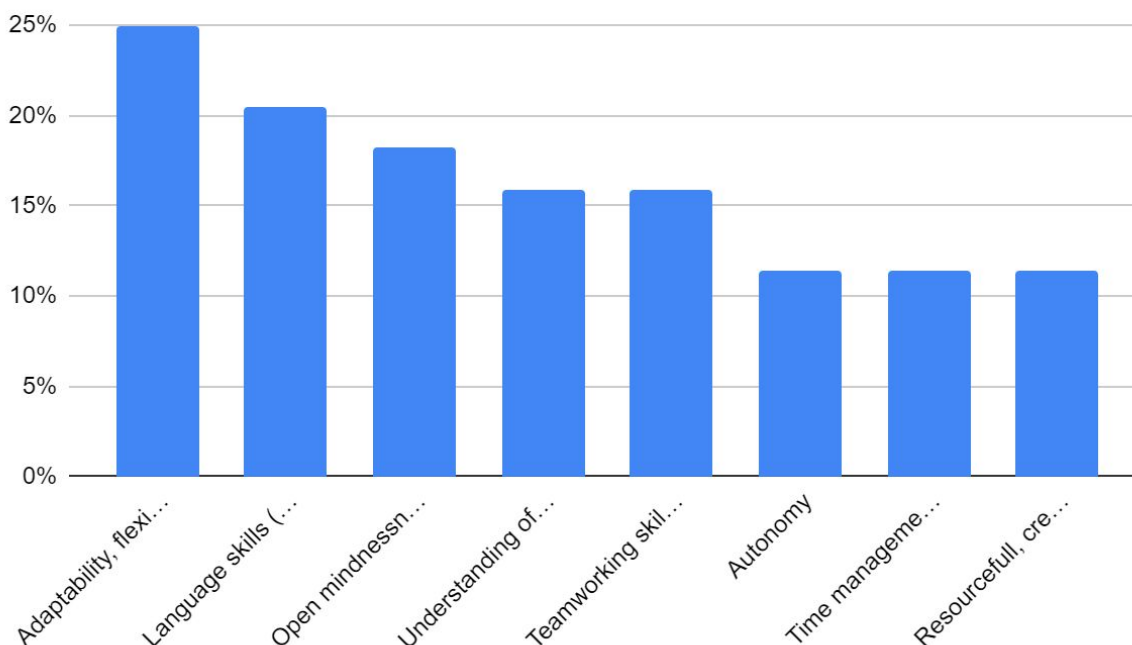
Before asking employers to rate a series of skills we had listed, we wanted to know what employers would say regarding the importance of an international experience, to gain their views as spontaneously as possible.

Out of the 55 companies we surveyed, **80% considered that a prior international experience mattered.**

The main gained that these employers saw were:

Skills Employers believe are gained through International experience

(Out of the 44% of employers who have answered YES)





The main skills identified by employers as being gained through having had an international experience AND as being important to them are:

- Ability to work in multicultural environments/ working with different cultures/teamworking skills: 36%
- Adaptability and flexibility: 25%
- Language skills (English): 25%
- Open mindedness / broader perspective / tolerance: 18%

Here are some of the comments made as to why an international experience can be seen important:

*'Yes, to some extent; it depends on the position. It shows the person is **open minded** and probably **ready to learn new cultures and ways of working**. Has **courage to go out of the one's comfort zone** in a sense' (answer from a large company)*

*'If we are looking to recruit potential leaders, international exposure is high on our list. It indicates a want to experience different cultures and to **not be afraid to try something out of their comfort zone**. **Adapting to different ways of working / living** is important. ' (answer from a large company)*

*'Working in a multicultural environment means you have to **be resourceful**, being able to **confront yourself with different cultures and mindset**. Plus, you can understand how to work in a very proactive way, learning multitasking and having the opportunity to acquire digital skills and confidence.'*

*'Yes. We believe that soft skills like **ability to adapt**, team management, etc, are enhanced with international exposure.'*

*'Yes. **Independent work, self-motivation**, willingness to do great things because it is important for them to learn and develop themselves.'*

'It's good to learn to adapt to different situations and communities.' *'Yes, as it boosts the adaptability and growth mindset'; 'Understanding other cultures, adaptability inside the company';*

*'Yes, it does. People usually learn to be **more independent and are better at taking initiative**.'*



'Language skills, problem solving, group activities.'; 'Definitively, our network is international as our market so are working environment is multicultural, and we consider this a strong value. Thus English proficiency is a strong asset.'

