

Erasmus+ Vocational Education and Training Tracer Study UK

Final Report for Ecorys UK

Rachael Archer, Senior Research Manager
Dr Rupal Patel, Research Manager
Andrew Corley, Senior Research Executive
Hayley Lamb, Research Director



For more information about this report please contact
Hayley Lamb:

CFE Research, Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street, Leicester,
LE1 5TE

T: 0116 229 3300 Hayley.Lamb@cfe.org.uk
www.cfe.org.uk

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CONTENTS

01.	Introduction	4
02.	VET placement experience	7
03.	Development of competencies/skills	17
04.	Career paths	27
05.	Conclusions	35
	Appendix 1: Detailed methodology	37
	Appendix 2: Interview topic guide	39
	Appendix 3: Focus group topic guide	48

01. INTRODUCTION

In March 2019, Ecorys UK commissioned CFE Research (CFE) to undertake qualitative research to understand how the Erasmus+ vocational education and training (VET) mobility placements (henceforth referred to as ‘placements’) that it manages have impacted participants, particularly the employability of VET learners. This report presents the findings from the research with participants, all of whom had completed their placement. These qualitative findings sit alongside and complement a quantitative survey of participants who have undertaken a VET placement since 2014.

Background and context

The VET landscape in the UK has been subject to significant reform over the last decade. The reforms have been designed to support the achievement of policy goals set out by government, including in the latest Industrial Strategy,¹ for innovation, productivity and growth. Strengthening the UK’s vocational and technical education and training is a key priority and is reflected in the reforms to apprenticeship standards and the subsequent drive to increase the number of apprentices, and the introduction of new providers (e.g. National Skills Academies and University Technical Colleges) and qualifications. In July 2017, the UK Government responded to the recommendations made by the Independent Panel on Technical Education² by confirming plans for 15 technical educational routes and the introduction of T Levels. T Levels are designed as a route into skilled, technical occupations and are offered at Level 3 and above. A total of 54 pilot providers (colleges and post-16 providers) have been selected to deliver new T Levels in September 2020 and a further 22 courses are to be rolled out in stages from 2021.

With a focus on developing VET learners’ skills and employability, Erasmus+ has the potential to contribute to the achievement of the UK’s policy priorities in this field. Erasmus+ is a European Union (EU) programme established in 2014 which aims to modernise education, training and youth work across Europe by 2020. Erasmus+ is run by National Agencies in the participating EU countries. In the UK Erasmus+ is managed by a partnership between Ecorys UK and the British Council. The multi-faceted programme provides opportunities for young people, as well as teaching staff and organisations, to engage with international partners in support of this goal. VET placement projects are a key strand of the programme aimed at apprentices and students currently studying with, or recently graduated from (within one year), vocational training providers. Learners are placed in a partner country for between two weeks and 12 months. According to the latest

¹ HM Government Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain fit for the future <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-building-a-britain-fit-for-the-future>

² The Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

guidance,³ VET placements seek to broaden young people’s minds and widen their social, professional and transversal skills. They also aim to develop the job-specific and foreign language skills of those who take part in long-term placements in order to boost their employability. A key benefit for participating organisations is the opportunity to support the development of the talent pipeline for their business or industry and address presenting skills gaps and shortages.

Aims and objectives of the research

This research is part of a transnational tracer research project tracking participants in VET placements funded through Erasmus+. Led by the Polish National Agency, the study involves several other partners, including the UK. Ecorys UK commissioned CFE to conduct qualitative research, which builds on the findings of an online survey with participants, to explore the impact of VET placements in the UK context.

In particular, the research aims to explore participants’ perceptions of the following:

- Their perceptions of impact on their future careers and personal development;
- New competencies and skills they acquired or developed during the VET placement abroad; and
- The usefulness of the skills and the experience to their further learning, personal development and professional career.

Methodology

As a transnational project, a consistent methodological approach to the other participating countries was implemented. In-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with two cohorts. Cohort 1: participants who have completed the programme they were engaged in at the time of their placement and have moved onto the next stage of their careers; and Cohort 2: current learners who have completed a placement within the last year.

DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Twenty-five in-depth telephone interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes, were carried out with Cohort 1 participants. The two primary sampling characteristics were: current educational/employment status and type of organisation in which the education or training placement abroad took place.⁴ The sampling for this study was purposive; participants were sought to cover a variety of contexts relevant to VET placements and career pathways. Participants were recruited from a sample of 130 participants who

³ European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide Version 2 (2019): 15-01-2019

⁴ A detailed overview of sampling characteristics can be found in Appendix 1.

consented to be contacted for research purposes through the Erasmus+ VET placement survey conducted in 2018. Interviewees were given a £15 voucher to incentivise participation.

FOCUS GROUPS

Three focus groups, each with six to eight participants, lasting approximately 90 minutes, were undertaken in person in England with Cohort 2 participants. Cohort 2 participants were recruited via the projects funded in 2017 and 2018, at the level of the provider. Organising providers were asked to invite learners that captured diverse experiences where possible. As such the sampling characteristics were: duration of placement, industry area in which the placement was carried out, country in which the placement took place and gender. Focus group participants were given a £25 voucher to incentivise participation.

Limitations

This study was qualitative in nature and sought to explore a range of attitudes from the perspectives of placement participants based on the sampling criteria. The report makes no attempt to quantify findings, which cannot be generalised beyond the sample. The findings of the quantitative online tracer study survey have been analysed separately by Ecorys UK. While the sample size for the qualitative research is limited, the findings provide insight into a range of perspectives including similarities and differences between respondents. This constitutes an important contribution to the evidence base around the perceived impact of VET placements. It is important to highlight that all the skills and professional development impacts presented in this report are self-reported and thus perceptions of impact are likely to differ among participants, and are relative to their various experiences.

Report structure

The remainder of this report presents findings from the research to address the aims outlined earlier. Chapter Two summarises the participants' overall experience by providing an overview of their motivations and expectations and how their VET placements were organised, including the nature of the placement activities and the support that was provided. Chapter Three describes the skills and competencies respondents acquired or developed during their placement whilst Chapter Four considers the usefulness of these skills in relation to employment, education and the extent to which they have influenced participants' choices regarding their careers. Finally, the report concludes by discussing the key findings to take forward for future Erasmus+ VET placements for UK projects.

02. VET PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE

This chapter provides an overview of participants' experience of their placements including their motivations and expectations and the extent these were met by the placements arranged for them.

The primary purpose of this research is a tracer study exploring how the VET placements have influenced participants' career paths rather than an evaluation of the placements themselves. However, insights into the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the placements can helpfully contribute to understanding any influence they have on participants' subsequent education and career decisions. As such, various elements of the placements including, participants' overall experience, the different models for placement arrangements, and support from supervisors and mentors are discussed.

Overall experience and motivations

Qualitative findings from both the focus groups and interviews illustrate that the VET placements were overall a positive experience for participants. Many younger participants, that is to say those aged sixteen to eighteen who undertook the placement via their vocational training provider soon after leaving secondary school, indicated that the experience was a unique opportunity. For some, it was the first time they had travelled, or travelled independently, and had first-hand practical work experience. In many cases the accommodation, travel and subsistence costs for the placement were all covered, so these participants were very grateful to be given the chance to complete a work placement abroad with little financial investment from themselves. It was commonly described as “the best experience I've had”; one that was worthwhile, enjoyable and significant.

I have just written down my words: I love it because, [in] my opinion, it has changed my life. It has made me completely own myself because I wasn't myself before. Now I completely know myself, who I am.

— Cohort 2, studying Public Services

None of the interviewees reported that they had selected their course because it included a placement; the majority were unaware their institution offered the opportunity to complete a placement abroad before enrolling on their course. Those that were aware were typically completing a course which involved a language.

Participants expressed a wide range of motivations for applying to undertake a VET placement. The most frequently reported was to gain practical experience of the subject they studied. This was considered to be a necessity either because they recognised it is an experience many employers seek in job applicants or it was an important part of their course, such as Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) certification.

“My main reason was to get experience, because I was actually quite interested in carpentry [...] and I just felt, if I was going to go into it, I needed some sort of experience to help me get a job in carpentry.”

— Cohort 1, unemployed

Largely, other motivations and expectations for participants undertaking the placements were typically rooted in the desire to acquire or develop new skills; related to both professional and personal development. Interviewees mainly noted the following expectations:

- To gain practical insight and additional knowledge into the course they were studying;
- To improve language skills and experience different cultures; and
- To become more confident and self-sufficient by travelling independently to a new country in order to complete the placement.

However, for several participants, particularly younger ones, their reasons for applying were not inherently linked to any detailed considerations about their personal or professional development nor ambitions for their future career path. Rather they applied in order to benefit from a ‘new experience’ that was fully paid for or because it was recommended by their friends. This is unsurprising given that many placements are undertaken by young people who have not necessarily had the time or opportunity to consider their longer-term career plans.

“It was literally just at that [right] point in my life. I just wanted to do something completely different to what I’m used to, so [...] when my friend sent me the link, I just thought, ‘You know what? It’d just be amazing to try something different, to experience something completely different.’”

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

VET placement organisation models

While overall experiences of the VET placements were overwhelmingly positive, several factors relating to the way in which placements were organised contributed to varying viewpoints. In turn participants’ experiences influenced their perceptions of their placement’s value in helping them to gain skills which could enhance their future employability. This section considers the arrangements put in place by the home and host organisations which affected participants’ experiences.

HOME INSTITUTION

The institutions in the UK through which the participants applied to undertake their placements were mostly further education (FE) colleges but also included not for profit

community training and social enterprise organisations. Overall, the findings illustrate that the ways in which the home institutions arranged the placements, in relation to the selection process, pre-placement preparation and alignment of the content to participants' existing or prior studies, varied. Consequently, the experiences expressed by participants at interview differed greatly to each other, as did their views about the effectiveness of these arrangements.

