

Development of competences in tourism higher education through Erasmus+ program

Francisca Rosa Álamo-Vera¹; José Luis Ballesteros-Rodríguez, Teresa Cabrera-Nuez; Lidia Hernández-López; Petra de Saá-Pérez
IDeTIC - Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the competences acquired by 188 students of the Degree in Tourism of the University of Las Palmas of Gran Canaria who participated in the Erasmus+ program, and their relation with employability expectation. To that end, an empirical analysis was carried out with data from the responses to the questionnaire of the European Commission during the academic years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17. The results achieved confirm the existence of a positive and significant relationship between the acquisition of competences through the Erasmus+ mobility, such as curiosity and tolerance to ambiguity, civic and intercultural behaviour, decisiveness, serenity and confidence, interpersonal skills, and vigour with students' expectations of employability. Therefore, the Erasmus+ program can become a valuable tool to improve the level of students' skills, thus helping to reduce the gap between the academic and the professional world, especially in the tourism industry, due to the international character of this activity.

Keywords: Competences, Employability, Erasmus+, Tourism degree students

1. INTRODUCTION

European universities are concerned regarding the competencies that graduates must acquire, given the gap in skills and imbalances between those required by companies and those that employees have. This question is particularly important for tourism students, who need to develop competencies such as the ability to adapt to new situations and to work with people from different backgrounds that can allow them to perform their work in multicultural environments. The Erasmus+ is an international mobility program that could be an effective instrument for the development of those necessary skills. As several authors point out [1, 2, 3], the Erasmus+ experience will allow students to know personally different European cultural contexts as well as develop their multicultural skills, a greater European awareness, fluency in foreign languages, greater self-confidence and the possibility of obtaining and keeping a job.

This EU program, which supports education, training, youth and sports, promotes the professional development of people of all ages, contributing to the European Strategy 2020 for growth. The experience of living and studying in a different economic, political and cultural context means that the students can assimilate "best practices" from other countries and be prepared for their professional future. Different studies reveal that an educational experience abroad allows improving opportunities in the labour market [4, 5, 6], due to those competencies acquired abroad are a crucial factor that can influence the attainment of a job [7, 8]. In this sense, there are differences between the competences acquired by students who go abroad and those who do not, and the positive relationship between the international experience and job opportunities for students [9].

In the particular context of the tourism industry, the Erasmus+ program can be of high relevance, since by fostering the ability to work in different sociocultural contexts, cultural sensitivity increases among students, and it allows the development of skills necessary to work in the tourism industry, due to the international character in which this activity takes place. Therefore, this paper analyses the acquisition of competences through the Erasmus mobility programs of 188 students of the Degree in Tourism of the University of Las Palmas of Gran Canaria who participated in this program from 2014 to 2017.

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail: francisca.alamo@ulpgc.es

This paper is structured as follows: the second section analyses the role of competences in tourism higher education. The methodological process followed throughout the work is explained in section 3, and the main results obtained in the study are shown in section 4. Finally, the conclusions and practical implications are presented.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the new educational context after the Bologna reforms, the acquisition of competences by the student becomes the central axis for articulating the learning process. The role of the student is essential because he/she must be the author of his/her learning [10, 11], being the teacher an instructor who helps the student to study and find solutions to the different problems, which could arise [12]. In this way, learning outcomes should be a set of competencies that include knowledge, understanding, and skills that the student is expected to dominate, understand and apply after completion of a learning process [13].

According to the Tuning Project, competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and skills, and describe what students should be able to demonstrate at the end of the different stages of the degree. Thus, the goal of this EU educational project is the acquisition by the student of competencies that allow him to adapt and deal with the different changes that will take place throughout his/her professional and personal life. This way, “[...] the competency approach in higher education makes it possible to manage the quality of students’ learning processes through two contributions: the evaluation of the quality of the performance and the evaluation of the quality of the education provided by the educational institution” [14].

The development of competences should contribute to improving the employability of university students because, in this new educational context, they must be able to manage the acquired knowledge and competences. That is, competence arises from knowledge absorption and involves the possibility of its application to a specific situation in order to carry out a specific activity. In this way, thanks to Erasmus+ mobility, students face complex situations that require the application of those knowledge and competencies acquired during their degree studies [15].

In Spain, the Bologna reforms in the area of tourism have introduced significant improvements in the acquisition of the competences [16], as well as in the implementation of new methods of teaching and learning with a student-focused approach [17]. At the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria the implementation of the Bologna process has highlighted the international mobility as a learning experience during the educational process in order to acquire different types of knowledge and competences [18]. More than 500 outgoing students and nearly 600 incoming students participated in a European mobility program during the academic year 2017/2018 in this University.

