



Erasmus+



Trainee Placements Abroad Perception of Secondary Vocational School Pupils

National Report for the Slovak Republic

Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation is a voluntary association of natural persons and legal entities, whose objective is to support and coordinate international co-operation of Slovak universities and other institutions especially with the European Union countries within the framework of educational and other programmes.

National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training Sectors operates under the Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation. It supports and implements the programme on the national level and works as a link between the European Commission and the participating countries at the local, regional, and national level.

Trainee Placements Abroad

Perception of Secondary Vocational School Pupils

National Report for the Slovak Republic

1st Edition

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INTRODUCTION

Erasmus+ is a European Union programme which supports activities in the area of education, vocational training, youth and sport within the programme period 2014 - 2020. In education and vocational training areas, it also supports the mobility abroad for a wide range of target groups: from pupils, students and adult learners to teachers, managing and professional employees of education organisations. Erasmus+ programme aims to contribute to the targets set in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ET2020¹ and the strategy Europe 2020².

The goal of learning mobilities³ of individuals, that is, pupils or fresh graduates from secondary vocational schools who are subject of this study is to enhance skills and knowledge. In other words, mobilities contribute to the increase in qualification of mobility participants and to their better adaptation to the current requirements of the labour market. Other areas equally important areas required not only by the labour market include increasing language competences and the development of the so-called soft skills such as independence, teamwork, and responsibility.

The National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Vocational Training operates under the Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation (SAAIC). It supports and implements the programme on the national level and works as a link between the European Commission and the participating countries at the local, regional and national level. In addition to the management of the programme at the national level, it has the ambition to monitor and evaluate the impact of the support provided by the programme to make the programme more efficient and beneficial. In 2018, SAAIC got involved in an international project which is coordinated by the National agency in Poland. The output of the project will be an international study mapping further study and careers of the participants in placements abroad, that is, pupils or fresh graduates from secondary vocational schools. Agencies from the following countries are involved in the project: Austria, Belgium (Flemish part), the Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and the United Kingdom.

1 <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/12095.pdf>

2 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32013R1288>

3 *The learning mobility is characterised in the Erasmus+ programme guide as Physical transfer into a country other than the country of residence with the purpose of studying, participating in vocational training or non-formal education or informal learning. It can be implemented as placement in businesses, apprenticeship, youth exchange, voluntary work, training or participation in activities of personal development and it can include training activities such as vocational training in the language of the host country as well as the sending, receiving and follow-up activities.*

How do the former participants perceive the benefit of placements abroad? Where do the former participants usually go after the completion of secondary vocational education? Do placements abroad have an impact on participants' further study or career paths? These are the basic questions this study focuses on. We collected the answers of the former participants using an online questionnaire survey, which was supplemented by focus groups and individual interviews. This study is designed not only for those who actively participate in the implementation of Erasmus+ programme, but it also provides important information to the entities which form the labour market needs, particularly the employers or recruiting agencies looking for the qualified workforce. The study will introduce them not only to the particularities of this programme but also to the added value brought by the programme concerning their needs.

CHAPTER I

GENERAL INFORMATION

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SYSTEM
OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

IMPLEMENTATION OF ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME
– KEY ACTION 1 IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

As this study is a part of an international study, this chapter also deals with the system of education in Slovakia with an emphasis on vocational education and training and the implementation of Erasmus+ programme in Slovakia – specifically mobility projects under Key Action 1 – Learning mobility of individuals in vocational education and training.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SYSTEM OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

As far as types of schools are concerned, the Slovak system represents a single-structure model with an atypical outflow of pupils in the course of lower secondary education (that is the second level of primary school - ISCED 2) to different types of schools; however, the vast majority of pupils complete primary education (ISCED 1) and lower secondary education (ISCED 2) at primary schools. Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education is provided by secondary schools.

Secondary schools are divided according to the Education Act into: gymnasiums, secondary vocational schools, secondary sports schools and conservatories⁴. Vocational education and training within secondary education is provided by secondary vocational schools and conservatories.

A secondary vocational school is an internally differentiated secondary school which provides pupils with vocational education and training in the educational programme of a respective study field focusing mostly on the pursuit of professions, groups of professions and professional activities;

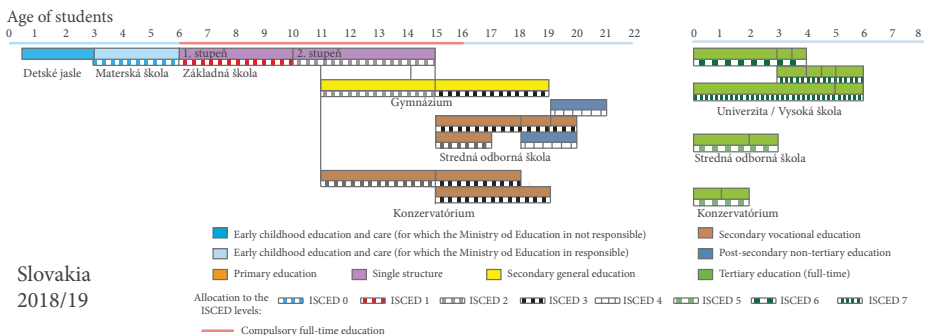
It provides pupils with vocational education and training which is divided into theoretical lessons and practical lessons; practical lessons at secondary vocational schools are governed by special regulations. Upon successful completion of a respective study programme of a study field, secondary vocational school pupils can achieve the following levels of education: ISCED 252, 253, 352, 353,354. Founders of secondary vocational schools are the state 77.83 %, private entities 18.24 %, the church 3.93 %.

⁴ A new type of secondary school will be legislatively created as of September 1, 2019: secondary sports school. The existing sports gymnasium will be renamed to secondary sports school.

Conservatories provide complex artistic and artistic-pedagogical education. They prepare pupils for the pursuit of artistic professions and for teaching artistic and vocational subjects in the arts educational programme. (Source: Eurydice 2018/2019, *General characteristics of the education system in Slovakia*).

The number of pupils at secondary vocational schools is decreasing and there is a decline in the interest in ISCED 353 study fields – various professions graduates of which are awarded the Certificate of Apprenticeship. Thus, we see a lack of some professions in the practice. The cost of one pupil's secondary vocational school study is about 2 100 - 3 700 EUR (gymnasium study 1 500 EUR), despite that, the graduates do not reach the required level of professional competences. It is caused by the fast development of technology, which the schools are not equipped with in the real-time. In order to improve the situation in the training of experts, the dual education system started to operate in Slovakia in cooperation with employers. Since school year 2015/2016, secondary vocational school pupils in Slovakia have had a possibility to train in the dual education system in order to increase their chances on the labour market.

The data of the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information show that 206 195 pupils studied at secondary schools in the Slovak Republic in the school year 2018/2019: 35.3 % at gymnasiums, 1.5 % at conservatories, 60.7 % at secondary vocational schools and 2.5 % in different types of schools with programmes for pupils with special educational needs. The current data on the unemployment rate of secondary school graduates show the lowest unemployment rate among gymnasium graduates ISCED 344 level – 3.1 %; ISCED 252 and 253 – 11 % on average; ISCED 353 – 10.2 % on average, ISCED 354 – 12.27 % on average; and ISCED 454 – 5.9 % on average.⁵



Structure of the national education system in Slovakia

Source: Eurydice 2018/2019

⁵ More information on the national education system in Slovakia can be found at Eurydice website: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/slovakia_en

IMPLEMENTATION OF ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME – KEY ACTION 1 IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Mobility projects in vocational education and training (VET) under **Key Action 1 – Learning mobility of individuals** can be implemented by secondary vocational schools or other institutions active in VET. These projects are a unique opportunity to send Slovak learners (pupils or fresh graduates) and employees to placement or vocational training abroad, where they will obtain valuable vocational, language and personal experience. This type of mobility projects is very popular in Slovakia and every year the demand exceeds the supply.

Call	No. of submitted projects	No. of approved projects	Success rate %	Total grant awarded €*
2014	139	85	61.2%	4 420 050
2015	148	94	63.5%	4 193 493
2016	188	86	45.7%	4 319 857
2017	185	110	59.5%	4 240 327
2018	200	102	51.0%	5 978 734

* We list the allocated grant as not all projects have been completed. Absorption of funds in this type of projects is more than 98 % in each call.

Overview of the submitted and approved projects in the Slovak Republic 2014 - 2018

Source: SAAIC - National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training Sectors

This study focuses on **pupils or fresh graduates**, who can participate in learning mobility (placement) in a **business** or at **school** (with practical training in a business or other relevant organisation). Fresh graduates have to participate within one year from the completion of their study. Mobilities are divided into short-term mobilities, which take from 2 weeks up to nearly 3 months, and long-term mobilities, which take from 3 up to 12 months. In 2014 – 2018, more than 9 700 participants took part in these mobilities⁶. Only 60 of them were long-term mobilities lasting over 90 days. Short-term mobilities, mostly lasting up to 20 days, are preferred both by schools and parents of secondary school pupils.

Call	No. of participants	Females	Males	Not specified
2014	1 841	927	914	0
2015	1 805	888	917	0
2016	1 839	853	986	0
2017	2 143	1 011	1 132	0
2018*	2 086	1 006	1 078	2
total	9 714	4 685	5 027	2

* Data for 2018 are not complete as not all mobility projects have been completed.

Number of implemented learning mobilities 2014 - 2018

Source: SAAIC - National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training Sectors

Mobility duration up to (in days)	No. of participants
20	6 410
40	3 152
60	62
90	64
more than 90	26
total	9 714

Overview of mobility duration 2014 - 2018

Source: SAAIC - National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training Sectors

CHAPTER II

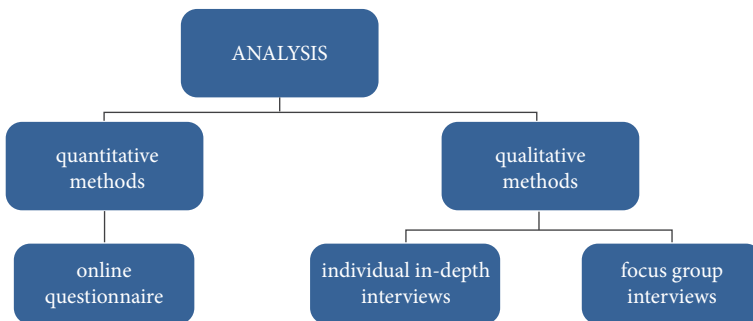
**METHODOLOGY AND
THE RESPONDENT SAMPLE**

As mentioned above, this study focuses on mapping the impact of mobility projects on the participants in learning mobilities implemented under Erasmus+ programme in 2014 – 2018. It has the ambition to study former participants' opinions on the trainee placement from different perspectives and to learn about their life situations at the time of the survey – whether they are still pupils of secondary schools which sent them to placement or not, where they go after completing secondary education.

The study aims to evaluate the benefit of placements abroad for the professional and personal growth of these participants as well as the impact on their access to the labour market. Its goal is to answer the following key questions:

- *Do placements abroad influence the personal development and the future career path of participants?*
- *Which competences and skills did the participants obtain through the placement abroad?*
- *Were they obtained competences and experience useful for participants' professional development?*

The survey was carried out between October 2018 and April 2019. As far as data collection is concerned, quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The key research tool was the **online questionnaire**, which was supplemented by **qualitative methods** - individual in-depth interviews and focus group interviews with a target group in particular - for better clarification of the topic.



The **online questionnaire** was sent to **5 394 participants**⁷, who took part in placements between 2014 – 2018 as a part of the Key Action 1 of Erasmus+ programme in vocational education and training. To achieve greater involvement

⁷ The online questionnaire was sent only to those placement participants who agreed to be contacted in their participant's report.

of former participants in the survey, the questionnaire link was sent to schools (project coordinators) which were involved in mobility projects in vocational education and training in the studied period. Some schools distributed this link⁸ to their alumni and published the information at their websites and on social network sites. The questionnaire survey took place from October to December 2018 and 645 anonymous respondents submitted questionnaires, 53 of which responded that they did not want to answer the questions or that they had not participated in a placement. 2 out of 592 completed questionnaires had to be discarded as it was obvious from the answers that they had been filled in by teachers. However, these participants were not the subject of this study. Thus, **answers of 590 respondents** were relevant for this study. This number represents a **respondent rate of 10.9 %** out of all 5 394 approached respondents.

The online questionnaire contained predominantly closed questions in which the respondents had to choose one or more options. Many of the closed questions – particularly those concerning the development of competences, the benefit of placements, and further career paths – were formulated as statements. Respondents declared their extent of agreement with the statements by selecting one option out of 5 (I agree: not at all, only a little, to some extent, a lot, completely). If they could not give an opinion to a statement they selected the “not applicable” option. We used a simplified model to describe the results - answers “a lot” and “completely” are classified in the study as positive, answers “not at all” and “only a little” express a low degree of agreement and answers “to some extent” express respondents’ partial agreement with a statement. The questionnaire also contained open questions in which the respondents expressed their opinions in their own words. These were then, along with the opinions presented in focus groups and individual interviews, used in the form of anonymous quotations. In many cases, we shortened and corrected them, mostly grammatically; that means they only have an indicative character with a preserved meaning.

As stated above, the analysis consisted of **qualitative methods**, which had two forms – individual interviews and focus groups. The respondents in **individual interviews** were secondary school graduates who participated in placements abroad and filled out the online questionnaire. Overall, the National Agency employees carried out 10 individual interviews with people from all 8 regions of Slovakia. These semi-structured interviews, which were standardised by the Polish national agency, took place either at the National Agency or at the place of respondents’ residence or via phone. All of these respondents gave their personal details in the questionnaire and agreed to be contacted for the purpose of obtaining more detailed information about the impact of the placement on

⁸ A total of 115 participants responded to the web link sent to schools, but only 70 of them completed the questionnaire completely, so their answers could be included in a total of 645 anonymous respondents.

their further career path. The random sample considered respondents' gender, study field, region, country, and location of the placement. Individual interviews were attended by 6 women and 4 men from all regions of Slovakia. 4 respondents were secondary vocational school graduates, 3 respondents were secondary medical school graduates, 2 respondents were business academy graduates, and 1 respondent graduated from a secondary industrial school. As far as the fields of study are concerned, two respondents graduated from the study field business academy and cosmetician/cosmetologist; other participants graduated from the following fields of study: electronics, information and communication technology, pharmaceutical assistant, masseur, medical assistant, and operator of glass production - hollow and pressed glass.

Two **focus group meetings** took place, as a part of the study, with participants who were still studying at the secondary schools which sent them on placements. The semi-structured focus groups, which were also standardised by the Polish National Agency, were implemented through an external facilitator in institutions with a wealth of experience with the implementation of Erasmus+ mobility projects. In total, 21 (16 men and 5 women) pupils from different types of schools – 3 secondary industrial school, 2 business academies, and 1 secondary vocational school - participated in these meetings. As far as the fields of study are concerned, 5 respondents studied in the field of electronics and business academy each and three respondents in the field of mechanical engineering and mechatronics each. Other respondents were from the following study fields: computer and network technologies, hotel academy, operator of printing, information and communication technologies, and technical lyceum.

Description of the quantitative sample (Note: the total number in each category is higher as some respondents fall into more categories)

		Total number of respondents	Respondents meeting the study criteria
Respondents	Total	645	590
	Vocational school learners		301
	School graduates		289
	Higher Education Students		178
	Graduates of HEIs		15
	Employed*		168
	Unemployed		8
	Other status		5

* The employed including higher education students.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Approaching the former participants played a key role in the quantitative part of the study. This proved to be the biggest limitation of the study due to the protection of personal data; the main source of participants' email addresses was participants' reports, filled out by participants immediately upon returning from placements. In many cases, the email addresses were invalid or cancelled. Another limitation was the fact that the online questionnaire was sent only to those former participants who agreed in their participant's report with being additionally contacted by the European Commission or national agencies. Overall, every third participant did not agree with being additionally contacted, which curtailed the number of approached respondents.

In spite of the fact that SAAIC – the National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme also took other steps to approach the target group, e.g. publishing the information on the survey on the national agency's website, social networks, other communication channels as well as approaching the project coordinators directly, the return rate of the questionnaire was low.

As mentioned in the methodology section, the study collected subjective opinions of former participants in placements based on the evaluation of statements. Since this study reflects opinions of only about 8 % of former participants (see table „*Number of learning mobilities implemented by individuals 2014 – 2018*“), their statements have only declarative character. Finally, the gender perspective was not a subject of this study; the study deals with this aspect only marginally, mainly in basic statistics.

CHAPTER III

MOBILITY EXPERIENCE

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

OVERALL EVALUATION OF PLACEMENTS

MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN LEARNING MOBILITIES

ORGANISATION OF PLACEMENTS ABROAD

MENTORS AND ACCOMPANYING PERSONS

– SUPPORT OF PUPILS DURING THE PLACEMENT ABROAD

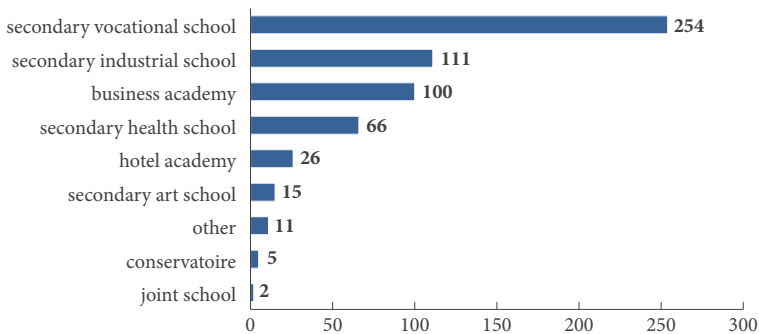
SUSTAINABILITY OF CONTACTS

This chapter deals with the mobility experience of former participants of placements abroad. We will look closely at the main aspects of the placements – overall evaluation, motivation, and mobility organisation, the role of mentors and accompanying persons, and retention of contacts.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Most respondents were pupils who attended secondary vocational schools at the time of the placement (43.1 %), secondary industrial schools (18.8 %) and business academies (16.9 %). Other types of schools included: secondary health-care schools (11.2 %), hotel academies (4.4 %), secondary artistic schools (2.5 %), conservatories (0.8 %) and joint schools (0.3 %). 11 respondents (2 %) did not state what type of school they attended, or they answered the question in the questionnaire incorrectly⁹. As far as the regional distribution is concerned, most often, the respondents came from Prešov region (23.2 %), Banská Bystrica region (14.6 %) and Nitra region (13.6 %). Other regions of Slovakia were represented as well; the smallest number of respondents was from Trenčín region (7.5 %).

Type of sending school (n = 590)

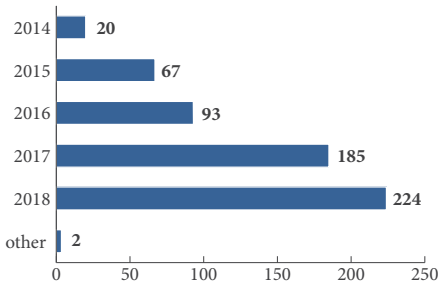


In the questionnaire survey, we asked the respondents when they participated in a placement abroad. Most respondents stated that they took part in a placement in 2018 (38 %), 2017 (31.4 %), and 2016 (15.8 %). Two respondents stated that they participated in a placement as a part of the previous programme; one respondent in 2013 and the other one stated he participated in two placements: one in 2013 and one in 2015. Vocational school pupils most frequently travelled abroad in the

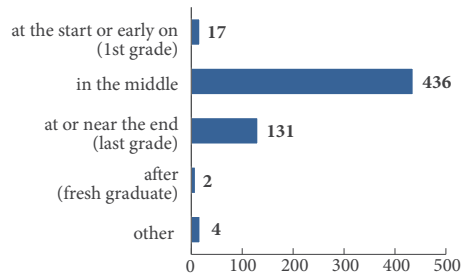
⁹ Two respondents did not state the type of school and 9 respondents provided the name of the institution they were sent to.

middle of their study (73.9 %). The middle of the study means any grade other than the first or the last one. 22.2 % of respondents participated in placement in their last grade and only 2.9 % in the first grade. Fresh graduates were the least represented group with 0.3 %. 4 respondents selected “other” – these were pupils in post-secondary non-tertiary education.