Whether participants were currently studying at the host institution or had approached them independently is a key factor in participants' varying experience of their placement. Participants already studying at the institution arranging the placement on their behalf appear to have benefited from a more comprehensive and organised approach. This was likely to have entailed a rigorous selection process, a pre-placement preparation session and support from mentors and/or supervisors throughout the placement. Typically, these participants were more fully-informed about their placement through a pre-placement briefing and, in some cases, a preparatory guide including details of their travel itinerary, accommodation, and a packing checklist and the opportunity to ask questions. As a result these participants tended to have a more thorough understanding of the arrangements for their placement, clear expectations, and felt equipped; all of which made them more likely to report having a positive experience.

The qualitative findings indicate that a sub-set of these organisations made exceptional provisions to prepare their students for their placements which resulted in them feeling well-supported and informed. For instance:

- One college provided participants with a 'survival kit' including useful products for the placement such as portable phone chargers, water bottles, luggage-scales and padlocks. The bags were also used as an aid by tutors to clearly identify the participants in public spaces while on placement.

"[They] explained to us what we're going to do there, how long we're going to work and every single thing [was] explained to us before we [went]. Like if you work in a hotel, you're going to have lunch hours, four to five hours [working] a day, and you're going to do this [during your time]; every single thing [was] explained to us."

— Cohort 2, studying Motor Vehicle

- Another training institution arranged pre-placement training for participants to provide them with contextual knowledge and skills relevant to the work experience they would undertake and basic language skills (for example, greetings) to assist them whilst abroad.

"Everybody that was going to go to Spain had a couple of days training for working with young people before we all split up into our groups and went to Spain [...] I thought that training was very helpful, and it gave me a lot of information I could take with me to refer to that helped me with my lesson plans and things."

— Cohort 1, unemployed

Conversely, participants who had applied independently to organisations arranging placements generally reported receiving a more limited amount of information about their placement in advance of their trip. These participants believe that detailed information about the learning activities they would be undertaking as part of their placement would have improved the limited briefings they received.

“The one thing we didn’t really know was what we would actually be doing at work”.

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

Regardless of the type of home institution, the majority of participants’ agreed that their placements were aligned to an appropriate industry or involved relevant training for the course they were still studying or from which they had recently graduated. These included TEFL students getting the opportunity to teach English to foreign language speakers, students in health and social care studies working in nurseries and residential care homes, and carpentry students undertaking lessons in woodwork. For a small minority where this was not the case (for instance, a student studying fashion and public relations undertaking a placement in marketing), this negatively impacted their experience in relation to the skills they obtained. Consequently, their expectations were not met and the potential for their placement to influence their professional development was limited.

The focus groups with Cohort 2 participants still studying at the institution which arranged their placement provided some useful insights into the role home institutions can play in making participants cognisant of the professional and/or personal development opportunities placements can provide. This is important in relation to how participants approach and reflect on their placement in order to gain the greatest benefits. Participants in focus groups held at two different further education (FE) colleges reported having a daily diary or log book to document the skills they developed on their placement. However, the focus group participants at one of the colleges perceived this to be a box-ticking exercise and reported how, neither before nor after their placement, was the opportunity provided for them to discuss the new and existing skills developed nor how these skills could be of use to their future careers. Conversely, the other focus group participants reflected how their receipt of the log books included a briefing session from their home organisation explicitly setting out their purpose to assist them to consider the applicability of the skills they acquire and develop during the placement on their future career paths. The latter group reported using the log books regularly to document examples of how they had used new or current skills. In addition, at the focus group, it was noted that they were more coherent in describing specific examples of how the skills they acquired will be useful to their future careers. This demonstrates how being explicit with learners enables participants to clearly understand and reflect on the use and influence of their newly acquired skills on their career plans.

HOST ORGANISATION

The qualitative findings indicate that participants undertook placements in a range of settings. These typically included education institutions (e.g. colleges, universities), enterprises (e.g. hotels, engineering companies) and other (e.g. cathedrals). There was no relationship between these categories of organisation and participants' experience of their placement. The factors affecting the extent to which the host institution managed a placement that met participants' expectations can be summarised as content and structure of the placement. These are explored in the following sub-section.

Content of placement

According to the participants in this study, the majority of host organisations were well-prepared, providing participants with a comprehensive and varied experience that involved practical experience, a variety of learning activities and support. These environments were effective in enabling participants to develop skills and knowledge. For instance, at a large car company, there was a variety of machinery with which participants were supported to work and both body work and engineering was undertaken on site so there was a range of technical areas from which they could learn.

“When I went to the work placement, there was always something to do. If there were no cars for me to repair, I would go to the workshop and do body and paint [work], [so I got to] learn about body and paint [work] and also cars.”

— Cohort 2, studying Motor Vehicle

However, participants placed with smaller-sized host organisations were less likely to be satisfied with the content of their placement. For example, a couple of interviewees were placed in small family-owned businesses where their placement consisted of working closely with family members. While they gained practical experience they did not have a wide variety of jobs or staff members to shadow to help participants acquire and develop a large number of skills. For example, one participant worked with a family-owned construction company and was required to move bricks. By contrast, some participants hosted by larger organisations reported being allocated a mentor who would try to tailor their placements to ensure they gained as much from the experience as possible. The size of the host organisation can therefore be an additional factor affecting the diversity of development opportunities available and influencing participants' experience of their placements.

“There were about 15 of us and we all got selected, different placements with different companies. They weren't like big firms. For me, it was a [one] man band [...] the majority of [my placement] was shadowing him. A few of the days, it was like there was nothing really to do.”

— Cohort 1, apprentice in Building Services Engineering

Regardless of the variety of development opportunities available to participants during their placement, the majority reported that the support they received from their host organisations was a strength of their placement and positively influenced their experience. These organisations were credited for their welcoming hospitality and supportive nature. Participants felt safe and looked-after by their host organisations.

“The actual workplace itself was well organised and the people there were very helpful. The actual guy that [was managing us] was very helpful and he was really nice. He brought us lunch each day and showed us around the area...”

— Cohort 1, studying HNC in Engineering

Structure of placement

The length of the placement and the hours per day to which participants were assigned activities varied and were important factors in participants’ perceptions of their experience.

VET placements can vary in length from two weeks to up to one year. A large proportion of the participants involved in this study went abroad for two to three weeks. Typically, their placements were arranged through a FE college, where a large group of students went out together to a host organisation for two weeks. Participants expressed mixed attitudes towards the length of the placement; some felt it was the right length, while others would have preferred to stay longer. Those who considered it to be the right length tended to be younger participants, aged sixteen to eighteen, who after the two or three week period began to feel home-sick. Other participants were disappointed that they had started an activity during their work experience but were unable to see it through or were unable to develop the language skills they had anticipated. This latter group believe that a longer placement would have been fulfilling as they would have been able to complete tasks and/or learn more about the country and the language.

“I feel like we could have stayed for maybe four [or] six months, and really got to know the country, got to know the language, got to know the job.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

The number of hours participants were meant to work or train during their placement varied considerably among interviewees, with some only working a couple of hours per day compared to others working full-time hours. While those who worked fewer hours appreciated the free time to go sightseeing and explore the country they were in, they also recognised that this limited the time they had to gain a realistic experience of the job role or training they were undertaking.

“We only worked from 10:30am to 2pm, so we got the whole afternoon to just explore Valencia which made it kind of like a holiday.”

— Cohort 2 studying Computer Science

By contrast, some of the participants who worked long hours (commonly those who were undertaking a teaching placement) regretted having little time to partake in cultural visits to learn more about their host country.

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

The opportunity for participants to partake in cultural activities varied. Some had an abundance of free time, whilst others had very minimal. This was in many ways influenced by the range of placements undertaken which, as already discussed, were affected by the approaches adopted by the home institutions and host organisations and the structure of the placements themselves. However, for the majority of participants the opportunity to explore their host country (for example, go sightseeing and learn about the culture) was an important aspect of their placement. Participants expressed the following reasons for valuing the cultural aspects of their placements:

- Being in a different country is the critical difference between these and other placements participants had had the opportunity to undertake; and
- Such activities provide an important opportunity to socialise with others and develop soft skills; for example, communication skills and developing confidence.

The organisation of cultural activities experienced by participants varied. It appears to have worked particularly well where events were organised through college tutors (whether from the home or host institution) but where provision was also made for participants to have their own free time to engage in activities. This dual approach both enabled participants to explore their host country and its history in a supportive environment and allowed them to discover their surroundings independently and establish their own contacts with local people. Such a model appears most beneficial for placements involving younger participants who might have limited previous experience of travelling abroad independently.

“[On a visit to Amsterdam the supervisors] gave us an allocated time to go to the town and do some shopping and stuff. In the evening we went out for drinks and just relaxed [...So the visit to] the Van Gogh museum and Anne Frank’s House was organised for us, everything else, we chose that.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Catering and Hospitality

SUPPORT FROM MENTORS

All participants appear to have been accompanied by a mentor on their placement who acted as a mediator for the host organisations, ensured participants were kept safe and felt comfortable, and provided a point of contact if they had any difficulties. The qualitative findings indicate that two types of mentor exist depending on the organisation model of the placement. Participants who undertook their placement as a cohort from a FE college tended to be accompanied by members of staff from their home institution, and in some

cases had additional supervisors providing support from the host organisations. Participants who applied independently to the host institution were more likely to have a mentor based at the host organisation in the country they were visiting.

The roles and responsibilities of the two types of mentors appear to vary considerably. The research findings suggest the host institution mentors play a more direct role; they visit the places of work, they support participants with their work, they arrange organised cultural activities, and they often stay in the same accommodation as the participants. Typically these mentors are the participants' teachers from the course to which their placement is linked. The majority of interviewees who had experience of this type of mentor stated that they valued the support as for many it was the first time they had travelled without their parents.

