INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT - IO2

Development of self-assessment questionnaires

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ERASMUS SKILLS

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1. General Information

1.1. Description and objectives

This document is the Intellectual Output 2 of the ERASMUS + Project titled ERASMUS SKILLS (Project number: *2018-1-ES01-KA203-050439. Erasmus+ Key Action 203 - Cooperation for innovation and the Exchange of good practices; Strategic Partnerships for higher Education*).

The latest annual report on Erasmus+ program mentions that over the last three decades, more than 10 million people have participated in this life-changing mobility experience. Erasmus+ has proved to be "a strong pillar in promoting the full range of knowledge, skills, and competences that help people succeed in the contemporary fast-changing societies, including transversal skills such as creativity, problem-solving, as well as an entrepreneurial mindset". The Erasmus+ programme continues to represent one of the most tangible achievements of the EU: uniting people across our continent, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity (Erasmus Annual Report 2018).

Erasmus Skills Project aims to prepare students before their mobility abroad for pursuing their studies under the Erasmus+ Exchange Program and to help them assess their learning curve before, during and after this mobility experience as well as to better understand the skills developed from this experience. Under IO2, the project attempts to reach the broader potential impact by implementing the student self-assessment questionnaires regarding the learning mobility outcomes in the Erasmus+ mobile App.

The main objectives of this Intellectual Output are to describe the methodology followed and to present the exact steps taken in order to develop the self-assessment questionnaires. Specifically:

- definition of soft skills developed when studying abroad;

- creation of self-assessment questionnaires (before and after mobility);

- validation of the questionnaires – Focus Groups;

- provision of recommendations to students, according to their results of self-assessments;

- update of the self-assessment questionnaires.

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At the end, the final versions of the questionnaires are provided along with their final instructions.

1.2. Responsible partner's contact details

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2. Methodology / Elaboration process

2.1. Definition of soft skills learned while studying abroad

Literature Review for determining the variables of the two questionnaires (before and after mobility)

The first task of this IO was to conduct a desk research – literature review in order to provide both a European-wide and a comparative analysis of:

- the skills developed during an international studying mobility experience;

- the definition of the mobility skills;

- the variables that will be included in the two questionnaires (before and after Erasmus mobility for studies).

The main method followed was a focused literature review on sources (mainly reports and papers) at national and European level about the mobility and intercultural skills. The leader of IO2 has taken into account and as one starting point the literature review and all information gathered in the Guide for Practitioners (IO1) in relation to competences. Additionally, different set of sources, such as explained here, have been used to elaborate the questionnaires for students (before and after mobility) as final outputs of IO2. Namely, 24 documents were reviewed in total, including international, European and national reports and questionnaires on intercultural awareness and intercultural skills and competences.

Skills and competences have multiple definitions, as they are usually the subject of interdisciplinary research conducted by academics, educators, practitioners and researchers of different scientific backgrounds. As Kankaras (2017) mentions "in consequence, there are many terms used to describe skills and their broader conceptual frameworks. Terminology differs across countries, time, research and social contexts. For example, the vast scope of literature on this topic results in tracing/locating terms that have similar meanings, such as 21st century skills, life skills, behavioural skills, non-cognitive skills, youth development assets, workplace or work readiness competencies, social-emotional learning, character skills, personal qualities, strengths or assets (Gates et al., 2015; Lippman et al, 2015). Moreover, the social context shapes the terminology used; for instance, employers usually refer to them as

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soft skills. Even, within particular fields the terminology changes as well; in psychology, the personality psychologists may describe these sub-dimensions as sub-domains, sub-elements, or facets, while developmental psychologists refer to these constructs as assets (developmental assets)".

Lippman et al (2015) define soft skills as a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, to work well with others, to perform well and achieve their goals. They also mention that these skills "*are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational, and academic skills*".

In addition, OECD describes "competence" as not merely a specific skill but as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values successfully applied to face-to-face, virtual or mediated encounters with people (PISA, 2018). In a study conducted on social and emotional skills, OECD (2015) defines social and emotional skills as: "…individual capacities that can be:

-   manifested in consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours,

-   developed through formal and informal learning experiences, and

-   important drivers of socio-economic outcomes throughout individual's life".

The Study includes the following 15 social and emotional skills in the Big Five model domains:

-   task performance: self-control, responsibility, persistence;

-   emotional regulation: stress resistance, emotional control, optimism;

-   engaging with others: energy, assertiveness, sociability;

-   open-mindedness: curiosity, creativity, tolerance;

-   collaboration: empathy, co-operation, trust.

Furthermore, the European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning refers to four cognitive and four non-cognitive skills (personality traits). In specific, the cognitive skills are:

-   communication in mother tongue;

-   communication in foreign languages;

-   mathematical and basic science competencies;

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- digital competencies.

While, non-cognitive skills refer to:

- learning to learn: key elements include self-discipline, perseverance and motivation;

- social and civic competences: key elements include communication skills, tolerance, empathy and coping with stress;

- sense of initiative and leadership: key elements include ability to plan and manage projects, leadership skills, innovation and risk-taking;

- cultural awareness and expression: key elements include appreciation and understanding of various cultural forms of expression of ideas, experiences and emotions.

Researchers of the Competence+ Program, an Erasmus project aiming at developing innovative tools to help participants in mobility programs access the labour market, describe skills as "*the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems*". Skills are classified as hard skills (technical competences), soft skills (aptitudes & personal qualities) and intercultural skills.

On the other hand, competences can be defined as '*the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development*'. It should be noted that competence is not limited to cognitive elements (involving the use of theory, concepts or tacit knowledge); it also encompasses functional aspects (including technical skills) as well as interpersonal attributes (e.g. social or organisational skills) and ethical values. However, the idea of competence remains a 'fuzzy' concept and there are as many definitions as the experts who have been interested in this notion, point out characteristically (Competence + project).

The Council of Europe (2018) defines competence as the "*ability to do something successfully or efficiently*". Competence is understood as having three interlinked dimensions:

- knowledge: refers to all the themes and issues a person knows or needs to know in order to complete his or her work. This is the "cognitive" dimension of competence;

- skills: refers to what a person is able to do or what needs to be able to do in his or her work. This is the "practical" or skills dimension of competence;

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- attitudes and values: refers to the attitudes and values that a person needs to espouse in order to do his or her work effectively.

Surveys suggest that the gains from the exchange period abroad are not merely academic. Personal development, confidence, adaptability, a global mindset and enhanced employability are among the most frequently mentioned benefits from the mobility experience. "Youth on the Move" (2011) showed that among the most important benefits are improved foreign language skills, awareness of another culture, greater ability to adapt to new situations, better interpersonal skills and better academic knowledge.

International researchers and experts in the field, such as Deardoff (2006) define intercultural competence as "*the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions*." Many of the existing definitions come from US and European contexts, with a predominant focus on the individual and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for an individual to be more interculturally competent (Deardorff, 2015).

The components of intercultural competence (McKinnon, 2012) are:

Knowledge

- cultural self- awareness: articulating how one's own culture has shaped one's identity and world view;

- culture specific knowledge: analysing and explaining basic information about other cultures (history, values, politics, economics, communication styles, values, beliefs and practices);

- sociolinguistic awareness: acquiring basic local language skills, articulating differences in verbal/ non-verbal communication and adjusting one's speech to accommodate nationals from other cultures;

- grasp of global issues and trends: explaining the meaning and implications of globalization and relating local issues to global forces.

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Skills

- listening, observing, evaluating: using patience and perseverance to identify and minimize ethnocentrism, seek out cultural clues and meaning;

- analysing, interpreting and relating: seeking out linkages, causality and relationships using comparative techniques of analysis;

- critical thinking: viewing and interpreting the world from another cultural point of view and identifying one's own.

Attitudes

- respect: seeking out other cultures' attributes, value cultural diversity, thinking comparatively and without prejudice about cultural differences;

- openness: suspending criticism of other cultures, investing in collecting 'evidence' of cultural difference, being disposed to be proven wrong;

- curiosity: seeking out intercultural interactions, viewing difference as a learning opportunity, being aware of one's own ignorance;

- discovery: tolerating ambiguity and viewing it as a positive experience, willingness to move beyond one's comfort zone.

In the VALERA study (Professional Value of Erasmus Mobility), conducted by the International Centre for Higher Education Research in 2006, experts – participants mentioned that students developed the following listed competences after an Erasmus studies mobility experience:

- foreign language proficiency;

- intercultural understanding and competences;

- knowledge of other countries;

- preparation for future employment and work;

- academic knowledge and skills.