9% had a more neutral position, and 11% did not consider an experience abroad as being important.

The position of the neutral ones were best expressed as :

'Not a deal breaker nor a deal maker'; 'Not a priority, but might help'; or 'Can be. they should have more experience with change and culture'. (answer from a large company)

Conclusions on the importance of international exposure:

A vast majority of the companies surveyed answered positively to this question and saw advantages in skills gained with international experience.

These skills were mainly the **'ability to work in multicultural environments and teams'**, **'adaptability'** and **'language skills'**; these correspond to some of the top-ranked skills which Erasmus students believe they have gained, as indicated in the skills matching table in the conclusions .

We also looked more closely to see if there was a difference in opinions between large corporations and smaller companies. Whilst two amongst the large companies saw merits to an international exposure particularly when it came to having the courage to go out of their comfort zone and adapting to different ways of living/working, three of them did not evaluate international experience prior to hiring as particularly important.

Ranking of skills

Question: 'How important are the skills listed below when you consider hiring a young graduate and if so, can you rate these ?'

After having been asked open questions in previous questions, employers were asked to rank a series of skills we had listed, based on the survey conducted on Erasmus+ students in the first

phase of this project, as well as based on the set of skills identifies as important by both employers and entrepreneurs in EILL ‘entrepreneurial skills report’.

Once the results were collected - and in order to take into consideration the importance given to a skill - a different weight was given if a skill had been ranked for example as ‘mandatory’ vs being considered as ‘important’ by employers.

The following weight was given in order to rank the skills in accordance to the importance they were given by employers; results obtained were multiplied by:

- ‘Mandatory skills’ x 3
- ‘Very important skills’ x 2
- ‘Important skills’ x1
- ‘Not important skills’ x (-2)

The table below shows the **skills ranked as most important by employers**.

Some of these could be considered more as attitudes rather than skills. Nevertheless, they are what employers consider significant when they hire recently graduated people.





Again, an **open-minded personality** and the **ability to adapt to new situations or environments** are amongst the most important characteristics employers look for when it comes to skills or attitudes they consider when evaluating - potential young recruits.

These characteristics also correspond to the top skills employers - who reckon that an international experience is important - valued as important skills gained through a mobility experience. ‘Adaptability’, ‘Ability to work in multicultural environments/ adapting and working with different cultures’ and the ‘open-mindedness’ also came first in the previous question, examining skills gained through a mobility programme (or more generally through an international experience).

‘**Creative problem solving**’, the ‘**ability to learn from experience**’ and ‘**time and self-management**’ also came as very high in the skills needed by employers.

Question: ‘If skills other than those listed above are important when you recruit a young graduate, please list them / comment below’

Only some employers answered this question. Nevertheless, these are worth mentioning as these skills / attitudes were also listed as part of the in the desk research carried out in the first phase of the project.

These were the most mentioned and were mostly related to attitudes:

- Respectful, ethical behavior, honesty and empathy
- Responsible, commitment
- Emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills
- Proactivity, initiative; 'go getter' attitude



2. Common skills required / skills different by sector or role

Question: 'Are the type of skills you require different by sector / discipline, or are there some common skills?'

We also set out to examine whether the competencies which employers had indicated as important when they hired young recruits were different by sector or role they were hiring for or if they were rather common.

A vast majority of 81% considered these competencies as **common**.

'Soft skills are pretty much common, while hard ones can be directly connected to sectors or disciplines'.

Whilst it was also mentioned that some skills set might be dependant on the job role (e.g. commercial role or R&D) as well as dependant on hierarchical levels.