“How old was I, probably eighteen or nineteen at the time and like I said I’ve never been to Germany[...] it was just helpful to have that really because...I guess I could’ve worked things out myself, but it’s just always nice to have that support and then them suggesting things because they’re art and design practitioners, it was helpful.”

— Cohort 1, studying Design

Participants' experience suggests that the role of mentors from the host organisations was less formal and more remote. For example, participants were typically provided with their mentor's contact details so they could be reached if needed rather than receiving dedicated support. Participants who had mentors of this type commonly applied for the placement directly to the independent organisations. They suggested that this more light-touch approach was not detrimental to their experience and in fact considered it to be of benefit; encouraging them to behave more independently.

“We had a couple of people that we could go and talk to [...] So, if you had an issue, a problem or whatever, you’d go to that person and just tell them whatever the problem was and they’d help us out.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Catering and Hospitality

The principal difference in the influence of the two types of mentor on participants' perceptions of their placement was in their ability to assist participants to reflect on their experience. Mentors from the home organisations had a much better understanding of the activities participants undertook during their placements as they had greater oversight of them. Furthermore they were in regular contact with participants on completion of their placement as they worked and studied within the same organisation. In these ways mentors had the opportunity to instigate a reflective environment with participants, both during the placement and following it. This enabled participants to discuss their views of their placement, consider the knowledge and skills they gained during it, and its usefulness to the next stage of their careers.

“They’re always helping us, all supporting us [...] on that trip and in college. They’re calling us and supporting us, asking us, ‘Do you need any help or anything?’ Like they understand us more.”

— Cohort 2, studying Public Services

Sustainability of contacts established abroad

The ability of participants to establish and maintain contacts with people they met during their placement was explored during the interviews and focus groups. The rationale being that such contacts (for example, with the enterprises with which they were placed) could potentially enhance participants’ future employment options. The findings indicate however that the VET placements in themselves did not guarantee that contacts were established and maintained in a professional sense. The majority of participants reported that they had not maintained contact with the employers with whom they were placed. The primary reason for this being they would not consider doing so unless it was instigated by the company.

In a few cases, however, some interviewees reported that they had maintained contact with their placement employer, and are confident that should they want to return to the country they would be able to find a job at the company for which they had worked. While this contact is not frequent, these participants have contact details such as the employers’ email addresses. The establishment of these contacts appears to be dependent upon the initiative of the participants involved.

There is only one case in our sample of a participant subsequently taking up an opportunity of employment with the organisation with which they had been placed. After completing a placement at a school in Italy, the participant returned a few months later and worked at the same school for one year. What sets this individual apart from many of the other participants is that they were thinking about moving abroad in advance of undertaking their placement. VET placements therefore have the potential to create employability opportunities abroad but the realisation of this relies heavily on participants being proactive and clear about their motivations.

“If you have good contacts and you’ve made a good impression on certain people, then they’re likely to offer you work and employment. Whereas, if you don’t really come out of your shell and you don’t really show people who you are and what you capable of, then that is probably not going to be offered to you.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Insurance Analyst

This is not to say however that the majority of participants were unable to establish and maintain contacts at all. Many interviewees established contacts with colleagues, room-mates and other people they met in a social capacity and have sustained these via instant messaging and social media. This suggests that young people find it easier to build contacts

in a social context as opposed to professional ones. Developing such relationships is less likely to result directly in opportunities for employment but do demonstrate the advancement of soft skills, as explored further in the following chapter.

“Well on the first day everyone is like ‘hello my name is’ and on the last day everyone was hugging, everyone was smiling and crying and they will miss each other. Everyone has got contacts from different groups [...] we’ve got a WhatsApp group...”

— Cohort 2, studying IT

03. DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCIES/SKILLS

This chapter explores the skills and competencies respondents acquired or developed during their VET placement.

A primary aim of the Erasmus+ VET placements is to increase participants' knowledge and skills that would be useful in their subsequent education and professional life. Accordingly, this chapter provides an overview of the reported competencies and skills the respondents acquired and developed during their placements. These have been categorised into soft skills, occupational competences, cultural awareness and language skills. These groupings of skills are set out by those most frequently cited by the participants involved in the research. Where applicable, findings relating to challenges experienced acquiring or developing skills during the placements are also included in this chapter.

Soft skills

All participants reported developing soft skills, in some form or other, as an outcome of their placement abroad. The soft skills acquired and developed by participants can be categorised as social skills, communication skills, and personal character attributes – all of which enable people to work well with others. These soft skills are each further explored in the following sub-sections. None of the participants reported any negative effects on their soft skills resulting from their placements.

SOCIAL SKILLS

The majority of participants noted how their social skills had developed as a result of undertaking their placement. The placements necessitated meeting with and speaking to new and different types of people. Participants talked about the progress they made in their social skills as a result of being surrounded by people they had not met before in a location they had not previously visited. Several participants referenced how they moved from feeling shy, unsure, and/or uncomfortable around new people to feeling confident, comfortable and open.

Being placed in situations where they had to *come out of their shell* was an important factor for participants developing these social skills. Such situations occurred both during the formal element of the placement as well as outside of the learning or working environment. Most of the examples where participants reported developing social skills referred to the time they spent with peers their host organisation. In these instances, participants' social skills developed as they were required to engage with a range of new people to progress and get the most from their placement. This was particularly the case if participants required the support of their peers to understand the activities they were undertaking if the instructions were in the host country's language. Having to overcome the language barrier gave participants a purpose to interact and socialise with their peers thereby increasing their social skills.

“I liked the fact that we were paired up with a Dutch person, it actually got us to talk. Because on the first day, [when] we had a tour of the city [...] it was English on one side and Dutch on the other side. But by the end of the second week, everyone’s talking to each other. It helped us to get to know each other, which was good.”

— Cohort 2, studying Civil Engineering

For some participants, opportunities to develop their social skills were found by meeting and interacting with new and different types of people during their time on the placement outside of the college teaching or the workplace shadowing element. Several participants spoke about the importance of meeting up with fellow students or employees in their spare time which helped to consolidate their increased confidence in their social skills.

“The opportunity to make friends with people from a different culture, that’s an interesting learning experience. It was really nice. We got to see outside of the college with them... When I first meet people, I do get really shy [but now] I’m more outgoing and livelier. It did help my confidence a lot.”

— Cohort 1, studying Graphic Design

COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

A number of participants reported how the Erasmus+ placement provided the opportunity to develop public-speaking skills. As part of their placement, whether during or following it, some respondents were expected to deliver a presentation or give a talk to their peers. Several of these individuals noted how they previously would have tried to avoid such a situation due to a lack of confidence. However, the fact that their involvement in the placement necessitated the delivery of a presentation or speech challenged them to move out of their comfort zone. One participant recognised how having to speak about their home country to a group of students from the host college due to visit the UK, resulted in them becoming more confident in public-speaking.

“We had some Danish students that were going to come to our college...they wanted to know a bit of information about England so we had to do a presentation and tell them bits about England and what was good about England and what they should expect when they arrived in England...it went quite well, because normally I’m not confident with [public] speaking.”

— Cohort 1, studying Public Services

PERSONAL CHARACTER ATTRIBUTES

Confidence in own abilities

Several participants talked about how their placement increased their confidence in their own abilities. The most frequently cited aspects of this were developing self-reliance and independence. For some, the placement provided the first occasion for them to live away from their parents or carers. It therefore provided the opportunity to experience key life skills, for instance:

- Time-keeping in terms of getting ready and arriving at their lessons or workplace on schedule;
- Purchasing food for and cooking their daily meals;
- Managing their finances such as travel and food expenses; and
- Learning to navigate to a new place in a different country, and often in a different language, whilst using local transport networks.

The successful undertaking of these activities on their own, without their parents or carers, resulted in an increase in self-confidence for some participants. Many participants were left with a lasting impression from the placement that they are more capable of living independently than they had previously thought.

“My confidence improved. I have never lived without my parents. To have that kind of independent living for two months, that felt incredible. It felt amazing. I learnt to take care of myself. I learnt more confidence. It made me feel happier. It made me feel like at the end of my experience, I had done something worthwhile.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Sales Assistant

Resilience and determination

As a likely outcome of increased confidence in feeling self-reliant and independent, several participants also spoke about how the experience had helped them become more resilient. Respondents felt that meeting new people, working in and exploring a new place, and living independently enabled them to become more resilient. A key factor in this appears to be the safe and supportive environment in which the placements took place. Participants talked about the importance of the support available to them if they experienced any difficulties (for example, mentors or supervisors from the home and/or host institutions being contactable and on hand if required). For some respondents, an increase in their resilience helped make them feel more confident and determined about what they want to do in future. For example, those that had practical teaching experience found the placement made them more resilient by challenging them to teach in a different country. In addition the rewarding experience of their placement validated their career choice.

“I think I feel more confident in going into the workplace after leaving college. I was quite nervous of doing that, but since doing the placement I think I am more confident in leaving college and going into the workplace and being able to work with people I don’t necessarily know or have worked with before.”

— Cohort 1, studying Animal Management

Occupational competencies

A large proportion of participants in the qualitative research made reference to a range of skills they gained or developed during their placement which would be relevant to the

labour market. These skills are categorised into two types and considered in the following sub-sections: firstly, technical skills and secondly, employability skills.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

The majority of participants either acquired new technical skills or further developed existing ones during their placement. All of these participants said that the acquired skills were relevant to what they were doing at home at the time they undertook the placement. The examples given included courses participants were studying, courses and/or jobs they were applying for, and jobs they were occupying.

Of the participants who did acquire new technical skills, these either helped them to lay the foundations for the profession they aspired to work in (or were working in) or it helped them to further develop and hone skills they already had. For example, a few participants who are studying a motor vehicle course were able to help change a tow bar and a gearbox, which was not available to do in their college workshop but a required skill for a mechanic.