Year of mobility experience
(n = 590)



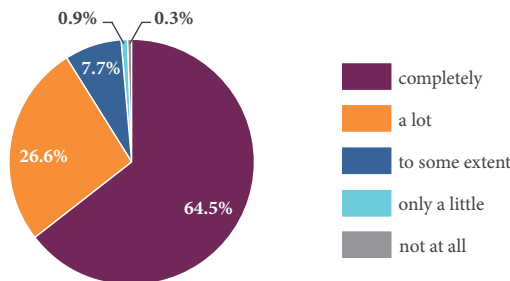
Stage of vocational education
(n = 590)



OVERALL EVALUATION OF PLACEMENTS

Based on the survey, it is possible to say that mobility experience is a very significant experience in the life of a secondary school pupil. The questionnaire survey shows that as many as 91.1 % of respondents remember the time when they participated in a placement abroad well. The survey results also indicate that neither the industry within which the placement took place nor the respondents’ current level of education or professional status influence how the respondents remember the circumstances connected with the mobility abroad.

I remember my time abroad as part of an internship/trainee placement well (n = 586)



In the interviews, they could list positive as well as negative aspects, and describe details of placements including leisure time activities. The respondents agreed that the placement abroad was most of all a very good life experience; it gave them many new experiences and most respondents appreciated the benefit of the placement for their personal development, strengthening or developing vocational skills and language competences or realising the cultural differences.

“We learnt there much more in 2 weeks than we had learnt at our school in 2-3 years.”

“A lot of great experiences; we were not bored a single day; we had a very good programme.”

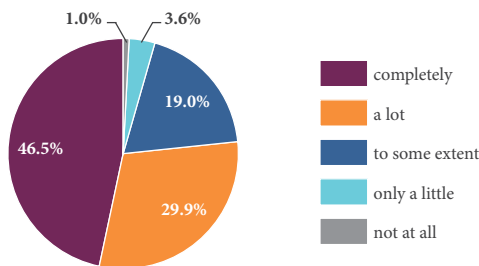
“It was very pleasant two weeks, which gave me a lot. I could stay there for a month.”

“I am definitely more self-confident. If I hadn’t gone there it would be harder for me to accept the idea of working abroad. I saw that it is nothing to be afraid of.”

More than 76 % of respondents stated that upon returning from the placement they shared their knowledge and experience acquired abroad. The individual interviews and focus group meetings revealed that in many cases it took place rather informal conversation with friends and schoolmates. Some participants were asked to present their mobility experience during the open days or to their schoolmates from lower grades who wanted to take part in a placement.

“When I was a primary school pupil I heard about placements during a secondary school open day. A couple of years later during an open day, I presented what the placement gave me.”

**After returning from the trainee placement abroad,
I shared my knowledge and experience with others (n = 585)**



Positive evaluation of placements was also reflected in the answers to the question on the willingness to recommend placement abroad to potential participants. On the scale from 0 to 10, 80 % of participants selected 9 or 10. On the other hand, only 6 % of respondents selected 0 – 6 and would not recommend a placement. The level of Net Promoter Score (NPS) that is, the evaluation of satisfaction and willingness to recommend placement abroad was 74 points. This is a very good level, and not only confirms the high rating of the quality of completed placements, but it also proves that learning mobilities have their place at secondary vocational schools.

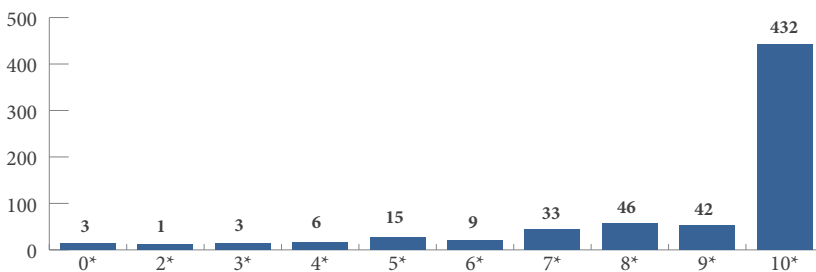
“You will improve your English, become acquainted with the culture.”

“Go, most definitely! Maybe it will start you off into the future career like me.”

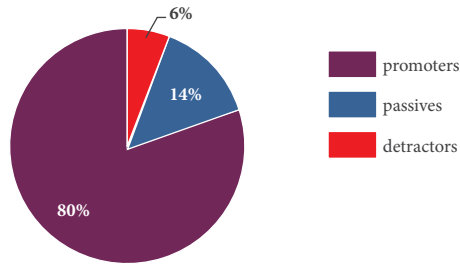
“Erasmus+ placements are great because the participants will get to know new things, learn a lot – theoretically as well as practically, realise their future career preferences; they will find a job more easily and have more opportunities. Placement is a kind of a bridge to the future career.”

“Do not be afraid. Placement is not like the professional practice in Slovakia, you don’t go there to work; it’s rather an adventure, it is good to get to know a different system in a different country.”

The level of NPS (Net Promoter Score) – the assessment of satisfaction with and willingness to recommend transnational vocational mobility (n = 590)



% share of NPS (n = 590)



MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN LEARNING MOBILITIES

We asked the respondents in the individual interviews and focus groups what motivated them to participate in a placement abroad. We were trying to identify what motives and personal goals motivated them to apply for a placement abroad knowing that they would have to demonstrate a certain level of language competences, vocational skills, and proactiveness in self-development in the selection process. In the interviews, the respondents spontaneously listed up to three motives why they wanted to participate in a placement abroad.

The most frequent motive was getting to know the country – people, history, culture, and natural beauties - and fulfilling their desire for travelling and new experiences.

“I was mainly motivated by the country: either Sweden or Finland. Both are beautiful countries with nice countryside and interesting history. I was planning to visit them.”

“I wanted to learn how things work in a different country and compare it to Slovakia.”

“I dreamt of going to England, London, so I applied for the placement.”

“Experience, get to know a different country, a different city.”

Approximately a sixth of the respondents (out of the total of 31) stated that they were motivated by the placement certificate or the document Europass mobility, which they can present to a potential employer. These were mostly respondents who wanted to start working immediately after completing their secondary vocational study, as well as respondents who completed the secondary education study and are studying at a higher education institution and working at the same time.

“Once I complete the secondary vocational study I do not want to go on to study in higher education. I want to start working, that’s why it was essential for me to obtain the certificate; perhaps it is something on top that will help me get a job.”

“The Certificate or document Europass mobility – not everyone has that.”

Similarly, approximately a sixth of the respondents wanted to improve their communication in a foreign language; while a part of them could speak the foreign language very well and they wanted to acquire new professional terminology by participating in a placement. Other respondents realised that their level of foreign language skills was low and wanted to focus mainly on the development of language competences in day-to-day communication.

Four participants declared motivation to acquire more knowledge and skills in their study field and to try working abroad.

“I wanted to try working in a company abroad.”

The desire for independence was mentioned in the focus group meetings and individual interviews more times. Some respondents associated it with travelling, as well as with a subconscious desire for self-knowledge and testing one’s ability to “survive” in an unknown environment.

“My motivation – visiting the country, and also testing my independence, the ability to take care of myself.”

Individual participants gave other motives for the participation: to escape the stereotype of the home country, to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in a placement free-of-charge, and to fly by plane for the first time in life.

ORGANISATION OF PLACEMENTS ABROAD

Mobility projects under Key Action 1 – Learning mobility of individuals, which also include placements of secondary vocational school pupils, have rules clearly defined in the Erasmus+ Programmes Guide. These rules apply not only to the eligible cost for funding of the projects, but also to the status and responsibilities of the sending organisation, the host organisation, and if necessary, the intermediary organisation. Individual interviews and focus groups clearly showed that the organisational models had a significant impact on the course of mobilities and on the obtained knowledge and competences, and they were crucial for the successful completion of mobilities.

The sending organisation, that is, the secondary school was responsible for the selection of pupils. The interviews showed that the selection procedure of pupils differed in individual schools – some had transparent selection criteria, others limited the selection to teachers' recommendations, and some selected pupils randomly, or the respondents remembered it only vaguely. Before the implementation of the placement, all respondents had a preparation meeting, where they met with a school management representative and the accompanying teachers or people from intermediary organisations. The sending schools subsequently organised mobilities abroad either directly to partner schools or businesses or through intermediary organisations. Supervising persons from the sending schools travelled abroad with the pupils or fresh graduates. Their task was to ensure the smooth course of mobility. Respondents were accommodated in host families (especially in placements in the United Kingdom) or a different accommodation facility – hotel, guest house, flat, business apartment, or dormitory.

“We were told about the placement in the third grade because up till then the school had not had any grant. I didn't think I had a chance because a lot of my classmates were interested. Almost everyone wanted to go. Finally, three of us went.”

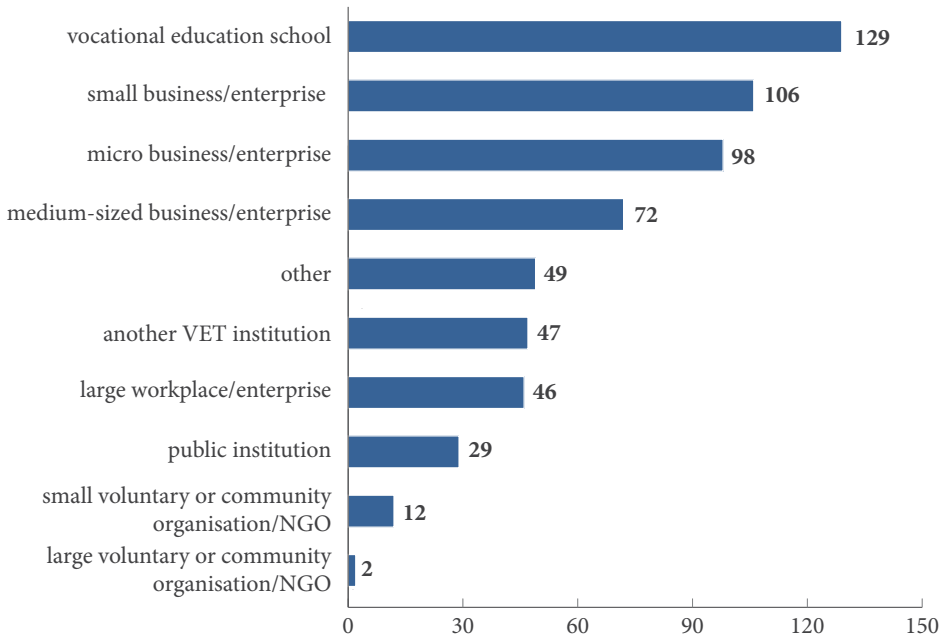
“The school informed us in detail what was awaiting us.”

“The first day, I was in a company whose professional focus was different from my study field. The intermediary agency acted promptly and chose a different company for me.”

“Our placement took place at school. We had 5 hours of vocational training every day with 2 assigned teachers: the first teacher – expert in photography and video, the second teacher specialised in modelling in Cinema 4D. We finished at school at about 1 p.m. and then we were free to do what we wanted; we just had to report to the teacher on WhatsApp, where we were and where we were going.”

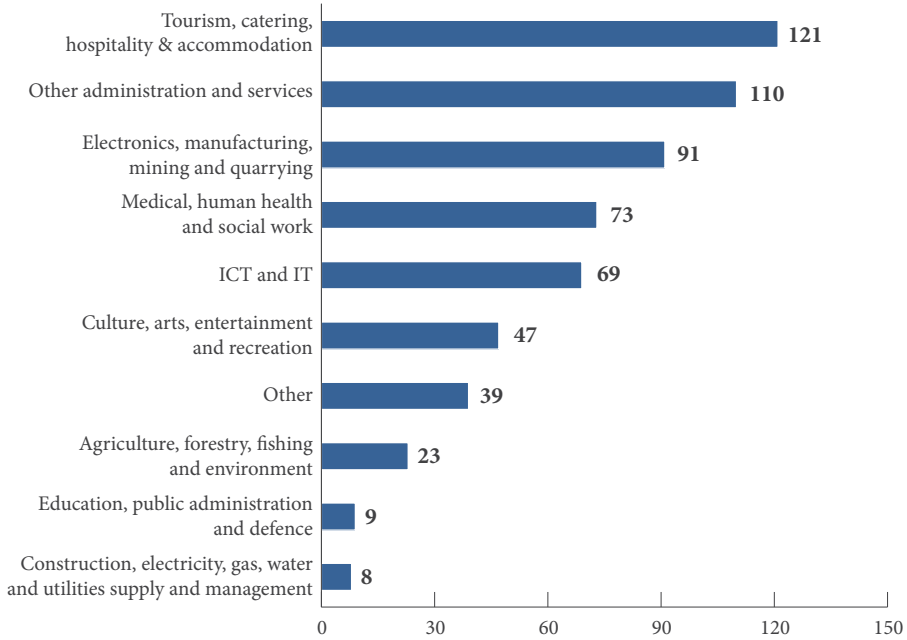
The questionnaire survey showed that the respondents participated mostly in placements abroad at secondary vocational education schools (21.9 %), in small businesses (18 %) or micro-businesses (16.6 %). 49 respondents, which is 8.3 % out of all respondents, stated that they participated in placements in other institutions. Under other institutions, they listed hospitals, social services facilities, a zoo, a veterinary clinic or a business of non-specified size. In the interviews, the former participants stated that at vocational education schools they were looked after by an assigned vocational teacher or teachers. Many participants who did their placement in businesses performed the same activities as other employees; they were integrated into the work team and supervised by their direct superior or a team leader.

Trainee placement abroad (n = 590)



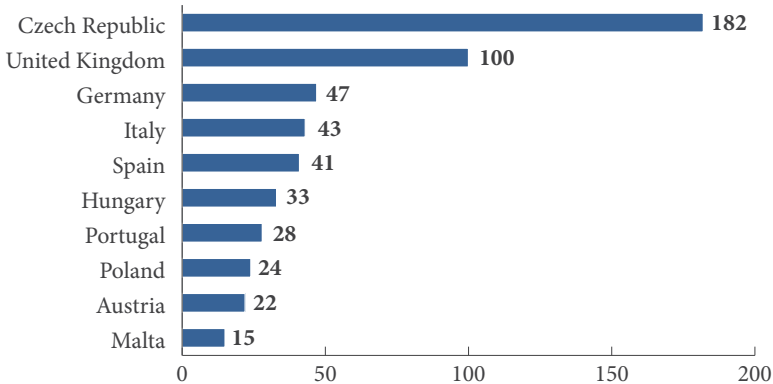
Subsequently, the respondents selected the industry in which they did their placement abroad. The selection shows that most respondents – 20.5 % - participated in placement in tourism and accommodation and food services. These were pupils from the following fields of study: hotel academy, business academy, management of regional tourism, waiter/waitress, confectioner/baker, cook, innkeeper, etc. The second most selected industry was administrative and support services, in which 18.6 % of respondents did their placement. The vast majority of pupils were from the study field business academy; other study fields included economic and business services, marketing, entrepreneurial school, and technical and information services. The third most selected industry was electronics, manufacturing, and mining and quarrying with 15.4 % of respondents. The industry included the following study fields: electronics, mechanic, mechanical technician, technology and transportation operation, technical lyceum and mechanical engineering. 39 respondents, which are 6.6 % of the total number of respondents, selected the option 'other' industry – these were mostly pupils from the study field cosmetician/cosmetologist, hair cosmetics, logistics, and biotechnology and pharmacology.

Occupational area of trainee placements (n = 590)



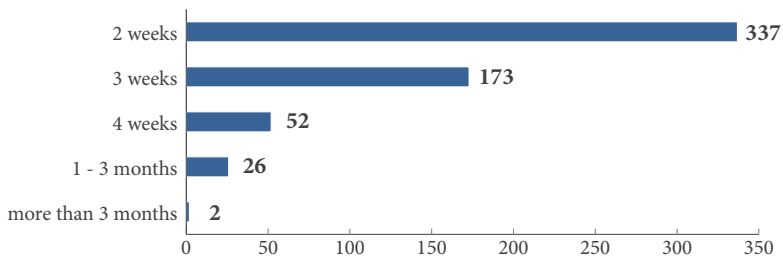
The target countries of placements abroad were 23 different countries involved in the Erasmus+ programme (except for Belgium, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Turkey and Northern Macedonia). The respondents most often participated in placements in the Czech Republic (30.9 % of respondents), in the United Kingdom (17 % of respondents) and in Germany (8 %). The following graph shows the number of respondents per country. Other countries not listed in the graph (13 countries) were selected by fewer than ten respondents.

Destination country (n = 590)



As regards the length of placements, short-term mobilities prevailed – as many as 57.1 % of respondents spent 2 weeks and 29.3 % of respondents spent 3 weeks on placement. Long-term mobilities are very rare in the overall comparison. Two respondents who participated in mobility for more than 3 months were from study fields hotel academy and medical assistant. They did their placements in a hotel resort in Cyprus and a hospital in the Czech Republic respectively.

Lasting of mobility experience (n = 590)



The qualitative part of the analysis showed that almost all respondents were satisfied with the host organisations and the positives outweighed the negatives. The respondents stated that if there was a problem, it was solved in many cases. Based on the positive reactions of the former participants, we can conclude that they were satisfied regardless of the location of the placement, that is, in businesses, at schools, or other institutions. Participants at vocational education schools with a centre for practical training positively evaluated mainly schools' equipment and the possibility to use it actively during the training; the vocational programme of the placement, which took into account participants' level of knowledge, developed their specific vocational knowledge and practical skills; high expertise of the assigned teachers (mentors); their friendly approach; and the overall positive and open atmosphere at the vocational education schools. Participants in businesses were satisfied with the following aspects: the possibility to see activities of several departments/workplaces in the company, independence in performing specific activities or tasks at the workplace, and the supervisor's partnership approach and trust. All respondents stated that they obtained certificates and the documents Europass Mobility.

“The school at which we did our placement focuses on arts; they had art studios, a photography studio, and a 3D studio. They had better multimedia equipment than our school because they have been specialising in this area for many years; our school opened the study field only recently.”

“The placement in Slovakia had very good quality, but it was interesting to see how a pharmacy in another country works.”

“The approach of the host organisation was different from the vocational practice in Slovakia; they were much friendlier and also talked a lot about their country – Iran.”

“I worked in a charity store. Pleasant environment - everything had its place.”

“They had a lot of equipment and tools I had never seen before. The placement was demanding but great!”

MENTORS AND ACCOMPANYING PERSONS – SUPPORT OF PUPILS DURING THE PLACEMENT ABROAD

One of the important factors of a successful implementation of a placement abroad is the expertise and motivation of the assigned mentor, or mentors, and the logistic and administrative support by accompanying teachers.

In the focus group meetings and individual interviews, we were trying to find how the participants in placements abroad perceived the support by mentors and accompanying persons. Participants in focus groups, in particular, were not familiar with the term ‘mentor’, although the interviews showed that they perceived the role of the assigned teachers of vocational subjects at secondary schools or the supervisors as well as the team leaders in the businesses in which they did their placements.

Most respondents who participated in placements at schools with a centre for practical training were satisfied with the level of vocational knowledge of the assigned vocational teachers; more of them appreciated their friendly approach to pupils and a pleasant atmosphere during the training.

More than half of respondents who participated in placements in businesses were assigned team- leaders or supervisors who were the company’s employees usually working in the same department. Mentors acquainted them with the company structure and the activities of each department, and trained them for the assigned task, monitored the quality of their work, and subsequently assigned new tasks. Some of the respondents were positively surprised by team-leader’s or supervisor’s partnership approach, open communication, natural and human interest in the participants and their country. In isolated cases, participants met with mentors also during the leisure-time activities organised by the team-leader also for other employees in the department.

“The mentor trained us and came to check our work and progress every day.”

“Our supervisor was our guide, our friend.”

Approximately a third of the respondents who participated in placements in businesses did not have an assigned mentor. They were given ad hoc tasks directly by the manager of the site or a member of staff; however, this was not a managed professional support of the placement participant.

“We didn’t have a mentor. There was the head of the store, who came once in a while; he told us what to do in the morning or at the lunchtime, then we went to him when we had finished the work and he gave us some other work.”