Also, studying in another country is beneficial for the learning process of students as well as for the growth of various competences such as:

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- acquisition of academic knowledge (theories, methods and basic disciplinary knowledge) in areas of expertise which are not taught in the home country at all or only on a lower level;

- gathering and experiencing field knowledge of the economy, society and culture of the host country of study;

- successful study in fields which are genuinely border-crossing (e.g. International Law);

- learning internationally comparative approaches;

- broadening the mind and improving reflection through contrasting experiences of different countries, different academic cultures, etc.;

- acquisition of international/inter-cultural communication techniques, e.g. foreign languages, inter-cultural communication styles.

Findings from the survey of the former Erasmus Students, showed that ERASMUS students perceive the contribution of this experience to their personal development, reflective thinking and enhancement of specific skills related to study abroad, (i.e. foreign language proficiency and knowledge of the host country) as the highest value of their study abroad experience, while the general academic and professional value is viewed somewhat more cautiously. The researchers selected and asked former Erasmus students to self-asses the following competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) as important elements of their mobility experience:

- field-specific theoretical knowledge;

- field-specific knowledge of methods;

- foreign language proficiency;

- analytical competences;

- problem-solving ability;

- initiative;

- assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence;

- planning, co-ordinating and organising;

- loyalty, integrity;

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- adaptability.

As Engel (2011) notes "the former Erasmus students assessed their competences of adaptability and foreign language proficiency very positively, competences which could well be attributed directly to the study abroad experience". However, they also rate their study field related knowledge and skills in a very positive way. When they were asked to compare their competences upon graduation to the competences of non-Erasmus graduates, they rated themselves substantially better as far as international competences like knowledge of other countries, foreign language proficiency or intercultural understanding are concerned. Students also feel better prepared for future employment and work and to have somewhat improved field specific knowledge and skills. One could argue that the graduates' self-assessment is not the most reliable source for developing a realistic picture of their competences. However, the findings of the employers surveyed in the VALERA study give a similar view. Again, the employers saw former Erasmus students - graduates as substantially superior compared to non-Erasmus graduates regarding their international competences, noting at the same time considerable differences in respect of graduates' soft skills and field-related competences.

The Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study, published in 2014, analyses the effects of mobility on students' employability and competences as well as on HEIs' internationalization. For the first part, a mixed quantitative and qualitative study was conducted. The study focused on six memo factors described as personality traits:

- tolerance of ambiguity: to be tolerant towards other people' culture and attitudes and adaptability to new situations,

- curiosity: openness to new experiences;

- confidence: trust in own competence;

- serenity: awareness of own strengths and weaknesses;

- decisiveness: ability to make decisions;

- vigour: ability to solve problems.

The data were collected using a memo tool, namely a survey-based online tool for assessing study abroad programmes and measuring exchange mobility outcomes of students, created by Che Consult, a German Consulting Company in the field of strategic higher education

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management. The tool measures the following ten factors as important elements of students' international competence:

- curiosity;

- confidence;

- adaptability;

- sociability;

- tolerance;

- decisiveness;

- self-awareness;

- problem-solving;

- self-assessment;

- position-defending.

The methodology followed refers to the collection of data via memo© Mobility Scan. This is a pre-departure and post-return online survey for outgoing and returning students, consisting of facts (who the students are and what they do), perceptions (what the students think) and a psychometric test of ten memo© factors measuring students' personality traits (how students behave and how their personality and mindset change).

Also, Erasmus Impact Study analysed the impact of the mobility on the European identity as well as students; attitudes before and after their Erasmus mobility experience.

The qualitative phase of the study revealed additional skills that participants developed in Erasmus Mobility programs such as awareness of the world, and improvement of interpersonal skills like communication, interaction and adaptation to different people from different cultural backgrounds. Mobility also allowed them to meet interesting people and places, to take part in new experiences and to acquire new perspectives.

In 2016, another publication of the Erasmus Impact Study titled "*A Comparative Analysis of the Effects of Erasmus on the Personality, Skills and Career of students of European Regions and Selected Countries*" shed light on regional differences regarding the impact of the Erasmus+ Programme. Specifically, the study contributed to the identification of regional

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trends in the effects of mobility on employability, skills, careers and social lives of students from Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, another recent Erasmus Impact Study conducted by CHE Consult and ICF Consulting between January 2017 and April 2019, analyses and discusses the findings of 77,000 participants that were released in the executive summary in 2020. According to the literature review, participating in an Erasmus Mobility program may have four main outcomes with a positive effect at an individual/student level:

- improved skills and competences such as foreign language skills, intercultural awareness, interpersonal communication skills, problem solving skills, ICT skills, entrepreneurship skills, leadership skills and learning to learn;

- improved personal and social development including self-confidence, autonomy and adaptability, networking with people/friends from another country;

- improved sense of belonging to the EU and readiness to live in foreign countries (e.g. enhanced openness to other cultures, better knowledge about Europe, improved readiness to work/study/live abroad, intention to move abroad for work/study/live);

- improved employability (employment and career progression prospects, provision of skills and experience by employers).

The same methodology has been followed for obtaining data from learners with the main target group referring to those aiming at an Erasmus+ Mobility experience. Groups of students were surveyed shortly (two weeks or less) before their mobility as well as after their return (E+ POST). Also, for this group, the researchers collected and analysed data of Erasmus+ graduates with and without aa mobility experience. The main findings of this study are summarised below:

- Erasmus+ students gained a better understanding of what they want to do in their future career while abroad. When they return from their mobility period abroad, they re-orient their studies in order to better match their career ambitions;

- students are exposed to new teaching and learning methods during Erasmus and therefore they aim to progress to higher levels of education more than students without a mobility experience;

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- Erasmus+ students improve competences for employment and social cohesion. The vast majority of students reported gains in adaptability, ability to collaborate with people from different cultures, communication skills and problem-solving skills. More than half also stated that they improved their digital skills. Also, Erasmus+ made an impact on their personal development, social engagement and openness to other cultures.

However, the interviews with the participants of the survey during the qualitative phase of the study, provided the researchers with additional factors as students first and foremost perceived the Erasmus mobility as a defining period in their personal and professional development, leading to greater maturity and personal enrichment. Teamwork skills and attributes such as self-confidence and resilience were perceived to have been improved significantly after exchanges, as well as their communication skills, language and presentation skills, interpersonal and intercultural competences, problem-solving skills, planning and organisation skills, critical thinking, openness, creativity, cultural and ethnic tolerance, self-understanding, better understanding of others, responsibility and adaptability (Erasmus Impact Study, 2019).

At an international level, the PISA study published in 2018 assessed students' global competence worldwide. As stated earlier, OECD describes "competence" as not a merely specific skill, but as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values successfully applied to face-to-face, virtual or mediated encounters with people. Regarding global competence, the term is specifically defined as "*the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development*" (PISA, 2018).

The four dimensions of global competence have four inseparable factors: knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. For example, examining a global issue requires knowledge of a particular issue, the skills to transform this awareness into a deeper understanding, and the attitudes and values to reflect on the issue from multiple cultural perspectives.

The assessment process is composed of two parts: a cognitive assessment and a self-reported questionnaire.

The cognitive assessment is designed to evoke the following students' capacities to:

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- critically examine global issues;

- recognize outside influences on perspectives and world views;

- understand how to communicate with others in intercultural contexts;

- identify and compare different courses of action to address global and intercultural issues.

Also, students self-assess and report their knowledge, skills and attitudes of:

- knowledge of global and intercultural issues;

- the level of their linguistic, communication and behaviour skills required to communicate with people in multicultural contexts;

- adaptability;

- empathy and perspective taking;

- to what extent they hold certain attitudes, such as openness and respect for people with different cultural backgrounds;

- global mindset as a sense of 'world citizenship', 'responsibility for others in the world', 'sense of inter-connectedness' and 'global self-efficacy'.

For the scope of our Erasmus Skills Project, during the Kick-off meeting in Madrid, all partners agreed on adopting/following the definition of the Council of Europe on Youth Work Competence Framework and the Social Erasmus Competence Framework.

Taking into consideration all the above, the dimensions and sub-dimensions of soft skills considered in the Erasmus Skills project are:

Knowledge

- knowledge on one's own culture in the global context;

- knowledge about the host/visiting country's culture;

- understanding of global issues, processes, trends, and systems with emphasis on teaching methods and academic environment.

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- ability to acquire, analyse and evaluate information, use cultural references to think critically and solve practical learning problems;

- skills to listen, observe, and relate, as well as communicate and connect with people with other cultural backgrounds;

- capacity to use acquired knowledge to extend one's access to learn the unknown.

Attitudes

- openness to intercultural opportunities;

- tolerance to cultural differences and ambiguity.

All, these are clustered in the following categories for the Erasmus App:

- European identity and global citizenship

- cultural knowledge;

- interaction / social skills;

- curiosity and open attitude;

- discipline awareness;

- communication in different languages;

- adaptability to change;

- teamwork in diverse environments;

- planning and organising.