Additionally, for these participants who acquired new technical skills, they mostly achieved these through some form of supervision from the personnel at the host institution. This involved being guided through the processes and practicalities of a technical task. These instances tended to benefit younger participants attending college or completing vocational training at the time of their placement because they had limited or no practical experience of the industry in which they were placed. On the other hand, other participants developed their existing technical skillset. These were most likely to be participants who had more experience in the labour market and therefore had some pre-existing skills on which to draw. This typically was the case among mature interviewees who were undertaking a TEFL placement. These participants had some experience of teaching prior to the programme and were therefore more focused about what technical skills they needed to acquire in addition.

There are two types of technical skills which participants acquired during their placements. The first are practical hands-on technical skills, where participants were given the opportunity to perform certain technical tasks, mostly under specialist supervision. For instance, one interviewee who was studying IT was given the opportunity to repair laptops by using professional IT equipment. The second relates to knowledge-based technical skills, where for example participants learned about the theoretical aspects of the work, such as TEFL teachers being taught about the rationale underpinning certain pedagogical approaches. It also included some participants receiving instruction on how to use specialist equipment. For example, some participants talked about one-to-one conversations with professionals who took the time to explain how to operate machinery.

“The guy that was working there, he did give us a lot of information to do with the powder coating machine. He gave us a lot of technical information about that. They did actually give us learning about certain things in the workplace so that was good.”

— Cohort 1, studying HNC Engineering

Participants' opportunities to develop technical skills were influenced by the approach adopted by the host institutions or employers, even within the same subject area. For one participant undertaking a placement in education, their host organisation arranged classes for them to improve and develop aspects of their teaching skills. However, some other participants on placements in the field of education were given classes to teach, with no direction or supervision. One of these participants reflected on how challenging this task was to undertake, but also recognised how rewarding to successfully teach the class and in doing so, increase their confidence in their own skills and abilities.

“We [were left] to stand up in front of a class and deliver a lesson, that was quite intimidating and quite scary. So, getting over that and learning how to deliver classes and be confident in front of a class definitely, even at my age, was a learning curve. It wasn't easy, I was very nervous to begin with.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Stained Glass Artist

In a minority of cases, the extent to which participants were able to develop relevant technical skills was limited by undertaking placements they perceive to be irrelevant to their current studies/employment. For example, one respondent indicated that although the placement provided the opportunity to learn some new technical skills regarding air conditioning, the placement's timeframe was too short for the knowledge they learnt to be useful to their workplace environment at home. Furthermore, this individual believed that the placement would have been more effective if its learning content had focused on developing pre-existing technical skills related to the electrical work they undertake at home.

“I would have enjoyed to do electrics with that being the reason why I went out there. I wouldn't say 'disappointing' but I think it could have been a bit more [useful...] I learned something new but I don't think I learned enough about air conditioning to actually do something with it, especially with it being people that spoke Spanish, they couldn't really teach me a lot, I was just looking [at what they did].”

— Cohort 1, apprentice in Building Services Engineering

The large variations in the organisations hosting placements and the approaches they adopt to teaching and training is likely to affect the extent to which participants develop technical skills and the impact of these on their future career paths.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Many younger participants alluded to their placement providing the opportunity to develop a variety of skills which can be classified as employability skills. These are foundational skills and behaviours necessary for successful participation in the labour market. In addition to the social skills already outlined earlier in this chapter, which can

also be considered as employability skills, participants indicated that they gained the following aptitudes during their placement:

- Being responsible for travelling independently to work/study and identifying their route to work/study;
- Being organised and arriving to work/study punctually;
- Listening to and taking guidance and digesting instructions from supervisors; and
- Following instructions and working independently.

“Time management. We had to make sure we get the right bus and just making sure that I’m not late.”

— Cohort 2, studying Childcare

“You’re going to be taking direction and advice from supervisors that you’ve never met. And I think that makes you grow as a person, not only professionally, but also personally.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Insurance Analyst

A number of participants recognised that the development of these skills helped to improve their ability to perform in a professional environment and realised these are necessary skills to succeed in the labour market.

Cultural awareness

As discussed in the previous chapter, the context in which placements were organised contributed to the amount of cultural activities in which participants were able to partake in their spare time. Participants undertaking a placement via their training provider were more likely to have the opportunity to join in more formal cultural activities compared to those who applied individually, primarily since they were pre-organised on their behalf for them and their peers. The type of cultural activities participants in this research reported doing in their free time on the placement included sightseeing trips, visiting shops and museums, and learning about local history and customs. The latter typically took the form of an introductory presentation delivered by the host institution. Participants valued the personal development that resulted from the opportunities to experience the host country’s culture. For instance it broadened their understanding of different cultures’ ways of living.

“We did learn a lot about the culture and the history. Every town and city that we went to, we visited all the museums and cathedrals, and spoke to a couple of locals here and there.”

— Cohort 1, studying Animal Management

A few participants also demonstrated that they had identified different ways in which people in their host country worked compared to what they had previously experienced at home. Focus group participants who had completed work placements in a nursery and residential care home in the Netherlands reported how the way in which employees interacted with children and care home residents respectively was less formal (whilst still maintaining safe environments and respectful relationships). Another focus group participant who worked in a computer repair shop during their placement noted that his colleagues' attitude to work was more relaxed and with what he perceived to be a better work-life balance. These examples illustrate the role placements can play in widening participants' perspectives about the world of work and the different approaches that can be adopted.

As a result of this increased awareness of different cultures, many participants have become more open to the idea of and motivated to travel to and visit other countries, and a minority to consider working abroad. One participant for example, since completing their placement and through their current course, has gone on to travel and work in different countries.

“We went to Hungary, we were immersed in the culture. We were able to meet lots of residents there and they were so kind and open. Actually, this course has allowed me to travel to different countries, to different places. I’ve been able to work full-time for an academic year in Italy. I was able to live in Spain. Because of this course I am more open to different cultures, definitely.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Teacher

In contrast, a few participants believe the length of their placement was too short to adequately explore their host country in order to gain an in-depth awareness of the culture. This appears to have been the case in particular for participants required to work full-time hours and were disappointed they had very little time to visit other nearby cities.

“I want to do more stuff like it. It was the most fun thing ever and I’m really grateful that I had the opportunity to do it...it’s almost like [I can’t] really understand [...] German culture because I only spent two weeks there.”

— Cohort 1, studying Design

Language skills

The qualitative research findings illustrate that the development of language skills varied considerably among participants. Participants outlined several approaches which facilitated language skills acquisition and included: informal development through the workplace where other colleagues helped understanding and pronunciation, language classes, accommodation arrangements, and pre-placement preparation. These are discussed in turn below.

The majority of interviewees reported learning basic language skills, such as greetings. This level of language learning usually occurred informally as a result of the placement taking place in a different country. For example, participants picked up a few words by interacting with locals in public spaces when visiting shops, and/or peers from the host country with whom participants studied or worked supporting them in their understanding of the native language by teaching them some basic phrases. In most instances participants indicated that this level of language acquisition was sufficient for them to interact effectively when in the host country as in the vast majority of cases English was also spoken by their foreign peers and many local residents. Furthermore some participants suggested that it would not have been worthwhile to have attended an extensive language course prior to commencing their placement as their time away was relatively short and basic language skills were sufficient for their needs.

“When you went to the shop and you bought something or the restaurant [...] the waitresses would know English anyway, but if it’s Lidl you could be like ‘danke schoen’, you know the little phrases. I think, it would’ve been a lot more difficult if we were expected to learn more German, because I think we probably [needed] lessons for about a month or two months, [and] it wasn’t really that long.”

— Cohort 1, studying Design

There is some evidence that placements arranged by training providers with large groups undertaking placements simultaneously are most likely to make provisions for participants to acquire some basic language knowledge of the host country in advance. At least one of these training providers also equipped participants with a language dictionary to enable them to learn how to better communicate with their peers in the host country. The participants who had experienced this preparation valued it and believed it adequately met their desired language skills required for the placement.

However, in a few cases, particularly where participants completed a work placement within a small family-owned businesses, in small towns or more rural areas, communication was challenging. In these settings it was less likely that the hosts had basic knowledge of the English language which appears to have been a critical factor in aiding communication with participants in other scenarios. These participants believe that having some basic language skills in these circumstances would have improved their experience. It is interesting to note however that some of these participants developed alternative creative ways to communicate with their hosts (for example, through hand gestures) which is a skills development in itself. In addition some of these participants consider that their experience was effective in helping them to become more patient and resilient which they consider to be useful skills for their future.

“Sometimes you wouldn’t understand the language [so would] use the sign language like using your hands to understand or using Google Translator as well.”

— Cohort 2, studying Motor Vehicle

The qualitative research identified two instances where the language skills developed by participants were more in-depth. Firstly, two participants reported undertaking more formal language learning as part of their placement. As part of their work experience they were required to complete an online language course which included an examination process to assess their understanding. According to the participants, this approach ensured they allocated designated time at regular intervals to improve their language skills. These participants were incentivised to work hard by the prospect of receiving a certificate to demonstrate completion.

“We did an online Italian course [...] With the Italian course, the more tests we did on the Italian course, the more certificates we got and [this demonstrated] how far our Italian had progressed.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

Secondly, one participant explained how by staying in accommodation shared with other students studying Italian at their host university they were immersed in the host country’s language. The participant was able to engage in Italian-only days whereby the students spoke solely in Italian all day. This approach enabled this individual to rapidly acquire knowledge of the language. He moved beyond the basic skills to being able to speak to his Italian friends in their native language.

“We’d have Italian days, where we’d only speak Italian for a couple hours a day... We’d have no choice but to immerse ourselves in the language, which I find amazing even now. I still speak to some of my Italian friends in their language, and they really appreciate it.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Insurance Analyst

Despite the limitations in the extent to which many participants acquired new language skills, most of them indicated that the placement abroad has encouraged them to either want to learn a different language or be more open-minded to learning basic phrases in the languages of the countries to which they travel.

“I was looking at using those free learning language apps, like Duolingo, and I was thinking about learning Dutch or Mandarin.”