During the placement, the majority of respondents had an accompanying teacher or teachers from the sending school, who were responsible for the group of participants at the placement location. The accompanying teachers provided pupils mainly with logistic and administrative support; they were involved in the vocational training of pupils at VET institutions or businesses to a minimum extent. If the placement was arranged by an intermediary agency, they informed it of the pupils’ requirements, problems, and complaints. The majority of respondents perceived the participation of accompanying teachers in the placement as necessary and listed various types of activities performed by the accompanying teachers: formal supervision of pupils (1 - 2 times a day), dealing with ad hoc problems, transportation to the host organisation, and organisation of leisure activities.

“We had an accompanying person, he checked on us daily; we made trips together and he helped us in problematic situations.”

“The accompanying teacher drove us to the company; he lived with us in one apartment; we had an opportunity to get to know him from a different side.”

However, it must be said that in most cases, the sending schools did not inform the participants clearly about the activities/responsibilities of the accompanying person and the mentor/supervisor in the placement before the departure. If the placement was implemented at a vocational education school with a centre for practical training, the participants assumed that the mentor should be a teacher who will provide specific vocational knowledge and skills during the placement. They realised the role and responsibilities of mentors in businesses only after the completion of placement abroad. The interviews also showed that most respondents did not have any information whether the mentor participated in the creation of the vocational content of the placement and whether and in what form the mentor provided the continuous and/or the overall feedback to the sending schools regarding the progress made by the participants in vocational knowledge and skills. Better information on the role and responsibilities of mentors and accompanying persons provided to the participants can contribute to the higher vocational and organisational level of placements abroad.

SUSTAINABILITY OF CONTACTS

Placements abroad are not only an opportunity to strengthen or improve one's knowledge and competences in different areas, but they also serve for getting acquainted with a new country, culture, and customs. Participants in learning mobilities meet new people, be it at the workplace, at school, in families, or during leisure activities. However, the questionnaire survey showed that many participants did not manage to retain the new contacts after they return home from the placement. Only 8 % of all participants stated that they often contacted people from the placement abroad; 22 % selected option 'sometimes'. Even lower numbers can be observed in connection with contacts with foreign organisations. Only 6 respondents (1 %) stated that they often contacted foreign organisations and only 57 respondents (10 %) did so 'sometimes'.

Sustainability of contacts is often limited by the short length of placement as well as by the fact that normally pupils participate in placements in groups. These pupils are often placed together into the same host organisation and then spend free time together. The individual interviews or focus group meetings indicated that pupils built closer and more sustainable contacts when they were separated into different organisations. In general, it can be concluded that the placement participants build the strongest contacts with people from host families or company employees. These contacts are often retained through social networks.

"I am in touch with the manager of the hotel where I did my placement and I am going to do a summer job there."

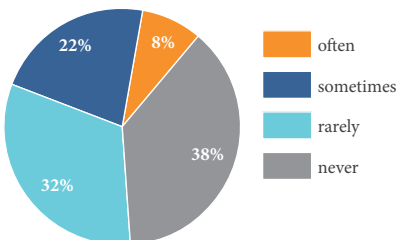
"I had a great host family, we stayed in touch and they are planning to come and visit me in Slovakia."

"Sometimes we 'like' each other's photos on Facebook and send a birthday message."

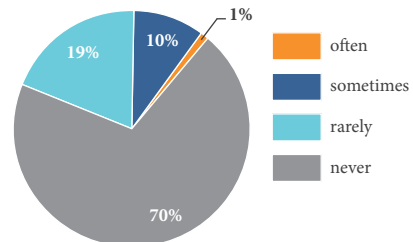
"I haven't thought of contacting them."

"I didn't exchange contact information with the employees. From time to time I write to the landlady from the host family and to her son. We are in touch on Facebook."

Contacts with people abroad
(n = 590)



Contacts with organizations abroad
(n = 590)



CHAPTER IV

DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCES

DEVELOPMENT OF VOCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL
VOCATIONAL SKILLS

SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES DEVELOPMENT

DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCES

This chapter analyses the impact of placements on the development of vocational knowledge and practical vocational skills, soft skills, intercultural and language competences of former participants. The analysis is based on the answers to the online questionnaire as well as the feedback of respondents from 2 focus groups and 10 individual interviews.

In the online questionnaire, we collected opinions of all respondents (590) on obtaining or developing competences. The respondents expressed their degree of agreement with a statement by selecting one of 5 options. We used a simplified model to describe the results - answers 'a lot' and 'completely' are classified in the study as positive, answers 'not at all' and 'only a little' express a low degree of agreement and answers 'to some extent' express respondents' partial agreement with the statement.

In the focus groups meetings and individual interviews with participants, we discussed the situations in which they acquired specific vocational, language, intercultural competences; these are presented in the study by participants in the form of descriptions or quotations.

DEVELOPMENT OF VOCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL VOCATIONAL SKILLS

Using 10 statements in the **online questionnaire**, we were trying to identify respondents' perception of the impact of placements on the development of vocational knowledge and skills. 5 statements investigated the degree of the development of specific vocational competences and other 5 statements focused on determining whether the placement abroad was an opportunity to obtain new skills or knowledge in comparison to the practical training in secondary vocational education in Slovakia.

The analysis of the first five statements shows that the respondents evaluated most positively **the possibility to obtain practical vocational skills** through the placement abroad. 67 % of all respondents obtained practical vocational skills, while the most positive evaluation came mainly from participants who did their placement in public institutions, other VET institutions, large businesses or vocational education schools with a centre for vocational training (a range of 75.9 % - 70.3 %).

62.6 % of all respondents **became aware of the activities of individual workplaces in the institutions of their placement** to a great extent. The degree of awareness differed depending on the type of institution; while 84.8 % of pupils placed in a large business, 72.4 % of pupils in a public institution, and 70.8 % of pupils

in a medium-size business became aware of the characteristics of individual workplaces, only 45.4 % of pupils placed in micro-businesses had this opportunity, which was given by the organisational structure and the number of employees in these institutions (fewer than 10 employees).

Less than a half (41.5 %) of respondents **worked with specialist and/or technical documentation** during the placement. Pupils who did their placements in medium-sized businesses had the most opportunities (54.2 %), followed by pupils in public institutions (51.7 %) and large businesses (50 %), whereas pupils in micro-businesses (26.5 %) and non-governmental organisations (7.1 %) had significantly fewer opportunities.

Ability to operate specialist machinery and equipment was significantly developed by 34.1 % of respondents, 23 % developed this ability to some extent, and 30.2 % of respondents only a little or not at all; 12.7 % selected that the development of this ability was not applicable. As regards the type of institutions, pupils participating in placements at vocational education schools with a centre of practical education (49.6 %) and in larger businesses (47.8 %) had more opportunities to develop this ability; pupils placed in micro-businesses and non-governmental organisations developed this ability the least.

Respondents stated that **during the placement, they used the latest technologies or software** ‘a lot’ or ‘completely’ – 31.9 %, ‘to some extent’ – 29 %, ‘not at all’ and ‘only a little’ – 28.5 %; and 10.6 % of respondents considered the statement ‘not applicable’. Most opportunities in this area were presented to pupils who participated in placements at vocational education schools with a centre of practical training (46.9 %) and in large businesses (45.6 %), and the fewest to the pupils who participated in placements in micro-businesses (19.4 %) and non-governmental organisations (0 %).

In connection with the last three questions, we analysed the **study fields** in which the pupils whose answers were mostly positive studied. The findings confirmed that the opportunity to work with specialist and/or technical documentation, use the latest technology and equipment, and operate specialist machinery and equipment was mostly presented to pupils in technical study fields such as technicians (machinery and equipment, computer networks, setters, fixtures and fittings, service engineer), mechatronic engineers, electricians, mechanical engineers, information technology and network technicians, proportionally to the total number of respondents from these study fields.

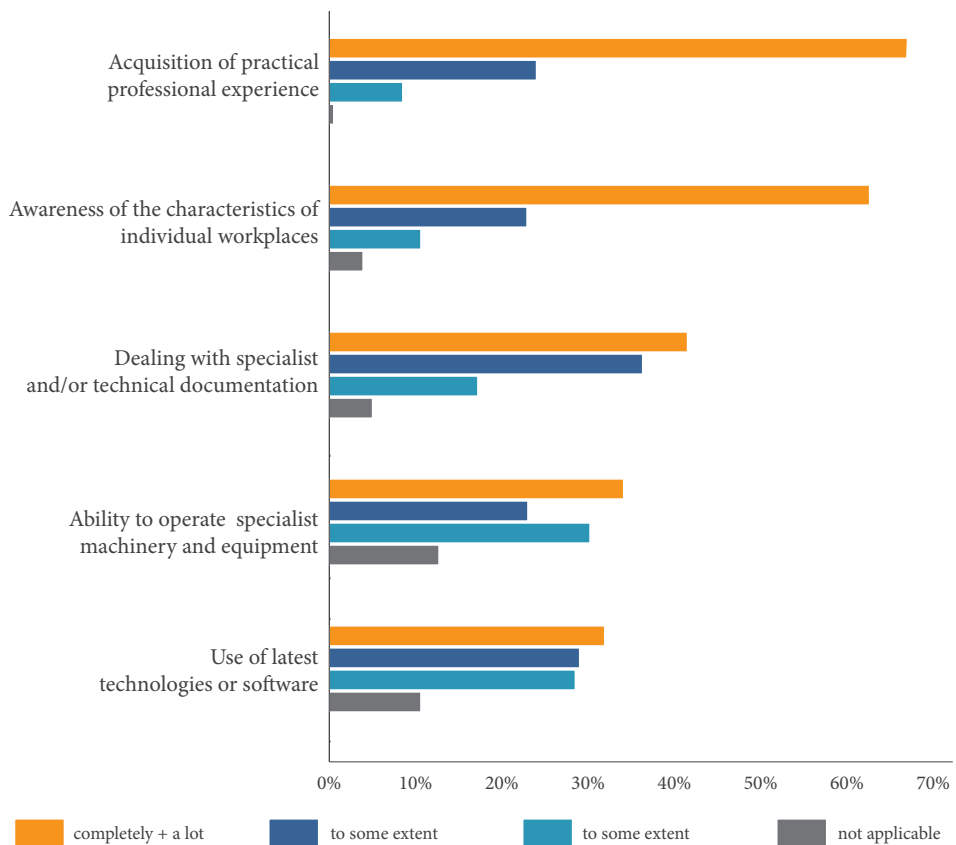
“This placement gave me a lot because I had a chance to work in different conditions, with laboratory equipment different from the one at the secondary school; I most definitely learnt new things and improved my ability to work independently when I do some work in the lab during the practice at our school.”

Pupils of hotel academies, business academies, tourism, and business and services had fewer possibilities for development in this area.

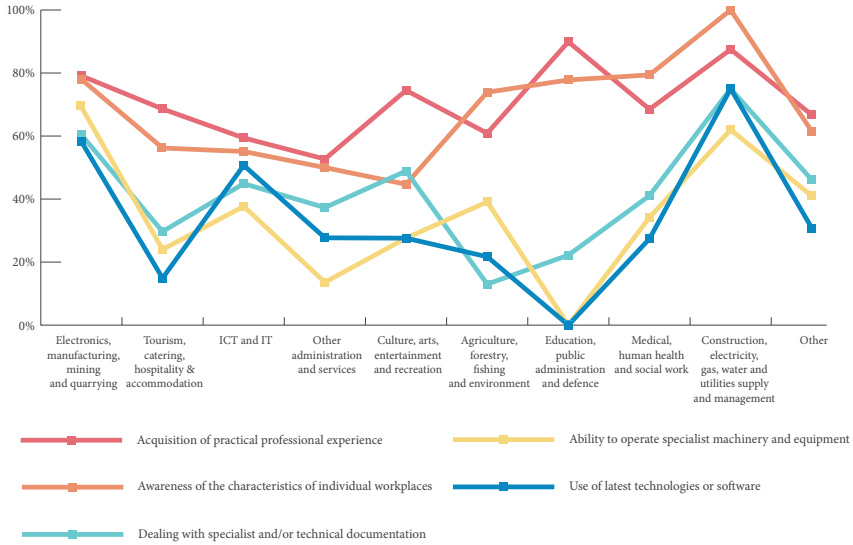
“It was great but I didn’t learn anything that I wouldn’t learn at home. I’m not saying they didn’t show what to do and how to do it, they always answered our questions. I just think they should have placed us at a school focusing on this study field or at a different workplace.”

The analysis of respondents’ answers according to the **industry** of their placement shows similar findings. Pupils participating in placements in industries like electronics, manufacturing, and mining and quarrying evaluated the impact of the placement in the five studied areas more positively than pupils who participated in placements in tourism, accommodation and food services or other administrative and support services.

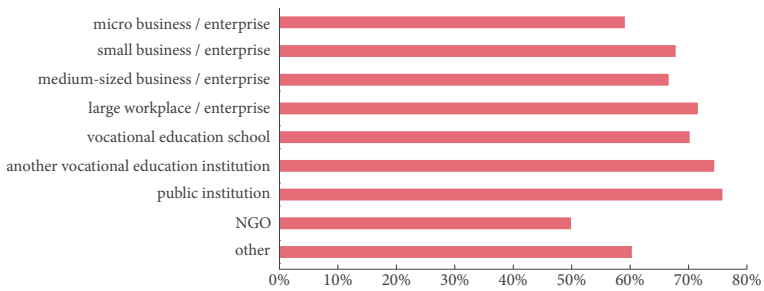
Impact of the trainee placements on the development of vocational skills



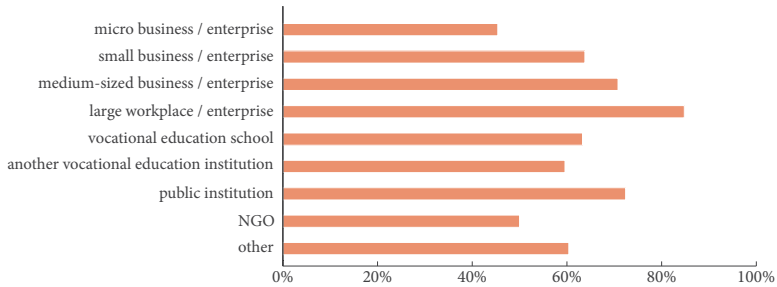
Development of vocational skills according to the sectors in which the traineeship took place*



Acquisition of practical professional experience*

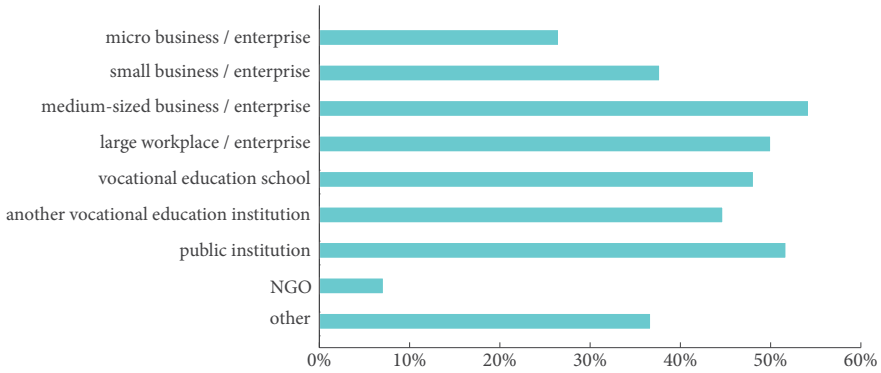


Awareness of the characteristics of individual workplaces*

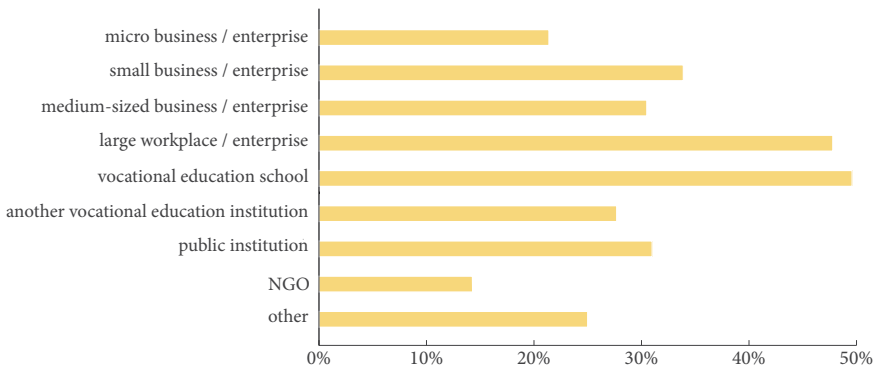


* The data include respondents who stated that they gained or developed the listed skills a lot or completely.

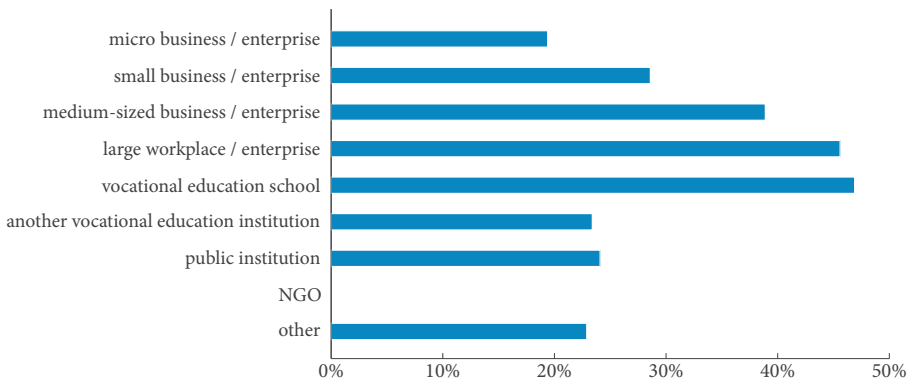
Dealing with specialist and/or technical documentation*



Ability to operate specialist machinery and equipment*



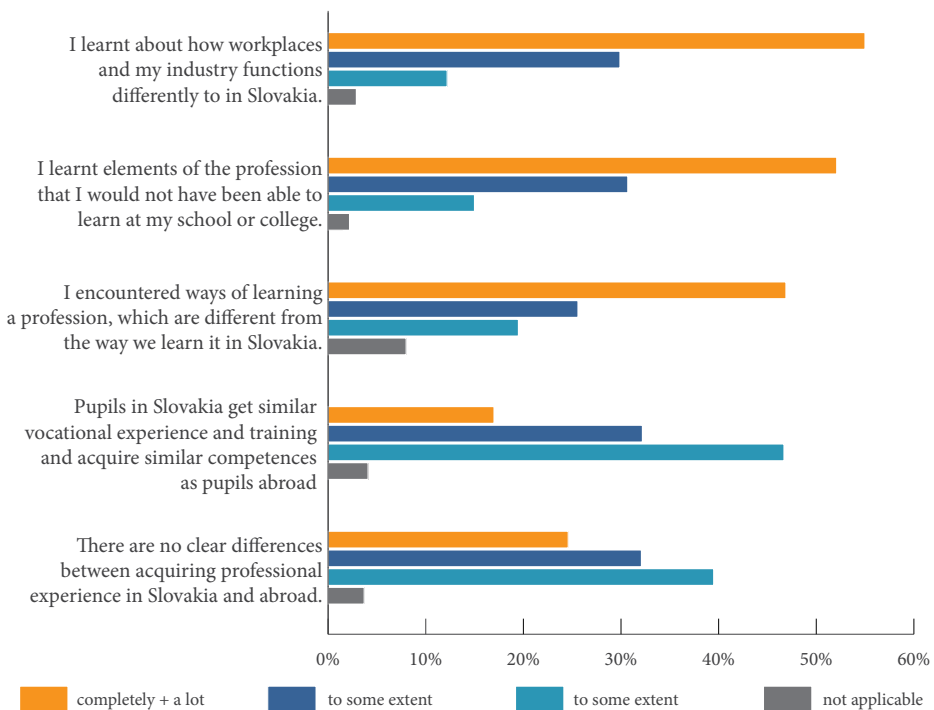
Use of latest technologies or software*



* The data include respondents who stated that they gained or developed the listed skills a lot or completely.