2.2 Creation of self-assessment questionnaires (before and after mobility)

Based on the literature review and according to what it has been described in the proposal of the project, self-assessment questionnaires were created for students before and after mobility containing questions grouped in 3 dimensions (KSA) and specific elements were described under each category.

- **knowledge**: linguistics, social knowledge, historical knowledge, cultural knowledge, self-awareness, technical sector knowledge, knowledge of educational context;

- **skills**: analytical, problem solving, activity design, teamwork, organizational, communication, language, adaptability;

- **attitudes**: confidence, curiosity, social responsibility, proactivity and engagement, European identity, equality and equity, intercultural understanding.

The Erasmus Skills questionnaires have been designed in the form of short self-assessment instruments for higher education students before and after participating in Erasmus for studies mobility.

Self-reported questionnaires are used frequently in relevant studies as seen in the previous chapter of literature review (Pisa, 2018; EIS, 2014; EIS, 2018; Valera, 2016; etc.) for a variety of reasons. Namely, self-reported questionnaires:

- provide a simple and efficient way to collect information;

- are easy to administer;

- tend to produce consistent results;

- and in many cases provide a remarkably good approximation of objective measures (PISA, 2018).

Self-reported questionnaires ask participants questions about themselves rather than gathering information from another source (Gonyea, 2005). Furthermore, as Kankaras (2017) mentions, "it must be taken into account that research in the social sciences indicates that people tend to react to questionnaires in the intended way and are generally able to describe their typical behaviour accurately".

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Short self-reported instruments reduce the burden on respondents and the feeling of boredom or fatigue, which in turn may decrease the quality of respondents' answers (Burisch, 1984). Short questionnaires may also seem more valid to respondents than longer questionnaires containing numerous items that may seem repetitive. Therefore, short scales are usually defined as those scales containing between one and five items per domain scale (de Vries, 2013).

Nevertheless, self-assessment scales have several drawbacks (Kankaras, 2017):

- misinterpretation/lack of information/memory bias: respondents may answer questions based on the way they interpret them, which may not always correspond to the intended meaning of a question. This may be due to the use of difficult or ambiguous words or formulations, or to respondents' burden or fatigue;

- social desirability bias: represents the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a way that they believe will be viewed favourably by others. This tendency can either lead to "desirable" behaviour being overstated or "undesirable" behaviour being understated;

- response styles: whenever the so-called Likert scales are used – i.e. where respondents are asked to determine their level of agreement with a particular statement, mostly using five answer options from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" – responses are subject to various response-style biases;

- reference bias: denotes a situation in which people from different countries answer the same question using different reference standards. Reference bias is a problem when comparing aggregate data between cultures, but not when comparing individual scores within the same culture;

- measurement equivalence/invariance: in order for results to be comparable across cultures and countries, as well as an absence of reference bias, they need to be measurement equivalent, i.e. they need to measure the same construct or trait in each group. It is not sufficient to accurately translate questions into each local language; the people responding to them must understand them in the same way.

In his article, Gonyea (2015) provides the following recommendations to higher education researchers for designing and creating accurate and validate self-report instruments.

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"Regarding the validity of their self-reported data, researchers should be able to answer yes to the following questions:

Comprehension

-   are questions phrased clearly and comprehensibly?

-   do words and phrases have specific, singular meanings and interpretations?

Retrieval

-   is the information requested known to respondents?

-   do respondents have a base of experience upon which to draw to answer the questions?

-   do questions refer to recent memories and events?

Judgment

-   will respondents believe the questions merit a thoughtful response?

-   are any time limiters (frequency or duration) realistic and unambiguous?

Response

-   are response options complete and appropriate?

-   do response options offer a clear way to report an answer?

-   do questions (or the survey administration process) avoid threatening, embarrassing, or violating the privacy of the respondent?

Gonyea (2005), also provides some recommendations to higher education researchers on the use of self-report instruments such as to use multiple data sources or triangulation, rather than relying solely on self-reported data. For example, self-reported data can be compared alongside student interviews, focus groups, faculty surveys, or transcript analyses. If information from differing sources appears to convey a consistent message, then the trustworthiness of the message is more secure. Directly ask students whether they had any trouble responding to the items on a survey, is another good advice on questionnaire design.

As noted in Pisa Survey (2018) "For socio-emotional skills and attitudes", finding the right method of assessment is arguably more a stumbling block than deciding what to assess. It is practically not possible to define scales for self-reported attitudes and skills that are always

100% valid". Therefore, a strategy adopted in PISA 2018 and other surveys is using and adapting scales that have already been validated in other empirical assessments.

Taking into good consideration all the above, the research group of the Erasmus Project followed the below described methodology/steps for the questionnaires' design:

- designing and pilot –testing a questionnaire and instructions for students before mobility;

- designing and pilot –testing a questionnaire and instructions for students after mobility;

- conducting focus Groups for validating the questionnaires;

- updating the final questionnaires for students before and after mobility, accordingly.

First, a questionnaire for students before mobility was created with questions grouped in three dimensions (KSA) and specific elements were described under each category, in order to provide clarifications (see table 1) The questionnaire was based as much as possible on pre-existing items from relevant surveys. AUTH shared to all partners the bibliographical references for each variable of the questionnaires along with the Likert scale. (see Annex I) Questions/items were formulated in the form of simple statements such as "*I am effective at managing time*" (item assessing students' time management), using a 10-point Likert type response scale, with answers ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 10 (completely agree). All the assessment scales used positively and negatively worded items.

The questionnaires were shared to all partners in order to make comments and suggestions. They were revised several times based on the feedback and discussion among the involved partners.

PILOT TEST OF BEFORE-MOBILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

There was a call for a pre-test procedure. Basic instructions for all partners (UAM and UGent) were created and shared by the leader of IO2 (AUTH), in order to follow the same procedure during pilot test.

The "before questionnaire" was pre-tested with six students of the three Universities before leaving for Erasmus studies and two staff members dealing with competence-based learning. The main objective was to ensure the understanding of all questions and get some insights on how to improve the questionnaire.

The purpose of pretesting the questionnaire was to determine:

- whether the questions as they are worded are well understood by respondents;

- whether the questions have been placed in the best order;

- whether additional or specifying information is needed or whether some questions should be eliminated;

- whether the instructions are adequate.

The main conclusions from this pre-test were the following:

- students asked for instructions of what is knowledge, skill and attitude as they didn't easily recognise difference between the three terms. "*I may feel but I am not capable of...*" mentioned respectively. Also, the definition of each variable (e.g. European identity, adaptability) was unclear and the majority of students asked for specifications or examples in order to understand them better;

- suggestions also were made on several questions that should be shorter or less positive biased. Social desirability bias is a common problem when designing self-reported instruments that measure attitudes towards race, religion, sex, etc (PISA, OECD, Global Competence Framework 2018);

- specifically, for linguistic knowledge, we had to split the question in two parts: for everyday life or for university courses (e.g. a student will go to Germany where courses are taught in English, but she doesn't know German). Students think that language skills are one of the main Erasmus skills that they are going to improve. We had also to consider

whether we would include all the EU speaking languages, however, this would make the questionnaire very long;

- as for the instructions of the questionnaire, it is important to have indications of the Likert scale (e.g. 1=Not at all, 10 = Very Much). Also, it is important to mention that this is a questionnaire referring to students' self-awareness and not a test. Therefore, there are no correct and wrong answers. Yet, the most important element is their self-awareness of how much the respondent will have changed during mobility, if he/she will.

Results were shared among the partners and AUTh summed up all comments and constructed another version of the "before" mobility questionnaire. Decisions were made by all partners on instructions, the Likert scale and the description of variables during TM in Thessaloniki. Based on these, a new version of the questionnaire was constructed.

PILOT TEST OF THE AFTER-MOBILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

The "after questionnaire" was pre-tested with five students after returning from mobility and with two students during mobility. The purpose of this phase was to ensure the understanding of all questions and get some insights on how to improve the questionnaire.

Specific goals of pretesting the questionnaire were to determine:

- whether the questions have been placed in the best order;

- whether additional or specifying information is needed or whether some questions should be eliminated;

- whether the instructions are adequate.

The pilot testing of the after-mobility questionnaire was conducted on face to face basis by experienced – staff members of the three Universities (AUTH, UAM and UGent). Also, feedback was taken via email by the two students of AUTH who had previously participated in the pilot test of the before questionnaire and were still in mobility for Erasmus Studies.