Transferable skills are largely considered as common skills by companies, rather than role specific. However, if looking to hire for very specific roles, companies will be looking for competencies specific for this role (e.g.: chemist degree for a chemist). Generally someone with a scientific degree can more easily move from a scientific first role into other non-science areas (eg finance, marketing, procurement); the opposite is usually not true.

3. Proven or Potential capabilities

Question: 'Do you hire on the basis of Potential capability or Proven capability? Please comment'

Only 13% of employers surveyed requested that capability be proven prior to hiring.

The majority either answered 'Both' (49%) or believed that 'Potential' (38%) capability was most important when hiring young recruits.

All large employers said they hired based on 'potential' capabilities or 'potential and proven' in some cases.



'Potentiality and motivation is emphasized in the recruitment of a young person'. Capability can then be assessed during the internship or first months of hire.

Interviews with some of the larger corporates also showed that **potential is crucial**: they look for people who have challenged themselves outside of their norm but are **robust to new challenges**. Potential capability is seen as important in order to face uncertainty.

By rotating inside the companies in different roles, companies test if the new recruit will be able to fit in the company culture (ex: Air Liquide offers a 3 month rotating programme inside the company; McDermott has a two years rotation programme inside the company).

The emphasis on **Potential competencies is particularly important to larger companies**.

4. Recruitment process

The recruitment process is usually different depending on the size of the company.

Whilst small companies hire through the various channels available, including very much through trusted universities, alumni and student organisations; screening CVs and subsequently interviewing those they have shortlisted themselves, larger companies such as Covestro, the assessment is usually done through external recruitment consultants, short listing best candidates.

For larger companies, after external recruitment consultants have shortlisted the best candidates, the 'shortlist' would normally go through people inside the company looking at CVs and then going through company interviews. Normally two people from the company would be assessing the candidates who have been shortlisted by recruiters to shortlist them further.

After that, candidates would go through a multi-day assessment center, with several people from the company assessing them. They usually look for skills to be demonstrated through some form of Behavioral Event Interview (describing events from the past that can show how they adapted). They often use the STAR interview technique (Situation, Task, Action, Results).

Larger companies would usually also go through a variety of psychological and cognitive assessments.



5. Comparison of top-ranked skills needed vs skills gained

The table below compares the skills most needed by employers with those gained by students having benefited from the experience that a mobility programme such as the Erasmus programme offers.

Survey question - Ranking order	Score	Adaptability, Flexibility, Agility	Motivation, enthusiasm, Passion	Communication skills (17.6%)	Professionalism/responsibility	Creative problem solving (17.2%)	Proactivity; initiatives (11.8%)	Skill non-matched
1. I am more able to adapt to and act in new situations	8	X						
2. I am more open-minded and curious about new challenges	7.9	X						
3. I know better my strengths and weaknesses	7.8		X					
4. See the value of different cultures	7.8			X				
5. Plan and carry out my learning independently	7.8		X					
7. I am more confident and convinced of my abilities	7.7		X					
9. Find solutions in difficult or challenging contexts (problem-solving skills)	7.7					X		
12. I am more able to reach decisions	7.6				X			
13. I am more able to think and analyse information critically	7.6					X		
14. I am more tolerant towards other persons' values and behaviour	7.5			X				
15. Plan and organise tasks and activities	7.5				X			
16. I have increased my sector- or field-specific skills	7.4				X			
17. I am better capable of taking over work tasks with high responsibility after	7.4				X			
18. Think logically and draw conclusions (analytical skills)	7.3					X		
20. Develop an idea and put it into practice	7.2						X	
21. Use the internet, social media and pcs, e.g. For my studies, work and per	7.2			X				
23. Cooperate In Teams	7.1			X				
24. Express Myself Creatively	7.1			X		X		
6. I am more able to cooperate with people from other backgrounds and cu	7.8							X
8. I would like to work in an international context	7.7							X
10. I can easily imagine working abroad at some point in the future	7.6							X
11. I believe that my chances to get a new or better job have increased	7.6							X
19. I am more interested in knowing what happens in the world daily	7.3							X
22. I am more interested in European topics	7.2							X
25. I Have A Clearer Idea About My Professional Career Aspirations And Goal	7							X
26. I Am More Aware Of Social And Political Concepts Like Democracy, Justic	6.9							X
27. I Have Better Opportunities For Traineeships Or Student Jobs In My Hom	6.9							X
28. I Intend To Participate More Actively In Social And Political Life Of My Co	6.8							X
29. I Can Easily Imagine Working In The Country Where I Did My Erasmus+ Pe	6.7							X
30. I Feel More European	6.7							X