In the online questionnaire, we were also trying to establish whether the placement abroad was an opportunity to **gain new skills or knowledge compared to respondents' practical training in secondary vocational education in Slovakia**. 52.1 % of respondents gave a positive answer to the question whether the placement abroad helped them **acquire any vocational competences which they would not have been able to learn at their school**. 55 % of all respondents found out during the placement that **workplaces and the structure of their industry function differently to in Slovakia**. 46.9 % of respondents had an opportunity to experience **different ways of learning, which are not used in their study field in Slovakia**. As regards the statement **there are no clear differences between acquiring professional experience in Slovakia and abroad**, 39.5 % of respondents agreed 'only a little' or 'not at all', which means that they perceived significant differences during the placement; 32.1 % of respondents selected 'to some extent', while 24.7 % of respondents selected 'a lot' or 'completely', which means that these respondents did not observe any significant differences. Only 17 % of respondents think that **pupils in Slovakia obtain similar vocational experience and education and acquire similar competences as pupils abroad**; 32.2 % selected 'to some extent' and 46.7 % of respondents selected options 'only a little' or 'not at all'. That means there are more respondents perceiving the differences in this area.

Opportunities for the development of new professional skills and competences during the traineeship



There were 15 pupils from technical fields of study in the **focus groups**: electronics, mechatronics, mechanical engineering, information and communication technology, computer and network systems; other 6 participants studied at a business academy, a secondary vocational school of business and services, and a hotel academy. All respondents participated in placement in 2018 and their placement lasted 2 weeks. More than half of them (14) did their placement in different types of businesses, both in terms of size and industry; for example, a manufacturing company, a real estate agency, an accounting company, a hotel, and a theatre. 7 pupils were at vocational education school during their placement. Respondents participated in placements in different countries - 7 participants in the Czech Republic, 5 in the United Kingdom, 4 in Sweden, 2 in Finland and Spain, and 1 in Poland.

In the focus group meetings, we used an anonymous questionnaire to collect data on participants' perception of the impact of placements on the development of their vocational skills.

The analysis of the answers shows that during the placement, 15 pupils (71 %) experienced a **different style of management and organisation**; other 5 pupils agreed 'to some extent', and only 1 pupil selected 'only a little'. 10 pupils (48 %) **got acquainted with new technology** to a significant extent, 5 pupils to some extent, and other 6 pupils only to a minimum extent, or they considered the question not applicable. Pupils were slightly more critical regarding the **change in their ability to use machinery, tools, and equipment** after the completion of the placement. 8 of them (38 %) declared a significant change, 5 of them to some extent, and according to 8 respondents, no change in this ability occurred or was relevant. More than half of the respondents (57 %) realised the need to develop their skills in certain vocational areas to a significant extent; other 7 respondents to some extent and 2 respondents only a little.

Pupils' answers in the focus groups confirmed the basic trends in the perception of the impact of placements abroad on the development of participants' knowledge and skills, visible in the respondents' answers in the online questionnaire.

In the focus group meetings, we talked with the participants about specific vocational skills that they developed through the placement abroad.

For example, the participants in placements in Sweden and Finland in study fields mechanical engineering and mechatronics performed the same vocational activities as the other employees of the company; they were integrated into the work team, supervised by an employee who worked in the department, direct superior – team leader, or the head of the organisation in the case of a small business. Their statements are presented below.

“We worked in a company which produced computer components. We performed several tasks: assembling, packaging, testing of components, preparation of components for shipping. At first, the employees showed us what to do and how to do it; then they checked our work and gave us another task. During the placement, we worked in all departments of the company.”

“I was in a company which specialised in welding of waste containers. I could see how plasma works; we saw how sheet metal rolling machines work, we directly made sheet metal, which were welded to containers.”

“I worked in a company which is a leader in the electrical installation; I was at the assembly line and I made contactors which are used in wind turbines and water power plants.”

An information and communication technology pupil was placed in a company which provided internet. She worked in the marketing and promotion department and she actively participated in the creation of marketing materials, which is also her field of interest at vocational school. As she said: *“I learnt how a company works and how marketing is done in practice. It was a very good experience.”*

Another placement participant from the field of computer and network technology was satisfied with the opportunity to try new technology and software in the company; however, he missed more thoroughly designed organisation of the placement, particularly professional supervision.

“I and my classmate were in a company specialising in camera systems. They put us into the showroom and told us that we can try cameras, disassemble them and test their functionality. When a new camera that they wanted to try arrived, we tested and installed it. Once, we participated in a professional presentation for clients. We were also given random ad hoc tasks; for example, translation from Czech to English or testing of systems before presentations. The company’s employees were busy and spent a very limited amount of time with us.”

4 placement participants in the study field electronics who were placed at vocational education school in the Czech Republic evaluated the quality of vocational training as well as the school’s technology very positively.

“Every day was different at school, including the teaching methods. Although we knew the technology they had, we had never worked with it at our school, e.g. during the placement, we worked with 3D printers in a 3D studio.”

“We learnt designing printed conductors, soldering, work with air – compressed air switches, we did programming.”

Interviews in the focus groups confirmed the findings from the online questionnaire that pupils from economy study fields – business academy, business and services reinforced their existing knowledge and skills obtained at the secondary school; they performed standard administrative tasks: simple email correspondence, filling in forms, attendance registration, processing of statistical data in tables, sorting and registering mail and invoices, scanning and shredding documents. The participants perceived the benefit of the placement mostly in the fact that they performed specific tasks in a workplace and at the same time, they got acquainted with the work of individual departments; they realised the connection between different tasks and they were given an opportunity to do independent work, for which they prepared theoretically at the secondary school, especially if they were placed in larger businesses.

A smaller part of participants had also an opportunity to do creative or more specialised activities.

“During the placement, I got a task of comparing the Slovak and British tax systems; I presented the comparison to the employees of the company at the end of the placement. I would like to do business and use this knowledge in the future.”

“We were assigned a task of preparing a presentation on our fictional product, shoot a commercial, and at the same time the mentor showed us good examples in the practice.”

We noticed a lower degree of satisfaction with the professional orientation of the placement in 2 out of 21 participants in the focus group. One participant complained of the inappropriately chosen programme of the placement, which did not correspond to the participant’s level of knowledge. Another participant was placed into an inappropriately chosen host organisation and performed inappropriate activities – manual work that was not related to his study field at all.

We discussed with the focus group participants whether they perceived **differences between practical training in Slovakia and the Erasmus+ programme placement abroad.**

Mainly pupils in technical study fields such as mechanical engineering, mechatronics, and electronics perceived a greater vocational benefit of the placement abroad regardless of whether they were in a business or vocational education school.

“I did vocational practice in Slovakia in my second grade for two weeks in a small business with 20 – 30 employees, archiving and saving documents on clouds. The technology was good; however, it can’t be compared to the school

in the Czech Republic where I did my placement, as it had a different focus and the best technology in the industry.”

“In Finland, I was in a company that specialised in welding of waste containers; the technology in this area is much more advanced in Finland than in Slovakia.”

“I did my vocational practice in an automotive company in Slovakia and I basically worked as an errand-boy; I walked in the hall and when they needed something at the assembly line I fetched it. During the placement in Sweden, I and my classmate had our own work station where they gave us work, checked and explained things we did not know.”

“I was in a train depot during the vocational practice in Slovakia. The only technical equipment was a crane and we also had a spanner and a bar, which they used for extending the arm. The technical equipment cannot be compared because it was a different company than the one in Sweden. What can be compared is the people’s approach and that’s what we lacked in the Slovak company.”

“We did meaningful work and nobody differentiated between us and the employees; we did the same work as them. During the vocational practice in Slovakia, we felt redundant.”

In the individual interviews, we talked with 10 participants in placements abroad who completed the secondary vocational study; some of them are studying in higher education or working while studying in higher education, and some of them are employed. The respondents included graduates of the following fields of study: business academy, cosmetician/cosmetologist, nurse, pharmaceutical assistant, masseur, electrical engineer, information and communication technologies, and operator of glass production - hollow and pressed glass. More than half of respondents whom we met in the individual interviews did their placement in micro-businesses. They confirmed the findings from the online questionnaire that participants in micro businesses had limited possibilities to work with new tools, machines, and technology; usually, they got acquainted with a considerably narrow range of activities and work procedures.

Some examples are presented below.

2 respondents from a business academy study field worked in micro-businesses during their placement in the Great Britain. Both respondents concluded that through the placement, they developed different skills to those which were the focus of their business academy study. Despite that, both of them evaluated the

development of their new practical vocational skills positively.

The respondent who worked in a charity store learnt how to receive, sort and dispose of goods, create price tags, at work at the cash-desk.

Another respondent worked in a small real estate agency, where he did market research – searched for information on the internet, inspected properties with another colleague, and published listings at the company’s website. As he stated: *“it was good that wasn’t work like – ‘go to the post office’, but real work.”* However, he admitted: *“the extent of activities was limited and I’d have preferred working in a larger institution where I could get a bigger picture of its functioning and got acquainted with more activities.”*

Another placement participant who graduated from a secondary vocational school in the field of information and communication technology worked in a micro-business during the placement – service and sale of used computers and IT components - where he repaired computers and published information on components the owner wanted to sell at the website. He evaluated the possibilities for the development of vocational skills in this way:

“It was a smaller store; they did not have top equipment, but I think they had everything that was necessary and everything we learnt about at school, so I could use the knowledge at work in the store. I also learnt something new. For example, when we worked with software, we used different programmes and procedures from the ones we learnt at school. However, I learnt more practical vocational knowledge during vocational practice in Slovakia than I did through the placement in the United Kingdom.”

2 graduates from the study field cosmetician/cosmetologist also worked in smaller businesses – parlours. One of them worked in a hairdressing/cosmetic parlour in Italy. She concluded:

“There was nothing that we wouldn’t see in Slovakia. The same work procedures as in Slovakia, only the quality of the products was better. I learnt more during my practice in Slovakia.”

She considers the placement’s added value to be in the fact that she learnt to do a pedicure, which is not in the curriculum of her field of study in Slovakia.

A graduate from the study field electronics – multimedia technology - who was on a placement in the Czech Republic had an opportunity to work with new technology and had a significant professional support from his vocational mentor, who passed a lot of new information onto him and his classmates.

“The placement gave me a lot because we did things we did not do at our school. Our school does not have equipment like the Czech school. I had a great mentor as far as vocational skills are concerned; he had a human approach.”

A participant in a placement in the Czech Republic, a graduate from the study field operator of glass production - hollow and pressed glass, positively evaluated the company's excellent equipment, which she had not seen before, as well as the professional guidance by the foremen, the assigned tasks, which were a challenge for her, and the opportunity to work with new technology. She improved for example in creating stained – cutting the arches and painting on glass with special brushes; she learnt the original medieval technique – lead lighting. At the same time, she realised during the placement: *“Only when I saw the people in person, I told to myself I want to do that too.”*

3 participants in individual interviews did their placement in the medical industry; each of them graduated from a different study field.

The graduate from the study field masseur was placed in a retirement home in Germany, which she compared to *“the best and the richest resort in Slovakia”* as regards the equipment. Despite doing support activities such as catering, cleaning, and leisure time activities with the clients in addition to massages, she perceived the added value of the placement from the professional perspective as well. She realised the need for an all-round approach to clients in such facilities, which is lacking in Slovakia. Since she would like to do rehabilitation massage in the future in a different type of facility to the one she was placed in, she stated: *“When I compare the vocational practice in Slovakia with the placement in Germany, I must say the vocational practice at the National rehabilitation centre in Kováčová gave me more, as I developed specific vocational skills.”*

A graduate from the study field pharmaceutical assistant participated in a placement at a pharmacy in Portugal. Although during her vocational practice in Slovakia she gained more extended vocational skills than in Portugal, she appreciated the opportunity to get acquainted with a different organisational structure of a pharmacy. She also learnt new work procedures, for example, receipt of drugs.

The biggest benefit as regards the development of vocational knowledge and practical vocational skills was cited by a graduate from the study field nurse, who participated in a combined placement at a vocational education school and a hospital in the Czech Republic. His statements indicate that it is possible to achieve high **added value in the development of vocational skills through placements abroad** provided several conditions be met:

- motivated participants who can clearly define, prior to the placement, what knowledge and skills they want to obtain through the placement;
- clear selection criteria which consider not only applicants' level of knowledge, behaviour, and foreign language skills, but also practical skills, which they continuously demonstrate within the vocational practice, proactiveness, striving for further development as well as a defined idea of their further career path;
- content of the placement which is connected to the knowledge and skills acquired through the vocational practice in the individual's home country and which complies with educational targets of the individual and the sending organisation;
- host organisation with an offer of specific vocational work activities for the whole period of placement, quality equipment, and motivated and expert mentors/supervisors;
- alternation on activities such as working at a workstation/department/site and getting acquainted with the work in other departments, expert lectures, presentations in order to obtain extended vocational knowledge;
- new approaches, methods, procedures, and technological equipment; with an emphasis on the applicability in further study or career rather than the range;
- trust, co-workers' openness and willingness to give advice, helpfulness, openness in communication, humaneness;
- possibility to make mistakes without consequences, sanctions or punishment.

According to the respondent, the host organisation in the Czech Republic managed to provide most of the listed factors.

SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

There were 7 questions in the **online questionnaire** enquiring about the **level of soft skill development** of participants. Employers consider these soft skills to be an important precondition for a successful integration of secondary vocational school graduates into the work process.

Out of the total number of respondents, more than 70 % agreed that during the placement they had an opportunity to develop their skills in **communication and teamwork**. The highest percentage of respondents (more than 79 %) who selected options 'a lot' and 'completely' were among participants in medium-sized businesses and vocational education schools with a centre for practical training.

Almost 50 % of respondents agreed that the placement significantly helped them to be more open in communication, **they can establish rapport with other people more easily**; other 35 % of respondents developed this skill to some extent. A similar percentage division was also found in the analysis of respondents' answers according to the type of institution they were placed in; however, it must be stated that placement participants in public institutions and micro-businesses evaluated the development of this skill slightly more positively.

Efficient planning and organisation skills can be developed and supported by involving students into various types of activities and tasks, which they perform under the supervision of an assigned employee, team leader, or mentor in the host organisation. 37 % of respondents stated that thanks to the placement abroad **they can plan and organise their tasks and activities more efficiently** and 33.6 % can use this skill for **planning and organising their learning**. Other 37 % of respondents perceive development in each of these areas to some extent.

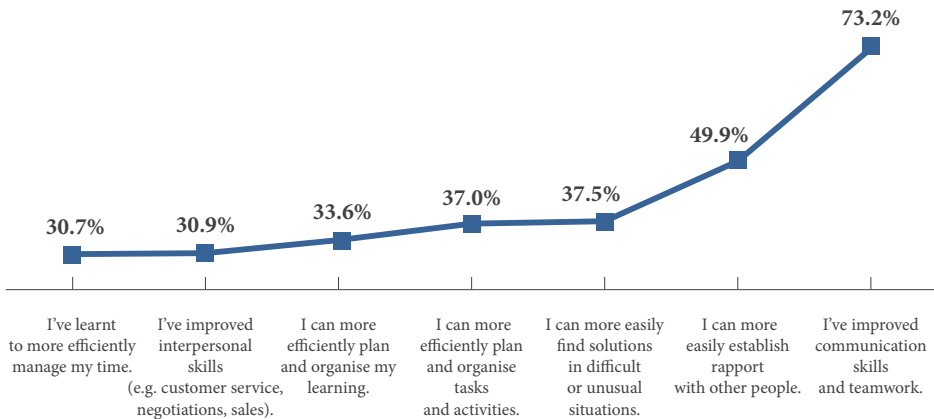
Almost 31 % of respondents stated that they learnt to **manage their time more efficiently** through the placement abroad - not only the work activities and tasks but also their personal time.

The ability to **find solutions in difficult or unusual situations** was developed through the placement abroad by 37.5 % of respondents to a great extent; other 38.5 % perceived a partial development of this skill. When comparing answers of respondents who participated in placements in different types of host organisations, we noticed the most significant improvement of this skill in respondents who were placed in medium-sized businesses, large businesses and public institutions.

The online questionnaire also collected respondents' opinions on the opportunity to develop specific skills connected with **communication with customers and sale**. As the development of these skills is connected with an active contact with

customers (written, phone, or personal) in specific industries such as business, services, administrative activities, this skill could be developed mainly by respondents who participated in placements in these industries.

Impact of the trainee placements on the development of soft skills*



* The data include respondents who stated that they gained or developed the listed skills a lot or completely.

In **focus group meetings** and **individual interviews** with participants, we discussed specific activities, tasks, and work situations which provided them with opportunities to develop soft skills.

More than half of respondents stated that their participation in a placement helped them to **overcome shyness, fear of establishing rapport and communicating with other people**.

During the placement, they realised that communication at school and at the workplace can have a different form from the communication at their home school or vocational practice. They appreciated mainly the **partnership approach** of the direct superiors or mentors-teachers, **their support and trust, openness in communication, interest in them** as people and in **the country**, they live in, **willingness** to spend their free time with them. Several respondents realised that these are important conditions for functional teamwork and cooperation.

"People were different, obliging, friendly, always trying to help, even those who were not our mentors; the team, everyone was great."

"The atmosphere at school was different from ours – we felt differently – familiar, friendly environment."

“Patient – nurse relationship, or the relationship between nurses is on a whole different level than in the hospital in Slovakia. Ethics, communication between people is on a whole different level; it is more mature, friendly and positive communication.”

Almost all respondents cited a significant benefit of placements for their **personal development**: an increase in self-confidence, self-respect, realisation of being responsible for one-self, more independence in decision-making, ability to react to changes and overcome obstacles, a need for proactiveness; they realised the need for the positive approach at work and in life.

“It was actually a test of adulthood; we had to go to work, clean our stuff, wash our clothes, and do the shopping. We didn’t have to report to anyone.”

“I learnt to be more independent.”

Several participants regardless of the industry of their placement were **concerned about failing at work and making mistakes**. The placement abroad helped them overcome these concerns, mostly thanks to team leaders, mentors, and other employees.

“The placement changed my perception of people – we were concerned about what the kind of people we will meet there, how they will receive us, or what if we mess something up; we were stressed up and they were really cool.”

A part of the respondents – participants in individual interviews and focus groups - stated that they can organise their time better, be it education, work or personal time; **they learnt the value of time and the importance of its targeted use**.

A smaller part of participants in focus groups and individual interviews concluded that they had also developed skills in **presenting partial projects** - on which they cooperated with other placement participants, and in searching for and analysing support information necessary mainly in sales or marketing.

“There were four of us working on the project and we had to cooperate.”

In the connection with soft skills development, the respondents pointed out the opportunities in this area offered to them by the host families with whom they stayed and other accommodation facilities. In addition to overcoming cultural differences, they had an opportunity to communicate with different types of people in the host families, as well as to cope with minor conflict situations, be assertive, and take care of themselves.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES DEVELOPMENT

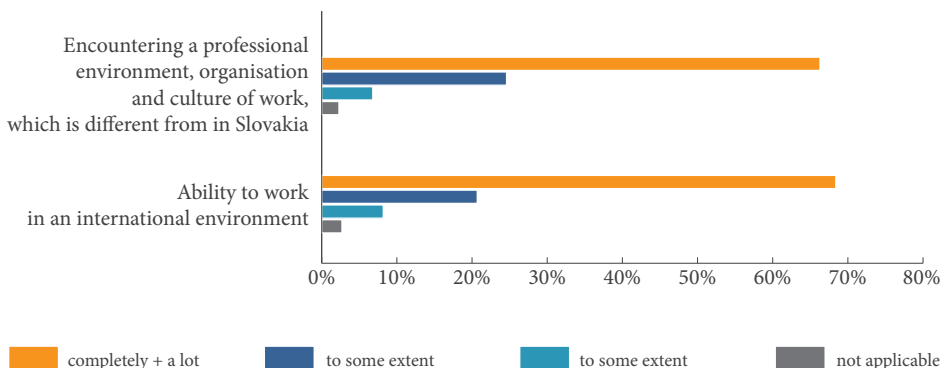
Some of the important goals of placements abroad are the development of participants' abilities to act appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations, acquire knowledge of the culture, history, politics, realise the stereotypes in their perception, communicate sensitively in different situations, and perceive and accept differences of other cultures.