The Degree in Tourism at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria fosters the development of four types of competencies: basic, general, nuclear and specific. The basic competencies refer to those that every student graduated by the University must possess, and the general ones refer to those that the graduates must develop to demonstrate that they are trained to perform their professional activities correctly. Nuclear competencies are those related to the skills that a graduate must have in order to demonstrate that they are qualified according to the degree they have taken. Moreover, the specific competencies are those that must be acquired only by graduates in tourism, since they refer to the necessary skills to perform the labour activity related to the industry. It should be noted that in this research work, we will focus only on the general competences of the Degree in Tourism (see table 1).

Table 1. General competences of the Degree in Tourism of the ULPGC.

1. Information management skills	2. Work in different socio-cultural contexts	3. Creativity	4. Initiative and entrepreneurial spirit	5. Motivation for quality	6. The ability of analysis and synthesis	7. Oral and written communication in Spanish	8. Trouble solving	9. Critical thinking	10. Ethical commitment	11. Independent learning	12. Adaptation to new situations	13. Decision making	14. Teamwork
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Source: Report of the Degree in Tourism of the ULPGC.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sampling procedure

To carried out this research, we conducted an empirical study which includes the 188 students of the Degree in Tourism of the University of Las Palmas of Gran Canaria who have participated in the Erasmus+ program during the academic years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17. Data were obtained from the responses to the questionnaire of the European Commission, selecting those questions related to the competences developed by the students. Specifically, we have only considered those items of the questionnaire that allows us to identify the general competencies detailed in the Tourism Degree Report (see Table 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire items related to the competencies developed.

Through my stay abroad with Erasmus+, I learned better how to...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think logically and draw conclusions - Find solutions in difficult or challenging contexts - Plan and carry out my learning independently - Use the Internet, social media and PCs - Develop an idea and put it into practice - See the value of different cultures - Cooperate in teams - Plan and organize tasks and activities - Express myself creatively
After having taken part in this mobility activity...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am more confident and convinced of my abilities - I know better my strengths and weaknesses - I am abler to adapt to and act in new situations - I am abler to think and analyse information critically - I am more tolerant of other person's values and behaviour - I am more open-minded and curious about new challenges - I intend to participate more actively in the social and political life of my community - I am more interested in knowing what happens in the world daily - I have a higher capacity to make decisions - I can cooperate better with people of different origins and cultures - I have more interest in European issues - I feel more European - I am more aware of social and political concepts such as democracy, justice, equality, citizenship, and civil rights - I have improved the skills related to my sector or professional field
Thanks to my stay abroad with Erasmus+...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think the chances of finding a new or better job have increased - I have clearer my professional objectives and aspirations - I have more opportunities to find training practices or jobs for students in my home country - I have a greater capacity to be assigned tasks with high responsibility - I feel that I have improved my language skills

As Table 3 shows, most of the respondents chose Germany (53.2%) and the United Kingdom (18.6%) as the destination for their Erasmus+ experience. Concerning gender, the number of women is quite high, compared to men (68.6% women and 31.4% men). Finally, if we analyse the academic year in which the students made their Erasmus+ mobility, there is increasing participation over the years, so that 57 students travelled in 2014, 63 students enjoyed the experience in 2015 and 68 students in 2016.

Table 3. Respondent profile.

COUNTRY OF THE RECEIVING ORGANIZATION	Number of students	% of students
Germany	100	53.2%
United Kingdom	35	18.6%
Italy	10	5.3%
Poland	16	8.5%
Others (Belgium, Croatia, Slovakia, France, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the Czech Republic)	27	14.4%
Total	188	100.0%
GENDER	Number of students	% of students
Male	59	31.4%
Female	129	68.6%
Total	188	100.0%
ACADEMIC YEAR OF MOBILITY	Number of students	% of students
2014/15	57	30.3%
2015/16	63	33.5%
2016/17	68	36.2%
Total	188	100.0%

4. RESULTS

In order to identify those competencies developed by the students, two Exploratory Factor Analyses (EFA) with varimax rotation were carried out. One of them on the items of the questionnaire concerning the competences developed in the Erasmus+ mobility experience and another on the aspect related to employability.

The results of the EFA for the twenty-two items regarding the competencies developed through the Erasmus+ program, six factors are obtained that explain 68.78% of the variance (see Table 4). All the dimensions have good factor loads, and Cronbach's alphas that confirm the suitability of the analysis since their values are above the minimum recommended thresholds. We must highlight that the factors extracted and the names assigned to each of them are similar to the so-called "MEMO Factors" (Monitoring Exchange Mobility Outcomes) identified in the Erasmus Impact Study [19].

Table 4. Results of the exploratory factor analysis for the competences developed during the Erasmus+.