The lower part of the table shows a series of answers provided in the Erasmus MobilityTool survey, which are not usable in the skills matching, since they are statements rather than skills gained.



The top part of the table however, clearly highlights that the skills most sought after by employers match widely with skills usually gained by Erasmus students.

These top-ranked skills from the perspective of both employees and Erasmus students are

- Adaptability, Flexibility, Agility (21,2%)
- Motivation, enthusiasm, passion, positivity, drive, dynamism (18,8%)
- Communication skills (17,6%)
- Professionalism/responsibility/commitment/Work ethic/Ability to deliver (17,6%)
- Creative problem solving (12,9%)
- Proactivity; Initiatives (11,8%)

The skills highly ranked by employers in this survey corroborate those underlined as part of those most in demand in a **LinkedIn Survey** [‘The Most In-Demand Hard and Soft Skills of 2020’](#). Amongst these are the ‘adaptability’, ‘creativity’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘emotional intelligence’ which employers have shown they value.

Conclusions

For this survey on employers’ needs, it is clear that companies require/look for people who are sensitive to and can adapt themselves to the different cultures in the different departments, functions and locations of their business.

When it comes to adapting to different cultures’, ‘culture’ should be understood in the wider sense of the word, as further explained by HR managers interviewed. This is particularly valid for large companies - who seek candidates who will be able to **adapt to their ‘company culture’** as well as the **various cultures of team members** they will have to work with, particularly when international positions are involved.

As explained by some of the large corporations during their interviews, when companies look for cultural sensitivity, what they need is the ability of someone to adapt themselves to the different cultures throughout the company from different functions, different departments, different sites and different locations.



Cultural sensitivity is however considered as a 'hygiene' factor. If the candidate doesn't have it, then the person doesn't go further; but having that open-mindedness and ability to adapt to different cultures is also not sufficient.

Young recruits should additionally show **motivation & drive** and should have good **communication skills**. They should show **professionalism**, be **responsible** and **committed**, and they should be **able to deliver**. Moreover, when confronted with difficult situations, they should be able to find **creative solutions**, take **initiatives** and be **proactive**.

These are all skills and attitudes which companies highly value. It is hard for candidates to prove that they possess these capabilities, and according to our survey, companies are happy to bank on 'potential' capabilities. They will be able to assess some of these through their interviews and other assessment tools and larger companies will be able to assess these skills further when 'rotating' young recruits in different departments of their company.

As shown in the comparative table above, the skills gained by Erasmus students are amongst the most valued skills which employers look for.

Similarly, as concluded in EILL 'Entrepreneurs Skills report (2016)' (*), young people actively involved in student organisations during their studies at university (organisations such as ESN, Junior Enterprise Europe, BEST, EYE, ESTIEM and so many other student societies and volunteers organisations) also get the chance to practice and develop some of these skills and should be able to put these skills forward to employers as 'potential' skills gained.

Even though Erasmus students gain a wide breadth of transversal skills through their experience during their mobility programme - and this survey shows these skills are indeed highly valued by employers - these transversal skills and capabilities are usually very poorly presented by Erasmus alumni and this is what this project sets out to remedy.

The results obtained in this Employers Survey and in the Erasmus MobilityTool survey will be tested further in the workshops planned in 2021 with the various stakeholders (employers, students and career officers) and will contribute to developing training material for the stakeholders and provide the contents of the ErasmusJobs platform for a better employable Erasmus+ alumni