The **online questionnaire** included two questions by means of which we wanted to establish to what extent the Erasmus+ programme placement contributed to the development of intercultural competences in the work environment.

The analysis of respondents' answers showed that thanks to the placement abroad 68.4 % of respondents significantly strengthened their **ability to work in an international environment**, other 20.7 % of respondents to some extent, and 8.2 % only a little or not at all; 2.7 % of respondents considered this question not applicable.

The placement abroad helped 66.3 % of respondent a lot, or completely and other 24.6 % of respondents to some extent to **get acquainted with the professional environment, organisation and work culture** different from Slovakia. Only 6.8 % of respondents had only a limited possibility to do so.

Impact of the trainee placements on the development of intercultural skills



In **focus groups and individual interviews**, we were trying to determine what impulses and situations helped the participants develop their intercultural competences.

As regards the development of **intercultural competences in the work**

environment, the placement participants experienced predominantly positive, friendly and open communication at the workplace, acceptance of differences, helpfulness, employees' effort (regardless of the hierarchy) to create a positive work environment. Several respondents tended to compare this atmosphere with their personal experience from the practical training in Slovakia.

“The placement in Germany was basically the same as or similar to what we did during the vocational placement in Slovakia. However, there is a different mentality in Germany. The health-care system is conservative in Slovakia. When we saw German nurses, who had colourful hair or shaved heads or tattoos we were really shocked. It was clear that in Germany people saw that differently; when you have a tattoo done in Slovakia people consider you a criminal or ...”

“The work morale in the company in Finland was different from the work morale in Slovakia; perhaps, one of the reasons might be that welders worked only for 6 hours; the enthusiasm for work is different from ours in Slovakia.”

“The diversity of people at work - you will not experience that in Slovakia. People work together; nobody cares where you're from, or if you are this or that type of person.”

The majority of the participants accommodated with host families recognised and listed the differences in dining, types of meals, everyday rituals, family habits, communication between the family members. Some positive experience from the stay with host families was described in the following way:

“Great, we lived with a family. We talked a lot with the landlady.”

“It was interesting to see how a different family functions.”

There were also cases, when participants were not satisfied with the host family; however, they also admitted that the negative experience opened their eyes and realised that regardless of how developed a country is people have similar personal problems and their behaviour is not always 'ideal'.

“I stayed with a host family; the landlady probably had some personal problems – she lost her job, which partially affected the atmosphere.”

Other participants who were accommodated at business and school facilities with placement participants from other countries talked about new friendships and new social contacts, which they made during common sports activities. In these situations, they could observe typical manifestations of behaviour and communication models of participants from different countries; they indirectly

learnt about the culture and customs of these countries.

There was some occasional critical feedback regarding the accommodation conditions, or limited possibilities of getting to know different culture: *“I spent my free time only with my classmates and the accompanying teacher.”*

Targeted visits of historical and cultural sites or countryside at the location of the placement during participants’ free time also represented a great stimulus for learning about the particularities of the host country. Many participants thus fulfilled their key motivation for applying for the placement abroad – getting to know a different country, travelling.

Several participants noticed different models of behaviour in host countries which they compared to Slovakia. Some of them appreciated mainly friendliness, openness, tactfulness of strangers to foreigners, and the functionality of communities.

“In our free time, we often went to the island. There was a nice and clean environment there; there were fireplaces everywhere, well-maintained, with chopped wood, places for a barbeque. Everything was clean and well-maintained.”

“People think differently, behave differently, cars will stop even when you’re 10 m from the pedestrian crossing.”

DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCES

The knowledge of a foreign language is one of the essential skills for secondary vocational school graduates from Slovakia on the Slovak and foreign labour market.

Erasmus+ programme placements abroad aim to foster the development of the existing language competences; they help participants to realise that knowledge of foreign languages opens the door to work life, helps to create social networks and understand the culture and history of a country better, as well as find one’s bearing in a different country and become more self-confident in communication. Thanks to the placement abroad, pupils will often realise their strengths as well as developmental needs; placement abroad will motivate them to further develop their language competences.

In the **online questionnaire**, we asked the respondents to what extent the placement made it possible for them to develop or improve **communication in a**

foreign language in the work environment.

The question was answered by 590 respondents, who participated in placements in 23 countries; the highest number of them did their placement in the Czech Republic (182), then in the United Kingdom (100), Germany (47), Italy (43) and Spain (41).

Out of the total number of 590 respondents, 51.8 % evaluated the possibility to communicate in a foreign language in the work environment positively, 31.5 % check the option 'to some extent', 13 % of respondents selected the option 'not at all' or 'only a little', and 3.7 % considered this question irrelevant.

In this regard, it must be said that the key target of participants doing their placement in the Czech Republic, which is a language-related country, was the development of vocational skills; the participants intended to develop their language competences only minimally. Due to this reason, we separately analysed answers of respondents (408) who participated in placements in countries other than the Czech Republic.

61 % of respondents (out of 408) selected the option 'a lot' or 'completely', 30.4 % of respondents said they had an opportunity to develop communication in a foreign language in the work environment 'to some extent', 7.4 % to a minimum extent, and 1.2 % of respondents did not consider the question applicable.

We also analysed the possibilities of developing the skill in each country, focusing on countries where the number of participants was 15 and more. The participants in three countries evaluated the opportunities to communicate in a foreign language very positively: Germany (80.9 %), the United Kingdom (76 %) and Malta (73.3 %); a lower degree of development in this area was registered in Austria (54.5 %), Portugal (53.6 %), Italy (48.8 %), Hungary (48.5 %), Poland (45.8 %), and Spain (36.6 %).

It must be mentioned that placements in Spain, Italy or Portugal are usually implemented in the English language, which is not the countries' official language and usually, only some employees from the receiving institution can communicate in English fluently.

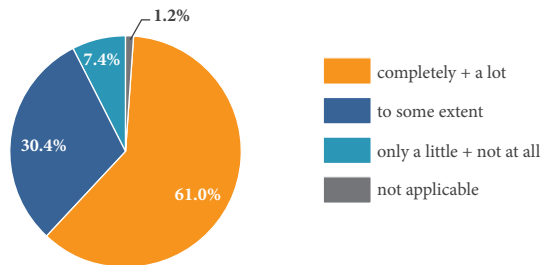
Placements in Hungary are dominated by pupils who, with regard to the region of their residence in Slovakia, can communicate in Hungarian fluently in day-to-day situations before departure; therefore, their main goal is to extend their professional vocabulary/terminology.

When analysing the data, we also focused on the comparison of respondents' answers to this question with regard to the length of the placement, which was

2, 3, 4 weeks, 1 - 3 months, or longer. We focused on placements in countries other than the Czech Republic. Most respondents participated in 2-week placements (176) and 3-week placements (157). A smaller number of respondents participated in longer placements: 4-week placements – 48 respondents, long-term placements 1 - 3 months – 26 respondents, and placements longer than 3 months – 1 respondent.

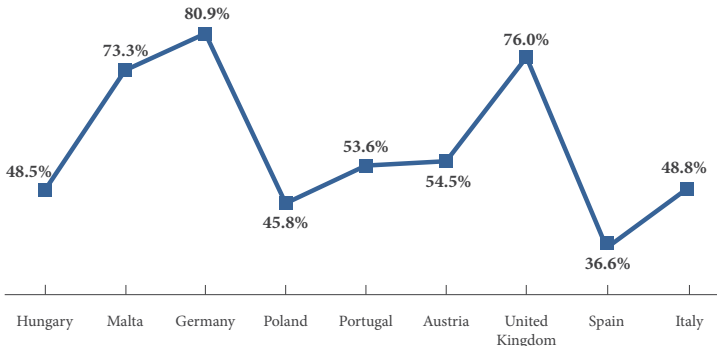
It is natural that the respondents who participated in placements for 1 to 3 months had more opportunities to develop communication in a foreign language compared to the respondents who did shorter placements: 84.6 % of respondents selected ‘a lot’ or ‘completely’. The assumption that ‘the longer the placement is, the more opportunities for development there are’ was not confirmed with the respondents who participated in placements for 2, 3, or 4 weeks. 61.8 % of respondents who participated in a 3-week placement and 59.7 % of participants in 2-week placements selected the option ‘a lot’ or ‘completely’, while only 52.1 % of participants in 4-week placements did so.

Communicating in a foreign language in a work environment



* The data does not include placements in the Czech Republic.

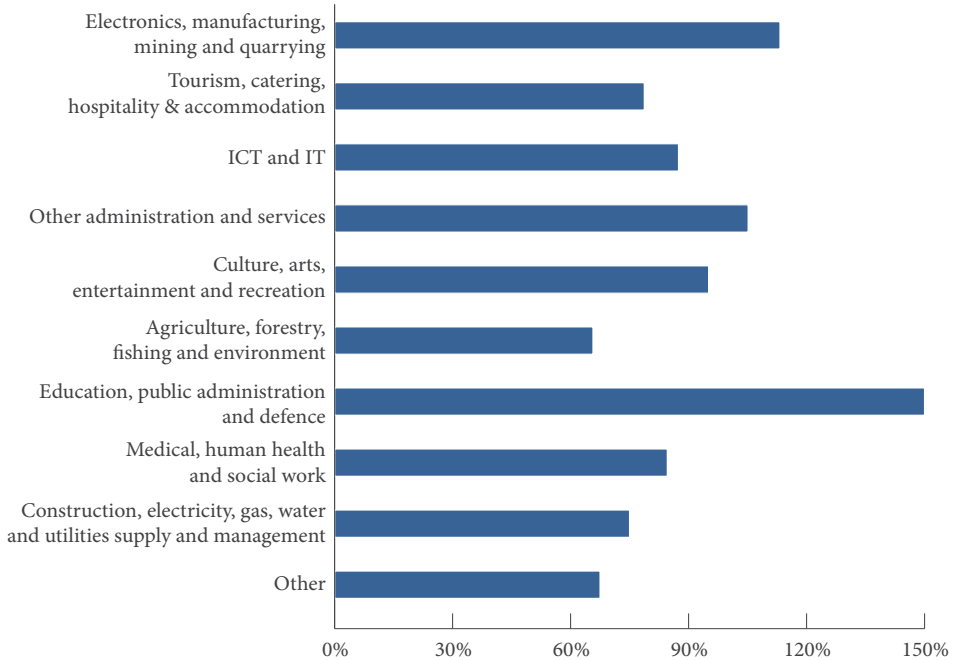
**Communicating in a foreign language in a work environment
Comparison of the results according to the traineeship placement**/****



* Selection of countries with the number of respondents/placement participants 15 and more.

** The data include respondents who stated that they gained or developed the listed skills a lot or completely.

Communicating in a foreign language in a work environment Comparison of the results according to the sectors*/**



* The data does not include placements in the Czech Republic.

** The data include respondents who stated that they gained or developed the listed skills a lot or completely.

In **focus groups**, we were trying to establish **to what extent the placement abroad contributed to the development of foreign language skills** by means of an anonymous questionnaire with three questions. As mentioned earlier, out of the total number of 21 respondents, 7 respondents were placed in the Czech Republic, 5 in the United Kingdom, 4 in Sweden, 2 in Finland and Spain, and 1 in Poland.

We focused on the answers of 14 participants who did not do their placement in the Czech Republic. Due to the similarity of the Czech and Slovak language, these questions were irrelevant for the participants in the Czech Republic.

11 participants were very positive about the question of whether they **improved their language competences** through the placement; another 3 to some extent. 8 participants **acquired new foreign language vocabulary** 'completely' or 'a lot', 4 'to some extent' and 2 respondents 'only a little' or 'not at all'. 4 participants stated the **placement abroad helped them overcome the barrier to speaking in a foreign language** to a great extent, 8 participants to 'some extent' and 2 participants selected 'only a little' or 'not at all'.

In the interviews, we asked the respondents about specific situations in which they can communicate in the main foreign language better after the completion of the placement. Most of them listed day-to-day situations such as searching for information about local transportation and cultural sites; communication with the host family on topics like family, traditions, leisure time, food, and accommodation; communication in shops and restaurants; and informal social contact with participants from different countries.

As regards these situations, they improved mainly in listening comprehension; they can understand the core idea even if the speaker has a different accent; they can react to questions as well as ask questions faster.

When communicating at the workplace, pupils partially acquired new vocabulary, learnt in which situations the terminology can be used; they can orientate themselves at the workplace in a different country and understand superior's requirements for the activities/tasks to be performed.

2 respondents stated that they could speak the main foreign language at a good level even before the departure; during the placement, they had an opportunity to try working with text in a foreign language when creating marketing materials or presenting the solution to a task to the company's employees.

“I was forced to communicate in English when we were leaving from the airport in Helsinki; I didn't have inhibitions to talk; the placement helped me in this way too.”

“I could speak English but I needed to get used to the accent, their accent is weird. I didn't understand the Scots at all.”

“I improved my English writing skills. I can write emails better.”

“English wasn't a problem for me when I went there, but I sure learnt a lot of professional terminology.”

“I learn new professional terminology that we used at work.”

Out of 10 participants in **individual interviews**, 4 were placed in the United Kingdom, 1 in Portugal, 1 in Germany, 1 in Italy and 3 in the Czech Republic.

Respondents who participated in placements in countries other than the Czech Republic evaluated the possibility to improve foreign language skills positively. 5 respondents were very satisfied and 2 participants were less satisfied.

5 respondents perceived the broader benefits of the placement for the development of language skills. They listed differences between teaching the foreign language at

school and acquiring practical language skills in the host country. They overcame shyness and fear of communicating in the foreign language; they are more self-confident in communication; they realised the need for continuous development of language skills also after the completion of the placement if they want to improve their labour market prospects. These respondents completed secondary vocational education, or studied at higher education institutions and worked at the same time, or were employed; it was clear that their perspective was different from secondary vocational school pupils who participated in the focus groups:

“Before leaving for mobility, I was not used to speaking English, because we don’t do it at schools; I improved my speaking skill in everyday English.”

“I definitely improved my language skills. The biggest difference is that we all talk with a Slovak accent at school. When we come to a foreign country we find that it’s completely different, everyone has a different accent, intonation; the English were the most difficult to understand.”

“My teacher told me in the fourth grade that I improved and overcame the fear of speaking in English.”

“They made us talk in English at work. I am not afraid of communicating anymore.”

“It also helped me to obtain a certificate in English; my overall level is B2; my speaking level is even better – C1.”

“I realised the necessity of being able to speak a foreign language and of further education; I try to practice the language by reading articles, watching movies in English, travelling; I was in England and Ireland on holiday.”

“Only after the placement, I realised I would like to go abroad in the future and I will need language there.”

“My German definitely improved, as long as a half year after I came back home I kept what I had learnt; however, as I did not learn any longer I lost a bit.”

“The placement incited me to learn the English language. I am attracted to London; I would like to go for a trip there.”

“I’ve become more confident in talking English; I also realised I can go anywhere alone and I would be able to get by.”

2 participants in the individual interviews, both from the study field cosmetician/cosmetologist criticized the possibilities for the development of language

competences through the placement. In both cases, the host organisation was not chosen appropriately; the employees could not speak the main foreign language or were not interested in communicating with the placement participant.

“We were tested in English in Slovakia and nobody spoke English there. The interpersonal relationships were good so we always understood each other.”

It is clear that the extent of the development of language competences is influenced by more factors such as the character of the activities performed by participants during the placement, the type of organisation where the placement took place, the main foreign language of the mobility vs. the official language of the country, the length of the placement, accommodation where participants could communicate in the target language vs. accommodation with other classmates from Slovakia, and the initial motivation to improve language skills.

CHAPTER V

FURTHER STUDY AND CAREER PATH

RESPONDENTS WITH COMPLETED SECONDARY EDUCATION

HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

RESPONDENTS OUTSIDE FORMAL EDUCATION

SELF-EMPLOYED PERSONS

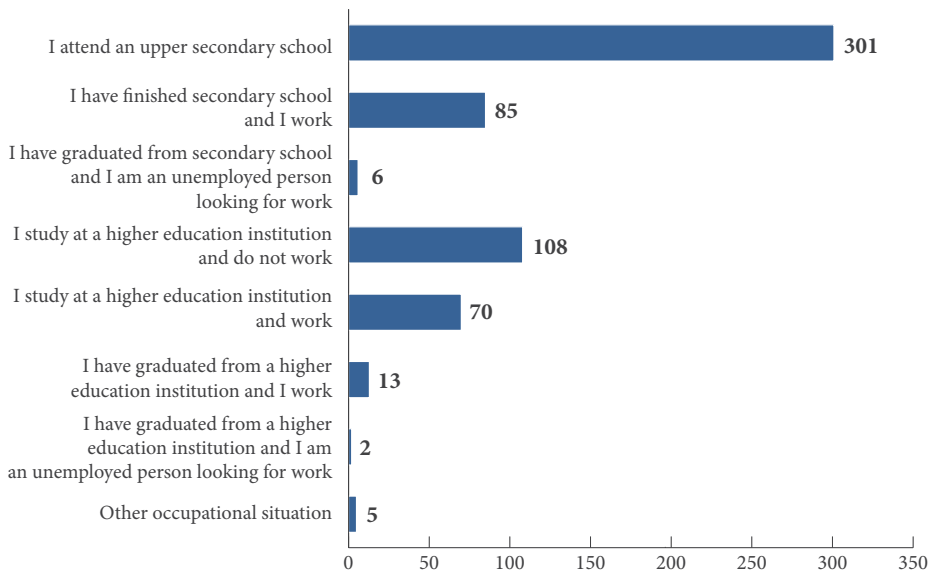
UNEMPLOYED RESPONDENTS

JOB SEARCH PREFERENCES

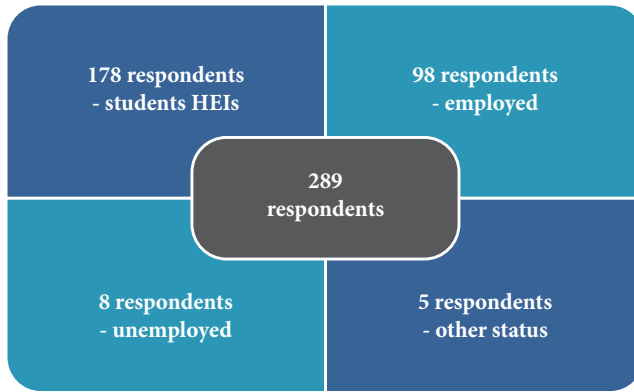
MIGRATION WITHIN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC AND ABROAD

This chapter deals with further study and career paths of former Erasmus+ participants. It focuses particularly on respondents with completed secondary education, that is, higher education students and people on the labour market (the employed, the unemployed or with another status). The study also aims to find to what extent the acquired competences and experience were useful for participants' professional development and how placements influenced their future career paths. Respondents' answers in the online questionnaire enabled us to outline the current status of the former participants and so we can closely follow in which stage of life in relation to study and work they were at the time of the survey.

Educational and professional status of the respondents (n = 590)



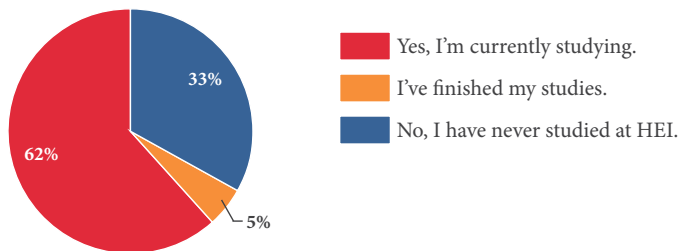
The overview indicates that at the time of the survey, more than half of all respondents (51.1 %) were still pupils of secondary schools from which they were sent to placements. **289 respondents had completed the secondary education study**, which represents 48.9 % out of the total number of 590 respondents. 178 respondents went on to study in higher education, which is 30.2 % out of the total number of respondents. One respondent (listed in the category 'Other' status) continued in post-secondary non-tertiary study. 111 respondents, which are 18.8 % out of all respondents, were not in any formal education, that is, they were either employed, unemployed or had some other status.



RESPONDENTS WITH COMPLETED SECONDARY EDUCATION

A more detailed analysis of answers shows that former participants most often went on to study in higher education after completing the secondary school. 178 respondents, which are 62 % out of the total number of **289 respondents**, were studying at a higher education institution at the time of the survey and 15 of them had already completed the higher education study. This is 5 % of respondents with completed secondary education. On the other hand, 96 respondents did not study at a higher education institution at the time of the survey or before; that is 33 % of respondents.