The main conclusions from this pre-test were the following:

- it was difficult for students to recognise difference between knowledge, skills or attitudes, even though it was clearly stated, and the questionnaire had the label of each category

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(KSA) and each variable (e.g. sociolinguistic awareness, technical skills etc). They recommend that clustering questions in competences will be better, as they cannot understand well the difference between knowledge, skills and attitudes;

- some questions were difficult for them to understand the exact meaning or proposed to be rephrased

Students made also some general comments on their cultural aspect of their mobility experience and how this is described or reflected in this questionnaire. They comment that the questionnaire helps in their self-reflection regarding their mobility as for their cultural understanding that there might be positive or negative for their own cultural background. They recognized differences among their previous and new self-perception on openness, readiness to communicate, cooperate and work with people of different background (discipline and/or cultural). For all of these, the majority of them agreed on having the visual results of previous and new entries in order to help them recognise how much they have changed and what actions they should take in order to prove this experience.

Another important dimension was the fact that it was difficult for them to define their European identity, as it has many aspects, but it was more easily understood compared to people of another origin (outside EU). Also, that this mobility experience enhanced their feeling of being citizens of the world, sharing similar values or beliefs with people of another country (within or outside EU).

2.3 Validation of the questionnaires: Focus Groups

In this phase we carried out focus groups in order to validate the questionnaires and get a better insight of the mobility experience of the students regarding their perception for the purpose of the Erasmus mobility program for studies, their motives to join the program, the skills gained or expected to be gained accordingly and recommendations/ suggestions for other students that can help maximize the mobility experience. According to Gonyea (2015), it is important to validate self-report questionnaires with triangulation, such as interviews with the participants, focus groups, experts in the field etc.

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Methodology

The same methodology designed, followed and applied by the consortium. Specific instructions were prepared by AUTH, reviewed and accepted by all partners during the TM in Thessaloniki. Decisions were made by all partners for the target group, the number of students to participate in the focus group, the methodology – face to face, the audio recording, the language (mother tongue) and the questions. The leader of IO2 prepared the observation sheets, placed in a common file for questions where all partners shared their opinions, questionnaires and instructions to be validated during focus groups (See Annex II).

Focus groups were in the form of in-depth, face to face discussions, using participants' mother tongue. Experienced researchers, members of the Erasmus project, facilitated the discussion. Students were encouraged to talk and reflect about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards mobility. The duration of each focus group was approximately 1,5 hours in each group. Focus groups were recorded upon students' approval . Facilitators and assistant facilitators kept notes and used relevant materials (forms, questionnaires etc.). The discussions were transcribed, content analysed and a report with their feedback was prepared, shared to all partners and uploaded in the common folder.

Six focus groups were organized and held by the three Universities that participated in the Erasmus Skills project (UAM, AUTH, UGent), during June 2019. Specifically, in each university two focus groups (with students "before" and "after" mobility) took place.

Characteristics of the participants

In UAM:

- 3 undergraduate students of different discipline, 2 males and 1 female, aged 20-21 years old, participated in the "before" focus group and

- 3 undergraduate students of different disciplines, all female, aged 22-23 years old, participated in the "after" focus group.

In AUTH:

- 5 undergraduate students of different disciplines, 2 males and 3 females, aged 20-23 years old, participated in the "before" focus group. All of them will go for studies, in

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different European countries (Austria, Latvia, Germany, Romania, Belgium). It is the first mobility experience for 3 of them, while the other 2 have previous mobility experience organized by IAESTE.

- 5 final-year undergraduate students of different disciplines, 3 females and 2 males, aged 22 and 23 years old participated in the "after" focus group. All of them spent 4-5 months abroad in different countries (Spain, Portugal, Germany and Finland) and it was their first mobility experience.

In Gent University:

- 3 female master students of different disciplines, aged 21-23 years old, participated in the "before" focus group. Students will go to Finland, Sweden and Austria and 1 of them had previous mobility experience.

- 3 female master students of different disciplines, aged 22-23 years old, participated in the "after" focus group. Students spent 4- 5 months abroad in different European Countries (Italy, Spain, UK). Two of them had experience in research, while one of them had previous mobility experience.

Structure of the focus groups

The focus group process was divided in two sections:

1. Test of the questionnaire "before" or "after" respectively.
2. Discussion among students on the following questions posed by the facilitators:

- What is the purpose of Erasmus? (How do you perceive the purpose of Erasmus?)

- With what purpose did you choose to enjoy an Erasmus grant? How did you decide to join Erasmus for studies? What are your main motives for making this decision?

- Could you define the KSA you expect to gain or gained during your mobility experience?

- In what way do you think this experience will be valuable for your career?

- What support do you think you will need to make the most of this experience?

One additional question was posed to the "before" group:

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- Readiness for the experience - Do you feel well prepared for this mobility experience? In what way?

Two additional questions were posed to the "after" focus group:

- Was your discipline taught differently in your host institution?

- Could you please give some recommendation to students who are going to study abroad under the Erasmus+ program, on how they can maximize their experience?

Results – Conclusions of the focus groups

1. Comments on the questionnaires

Participants in all groups pointed out the following:

The length of the questionnaires is appropriate for its purposes and the instructions are sufficient and clear. They had difficulties in understanding the meaning of several words e.g. (discipline, assumptions, reconcile, tolerant) probably because English is not their mother tongue. Therefore, it was suggested to have a professional English linguistic correction. Also, they suggested that it would be helpful if questions - variables would be formulated in competences rather than KSA's.

Several questions gave rise to discussions. Specifically, those on awareness of own's culture and feeling European. Students in all Universities felt difficult to estimate, using a Likert scale, their awareness or feelings, but they concluded that these were good and important self-reflective questions for the outcomes of their mobility experience.

2. Conclusions from the discussion among students

Purpose of Erasmus program - What is the purpose of Erasmus? How do you perceive the purpose of Erasmus?

Students before going abroad

Students of the "before" focus group mainly described Erasmus for studies as an opportunity for them to obtain intercultural awareness, create a sense of European belonging – common European identity ("United in Diversity" stated characteristically), develop or improve language skills (English and learn new one from the host country), compare different academic

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environments and experience different methods of teaching and conditions as a way of improving their studies. Also, they mentioned the opportunity for personal change as they are expecting to meet new people, experience a different country and exchange ideas. As for their career development, Erasmus for studies will help them be well prepared for working/staying abroad in future.

<u>Students of "after" focus group</u>

The Erasmus programme has several purposes or meanings. Participants in different Universities gave different descriptions. Spanish and Greek students laid more emphasis on the personal implications of the programme than in the academic ones. Students of UGent, mentioned also academic benefits such as (working on thesis, getting lab experience, language skills advancement etc) However, they also mentioned personal growth mostly in terms of living abroad, challenging comfort zone, etc

Although Greek students recognize and acknowledge the European integration as an important goal, it is interesting, that almost all mentioned that they feel less European, after this mobility experience and pay attention more to what distinguishes their own culture (Greek) from the others.

<u>KSAs that they developed/improved - Could you define the KSAs you gained during this mobility experience?</u>

Students of "before" focus groups could recognize just 2 main types of **knowledge** they are expecting to gain: academic knowledge and experiences of new teaching methods in their field of studies and language of the host country. Similar to this, they are expecting to improve social and language skills (e.g. "It will be easier and more comfortable to start a conversation in another language different from mine"). Having the experience of different learning and teaching methods (e.g. project), they think they will become more practical and able to apply the knowledge acquired and put it in practice (e.g. knowing how to work with an application or a new software). Also, they think that they will become more independent. As for the attitudes, by meeting new people, they believe that they will change personally, as well as how others see them.

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Students of "after" focus groups listed several types of knowledge that they had acquired during their mobility experience. Their responses can be grouped in:

a) Social - Political knowledge as they experienced another's country way of life, medical system, history, politics, ecology, feminism, religion etc.

b) Cultural knowledge. Getting in contact with local people of the host country but also with other international students, participants in the focus groups highlighted the cultural knowledge they acquired about their host country and about the home country. They think that Erasmus allowed the internalization of social practices of other cultures. In this process, students compared their own culture (Spanish, Greek, Flemish respectively) with other cultures and they developed a better opinion about their own country/culture.

c) Academic - subject-related knowledge. Students mentioned that they enhanced their academic – scientific knowledge, by experiencing new methods of teaching and, communication and technology integration, gained through the attendance of courses they took during their mobility. However, they specially valued the more practical and applied (less theoretical) learning approach of their host institutions compared to their home universities. Also, some students were surprised about the university degrees' organization, structure and the flexibility when choosing courses in comparison to their own university as well as the facilities and discipline (cleanness, security of campus, respect the public areas and buildings, time frame – schedule of courses). By visiting schools and other organizations they also gained experience about the actual teaching practice (Finland's education system) that helped them understand better that the context plays an important role in the teaching process (you cannot simply transfer a teaching method in the Greek culture context).

d) Language. Students referred to acquiring knowledge of another European language and culture (e.g. Italian, Spanish).

