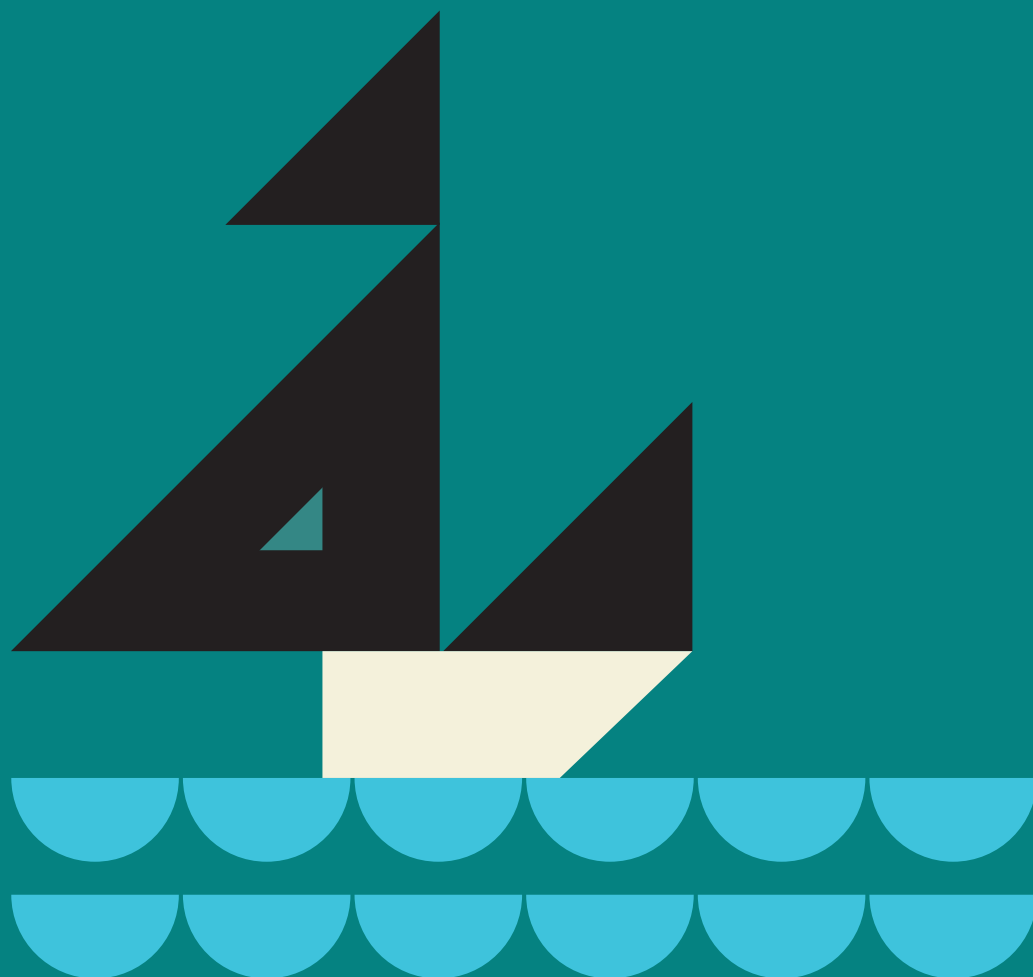


“It Made Me Hungry For More”: Tracing the Impact of European Work Placements on the Skills, Attitudes, Education and Career Paths of Vocational Learners from Ireland

Ireland National Report



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Abbreviations Used

CAO: Central Applications Office

The CAO processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish higher education institutions

CFE: College of further education

Public or private college that offers further education courses, usually including one- or two-year post-Leaving Certificate courses and shorter adult education courses

ETB: Education and Training Board

Statutory authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions

FET: Further education and training

Umbrella term for non-post-primary, non-tertiary education options in Ireland, including apprenticeships, vocational training, and community and adult education

HE: Higher education

Tertiary-level education

LDV: Leonardo da Vinci Mobility programme

Mobility strand of the European Commission Programme for Vocational Education, 2007–2013

NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications

A 10-level system of nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence that helps define what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning

PLC: Post-Leaving Certificate course

A full-time non-post-primary, non-tertiary programme for learners, usually lasting one or two years and combining practical and classroom learning

QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland

An independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland

VET: Vocational education and training

Umbrella term for formal training in job-related and technical skills

Foreword

This research study traces the personal and professional paths of VET graduates from Ireland, after a period of mobility experience funded by the European Union through the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 or Leonardo da Vinci 2007-2013 Mobility programmes. The research was carried out in 2019 as part of a transnational project with partners from nine other countries: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), the Czech Republic, Latvia, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. The transnational study report reflecting findings from all project partners, 'Tracing VET Graduates With Foreign Mobility Experience' (Fassl, Kirsch et al, 2020), is available to download from <https://www.frse.org.pl/czytelnia/tracing-vet-graduates-with-foreign-mobility-experience>.

Since this research was conducted, the Erasmus+ 2014–2020 programme has concluded and a new programme cycle for 2021 to 2027 has begun. Much more significantly, the practice of educational and training mobility in Europe has been completely transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Mobility programmes of all kinds were effectively brought to a stop in March 2020, when the full extent of the crisis began to unfold. It is only now, in summer 2021, that pandemic-related restrictions on international travel from Ireland are beginning to ease. As such, it is an apposite time to ask what the impact or potential advantages of resuming funded educational and training mobility in Europe may be. This is extremely pertinent for both Irish VET organisations and learners facing into a period of renewed economic uncertainty post-pandemic and post-Brexit.

Perhaps the other most notable societal change to occur in 2020 was increased recognition, in Ireland and globally, of the importance of true inclusion and diversity in our communities – and the very long road that needs to be travelled to achieve it. This study illustrates that VET learners who had transnational mobility experience felt it had enhanced their intercultural and interpersonal skills; recent research carried out at NUI Galway has examined whether transnational mobility could also serve as a basis to bond increasingly multicultural and diverse teams. The research found that:

Overseas experience was found to be a salient social category, which means that people inside and outside of the group attribute specific labels to people with that experience. However, more research is needed to see if this is enough for a group bond. It does offer one way to potentially allow the benefits of diversity to be retained in the group, while providing another, non-threatening, bonding mechanism. Managers could intentionally use overseas experience as a basis for forming team bonds.¹

While the context in which mobility programmes operate has changed fundamentally since the conclusion of this research, there can be no doubt that mobility retains an important role in addressing these key economic and societal challenges. Indeed, the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme has pledged 70% of its overall budget of more than €28 billion to fund mobility projects across Europe²: mobility continues to be a cornerstone of European Union strategy. I hope that this study will shed light on the influence of mobility on participants' subsequent paths and choices, and help to guide Irish VET organisations on how to make the most of these opportunities.

Charis Hughes, Impact Researcher, Léargas
June 2021

¹ 'The paradox of teams: diverse teams are smarter but not easy', The Irish Times, 4 June 2021
<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/work/the-paradox-of-teams-diverse-teams-are-smarter-but-not-easy-1.4582110>

² Press Release 'Erasmus+: over €28 billion to support mobility and learning for all, across the European Union and beyond' https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1326

Executive Summary

The European Union has operated programmes that support the mobility of vocational learners for more than 30 years. The purpose of this study is to trace the impact these transnational vocational work placements have had on the skills, attitudes, education and careers of vocational learners from Ireland.

The study is part of a wider transnational research project involving 10 European partners. Part I outlines the vocational system in Ireland, allowing for comparison with other European systems. Part II explores research methods, data collection and analysis. The research was carried out in 2019 and was based on:

- an online survey of 335 participants
- four semi-structured in-person interviews with individuals
- two in-person focus groups, with 12 participants.

Part III concentrates on mobility experience. Survey respondents rated their overall mobility experience very highly. Almost 90% remembered their time abroad on a placement positively or very positively; just 3% did not remember the experience positively at all. Almost 70% said they had gained practical professional experience on their placement, and 64% said they had learned elements of their profession that they could not otherwise learn in school or college. They also felt their mobility experience offered something they could not get at home: over 60% agreed that they had encountered work cultures and environments that were different from Ireland. More than half also agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that they had encountered different ways of learning. Among the fewer than 10% who had negative or very negative comments about their experience, the most common issues were difficulties with host companies or with the overall organisation of the placement.

Participants from the in-person groups described receiving support through both the sending and host organisations. Sending organisation staff tended to focus on the participants' emotional and physical well-being, while host organisation staff more often provided practical and logistical assistance.

In-person group participants identified the chief motivating factor for participation was the desire to obtain relevant work experience in their vocational area. Consequently, it is striking that very few of them were aware of the opportunity before they chose their courses of study. These findings were echoed among the survey respondents, 75% of whom were not aware that a vocational placement abroad was available when they selected their course or college.

An identified strength of mobility experiences was that they offer VET learners a taste of their potential future careers at an early stage. There is evidence that this taste can affirm learners' belief that they have chosen the right career, but it can also challenge that belief and lead to changes.

Turning to mobility weaknesses, survey respondents whose overall experience was negative or very negative highlighted a perceived mismatch between the work placement offered and their own level of vocational skill. Both survey respondents and in-person participants frequently mentioned that they would have liked more language instruction before going on placement. Interestingly, what learners from the in-person research group most frequently said they would change was the attitude of their fellow learners. They identified difficulties with peers who did not take their work placements seriously. The participants found these attitudes demotivating, and also felt that bad behaviour could diminish the status of vocational learners in the eyes of employers. Participants in both groups argued strongly that organisations should operate a strict selection process for these reasons.

Part IV examines the development of competences. Mobility experiences seem to have the greatest impact on developing soft skills, and broadening possibilities for the future. More than three-quarters of respondents said that the placement had developed or improved their communication and team-working skills, and their ability to work in an international environment. More than two-thirds said that as a result of their placements they were not afraid to work abroad (66%) or to study abroad (68%). Evidence from the in-person groups suggests that this type of impact from short-term placements is most strongly felt by participants who have not lived away from home or worked in their vocational area before.

Interpersonal skills were also a key area, with 57% having developed or improved their skills 'a lot' or 'completely'. Just over 20% also reported significant development of more specific competences such as dealing with technical documentation, use of latest technologies or ability to operate specialist machinery.

Survey respondents felt their intercultural competences were substantially enhanced by their mobility experience: 75% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their ability to work in an international environment had developed or improved due to the placement.

Part V explores VET learners' subsequent education and career paths. At the time of the survey, respondents were almost evenly split between those who were currently studying VET and those who had completed their VET education. Just over half of those who had completed their VET education indicated that they had progressed to degree-level study. This is broadly in line with national trends. However, mobility experience influenced degree-level study choices by affirming the learner's choice of vocational area, and by giving the learners confidence to pursue higher education. Survey respondents also reported an improvement in academic performance: 55% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their placements had positively influenced the grades they received in their vocational training.

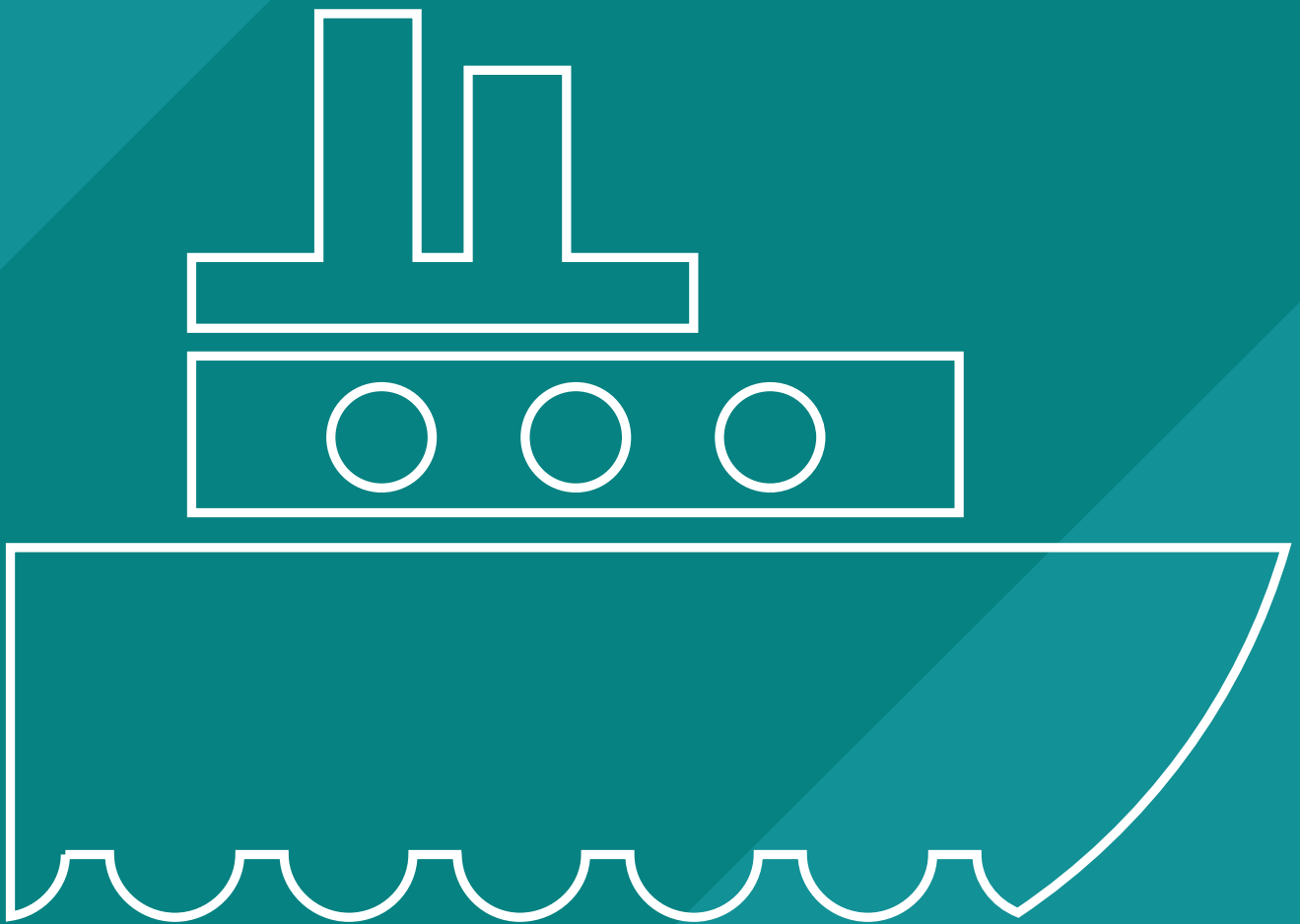
Among those who had entered the labour market and were in full-time employment, just under half agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that young people have easier access to the labour market thanks to placements abroad; more than 65% agreed that vocational placements abroad have a real impact on future career development; and 55% agreed that vocational placements made it easier for young people to find work abroad. Finally, 29% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their participation had helped them get a job, with a further 31% agreeing it had helped 'to some extent'.

Almost two-thirds of survey respondents agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that they had told prospective employers about their placements when they were seeking work. Another 17% agreed they had told prospective employers 'to some extent'. There was a general feeling among respondents that a placement made their CV more attractive to employers, but they also had a desire for more assistance with bringing their skills to life professionally.

The study concludes that even short-term mobility placements have a profound effect on the competences, skills and attitudes of participants long after completion, and that they provide pathways into education and employment. Finally, six recommendations are made:

1. Peer-to-peer connection should be further supported and encouraged.
2. Targeted, vocationally oriented language instruction would substantially enhance the experience of participants who have an existing knowledge in the language of their destination country, and those who undertake longer mobility placements.
3. The introduction of a project-based learning element to mobility placements could mitigate the reported disengagement of some participants in the mobility experience.
4. Participants would benefit from greater guidance on how to present the value of their mobility experience to employers in CVs and interviews.
5. Mobility placements could be used more flexibly to suit different cohorts of learners.
6. The Irish vocational sector in general, and VET learners in particular, should be made more aware of the opportunities that exist for them under European mobility programmes.

One: Introduction



Introduction

The European Union has operated programmes that support the mobility of vocational learners for more than 30 years. The PETRA, Leonardo da Vinci Mobility, and Erasmus+ programmes have all sought to enhance the quality of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe, and have all included funding for vocational learners to spend short periods of time abroad for work experience and training. PETRA presented these 'mobility periods' as a 'measure to increase the esteem for training in general, and to motivate participants'. The European programme Erasmus+ views learning mobility as a tool to 'improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society', and as a means to strengthen cooperation between education and training and the world of work. National policy also recognises the importance of mobility: 'Ensure provision facilitates mobility across Europe and globally' is one of the actions listed under strategic objective 5, 'Standing of FET: Promote and provide high-quality FET responsive to the needs of industry and learners' in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019.

The purpose of this study is to trace the impact these transnational vocational work placements have had on the skills, attitudes, education and careers of vocational learners from Ireland since the time they took part. The study is part of a wider transnational research project involving 10 European partners. In each of the 10 countries, the National Agency with responsibility for Erasmus+ VET carried out research focused on its own population. All countries used an agreed research model, as initially developed by the Polish National Agency, FRSE, for its 2019 research report 'Erasmus...and what next?'. The research data was aggregated and a comparative report produced.³ Although Erasmus+ and its predecessors are standardised programmes, designed by the European Commission to be implemented in largely the same way in each participating country, each member state has its own vocational system. There is huge variation in the scope, size and structure of these systems across Europe. The project partners therefore envisioned that comparing results between countries would enable common trends and patterns among vocational learners to emerge, and contrasts to be observed. It is hoped that findings will illuminate how learning mobility might best function within each system.

The Vocational Education and Training System in Ireland

In Ireland, vocational education and training is firmly part of the formal education system – although it is more commonly known here as further education and training, or FET. For this reason, in this study 'FET' will generally be used to refer to the Irish system and 'VET' to the European. In keeping with this flexibility of terms, the definition of FET in Ireland is itself somewhat fluid. The Department of Education and Skills describes it as 'education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system'⁴. This definition is based on the division of the Irish education system described in Table 1.

³ 'Tracing VET Graduates With Foreign Mobility Experience' (Fassl, Kirsch et al, 2020) <https://www.frse.org.pl/czytelnia/tracing-vet-graduates-with-foreign-mobility-experience>

⁴ Department of Education and Skills website <https://web.archive.org/web/20210820135026/https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Further-Education-Training/>

Table 1: Irish Education System

IRISH EDUCATION SYSTEM	
Primary level	Pupils aged approximately 4 to 12 years old
Post-Primary level	Pupils aged approximately 12 to 18. This level includes two state examinations, the Junior Certificate (after a three-year study cycle) and the Leaving Certificate (after a two-year cycle, often completed following an optional 'transition year')
Third level	Higher education leading to an undergraduate or postgraduate degree

Qualifications in these levels are mapped to the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which measures and relates learning achievements to each other and sets out qualification pathways between them. The Junior Certificate is a Level 3 qualification and the Leaving Certificate is Level 5, while higher education degrees may be at Levels 7, 8, 9 or 10. The majority of accredited VET/FET qualifications correspond to Levels 5 or 6 on the Framework.