Share of HEI students (n = 289)

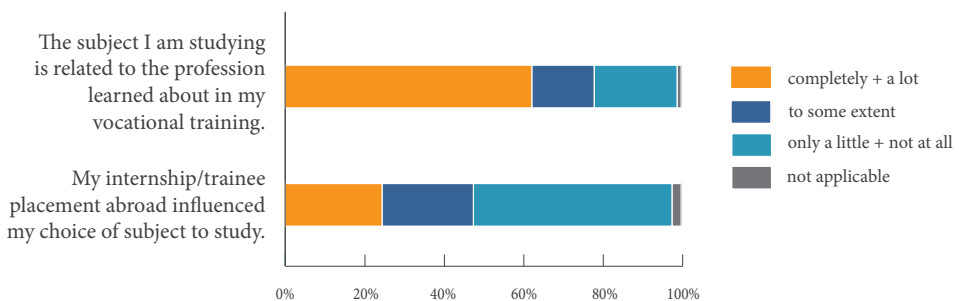


HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

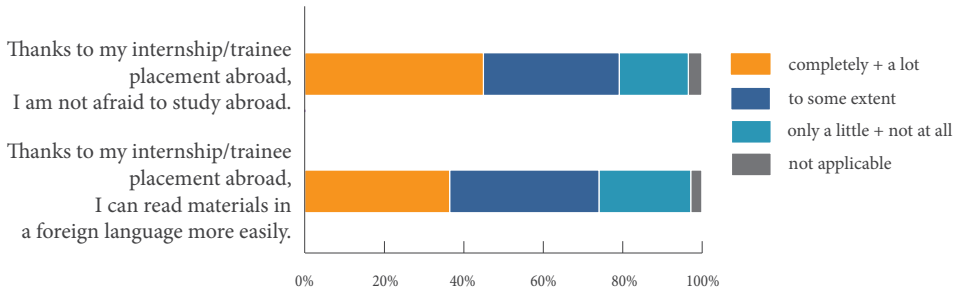
Respondents who were **higher education students** at the time of the survey studied mainly at higher education institutions in Slovakia. Almost every tenth respondent (9 %) studied abroad, mostly in the Czech Republic – 10 respondents. 3 respondents studied at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom and there was one higher education student in each of the following countries: the Netherlands, Austria, and Denmark.

Higher education students studied in different fields of study at secondary schools, none of which was significantly predominant, but most graduates who went on to study at a higher education institution came from the following study fields: medical assistant, business academy, other economic fields (accounting, economics), technical lyceum and IT study field (e.g. information and network technologies, computer networks).

The online questionnaire survey in this category of respondents showed that 62.4 % of respondents studied at higher education institutions in study fields that **are related to the study fields in which they studied at secondary schools**. 15.7 % of respondents stated that their study field is partially related. On the other hand, 21.3 % of respondents declared that the higher education study field is not related to their secondary school field of study. As regards the **relationship between the placement and the choice of the field of study**, almost every fourth respondent stated that the placement influenced their later choice of the field of study. 23 % of respondents perceived a partial influence. On the other hand, more than 50 % of respondents declared that the placement influenced their choice of the study field ‘only a little’ or ‘not at all’.



Higher education students **considered losing the fear of studying abroad** to be a significant benefit – 45 % of respondents perceived this benefit positively. 34.2 % of former participants partially agreed with this statement. **The ability to read materials in a foreign language more easily after the placement** was positively perceived by 36.5 % of respondents, partially by 37.6 %. On the other hand, only every fourth respondent (24.7 %) declared that the placement helped him/her with the choice of higher education study field.



“The placement was one of my best experiences at secondary school. I became so fond of the Netherlands during my practice that I applied for a place at a university and I am currently studying in the third term there.”

“I improved my English during the placement – that is the benefit I see, and I benefit from it even now in higher education.”

4 participants of **individual interviews** were studying at a higher education institution at the time of the survey. One respondent, who studied in the study field nurse at secondary school, continues in the same field of study at a higher education institution as well and is working as a nurse in a hospital at the same time. Another respondent also declared that the higher education study field (international relationships) is partly related to the field in which he studied at secondary school (business academy). Two respondents stated that they are studying at a higher education institution in a study field which is not related to the field they studied at secondary school. One of them is studying psychology and the other one is studying pre-school and special pedagogy. Before that, the first one studied at a business academy and the other one studied cosmetic. All respondents stated that they are studying what they are interested in. However, two of them also declared different motivation – getting a degree (diploma) and following their friends.

“I enjoy my higher education study; I consider doing a PhD.”

“I have always wanted to work with people. At secondary school, I realised that I didn’t want to work as an accountant. Now I am studying what I am interested in. I would like to become a paediatric psychologist.”

“I am in higher education only to get a diploma. I would like to go back to what I studied at secondary school and open my own beauty salon.”

“I chose the study field because all my friends chose it.”

In one case it is possible to say that mobility influenced the choice of higher education study – the placement upheld one respondent’s decision to study in the Czech Republic in the study field that was in line with the secondary school study field. Other participants in individual interviews stated that the placement did not have any significant influence on the choice of their further study. However, they stressed the indirect impact of mobility, e.g. improvement of language skills, increase of self-confidence, etc.

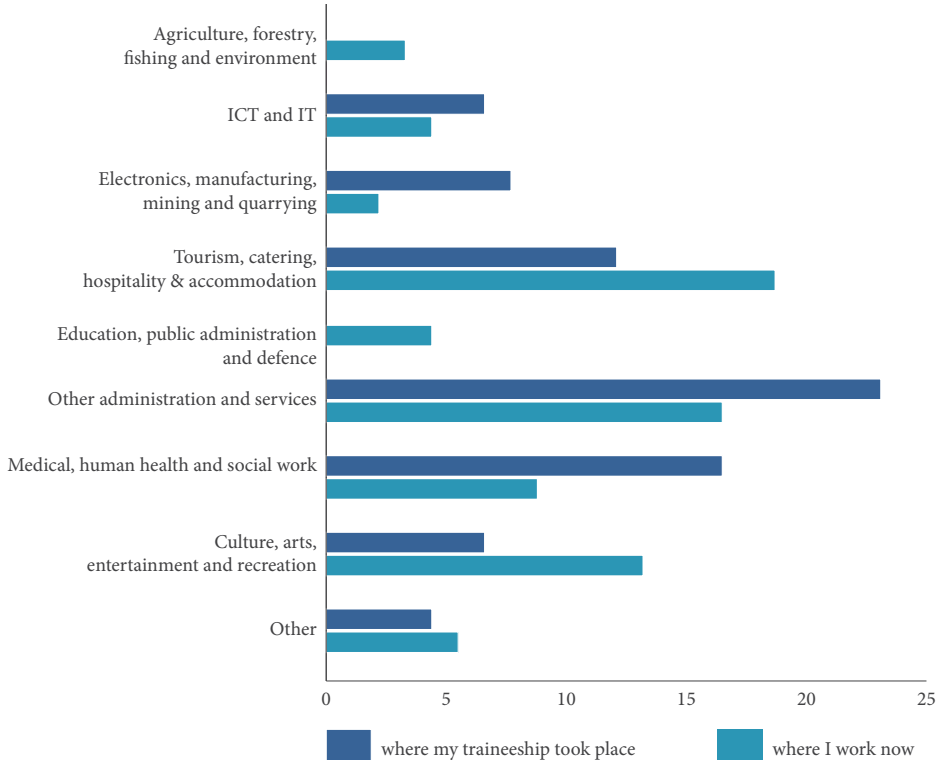
“The placement certainly influenced my further study in higher education as well as on my decision to find a job in the Czech Republic.”

The survey revealed an interesting finding that 70 respondents (39.3 %) studying at higher education institutions at the time of the survey were working. 8 respondents were working full-time (in five cases, it was former medical assistant pupils, the other three were from biotechnology and pharmacology, clothing design, and electronics) and 62 respondents were working part-time. Higher education students most often worked on temporary student job contracts, which are often not related to the study field at all. Many higher education students often do casual jobs during their study to fund their study or earn extra money for student’s life. Also, the effort to obtain practice cannot be neglected; the practice will help the students start their career after graduation from a higher education institution.

As regards the comparison of the **industry of placement and work** in this category of respondents, it must be emphasised that 40 respondents, which is 57.1 % out of 70 respondents, did not work in the industry in which they did their placement abroad.

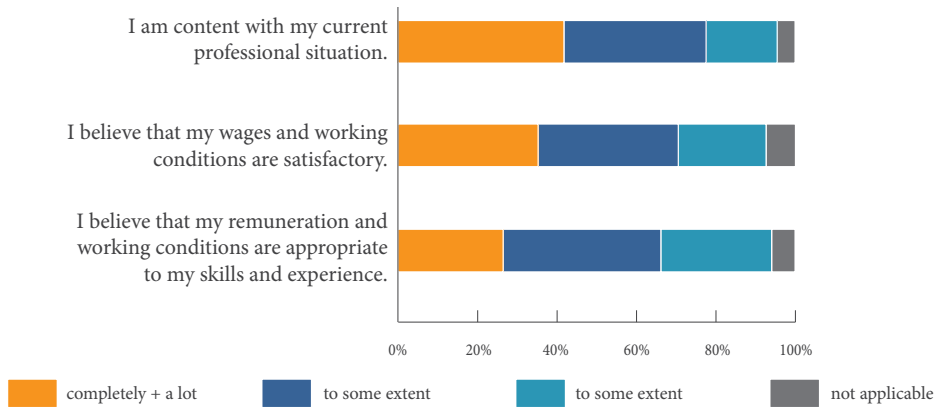
The division according to individual industries is shown in the following graph:

Occupational areas - traineeship placement vs work (n = 70)



The analysis of statements concerning the **satisfaction with the professional situation** in this category of respondents indicates that 41.8 % of respondents are content with their current job. 35.8 % of respondents agreed with this statement partially. On the other hand, almost 18 % of respondents perceived their current professional situation as dissatisfactory. The respondents perceived a lower degree of satisfaction as regards the question about **remuneration and work conditions**, where 35.3 % of respondents perceived these factors as satisfactory. The same number of respondents perceived these factors as partially satisfactory (35.3 %). 15 respondents (22.1 %) were dissatisfied. The respondents perceived the statement regarding the relationship between **remuneration/work conditions and skills/experience** the least positively. 26.5 % of respondents perceived this relationship as appropriate, 39.7 % as partially appropriate and 27.9 % as inappropriate.

Satisfaction with professional situation (n = 70)



In the online questionnaire survey, we tried to establish the degree of the **direct impact of placements abroad on the current professional situation**. The respondents expressed their degree of agreement with statements by selecting one of 5 options (I agree: not at all, only a little, to some extent, a lot, completely). We used a simplified model to describe the results - answers 'a lot' and 'completely' are classified in the study as positive, answers 'not at all' and 'only a little' express a low degree of agreement, and answers 'to some extent' express respondents' partial agreement with a statement.

More than half of respondents (58.8 %) declared that **when looking for employment they informed the potential employers about the placement abroad**. 16.2 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. On the other hand, almost every fourth respondent did not inform the potential employers about their participation in a placement abroad.

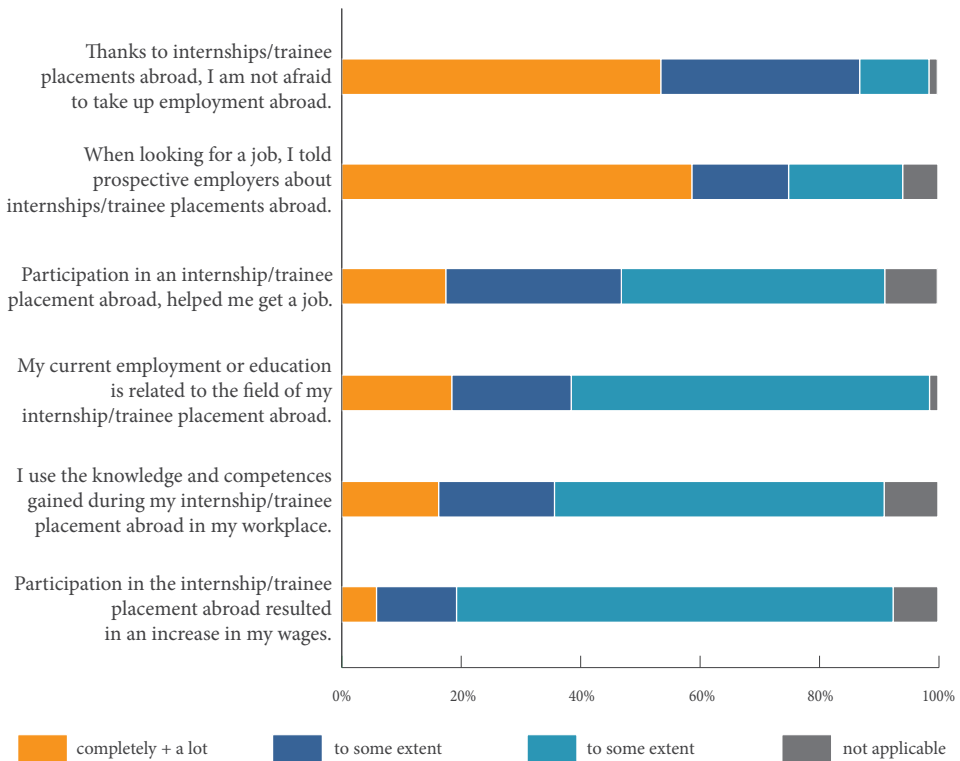
Another important impact of placements is overcoming the fear of working abroad. 53.6 % of respondents stated that thanks to the placement they are not **afraid to take up employment abroad**. 33.3 % partially agreed with this statement. On the other hand – 11.6 % of respondents expressed disagreement.

18.6 % of respondents declared that their **current employment is related to the field of their placement abroad**; 20 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. On the other hand, as many as 60 % of respondents stated that their current employment is not related to the field of their placement.

16.4 % of respondents used the **knowledge and competences obtained through the placement abroad** in practice; 19.4 % of respondents used this knowledge and competences partially. More than half of respondents (55.2 %) gave a negative opinion on this statement.

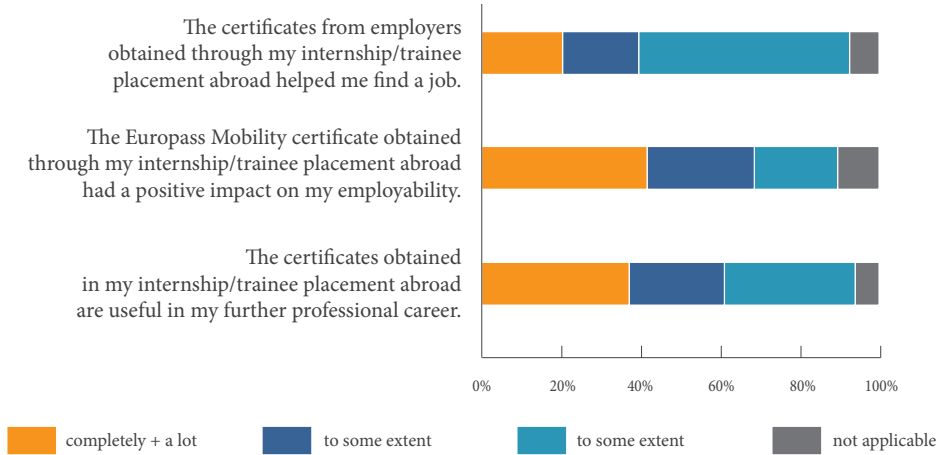
Lower verifiable impact of placements can be observed in the following statements: 17.6 % of respondents stated that **participation in the placement helped them find a job**. 29.4 % of respondents perceive this statement partially positively. Finally, 6 % of respondents stated that **the placement resulted in an increase in wages**. 13.4 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. On the other hand, 73.1 % of respondents stated that the placement did not result in an increase in wages.

Declared impact of the internship on the professional situation (n = 70)



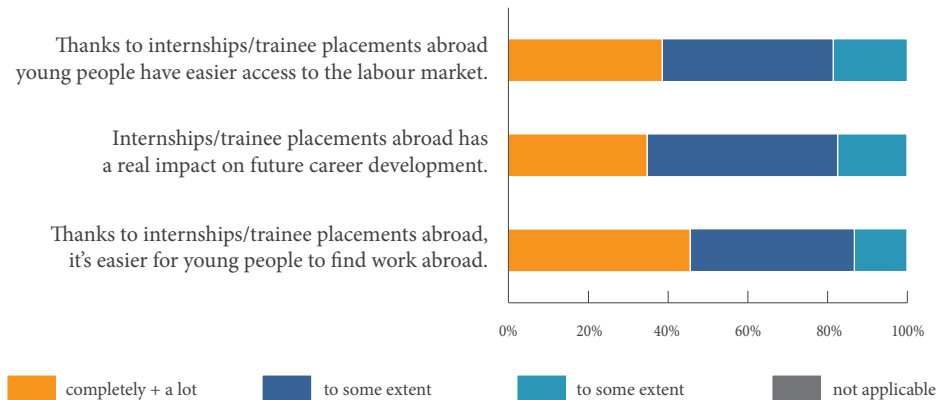
37.3 % of respondents consider certificates obtained through the placement abroad to be useful in their further professional career. 41.8 % respondents declared already at this stage of their career that Europass mobility certificate had an impact on their employability. Similarly, almost every fifth respondent stated that the certificate from the employer obtained through the placement abroad helped them find a job.

Significance of documents confirming participation in transnational learning mobility (n = 70)



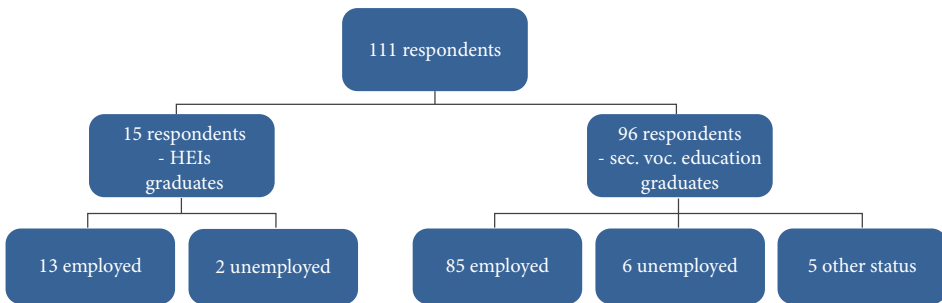
The questionnaire survey showed that students at higher education institutions who were also working at the time of the survey perceived the relationship between the placement and the future career positively. 38.6 % of respondents were convinced that **thanks to placements abroad young people have easier access to the labour market**. 42.9 % of them partially agreed with this statement. The fact that **a placement has a real impact on the future career** was positively perceived by 34.8 % of respondents and partially positively by 47.8 % respondents. Most respondents (45.6 %) were convinced that **thanks to placements abroad it is easier for young people to find work abroad** and 41.2 % of them partially agreed with the statement.