As for the **skills** gained from Erasmus, students agreed that Erasmus mobility is a vital experience that improves both the professional and personal skills. According to students, they developed communication skills, such as expressing their ideas and opinions in another language, interacting with other people and working in groups. After the mobility, they became more self-confident, more extrovert and open in terms of networking, listening and understanding other ideas and opinions. Also, they improved their time management,

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flexibility and organizational skills. Almost all of them agreed that the mobility experience helped their personal development, as they challenged their comfort zone, became more independent and improved their problem-solving skills.

Regarding the **attitudes**, students changed their attitudes, namely by becoming more sensitive, towards specific global issues, such as ecology, environment and feminism. Their attitude towards money changed too: they realize the monetary cost of everything they do and respect and acknowledge the privilege of "free higher education". Also, they became more confident, self-aware of their abilities and specifically of their intercultural understanding and respect of other cultures.

Benefits for professional life - In what way do you think this experience was valuable for your career?

Students of the "before" focus group, said that Erasmus will be valuable for deciding to search for a job or seeking opportunities for research abroad in the future. Also, Erasmus will help them develop skills such as adaptability in a new place, challenge their comfort zone and become independent, be productive and result oriented despite difficulties (e.g. manage to get good grades). Erasmus mobility will be an asset or another qualification and may be considered as an extra work experience compared to someone who didn't have this experience. They believe that their resume would be more interesting to potential employers in their country or abroad (as they show evidence of adaptability and interest to do the maximum with their studies). Furthermore, a foreigner employer may perceive the Erasmus experience as an added value, as (s)he may think that this candidate has been in the country before, so (s)he is familiar with the cultural context.

Participants in the "after" focus groups agreed on the benefits of the Erasmus programme for their personal and professional development. They pointed out benefits such as: adaptability skills, linguistic skills (ability to speaking other languages), teamwork, problem solving, analytical skills, networking and access to new (labour) markets, communication skills such as defending one's opinion, self-confidence, self-acceptance etc. However, some students couldn't recognize a direct impact on their career prospects. They understand that they have gained and developed useful skills (e.g. adaptability, problem solving, broaden their scope regarding the activities related to their career, communication and time management skills)

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but they don't feel that these will be recognized from the local labour market. It may have an indirect positive impact, as they have enhanced their academic interests and, maybe, the experiences gained will help them define better their career goals (e.g. for master studies or new directions towards their specialization). Also, they consider this experience valuable in case they want to continue their career and life abroad.

Was your discipline taught differently in your host institution?

Students of the "after" focus groups in all (3) universities, referred to having experience more flexible programs of studies, more practical and applied learning and teaching approaches as well as career related studies and hands on experience. They highly valued the better organization of the host universities and advanced use of communication and technology. They also made references to different evaluation system and methods, more group assignments and research opportunities.

EXTRA QUESTIONS

BEFORE FOCUS GROUP

Readiness for the experience - Do you feel well prepared for this mobility experience? In what way?

Actually, some students feel insecure regarding their personal abilities to adapt themselves especially because they don't know where they will stay (housing) and whether they will travel on their own or with fellow students. Others are excited and welcome the challenge, especially when they have travelled abroad previously, or they will go in a place with a co-student.

AFTER FOCUS GROUP

Recommendations to future Erasmus students - Could you please give some recommendation to students who are going to study abroad under Erasmus, on how they can maximize their experience?

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Students in the 3 countries agreed that having an "open mind" attitude, trying to meet people of the host country (natives) and other Erasmus students is a good way not only to adapt in the new environment, but also to have a positive experience, advance the language skills and make the most of this mobility experience.

As for more practical recommendations, some of them mentioned how important is to make a conscious choice of the country and the host university, as it affects the quality of teaching learning and the cost of living. On the other hand, they did agreed on recommending enjoying an Erasmus mobility regardless whether someone gets the destination (s)he wanted or not.

Students also recommended future Erasmus students to attend the welcome days at host Universities, as a good way of networking with other Erasmus students and get useful practical help. Another practical suggestion is finding a place to stay near the city or arrange to share a house with other Erasmus students – housemates. Similar, trying to meet native students and avoid being always with other Erasmus students is a good strategy for the improvement of language and social skills.

As for practical – administrative tips are concerned, they would warn the outgoing student that even though the learning agreement is important, once you return in the host institution you can change it. However, they recommend avoid courses with a final test in their evaluation process. Also, paying the necessary attention to the Erasmus paperwork.

<u>Institutional support - What support do you think you should have had to make the most of your mobility experience?</u>

Participants of the "before" focus group mainly requested easier access and communication with the receiving institution (and coordinator/tutor), support for housing and organizing "Welcome Days or week" for Erasmus students as a way to gain information on culture, habits and a good opportunity for networking.

Students of the "after" focus group suggested better communication of the home and host universities, but also gave more concrete ideas of ways for both host and home Universities to support Erasmus students. These can be summarized in:

Home institution	● Make the bureaucratic process as easy as possible.
	● IRO: wide opening hours, updated website with clear information, friendly staff, effective and efficient staff that answers phonecalls and e-mails.

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	• Communication/coordination between the tutors/coordinators of the home and host institutions. • Control of the quality of the tutor/coordinator: list of equivalent subjects in the home and host in other to standardize the criteria applied by coordinators/tutors in learning agreements. • Erasmus grant: the amount of the grant should be closer to the cost of living of the home city. • Network – Platform with former Erasmus Students who share their experience and useful insights of the host universities
Receiving institution	• Information about necessary paperwork and bureaucracy. • Improvement of Digitalization and communication process with administrative staff before mobility and arrangement for housing • Concrete program of studies, flexibility in the evaluation of the Erasmus Students, diminish of recognition problems. • Academic support: There should be a specific guide for courses, in which the bibliography, as well as the demands of the course should be outlined, in order the Erasmus students to be able to know what it is expected on each course. • Language Courses of the local language provided free of charge, obligatory for Erasmus Students, practical and with local students invited to help in the running of the courses • Integration activities: meetings, parties, social events and activities not only with mobility students but also with native students. • ESN or similar structures - Use of Erasmus APP

2.4: Recommendations to students according to their progress self-assessments

Based on the literature review and the results from the focus groups, several concrete recommendations have been prepared by the leader of IO2 (AUTH) that can help students in different phases of their mobility. Recommendations were shared and constructive feedback collected by all partners of the consortium. Based on it and discussion among all partners in Virtual Transnational Meeting, the final recommendations described below, delivered on time to be included in IO3.

<u>**BEFORE MOBILITY**</u>

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The pre-departure phase concerns preparation that can enable students not only to cope better with some of the challenges they will encounter during their time abroad, but also to further develop their mobility skills. This involves linguistic and cultural preparation, practical preparation (housing, passport, etc.) academic preparation (defining and agreeing on learning objectives, searching information about the obligations and choosing courses), and psychological preparation (how to deal with homesickness, isolation, culture shock, etc.).

Linguistic preparation

Having basic comprehension skills of the host country's language can ease student's adaptability as diminishes the feeling of insecurity and helps in daily interaction with local people (EOPPEP, 2012). Also, having good English language skills or the host university's main language of instruction can help in active participation in class and meeting the obligations of coursework.

There are several instruments for language skills testing of English or of the language of the host country that they will go. Students could test themselves, start learning or refresh their foreign language skills via platforms such as **Online Linguistic Support** ([OLS](#)). OLS is a free online language learning platform designed for Erasmus+ participants. It offers online language assessments and a wide variety of flexible courses and other opportunities for improving language skills. Students can use this platform before or during their Erasmus Mobility, at their own time and pace in order to adapt their learning experience to suit their needs. Also, there are some fun games, language challenges and more info on European Languages available at the site of [European Centre of Modern Languages](#). Furthermore, students could attend language courses tailored to their needs organized by their home university and specifically the centre of foreign language (as it has been identified from good practices collected in IO1).

Practical Preparation

- Returned students who participated in our focus group recommend students to make conscious choices of the selecting Universities and the country they are going abroad. Setting concrete learning goals will help when facing challenges. However, even if offered a place that it wasn't their choice, don't have second thoughts of taking part in Erasmus. According to all Erasmus Impact Studies (2014, 2018) and our focus groups participants, it is better to have an experience, than being a non-mobile student.

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- Arranging paperwork such as learning agreement, selection of courses, travel documents etc. can be overwhelming, but thanks to Erasmus App and digitalization of the Erasmus Administration all these may more easily be arranged.

- Get in contact with the IRO department of the Home University, read carefully all the necessary documents, course guides and don't hesitate asking questions politely to the correct source – person responsible for. Collecting valid and accurate information, evaluating the information found and effectively using it in order to accomplish a specific purpose are dimensions of valuable information management skills, that student should and could develop in this phase.

- Meeting former Erasmus students of their own University, who have been previously there, can give an insight of all the procedures they may have to follow. Also, it is a very good source of information as for practical aspects of this University and place, such as, housing, transportation, weather conditions, cost of living etc.