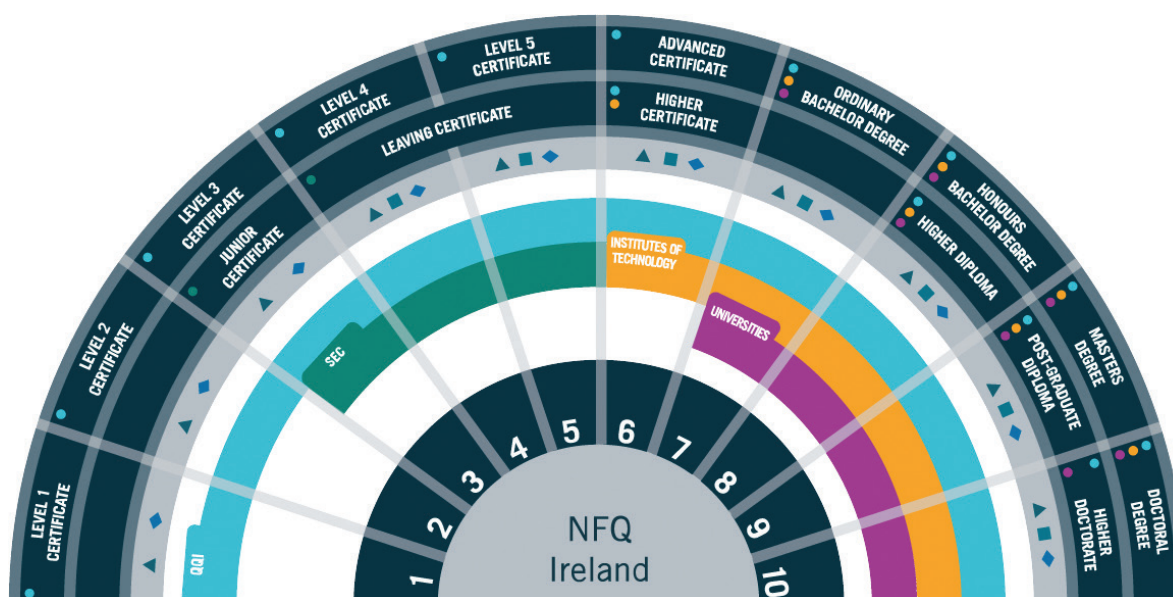


Figure 1: The National Framework of Qualifications

(source: <https://nfq.qqi.ie/>)

These positions on the NFQ Framework show that a FET qualification may be considered both as a credential in itself, and as a potential entry point to higher education. Indeed, this is the approach taken by SOLAS, the state agency with responsibility for managing, coordinating and supporting the delivery of FET in Ireland. The SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 defines FET as follows:

FET provides education and training and related supports to assist individuals to gain a range of employment, career, personal and social skills and qualifications at Levels 1–6 on the NFQ or equivalent, and is aimed at jobseekers, school leavers, labour market returners, employees, those interested in new career direction, those wishing to access 'second chance' education, those

wishing to re-engage in learning and to prepare school-leavers and others for higher education. FET also plays an important role in helping people to lead fulfilling lives, supporting some of the hard-to-reach individuals and groups to achieve their potential and reducing the costs to society of exclusion.

It is notable that this definition draws attention to the societal as well as educational dimension of FET, as this has historically been an important aspect of the system. FET has never focused solely on school leavers, but has always included those who wish to expand their learning horizons or seek to return to the labour market. For example, the state-operated Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) offers a training allowance to unemployed people aged over 21 who have been in receipt of social welfare payments to take part in certain FET courses⁵. The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) similarly exists to support those who have not completed their Leaving Certificate to enrol in FET courses⁶.

In addition to those returning to education, the FET sector also includes learners in apprenticeships and other employer-based learning programmes, and in community education. Apprenticeship programmes in Ireland were traditionally clustered in the construction industry, and participation rates were set by the level of employer demand. Levels of apprenticeships consequently declined sharply after the end of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom in 2008. However, participation rates have begun increasing in recent years, following a relative upturn in the economy and the establishment of the Apprenticeship Council in 2014, which sought to diversify the industries involved⁷. SOLAS reports that there were 5,648 new apprenticeship registrations in 2018, a sizeable increase from 3,821 registrations in 2016⁸.

Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) Courses

As a proportion of the overall FET sector, apprenticeships remain small in comparison with post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. PLC courses are full-time, usually lasting one or two years and lead to a Level 5 or 6 qualification. In 'Evaluating Post-Leaving Certificate Provision in Ireland' (2019), McGuinness et al found that PLC courses 'represent the largest component of full-time further education and training provision in Ireland, with over 32,000 learners enrolled in such courses in 2015/2016'. They also state that these courses were 'designed to provide vocational education in order to facilitate young people's transition to employment'⁹. However, the largest share of training in PLC courses takes place in classrooms rather than in workplaces. In a 2019 policy paper 'Evaluating Post-Leaving Certificate Provision in Ireland' McGuinness et al found that:

Work experience does not appear to be a universal feature of PLC provision, given that 77 per cent of principals indicated that all learners took part in work experience. In terms of duration, approximately 40 per cent of principals indicated that work experience placements typically lasted up to ten days, with a further 37 per cent reporting an average duration of 11–20 days.

5 https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/returning_to_education/vocational_training_opportunities_scheme.html

6 https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/returning_to_education/back_to_education_initiative.html

7 "The Apprenticeship Council was launched by the Minister for Education and Skills in November 2014. The establishment of the Council was a key action in the implementation of recommendations from a 2014 Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland. The Council is tasked with the expansion of apprenticeship into new sectors of the economy and identifying sectors where new apprenticeships can make a real difference to both employers and employees." <https://apprenticeship.ie/more/about>

8 '5,648 in 2018 and Rising: Apprentices You're Hired', The Irish Independent. Available from <https://amp.independent.ie/irish-news/education/going-to-college/5648-in-2018-and-rising-apprentices-youre-hired-37883827.html>

9 Evaluating Post-Leaving Cert Provision in Ireland, ESRI. Available from <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/JA201944.pdf>

PLC courses are offered in a wide range of private and public vocational colleges across Ireland. The public vocational colleges are overseen by the 16 regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which were established in 2013 and replaced the previous network of 33 Vocational Education Committees. Each ETB is a statutory education authority that manages primary, post-primary and vocational education institutions. The City of Dublin ETB, for example, operates more than 20 colleges of further education and community colleges across the capital.

The profile of learners in PLC courses differs considerably from learners in higher education, with a larger proportion coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ireland has a particularly high level of engagement in higher education; roughly half the population hold a third-level degree. This rises towards 60% among the under-35s, according to the OECD¹⁰. However, this engagement is more pronounced among wealthier socio-economic groups. The 2010 report 'Hidden Disadvantage? A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-manual Group' by McCoy et al found that:

Differentiation in the sector of HE that young people enter into is prominent, with school leavers from more advantaged backgrounds much more likely to enrol in university courses than any other institute (Institutes of Technology, Colleges of Further Education or Others). (...) While almost two-thirds of HE participants from professional backgrounds enter university courses, less than one-third of those from the other non-manual backgrounds similarly enter courses in this sector.

In 'Evaluating Post-Leaving Certificate Provision in Ireland', published several years later in 2019, McGuinness et al found that there was still a substantial difference between the profiles of learners in PLCs and higher education:

PLC learners are disproportionately female, from less educated backgrounds, are more likely to be older and parents, and have greater Special Educational Needs incidence than their counterparts enrolling in higher education.

Another key difference between the sectors is that colleges offering PLC courses tend to have small student populations, and are often located in rural areas outside major cities. In some cases, learners may opt to attend their local vocational college if they do not feel emotionally or financially ready to leave home. For example, the Final Report on a 2016 Erasmus+ VET mobility project recalled the case of a learner who had chosen to attend a local institution over a more suitable one further away, 'because she felt that she would be too nervous moving any further away from her family'¹¹.

Finally, it's important to note that a difference in perceived status between PLC courses and higher education also persists, with the former sometimes considered a lesser choice: the 'Cinderella of options for school leavers', in the words of one Irish Times article¹². In Leaving School in Ireland, a longitudinal study of attitudes and pathways among school leavers published in 2014, McCoy et al found that 'For many young people, PLC courses appear to have been a compromise rather than a specific goal, especially where they did not go on to further study on completion.'

10 2019 OECD Education at a Glance Ireland Country Report. Available from https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2019_e6f76052-en#page1

11 Léargas Impact Study: Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland, Léargas. Available from <https://www.leargas.ie/resource/leargas-impact-study-erasmus-work-placements-for-vocational-learners-from-ireland-2018/>

12 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/what-is-further-education-and-training-1.3973131>

The position of vocational education and training in Ireland then is somewhat complex. It can be both a preparation for employment and a route towards higher education. It aims to create skills relevant for the workplace, but concentrates on classroom-based training. It is an important mechanism for social inclusion, but is not always afforded high societal status. It remains however an important pillar in the Irish education system, providing access to education for many thousands of learners. The 2014–2019 SOLAS FET strategy sets out five strategic goals to ensure the sector remains vibrant and relevant:

- Creating skills useful for the economy and to employers
- Active inclusion of people of all abilities in society
- Providing training that meets national and international quality standards
- Integrating planning and funding based on needs analyses
- Keeping FET in good standing by ensuring it is a valued learning path leading to agreed employment, personal, social and developmental options.

Through actions associated with these goals, it is hoped that FET will continue to ‘improve the wellbeing of individuals, communities and enterprises.’ This objective is very much in keeping with the Erasmus+ aim to ‘improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society.’¹³

European-Funded Mobility Programmes for VET Learners in Ireland, 2007–2019

As noted in the Introduction, the European Union has funded and supported the mobility of vocational learners from Ireland for more than three decades. The National Agency for these programmes in Ireland is Léargas, an agency of the Department of Education and Skills until its transfer to the newly-established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2020. Léargas seeks to connect people in different communities and countries, and bring an international dimension to the work of organisations across Ireland. This study focuses on the two most recent EU programmes: Leonardo da Vinci Mobility, which ran from 2007 to 2013 as part of the Lifelong Learning Programme; and Erasmus+ Mobility for VET Staff and Learners, which is part of the wider Erasmus+ programme running from 2014 to 2020.

Leonardo da Vinci Mobility had three distinct project ‘actions’, or categories, aimed at:

- people in initial vocational training (IVT)
- people in the labour market (PLM)
- professional trainers in VET organisations (VETPro).

This study covers only those involved in the IVT category, which enabled apprentices/trainees to travel to other European countries for vocational training or work experience in enterprises/training institutions. The longest possible mobility duration in this category was 39 weeks, though the majority of placements organised from Ireland were between two and six weeks.¹⁴

¹³ Erasmus+ Programme Guide. Available from https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b_en

¹⁴ Making a Difference: Study of the Impact of Learning Mobility Lifelong Learning Programme in Ireland 2007–09. Léargas

Erasmus+ serves all vocational learners and staff members in just one category, 'Mobility Projects for VET Staff and Learners'. This means that Erasmus+ VET mobility projects can involve mobilities for staff only, for learners only, or for a mix of both. There is one 'standard' call for Erasmus+ VET applications each year, though since 2016 Léargas has held a second call each year by agreement with the European Commission. Experienced VET organisations also have the option to apply for an Erasmus+ 'VET Mobility Charter', which recognises their operational capacity to carry out large-scale and high-quality projects, and allows organisations to make simplified applications through the annual calls. While Erasmus+ VET projects can run for one or two years, Erasmus+ learner mobilities last from two weeks to a maximum of twelve months. However, the vast majority of placements are short-term: the Léargas Impact Study on Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland (2018) found that only 8% of all learner mobilities completed between 2014 and 2016 lasted more than one month, and none were longer than three months.¹⁵

Table 2 below shows Léargas data¹⁶ on the number of eligible applications received each year; the number of applications approved for funding; and the number of learner mobilities approved for funding. Leonardo da Vinci Mobility project figures refer to the IVT category only.

Table 2: Eligible and approved applications, with number of learner mobilities 2007–2018

Call Year	Number of eligible applications received	Number of projects approved for funding	Number of learner mobilities approved for funding
Leonardo da Vinci Mobility (IVT category)			
2007	8	8	187
2008	12	11	346
2009	12	12	280
2010	14	12	455
2011	13	11	346
2012	14	13	599
2013	11	10	444
LdV IVT total	84	77	2,657
Erasmus+ Mobility for VET staff and learners (KA102 and KA116)			
2014	17	16	893
2015	20	17	726
2016	21	18	723
2017	31	30	1,070
2018	39	38	1,284
Erasmus+ 2014–18 total	128	119	4,696
2007–2018 total	212	196	7,353

There is a very high success rate for Erasmus+ VET Mobility projects, with over 90% of applications approved for funding. Project application numbers have more than doubled between 2014 and 2018. The vast majority of applications for Erasmus+ VET mobility projects come from colleges of further education (CFEs) within the state Education and Training Boards. In 2018, for example, only 4 of the 38 projects approved did not originate in ETBs¹⁷. In general, these projects are coordinated by a staff member in the CFE rather than directly by the ETB. Some larger ETBs choose to manage the financial aspects of the projects centrally, but daily running of the project would still be handled by CFE staff. Applications from outside the ETBs tend to come from private vocational training organisations that focus on very specific aspects of VET, such as entrepreneurship, or ecology and conservation.

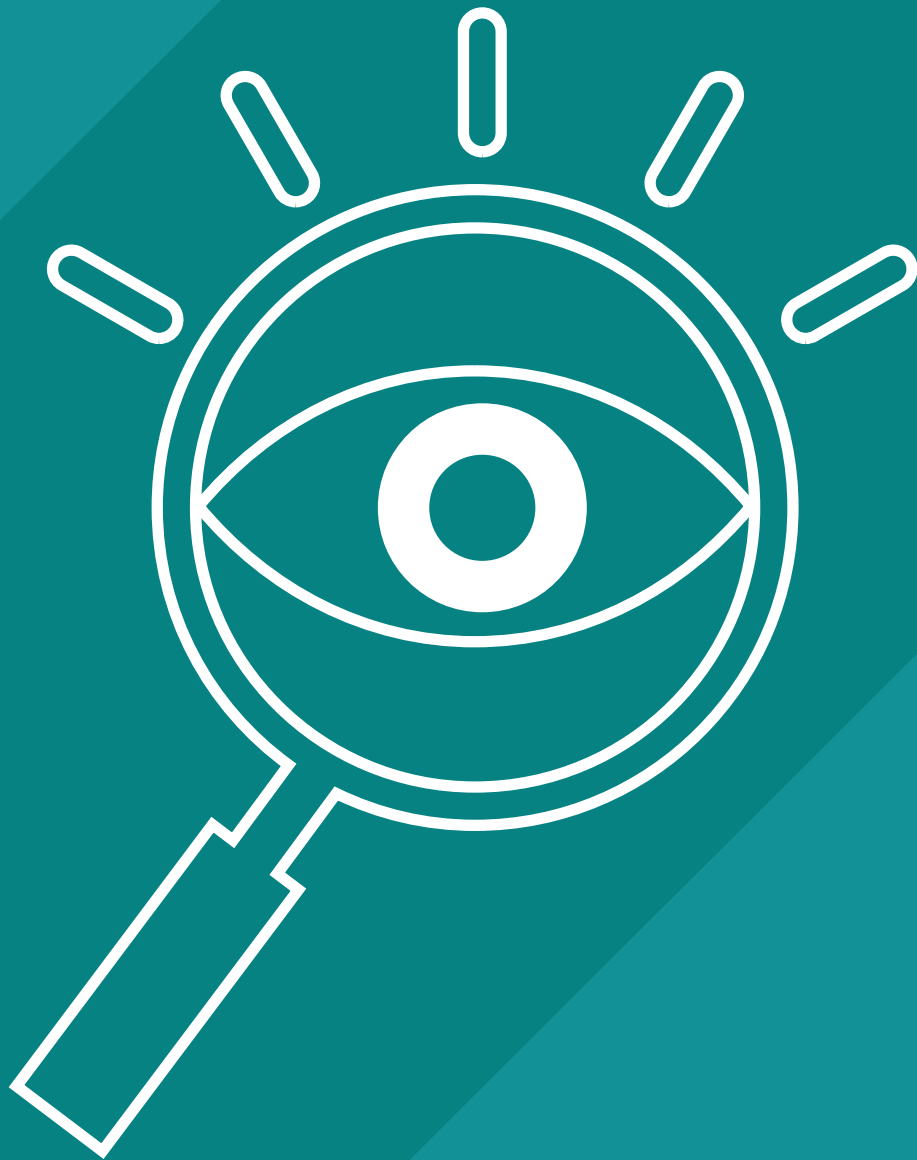
¹⁵ Léargas Impact Study on Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland (2018). Available from <https://www.leargas.ie/resource/leargas-impact-study-erasmus-work-placements-for-vocational-learners-from-ireland-2018/>

¹⁶ Data from Léargas Annual Reports and Funded Projects lists. Available from www.leargas.ie

¹⁷ Erasmus+ VET Key Action 1 (KA102) 2018 and Erasmus+ VET Mobility Charter (KA116) 2018 Funded Projects Lists, Léargas. Available from www.leargas.ie

Two:

Research Methods, Data Collection and Analysis



Research Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

Research for this study was carried out by the Léargas Impact Research Officer between November 2018 and November 2019. The research scope was learners involved in projects approved for funding between 2007 and 2018.

The research is based primarily on:

- an online survey of 335 participants from Ireland who had completed Leonardo da Vinci or Erasmus+ vocational mobility placements
- four semi-structured in-person interviews with individuals who had completed Leonardo da Vinci or Erasmus+ vocational mobility placements
- two in-person focus groups, with twelve participants who had completed Leonardo da Vinci or Erasmus+ vocational mobility placements.

As this study is part of a wider project involving National Agencies across Europe, the survey format and questions used in interviews and focus groups were agreed in advance by all project partners. The same format was used in all countries.

The study uses a mixed-method research approach, combining quantitative analysis of survey data along with qualitative assessment of the experiences reported by individual participants. This approach seeks to reflect the variety and diversity of experiences, and to explore aspects of the placements in greater depth than a wholly quantitative approach could offer. Each component of the research is described in detail below.

Online Survey

The project partners agreed a standard survey questionnaire for those who had taken part in vocational mobility placements under either the Leonardo da Vinci or Erasmus+ programmes. This questionnaire was then localised for Ireland, and six extra local demographic and contact information questions were added. The survey was uploaded to the online survey tool SurveyMonkey. Participation in the survey was voluntary and questions could be answered anonymously. Only respondents who were willing to take part in individual interviews or focus groups were requested to provide their contact details for follow up.

Email addresses for 1,483 participants were sourced through the European Commission's Mobility Tool and Léargas' own records. Participants who had agreed to be contacted after their placements received information about the study and an invitation to take the survey. Predictably, there was a very high bounce back rate from these emails. Many participants had supplied college-based email addresses which had expired, while others had changed or closed accounts since the time of their mobility placement.

Emails were also sent to 66 vocational organisation staff members who had coordinated Leonardo da Vinci or Erasmus+ projects, asking them to share the survey link with their participants. The survey was also advertised in a news item on the Léargas website, in the Léargas VET newsletter and in posts on the Léargas social media accounts.

The survey had 47 questions, the majority of which required closed or scaled answers. It also included two open questions seeking overall comment on the mobility experience.

Respondents had the option to skip questions that were not relevant to them, or which they preferred not to answer. Additionally, some respondents closed the survey early and did not complete all questions. For clarity, the sample size (n) is provided under each figure.

All survey data was coded using a matrix agreed by the project partners.

Profile of Survey Respondents

The survey was open from November to December 2018 and received 360 responses. Of these, 335 were valid. As Table 2 shows, 7,353 learning mobilities were funded between 2007 and 2018. This makes the survey sample just over 22% of those directly emailed and 4.5% of the total potential group. The figures below show the profile of the respondents to the survey. The vast majority (86%) were from CFEs, with just 7% involved in apprenticeships or work-based training. There was a high proportion of female respondents, at 71%.

Figure 2: Type of vocational organisation attended at time of placement (n=335)

Q5 'What type of education institution were you part of when you went on your placement abroad?'