Impact of the internship on participants' professional career (n = 70)



RESPONDENTS OUTSIDE FORMAL EDUCATION

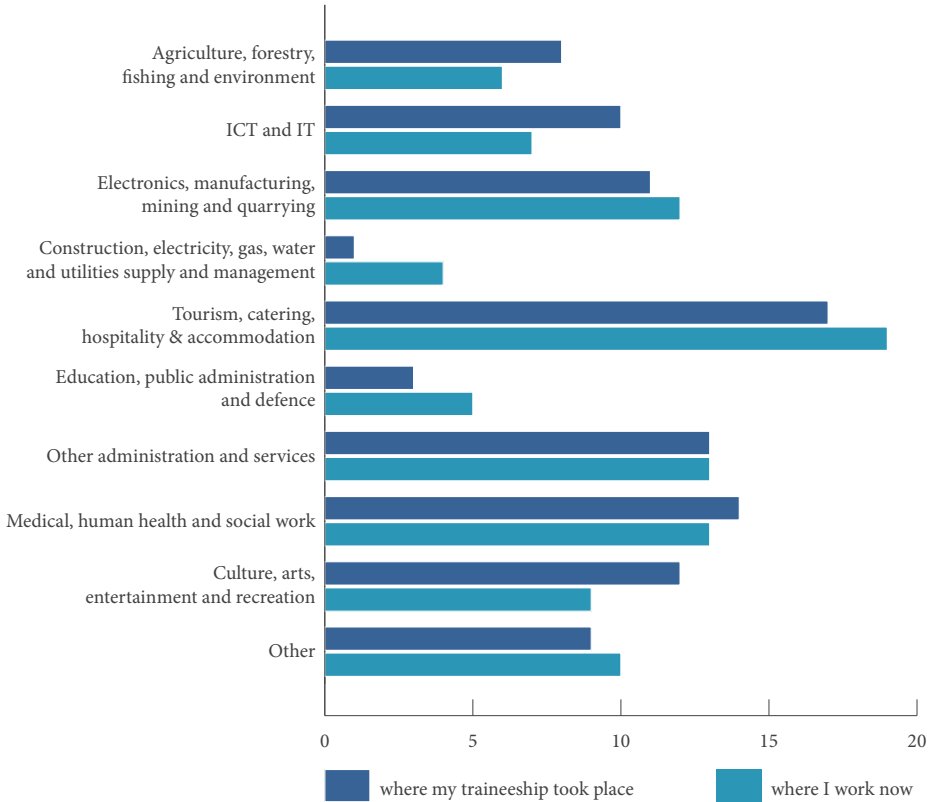
There were **111 respondents** outside formal education at the time of the survey - 15 respondents (13.5 %) with completed higher education and 96 respondents (86.5 %) with completed secondary education. 98 respondents were employed, 8 were unemployed and 5 respondents had another status.



The analysis of the questionnaire survey showed that 61 respondents, which are 62.2 % out of the total of 98 employed respondents, were working in the industry in which they did their placement abroad. Almost 20 % of respondents were working in tourism and accommodation and food services at the time of the survey; 13.3 % were working in administrative and support services as well as in medical, human health and social work industry.

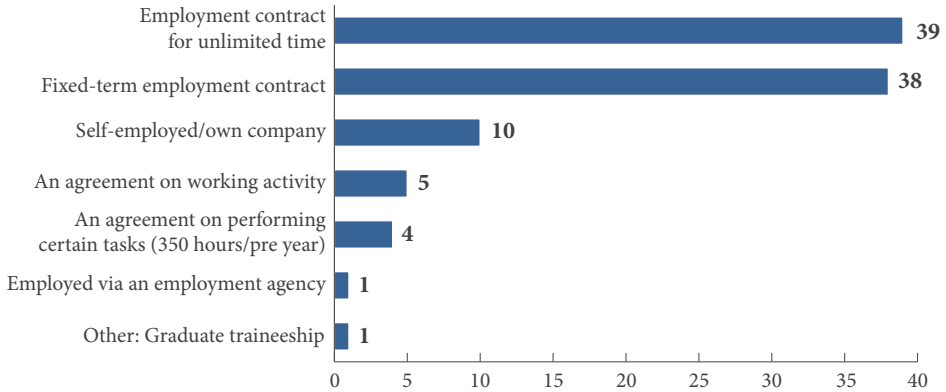
The overall overview of industries of respondents' placements and employment is shown in the following graph:

Occupational areas - traineeship placement vs work (n = 98)



79 respondents (80.6 %) were working full-time at the time of the survey. The other 19 respondents were working part-time. As regards the employment contracts, almost 40 % of respondents were employed with unlimited time employment contract or fixed-term employment contract. The questionnaire survey also showed that 10.2 % of respondents were self-employed. The study will deal with this group of respondents in detail later.

Type of contracts (n = 98)



In this category of respondents, we studied **satisfaction with the employment situation**. Like higher education students who worked, the employed respondents also answered questions in the form statements. Almost half of the respondents (48 %) stated that they were content with their professional situation. 34.7 % of respondents stated that they were partially content. On the other hand, almost 15.3 % of respondents perceived their current professional situation as dissatisfactory. 43.9 % of respondents were satisfied **with remuneration and work conditions**; 29.6 % were partially satisfied. A negative opinion on this statement was given by 22.4 % of respondents. Finally, 41.8 % of respondents positively perceive the fact that **remuneration and work conditions** are appropriate to **their skills and experience**. This statement was perceived partially positively by 28.6 % of respondents. On the other hand, every fourth employed respondent perceived this statement negatively. When compared to higher education students who were also employed, we can only conclude that respondents outside formal education showed a higher degree of satisfaction with the work situation in all surveyed indicators.

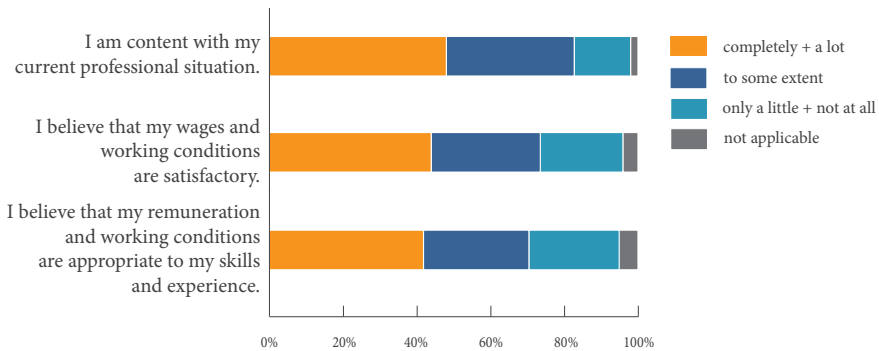
We asked the employed participants (6) about their satisfaction with their current work situation also in the individual interviews. The respondents were more or less satisfied with their work position. They were less satisfied with their wages. Three respondents considered their work situation temporary, as they were planning to study in higher education. One respondent considered working abroad.

“I like working at the chemist’s, but I would like to go on to higher education study. I applied for a course in medicine. If I don’t get a place I will stay at the chemist’s.”

“I am satisfied with my job, but I’d rather be a kindergarten teacher, so I am going to study at university. I have been already admitted.”

“After the completion of secondary vocational study, I found a job in an organisation in Slovakia where I did my practice as a telecommunication networks technician during my study. However, I would like to work abroad.”

Satisfaction with professional situation (n = 98)



In the online questionnaire, we surveyed the extent of the **direct impact of placements abroad on the current professional situation**. The respondents also expressed their degree of agreement with statements by choosing one of 5 options. The answers indicate that 58.8 % of respondents **informed the potential employers** about the fact that they participated in a placement abroad. 15.5 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. On the other hand, almost every fourth respondent did not inform the potential employers about participation in a placement abroad. 45.4 % of respondents stated that thanks to the placement, **they were not afraid to take up employment abroad**. 28.9 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. 21.6 % of respondents expressed a negative opinion.

“Thanks to the placement abroad I got a job offer from the company where I was placed, but in Slovakia.”

Almost 31 % of respondents declared that their **current job is related to the field of the placement abroad**; 20.6 % of respondents agreed partially. A more detailed analysis allows us to conclude that positive or partially positive opinions were expressed by respondents from a wide range of study fields, in particular, health-care-industry-related study fields (e.g. medical assistant, nurse, masseur, pharmaceutical assistant), services (e.g. cook/waiter, cosmetician/cosmetologist, hairdresser), but also economy and IT. Positive opinions were expressed also by graduates from specific fields of study such as wood design and shaping, agribusiness, operator of glass production - hollow and pressed glass.

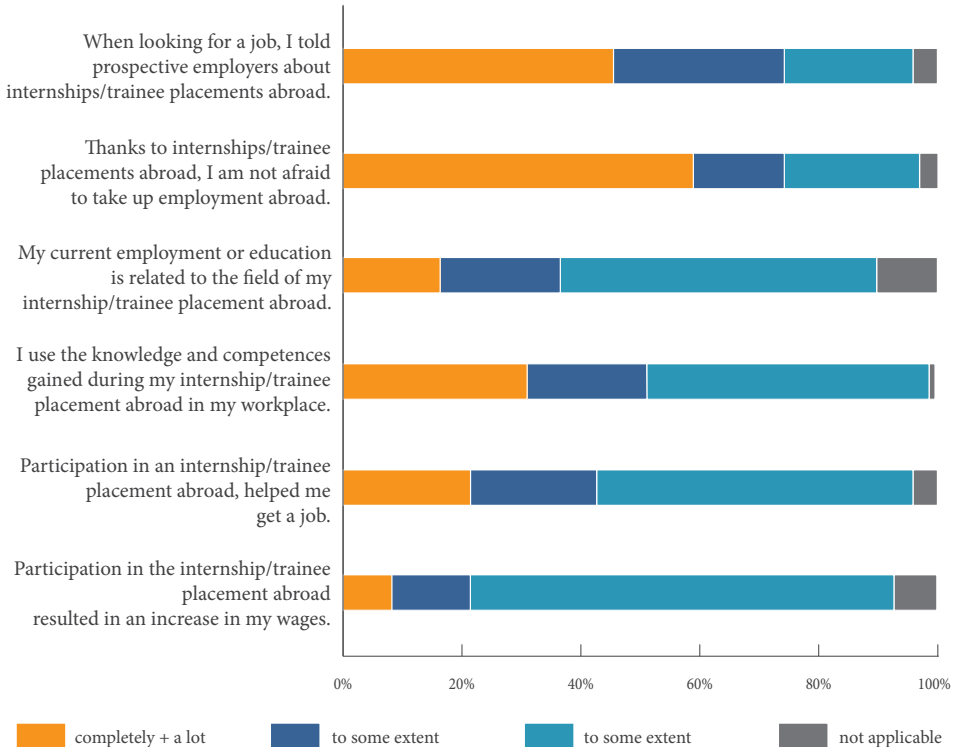
Knowledge and competences gained through the placement abroad were used at the workplace by 21.4 % of respondents; similarly, 21.4 % of respondents used this knowledge and competences partially. More than half of respondents

(53.1 %) were negative about these statements.

A lower verifiable impact of placements can be observed in the following statements: 16.3 % of respondents stated that **participation in the placement helped them find a job**. 20.4 % of respondents perceive this statement partially positively. Finally, 8.2 % of respondents stated that their **placement resulted in an increase in their wages**. Partial agreement with this statement was expressed by 13.4 % of respondents. On the other hand, 71.1 % of respondents stated that the placement did not result in an increase in their wages.

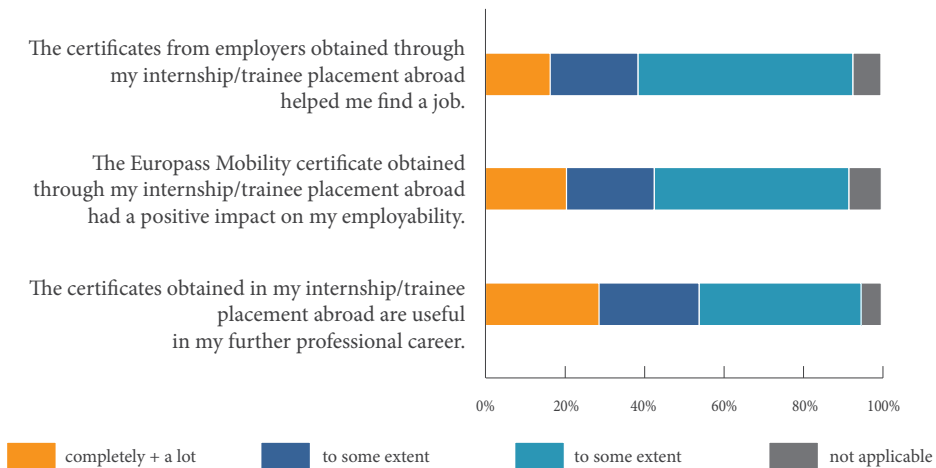
In the individual interviews, the majority of respondents stated that they used the vocational skills gained through the placement abroad at their workplace only partially. Two respondents stressed that they rather used the vocational knowledge and skills gained through the placement in Slovakia, which was allocated more time. They see the benefit of placements abroad in improving soft skills and language skills. They also point out that the placement helped them realise they can work abroad.

Declared impact of the internship on the professional situation (n = 98)



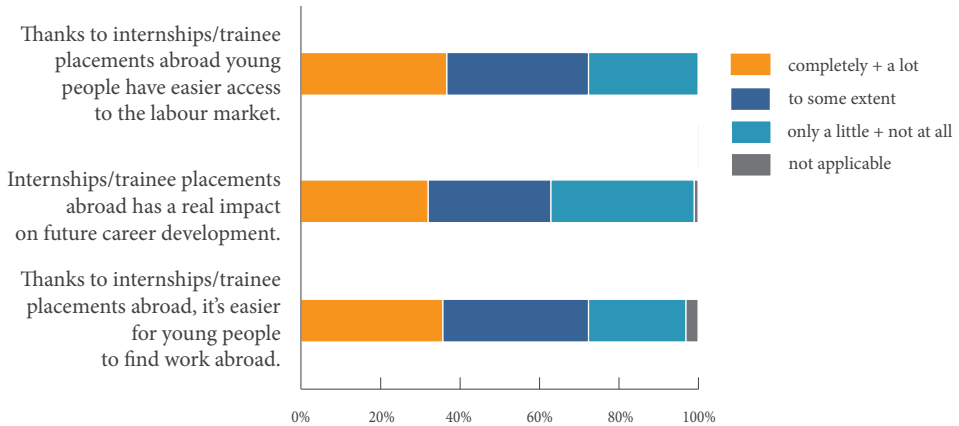
The respondents also evaluated the importance of documents obtained through the placement (certificate and Europass mobility certificate). The analysis of these statements shows that 16.3 % of respondents thought that certificates obtained in their placement were useful in their further professional career. 22.4 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. Every fifth respondent stated that the Europass mobility certificate had an impact on their employability. 22.4 % of respondents perceived this document as partially beneficial. 16 respondents (16.3 %) were convinced that their certificates helped them to find a job. Every fourth respondent partially agreed with this statement.

Significance of documents confirming participation in transnational learning mobility (n = 98)



Respondents outside formal education overall perceive placements abroad as a good start to the future career. 36.7 % of them think that **thanks to placements, young people have easier access to the labour market**. 35.7 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement. 35.7 % of former participants are convinced that **thanks to placements, it is easier for young people to find work abroad**. 32 % of respondents think that **placements have a real impact on their future career**. 30.9 % of respondents partially agreed with this statement.

Impact of the trainee placements on participants' professional career (n = 98)



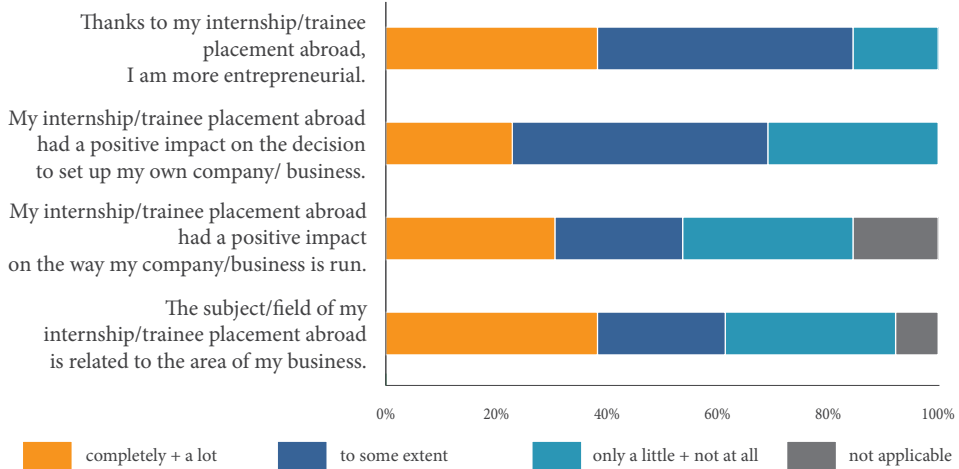
SELF-EMPLOYED PERSONS

13 respondents were self-employed at the time of the survey – 10 respondents outside formal education and 3 respondents classified themselves as higher education students. As regards the industries, 6 respondents worked in culture, art, entertainment, and recreation and 3 respondents in agriculture, forestry, fishing, and environment. The following industries had one respondent each: tourism; accommodation and food service; electronics; manufacturing; mining and quarrying, other administrative and support services; and building, electricity, gas and water supply.

38.5 % of respondents stated that they are more entrepreneurial thanks to the placement. Another 46.2 % of the participants partially agreed with the statement. 15.4 % of participants were negative about the statement. 3 respondents (23.1 %) declared that the placement had a positive impact on their decision to set up their own business. Almost half of the self-employed (46.2 %) selected that the placement influenced their decision partially. 38.5 % of respondents stated that the field of their placement and the area of their business are related to a great extent, 23.1 % chose 'partially'.

„The placement was the first impulse to try it too. So, I got a trade license.“

Influence of traineeships abroad on participants' entrepreneurial attitudes (n = 13)



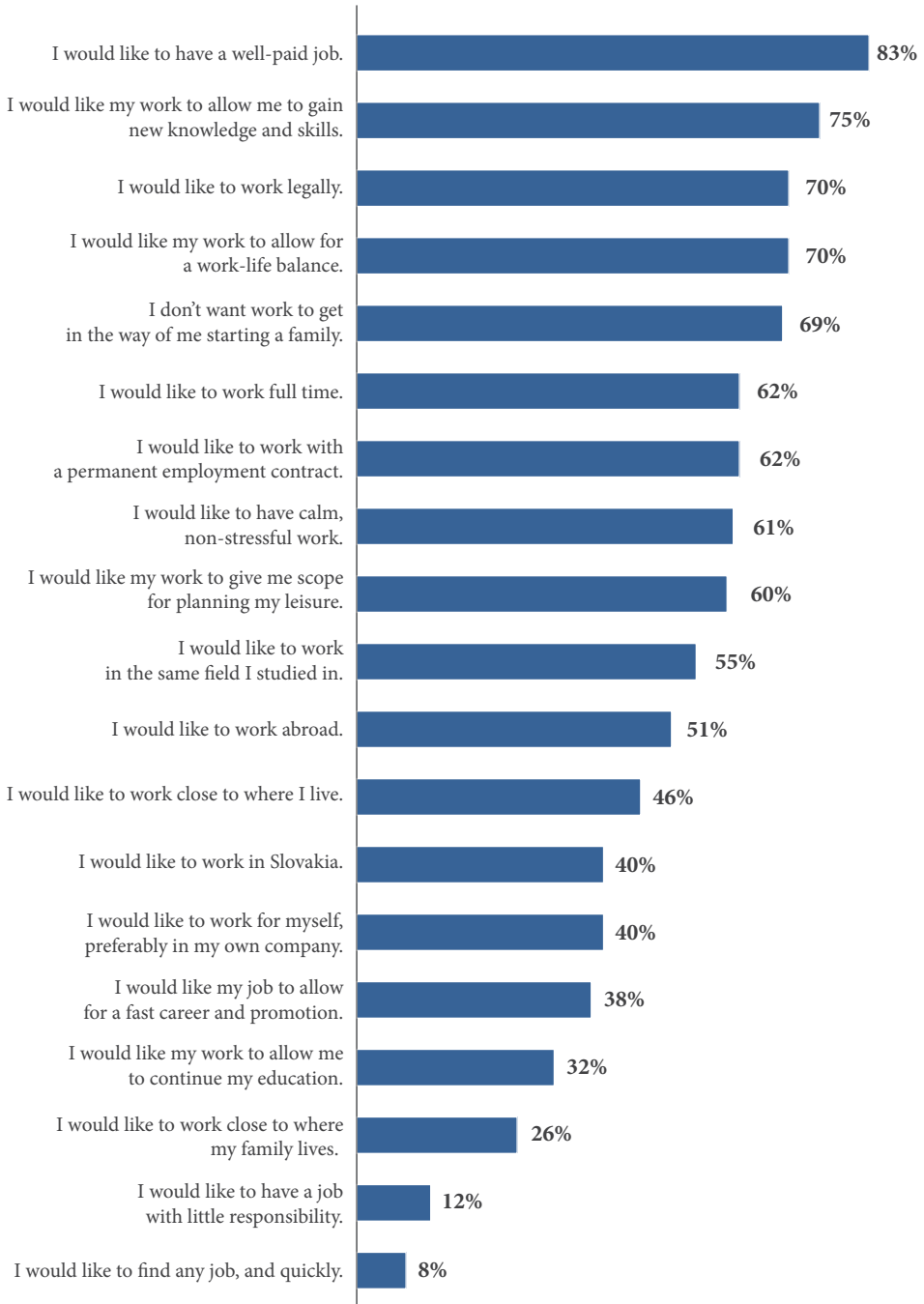
UNEMPLOYED RESPONDENTS

The questionnaire showed that 13 respondents were unemployed at the time of the survey. Out of the total number of respondents outside formal education it is 11.7 % of respondents. 8 respondents were unemployed – 6 of which with completed secondary education and 2 with completed higher education. All respondents stated in the questionnaire that they had been looking for work for less than 3 months. The other 5 respondents were not looking for work at the time of the survey – 2 respondents did not specify their current situation, 1 respondent was studying in post-secondary education, 1 respondent was on maternity leave and the last one stated that he was going abroad soon.