— Cohort 1, studying Marketing and Management

A small number of participants reported limited or no impact in terms of the language skills they acquired. Typically this results from participants having low expectations for the amount of language skills they should develop during their placement. The reasons for this are:

- The timeframe of the placements is perceived to be too short to necessitate the learning of the host country’s language, particularly where participants worked full-

- time at the time of and/or during their placement so had little availability to acquire this additional skill; and
- The placement is considered to be a one-off temporary opportunity which would not be followed up with further visits to the host country which contributes to a lack of motivation to learn the language.

“It was much too short a time to really be bothered with [learning Spanish].”

— Cohort 1, unemployed

04. CAREER PATHS

This chapter considers the usefulness of the skills acquired and developed by participants during their placement in relation to their subsequent employment and education experiences and the extent to which the placements influenced participants' career choices.

According to the Erasmus+ programme guide,⁵ completing a VET placement provides participants with the opportunity to develop job-specific skills that inherently boost their employability. This chapter concerns the subsequent education and career paths of the participants involved in the qualitative research and the impact of the skills they developed and acquired during the placement on their choices. It predominantly draws on Cohort 1's findings as these respondents have moved on from the programme in which they were engaged at the time of their placement. However, the findings from Cohort 2 relating to current learners are incorporated in relation to their anticipated impacts on future education and employment plans. First a brief summary of the current professional status of the research participants is provided to give context to the subsequent findings followed by a consideration of the placements' influence on their career choices. Then the usefulness of the placement on participants' current occupation and/or further studies is examined.

Current professional status

Of the 25 Cohort 1 participants interviewed, there is a wide variation in their education and employment status. Just under half are in education, two-fifths are in employment and only a few are unemployed (3). Most of the interviewees in employment are working on a full-time basis, often in a professional occupation (for example, teacher, head chef, and designer). Some of them were undertaking an apprenticeship (for instance, in building services engineering). A small proportion (2) were working part-time alongside studying to further their education.

The majority of participants currently in education are studying an undergraduate degree at university. A range of courses were reported: graphic design, marketing and management, business management and early childhood studies. A couple of participants have continued their studies within the further education and skills sector to pursue either vocational courses, such as animal management, or A-Levels (e.g. Biology, Chemistry and Maths).

⁵ European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide Version 2 (2019): 15-01-2019

Influence of placement on choice of career path

The influence of the skills acquired and developed during the placement on participants' subsequent career paths differs for participants both between and within the categories of employment status set out earlier. There was no clear relationship in the findings between current professional status and the extent to which respondents considered the placement increased the likelihood of employment. It is important to note for many participants their career trajectory is far from linear, primarily driven by changes in their areas of interest.

IN EMPLOYMENT

The qualitative research findings indicate that the extent to which participants now in employment consider the skills and experience they gained from their placement to be useful depends upon the industry in which they work. Teachers, and English teachers in particular, are most likely to find the skills they acquired had the greatest impact on their employability. The key reason for this is that the placements they undertook provided practical experience of teaching English as a foreign language. This enabled these individuals to develop the essential pedagogical skills and confidence to deliver classes successfully.

“I’ve been teaching ever since really, the last thing I did before I left Italy was to give a teacher training session on exam teaching and all that started on my teacher placement in Seville. So [the placement had an] absolute tangible benefit.”

Cohort 1, employed, Teacher

These participants now in teaching are also notable for the following reasons:

- They were completing a course with a significant focus on foreign language knowledge at the time of undertaking their placement so they had an inherent interest in having an opportunity to develop their language skills;
- Their placement was an integral part of the course they had selected for instance TEFL/DipTESOL and their completion of it would enable them to gain the qualification they sought;
- By undertaking a course related to teaching English abroad at the time of undertaking the placement, they had a certain degree of clarity about their career pathway; and
- They tended to be mature students and consequently better able to make informed decisions about the skills and experience required to succeed in their career ambitions having already had some experience in the labour market.

“It’s opened many, many doors, to have this qualification means that I can work in any language school in the UK, or in Europe. In fact, anywhere in the world.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Teacher

Participants employed in industries other than teaching are less likely to suggest that their placement was germane to their current choice of occupation. While their placement was relevant to the course they were undertaking at the time, their current employment is not directly aligned to the studies they completed. There are two core reasons for this. Firstly, many participants were fairly young at the time of their placement, uncertain about their career aspirations, and have subsequently chosen alternative career paths as their interests have changed.

“I don’t think I really got [as] much out of it [as] someone else could have, because it didn’t become the kind of career path I wanted to go down.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

Secondly, for others, the selection of their current occupation has been influenced by more pressing factors (for example, to meet financial needs while they consider their long-term career plans).

“Mainly it was a financial standpoint. I just had to get a job to make ends meet at home. It’s not a job that I want to particularly continue doing [...] It’s just a case of trying to get money.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Sales Assistant

For some participants, both those already in employment in Cohort 1 and those in Cohort 2 at the start of their career paths, the practical experience gained during their placements has played a critical role in helping them to make informed decisions about which careers they do not wish to pursue.

“It had an impact on my decisions of how to look at my career progression [...] I realised after doing it [...] it wasn’t really the kind of job I wanted to do.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

IN EDUCATION

All of the interviewees currently in further or higher education indicated the placement either validated a prior decision to commence a course or provided clarity on what specific course they wished to apply to at university. For some participants, the placement was an opportunity to gain practical experience of the theoretical knowledge gained from their course, and confirm their decision to continue their desired career by the means of a degree in higher education or a higher level in further education.

“I went to Sweden. I was working in schools and nurseries over there [...] I was on childcare, Level 3 childcare [...] I want to work in nurseries over here, so obviously to gain more experience in another country there was relevant.”

— Cohort 1, studying Early Childhood Studies

For others, the placement helped them to make an informed decision about a direction in which they did not wish their careers to develop. For example, one respondent who undertook a placement in a school, assisting with the teaching of art lessons which included visiting galleries, specified how these activities enabled them to clarify that they did not want to produce art that would be showcased in museums. Subsequently, they went on to enrol on a graphic design course, as opposed to art design, which will enable them to become a designer.

“I’m a designer and I wanted to make stuff that improves people’s lives rather than stuff that people see in a gallery, look at, nod their head at or whatever, and then two minutes later they just walk off. I just want to impact people lives.”

— Cohort 1, studying Design

It is important to note that a couple of interviewees expressed disappointment that their placement was not matched to the industry relevant to the vocational course they were undertaking at the time. Consequently, this restricted the potential influence of the placement on their course selection. That said, such instances did provide participants with an opportunity to rule out areas in which they do not want to work in future.

UNEMPLOYED

All three interviewees in this research who are currently unemployed emphasised that their placement had enabled them to develop skills which were highly beneficial for subsequent jobs they had after the placement. Their unemployed status at present has not been influenced by the placements they undertook but is instead a result of them now being retired (in one case) or facing personal uncertainty about the type of career they would like to pursue.

“But having done the Erasmus placement, I was able to get that work and I spent several months in 2017 teaching English as a foreign language. I didn’t carry on with that because early in 2018, I got a job proofreading and translating with a travel company quite near to where I lived [and then retired].”

— Cohort 1, unemployed

Applicability of skills gained through placements

The qualitative research findings suggest that participants have effectively employed a number of the transferable skills and experiences they gained from placements to enhance their career prospects. The specific ways in which these have proved useful vary depending on whether participants are now in employment or education, although there are some parallels in the nature of these. It should be noted however that the number of participants able to provide specific examples of how they have applied the skills and experience was limited.

IN EMPLOYMENT

Participants currently in employment cited a number of ways in which the skills they had acquired and developed during their placement had increased their employability. These include enhancing their CVs and thereby their attractiveness to employers, employing particular skills learned to increase their effectiveness in their current roles, and opening up employment opportunities abroad.

A few interviewees did however perceive little professional impact to have resulted from their placement. This is primarily because the knowledge and practical experience they gained is irrelevant to their current roles which vary from the subjects they were studying at the time.

“I don’t think the [placement] really did much for me...It’s not really [linked to] my career path.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Clinical Support Worker

Strengthen CVs and attractiveness to employers

Regardless of whether participants currently in employment undertook placements relevant to their occupation at present, all interviewees highlighted how they reference their placement in their CV in order to enhance it. Some of the interviewees explained how they provide specific examples of the skills they acquired or developed during their placement to demonstrate requisite experience in the recruitment processes they undertake for jobs. For instance, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability. One participant reported how the transferrable skills from their placement that they demonstrated in their job application enabled them to obtain their current role.

“When [the employer] saw it, they were like, ‘Oh, this is really good, we’ll take you on.’ Because you have a bit of experience about how to handle different situations.”

— Cohort 1, studying Public Services

Another respondent, who is no longer pursuing the career in archaeology for which they were training when they undertook their placement, still recognises the high esteem with which their experience is held in the profession. They believe evidencing participation in such a placement would have a positive impact on their employability in that sector.

“If you were to apply for a job in archaeology in the UK, they would ask you to provide evidence of experience and if you have an archaeological skills passport and you can hand that over to the potential employer and tell them this is what other supervisors have signed me off for [...] it [would] have a big impact on any future jobs that I would do in archaeology.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Insurance Analyst

Increase effectiveness in their chosen occupation

Many interviewees acknowledged they have been able to use the skills gained from their placement, in particular the soft skills they developed (such as, increased confidence, the ability to work independently and/or as part of a team, and communication skills), both in their current roles and personal life. The majority of interviewees were only able to articulate the employment of such skills in generalities; however, a few were able to provide specific examples. For instance, one interviewee working as a chaperone for a film cast in Hungary believed they were only able to perform this role confidently and happily having undertaken a placement in the country and had the opportunity to understand the culture.