- Meeting international students of the country they are going to go, such as networking with the ESN branch in their Home University can also help. Hanging out with them, not only may help students get useful info for practical issues (cost of life, means of transportation, food, weather etc.), but also become aware of the customs, traditions, learn some things about history, politics etc. that can assist them in gaining a first picture of the place they are going to live for some months.

- Visiting webpages of local and national portals and foremost the webpage of the University and follow the host university's social media; in this way students may become acquainted with the new place and they may also find info for housing, transportation etc.

- Arranging to travel to the city or the country in which they will go beforehand, helps in getting a hands-on experience of the hustle and bustle of the place. Having been there before, minimizes the fear and anxiety of orientation and the time needed for adjustment.

- Watching the videos created in IO3 of the Erasmus Skills project can also help students to learn more on European Integration and history of the Erasmus Program, as well as to get useful advice on how to be well prepared in order to maximize the benefits of the mobility.

Psychological Preparation

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Feeling insecure about this new experience, especially if this is the first time abroad, is normal and expected. Reading some info about culture shock phases, arranging practical issues and keeping a positive attitude towards this new life challenge are good tips on being psychologically prepared.

DURING MOBILITY

Typical challenges for international students who are going abroad to study in another country, result from the cultural change related to the differences in social behaviour, customs, norms, the cost of living, weather, climate and language. Bennet (2002) set light on three different dimensions of culture shock:

- culture surprise is a small thing that is noticeable, such as how the toilets work;

- culture stress is handling the small events in the new culture such as how to wait in lines, crossing lights or cultural rules in social settings;

- culture shock is the overarching larger events such as realising that the ideas of values are different in this new place.

Students need to find appropriate support services to overcome anxiety and fear. Some good recommendations and advice are the following:

- **Give it time...** While culture shock is usually temporary it is common among international students. There may be differences between the ways things are done compared to what the student is used to at home. These include the way people speak and behave, the teaching and learning styles, the food – and other aspects of life. This can be frustrating and disorienting at first, as even something simple like buying a bus ticket can create questions and frustration, and therefore the individual needs to figure out for instance from where can I buy it? (On the bus, from a shop or kiosk?) Do I have to validate it? Does it cover a single trip, or a set period of time?

Eventually one will soon learn the new "rules" to get along, but it may be reassuring to know that it is perfectly normal to find it hard at first. Former Erasmus Students shared the same experience and almost all international students would feel the same. According to research, this might last 1 month. There are 5 stages (Honeymoon, Increased Participation, Crisis Phase,

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Gradual Adjustment – Recovery Phase, Adaptation Phase) described as U-Curve of adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955) that international students usually go through on their time abroad.

Furthermore, no matter how frustrating this experience might be at first, eventually it will help students develop transversal skills such as problem solving, intercultural communication and rising their confidence.

If someone is more interested on this, it might be well to read some info on these links:

- UK Council of International Student Affairs (2018, October 2) Facing culture shock -UK Council of International Student Affairs Retrieved from https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Preparation-and-Arrival/Facing-culture-shock

- Lorent, D., Vanraepenbusch J. , Boscato, G. , Gros, E., Roux, C., Noesen, J., Mayer, K., Hawlizky, S., Jigau, M. (2009) Mobility Advice Interview, Euroguidance Centres of Belgium, France, Luxemburg, Romania, Retrieved from https://www.anefore.lu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/EUROGUIDANCE-MOBILITY-ADVICE1.pdf

- **Seek and Ask for help.** In case, students experience feelings of isolation that are hard to handle and experience difficult situations, it is advisable to seek and reach counselling services offered by the host University. Also, students can talk to their peers and advisor. People are willing to help, if they are being asked to.

Academical Adaptation

- Meet regularly with the study abroad coordinator and ask for advice, info and support on time schedule, program of studies, obligations, exam system etc. The academic advisor is the official representative of the host University to support in the learning mobility experience.

- Set learning goals for your study abroad trip. Having specific learning goals, will help when facing challenges. Write your goals beforehand and try to note down regularly what new things and experiences you have acquired.

- Try to have evidence of your experiences abroad such as collecting reference letters of professors or supervisors of your assignments, photos of presentations that can help

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- Updating your portfolio and be useful as proofs of your experiences.

- Watch the videos created in IO3 in order to get extra tips and advice on how to maximize your studying experience abroad for your career advancement

Linguistic Adaptation

- In order to acquire foreign language skills of the host country, attend language and cultural courses offered by the host University. Learning about the history of the place, the culture and the customs enables intercultural understanding and communication. Put an effort to get to know local people and talk to them in their native language. This is the best way to practice your oral and speaking skills. Even if it is hard in comprehending at first or difficult to express thoughts, eventually your language skills will be improved.

- Accepting any invitation of tasting food, traveling in the country and experiencing the daily life of local people are some of the recommendations that former Erasmus students made. Hanging out with locals helps in advancing cultural knowledge, communication and social skills, as well as in understanding the value of cultural diversity and challenging the attitudes and assumptions of what is considered normal and appropriate in a social context.

AFTER MOBILITY

Psychological Reintegration

- Returned students, especially after a long period of staying abroad, may experience a reverse culture shock and need assistance to reintegrate properly into the home environment that suddenly has become foreign.

- Join workshops or seminars on reflecting on learning experience.

- Networking with ESN and assisting in foreign students' adaptability in your own University can be helpful to adjust oneself smoothly and keep a contact with international experience.

- Be an ambassador of your institution and share your experience with peers.

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- Join alumni networks in the host and home institution to keep relations in a professional level.

- Try to keep contacts with the Erasmus fellow-students and friends via not only personal (Facebook) but also professional (LinkedIn) social media. Writing references, giving endorsements can be a vice versa process and prove profitable for one's career prospects.

Academical Procedures

- Arranging all the paperwork for courses' recognition can be overwhelming. Again, politeness, accurate information and problem-solving skills can help in this process.

- Use correctly, in your mother language, all new field terminology learned while being abroad. Similarly, adapt yourself in the "home etiquette" when writing emails and contacting your professors or supervisors.

"Translate" Erasmus Skills into Career Opportunities

To maximize the Erasmus skills in a beneficial way for your career prospects, it is also advisable to learn how your new set of skills can combine with the needs of the local labour market. According to Predovic & Dennis (2019) "international experiences matter for employers but only if graduates can transform skills acquired into behaviours that are observable and translatable into value-adding workplace performance". Therefore, try to make your research on skills needs and show off your Erasmus Skills in a tangible way for recruiters and employers in your home country. You can take ideas and useful advice by watching the Erasmus Skills webinar titled "Erasmus Skills: discovering the benefits of studying in the EU" and relevant video.

Students may find interesting and useful information for all these aspects if they follow several useful webpages and blogs such as:

- Finnish Center for International Mobility and Think Tank Demos Helsinki (2012) Hidden Competences: International Competence in working life , Finnish National Agency for Education (toolkits for students, materials for teachers, counselors, coordinators, available in English, Finnish, Swedish, Nordic). Retrieved from https://www.oph.fi/en/development/hidden-competences

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- Greek National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications &Vocational Quidance – EOPPEP (2012)– Self-help Tool "Guide for Mobility in Europe for students, higher education students, Young people and anyone else interested in searching opportunities for studies or work" (in Greek); Retrieved from: https://www.eoppep.gr/images/SYEP/BOOKLET_MATHITON_teliko.pdf.

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- Norvaisaite, V. (2016, September 14) 5 things I wish I knew before: Returning to my home country. Retrieved from: https://careerprofessor.works/5-things-wish-knew-returning-home-country/

- Predovic, D. & Dennis, J. (2019) Understanding how international experiences engage employability: A game-based analytics approach in Coelen R. & Gribble C. (edit) Internationalization and Employability in Higher Education (chapter 7)

- Watson, J. & Davey A. (2014) https://www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk. University of Southampton & UK Council for International Students Affairs (available in English)

- ESN ESNblog Retrieved from https://www.esn.org/blog/

3. Results – Creation of Self Awareness Questionnaires

As a result of the pre-tests and focus groups validation processes, the questionnaires were updated. All partners of the consortium reviewed the final questionnaires during the TM in Rotterdam, as well as the final version of the instructions. Taking into consideration their final comments and suggestions, AUTH created and delivered on time the final self-assessment questionnaires and their instructions, to be used in IO3 (see annex III, IV, V, VI).

