

Leo-Net's Barcelona Seminar on Sustainable Employability

Ways forward in the implementation of ERASMUS+

Date	April 16th – 17th, 2015 in Barcelona, Spain
Venue	Universitat Pompeu Fabra – Ciutadella Campus Ramón Trias Fargas, 25-27 Barcelona
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INTRODUCTION TO THE SEMINAR

1. The seminar took place on 16 and 17 April 2015 at the UPF Ciutadella campus in Barcelona. This year's focus was on Sustainable Employability. Following guests were invited and held a presentation in the discipline. Mr Vincent Merk – Eindhoven University of Technology (NL), Senior lecturer in Intercultural Management and an advisor to the international community.
2. Ms Sonia Hendy-Isaac – Birmingham City University (UK), Senior lecturer in Curriculum Design
3. Mr Luca Pirozzi – European Commission (BE), Policy Officer - Higher Education - Erasmus+

The presentations of the guests can be found as annexes to this seminar report. This report deals with the outcomes on the discussions of the hot topics and the workshop of intercultural competences and employability.

HOT TOPICS ERASMUS+

In the first plenary session, several topics were discussed. These topics will be addressed in the key-findings and recommendations to the European Commission.

The first topic focused on **consortia**. How is the past performance taken into account, how do we address young graduates in the new Erasmus+ program, and specifically within consortia.

In some countries the past performance of consortia under the Life Long Learning programme was only partly taken into account. Therefore the consortia were confronted with a serious cut down in budget.

In other countries the past performance related to graduate mobility was not taken into account at all. Therefore there was hardly any budget available for the target group 'young graduates'.

Another issue is the rules that count for the participation of Young Graduates under ERASMUS+. Very often they are not planning a traineeship already during their studies. But they have to apply during their last year of study. So a solution for this is, just to be sure, that universities advise their students to apply. Consortia have no direct contact to the students of the consortia partners.

A best practice example was given to solve this. The consortia coordinator asks the partners to put a text on their individual websites, pointing out the possibility of a traineeship after graduation and guiding the students via a link to information provided by the consortium coordinator. This

information explains the rules set up by the Erasmus+ programme and invites the students to send an email showing their interest. Later on when they really want to do a traineeship they send again an email, mentioning the first one and only then the real application procedure starts.

The next topic addressed **cross-sectorial employability and apprenticeship**, how is this included in the new Erasmus+ program.

If we want companies to be a real stakeholder in traineeship mobility schemes for students, apprentices and graduates we have to take their needs serious. Companies do often look for young people with different study back grounds. However due to the remaining educational sectors within the Erasmus + Programme most of the time there is not one organization on behalf of the different sectors that can serve them so they have to deal with different educational institutions.

Then the new **Online Linguistic Support (OLS)** was addressed. As there are a lot of problems with the OLS, the application should have been tested prior to implementation in the Erasmus+ program. Furthermore, it was addressed that sometimes the course was given in the wrong languages (e.g. the difference between work and country language), or at a wrong level. Also it is noted that different institutions use different approaches on how to distribute the language courses. Some countries can distribute them at their own insight, whereas other countries have to distribute them according to (tight) regulations from their National Agencies. Lastly it is noted that sometimes the decision to go abroad is rather last minute (especially with placements) and that a grant cannot be distributed after the internship has already started and no OLS course has been done before the internship.

Another topic that was discussed in the primary session of the seminar involved the **zero grant students**. If for example a student does an internship for six months, and due to budget constraints, receives two months of funding and receives a zero-grant status for the remaining four months, would it be possible to pay the students on a moment one knows there is budget for it? Or if students extend their stay, is it possible to encounter problems with the time period? And can we deduct a certain amount of grant for students who are receiving an internship remuneration?

Note: All previous topics will be included in the recommendations and requests to the European Commission. Feedback of the Commission will be provided on the Leo-Net website (www.leo-net.org).

The next topic involved the **highly evolving labor markets**. Main concern is technical skills becoming obsolete in a very high rate. The question is raised how we cope with changing technical skills and how higher education institutes cope with changing technical skills? Besides the technical skills, there are also the soft skills that need to be addressed. Are we giving our students all the necessary skills which they need for their working life? And is it even possible to give our students all the correct skills? An 'adapt, adopt, improve' strategy is proposed for meeting the demands set by society.