“I was back in Hungary as a chaperone. And because of my experience, I was comfortable in Budapest. And being able to support all those people from Italy, Albania, Switzerland [...] and obviously the film crew were all Hungarian. And I was really confident and happy to be a sort of bridge between the cultures and supporting people and helping out and that sort of thing. I don't think I could have done any of that if I hadn't have done this placement in Hungary.”

— Cohort 1, unemployed

Another interviewee described how they had been able to usefully implement the alternative communication skills they had developed while completing their placement abroad where they were unable to speak the native language. Building on their experience they were able to adapt teaching methods and create games and visual information to aid their communication when volunteering to teach Syrian refugees in their home town.

OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK ABROAD

A couple of interviewees stated that their placement had provided them with the opportunity to work abroad. One respondent returned to their placement school and worked there for a year, while another felt confident that, should they wish to return to where they undertook their placement, their host organisation would try to find them a role.

“If I wanted to go and work with the people that I worked with in Portugal, I am sure that I could contact them and say, do you have anything coming up? And they would do anything they could to accommodate that.”

— Cohort 1, employed, Insurance Analyst

While only a few of the participants in Cohort 1 have worked abroad since completing their placement, the majority of participants involved in the qualitative research indicated that their experience had either affirmed or raised the prospect that they could work abroad if they wished. While many participants have no desire to work abroad due to family commitments and/or personal preference, others reported that the experience had

encouraged them to consider working abroad in future. These individuals indicated that the environment, culture and/or lifestyle were key factors of attraction.

In education

Participants in education identified a few of the ways in which the skills they acquired or developed during their placement have, or they anticipate will have in the case of Cohort 2, been applied usefully. These include enhancing the content of their application submissions to further or higher education institutions and enabling them to undertake their studies with greater confidence. There are notable similarities in the usefulness of the skills gained from the placements for participants currently in education and those in employment.

ENHANCING APPLICATION SUBMISSIONS

All interviewees currently in education acknowledged that the skills and knowledge they demonstrated in their application process that they had acquired or developed during their placement had helped them to secure a place on their current course. They believed that by referencing these examples in their personal statements and/or interviews they increased their attractiveness to the institutions during the recruitment process. Some of the participants suggested that the placements provide a more unique work experience which gives them an advantage over other applicants competing to secure university offers. Similarly some of the focus group participants in Cohort 1 also highlighted how they anticipate referencing the skills and competencies they gained during their placement in future applications to further or higher education institutions in order to boost their chances of success.

“I included it in my personal statement. I got five offers which is quite nice to have. I think that’s what made me stand out of other people who would’ve got that place. The experience is definitely unique to have.”

— Cohort 1, studying A-Levels

Some interviewees also recognised the importance of their placement’s work experience in terms of their future employability. These participants believe that when they commence their job hunting on completion of their course employers will perceive it to be an asset as they often seek both qualifications and on-the-job experience. In particular, a few interviewees highlighted how the soft-skills they gained from their placement are typically listed in job specifications and will be useful for their future career.

“It shows [...] I can work in a new environment with people that I don’t necessarily know or haven’t worked with before, and I can work as a team.”

— Cohort 1, studying Animal Management

INCREASING CONFIDENCE IN THEIR ABILITY TO COMPLETE THEIR COURSE

For some interviewees currently in education, the skills acquired or developed during their placement have been useful to the courses they study at present or undertook at the time of the placement for two reasons. Firstly, they helped to develop their understanding of the course. A few respondents alluded to the fact that the placements had provided an interactive way in which to gain practical hands-on experience of the theoretical concepts taught in their courses. This enabled them to feel better equipped and confident to understand the latter. Secondly, they have been able to utilise the soft skills they developed (for instance, communication skills). One respondent identified how their experience on their placement had increased their confidence to engage in public speaking and deliver presentations as opposed to opting to do written assignments.

“In university, we get PowerPoint presentations. [Previously] I was, like, ‘I don’t want to do it.’ In fact, I used to refuse them at the time and do the written assignment instead. But [now I think] ‘I will give it a go.’ [...] So, yes, this has actually impacted on me.”

— Cohort 1, studying International Tourism Business Management and employed part-time

Experience of certification

For the majority of participants, receiving a certificate to confirm completion of their placement was not considered to be important or useful to their professional development. While some respondents received a certificate, many others did not. There was no pattern among the type of home institution or course for those who received a certificate. For those who did, they rarely used the certificate and documenting the experience on CVs, job applications and personal statements was perceived to be sufficient to demonstrate participation in the placement.

The minority of participants who were keen to receive a certificate were motivated by the following reasons:

- It demonstrates achieving a particular qualification for participants for whom the placement was an integral part of their course; and
- It validates specialist knowledge or skills for employers in sectors which require such experience; however, only a minority of participants mentioned this requirement. In one example an interviewee received five certificates for being qualified to create Google adverts and ad-buys, and for completing a language course.

The majority of respondents interviewed did not receive a Europass mobility certificate and nor had they heard of it. One interviewee reported having received a Europass mobility certificate but could not comment on its usefulness since they had not used it to date.

05. CONCLUSIONS

The report concludes by considering the key findings to take forward for future Erasmus+ VET placements for UK projects.

1. The principal way in which participants derive benefit from VET placements is through their personal development. For many participants, particularly younger ones, it was their first opportunity to travel abroad independently of their parents or carers. Through interactions with new people from different places participants' developed their communication and social skills. The requirement to be self-reliant in terms of finances, time management, punctuality, and travel plans increased participants' independence. These soft skills developed by the participants reflect the transferable skills sought by business and education institutions. Participants able to demonstrate these skills in job or course applications consider themselves to have a competitive advantage. Where contact with participants is maintained following completion of the placement, home institutions can assist them to identify and articulate these skills in order to enhance their employability.

2. The skills and competencies gained during VET placements have the most direct applicability to the current careers of participants who were clear about their career pathway (for example, language teachers). These learners tended to be the most self-motivated to acquire as much relevant experience and skills from their placement as possible in order to further their career. However, the placements play an important role even where participants choose an alternative course or employment direction to the one in which they were studying at the time of it. A large proportion of the placement participants are relatively young and without fully developed career plans. The opportunity to train or work abroad helped to broaden their horizons and increase the range of their experiences. This has enabled participants to make informed decisions about their career path through a greater understanding of what they do and do not wish to pursue. In addition, many participants reported referencing their placement to demonstrate the transferrable skills they had developed and acquired on it to apply for jobs or places on further or higher education courses.

3. For many participants the placement is a one-off episode in their education, as demonstrated by the limited number of participants who have chosen to work abroad since undertaking their placement. The majority of participants were presented with the opportunity to undertake a placement having already selected their course. As a consequence participants had a limited understanding of how the placements could influence their career plans. Home institutions can play an important role in drawing participants' attention explicitly to the opportunities placements provide to develop personally and acquire transferable skills applicable to their career paths of interest. This can be facilitated effectively during pre-visit briefings or by mentors who supervise

participants when they are abroad. The evidence suggests that participants with a clearer understanding of the potential benefits of the placements on their personal or professional development are more likely to derive greater benefit. Sharing examples (whether in person or written) with placement applicants of how previous participants have used their experience to successfully apply for courses or jobs could help them to better appreciate how the placements can influence their future careers.

4. The acquisition of language skills during placements for UK participants is limited. This is the product of several factors including: the relatively short timeframe of the placements; many people in the host countries being able to speak English; and, the minimal necessity for many participants to learn another language as part of their studies. Lack of language skills, however, can prove problematic for some placements, particularly those in small businesses or located in more rural areas where fewer people are likely to speak English. Potential ways to encourage participants to learn the basics of the host country's language include the home institutions providing simple language knowledge and equipping participants with language dictionaries or apps to aid their communication during their placements. Additional effective methods to increase language acquisition include integrating online language courses into the placement or placing participants during their stay in accommodation with native speakers so they are encouraged to speak the local language.

5. The time participants spend in the host country not undertaking their work or training placement activities is important to their wider development. It enables participants to participate in social and cultural activities which can be useful for developing soft skills and is widely appreciated by participants. Home and host institutions should consider the value of this when planning the structure and content of placements. The balance of structured and unstructured cultural activities is also important for placement organisers to consider. Arranged group visits, for example sightseeing, are useful for participants to gain an appreciation of the culture and history of the host country. While having the opportunity to explore the locality in which they are staying on their own enables participants to develop their independence.

6. There is little evidence to suggest that organisations hosting placements are maintaining contact with participants which would have the potential benefit of helping to develop their pipeline of talent. In the absence of this it is important to understand what benefit host organisations are seeking to derive from the participants and what improvements to the system could be made to ensure this is delivered. The relatively limited length of the typical placements could be a barrier to firms investing significant time and energy in individuals who are placed with them for such a short amount of time. Organisations and enterprises which value the role participants play during their placement are likely to have a greater incentive to provide placements offering a range of interesting experiences for participants to develop both personally and professionally.

APPENDIX 1: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

As a transnational project, a consistent methodological approach to the other participating countries was implemented. In depth qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with two cohorts. Cohort 1: participants who have completed the programme they were engaged in at the time of their placement and have moved onto the next stage of their careers; and Cohort 2: current learners who have completed a placement within the last year. The topic guides used for the interviews and focus groups were those produced by the Polish NA for the transnational project with the wording adapted where applicable for a UK audience. A detailed overview of the sampling and analysis approach is offered.

Sampling and recruitment

DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Depth interviews were conducted with Cohort 1 participants. These participants were identified from the 130 respondents who in their response to the 2018 Erasmus+ vocational training and work placement abroad survey consented to being contacted for a follow-up interview. From this sample CFE aimed to undertake at least 20, and up to 25, depth telephone interviews. The sampling approach for this study was purposive and designed in partnership with Ecorys. At the project's inception meeting it was agreed that a pragmatic approach should be adopted for the sampling strategy in order to achieve the target number of interviews while also trying to reflect the interesting findings in the survey and the profile of the survey respondents. After reviewing the survey responses and previous topic guides, two primary sampling characteristics were adopted. These were: current educational/employment status and type of organisation in which the education or training placement abroad took place. Table 1 below illustrates the achieved sample. To reflect the sample, fewer unemployed participants were targeted for interview; only 12 of the 130 survey respondents were unemployed.