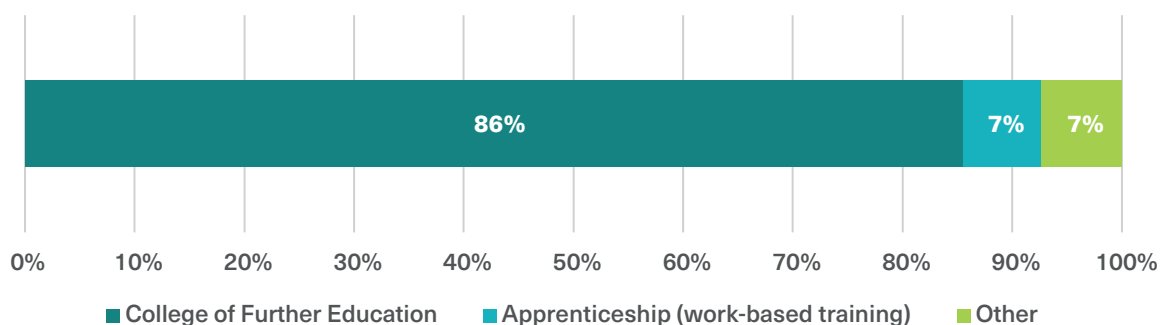
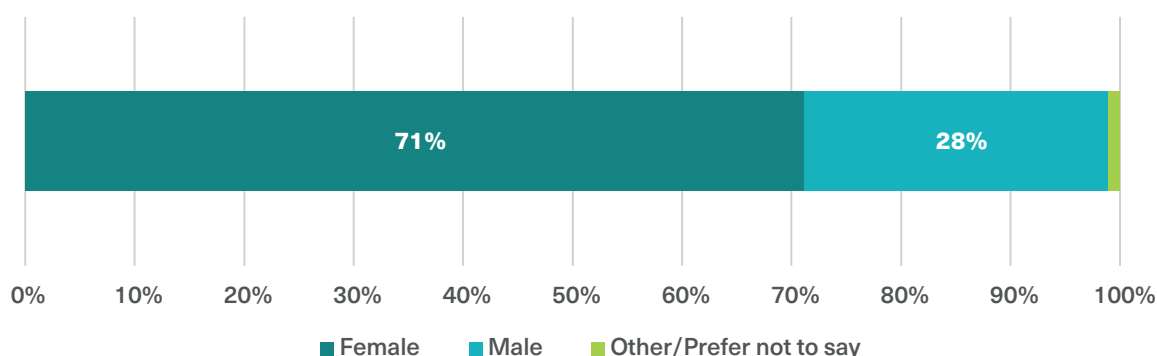


Figure 3: Gender of survey respondents (n=278)

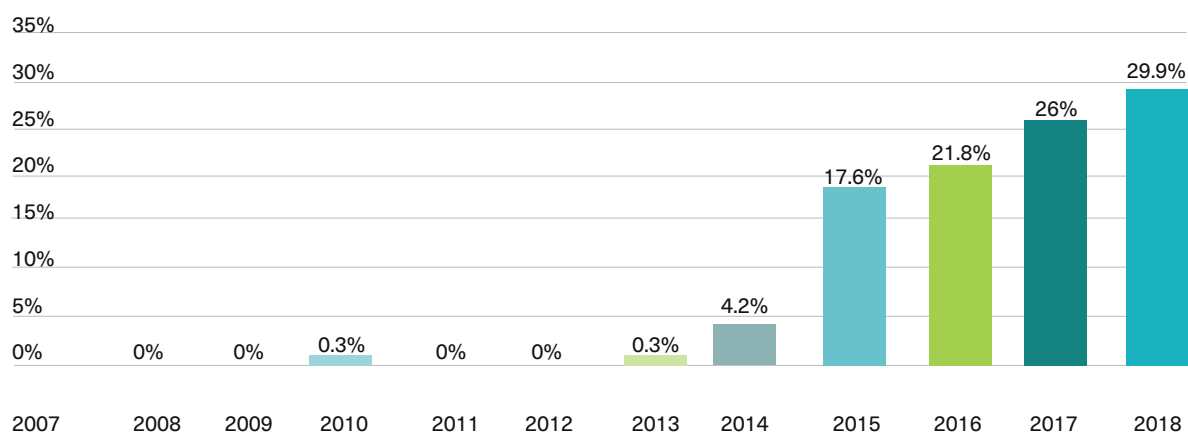
Q42 'What is your gender?'



The majority of respondents had been on placements in the years 2015 to 2018. Fewer than 5% of respondents had placements in the period 2007–2014, which roughly corresponds with the years of the Leonardo da Vinci Mobility programme.

Figure 4: Year of vocational placement (n=335)

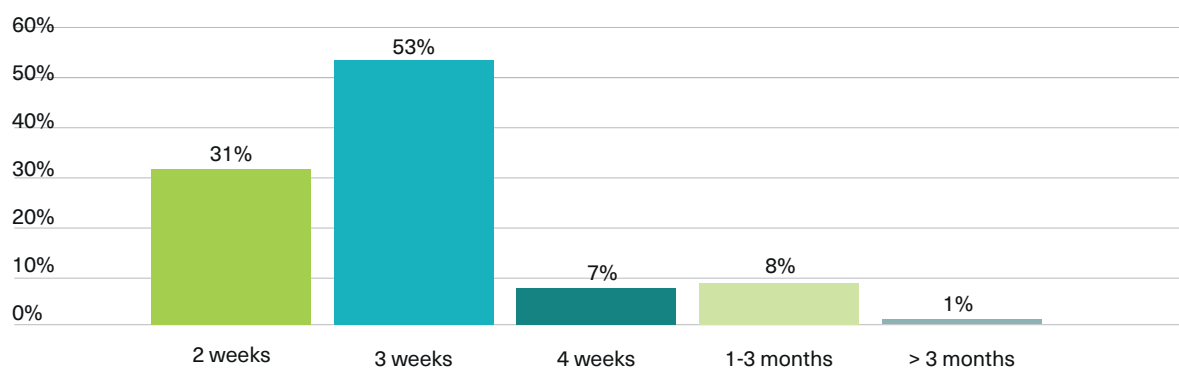
Q3 'What year did your vocational placement happen?'



Placement durations tended to be short. Just under a third of placements lasted two weeks, while another half lasted three weeks. Only 9% of participants had mobilities that lasted longer than one month.

Figure 5: Duration of vocational placement (n=335)

Q4 'How long did your vocational placement last?'



Respondents lived across the range of Irish provinces at the time of their placements. All of the counties were represented, with the exception of Laois. As might be expected, the biggest proportion of respondents came from the most populous counties, Dublin (22.7%) and Cork (17.3%). However, there was also a high proportion of respondents from Cavan (8.3%) and Westmeath (9.8%) relative to their population size.

Respondents were also asked where they lived at the time they completed the survey. The sample size here is smaller, as some respondents were living outside the country or opted not to answer the question. Results are presented here for the sake of comparison only.

Table 3: Respondents' county of residence at time of placement (n=335) and at time of survey (n=277)

Connaught	Placement	Survey	Leinster	Placement	Survey	Munster	Placement	Survey	Ulster	Placement	Survey
Galway	24	17	Carlow	1	0	Clare	1	2	Cavan	1	2
Leitrim	6	6	Dublin	76	68	Cork	58	42	Donegal	58	42
Mayo	12	11	Kildare	3	3	Kerry	4	1	Monaghan	4	1
Roscommon	2	3	Kilkenny	3	2	Limerick	3	3		3	3
Sligo	16	8	Laois	0	0	Tipperary	4	4		4	4
			Longford	10	8	Waterford	1	5		1	5
			Louth	2	3						
			Meath	15	14						
			Offaly	17	17						
			Westmeath	33	25						
			Wexford	8	6						
			Wicklow	2	2						
TOTAL	60	45		170	148		71	57		71	57

The profile of respondents is broadly in line with the profile of mobility programme participants as a whole. The vast majority of respondents were enrolled in colleges of further education at the time of their placements, and these colleges make up the majority of participating institutions in the programme. Just over 8% of participants had mobilities that lasted longer than one month, which is the same figure found for the entire 2014–2016 cohort in the Léargas Impact Study¹⁸.

The proportion of responses from females relative to males was 71%, which seems disproportionately high. As noted in the Introduction, however, PLC courses in Ireland tend to attract more females than males. Several response-rate studies have also found that, in general, women are more likely than men to respond to surveys¹⁹. These factors taken together may explain the high proportion of responses from women.

It should also be noted that very few respondents travelled in the years 2007–2013, the years of the Leonardo da Vinci Mobility programme. As a mobility project can last two years and does not necessarily start immediately after it is approved for funding, it is possible that the 2014 and 2015 figures include participants who were funded under the Leonardo da Vinci programme. Nonetheless it is evident that the responses are heavily weighted towards Erasmus+ participants.

With these caveats in mind, the high degree of correlation between the survey respondents and the participant group as a whole suggest that the sample is statistically valid.

¹⁸ Léargas Impact Study: Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland, Léargas. Available from <https://www.leargas.ie/resource/leargas-impact-study-erasmus-work-placements-for-vocational-learners-from-ireland-2018/>

¹⁹ See, for example 'Does Gender Influence Online Survey Participation?', San José State University, 2008. Available from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED501717>

Individual Interviews

The researcher conducted four individual interviews with participants in April 2019. Interview subjects were selected from among the 110 survey respondents who had indicated that they were willing to take part in this phase of the research. The researcher then selected four participants based upon their availability for, and continued interest in, the interview process.

Relevant details, including destination country and vocational area, are provided for each interview subject in Table 4. However, the names used are pseudonyms and no identifying organisations are named in the report. This is to preserve anonymity and was made clear to interview subjects at the start of the process.

Table 4: Interview subject details

Pseudonym	Host country	Placement year	Mobility duration	Vocational area	Sending org.	Current occupation
Dorota	UK	2017	2 weeks	Business	Private VET organisation	Full-time study (HE) & part-time employment
Colm	Slovenia	2017	2 weeks	Business	College of further education	Full-time study (HE)
Mark	UK	2016	2 weeks	Media	Private VET organisation	Full-time study (HE)
Oisín	Spain	2017	3 months	Ecology	Private VET organisation	Full-time employment

All interviews were conducted one-to-one with the researcher. Three interviews were held at the Léargas office in Dublin, and one over Skype. The interviews followed a semi-structured format agreed by the project partners: there was a list of questions guiding the interviewer, but latitude for free flow of conversation and follow-up questions. The shortest interview lasted twenty-six minutes and the longest was just under one hour. All interviews were audio recorded with the prior consent of the interviewee, and then transcribed verbatim.

Initial analysis involved grouping responses into the themes agreed by the transnational research group. These included:

- motivation to take part
- organisation of the mobility
- skills gained
- subsequent career path
- mobility strengths and weaknesses.

This was followed by an in-depth examination to identify responses outside of these thematic areas, and to compare shared and diverging views among participants.

Focus Groups

The researcher conducted two focus groups with participants in November 2019. The initial intention was to select participants from among the survey respondents who had indicated their willingness to take part. Although 84 of the 335 respondents had agreed to join a focus group, it proved logistically very challenging to assemble groups in the same place at the same time due to the variety of the respondents' locations and working hours. After several unsuccessful attempts to coordinate schedules, a new approach was adopted. The researcher contacted Erasmus+ project coordinators in CFEs and requested their help to select participants from among their college's alumni. Using this approach, focus groups were organised in Galway and Dublin.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format agreed by the project partners. There was a list of questions guiding the interviewer, but latitude for free flow of conversation and for follow-up questions. Focus group members were encouraged to ask each other questions if desired, and to feel free to express dissenting opinions. Both groups were audio recorded with the consent of all members, and transcribed verbatim.

Focus Group A was held in a CFE in Galway and lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. There were five participants, who expressed their views and impressions very freely. Focus Group B took place in a CFE in Dublin and lasted one hour and four minutes. There were seven participants, who occasionally required prompting to answer questions in depth, but who engaged very well with the process. Table 5 below gives relevant details for each participant. Again, pseudonyms are used and no organisations are identified.

Table 5: Focus group participant details

	Pseudonym	Host Country	Placement Year	Mobility Duration	Vocational Area	Sending Org.	Current Occupation
A	Filip	Finland	2017	3 weeks	Film	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (HE)
A	Craig	UK	2019	3 weeks	Information Technology	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (HE)
A	Seán	Poland	2018	3 weeks	Information Technology	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (HE)
A	Ellen	Spain	2018	3 weeks	Fashion	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (HE)
A	Aedín	Finland	2018	3 weeks	Film	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (HE)
B	Grant	Iceland	2017	6 weeks	Tourism	College of F.Ed.	Full-time employment
B	Weronika	Finland	2017	6 weeks	Tourism	College of F.Ed.	Full-time employment
B	Tara	Malta	2016	6 weeks	Tourism	College of F.Ed.	Full-time employment
B	Aoife	Finland	2013	6 weeks	Business	College of F.Ed.	Full-time employment
B	Cathy	Finland	2019	3 weeks	Business	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (FET) and part-time employment
B	Steven	Finland	2019	3 weeks	Business	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (HE) and part-time employment
B	Sonia	Finland	2018	3 weeks	Business	College of F.Ed.	Full-time study (FET)

As Table 5 shows, organising the focus groups directly through the sending CFE resulted in a high degree of clustering in destination country and vocational areas. However, all participants were placed in unique enterprises at unique times. The focus groups included participants whose mobility experiences took place in 2019, but these were as part of projects approved for funding in 2018.

As with the individual interviews, initial analysis involved grouping responses into the themes agreed by the transnational research group (motivation; organisation of the mobility; skills gained; subsequent career path; and mobility strengths and weaknesses). This was followed by in-depth examination to identify responses outside of these thematic areas, and to compare shared and diverging views among members.

Research Limitations

Taking part in the survey, interviews and focus groups was entirely voluntary, so all participants were self-selected. This study, like all studies based on voluntary participation rather than random selection of subjects, will have a certain amount of bias resulting from this. Perhaps chief among these biases is the likelihood of attracting responses from those with strong positive or negative feelings about the subject, rather than from those who feel more neutral.

The survey was distributed online, and in theory equally available to all respondents no matter where they lived. However, it was promoted almost exclusively through Irish channels and networks: the Léargas website, newsletter and social media accounts, and by the project coordinators in sending organisations. It is likely that more Irish-based than international-based participants would have been aware of and responded to the survey.

Finally, as noted above, the majority of survey responses came from participants in Erasmus+ rather than the Leonardo da Vinci Mobility programme. This is also the case for the individual interviews and focus groups. This means that the findings in this study are not only more relevant to Erasmus+, but are more weighted towards the relatively early stages – the first five years or so – of participants' post-placement paths.

Three: Mobility Experience



Mobility Experience

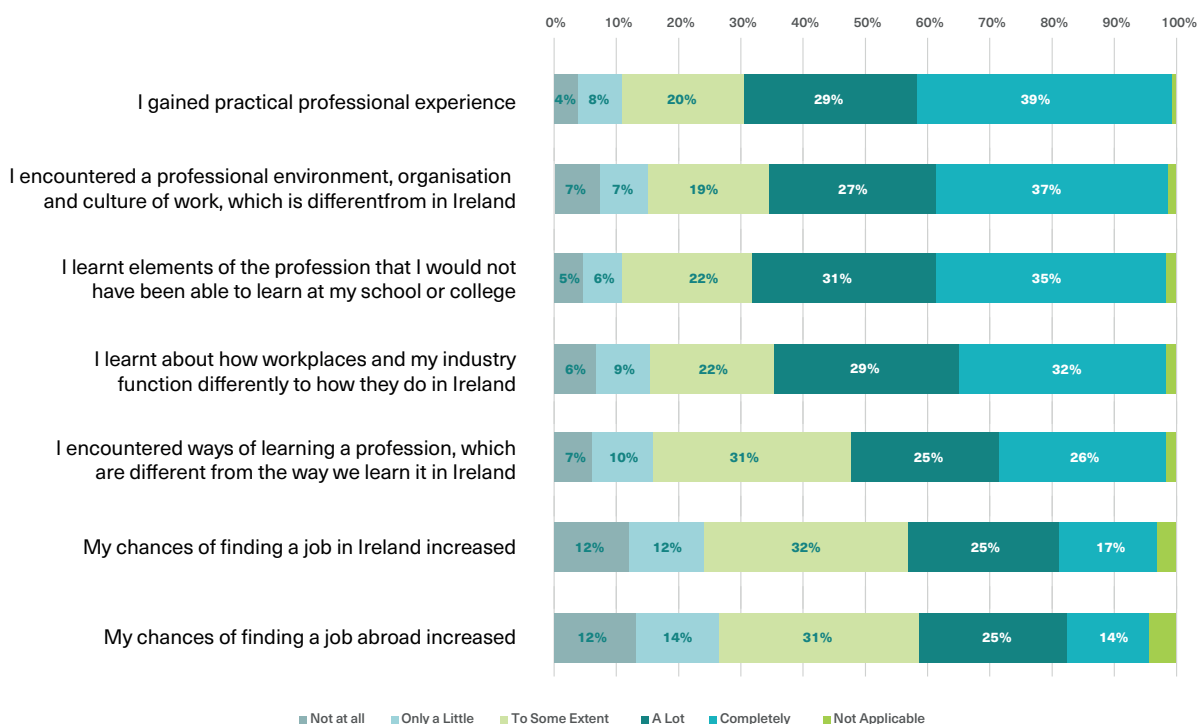
This section looks in detail at the research groups' assessment of their mobility experience; the reasons that vocational learners go on mobility placements; where and when they go; how their placements are organised; and the mentoring and support structures they experience. It also looks at the contacts participants make during their placements, and whether these are maintained afterwards. The section closes with participants' thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of their mobility experience, and what they would change if given the chance.

Overall Assessment of Mobility Experience

Participants rated their overall mobility experience very highly. Almost 90% of respondents remembered their time abroad on a placement positively or very positively; just 3% did not remember the experience positively at all (Figure 18). Almost 70% said they had gained practical professional experience on their placement and 64% said they had learned elements of their profession that they could not otherwise learn in school or college. Survey respondents also felt their mobility experience offered something they could not get at home: over 60% agreed that they had encountered work cultures and environments that were different from Ireland, and learned how these workplaces function differently from Ireland. More than half also agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that they had encountered different ways of learning (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Professional experience (n=317)

*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
'Thanks to the training or work placement abroad ...'*



The survey included an option to make general remarks or observations about the placement. Of the 99 responses submitted, 92% were graded as positive or highly positive. Examples included:

- 'It is the most positive memory I have to date, even years later I still speak about it. It was the most amazing opportunity and experience I've ever had.'
- 'It was honestly the best three weeks of my life, I would 100% recommend it to anyone thinking of doing it.'
- 'It was sincerely one of the best experiences ever, it's been almost two years since I worked abroad, I still remember it like it was yesterday.'
- 'It was an amazing experience. I got to improve many skills that are needed in my vocational area and I also learned many life skills. I will never forget it.'
- 'It was overall a great learning experience and makes my CV more attractive to employers.'
- 'It is a fantastic opportunity if you are interested in learning new things, meeting different people from different backgrounds and respect their cultures.'

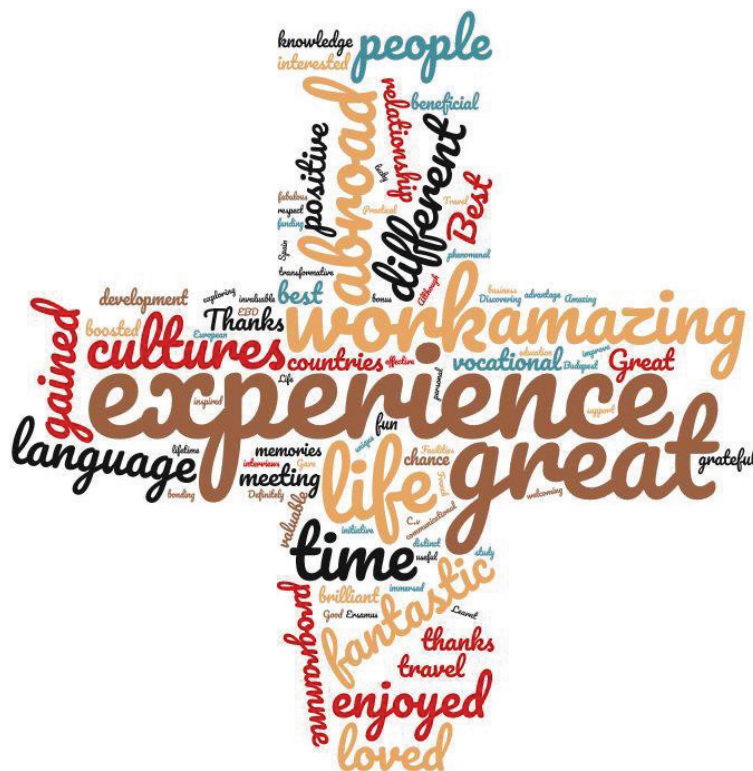
Several respondents emphasised that they would not have had the opportunity to work abroad without Erasmus+:

- 'Never having left Ireland before, I would have never got to experience another country. If given the chance to go back, I would be there tomorrow.'
- 'As I am a mature student of 50 plus I would never have had the opportunity to go otherwise. I loved it. Gave me great confidence. Had a lovely bunch travel with me, we still keep in touch. Should I have that opportunity again, I would gladly take it. It was a great boost to my confidence on returning to college and I learnt new ways and culture. Very positive outcome.'
- 'It was a fantastic experience that never would have happened if it was not on offer to me through my college.'
- 'This is a wonderful programme and should be available to everyone.'

In free comment about their experience, the words that respondents most frequently used to describe their overall mobility experience were 'learning' (19 uses); 'great' (16 uses); 'opportunity' (14 uses); and 'amazing' (9 uses). There were six uses each of 'fantastic', 'wonderful', 'recommend' and 'enjoyed'. The word cloud in Figure 7 shows that other frequently used words were 'work', 'culture', 'language', 'skills', 'confidence' and 'positive'.

Figure 7 represents the words used in free comment about the placement in a word cloud. The most frequently used words are represented by the largest text, and less frequently used words by smaller text.

