

# The Importance of Academic Mobility: The Erasmus+ Program

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In recent years, the European Union (EU) has made a great effort to improve its program for education, training, youth, and sport (Erasmus+) from 2014 to 2020 (see Figure 1). Compared to its predecessor, this program has increased its investment by 40 percent, aiming to achieve \$14.7 billion in subsidies and offering opportunities to 3.7 percent of young people in the EU (around 3.3 million people) during the aforementioned period.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, this investment has been fruitful. According to the Erasmus+ 2017 Annual Report, issued by the European Commission, young people are progressively using Erasmus+ exchanges to obtain valuable work experience

abroad. As a result, more than 2 million people have participated in the program: one out of three Erasmus+ scholarship holders is offered a position by the company in which they were trained, and one out of three participants comes from a disadvantaged environment. The report emphasizes that five years after graduation, the unemployment rate of young people who studied or had internships abroad is 23 percent lower than that of those who did not take part in the program.<sup>2</sup>

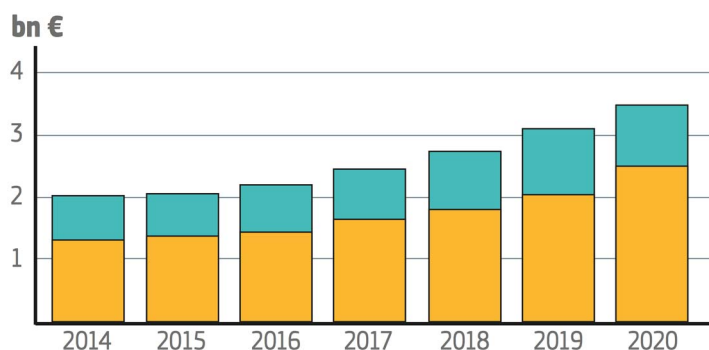


Figure 1. Erasmus+ budget 2014-2020. Yellow represents learning opportunities abroad for individuals, and green exemplifies partnerships plus reforms of the education and youth sectors.

This article aims to show the importance of participating in academic mobility programs from my own experience in both academic and professional contexts.

## MOBILITY IN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS

A recent study from San Francisco State University<sup>3</sup> suggests that happiness is not found in the material goods that we possess, but in the memories that we store (at least in the long term). In this study, the authors state that we are the total sum of our experiences; that is to say, our biggest investments should be dedicated to creating memories based on personal experiences, such as those generated by traveling.

From this point of view, academic mobility plays a very important role in the formation of students, both academically and personally. The activity diagram in Figure 2 describes the basic activities that students granted with an Erasmus+ scholarship have to follow in order to complete it.

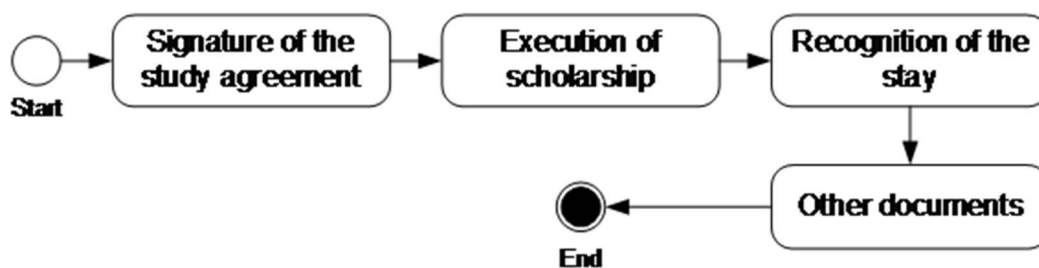


Figure 2. Erasmus+ steps for new students participating in the program.

- Signature of the study agreement. This must be performed a year before the academic course that the student has been granted.
- Execution of the scholarship. The student has to complete the subjects that he/she had included in his/her study agreement along the academic course. Since the study agreement is made before mobility has taken place, it might be modified during the stay.
- Recognition of the stay. Once the student scholarship is completed, he/she has to request the validation of the modules carried out at his/her host university. This recognition has to be done in liaison with the international relationships department of the student's home university.
- Other documents. There are some documents such as the Erasmus certificate of stay or activity certificates that are very important to request after or during the scholarship.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES FORM A BIGGER PART OF A PERSON'S IDENTITY

Studying abroad can become a differentiating element in a future process of applying for a job. As a general rule, all candidates usually provide similar information: academic records, languages, behavior, and particular skills or hobbies, for instance. For this reason, recruiters and employers consider an Erasmus program experience to be very valuable.