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Annex I: Bibliographical Justification of each variable

Self Reflection Questionnaire for students Before/After Mobility

		Scale 1-10 1= not at all 5= Average 10= Excellent
Knowledge		
Sociolinguistic Awareness	I have working knowledge of the language spoken in the host country.	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I have working knowledge of the language of instruction of the host university.	European Commission (2014)
Technical skills / Educational context	I have the skills needed in my field of study to properly use information and communication technologies.	European Commission (2014) Tuning Educational Structures in Europe (2003, p. 303).
	I am aware of the newest theories, interpretations, methods and techniques of my discipline.	Social Erasmus Competence Framework Bracht, O., Engel, C., Janson, K., Over, A., Schomburg, H., Teichler, U., (2006). Tuning Educational Structures in Europe (2003)
Self awareness	I have a realistic picture of my strengths and weaknesses.	McKinnon (2012, p.2.) European Commission (2014)
Cultural knowledge	I have a clear sense of my own cultural identity	Bennett (2008), McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I feel comfortable when I encounter differences in race, color, religion, language or ethnicity.	Bennett (2008), McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I am aware of how my culture influences my perception of what is "normal" in behaviors, communication styles or values.	Bennett (2008), McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I am aware of the assumptions that I hold about people of different cultures than my own.	Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society (2015)
Educational context	I am aware of the teaching and educational methods used in the host country.	McKinnon (2012, p.2.), European Commission (2014)
Skills		
Analytical skills	I think logically and draw conclusions	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I am able to gather, analyze and articulate information from different resources in order to solve problems and make decisions.	Ornellas et al, 2018 Haselberger et al, 2012
	I am able to synthetize technical information and to provide analysis with a critical point of view	McKinnon (2012, p.2)

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Problem solving	I am capable of finding solutions in difficult or challenging contexts	Petrova (2010, p. 2), Reid et al. (2010), McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I am able to use logic and reasoning to identify alternative solutions and approaches to problems.	McKinnon (2012, p.2), Lorent et al. (2014)
	In my discipline, I am able to handle problems and think in an original or creative way.	Petrova (2010, p. 2), Reid et al. (2010), McKinnon (2012, p.2)
Creative thinking	I am able to think outside of the box to bring new ideas to solve problems or seek solutions to a particular situation.	Erasmus Impact Study, 2018
	I know how to develop an idea and put it into practice	Erasmus Impact Study, 2018
Team work	I am able to like to work collaboratively in teams	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I can work easily in intercultural groups	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I am able to interact with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I feel confident in expressing my opinion in a group	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I am able to work together with people from a different scientific discipline	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
Organizational skills	I am able to plan and organize tasks and activities	Evrard and Bergstein (2016) Ornellas et al, 2018
	I am effective at managing time	Evrard and Bergstein (2016) Ornellas et al, 2018
	I am capable of setting priorities	Evrard and Bergstein (2016)
	I am capable of keeping deadlines	Ornellas et al, 2018
Communication skills	I can express myself creatively	Reid et al. (2010), Evrard and Bergstein (2016)
	I feel confident enough to ask for advice from people that I don't know	Reid et al. (2010), Evrard and Bergstein (2016)
	I can understand well nonverbal communication and gestures.	Reid et al. (2010), Evrard and Bergstein (2016)
	I am able to (effectively) communicate my ideas in intercultural social environments	Reid et al. (2010) McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I feel confident about giving a presentation in a language different from my mother tongue.	Reid et al. (2010), Evrard and Bergstein (2016)
Negotiation skills	When different opinions are arising in a group, I am able to reconcile.	Keeley (2014)
Language skills	I am able to communicate my ideas and thoughts to people from other cultures	Reid et al. (2010), Evrard and Bergstein (2016)
	I can explain clearly to local people of the host country what I need and why I need it.	Reid et al (2010)
	I do not let my language level hold me back from speaking with people	Reid et al. (2010), McKinnon (2012, p.2)

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Adaptability	I am able to adapt to and act in new environments	Petrova (2010, p. 2), Reid et al. (2010)
	I handle well lack of security	Reid et al, 2010
	It is easy for me to deal with unexpected events.	Reid et al, 2010
Attitudes		
Confidence	I feel confident in working with intercultural teams	McKinnon (2012, p.2)
	I feel prepared to enter the labour market	Petrova (2010, p.2), Reid et al. (2010), Keeley (2014)
Open Mindedness	I try to keep an open mind regarding new challenges	McKinnon (2012, p.2), Lorent et al. (2014)
	I am ready to live abroad and learn new things	McKinnon (2012, p.2), Lorent et al. (2014)
Proactivity and Engagement	I am interested in knowing what happens in the world daily	McKinnon (2012, p.2), Lorent et al. (2014)
	I am ready to reexamine the way I think and act	Lorent et al (2014), EuroGuidance.
European identity	I am interested in European topics (politics, economy, cultural, education etc)	European Commission (2014, p.129)
	I feel European	European Commission (2014, p.129)
Equality & equity	I am tolerant towards other persons' values and behavior.	Petrova (2010, p.2), Deardorff (2004)
	I respect the views and the thoughts of others even if they are significantly different from mine	Petrova (2010, p.2), Deardorff (2004)
	I respect and follow the principle of equality in humanity.	Petrova (2010, p.2), Deardorff (2004)
Transcultural understanding	I put effort in meeting new people.	Deardorff (2004), McKinnon (2012, p.2), Keeley (2014), Center for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (s.f., p.1)
	I enjoy meeting and cooperating with people from different cultural background	Deardorff (2004), McKinnon (2012, p.2), Keeley (2014), Center for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (s.f., p.1)
	I accept that today's globalized societies are characterized by diversity	Mc Kinnon (2012)
	I see the value of interacting with different cultures	Deardorff (2004), McKinnon (2012, p.2), Keeley (2014), Center for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (s.f., p.1)

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Annex II: Focus Group Methodology followed during the focus groups to validate the self-assessment questionnaires

Designing and Conducting Focus Groups

Objectives

- to discuss the findings from the first phase of the study on the skills selected and the description of the variables;
- to produce recommendations to students on how to maximize their mobility soft-skill learning curve (giving examples of concrete results and evidence for future reference to employers);
- to validate the designed questionnaires, at the end of the session.

Characteristics of Focus Group Interviews

Participants

- 5 to 10 people per group, 6-8 preferred (mixed as for discipline, sex, etc);
- Similar types of people (students before / after mobility);
- Consent form - clear privacy and confidentiality statements on how the data they provided will be stored and used within the project.

Methodology

- Face to face discussion;
- Language (mother tongue for UAM and AUTH students, English for UGent);
- Focus groups will be recorded. Transcription won't be necessary.

Environment

- Comfortable;
- Circle seating;
- Digitally Recorded.

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The Research Team

a. Moderator

Main mission: To conduct and maintain the discussion facilitating group interactions

- Skilful in group discussions;
- Uses pre-determined questions;
- Establishes a permissive environment.

b. Recorder / Rapporteur (Assistant Moderator) Skills

Main Mission: To sum up and present daily the most significant topics resulting from discussions.

- Help with equipment & refreshments;
- Arrange the room;
- Welcome participants as they arrive;
- Sit in designated location;
- Take notes throughout the discussion;
- Operate recording equipment;
- Do not participate in the discussion;
- Ask questions when invited;
- Give an oral summary;
- Debrief with moderator;
- Give feedback on analysis and reports.

Conducting a Focus Group (useful info)

1. Establish a welcoming and open environment with some basic ground rules:

- Emphasize there are no right or wrong answers to the questions;
- Ask participants to listen respectfully to each response;
- Have all attendees turn off cell phones;
- Require that only one person speak at a time.

2. Role of Moderator:

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- Facilitate the conversation;
- Present questions in a conversational style, one at a time, and allow processing time if needed;
- Probe deeper into responses by providing appropriate prompts;
- Manage the conversation to encourage equal time for all participants.

3. Role of Recorder:

- Record focus group basics such as date, time, topic, and number of participants;
- Briefly summarize responses including both positive and negative points of view;
- Capture interesting quotes and note non-verbal communication that may be useful;
- Assist the moderator in monitoring time;

Questions that Yield Powerful Information

Use open-ended questions

✓ **Questions for the focus groups on the "before questionnaire"**

1. What is the purpose of Erasmus? (How do you perceive the purpose of Erasmus?
2. With what purpose did you choose to enjoy an Erasmus grant?
3. How did you decide to join Erasmus for studies? What are your main motives for making this decision?
4. Could you define the KSA you expect to gain during your mobility experience?
5. In what way(s) do you think this experience will be valuable for your career?
6. What support do you think you will need to make the most of this experience?
7. Do you feel well prepared for this mobility experience? In what way(s)?

✓ **Questions for the focus groups on the "after questionnaire"**

1. What is the purpose of Erasmus? How do you perceive the purpose of Erasmus?
2. Could you define the KSAs you gained during this mobility experience?
3. Was your discipline taught differently in your host institution?
4. In what way(s) do you think this experience was valuable for your career?
5. Could you please give some recommendation to students who are going to study abroad under Erasmus, on how they can maximize their experience?

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6. What support do you think you should have had to make the most of your mobility experience?