Figure 7: Frequency of words used in free comment



Among those who made negative or very negative comments about their experience, the most common issues were difficulties with host companies or with the overall organisation of the placement. These negative remarks are analysed in more detail in the section on Mobility Weaknesses. All respondents who gave negative remarks either opted out or did not respond to invitations to take part in interviews or focus groups, so could not be contacted for additional comment.

The mobility experience was rated highly by those involved in interviews and focus groups. They recalled it as a 'once in a lifetime' experience that gave them self-confidence and exposure to a real workplace. All had maintained connections with people they met in the host countries, and several were also in touch with their host organisations. When recalling their experiences, these participants tended to emphasise the value of immersion in a new country and culture as much as the contribution it made to their learning.

- When we got there, it exceeded any expectations we had for our group. It was a trip of a lifetime and something that I'll always remember for years to come. Doing a 9 to 5 job or whatever, I'll think back to that time I went to Poland on Erasmus+. It was class! You just learned so much from it. It is a lifetime experience that you only get once. Really worth it. *Seán*
- It was something exciting that I never would've done before, and I definitely didn't have the opportunity since to do it. If I had to do it again I definitely would. It was one of the most amazing experiences I've had. Meeting new people and taking the friendships back home, that for me was one of the benefits of it all. And then exposure to the industry. You wouldn't really get another opportunity to do that unless it's part of a degree you're doing or something. So that was very beneficial. *Mark*

- Genuinely, as positive as I'm putting it across there, is as positive as my experience was. It was – I hate to say 'life-changing' – but technically it was. It did get me on to this career path and I fully believe it was due to experience I gained in [my host organisation]. Keep the funding coming, seriously! It's a great initiative. *Oisín*
- It's one thing to learn a subject in college and practise in college whatever work you do, but when we got to our work placement in Finland, it was like a semi-professional studio. It is really good experience because you actually get to use the skills you've learned in college. *Filip*
- It just gives you a different perspective when you are over there. Living here for so many years, you're just in your own little space, 'this is how we live'. Then you're in this complete different world, where they do things completely different. It just kind of gives you a different perspective, a different outlook on life. *Steven*

Where and When Do Placements Happen?

The majority of survey respondents had placements in Western European or Nordic countries. As Figure 8 shows, the most popular destinations were Spain (84 respondents), the UK (49), France (35), Italy (30) and Sweden (26). There were relatively few placements in Eastern Europe, with the exception of Romania (18 respondents). There appears to be some correlation between destination country and vocational area: almost 70% of those who went to Romania were students of medical, human health and social work, and Romania accounted for a third of all placements in this field.

Figure 8: Destination countries (n=335)

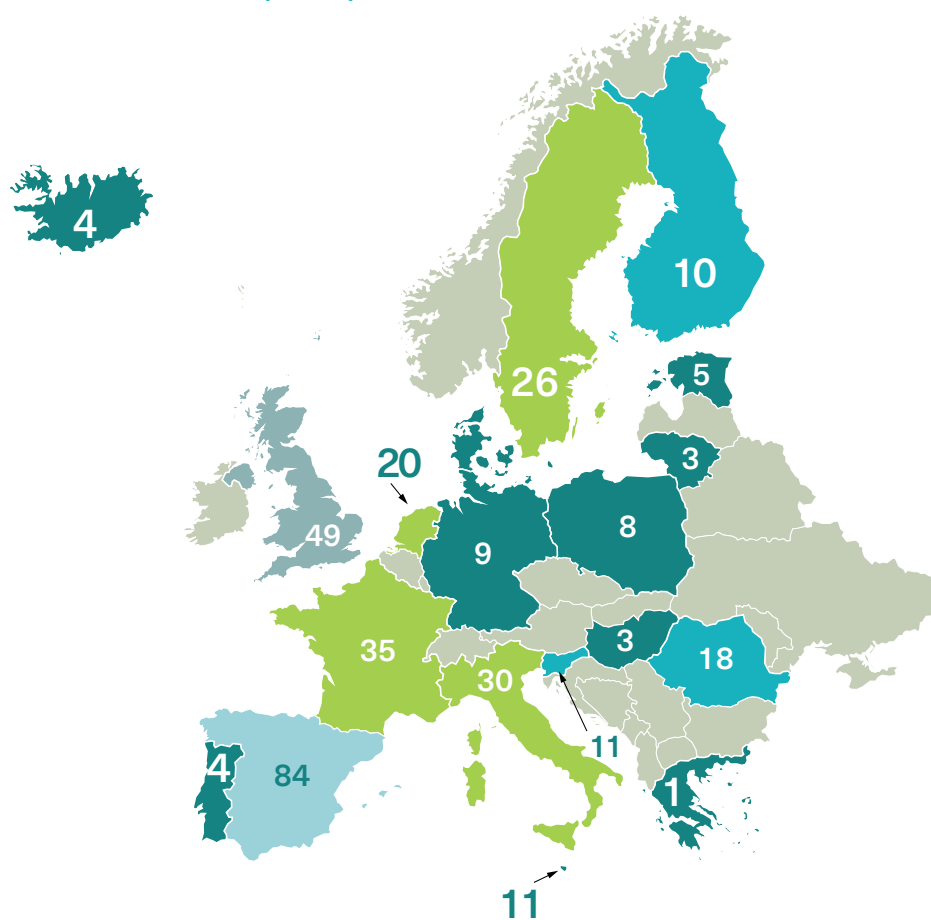


Figure 9: Host organisation type (n=314)**Q8: 'My vocational placement abroad took place in ...'**

Survey respondents had placements in a variety of host organisations, although over half were based in businesses or enterprises. Just under 15% were based in vocational education schools. Among the in-person research group, nine participants had been placed in enterprises (including research stations, manufacturing companies and IT service providers) and seven in vocational institutions. The quotes below show the diversity of placement organisations and work duty that participants experienced:

- I worked in the tourism office in the local town. My job and duties differed. It started with potentially interacting with some tourists from neighbouring countries such as Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy and also sorting out brochures in the different languages as well. I was happy to decorate the office, to arrange decorations for an upcoming festival in the town. I was also a courier in some instances; I would deliver brochures on behalf of the office to local businesses. There was quite a lot over the two weeks and it certainly was a great experience. *Colm*
- We were in a town in Poland, in a company. And we were in three different departments for each week. The first week we were doing design, doing CAD and coding and stuff like that. The second week we were working with a €1.5 million robot. It was, like, we were up in the room coding away and then 10 minutes later we were down in this warehouse with this robot doing the same code but if we messed up it'd be very expensive! And then the third week we were doing networking on the company facilitates for the whole industrial park. So we got to go round to all the servers and stuff like that, and make our own servers for the whole industrial park and go round and test it and it was

so interesting; it was in a real-world environment and if something went wrong we'd have to go and fix it. Like if you made a mistake you had someone to answer to. There was someone supervising, but still it was pressurised – hard work, but enjoyable. *Seán*

- In Tenerife we worked with an independent fashion designer. I thought it would be like a normal shop but it was a massive warehouse. There were costume-based props, and everyday wasn't the same, 'cause some days we might work with feathers, some days with glue guns. From start to finish we would have 4 or 5 different jobs. Creating this costume, we didn't know what the outcome was gonna be. We're just doing little bits, bit by bit. The day before the carnival we brought everything we did together – it was massive. I stood by, like – did we actually do this? It's not an easy thing but it all came together. We had two weeks in the warehouse non-stop apart from maybe weekends. *Ellen*
- I worked on a boat that was doing northern lights tours and whale watching, but I didn't do well on the boat – four hours on the Arctic Sea. So they just put me in reservations at the ticket desk, dealing with people as they came in. And doing all their emails, the people moaning like, 'Oh, we didn't see the whales' and all that. *Grant*
- I worked in Fiskars; they make those orange-handled scissors that you see everywhere. They make a whole lot of products. They have a factory there and we were just doing a lot of admin work. Kind of random work; they asked us once to interview their employees and see if they're happy in the company. We were just doing bits and pieces but it was really good. We got a tour of the factory. It was good experience; I enjoyed it. *Aoife*
- I worked for Pernod-Ricard, the second biggest drink distiller in the world. I was working in the main office. I was just doing a range of things, marketing; I went to the biggest whiskey fair in Finland. I was sitting there and people come up to you and ask you questions; you'd have to explain how this was made and basically sell them on the brand and increase their sales for the year. It was class. *Steven*

Overall, satisfaction with placement organisations among this group was very high, and did not seem to be affected by the organisation type. One exception was Aedín, who felt that her placement in the film department of a vocational college was not representative of real professional life:

- For me it felt like it wasn't a very realistic work environment, if that makes sense. It's a vocational school but they produce professional things there. So it wasn't like working for a company or working in a more professional setting; it was more like half and half. So I felt a bit like, it wasn't exactly what it would be like if I was working. It was definitely more like working than it was here [in her sending organisation]. But it wasn't completely what it would be like.

Motivation to Take Part

For participants in interviews and focus groups, the principal motivation for mobility was to obtain experience in their vocational area: 'I wanted to further add to my expertise in the business field' (Colm), or 'I wanted to see the challenges that IT professionals face' (Seán). While many participants had worked part-time while they were in college, none had worked in their vocational area before.

Oisín in particular had struggled to gain a foothold in his chosen profession. He had graduated several years previously with a bachelor's degree, but had never worked in his field. He characterised his three-month placement in ecology as a 'last ditch attempt' to get the experience he needed for employment.

The great dream was just to walk straight into a graduate position. But unfortunately life had different plans. I got a good degree but the market was saturated with fresh graduates and the only thing that sets you apart – and most of the positions I was applying for required – two years' work experience. I worked in numerous different jobs and I nearly gave up on my dream. I was working as a tour guide. I retrained, and was working as a chef in the UK. But I was constantly chipping away at gathering experience; I would always be volunteering [in ecology], but I was a few months away from being like, 'I'm never going to crack this nut, I've wasted too much time. I may need to look into a new field or upskill.' But all that takes money, and I didn't have enough to afford a master's or what have you. And that's kind of what led me on to this programme. I saw it and I said, look, a three-month placement. It's in the line of work that I'm interested in – why not?

Other participants emphasised the need to get relevant work experience in a real-world setting. As noted in the section on PLC courses, work experience is not a universal feature of VET in Ireland and the majority of time is spent in the classroom. There was a palpable desire among participants from PLC courses to gain exposure to authentic workplaces:

- I wanted to see the real-world scenario of what we were studying. It's all very well and good being in a classroom and learning about this and that, but seeing it in the real world is a priceless asset. *Seán*
- [I wanted] just to see a different side of it, because we spend so much time inside here in the studio. So it was really to see a different way of doing things that could open my mind a little bit. *Aedín*

The other chief motivating factor for these participants was to increase their autonomy and self-sufficiency. Two-thirds of the participants lived with their parents at the time of their placements and wanted to experience a different way of life:

- For me, I was living at home before I went away. I just wanted to go away to get me own independence. That was the main goal for it, just finding my own way of how to do things. *Sonia*
- I was living at home. And then just going over there for a few weeks, being so used to living your own life, looking after yourself, being responsible for yourself. When I came back I was like, 'I can't believe I have to go live in this house again! I just want to move out now.' *Steven*

Awareness of Vocational Placement Opportunity

As so many learners were motivated by their desire to obtain relevant work experience in their vocational area, it is striking that very few of them were aware of the opportunity before they chose their courses of study.

In Focus Group A, Seán remarked, 'I hadn't heard of Erasmus+. At the start of the year they mentioned the Erasmus programme and gave us a little bit of insight into it, how it was run in the college.' In Focus Group B, Steven observed that '[the college is] putting more into Erasmus+ and they're pushing it as an option; it's something they're really proud of, to have in the college. It's like ... this is a big thing to have in this little small college that I didn't even know existed. You would just never think they would have these kind of things available.'

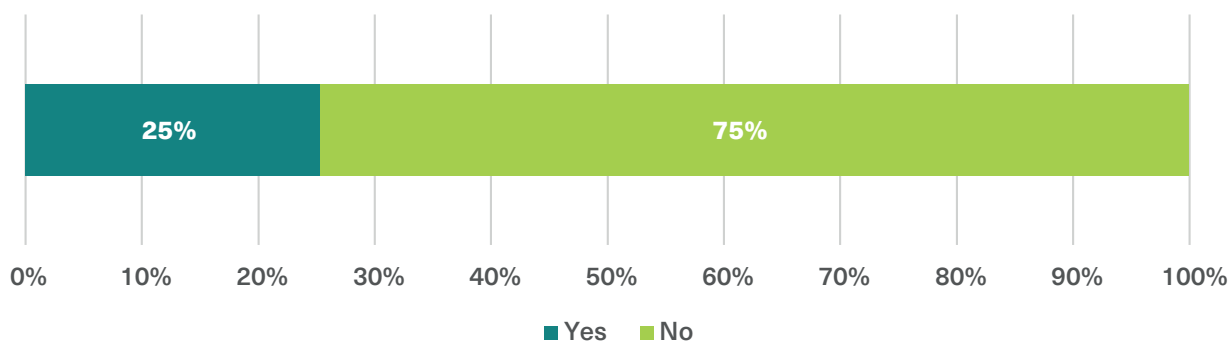
Oisín, who had graduated from higher education several years before his placement, said:

I knew about Erasmus just from being in college. The 'Plus' side I'd never heard of; I wasn't aware of that aspect of that initiative until I came across it. I was looking for a job on Green Careers or Eco Careers, one of those websites and it just popped up there. I sat on it for about a week too. I thought 'It's definitely a scam ...!' When I told everybody else it was funded, they couldn't believe it either. That's just the icing on the cake. *Oisín*

These feelings were echoed by the survey respondents, 75% of whom were not aware that a vocational placement abroad was available when they selected their course or college.

Figure 10: Awareness of vocational placement opportunity prior to course/college selection (n=278)

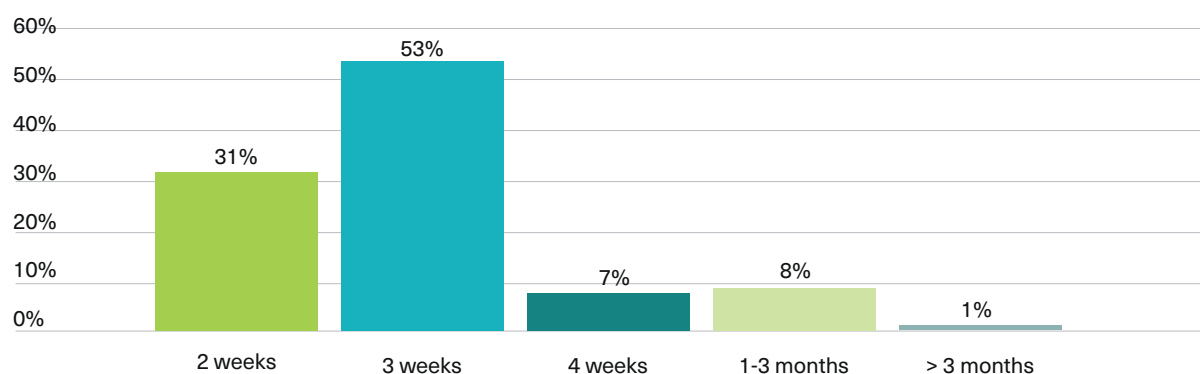
Q43 'Did you know there was an option to go on a vocational course abroad before you selected your course or college?'



However, almost half of those who **were** aware of the opportunity said it had influenced their choice of course or college 'a lot' or 'completely'.

Figure 11: Influence of vocational placement opportunity on course/college selection (n=90)

Q4 'How long did your vocational placement last?'



That there is low awareness of Erasmus+ VET opportunities among the overall research group is a crucial point for the National Agencies and the Irish FET system to consider. However, when learners **are** aware of the opportunity it does increase the attractiveness of particular courses and colleges. This suggests that mobility in general, and Erasmus+ in particular, can help to increase the standing of FET, as outlined in the SOLAS FET strategy.²⁰

²⁰ Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019, SOLAS. Available from <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1d219a-further-education-and-training-strategy-2014-2019/>

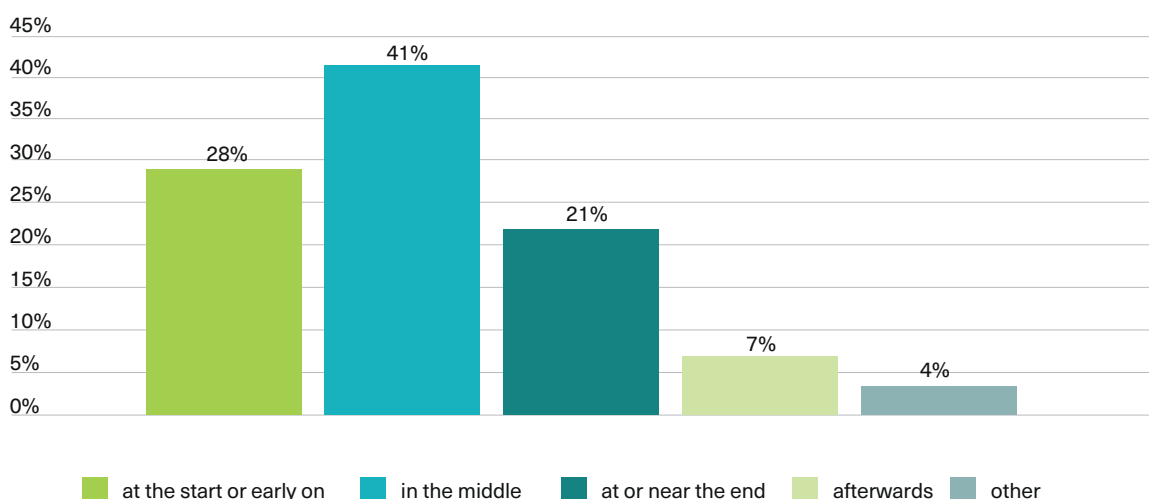
How Placements Are Organised

The vast majority (86%) of survey respondents were enrolled in CFEs at the time of their placements. Analysis of project Final Reports carried out for the Léargas Impact Study on Vocational Placements²¹ showed that the most common organisational model among CFEs is to form partnerships with vocational colleges in other countries, which then provide support with accommodation, mentoring and logistics, and source the host organisations.

The majority of the in-person research group (13 out of 16 people) had their placements organised by their CFE in this way. Two more of the group were registered in CFEs at the time of their mobility, but their placements had been organised by a private VET organisation which drew participants from a range of organisations. The remaining participant had his placement arranged by an independent training organisation specialising in environmental and arts courses.

Figure 12: Vocational education stage at time of placement (n=335)

Q10 'At what stage of your vocational education was the placement abroad organised?'



Almost 70% of placements were organised at the start or in the middle of respondents' vocational education. Only around 7% of placements took place after completion of vocational education.

The selection process used in CFEs took into account a range of factors, including rate of attendance, engagement in class and punctuality in delivering college assignments. Participants who had been selected this way emphasised that the process was competitive and that they felt proud of their achievement as a result:

- If you know that you've been chosen to go on this thing because of how well you did in your assignments or how well you presented in an interview, then it gives you a lot more of a feeling of responsibility and you feel like – you're being trusted with money, with faith that you can go over there and do a good job to represent your country and your school and everything. *Aedín*
- I was very happy when I was chosen, 'cause a lot of people wanted to go for different reasons, but I wanted to go because I knew I had something to learn. Me being chosen was great; I was really wowed. So I made very good use of it. *Ellen*

²¹ Léargas Impact Study: Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland, Léargas. Available from <https://www.leargas.ie/resource/leargas-impact-study-erasmus-work-placements-for-vocational-learners-from-ireland-2018/>.

This sense of prestige was particularly important to Dorota, who had moved to Ireland from Poland after completing post-primary school. She had delayed her entry into vocational education until she had improved her English skills, and as a result was somewhat older than her peers. She found that selection for Erasmus+ increased her confidence, and helped her to better integrate with her peers in class afterwards:

- But to be chosen for the Erasmus ... you know it was just a few places possible. And we were interviewed, every single person from school could do it. And they chose me. It was amazing. So I tried to twist my brain and start to look at things differently. You start to realise that the thing was that actually I probably pushed myself back. Not maybe that much the people, because they had no problem whatsoever to talk to me, to have me in a group, to see me as a normal person who just speaks another language. So that was cool. That was a really good experience.