Academic mobility allows students to increase the flexibility of their studies, to diversify their competencies, to acquire communication skills in foreign languages, and to have professional experiences among culturally different work teams. In summary, academic mobility strengthens the occupational mobility of graduates, which will provide results after they have completed their studies and start a permanent job in their own country or abroad. This organic bond be-

tween the academic and occupational mobility among students is now, when the economic market is based on knowledge, a very important and a significant asset in the professional career of young people, making them become hardworking, creative, and committed employees.<sup>4</sup>

The internationalization of business is constantly growing, so young people who have enlisted in this kind of mobility match very well with this new expanding market. As mentioned before, the unemployment rate of young people who studied or got internships abroad is 23 percent lower than that of those who did not take part in this mobility program.<sup>2</sup>

I moved abroad for both academic and professional purposes during my study period. I was granted with an Erasmus scholarship in 2010 for a period of 9 months, and I travelled to Ancona (Italy) with the aim of finishing my degree in technical engineering in computer sciences.

Later, during my PhD studies, I had long academic stays in different countries: one in collaboration with Solent University of Southampton (SUS) in the UK, and the other at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) in the US, both carried out in 2016 for a total period of four months.

This academic mobility has been very productive for me in two ways. First, for finishing my degree and experiencing my first long stay away from home, and second, to set my doctoral thesis for the future. Undoubtedly, both universities are widely recognized in the field of computer engineering, and the extensive expertise of the people who were supervising my academic stay (Margaret Ross, Professor Emeritus at SUS, and Susan Giesecke, director of the Global Engagement Center of Entrepreneurship and Technology at UC Berkeley) had a huge impact on my work—both the thesis and later publications that derived from it.

Academic mobility provided me with the opportunity to carry out different professional stays in which I was able to gain new skills, acquire new values, and learn more about the way people work in different countries.

The first one was in Dublin (Ireland) in 2009, within the framework of practical Erasmus, and lasted for three months. The main objective was running a business internship that gave me the opportunity to work in the IT area of a travel agency as a web programmer. It was the first international stay I experienced; thus, it helped me face new challenges, learn about new cultures and languages, and learn how to live in a much more independent way. Undoubtedly, this experience taught me many important things, such as that anything can be achieved with personal effort, work, and sacrifice.

As part of my pre-doctoral training, I had the opportunity to do some professional practice working as a teacher at the British Computer Society (BCS) at SUS. The two main objectives of this society are to commit to making IT good for society through its network of contacts, and to defend the global profession of IT and the interests of those committed to that profession to benefit the entire community. BCS is a highly recognized society in the UK, being one of the most important in the sector. The training I acquired at BCS was quite interesting for me, since it was the first time I had to place myself in front of an expert audience in the field, perhaps with a higher level of education than me. It enabled me to have the possibility of repeating the course at the London headquarters.

Finally, my last professional mobility dealt with my pre-doctoral training period, in this case at UC Berkeley. I gave a series of conferences about the research group (where I am currently developing my professional career) at the Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology at UC Berkeley (SCET). Since 2005, SCET has been creating the foundation of Berkeley's business ecosystem, which includes Sky Deck, the Fung Institute, the Professional Leadership in Engineering Program, the Global Venture Laboratory, and an extensive ecosystem of Silicon Valley and global partners. It was much easier to face this challenge with more experience in this type of work. As a result, my research group profitably collaborated with SCET.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF MOBILITY IN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS

From my personal point of view, both academic and professional mobility are essential to improve the training of a student or professional.

To me, the best thing about the Erasmus program was the feeling of freedom, since for many young people it might be the first time they live independently. I also gained an Erasmus family—a number of new friends spread around the world, in the same situation and looking to share new experiences. These new friends will also be future colleagues. Moreover, Erasmus participants get a higher level of security, provided by the knowledge that they have successfully overcome the challenges of living abroad, which is a very important quality when applying for a job. In short, they acquire a high level of maturity, which is an indispensable quality in today's professional world.

There are few disadvantages to an Erasmus scholarship, however—mainly, the amount of money it involves, which greatly limits the possibility of many low-income families to apply.

I would strongly recommend any student or professional to apply for this kind of mobility program. Today, we live in a global world where it is essential to have knowledge of different communities and the way they think, behave, and live. In general, facing new challenges stimulates people and improves their lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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