Note: This topic is identified as a very important one and therefore needs further discussion. A forum discussion will be started via the Leo-Net LinkedIn group, moderated by Ms Line Pillet. To follow the discussion and/or actively contribute to it people need to sign up for the Leo-Net LinkedIn group. The topic will also be part of the programme for the Leo-Net Barcelona seminar 2016.

Interesting background information (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140913163925-131079-are-you-ready-to-become-obsolete-what-i-ve-learned-about-continuous-reinvention>).

PRESENTATION LUCA PIRROZZI – EMPLOYABILITY AND ERASMUS+

Luca Pirrozzi gave a presentation on the impact of the Erasmus+ programme. It covered the effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalization of higher education institutes.

The presentation started with a brief overview on youth inactivity, which is one of the main problems in Europe, followed by the opportunities to increase employability in Erasmus+. Following opportunities in Erasmus+ were defined by the commission: the organization of traineeships, mobility consortia, staff mobility, cooperation in strategic partnerships and knowledge alliances. Also some examples were given.

After the short introduction the motivation for students to participate in the Erasmus programme was discussed. The impact of this mobility period for their personal development was stressed. The reason why students should participate is that they have higher chances to have a good start on the labor market and a sustainable career afterwards. The improved skills of graduates are attractive for future employers.

The results of the Erasmus impact study are to be expected beginning 2016. One of the reasons for the study was to identify/compare different countries with respect to each other. At the moment five countries have provided enough data for the analysis (Spain, Germany, Italy, France and Poland). The impact study clearly showed differences between different geographical regions in Europe (western, southern, eastern and northern countries). However at the moment of the seminar, it was too early to draw clear conclusions.

Note: Presentation can be found on the Leo-Net website.

WORKSHOP VINCENT MERK – GROUP DISCUSSIONS

After the workshop on intercultural awareness given by *Vincent Merk* (Eindhoven University of Technology, NL) several aspects were debated

The discussion was focused around the **development of employability at institutions (HEI)**. The key problem was creating the awareness with people working at HEIs. But what is employability - the concept should be defined before it can be debated or actions can be discussed - and what is the role of an HEI to incite this? Should parents and society be involved and is international student mobility not just one of the means? Other tools could, for example be:

- Language courses;
- Internationalization at home;
- Lessons in foreign languages.

All of the attendees agreed on that thresholds for internationalization should be as low as possible.

There should be a dialog with companies to identify which skills are needed for those companies. HEIs might also focus on having a separate career development department in order to create sustainable careers. Give students the opportunity to be creative which leads to innovation and include alumni for mentoring and career examples or at least lower the threshold for the inclusion of alumni in career programs. At the moment, alumni are not enough reached by HEIs to include them in their career centers.

Furthermore, it is mentioned that there are different types of students who all have different learning skills. HEIs should counter this and also should provide opportunities for employees. *Vincent Merk* mentions the Kids University as an example (e.g. TU/e junior – [link \(NL\)](#)).

Note: Presentation of Vincent Merk can be found on the Leo-Net website.

Intercultural Awareness is highly important towards sustainable employability. On this subject Leo-Net offers the CULTOOL online course. For members the license fee is part of the overall service package. More information can be found on the Leo-Net website.

WORKSHOP Sonia Hendy-Isaac – GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Sonia Hendy-Isaac presented her view on aspects of employability at institutions of higher education.

What is the impact of employability? Do scholarship schemes tend to target the bright students, rather than the ones that really need a scholarship? The main problem with equal opportunity schemes is that they attract the bright students, rather than the 'shy' students who might benefit even more from the mobility schemes. It is up to the HEIs themselves to target students that really need the support. Unfortunately we see that HEIs focus on motivation, grades or practical assignments, in which creative and outstanding students have an advantage.

Furthermore, what are the benefits for students? A couple of questions can be raised:

- Why is international mobility important?
- Which skills does the student need to have?
- Which skills does the market demands?
- What happens in the real world? Are the skills we teach are students still relevant today?

Furthermore, what is the image of vocational apprenticeship? Within HEIs they are often not regarded properly academic, and students might experience uncooperativeness within their department. However, are these mobility programs valued by society? And do the students value the mobility programs, rather than a degree? And do these programs tend to increase self-employment and entrepreneurship?