It was interesting to note that participants were strongly in favour of this competitive selection process, and felt that it had increased motivation among their class group:

- At the start of the year they mentioned the Erasmus programme. They gave us a little bit of insight into it, how it was run in the college. I think that motivated people to come in more. My class were shockingly bad attenders, but once Erasmus was mentioned, it picked up for a while. And assignments were in straight away! *Seán*
- Attendance did really increase leading up to the Erasmus applications! It was like, I've got to get that attendance sorted. *Aedín*
- And after the placements, everything died down. But you could see the ones that it motivated; they stayed motivated. *Craig*

All participants from the in-person group received some pre-departure training from their sending organisations. For those in CFEs, this included presentations from and discussions with peers who had previously been on mobility placement. Participants found this useful and reassuring.

- We had pre-departure training and that went very well. I didn't have to worry about anything while I was there. They kind of covered everything. It was all planned out for you. Like from the flights to the host family when you get there to arrival. Every day was kind of planned out and you didn't really have anything to worry about – it was a stress-free environment. *Mark*
- They introduced other students who had been to Finland before, and showed some photos and videos of what the place was like. They showed us the work they'd done, what things they filmed in that studio and so on. So they gave us a rough idea of what the experience was like before we went there, and what we would be doing before we got there. *Filip*
- My predecessors told us all about it. To be honest what they said was what I got. They didn't sugar-coat nothing. They said, 'It is hard work, are you ready to go? It's not a posh place; you have to get down and work hard.' I said, 'As long as I'm going to learn from it. If it's going to enhance my learning, I'll go.' *Ellen*
- We had a Christmas party last year where they brought past students in; we could ask about Erasmus and how they felt about it and they were, like, really positive about it. *Steven*

Most participants stayed in apartments and hotels during the placements, along with others from the same sending organisation. One participant stayed with a host family. None experienced any significant problems relating with accommodation or logistics. As Seán put it, 'At the end of the day, food, transport, accommodation – no problems.'

Finally, it was noticeable that all participants whose placements were organised by CFEs described having support from the college staff either in person, online or by phone throughout their placements. Accompanying people from the college stayed for the first part of the placements and were in regular touch with participants afterwards.

- Before we went we set up a WhatsApp group. Any information, trips, meeting, everyone would see it. There were messages from both sides. One of our teachers was on the group, so she would pass on the message if there were any problems. And I've still got that WhatsApp group chat on my phone, so it created a long-term relationship with people. *Ellen*
- We all went over with a teacher for three days. They made up a little WhatsApp group, saying, 'If anything happens, text us!' Then [the project coordinator] would be ringing, asking, 'How are you getting on?' *Grant*

Survey respondents were not directly asked how their placements were organised. One respondent mentioned in their observations on the placement that it was 'so unorganised and I wouldn't recommend anyone to do it'. However, the respondent did not elaborate on which aspects of the placement were unorganised so this could not be investigated further.

Mentoring and Support Structure

Participants from the in-person research group described receiving support through both the sending and host organisations. Sending organisation staff tended to focus on the participants' emotional and physical well-being, while host organisation staff more often provided practical and logistical assistance.

Two focus group participants experienced serious illness during their placements; one needed to return to Ireland after only two weeks of her six-week placement to receive hospital care. Both participants described receiving exemplary support from their sending organisation staff during this time.

- It was brilliant. [The accompanying person] looked out for me and brought me to the hospital. [The project coordinator] came over and took me home. It just wasn't going to work out after two weeks, so she sent me somewhere else in Ireland then [for a work placement] over the summer. *Tara*
- I woke up in the middle of the night one night, turns out I have arthritis. [The accompanying person] took me out shopping for a walking stick, 'cause I was walking like a penguin! I ended up having to go to the hospital. [The accompanying person] was brilliant, she was absolutely brilliant. *Sonia*

Participants also spoke very positively about the mentoring they received in their host organisations. All were able to recall their mentor immediately and some had established quite close relationships with their mentors and maintained that contact.

- [My mentor had] amazing knowledge, and what an attitude. Like, really an incredibly open-minded person. So fabulous. He always found the time to talk to us as a group and as individuals. So whatever questions you had, or even if he could check something on your project and find it's not maybe as it should be, he was there – teaching, teaching, teaching. *Dorota*
- We had contact on a daily basis. It was a school, so every day we would walk in and they'd say, 'This is what we're doing today.' We'd have meetings every morning basically. And then you see these boards where they would plan out stuff. So it was very organised; if we needed anything they were always there to help us out with stuff. *Filip*

Participants gave extensive examples of how support from mentors had added value to their placements. This often related to adjusting to the host country or culture, as well as to work-related issues.

- We had a woman in the area, she had links with the company and if we had concerns we'd go to her and she'd speak to them. If we wanted to go anywhere, she'd meet us in the train or bus station and make sure we were in the right place or give us the right times. Sometimes websites don't translate properly and she'd help us out. She was a great help, even getting to and from the airport. We'd a group chat set up before we left, so she would know what was going on. **Seán**
- When I was over there the supervisor actually invited me over with a few of the other guys for a bit of dinner, just to see how they eat. That was quite interesting. They literally eat the same as what we eat but it was nice of her! **Steven**
- The lady who was a mentor in the project, she was saying that it's really important when you're doing something for a client as a professional to know when to stop. She was saying you could keep going with something until it's absolutely perfect but then it's going to get contrived. You can keep going forever so you have to know when to stop and be like, 'No, this is enough. This is the best I could do right now, for what's happening, for how much time I have.' So I think that was one of the most important things that [the placement] taught me. **Aedín**

Maintenance of New Contacts

In addition to connecting with staff and mentors, participants made new contacts with fellow VET students and host organisation employees while on placement. These ties seemed to last: more than half the respondents said they were still in touch with people they had met on placement 'sometimes' or 'often'. Contact with organisations, such as companies or education institutions, was much less likely to endure: less than 20% of respondents still had contact at the time of the survey. There also appears to be a correlation between frequency of contact and year of placement: participants from 2017 and 2018 were more likely to be 'often' in touch with people than were participants from 2016 and 2015.

Figure 13: Frequency of contact, comparison of personal and organisational contact (n=313)

Q13 'How often are you in contact with people you met during your placement?'

Q14 'How often are in contact with foreign companies or education institutions you encountered during your placement?'

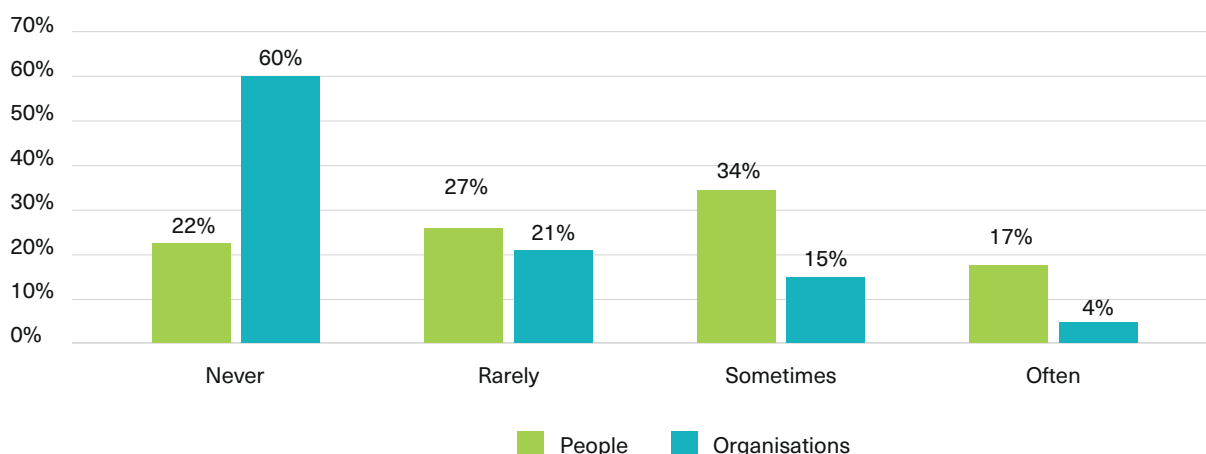
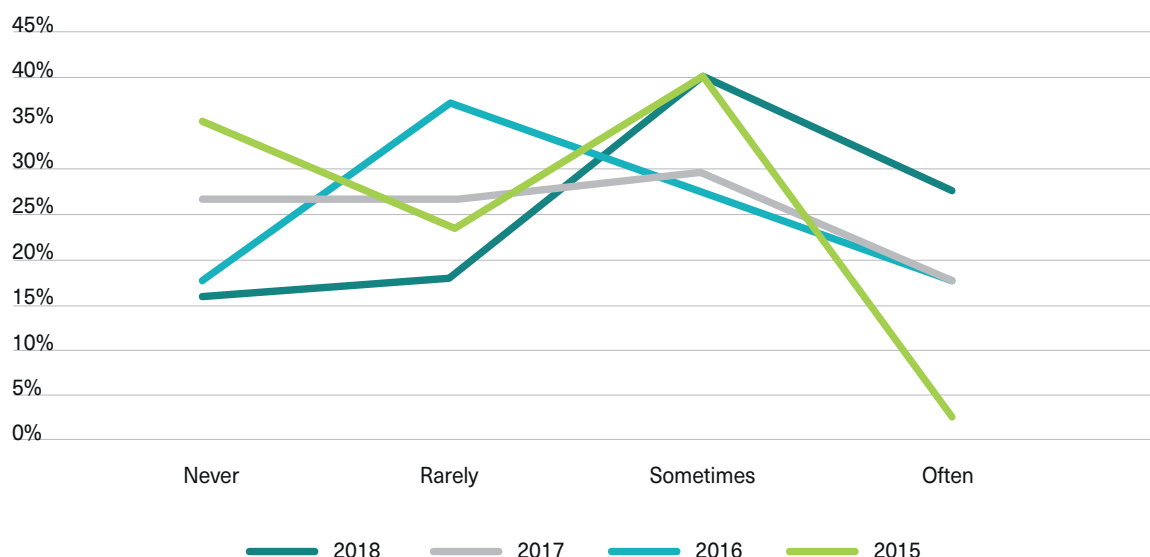


Figure 14: Frequency of contact with people; comparison between 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 (n=283)

**Q13 'How often are you in contact with people you met during your placement abroad?
For example, other students, host family members, other employees.'**



Nonetheless, several participants from the in-person research group had maintained contact with organisations as well as individuals over the course of several years. This was often through online platforms such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Instagram.

- I would stay in touch with [my host organisation] over LinkedIn and they also set up their own independent app recently for networking. So I joined that recently. So I know that they all chat away there, and I keep in touch with the main guy who would have been in charge of things. It was February of 2016 when I went, three years ago, so that's a fairly long time to be in touch. **Mark**
- It must be a year and probably six or seven months since I got back. I still have contacts out there. I've actually been back to Seville since I left, to meet up with some people that I made friends with. I still have a working relationship with one or two people that I worked with out there, and we're in touch pretty much every two to three weeks. The people I keep in touch with the most are actually the people I worked with, the Spanish nationals. [I stay in touch with my mentor through] WhatsApp mainly, and now he's after signing up to Instagram where he puts up pictures of the research he's doing. So we keep in touch through Instagram and WhatsApp, and every so often emails. But mostly through WhatsApp. Literally I'd be surprised if two weeks went by where we weren't kind of messaging back and forth. Something like, if I see a specimen here that I'm unsure of, if I fire it over to him, he'd help. He's kind of still like a mentor in a way which is great. And he's always said he'd keep me in mind if there are any projects that require somebody that he knows I have the skills to do so. **Oisín**
- I still keep in touch with a lot of people from the office. We had our graduation last week and I put up a post about it. About three or four of them texted me saying, 'Congratulations, you're going on to great things!' and asking how I was getting on. **Steven**

Participants also formed strong relationships with other learners from Ireland who were on placement at the same time. Many of the participants shared workplaces, accommodation and even rooms with other learners, and often did not know these people before the placement. When these arrangements worked well, it led to the establishment of very close bonds and friendships. This was particularly valuable to participants who had felt isolated or out of place beforehand.

- It was brilliant. The group of people who attend the Erasmus+ programme – they really connected, our group. So basically our connections are growing – we have connections to those people; we text and catch up together. In our group was 16 people, plus the owner of the company and all the companies involved. So that was your network. So that was a nice experience because I'm from Poland, and at the time I was in college I couldn't really communicate at the level where I would feel confident enough to catch up with all the others. I always felt there's a barrier to me from a language point of view, and then because I'm older than them, why would they possibly want to catch up with me? It was great because after the placement, it kinda made me more open-minded. I found myself more like a part of the group. When we got back to school we had more to talk about. We had connections, which the others hadn't. We had this sort of bond that I felt was great. I was like, maybe I'm older and I'm not fluent in English but it was so cool to see those people kind of recognise me. I was visible. It changed my perception of myself. 'Cause I really like to talk to people. I'm a chatty girl! I have my sad moments when I want to be alone, who doesn't, but I stopped looking at myself like an outsider. So it really, really made me hungry for more. *Dorota*
- That was part of the communal experience, getting on the plane with a bunch of people you had no idea who they were and then meeting them all there and just enjoying yourself with them. I'm still friends with all of them up until today. Like I'd chat away with them all, and one of them is my best friend. *Mark*
- I met so many lovely people and we still keep in touch online. We still chat online and there is a long-term relationship still there today. *Ellen*

Mobility Strengths

Mobility experiences seem to have the greatest impact on participants in the areas of developing soft skills, and broadening possibilities for the future. More than three-quarters of respondents said that the placement had developed or improved their communication and team-working skills, and their ability to work in an international environment (Figure 6). More than two-thirds said that because of their placements they were not afraid to work abroad (66%) or to study abroad (68%) (Figure 32). These particular strengths were summed up succinctly by Colm, who had completed a two-week placement in a tourist office in Slovenia, in his interview:

It vastly helped my communication skills and it made me a lot more confident by being in a rather diverse environment. Of course I got the best of it by getting to know quite a few different people, and this was all part of the great package. I felt as if it helped me to become a more independent person, to be more self-sufficient, to be able to look after myself as well. And of course it also gave me a great feel for the place. I feel as if this would be of great benefit to me again should I ever go on a work placement abroad again. Which I gladly will at any given time.

One of the survey respondents stated simply, 'It showed me so many other available opportunities for work and education abroad.'

Evidence from interviews and focus groups suggests that this type of impact from short-term placements is most strongly felt by participants who have not lived away from home or worked in their vocational area before. As one survey respondent put it, 'Having been placed with a girl that had just finished her Leaving Cert, I think the placement was more valuable to her than to myself as a mature student (40). Being away from home and working with strangers is good for confidence and a taste of the real world.'

One of the other key strengths of mobility experiences is that they offer VET learners a taste of their potential future careers at an early stage. There is evidence that this taste can affirm learners' belief that they have chosen the right career, but can also challenge that belief. In both cases, the experience can influence the learner's subsequent decisions. A survey respondent who had been studying childcare remarked that she 'really enjoyed the placement abroad, got really good experience and went on to work in a crèche in Dublin after it – which I did not want to do before I went to Finland!'

Conversely, Aedín remarked in her focus group that she had progressed to higher education precisely because the practical nature of her placement showed her it was not what she wanted:

It helped me to figure out what I didn't want to do. Obviously, I didn't keep doing film and documentary. I loved it, I just wanted to do something else as well. Because Erasmus was so practical, it gave me a chance to figure out that that's not really what I wanted in life right now. I wanted to keep doing something more academic, which is what I have in my course now. I didn't want to continue to keep doing the more practical side of it. So even if you're not sure about it, that this is absolutely what you want to do for the rest of your life, it's still a really good experience. It still shows you one side of things or one option and what it could be. It gave me clarity and choice.

Mobility Weaknesses

The strengths of European mobility placements are, broadly, inbuilt in the design. By their very nature, mobility experiences require VET learners to travel away from home and encounter new cultures, new people and new work environments – which inspire the development of soft skills and the sense of new possibilities described above. Mobility weaknesses are more varied, but the most serious weaknesses described by survey respondents were due to a mismatch between the work placement and the learner's level of vocational skill. Survey respondents whose overall experience was negative or very negative commonly mentioned that they had not received the type of work experience they expected from their host organisation:

- 'I didn't get any practical experience from workplace, no interaction with the animals.'
- 'It wasn't really connected directly to my vocational education.'
- 'My placement was badly organised and I was only there to do free labour, I learned nothing and was in a very unprofessional environment, I found the work experience to be very negative. However, I did find the overall experience a positive one as I am still in the country where my placement was – which would never have happened otherwise (in a different job of course).'
- 'It was a great experience but it was more like a holiday! The college in Budapest didn't have anything for us to do relating to our course. Over the course of the 3 weeks we probably spent 4 days in the college and the only work they gave us was a scavenger hunt map to complete which was good for exploring the city but that's it. Great memories, great experience, but didn't feel like work placement at all.'
- 'Terrible for learning but it was great fun all the same.'

One focus group participant reported that while she had enjoyed her placement, it was not the one she had been prepared for:

- I was told I was going to somewhere that was like the Finnish 'Just Eat', so I had researched that. And at the last minute the man couldn't take me on. I was so excited about it, and then the day we got there I was told I wasn't going. It worked out OK but that was disappointing. *Cathy*

This issue of lack of detailed information about work duties prior to travel was also highlighted by Oisín in his interview, who felt that having more information about the work involved would have been beneficial to himself and the group he travelled with:

- The one negative thing I could say, prior to going out there, there was just that one paragraph essentially describing the work placements. That was enough to intrigue me and get me excited but it was still at least I think five days until we actually met our supervisors. We were already in Spain before we knew exactly what we were going to do for the three months. There was a bit of apprehension amongst some people in my group as they had just a one-line description, explaining what they're going to be doing for three months. And they're only going to find out what they're actually doing when it was too late – when they were already in Spain, standing in front of their employer.

Some survey respondents also felt that the work placements were too short:

- 'I would have liked if it was longer as the institution was far superior to anything we have in this field in Ireland.'
- 'It was a very useful and effective time however three months is not enough to gain real experience and to learn a new language. The minimum period would be six months.'

However, among the in-person research group there was agreement that the placements felt 'too short' only after they had been completed and proved successful.

- While you are there it seems to be a relatively short stint. It doesn't necessarily seem that way on paper – two weeks – but absolutely when you're there it does seem to be short. So when you're there, do definitely make the most of it. *Colm*

In Focus Group B, Cathy and Steven – who had both had two-week placements – mentioned that Cathy's anxiety about the unknown would have prevented her from taking up a longer placement:

- When we left [Ireland] I was roaring crying. (My friend) had to drag me to the airport! But then when we were coming home, he had to drag me back to the airport! *Cathy*
- She had serious anxiety about going over and we had to say, 'Look, we're gonna look after you, you're gonna be fine!' And then it was the same thing coming back, she's like, 'But I don't want to leave now.' We were like, 'You have to go!' *Steven*

What Would Learners Change About Their Mobility?

Survey respondents frequently mentioned that they would have liked more language instruction before going on placement:

- 'All students should get a few weeks of language classes before going abroad.'
- 'Would advise if going to a foreign national country to consider languages classes as communication skills are so important.'
- 'I enjoyed my placement immensely, however I would have liked to be more familiar with the language of the country before I went. But this time was not given to learn.'

Interestingly, what learners from the in-person research group most frequently said they would change was the attitude of their fellow learners. Both focus groups reported difficulties with peers who were challenging to live and work with, who complained excessively or who did not take their work placements seriously. The participants found these attitudes demotivating, and also felt that bad behaviour could diminish the status of vocational learners in the eyes of employers. Participants in both groups argued strongly that a strict selection process should apply. In Focus Group A, Ellen stressed that Erasmus+ opportunities should be offered only to people who would make the best of them:

- You can only help someone to strengthen themselves; the person has to keep pushing. So Erasmus+ is a huge foundation for any student who wants to push themselves.