Table 1: Sampling stratification for completed interviews

	In education – compulsory education or studying for a degree	In employment	Unemployed
Placement took place in vocational education school / institution	2	2	1
Placement took place in enterprise	4	3	2
Placement took place in 'other' organisation	3	2	1
TOTAL	9	7	4

Since some time had elapsed from when the survey was conducted, Ecorys sent an initial opt-in email to the sample of 130 respondents inviting them to participate in a follow-up interview. CFE then followed up these respondents in line with the sampling strategy.

In total, twenty-five in depth telephone interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes, were carried out with Cohort 1 participants. All interviewees received a privacy notice with information about how their data would be protected. Interviewees were given a £15 voucher to incentivise participation.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were carried out with Cohort 2 participants. The focus groups were recruited via the projects funded in 2017 and 2018, at the level of the provider. Ecorys sent introductory emails to organisations which had supported large numbers of placement participants and then provided CFE with contact details of those organisations which expressed a willingness to host a focus group. CFE followed-up this communication and provided the organisations with further details, including privacy and data protection information.

The providers hosting the focus groups were asked to invite eight to ten learners to the focus group whom reflected diverse experiences where possible. The suggested sampling characteristics of learners were: duration of placement, industry area in which the placement was carried out, country in which the placement took place, and gender. It is important to note that in order to provide flexibility for those arranging the focus groups and accommodate learner timetables, these characteristics were not always represented. Three focus groups, each with six to eight participants, lasting approximately 90 minutes, were undertaken in person in England with Cohort 2 participants. Focus group participants were given a £25 voucher to incentivise participation.

Analysis

A total of 28 interviews (of which three were focus groups) were conducted with placement participants. All interviews were transcribed. The research aims and discussion guides were used to structure the data analysis using Nvivo. An inductive approach to qualitative analysis was adopted to aid an understanding of meaning in the data through the development of the summary themes and categories identified, otherwise described as a process of data reduction. This means CFE did not attempt to enumerate qualitative data in ways that were inappropriate and cannot be supported by evidence. Instead, the focus was on displaying the range and diversity of experiences using rich description and precisely identifying the facilitators and barriers that underlie the impact of the placements.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

INTERVIEW DETAILS FOR PARTICIPANT

The **research aim** is to help the UK's National Agency for the Erasmus+ training and work placements abroad programme, Ecorys, gain a better understanding of the experiences of, and impact on, participants who have undertaken one of the placements.

The **purpose of the interview** today is to gain an understanding of your experience and views about your Erasmus+ training or work placement abroad. We are especially interested in your thoughts on:

- Your overall experience of the training or work placement abroad;
- The context of your education or training in which the placement abroad took place;
- Identify the skills, if any, you gained during your placement abroad; and
- Consider the usefulness of the project in furthering your professional and/or personal development.

[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Brand recognition of 'Erasmus+' might not be very high amongst interviewees so please refer to 'work or training placement abroad' rather than 'Erasmus+' during the interview].

PRIOR TO RECORDING: Ask the participant if they have read the Privacy Notice [if not then it is important to summarise the information contained] and provide them with the opportunity to ask you any questions about the research and/or how their data will be used.

IF THEY HAVE READ THE INFORMATION – PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING DETAIL

We expect the interview to last no more than 60 minutes. It is important to note that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers; it's your thoughts and experiences that we are interested in.

You have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions and you can leave the interview at any point without giving a reason. All information captured will be handled in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which means it will be kept confidential and all the information you provide will be anonymised before being used in reports and deleted by one year after the study is completed.

With your permission, I would like to record the interview to assist us with reviewing and understanding your responses in more detail. Is this ok?

[If not, then explain that you will take notes of their responses as you conduct the interview instead and that this might make the interview last a bit longer and not provide as accurate a record of it as an audio recording.]

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Then switch the recorder on [if applicable] and read out the following statements - For the purpose of the recording, I will now ask you to confirm that:

- You have read and understood the Privacy Notice, and had the opportunity to ask questions
- You understand who will have access to your personal data, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the research
- You agree for the interview to be recorded

Now proceed with the interview questions.

Introduction and motivations (10 minutes)

INTERVIEWER TO SAY: Before we go into the main purpose of the interview, I am going to ask you some questions about your background and your current educational / employment status.

1. Firstly, are you currently studying or working?

Probes:

If studying:

- *What are you currently studying? (subject, length of course, full-time or part-time)*
- *Where are you studying? (type of institution)*
- *What attracted you to the course and/or institution?*
- *What link, if any, does it have to the studies you undertook when you did your placement abroad?*

If in employment:

- *What is your job-role?*
- *What is your employment situation e.g. full-time, part-time, self-employed?*
- *What attracted you to the job role?*

- *What link, if any, does it have to the studies you undertook when you did your placement abroad?*
- *Are you working in the career you anticipated when you undertook your placement, and if not, why not?*

If neither in education nor in employment

- *What type of educational studies have you previously undertaken? (subject, length of course, full-time or part-time)*
- *Have you previously been working? (role, job-pattern)*
- *Are you currently looking for a job or course? (type of role, industry, course)*

2. To provide context to your responses, could you briefly outline the type of institution you were attending in the UK when you went on your placement abroad and the industry in which you were studying?

Prompts:

- *Secondary school sixth form, sixth form college, Further Education college, or an apprenticeship (work-based training)*

3. We will go into further detail during our discussion but for now please can you provide an overview of your placement abroad, including whether it was training or work based?

Prompts:

- *Country/countries where placement took place*
- *Type of host institution/organisation*
- *Length of placement*
- *Accommodation (where stayed i.e. with other students, host family, other; who arranged this i.e. home or host institution)*

4. What prompted you to undertake training or work placement abroad?

Probes:

- *To what extent was the fact that the institution at which you were studying organised such placements abroad a factor in you choosing to go there?*
- *What were your reasons / motivations for undertaking the placement abroad?*

- *What did you hope to achieve / learn from undertaking the placement abroad?*

Experiences of undertaking an Erasmus+ training or work placement (10 minutes)

INTERVIEWER TO SAY: I'm now going to ask you some questions about your experience of the placement itself.

5. Please could you tell me how your placement abroad was chosen?

Probes:

- *Was it compulsory for you to attend the placement? What, if any specific criteria did you have to meet?*
- *What was the size of the group that undertook the placement?*
- *How was the country/organisation/institution chosen?*
- *When and how did you find out about what your placement abroad would entail? How much information was provided?*

6. Prior to undertaking your training and work placement abroad, did you undertake any other training as part of the placement in your home country? If so, could you provide an overview of the training?

Prompts:

- *Length of training*
- *Training activities*
- *Type of institution where the training was completed*

7. Please can you provide an overview of the learning activities, if any, you were involved in as part of the placement?

Probes:

- *What did it entail e.g. classroom teaching / shadowing in the workplace?*
- *What learning/tasks/roles did you undertake?*
- *How many days per week and hours per day did it cover?*
- *How useful did you find these tasks that you were involved in and why?*
- *In what ways, if any, were the tasks relevant to your home studies and/or job?*

- *Did you feel the tasks/content was pitched at the right level and why?*

8. What activities if any, did you do in your free time (e.g. cultural activities)?

Prompts:

- *Were these prescribed as part of the placement or did you undertake them independently?*
- *How much time did you have to partake in cultural activities?*
- *Did the cultural activities help you settle in and why?*
- *How important were these to your trip?*

9. How equipped did you feel your host institution/organisation was in delivering your placement?

Prompts:

- *Equipment*
- *Working conditions i.e. hours per day and per week you were expected to work/train*
- *Infrastructure and support i.e. to meet learning and/or skills needs*
- *Company/organisation reputation*

10. Did you have a tutor or representative from your home institution attend your placement? If so, could you provide an overview of their role and thoughts on how effectively this was carried out?

[If not, would this have been useful and why?]

Prompts:

- *Pastoral support*
- *Attend classes, assist in communication, facilitate activities whilst abroad*

11. How would you describe your overall **experience** of undertaking the placement?

Prompts:

- *Selection process*
- *Length of placement*
- *Meeting your learning and/or skills needs*
- *Challenges/highlights*

12. Were there any aspects of the placement that you particularly liked / disliked?

- *What were these and why? [Probe both likes and dislikes as appropriate]*

13. Have you undertaken any placements or internships other than your placement abroad, and if so, how do they compare to it?

Probes:

- *Please can you provide an overview of that placement/internship?*
- *In what ways was that placement/internship similar or different to the placement abroad?*

Benefits and impacts of undertaking an Erasmus+ placement abroad (20 minutes)

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: The next few questions aim to build on interviewees' survey responses regarding their training or work placement.

INTERVIEWER TO SAY: This section relates to the benefits of placements in relation to the skills acquired and the possible impact on your personal and/or professional development.

14. What, if any skills, abilities or knowledge did you acquire during your placement abroad?

Prompts:

- *Language and communication skills (occupational language, general foreign language, collaboration with colleagues)*
- *Professional skills (new knowledge, management, workplace information, work in an international team)*
- *Technical abilities (use of equipment, devices and machines)*
- *Social skills (working in an international team)*
- *Cultural knowledge (different cultures and countries)*

15. In what ways, if any, have you been able to use/apply the skills acquired during the placement since completing it?

[Interviewer to probe as appropriate from Q15]

Prompts:

- *In what ways, if any, did the process of gaining this knowledge or skills differ to how you are taught in your home institution?*
- *What, if any, influence did this have on the type of skills, abilities and knowledge you developed during your placement?*
- *To what extent, did the way you were treated differ during the placement from your home institution?*

16. Did you receive any certificates as part of your placement abroad (in particular the Europass Mobility certificate) and if so, how useful have they been since completing the placement e.g. in relation to further study or job applications?