COMPETENCES	Factor load	Cronbach Alpha
F.1. Curiosity and tolerance to ambiguity		
Being open-minded and curious about new challenges	0.742	0.816
Being more tolerant of the values and behaviour of other people	0.725	
Ability to adapt and act in new situations	0.632	
Being able to interact and work with people from other cultures, backgrounds	0.517	
Interest in knowing what happens in the world daily	0.553	
F.2. Civic and intercultural competences		
Europe-wide perspective	0.829	0.777
Being more aware of social and political concepts like democracy, justice, equality, citizenship, civil rights	0.686	
Being more interested in European topics	0.611	
Intend to participate more actively in the social and political life of my community	0.580	

COMPETENCES	Factor load	Cronbach Alpha
F.3. Decisiveness		
Analytical and problem-solving skills	0.663	0.735
Sector-specific skills	0.703	
Being more able to reach decisions	0.629	
F.4. Interpersonal skills		
Planning and organizational skills	0.792	0.812
Team working skills	0.775	
Creative skills	0.751	
F.5. Serenity and confidence		
Being more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses	0.797	0.793
Being more confidence in and conviction regarding one's own abilities	0.732	
Analytical and critical thinking	0.523	
F.6. Vigour		
Planning and carry out one's learning independently	0.662	0.673
Problem-solving skills	0.636	
Seeing the value of different cultures	0.606	
Percentage of variance explained: 68.79 KMO Index: 0.900 Bartlett's sphericity test: 1,899.497 Significance: 0.000		

The EFA for the items related to employability expectation can be seen in Table 5. The results show one factor that explains 58.66% of the variance. Also, the Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.75, and the KMO index is close to 1, which indicates that the extracted factor is adequate.

Table 5. Exploratory factor analysis results for employability expectations.

COMPETENCES	Factor load	Cronbach Alpha
I think the chances of finding a new or better job have increased	0.839	0.759
I have a greater capacity to be assigned tasks with high responsibility	0.825	
I have more opportunities to find training practices or jobs for students in my home country	0.711	
I have clearer my professional objectives and aspirations	0.676	
Percentage of variance explained: 58.66 KMO Index: 0.746 Bartlett's sphericity test: 192.613 Significance: 0.000		

Table 6 shows the correlation between students' perception of employability after the mobility and the competences acquired through the Erasmus+ mobility programs. The results show that there is a positive and significant relationship between all the competences acquired and employability expectations.

Table 6. Competences and employability expectation correlations.

	CORRELATION	SIGNIFICANCE
F1. Curiosity and tolerance to ambiguity	0,220	0,002
F.2. Civic and intercultural competences	0,223	0,001
F.3. Decisiveness	0,314	0,000
F.4. Interpersonal skills	0,245	0,001
F.5. Serenity and confidence	0,224	0,002
F.6. Vigour	0,148	0,043

** p<0,01; * p<0,05

5. CONCLUSIONS

This work has analysed the experience of international mobility through the Erasmus+ program and its relationship with the employability expectations of tourism students. The results show that the acquisition of competencies such as greater curiosity and tolerance to ambiguity, civic and intercultural behaviour, decision-making, serenity and confidence, interpersonal skills, and vigour, developed in the Erasmus+ mobility program, are important in their job expectations for future.

Our results reveal that, in the specific context of tourism higher education, a tolerant student, able to adapt to new situations and to work with people from different backgrounds, can better perform their work in multicultural work environments. Besides, mobility experiences make students more aware of social commitment and the value of civic behaviour. They also increase their competences regarding the ability to make decisions and think logically, a critical aspect of the dynamic and changing environment in which the tourism industry develops. Finally, tourism students have also acquired competencies related to interpersonal skills and teamwork, as well as greater self-confidence and independent learning. Therefore, the Erasmus+ program can become a valuable tool to improve the level of students' skills, thus helping to reduce the gap between the academic and the professional world, especially in the tourism industry, due to the international character of this activity.

This work has led to the development of *International Mobility Workshops* chaired by recent tourism graduate students that have participated in international mobility programs. The workshops are designed to provide undergraduate students with real life experiences of tourism students of how participation in international mobility programs can strengthen skills development for the tourism sector. The workshops include a general presentation about the student's academic and work experience as well as a roundtable discussion that focus on providing students with practical examples of competencies acquired through the international mobility programs that have helped them to perform their work in the tourism industry. The workshops are directed to undergraduate tourism students and are conducted within the module of *Management Skills*, a second year module in the Degree in Tourism of the University of Las Palmas of Gran Canaria.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research work has been developed under the framework of the Research Project CEI2018-13 funded by the Consejería de Economía, Industria, Comercio y Conocimiento of the Government of the Canary Islands.

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