JOB SEARCH PREFERENCES

Based on the questionnaire survey, we can observe all respondents' job search preferences. The respondents were asked to select any number of expectations with the same weight, that is, without applying greater importance to any of them. The questionnaire survey showed that the most selected preference (83 % of respondents) was the desire to find a well-paid job in the future. It was important for 75 % of respondents that their work allows them to gain new knowledge and skills. 70 % of respondents would like to work legally in the future; that means with a valid work contract. The work-life balance was also important for 70 % of respondents. The detailed analysis of the answers showed that these preferences were the most important in all categories of respondents, be it secondary school pupils, higher education students, the (un)employed or with another status.

Professional preferences and expectations of the respondents (n = 590)



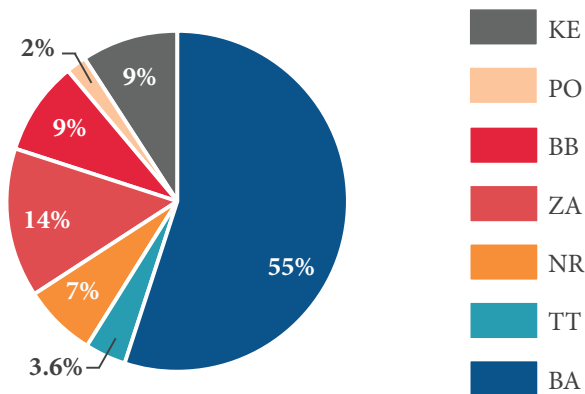
MIGRATION WITHIN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC AND ABROAD

The analysis of job search preferences indicated that respondents did not find the questions concerning migration as important as the questions concerning remuneration and work conditions. 51 % of respondents could imagine working abroad. 40 % of respondents would like to work in Slovakia and 46 % close to where they live. However, these are only preferences and in some stages of life, the respondents will have to confront them with real-life situations.

Based on the questionnaire survey, it is possible to see where the respondents were **after the completion of secondary education**. 253 respondents, which is 87.5 % out of 289 respondents, lived in Slovakia at the time of the survey and 36 respondents (12.5 %) were abroad, 28 of which permanently and 8 temporarily.

Respondents living **in Slovakia** after completion of secondary education usually stayed in the region from which they travelled to the placement. However, 44 respondents lived in a different region at the time of the survey; that is 17.4 % of respondents with completed secondary education living in Slovakia. Migration within Slovakia occurred for the purpose of studying at a higher education institution, which happened in 36 cases. 8 former participants who moved were not in any formal education (completed secondary or higher education) and all of them were employed. Most respondents – 24 – moved to Bratislava region (21 for the purpose of studying in higher education and 3 for work). Significantly fewer respondents moved to other regions (except for Trenčín region, to which nobody moved).

Migration within Slovakia (n = 44)



As mentioned above, 36 respondents from this category – with completed secondary education – lived **abroad** temporarily or permanently at the time of the survey; 18 worked with completed secondary education, 16 were in higher education, and 2 worked with completed higher education. As regards the countries, most respondents lived in the Czech Republic – 18 (10 higher education students and 8 employed). 5 respondents moved to Austria and 3 to Germany and the United Kingdom each. The rest lived in the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, and Sri Lanka at the time of the survey.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

This study focuses on the evaluation of the benefits of Erasmus+ programme mobility projects in vocational education and training. It summarizes the feedback from placement participants from multiple perspectives: it describes the quality of preparation and implementation of placements, the extent of the development of participants' key competences, the importance, and usefulness of the acquired competences in participants' further professional development and future career path.

The study contains findings from the survey we carried out between October 2018 and April 2019 in the form of an online questionnaire, focus group meetings, and individual interviews. Through the online questionnaire, we approached 5 394 former participants from years 2014 - 2018; 590 respondents' answers were relevant. The sample of respondents was dominated by pupils who at the time of the placement attended secondary vocational schools, followed by pupils of secondary industrial schools, business academies, and secondary health-care schools; most respondents were from Prešov region; however, opinions of respondents from all regions of Slovakia are represented in the study.

Placement participants who answered the online questionnaire did their placements in different types of host organisations, most often at vocational education schools with a centre for practical training, then in small businesses or micro-businesses. Most respondents took part in placements in the following areas: tourism, accommodation and food services, administrative and support services, electronics, manufacturing, and mining and quarrying. The target countries of the placements abroad were 23 countries involved in the Erasmus+ programme. A third of respondents did their placements in the Czech Republic, with the second most popular country being the United Kingdom; short-term mobilities, which took 2 or 3 weeks, prevailed.

After collecting data using the online questionnaire, we arranged 2 focus groups with pupils from several types of secondary schools in VET and 10 individual interviews with former participants, who completed their secondary study and went on to study in higher education and/or found employment. The selection of respondents for both forms of the qualitative part of the survey required that respondents come from several types of schools, study fields, regions of Slovakia, and that they participated in placements in different industries, types of VET host organisations and businesses. A total of 31 respondents took part in the qualitative part of the survey. The focus groups and individual interviews aimed to obtain suggestions; ideas; additional qualitative information from respondents related to the questions included in the online questionnaire; and to map respondents' perception and evaluation of the benefits of placements as well as their suggestions for improvement of future placements abroad.

What motivated the respondents to take part in the placements abroad?

As the individual interviews and focus group meetings showed, the respondents were most often motivated to apply for a placement abroad by the opportunity to get to know a new country, fulfil their desire to travel and experience new things; they saw the placement as a good opportunity to find their strengths and weaknesses - a test of adulthood. Respondents who wanted to find employment immediately after the completion of secondary vocational study or who were already employed stated that their primary motivation was obtaining the Europass mobility certificate, which they considered interesting for the potential employers. Some respondents wanted to improve their communication in a foreign language, learn the specific terminology or develop their ability to communicate in a foreign language in day-to-day situations. Other participants were motivated by gaining more knowledge and skills in their field.

Selection of participants and preparation for the placement

According to the information from the participants in the qualitative survey, the criteria and the selection process for placements differed; at some schools they had a two-round selection procedure, that is, a foreign language test and interviews to evaluate pupils' ability to communicate in day-to-day situations. Other schools put an emphasis on pupils' study results, behaviour, and mainly proactiveness – participation in knowledge Olympiads, representing the school in sport, etc. Some respondents assumed that they were selected based on the continuous monitoring of several criteria, which were not directly communicated to them, or they remembered the selection procedure only vaguely.

Before the implementation of placements, the schools organised preparation meetings, in which the participants met with the school management representative and the accompanying teachers or intermediary organisations representatives. The participants were provided with basic logistic and intercultural information; only in some cases did the meeting include discussion about expectations and goals regarding the development of participants' competences and possibilities of using the obtained skills and knowledge in their further career. Only a small part of respondents was informed clearly about the activities and responsibilities of the accompanying person and the mentor/supervisor during the placement.

Which competences did the participants develop and in what form and to what extent?

One of the key goals of the survey was to determine the extent of the development of the placement participants' vocational knowledge and practical vocational skills, soft skills, and intercultural and language competences.

67 % of respondents of the online survey obtained practical vocational skills through the placement and 62.6 % of respondents became acquainted with the activities of individual workplaces in the host organisations. Less than a half (41.5 %) of respondents used specialist and/or technical documentation during the placement. The ability to operate specialist machinery and equipment was significantly developed by 34.1 % of respondents; less than a third of respondents (31.9 %) used the latest technology or software in the placement.

The online survey, focus group meetings, and individual interviews showed that positive statements on the development of vocational skills prevailed in respondents who did their placements in large businesses and vocational education schools with a centre for practical training, particularly in participants from technical study fields such as mechatronics, electronics, mechanical engineering, information and network technology. These respondents also listed specific strengths of placements in the qualitative interviews. Participants in placements at vocational education schools or institutions positively evaluated mainly the technological equipment of the centre for practical training; the possibility to use it actively in the training; the vocational programme of the placements which took into account the level of participants' knowledge and developed their specific vocational knowledge and practical skills; the professionalism of the assigned teachers (mentors) and their friendly approach; and the overall positive and open atmosphere at the vocational education school.

Respondents who were placed in businesses mostly performed the same activities as the other employees; they were integrated into the work team and supervised by an assigned employee or team leader. More than half of participants of placements in businesses appreciated the opportunity to get acquainted with activities of more departments/workplaces, independence in performing specific activities or tasks at the workplace, and supervisor's/team leader's partnership approach and trust.

Pupils of economic study fields perceived the benefit of the placement in the area of vocational knowledge and skills, particularly in the opportunity to independently perform activities which they mastered theoretically through their study at secondary school; and if placed in larger institutions, they got acquainted with activities of individual workplaces/departments.

We identified a lower degree of impact of placements on the development of vocational skills in participants who were placed in micro-businesses or a non-governmental organisation, which is to some extent due to the organisational structure and the number of employees and equipment in such types of institutions.

Other reasons for a lower degree of respondents' satisfaction which we discovered in the qualitative discussions included: an inappropriately chosen placement

programme, which did not correspond to the participants' level of knowledge; an inappropriately chosen host organisation and activity, which were not related to the study field, e.g. support manual work; and the absence of a vocational supervisor/mentor and ad hoc activities without proper vocational support for the placement participant.

In the online questionnaire, we were also trying to establish whether the respondents perceived any differences between practical training in Slovakia and the Erasmus+ programme placements abroad. More than half of the respondent sample acquired vocational competences which they would not be able to learn at their secondary school; and they also found out that workplaces and the structure of industries function differently from in Slovakia.

Employers consider soft skills to be an important precondition for successful integration of secondary school graduates into the work process. More than 70 % of respondents of the online survey agreed that the placement enabled them to develop communication skills, team work, and cooperation. Almost 50 % of respondents stated that they can establish rapport with other people more easily, which was also confirmed by the findings from individual and focus group interviews, in which more than a half of respondents stated that the placement abroad helped them to overcome shyness, fear of establishing contact and communicating with other people. 37 % of the online survey respondents stated that thanks to the placement abroad they can plan and organise their tasks and activities more efficiently and 33.6 % can use this skill for planning and organising their education.

In the individual and group interviews, the respondents also identified personal development as one of the outcomes of the participation in placements abroad, mainly: an increase in self-confidence and self-respect, realising the responsibility for one's self, greater independence in decision making, the ability to react to changes and overcome obstacles, need for proactiveness, and the power of the positive approach at work and in life.

The placements also contributed to the development of participants' intercultural skills. 68.4 % out of the total number of respondents significantly strengthened their ability to work in an international environment. Placements abroad helped 66.3 % of respondents to get acquainted with the professional environment, organisation and culture of work, which are different from in Slovakia according to the respondents. Several qualitative survey respondents who had participated in placements in businesses appreciated the friendly and open communication at the workplace, acceptance of differences, helpfulness, and employees' effort to create a positive work environment.

Targeted visits of historical and cultural sites or countryside at the location of the placement during participants' free time also represented a great stimulus for learning about the particularities of the host country. Many participants thus fulfilled their key motivation for applying for the placement abroad – getting to know a different country, travelling.

Knowledge of a foreign language belongs to the basic preconditions for secondary vocational school graduates for better chances on the labour market in Slovakia and abroad. In the online questionnaire, we asked the respondents to what extent the placement enabled them to develop or improve their communication in a foreign language in the work environment. Out of the total of 590 respondents, 51.8 % were very positive. We separately analysed answers of 408 respondents who participated in placements in countries other than the Czech Republic. 61 % of these respondents perceived the positive impact of placements on the development of their foreign language skills.

In the interviews, we asked the respondents about specific situations in which they can communicate in the main foreign language better after the completion of the placement. Most of them listed day-to-day situations, communication with the host family on different topics, informal social contact with the placement participants from different countries. As regards these situations, they improved mainly in listening comprehension; they can understand the core idea even if the speaker has a different accent; they can react to questions as well as ask questions faster. When communicating at the workplace, pupils partially acquired new vocabulary, learnt in which situations the terminology can be used; they can orientate themselves at the workplace in a different country and understand the superior's requirements for the activities/tasks to be performed. In the interviews, some respondents stated that they lost shyness and fear of communicating in a foreign language; they are more self-confident in day-to-day communication; they realised the need for continuous development of language skills also after the placement as well as the need to use the foreign language very well to improve their chances on the labour market.

The findings of the survey clearly show that the degree of the development of language competences is influenced by more factors such as the character of activities performed by participants during the placement, the type of organisation they were placed in, whether the official language in a given country is also the main foreign language, the length of the placement, opportunities to communicate in the foreign language in participants' free time, and participants' initial motivation to improve language skills.

As regards the evaluation of the development of competences through the placement abroad, we can conclude that the majority of participants found added

value in self-knowledge from different perspectives – personality, vocational, language – which occurred in new situations and conditions. Furthermore, they gained self-confidence in communication with other people in the foreign language and realised the differences and commonalities of people from individual cultures.

How do the participants perceive the usefulness, importance of placements in their further professional development?

One of the goals of the study was to find to what extent they gained competences and experience were useful for participants' professional development and how placements influenced their future careers. 301 respondents, which are 51.1 % of the total number, were still secondary school pupils. Therefore, we can only study further education and career path of 289 respondents who stated in the online questionnaire that they had completed secondary education.

178 respondents, which are 62 % out of the total number of 289, studied in higher education at the time of the survey. 15 respondents completed higher education. On the other hand, 96 respondents (33 %) did not study in higher education at the time of the survey nor before that. Only a small percentage of respondents (1.3 %) were unemployed at the time of the survey, which is a very positive result. As regards higher education students, 62.4 % of respondents stated that they studied in a higher education field of study which was related to the secondary school study field. Almost every fourth respondent stated that the placement abroad influenced their choice of the higher education field of study.

The respondents positively evaluated the impact of the experience and knowledge gained through the mobility abroad on their development and the subsequent better position on the labour market. As far as the evaluation of the placement as a whole is concerned, almost an identical number of respondents (36.7 %; 38.6 %) in both studied categories of employed respondents (with completed or not completed formal education) were convinced that young people have easier access to the labour market. A comparable sample (32 %; 34 %) of respondents claimed that placements abroad have a direct impact on the future career. More than 35 % of the employed and 45.6 % of employed higher education students declared that that young people can find work abroad more easily thanks to a placement.

We identified a verifiable impact of placements on the current career of the studied respondents particularly in the following areas: informing employers about the participation in placement when looking for employment (58.8 % of respondents in both categories) and overcoming the fear of working abroad (45.4%; 53.6 % of respondents). Employed higher education students perceived these benefits of placements more positively. A lower verifiable impact of placements can be observed in the following areas: the current employment is related to the field

of the placement and the use of knowledge and competences gained through the placement at work. These benefits were more positively perceived by employed respondents outside formal education. On the other hand, only 6 % of higher education students and 8.2 % of the employed stated that the placement resulted in an increase in wages.

The analysis also showed that the respondents perceive the certificates and documents obtained through placement abroad (e.g. Europass mobility) as useful or partially useful in the further professional career. Almost every fifth employed respondent declared that the Europass mobility document had impact on their employability. As an instance 41.8 % respondents in the category of employed higher education students claimed this statement. On the other hand, a lower percentage of respondents (16.3 %; 20.6 %) were convinced the certificates from employers helped them to find a job.

Finally, it is important to say that the studied sample was comprised of respondents who had been on the labour market only for a short time (max. 5 years). Due to that and also based on in-depth interviews, we can conclude that despite being predominantly content with their work situation, many respondents were not firmly anchored on the labour market and considered various changes; for example, change of work position, moving abroad or higher education study.

CHAPTER VII

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations aim to achieve an increase in the quality of placements abroad and to increase the impact of placements on the targeted development of participants' competences and further career paths. In order to meet these goals, the cooperation of the sending and receiving organisations, placement participants, their parents, and career advisors at schools as well as the support from the National Erasmus+ Agency for vocational education and training are necessary.

At the level of sending institutions:

- to strive for continuity in the provided vocational placements abroad; provide a wider selection of placements;
- to consider options how to achieve that practical training in Slovakia and trainee placements abroad complement each other and provide pupils with quality foundations in specific vocational skills;
- to communicate criteria for the selection of placement participants clearly as early as the first grade of the study; use more internal information channels within the school;
- to implement selection criteria which consider not only participants' level of knowledge, behaviour, and foreign language skills but also practical skills, which they continuously demonstrate in practical training, proactiveness, and endeavours for further development. In the selection process, focus on motivated participants who can list knowledge and skills they would like to acquire through the placement, also in connection with their further career path;
- when looking for and choosing host organisations, focus on institutions which offer specific vocational work activities for the whole period of the placement with quality equipment and motivated and professional mentors/supervisors;
- to check the quality of host organisations from more sources, provide host organisations and/or intermediary organisations with information on the level of participants' vocational knowledge and skills and language skills well in advance before the placement;
- to ensure that the content of the placement was linked to the knowledge and skills obtained in practical training in participant's home country and in line with the goals of vocational education and training of the individual and the sending institution;
- to supplement the preparation meeting with a discussion with participants

about specific knowledge and skills they will be developing and their possible use in further study or career;

- to inform the participants about the role of mentors and accompanying persons in the placement;
- to continuously monitor the quality of the ongoing placements and if there are shortcomings, remedy them immediately;
- to ensure feedback from participants after the completion of placements, define the progress they achieved in the development of vocational skills and knowledge, soft skills, language and intercultural competences, and their possible use in further career.

At the level of host organisations:

- to obtain vocational profiles of participants from the sending institution – a description of vocational and language competences of every participant;
- to ensure the active involvement of future mentors and/or supervisors in the content and methodological preparation of placements;
- if relevant, to provide alternation between several activities for the participants such as work at a workstation/department/operation, and at the same time, make them acquainted with work in other departments, provide vocational lectures or presentations to obtain extended vocational knowledge;
- to provide mentors/vocational supervisors who will work with the assigned participants over the whole placement and who also meet personality requirements, mainly: vocational expertise, respect, openness in communication, willingness to give advice, helpfulness, humaneness;
- to provide sending institution representatives with continuous feedback according to the predefined criteria for progress achieved by each placement participant in the development of vocational competences;
- to evaluate the quality of the placement after its completion with the sending institution's representative; and individually with each participant, identify specific competences which they acquired or developed through the placement.

At the level of the National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training Sectors:

- to stress the need for targeted development of pupils' specific vocational skills, language competences through the placement abroad with a link to the knowledge and skills obtained through education and vocational practice at the sending institution;
- to make the receiving institutions – sending institutions focus on the development of competences useful for participants' further careers at the time the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of the placement abroad;
- use different communication channels in communication with the receiving institutions such as informative seminars on the preparation of projects and submission of applications, publishing information on successfully implemented projects, vocational workshops, and non-formal meeting with the recipients at round tables, social media;
- inform the representatives of employers, employer organisations and associations about the benefits of placements abroad for the development of pupils' key competences required by the labour market.

ANNEX

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

REFERENCES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HEI	Higher education institution
ISCED	International standard classification of education
KA1	Key action 1 – learning mobility of individuals
n	Number of respondents
NA	National Agency
NPS	Net Promoter Score
SAAIC	Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation
VET	Vocational education and training

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Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation
National Agency for Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training Sectors
Križkova 9
811 04 Bratislava
www.erasmusplus.sk

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