17. What opportunities, if any, existed at your home institution to discuss your experience of your placement abroad following its completion?

18. Were any noticeable changes implemented at your home institution following your placement abroad?

Prompts:

- *Curriculum of vocational training*
- *Equipment*

19. In what ways, if any, has undertaking a placement abroad had an impact on your personal development?

Prompts:

- *Confidence*
- *Perceptions of other countries and cultures*
- *Relationships with people*
- *Did you maintain contact with any peers or supervisors from your placement? If and how have you benefitted from this since?*

20. In what ways, if any, has undertaking a placement abroad had an impact on your professional development?

Probes:

- *In what ways, if any, has it influenced your selection of the courses, jobs, and/or roles you have since studied/held?*

- *In what ways, if any, has it helped you achieve the career decisions you have made to date?*

Probes:

If studying:

- *Did the placement influence your decision to pursue a specific course and/or place of study?*
- *Did the placement help develop your knowledge of the course content you are studying?*
- *Do you feel undertaking the placement will help you when looking for a job, and if so, how and why?*

If in employment:

- *Did you mention the placement in your job application?*
- *Did contacts made during your placement help find a job and/or were you referred to an employer via your placement?*
- *Are you working in a similar industry to the organisation where you undertook your placement?*
- *Have you used the skills acquired during your placement in this or previous job roles?*

If neither in education nor in employment

- *Do you think participating in the placement will help you find a job/course in future?*

Recommendations for improvements (10 minutes)

INTERVIEWER TO SAY: The next few questions ask you about your thoughts on what, if any, improvements could be made to the Erasmus+ training and work placement abroad programme.

21. To what extent did the placement abroad meet your expectations, and why?

Probes:

- *Can you provide some examples of your expectations and ways in which these were or were not met?*

22. Have you / would you recommend the placement abroad programme to your colleagues / friends, and why?

Probes:

- *What reasons do you use to explain your viewpoint?*

23. In what ways, if any, could the placement abroad programme be improved for future participants?

Probes:

- *How would these improvements make it more useful for participants?*
- *What advice would you give someone considering undertaking a training or work placement abroad?*

Close of interview (2 minutes)

24. Is there anything that hasn't been discussed so far that you think is important for the research team to consider?

25. Do you have any further comments you would like to make?

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today.

APPENDIX 3: FOCUS GROUP TOPIC GUIDE

FOCUS GROUP DETAILS FOR PARTICIPANTS

The **research aim** is to help the UK's National Agency for the Erasmus+ training and work placements abroad programme, Ecorys, gain a better understanding of the experiences of, and impact on, participants who have undertaken one of the placements.

The **purpose of the focus group** today is to gain an understanding of your experience and views about your Erasmus+ training or work placement abroad. We are especially interested in your thoughts on:

- Your overall experience of the training or work placement abroad;
- The context of your education or training in which the placement abroad took place;
- Identify the skills, if any, you gained during your placement abroad; and
- Consider the usefulness of the project in furthering your professional and/or personal development.

[NOTE TO FACILITATOR: Brand recognition of 'Erasmus+' might not be very high amongst interviewees so please refer to 'work or training placement abroad' rather than 'Erasmus+' during the focus group].

PRIOR TO COMMENCING FOCUS GROUP - MODERATOR TO CHECK WITH EACH PARTICIPANT THAT THEY HAVE READ THE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND PRIVACY NOTICE

May I first check you have read the privacy notice with details of the purpose of the research, what your participation involves, and details of what will happen with the information you give to us today? [If not then it is important to summarise the information contained.]

IF THEY HAVE READ THE INFORMATION – PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING DETAIL

We expect the focus group to last no more than 90 minutes. It is important to note that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers; it's your thoughts and experiences that we are interested in.

You have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions and you can leave the group at any point without giving a reason. All information captured will be handled in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which means it will be kept confidential and all the information you provide will be anonymised before being used in reports and deleted by one year after the study is completed.

With your permission, I would like to record the focus group to assist us with reviewing and understanding your responses in more detail. Is this ok?

[If not, then explain that the respondent will not be able to participate, and thank them for their interest in the research.]

FACILITATOR TO CHECK ALL PARTICIPANTS HAVE GIVEN INFORMED CONSENT AND SIGNED THE FORM

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Now proceed with the interview questions.

Information about the respondents and their motivations (10 minutes)

1. Before we go into the main purpose for the group, can you first introduce yourself giving your name and provide some information about your current educational/employment status? [e.g. if working, what is your role and/or if studying what course are you doing?]

2. What attracted you to undertake a training or work placement abroad?

Probes:

- *What were your reasons / motivations for undertaking the placement abroad?*
- *What did you hope to achieve / learn from undertaking the placement abroad?*
- *Did you talk to other colleagues who had already completed a placement and if so, how influential were they in your decision to apply for the placement?*

3. Did you know your institution at which you were studying organised such placements? And did this influence your decision to study/train there?

- *What type of institution were you attending when you went on your placement? [Secondary school sixth form, sixth form college, Further Education college, or an apprenticeship (work-based training)]*

Experiences of undertaking an Erasmus+ training or work placement (30 minutes)

FACILITATOR TO SAY: I'm now going to ask you some questions about your experience of the placement itself. Please do share your opinions, as each of you may have had completely different experiences.

4. Please could each of you provide some information about the type of placement you undertook and how your placement abroad was chosen?

Probes:

- *Country/countries where placement took place, how was this chosen?*
- *Type of host institution/organisation*
- *Was it compulsory for you to attend the placement? Did your whole class undertake the placement?*
- *How did you select / were you recruited to the placement?*
- *Length of placement (what are your thoughts on the length of the placement?)*

5. Prior to undertaking your training and work placement abroad, did you undertake any other training as part of the placement in your home country? If so, could you provide an overview of the training?

Prompts:

- *Length of training*
- *Training activities*
- *Type of institution where the training was completed*

6. How equipped did you feel your host institution/organisation was in delivering your placement?

[Interviewer to probe for each: How did this influence your experience of the placement?]

Prompts:

- *Preparedness of hosting a placement (i.e. developed training programme)*
- *Introductions to the placement upon arrival*
- *Equipment and working conditions (i.e. number of days per week, hours per day, appropriateness of the tasks)*
- *Infrastructure and support i.e. to meet learning and/or skills needs*

- *Company/organisation reputation*
- *Team and other colleagues*
- *Accommodation*

7. Did you have a tutor or a representative from your home institution attend your placement? If so, could you provide an overview of their role?

[If not, would this have been useful and why?]

Prompts:

- *Pastoral support*
- *Attend classes, assist in communication, facilitate activities whilst abroad*

8. Please can you provide an overview of the learning/training activities, if any, you were involved in as part of the placement?

Prompts:

- *How useful did you find these tasks that you were involved in and why?*
- *In what ways, if any, were the tasks relevant to your home studies and/or job?*
- *Did you feel the tasks/content was pitched at the right level and why?*

9. What activities if any, did you do in your free time (e.g. cultural activities)?

Prompts:

- *Were these prescribed as part of the placement or did you undertake them independently?*
- *How much time did you have to partake in cultural activities?*
- *Did the cultural activities help you settle in and why?*
- *How important were these to your trip?*

10. Were there any aspects of the placement that you particularly liked or found challenging?

- *What were these and why? [Probe both as appropriate]*

11. Have you undertaken any placements or internships either at home or abroad other than this placement abroad, and if so, how do they compare to it?

Probes:

- *Please can you provide an overview of that placement/internship?*
- *In what ways was that placement/internship similar or different to the placement abroad?*

Summarising overall experience of training and work placement (15 minutes)

FACILITATOR TO SAY: You will find some post-it notes in front of you, if you had to summarise your placement experience in three words what would they be?

Facilitator to go through these words, gaining examples of why participants expressed those attitudes.

Benefits and impacts of undertaking an Erasmus+ placement abroad (20 minutes)

FACILITATOR TO SAY: This section relates to the benefits of placements in relation to the skills acquired and the possible impact on your personal and/or professional development.

12. What, if any skills, abilities or knowledge did you acquire during your placement abroad?

Prompts:

- *Language and communication skills (occupational language, general foreign language, collaboration with colleagues)*
- *Professional skills (new knowledge, management, workplace information, work in an international team)*
- *Technical abilities (use of equipment, devices and machines)*
- *Social skills (working in an international team, establishing contacts)*
- *Cultural knowledge (different cultures and countries)*

13. In what ways, if any, have you been able to use/apply the skills acquired during the placement since completing it?

Prompts:

- *In what ways, if any, did the process of gaining this knowledge or skills differ to how you are taught in your home institution?*
- *What, if any, influence did this have on the type of skills, abilities and knowledge you developed during your placement?*

14.What opportunities, if any, existed at your home institution to discuss your experience of your placement abroad following its completion?

Prompts:

- *Were any noticeable changes implemented at your home institution following your placement abroad? (i.e. curriculum of vocational training, equipment)*

15.In what ways, if any, do you think the placement might influence your future career decisions?

Probes:

- *In what ways, if any, might it influence your selection of the courses or job you are planning to pursue?*
- *Would you like to work abroad in the future? Why/why not?*

Recommendations for improvements (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR TO SAY: The next few questions ask you about your thoughts on what, if any, improvements could be made to the Erasmus+ training and work placement abroad programme.

16. Have you / would you recommend the placement abroad programme to your colleagues / friends, and why?

Probes:

- *What reasons do you use to explain your viewpoint?*

17.What advice would you give someone considering undertaking a training or work placement abroad?

Probes:

- *In what ways, if any, could the placement abroad programme be improved for future participants?*
- *How would these improvements make it more useful for participants?*

Close of focus group (2 minutes)

18. Is there anything that hasn't been discussed so far that you think is important for the research team to consider?

19. Do you have any further comments you would like to make?

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this focus group today.