<u>Be cautious of phrases such as "how satisfied" or "to what extent"</u>

✓ **Avoid dichotomous questions**

These questions can be answered with a "yes" or "no".

✓ **Why? is rarely asked**

Instead ask about attributes and/or influences. Attributes are characteristics or features of the topic, while influences are things that prompt or cause action.

✓ **Use "think back" questions.**

Take people back to an experience and not forward to the future

✓ **Use different types of questions**

Identify potential questions

<u>Five Types of Questions</u>

1. Opening Questions (round robin);

2. Introductory Questions;

3. Transition Questions;

4. Key Questions;

5. Ending Questions.

✓ **Use questions that get participants involved**

Use reflection, examples, choices, rating scales, drawings, etc.

✓ **Focus the questions**

Sequence that goes from general to specific.

✓ **Be cautious of serendipitous questions**

Save them for the end of the discussion.

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Don'ts

- Expect the group to reach consensus to the topic;
- Express judgement when moderating the group;
- Ask yes or no questions.

Analysis and Reporting

- Systematic analysis
- Verifiable procedures
- Appropriate reporting

Source:

Krueger, R. & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (4th Edition). Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

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Annex III: ERASMUS SKILLS "BEFORE" QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

ERASMUS SKILLS "BEFORE" QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

This self-reflection questionnaire is designed to explore your knowledge, skills and attitudes before starting the Erasmus exchange program for studies.

Its purpose is to help you to self-reflect on your mobility journey, to recognize the acquired competences and to think on what you can do to become more effective while studying and living in an internationalized environment.

This is simply a tool and not a test.

Remember that intercultural competence is a lifelong process and that learning is a journey that occurs on a lifetime basis.

After mobility, you will be able to fill a second questionnaire that will help you understand the evolution or not of the skills acquired in the context of mobility.

At the end of this process, you will be able to see how much your knowledge, skills and attitudes will have changed before and after this mobility experience.

Read each entry in the section below and place a check mark in the appropriate column. In each question you have to do the self-reflection and rate it from 0 to 10 where 1= not at all, 5= Average/ Moderately and 10= Excellent. In case, you feel that you do not have experience on the issue described choose the lowest rate. There are no correct or incorrect answers.

The information provided is anonymous. Each individual will be treated confidentially.

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Annex IV: ERASMUS SKILLS "BEFORE" QUESTIONNAIRE

Self Reflection Questionnaire for Students BEFORE the Mobility

	Scale 1-10 1= not at all 5= Average 10= Excellent
I have working knowledge of the language spoken in the host country.	
I am aware that my field of studies can be applied differently in other countries.	
I have a clear sense of my own cultural identity.	
I experience discomfort when I encounter differences in race, colour, religion, language or ethnicity.	
I am aware of how my culture influences my perception of what is "normal" in behaviours, communication styles or values.	
I am aware of the assumptions that I hold about people of different cultures than my own.	
I am aware of the teaching and educational methods used in the host University.	
I think logically and draw conclusions.	
I am able to gather, analyze and articulate information from different resources in order to solve problems and make decisions.	
I am able to synthetize technical information and to provide analysis with a critical point of view.	
I am capable of finding solutions in difficult or challenging contexts.	
I am able to use logic and reasoning to identify alternative solutions and approaches to problems.	
In my discipline, I am able to handle problems and think in an original or creative way.	
I am able to think outside of the box to bring new ideas to solve problems or seek solutions to a particular situation.	
I know how to develop an idea and put it into practice.	
I am able to work collaboratively in teams.	
I can work easily in intercultural groups.	
I am able to interact with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives.	
I have no problem in expressing my opinion in a group.	
I am able to work together with people from a different scientific discipline.	

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I am able to plan and organize tasks and activities.	
I am effective at managing time.	
I am capable of setting priorities.	
I am capable of keeping deadlines.	
I can express myself creatively.	
I feel confident enough to ask for advice from people that I don't know.	
I can understand well nonverbal communication and gestures.	
I am able to effectively communicate my ideas in intercultural social environments.	
I feel confident about giving a presentation in a language different from my mother tongue.	
When different opinions are arising in a group, I am able to reconcile.	
I am able to communicate my ideas and thoughts to people from other cultures.	
I do not let my language level hold me back from speaking with people.	
I am able to adapt to and act in new environments.	
It is easy for me to deal with unexpected events.	
I feel confident in working with intercultural teams.	
I feel prepared to enter the labour market.	
I try to keep an open mind regarding new challenges.	
I am ready to live abroad and learn new things.	
I am interested in knowing what happens in the world daily.	
I am interested in European topics (politics, economy, cultural, education, etc.).	
I feel European.	
I am tolerant towards other persons' values and behaviour.	
I respect the views and the thoughts of others even if they are significantly different from mine.	
I respect and follow the principle of equality in humanity.	
I put effort on meeting new people.	
I enjoy meeting and cooperating with people from different cultural background.	
I understand that today's globalized societies are characterized by diversity.	
I see the value of interacting with different cultures.	
I feel like a global citizen.	

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Annex V: ERASMUS SKILLS "AFTER" QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

ERASMUS SKILLS "AFTER" QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

This self-reflection questionnaire is designed to explore your knowledge, skills and attitudes after Erasmus exchange program for studies and to compare it with previous results from before mobility. Its purpose is to help you to self-reflect on your mobility journey and the acquired competences.

If you did not fill the questionnaire before, you can still self- assess your competences after mobility here.

This is simply a tool and not a test.

Remember that intercultural competence is a lifelong process and that learning is a journey that occurs on a lifetime basis. With the results, it will be possible for you to understand the evolution or not of the skills acquired in the context of mobility. At the end of this process, you will be able to see how much your knowledge, skills and attitudes will have changed before and after this mobility experience.

Read each entry in the section below and place a check mark in the appropriate column. In each question you have to do the self-reflection and rate it from 0 to 10 where 1= not at all, 5= Average/ Moderately and 10= Excellent. In case, you feel that you do not have experience on the issue described choose the lowest rate. There are no correct or incorrect answers.

The information provided is anonymous. Each individual will be treated confidentially.

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Annex VI: ERASMUS SKILLS "AFTER" QUESTIONNAIRE

Self Reflection Questionnaire for Students After the Mobility

	Scale 1-10 1= not at all 5= Average 10= Excellent
I have working knowledge of the language spoken in the country I have been for Erasmus Studies.	
I am aware that my field of studies can be applied differently in other countries.	
I have a clear sense of my own cultural identity.	
I experience discomfort when I encounter differences in race, colour, religion, language or ethnicity.	
I am aware of how my culture influences my perception of what is "normal" in behaviours, communication styles or values.	
I am aware of the assumptions that I hold about people of different cultures than my own.	
I am aware of the teaching and educational methods used in the host university.	
I think logically and draw conclusions.	
I am able to gather, analyze and articulate information from different resources in order to solve problems and make decisions.	
I am able to synthetize technical information and to provide analysis with a critical point of view	
I am capable of finding solutions in difficult or challenging contexts.	
I am able to use logic and reasoning to identify alternative solutions and approaches to problems.	
In my discipline, I am able to handle problems and think in an original or creative way.	
I am able to think outside of the box to bring new ideas to solve problems or seek solutions to a particular situation.	
I know how to develop an idea and put it into practice.	
I am able to work collaboratively in teams.	
I can work easily in intercultural groups.	
I am able to interact with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives.	

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I have no problem in expressing my opinion in a group.	
I am able to work together with people from a different scientific discipline.	
I am able to plan and organize tasks and activities.	
I am effective at managing time.	
I am capable of setting priorities.	
I am capable of keeping deadlines.	
I can express myself creatively.	
I feel confident enough to ask for advice from people that I don't know.	
I can understand well nonverbal communication and gestures.	
I am able to (effectively) communicate my ideas in intercultural social environments.	
I feel confident about giving a presentation in a language different from my mother tongue.	
When different opinions are arising in a group, I am able to reconcile.	
I am able to communicate my ideas and thoughts to people from other cultures.	
I do not let my language level hold me back from speaking with people.	
I am able to adapt to and act in new environments.	
I feel confident enough to deal with unexpected events.	
I feel confident in working with intercultural teams.	
I feel prepared to enter the labour market.	
I try to keep an open mind regarding new challenges.	
I am ready to live abroad and learn new things.	
I am interested in knowing what happens in the world daily.	
I am interested in European topics (politics, economy, cultural, education, etc.).	
I feel European.	
I am tolerant towards other persons' values and behaviour.	
I respect the views and the thoughts of others even if they are significantly different from mine.	
I respect and follow the principle of equality in humanity.	
I put effort on meeting new people.	
I enjoy meeting and cooperating with people from different cultural background.	
I understand that today's globalized societies are characterized by diversity.	
I see the value of interacting with different cultures.	

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