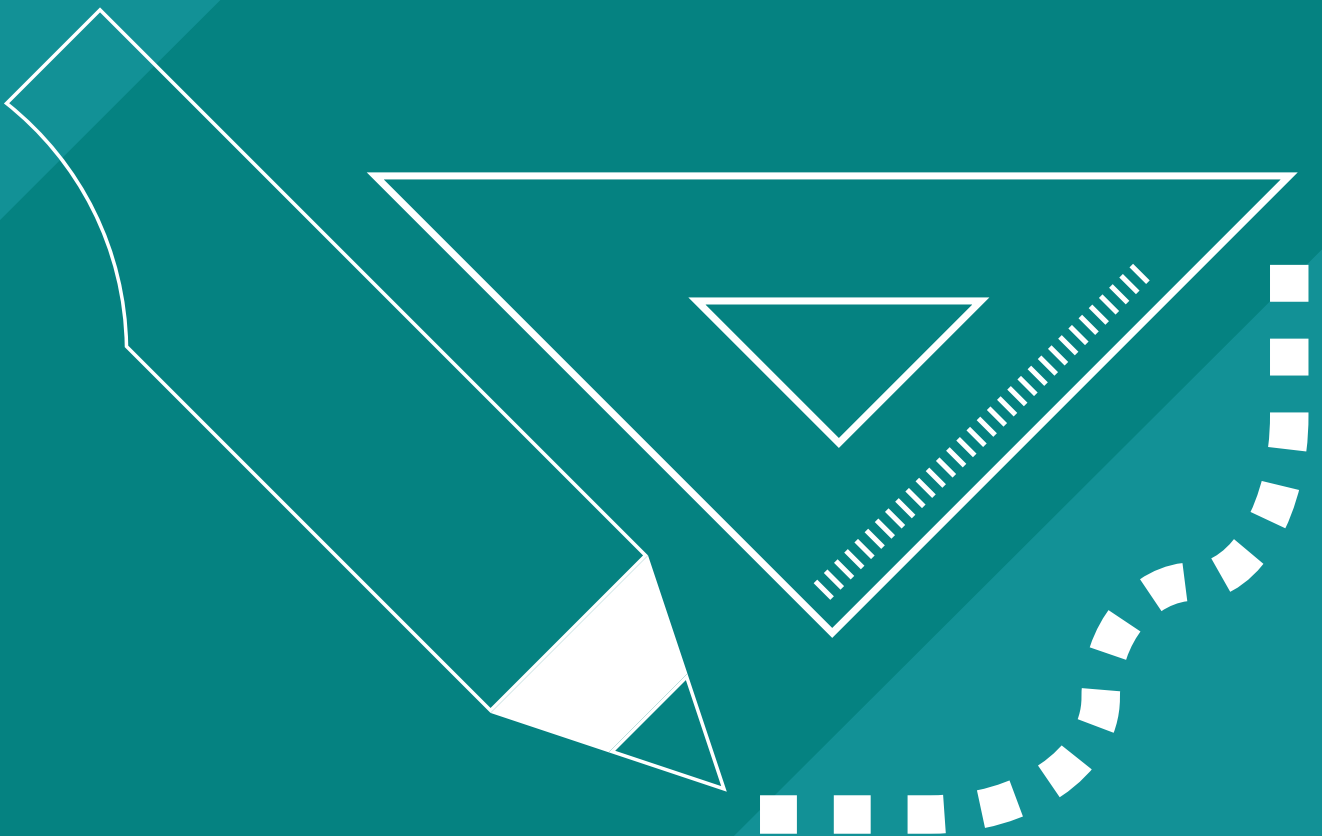
We all have different reasons why we wanna go, so if you're chosen to go why don't you just use that opportunity? My advice would be to look for those who are really passionate because you can't waste all that money and time on someone who is not going to bring back nothing. Some people just want to go, dump their bag and fly into the air – it's not worth it; it should be looked into. People should know if they're going on Erasmus, it's hard work and that is why you are going there.

Participants in Focus Group B echoed this sentiment and felt that agreed selection procedures should be strictly adhered to. This was the case even when sending organisations were under pressure to complete the number of mobilities that had been agreed in their contracts.

- For me the biggest achievement was dealing with the people that I actually went with to Finland! That taught (sic) me a lot. We had two people that were very difficult to deal with. So that's actually the best thing I learned. We had a nice group of six people, but those other two were so difficult. So that's how I learned – when I deal with difficult customers now, I think of them. *Weronika*
- I'd definitely be more specific about who they let go on it. Without being rude, there were people that just were not motivated to do it and it ruined – not ruined, I mean, I wouldn't change the way I did it – but affected our experience. But some people just weren't motivated enough. *Cathy*
- And they blamed the course, they blamed Erasmus – they blamed [the project coordinator], they gave her a lot of grief. She basically got the brunt of it – 'you didn't organise this' – but at the end of the day it wasn't because of her. We were told before we left that we'd have to be very independent. *Steven*
- But they wanted their hands to be held. They didn't like it when basically [the project coordinator] slapped the wrist and said, 'You can't do that.' *Sonia*
- They need to be a bit strict because they said [selection] was based on attendance but there were people not listening to that and taking loads of holidays and they were still allowed to go as well. Which wasn't fair for those who actually put in the work to go. *Cathy*

- But [the project coordinator] was at a disadvantage because our class group was so small, and there was so many places, she was struggling to fill the places. She was saying that if you don't fill the places, you lose them. I don't know if that's an Erasmus thing, but she had these businesses on board and she had to put somebody in these businesses or they wouldn't get the places again the next year. **Steven**
- And you have to keep a good reputation which, unfortunately ... the place we were in probably won't take half as many people on next year because of how some people in our group were. **Cathy**
- Because we had some people going over there that were going into the workplace, they'd stay for a few hours then leave – they'd leave early. **Sonia**
- I think some of them took too much of an advantage and it wasn't fair on [the project coordinator], who finally found a place for them and put them somewhere and they just took complete advantage of it. **Steven**

Four: Development of Competences



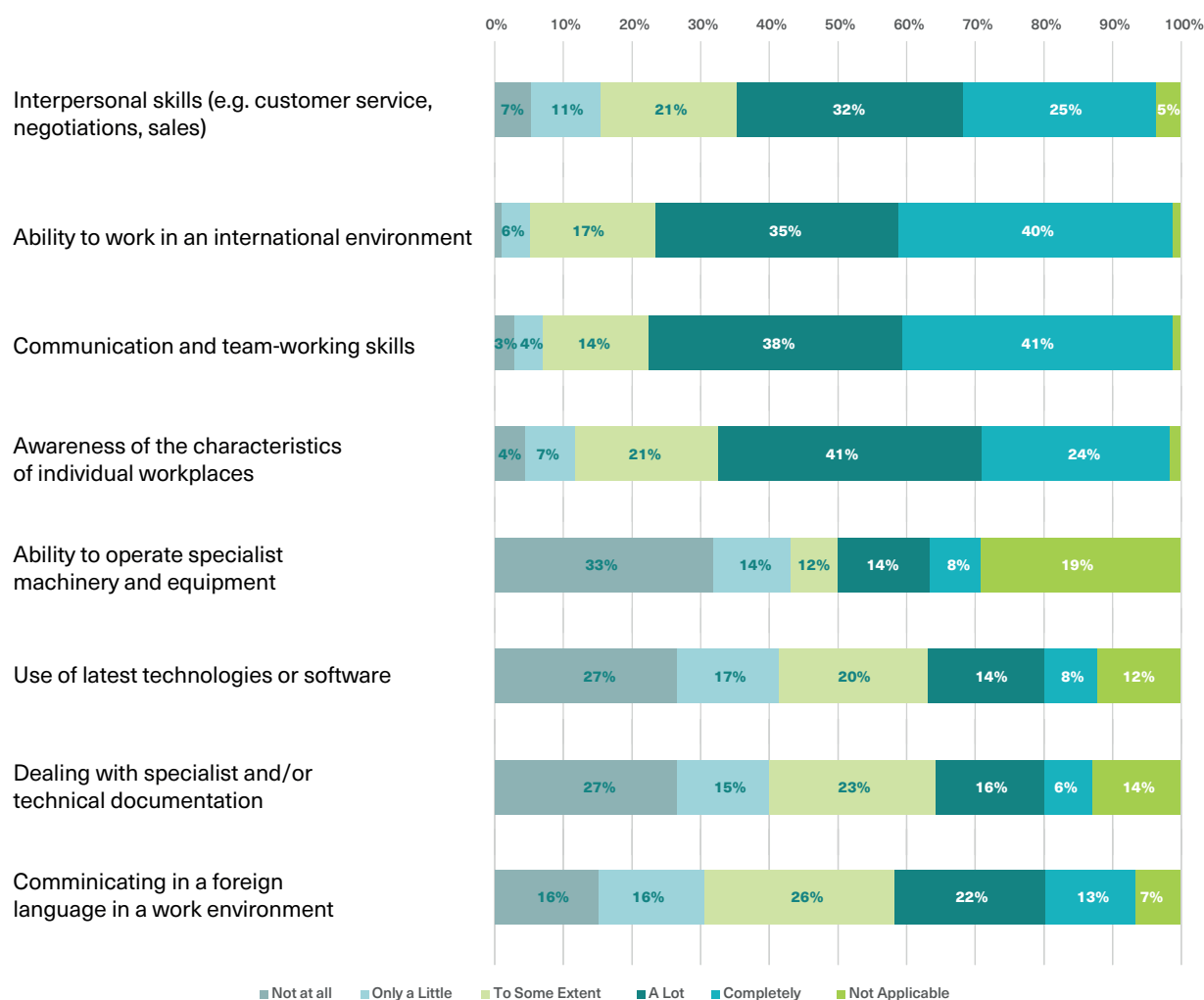
Development of Competences

This section looks in detail at the vocational, language and soft skills learners gained or developed during their mobility placement, and the effect of the placements on intercultural competences. The focus is on how these skills were developed and what impact their acquisition had on the subsequent choices, education and career paths of learners.

The areas where survey respondents most strongly agreed that they had acquired, developed or improved competences were communication skills (79%), ability to work in international environments (75%) and awareness of the characteristics of individual workplaces (65%). Interpersonal skills were also a key area, with 57% having developed or improved their skills 'a lot' or 'completely'.

Figure 15: Acquisition, development or improvement of competences (n=317)

Q11 'To what extent did your placement abroad allow you to acquire, develop or improve the following competences?'

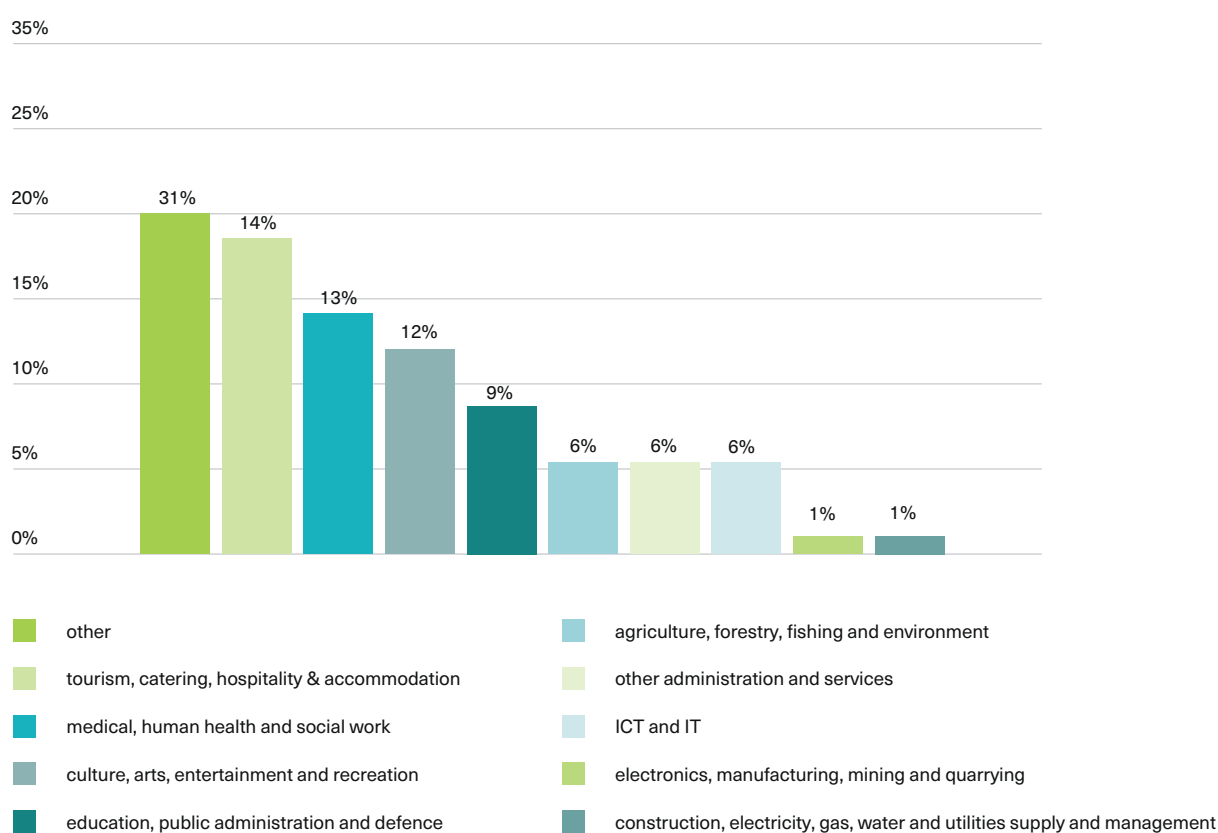


Vocational Skills Development

A very wide range of vocational areas and courses was represented in the online survey. Tourism, catering, hospitality and accommodation formed the largest category of vocational placements at 14%, followed by medical, human health and social work at 13%. Just under a third of respondents described their occupational area as 'other'; the vocational areas most commonly listed here were, in descending order: business and entrepreneurship, beauty therapy, animal/veterinary care, hairdressing, and automotive maintenance.

Figure 16: Occupational area of placement (n=335)

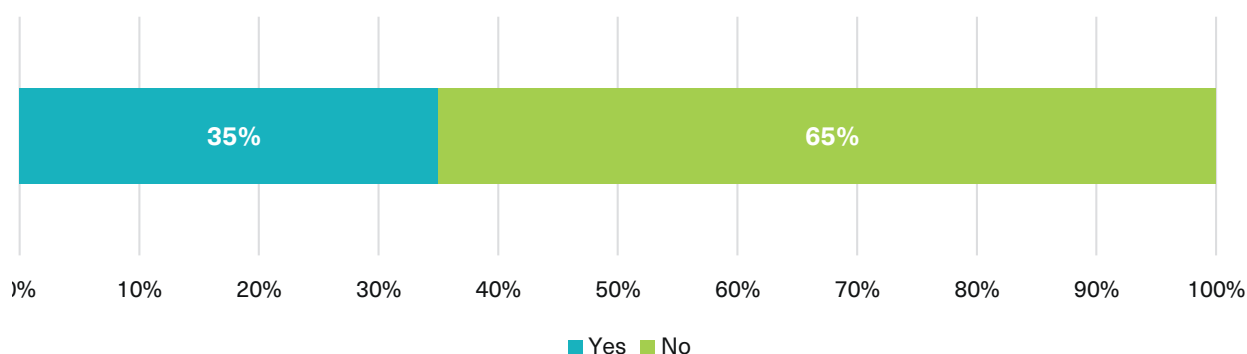
Q8: 'My vocational placement abroad took place in ...'



Just under two-thirds of respondents indicated that their Erasmus+/Leonardo da Vinci funded placement was the only work placement they had experienced as part of their study programme.

Figure 17: Incidence of other placement (n=313)

Q15 'Apart from the Erasmus+/Leonardo da Vinci placement abroad, did you also do a placement in Ireland as part of the same study programme?'



As shown in Figure 15, soft skills such as communication and interpersonal skills were the strongest areas of development for most respondents. This is perhaps consistent with the high level of 'person-centred' vocational areas represented, such as tourism, social care, and beauty therapy. However, just over 20% also reported significant development of more specific competences such as dealing with technical documentation, use of latest technologies, or ability to operate specialist machinery.

This proportion of skills development was more or less reflected by the in-person research group. Three of the four interview subjects focused very much on the self-confidence they had developed, and what they had learned from the international aspects of their placement. The fourth, Oisín, emphasised the vocational skills he had learned above all else. The key differences seemed to be that he had a longer placement period, working for three months rather than two weeks, and that the placement happened several years after his initial education. He had worked extensively and lived abroad during that time, so felt that his interpersonal and intercultural competences were already quite developed.

I've lived outside of Ireland before. It's not going to be a big culture shock – it's three months. I was just delighted to be accepted. There was no trepidation or any negative in going out there. It was all positive.

The main thing I learned is greater appreciation and understanding of the world of bees, and pollinators in general. It really opened my eyes up to how to identify species 100% accurately. That would involve my microscope work as well which I, prior to going out there, didn't even realise that was essential for identifying and differentiating different species. So IDing specimens is one of the key skills I would have brought back. But also just some practical things, in terms of carrying out field studies, just simple little things that can help you along. Like, just being very precise with your notes and the likes of that. They're the kind of things I brought back. Another technical skill that I didn't think I'd get to work on was the preservation of specimens – pinning pollinator specimens. That's a very technical skill and I didn't realise how difficult it was going to be until we got taught how to do it. We spent about two weeks doing that towards the end. It's something I have continued since I got back.

The position I have now, [the experience of working with pollinators] is an element of it, but the fact that I had good fieldwork skills, which would have been improved upon in Spain – that's something I use in my everyday work. But the bee thing is something I'm passionate about and something I do see myself getting into down the line. So I use the skills every day you could say.

Participants in focus groups also tended to highlight the soft skills they had developed over specific vocational skills, but did identify some key areas such as using new equipment and new software and making contact with suppliers.

- I feel like because they have a lot more equipment over there, because they're a school funded specifically for film, I feel like we learned how to use a lot more equipment and learn that there's a lot more structure to how you work. We had to be specific about the shots, about the management and all the logistics.

Also I feel like because they really packed those three weeks with as much work as we could possibly do, it gave us the experience of what a very, very fast-paced working environment is like. And because we have done it, we can say – I've done hard work like that before, I can do it again.

Filip

- I asked the [fashion] designer a lot of questions. 'Where do you get these? How do you bring this together?' He was into millinery and I was so curious to see where to go, and he actually took me to this shop. So if I hadn't asked him I wouldn't get that information. So I have the contact details and I can get things shipped out to here. So for working in my field, it was very good. *Ellen*
- I use some of the skills I learned in my job now, basically the administration part of it. When I was over there, it was a good few years ago, they wanted us to interview the employees and then after that it was just admin and I've always used that in any job that I've had. I'd say I've took that skill away. *Aoife*

Development of ICT Skills

Neither survey respondents nor the in-person group identified ICT skills as a strong area of development. Mark, who completed a placement in entrepreneurship, remarked that he was already up to date with many of the ICT tools used in his workplace:

I don't think I experienced new technologies. Being from a multimedia background, I would have had the exposure to that beforehand. New strategies? I don't think so. I think maybe just because it was a new environment for me, everything was kind of new there.

The one participant who strongly identified ICT skills as an area of development was Dorota, who used social media and IT skills as part of a business and entrepreneurship placement. She emphasised that as she had no background in IT she found the development of these skills very rewarding.

That time when I got my work placement, people had just started being very active on social media. So that's why they focused on that, because they wanted to teach us something that will have a big impact soon for the business market. It was amazing, like at that time I wasn't really open for the social media side of e-commerce. I was like, why? I couldn't understand that. So what [the company owner] explained was that social media will have impact and how it's important for us to know how to apply that, for the future, as a successful company or entrepreneur or even an employee. So that was magnificent. He taught us how to create and how to build websites. What goes on from the IT design side, everything. And then they chose first second and the third place of the most creative idea – with the bigger chances to sell successfully. My idea was funny, but actually I got third place! To design websites, for me all the skills were new. I never was an IT person. So for me to get to actually know how to create stuff, and know how to operate IT – that was amazing.

Language Skills Development

Overall, 35% of survey respondents said that their placement had helped them to acquire, develop or improve their foreign languages skills 'a lot' or 'completely' (Figure 15). The defining variable in this area was placement destination: just under 10% of those who travelled to the UK said their language skills had improved, whereas the figure rises to 50% for those who were on placement in France. French is the most commonly taught foreign language in Irish schools²², so it might be that learners had a base level of knowledge that was built on during the placement. As one respondent explained:

I went on this placement with nearly no French speaking skills which improved significantly because I was thrown into a situation where I had to speak. The place I had my work in was not the best in terms of being warm or welcoming, but it was still an extremely good experience which gave me the confidence to go on to study French at University level and gelled me really close to my class mates in my [PLC] course. This was one of the best experiences I had and allowed me to really experience another culture.

The other key variable in development of language skills was the duration of placement. One respondent, who had a 22-week placement in Germany under the Leonardo da Vinci programme, commented, 'I learned German to fluency which was a huge achievement for me.' Other respondents who had three-month placements remarked that a longer duration would have helped them develop their language skills further:

'I really enjoyed my time abroad, and feel really lucky to have been selected for the programme. I only wish it had been a longer placement so that I would have more time to develop the language!'

'It was a very useful and effective time however three months is not enough to gain real experience and to learn a new language. The minimum period would be six months.'