Do students recognize all the skills they need in their life? Can they be obtained in another way? Volunteering can be a great way to increase skills that might be overlooked easily. Another example is learning a foreign language by watching movies. This enables people to engage in language in another way. And is it possible to incorporate this within the framework of the new Erasmus+ project. On the one hand there is skill shortage, where on the other hand we have a huge problem with youth unemployment in Europe. What can be the role of the program in countering this problem?

Career improvement needs an integrative approach and should be focused on trying to reach all students. One could think of offering special courses to students which focus on career enhancement, or on motivation. In these special courses focus on international mobility can be introduced as well. Point out that there are grants available for mobility to both students and staff at HEIs. Be aware that a lack of funding disappoints students and might lead to a decrease in students who want to apply for a mobility.

Lastly it was pointed out that past participating, receiving institutions should be motivated to participate once again. A base of alumni could be made who want to help students who want to go abroad. Students get motivated by practical examples, so follow-up students who return from their mobility period abroad. Ask for feedback from students, which will help institutions and will enhance the commitment of HEIs to invest time in mobility programs. Stress out that the mobility period is not over directly after the return to the home country.

The next point was about the global labor market and international mobility.

It is the university's responsibility to persuade students to do part of their curriculum abroad and how students can be prepared for that. It is impossible to let students take up on all the extra topics that are available throughout their studies, so they should be motivated to take on certain topics that are available to them. For example, an extra language course or a career development topic.

What is the role for the person employed at HEIs to smoothen the process? As program rules are rapidly changing, staff should keep up with changes in these rules. Try to keep the subject in the air. Take the subject up and carry it all over the university, try to keep everyone conscientious about the topic of international student mobility. Stress out that international mobility is a way to overcome unemployment, as students who did an experience abroad, always point out that this is of added value for their career.

[Note: the presentation can be found on the Leo-Net website.](#)

[The changing role and responsibilities of providers of higher education will be included in the recommendations to the EC, with the explicit request to discuss it on a European policy level. Relevant information about evolutions in this field will be published on the Leo-Net website.](#)

[Contributing to sustainable employability is one of the main scopes of Leo-Net. Therefore the evolving concepts of skills and employability will be actively followed up and included in future activities.](#)

Vincent Merk has some comments about the discussions that were given.

It is fairly controversial to point out that a university should serve everybody rather than the excellent students. Bright students will get jobs anyway, and should not be focused on. HEIs should keep track of all the students that study in the institution. These grant schemes are of utmost importance for the regular students, as they are often crucial in providing the necessary financial assistance for their trip abroad.

There is competition between HEIs. Employability is becoming competitive and every institution wants to provide the best scheme for their students (at least in the Netherlands). This is however not

leading to sustainable employability at the moment. However, one can argue about the definition of sustainability.

To answer the questions a set of stakeholders has been identified. In a very short amount of time, the following were named:

- Students
- Society
- HEIs
- Career services
- Learners
- Teachers

Vincent Merk explains the new system of the Bachelor curriculum of the Eindhoven University of Technology (see the website – <https://www.tue.nl/en/education/tue-bachelor-college/>). In this new curriculum there is more focus on the soft skills part. The curriculum is based on three pillars:

- Teamwork
- Writing
- Presentation skills

All of the subjects have aspects which focus on these three points and students are encouraged to develop these skills, if this is not done at their secondary school. The great challenge lies in the fact that these skills should be included in the Master curriculum as well.

The last point addressed was about changes (to facilitate sustainable employability). It was pointed out that there should be more links between universities. For example in Flanders, there is a network which communicates about finding all opportunities within the subject of (sustainable) employability. It is convenient that these networks can communicate with each other as well.

Note: Consortia are a recognized facilitator for actions to increase employability. Therefore for many years National Agencies organised a consortia meeting. For 2016 Leo-Net takes over this responsibility and will include all relevant subjects in the 2016 edition of the Leo-Net Barcelona seminar.

Vincent Merk points out that there is more than only your own institute. That contacts are always useful, and that these contacts should be sustainable. It might be wise to make a personal action plan. It was suggested that it might be good to follow up on these topics as well, and that a task force might be formed.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Panel members:

- *Luca Pirrozzì*
- *Vincent Merk*
- *Sonia Hendy-Isaac*

The seminar closed with a final discussion about the most important topics related to the employability of students:

- The relation of Erasmus + and Youth inactivity
- The question of who is responsible for the employability of students
- Sustainable employability (continuing process of what skills are demanded by the market and need to be developed)