Turning to the in-person research group it was noticeable that all of the participants had carried out their work in English – even though three-quarters had placements in countries where English is not a national language. None of the participants reported any language barrier in their work and were impressed by English fluency of those around them. Grant noted, 'At work I heard no-one speak Icelandic. Because we worked in a tourism place, most of them just spoke in English even to each other', while Filip remarked, 'I didn't expect them to teach English to such a high standard in Finland. I knew they obviously learn it, but I didn't know they would be so fluent and that it wouldn't be a problem at all speaking to them.'

Outside the workplace, the participants used the local language to some degree for shopping, navigating public transport and socialising. They occasionally had language difficulties in these situations but used technology such as Google Translate to help them:

If we went to the shop or went to a restaurant, it was an absolute disaster. Google and Polish don't really mix. But we managed slowly but surely. By the third week we had a few sayings off. *Seán*

²² '[The Department of Education and Skills'] audit shows French dominates language tuition in secondary schools and is taught in 94 per cent of schools. It is the only language on offer in about a quarter of secondary schools.' 'Schools may drop foreign languages due to lack of teachers', The Irish Times, 11 November 2019. Available from <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/schools-may-drop-foreign-languages-due-to-lack-of-teachers-1.4078581>

Oisín also used Spanish socially, but was pleased not to have to use it in the workplace:

There was no level of Spanish required, which was great. My Spanish would have been probably the same as everybody's who's been learning it – you know, the basics. That was OK to get by socially, doing the shop and little things like that. And we did have the lessons; there was numerous opportunities given to us to meet locals to have conversations.

Seán mentioned that this experience was a good way to develop problem-solving skills:

I think the language barrier as well would be the main one for your problem solving. From how you get around, the little things, having a conversation with a colleague – I think that would make someone more employable, having work experience in a different country.

It was noticeable that only three participants spoke about wishing to improve their own foreign language skills more because of the placement. There was no discernible difference in attitudes to improving language skills between native English speakers and those who spoke English as an additional language. One participant stated that having no requirement for knowledge of the host country language was an attraction of the placement. Others felt that it was very 'lucky' that they could get by using English alone.

Irish people talk really fast; [our mentor] told us that we talk very fast and he couldn't understand us. So we'd have to break our sentences down so he could understand us. But that was the only language issue. We only used Finnish to say 'kiitos' [thanks]. That was the only word. It kind of makes you think though should we actually be a bit more ... should you motivate yourself to learn another language? But then again English is more universal so, you know ... *Cathy*

As noted above, just under 10% of participants who travelled to the UK indicated that their language skills had improved because of the placement. The survey did not ask participants what their native language was, but Dorota's experience gives a potential explanation. Having moved to Ireland from Poland as a teenager, she reported that her placement had strongly developed her knowledge of business terminology and her comfort with business terms.

Well, business language I learned, very much so. 'Cause I really needed to apply all the terms. How would you possibly write down a project full of business terms if you're not really familiar with them?

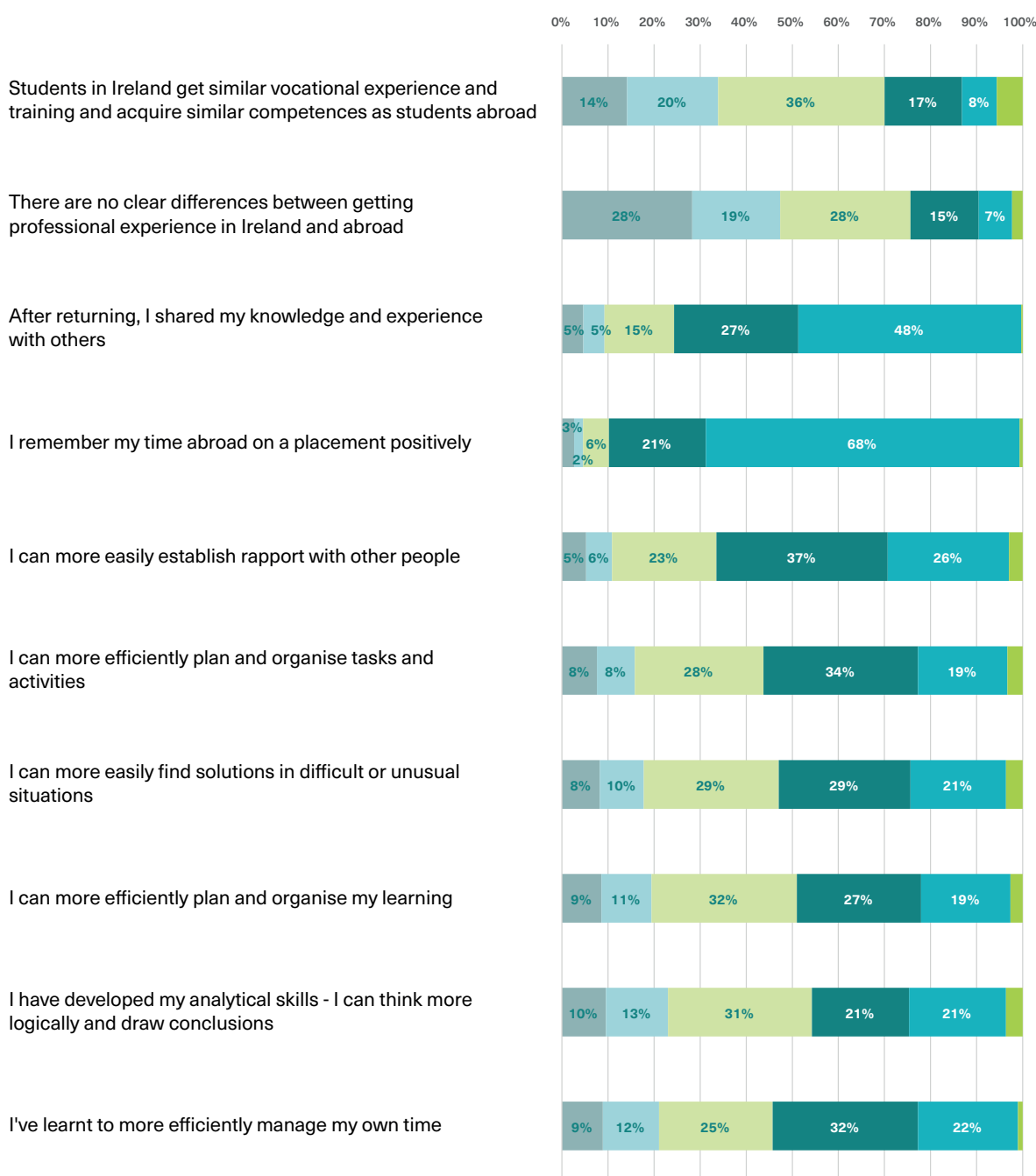
Half, we learned the terms ourselves and half if was explained to us. It wasn't really time for babysitting. [My mentor] believes that once you get the idea and you work on it, you just kind of apply it in the practice more and more and more and more. Then you'll hear the term once or twice or three times and it will just click. It sticks in your head.

Soft Skills Development

The overwhelming impression from survey responses and interviews is that soft skills are the area most universally developed by mobility placements. Almost 80% of respondents said that they had developed their communication and team-working skills 'a lot' or completely, and 57% said that they had developed their interpersonal skills (Figure 15). Figure 18 shows that 54% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that they could manage their own time more efficiently, and 53% said that they could more efficiently plan and organise tasks.

Figure 18: Soft skills development (n=300)

Q16 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'



Evidence from both the surveys and the in-person group is that these soft skills are developed not just because of experience in the work environment, but from exposure to a new country and culture.

Survey respondents commented:

- 'My placement gave me confidence and instilled a can do attitude. I highly recommend the experience.'
- 'Being away from home and family taught me how to be independent.'
- 'Having been placed with a girl that had just finished her Leaving Cert, I think the placement was more valuable to her than to myself as a mature student (40). Being away from home and working with strangers is good for confidence and a taste of the real world.'
- 'I owe my maturity and strong independence to that placement.'

Participants in the in-person research group spoke at length about the increase in personal and professional confidence that the placements had instilled in them, and the sense of their own independence that had developed. This was especially true for the younger cohort: ten of the participants were living with their parents at the time of their placements, and eight had never been away from home for any significant period before the placement.

- Our place was help yourself basically. There was no cleaning staff, you cleaned your own room, you're responsible for everything in your room. It was the same with clothes; nobody was going to wash your clothes, so we'd to go downstairs to the basement and wash our clothes. There was a little log book so you had to book your time to wash your clothes.

I'd never felt so independent!

I was living at home. And then just going over there for a few weeks, being so used to living your own life, looking after yourself, being responsible for yourself. When I came back I was like, 'I can't believe I have to go live in this house again!' I just want to move out now. **Steven**

- It really challenges your independence. I'd never gone away on me own before. Even going down and doing the washing – 'cause I'd never used a washing machine before. My ma gave me the basics, 'Move the dial to here, put the powder in.' So to learn stuff like that was brilliant. **Sonia**

The importance of confidence and the ability to communicate well in the workplace were the other principal themes:

I felt as if it vastly helped my communication skills and it made me a lot more confident by being in a different environment. I made the best of it by getting to know quite a few different people, and this was all part of the great package. I felt as if it helped me to become a more independent person, to be more self-sufficient, to be able to look after myself as well. It has made me more confident, it's made me be more forward and I'm not as hesitant as I initially was. I'm more confident and I feel as if I communicate better since I was there as well. **Colm**

Probably confidence and kind of being out of my comfort zone. I'd say that would have been the first time I would have been way out of my comfort zone, in a completely new environment. Networking with new people, and getting confidence in presenting. It would have been completely a new group of people, having to pitch your ideas to industry professionals. And then all of the communications and marketing plans we had to do. That would have been something I would've picked up and continued until now, which was very beneficial.

There was also working in a new environment and all the teamwork. It was good to have that exposure to the business background. And to see that side of things, because down the line I might want to go into that area, spinoff maybe into entrepreneurship or something like that. It was quite good at developing soft skills. *Mark*

My biggest change was being more outgoing and asking questions when you have a question instead of being shy. When you're in a work environment you don't have the chance to go back to something; if it's in, say, a production line, you have to ask the question there and then. So you can't be within your shell and feeling shy. And so I think that was a major part of my Erasmus experience, was just not being as shy and just asking what you want to ask and when you need to ask really. Just being more outgoing, it's more beneficial to yourself. *Seán*

It definitely does give you confidence, and I'm still in touch with the guys that I went over with. We're still really good friends, so it helps build relationships with people, and with the staff as well. I got on really well with the coordinator before this, but even better afterwards. I just thought it a really great experience overall. I'm really glad I did it. *Steven*

The in-person research group also emphasised that this increase in confidence and self-belief empowers young people's ability to manage in new situations and cultural contexts.

- I think, not so much for me, but what I saw in a lot of other people was it gave them a lot of confidence. Because if you know that you've been chosen to go on this thing because of how well you did in your assignments or how well you presented in an interview, then it gives you a lot more of a feeling of responsibility and that you feel like you're being trusted with money, with faith that you can go over there and do a good job to represent your country and your school and everything. And then as well, once you've done it and you come home, when you're, like, oh actually I went to a country that I've never been to before and I worked with people I've never met before, with maybe a language I don't speak and then it gives you the confidence to be, like, actually if I ever did want to do something, that I could. I could go to a company I'd never been to and it would probably be fine. So it gives you more, like, self-confidence to realise actually it's not impossible to do something that seems impossible. *Aedín*
- I know I'm still quiet, but I definitely would not be half as confident as I am now if I didn't do it. I just got talking to new people, learned how to adapt myself into a new working culture. I wouldn't have been able to do that before I went. So it gave me a lot more confidence to do that. *Cathy*
- You don't get that nervy feeling going into a new place. *Seán*

Finally, Weronika recalled that the soft skill most improved by the placement was her ability to deal with difficult customers, which unfortunately was derived from navigating difficulties with fellow learners.

For me the biggest achievement was dealing with the people that I actually went with to Finland! That taught (sic) me a lot. We had two people that were very difficult to deal with. So that's actually the best thing I learned. We had a nice group of six people, but those other two were so difficult. So that's how I learned – when I deal with difficult customers now, I think of them.

These are attributes and skills that are in demand among Irish employers. The Irish Business and Employers Confederation 2018 paper 'Future Ready: Improving Graduate Employability Skills'²³ defined 'employable' people as those who:

not only know their technical area or specialism but can also apply the knowledge and skills they have in varied and dynamic situations which allow them to develop their skills further. Capable people are deemed confident in their ability to:

- take appropriate action effectively;
- explain what they are hoping to achieve;
- engage successfully in life and work with others;
- continue their learning through their experiences in a changing world.

Development of Intercultural Competences

Survey respondents felt their intercultural competences were substantially enhanced by their mobility experience: 75% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their ability to work in an international environment had developed or improved due to the placement and a further 17% agreed 'to some extent' (Figure 15). Two-thirds agreed that their vocational placement had exposed them to a professional environment and culture different to what they would experience in Ireland (Figure 6). The experience also seems to have increased learners' willingness to explore opportunities outside Ireland: 68% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that they were not afraid to study abroad (Figure 27) and 66% said that they were not afraid to work abroad (Figure 32) thanks to their placements. As one respondent put it, 'It makes the idea of working abroad more realistic now that I have experienced it.' Another remarked, 'The biggest thing I gained from it was confidence. I now feel confident and able to work abroad, whereas if I had not done the Erasmus I would probably still fear moving abroad. Now I don't.'

All of the interview subjects had travelled to some extent prior to the placement and none reported any significant difficulty with adapting to a new culture: as Colm said, 'I'd like to work abroad again. I tend to be rather adventurous in terms of where the road may take me in terms of abroad. There's quite the selection, to say the least. And of course I'd be open to go anywhere.'

After his placement, Mark progressed to higher education and became very active in the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) at his university. He traced this to the positive experience of meeting new people from different cultures during his placement, and wanting to make international friends.

I definitely think meeting new people, that was important. Everyone was from a different background in the [host organisation] anyway, all coming from different countries.

[At university] I was looking to meet new friends, so I knew [the Erasmus Student Network] was a perfect environment to meet new people. I hung out with a lot of Americans there, and then I met a lot of people from all over Europe and Asia, kind of just all over the world really.

So I'm definitely internationally minded, yeah! I would go visit a lot of them because the ESN is an international European network. I got the chance to go to a lot of European countries and go to conferences, trainings, and meet a lot of people there. So I definitely have had that exposure to a lot of international environments, I guess.

²³ Future Ready: Improving Graduate Employability Skills, IBEC, 2018. Available from <https://www.ibec.ie/influencing-for-business/labour-market-and-skills/future-ready-improving-graduate-employability-skills>

However, even those who had moved to Ireland from other countries felt they had learned something new from being in an intercultural work environment:

It was very challenging. Because it's not only working with different cultures, but you have to kind of adapt to the way they think. If I did a work placement here (in Ireland) it would be great and it would be challenging too. But to go abroad and be supervised and work with people in English companies really helped me get the taste of a different mind. Because even from the business perspective, I couldn't do research based on what I know about Ireland. I had to do research based on English markets. So for me there was no cheating. I can't just use my information I already had – I had to do it from scratch.

Each of us had strong point of view based on our background life – my nationality is known as similar to German; we have a more direct style. Even unconsciously sometimes we just say something and it sounds rude but we don't mean it. It's just a direct style. While the Irish boy, he was so soft, even his voice. And then Croatia – she was very intelligent but she wasn't really that chatty. And then we had an African girl and she was so loud, like an Italian! So that was challenging. And also to understand, that you kinda need to send that information to all – that I'm not rude, but it is the style I grew up in for the last 20 years. So we had to learn how to listen.

Dorota

The importance of recognising cultural differences in communication styles was highlighted by Aoife, who felt the experience had influenced her subsequent interactions in Ireland:

It was understanding where they're coming from, you know, with the language barrier as well. I found in Finland [the communication style] was very out straight, whereas I find that Irish people kind of beat around the bush when they're talking to people. For me it was just understanding their background and how to communicate with them.

Nowadays in Ireland, in organisations, it's more diverse – people from Poland and different parts of the world are coming in. From working in Finland, I know they kind of have similarities in how they address situations and in their work culture, so I guess I learned how to understand them a little bit more.

Other participants noted that their experience had given them greater understanding of and respect for international workers in their own workplaces, because of their similar experience on Erasmus+:

- I work with students now who are from say Germany or France, and they are coming here for the same reasons I was. And so I get where they are, and how nervous it is going in somewhere new – especially 'cause they're trying to work on their English too. But it's amazing to be able to do that, and to see other people do it. *Tara*
- I really believe that working abroad has helped me with working with different cultures, especially the students that are working with us now in the hotel. I admire their strength and knowledge, and their willingness to learn how we run our business. *Survey respondent*

It was notable that in the focus groups, the participants' discussion of cultural differences focused on differences in work culture and attitudes to work, more than on differences in cultural custom or practice. All participants emphasised that learning to work in a different country and being exposed to different ways of doing things had been beneficial to them.

- The benefit of it all is that you went to a different country and it's a completely different way of life, from driving on the wrong side of the road to the way they manage things. Fair enough, we're all in the EU but the way they do things is completely different to what we do here. **Seán**
- It was nice to see their different ways. Over here to be social you go to the pub, but over there when they finished work they all go to these big huge outdoor pools. It was really cool. They just live completely different to what we do. **Grant**
- It just gives you a different perspective when you are over there. Living here for so many years, you're just in your own little space – 'this is how we live'. Then you're in this complete different world, where they do things completely different. It just kind of gives you a different perspective, a different outlook on life. You're exposed to a completely different way of doing things. Completely different attitudes, completely different work ethic. **Steven**

Finally, two participants also stated specifically that the experience had made them more aware of being part of the European Union:

- It makes you feel part of the EU in a sense. It makes you feel like alright we're all in it together I guess. Especially with the whole Brexit situation going on, it made me think we actually are so lucky to be able to experience something like this. I think being part of the EU means we're all one. **Aoife**
- You feel like you're part of a bigger thing. **Cathy**

Five:

Further Education and Career Paths



Further Education and Career Paths

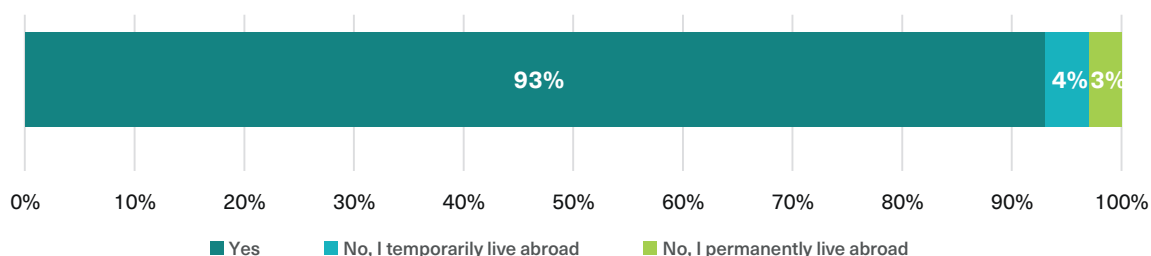
This section looks in detail at the education and employment of VET learners after their mobility placements, and the potential influence of the placements on these pathways.

Respondents' Place of Residence at Time of Survey

The vast majority of respondents (93%) were based in Ireland at the time they answered the survey. As previously noted, one of the research limitations of this project is that the survey was promoted predominantly through Irish networks, so it may have been less likely to reach former participants living abroad. This makes it somewhat difficult to say that results are indicative of the wider group of mobility participants. However, there are residence patterns among the survey respondents that are of interest.

Figure 19: Current country of residence (n=298)

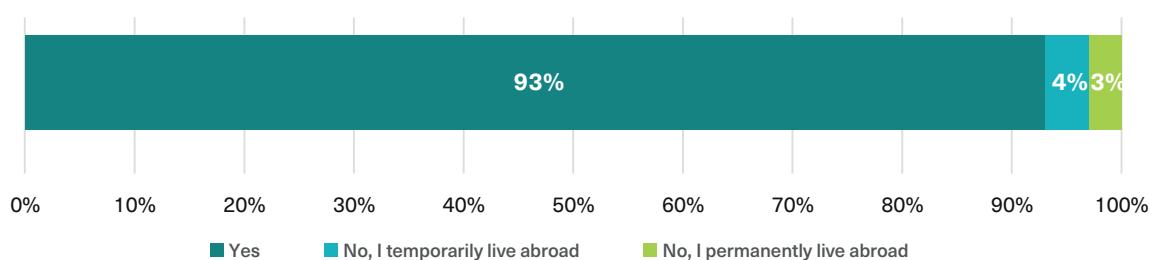
Q18 'Do you currently live in Ireland?'



Of those who had moved away, 4% described themselves as temporarily living abroad while 3% were permanently abroad. The UK had the greatest proportion of residents, with eight respondents living there temporarily or permanently. The remainder were spread among a range of European and non-European countries, including Australia, Canada and the United Arab Emirates.

Figure 20: Foreign country of residence (n=20*)

Q18 'Do you currently live in Ireland?'

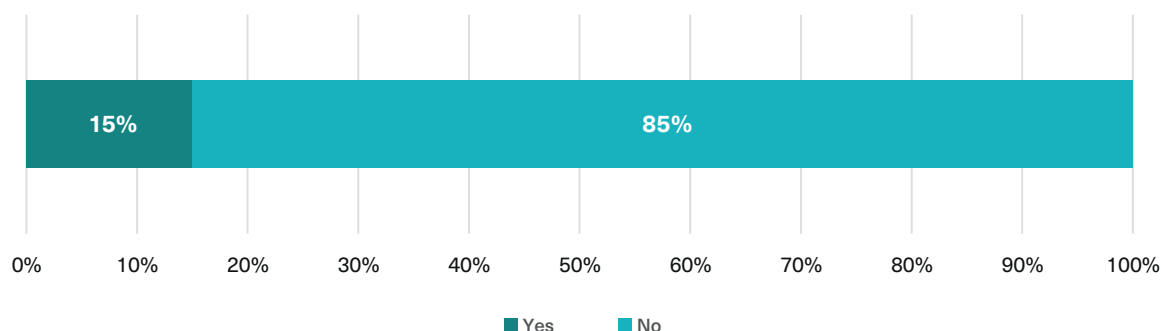


*Group of 20 excludes three respondents who stated they lived abroad but listed Ireland as their place of residence

The majority (85%) of those who lived abroad were not based in the same country in which they had done their placements.

Figure 21: Correspondence of country of residence with mobility destination (n=20*)

Q21 'Is the foreign country where you currently live the same country where you had your placement?'



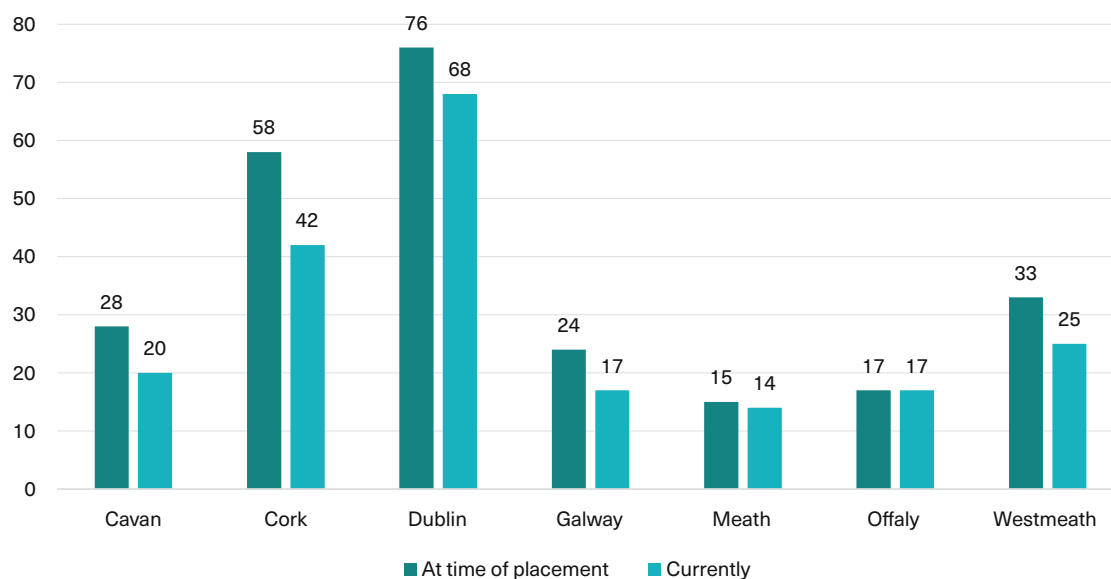
However, there was a noticeable difference between those who were living abroad temporarily and permanently. None of the temporary residents lived in the same country where they had done their placements, but one-third of the permanent residents did. While the sample size is too small to draw general conclusions about the impact of the placements on international mobility, it is noticeable that one respondent explicitly stated that the placement was the reason they had moved to the new country – even though they had not enjoyed their work experience: ‘My placement was badly organised and ... I found the work experience to be very negative. However, I did find the overall experience a positive one as I am still in the country where my placement was – which would never have happened otherwise (in a different job of course).’ Another stated that they had immediate plans to move back to the country where they had completed their placement, thanks to a positive experience there: ‘Best experience of my life and I’m moving to Spain for good in 2019 thanks to the opportunities furnished via Erasmus+. It was nothing short of life-transformative.’

Comparing this cohort of temporary and permanent foreign residents with the wider cohort of respondents brought up some other interesting findings: they were less likely to have studied to degree level, with almost 65% not having done so. They were also slightly more likely to state that placements made it easier for young people to work abroad, and to have told their employers about their work placements. It was also notable that two respondents who said that their placement had not made it easier to get a job lived outside Europe, in Australia and Canada.

Looking briefly at internal mobility in Ireland before and after placement, the representation of each region remained relatively stable. The fact that some respondents had moved out of Ireland and others did not complete the entire survey means it is not possible to track the ‘before and after’ of every individual respondent, but Figure 22 indicates that there does not seem to have been significant internal mobility after the placement period.

Figure 22: Individual internal mobility after placement (responses under 5% of n value excluded)
n=335 (Q6) n=277 (Q19)

Q6 'What part of Ireland were you living in when you went on your placement?'
Q19 'What part of Ireland do you currently live in?'

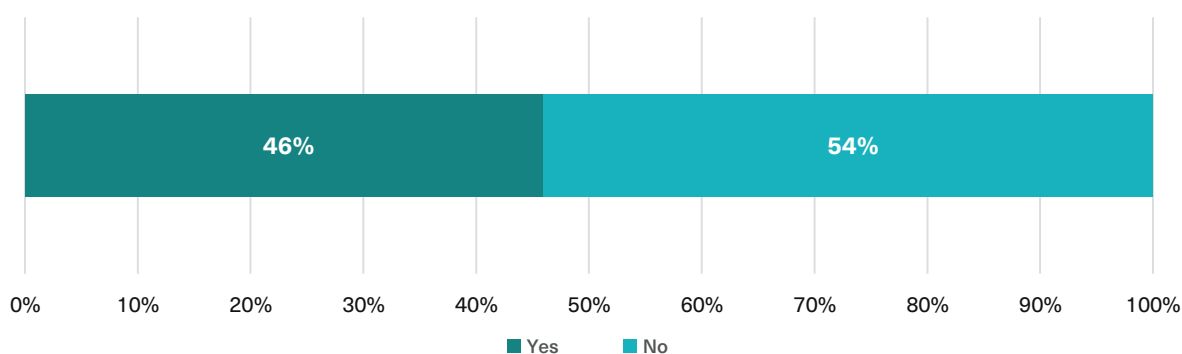


Respondents' Post-Placement Paths

At the time of the survey, respondents were almost evenly split between those who were currently studying VET and those who had completed their VET education. Of the 335 total respondents, 38 skipped the question 'Are you currently studying VET at a school or college?'. Of the 297 who responded, just under half indicated they were currently in VET education.

Figure 23: Current VET education status (n=297)

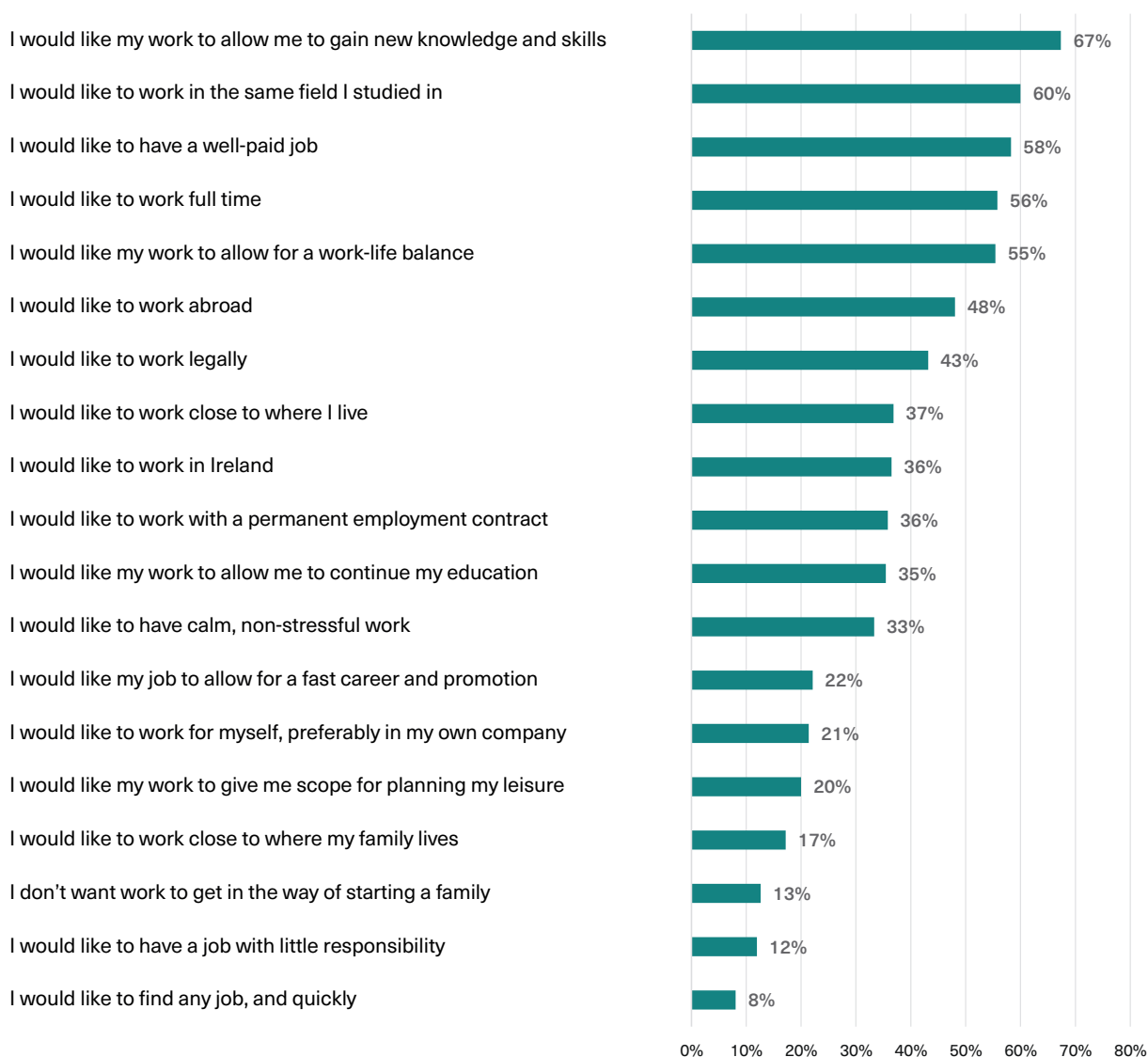
Q23 'Are you currently studying VET at a school or college?'



This group of learners were not asked questions in relation to employment, with the exception of what they would value in their future careers. All respondents were asked to select as many options as they liked from a list of factors they considered important while looking for employment. The most popular choices were 'I would like my work to allow me to gain new knowledge and skills' at 67%; 'I would like to work in the same field I studied in' at 60%; and 'I would like to have a well-paid job' at 58%.

Figure 24: Most valued characteristics of employment (n=282)

Q39 'Which of the following are important to you while looking for employment? Select as many as you like.'



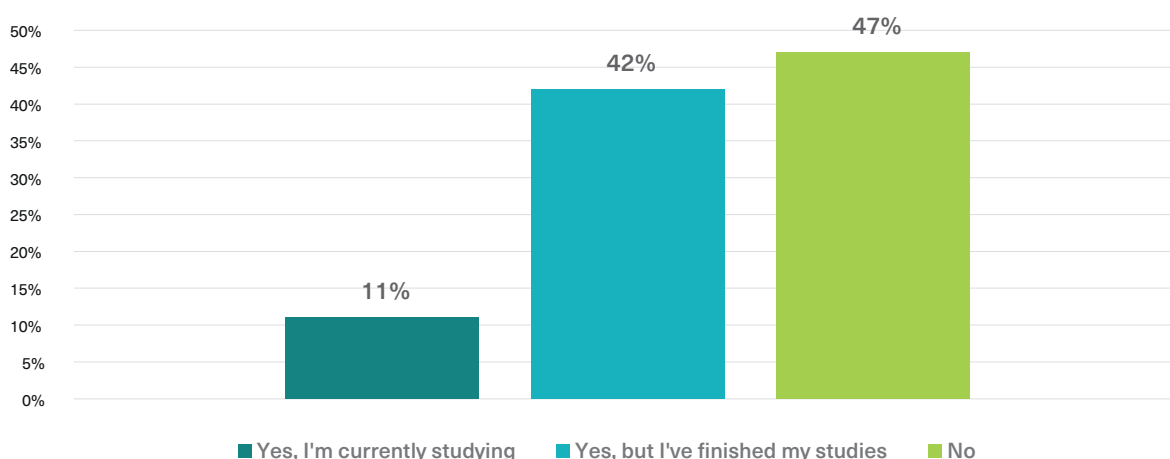
Progression to Degree-level Education

Among the remaining respondents who had completed their VET education, just over half indicated that they had progressed to degree-level study. This is broadly in line with national trends. In 'Evaluating Post-Leaving Certificate Provision in Ireland' (2019), McGuinness et al found that '39 per cent stated that their main reason for undertaking a PLC was to get a job immediately, with a similar percentage reporting that their main objective was progression to HE. Personal development was the key motivating factor for 20 per cent of PLC learners.'

The majority of those who had progressed to degree-level study (making up 42% of the total group) had already graduated at the time of the survey. A further 11% of the total group were currently studying at degree level.

Figure 25: Study for degree or equivalent qualification (n=158)

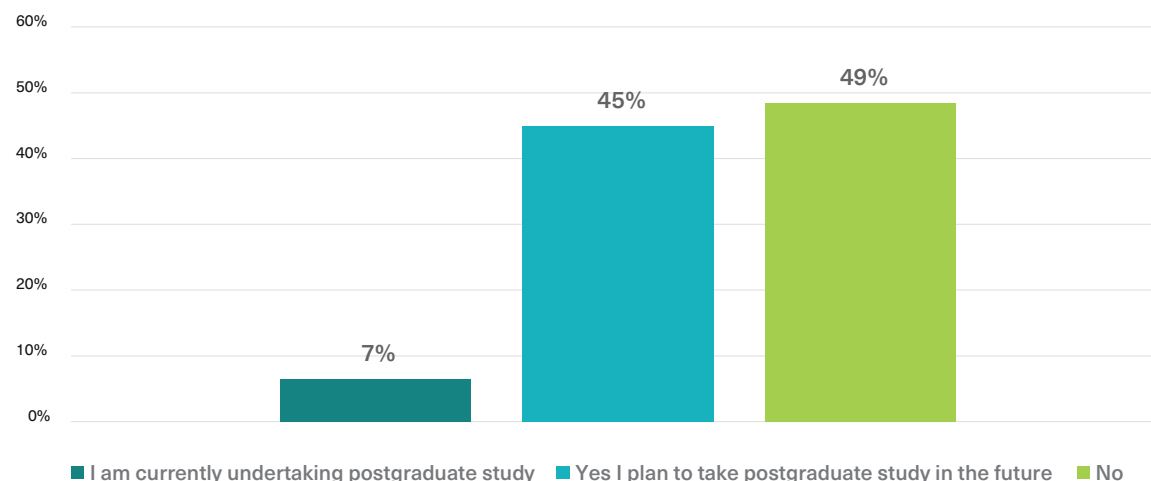
Q24 'Have you studied for a degree or equivalent qualification at a higher or further education institution?'



Among this group who had finished their VET education, just under half intended to take postgraduate study in the future. A further 7% were already undertaking postgraduate study.

Figure 26: Intention to continue academic studies among those who are no longer in VET (n=154)

Q26 'Do you intend to continue your academic studies?'



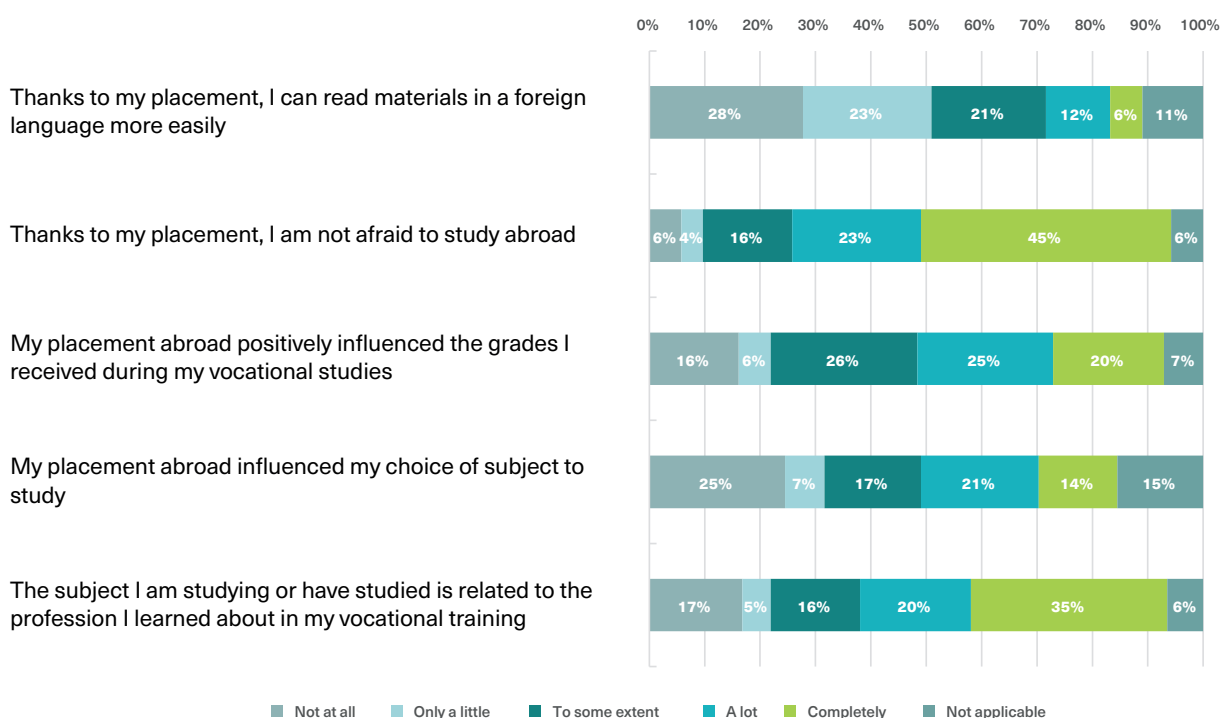
The reasons that VET learners choose to proceed to degree-level study are of course varied. Three of the four people interviewed for this study had progressed to degree-level study in the same vocational areas: their motivations ranged from deepening their understanding of their subject area, to experiencing a university environment, to feeling a degree would be beneficial for their future career.

- [After the placement] I was still intent on continuing down the line of business in terms of my studies. Although having said that, it did definitely help me personally, absolutely. It did help me to be more forward thinking and not so hesitant. To be more confident and helped me communicate better as well, absolutely. Quite a few factors contributed to me going on to study; I wanted to keep myself occupied and I wanted to continue to go down the business route. I wanted to further add to my expertise in the business field. It's going very well thankfully. *Colm*
- The foundation course in multimedia production in (my vocational college) completely relates to what I'm currently doing. It's the exact same. So I just repeated everything again, refreshed my memory. It was great. I completely just did it all over again, using everything I learned before. I plan to go into multimedia communications. I mean if I can work in an Erasmus environment with internationals, or a university international department, that's something I'd also be interested in. So you know developing from what I've kind of learned over the past three years, and that's kind of just changed my mindset I guess. *Mark*

Similarly, many survey respondents continued to degree-level study in the same area as their VET studies. More than 70% agreed 'completely', 'a lot', or 'to some extent' that their course of study was related to their vocational training. Work placements were also a factor: over one-third stated that the work placement abroad had influenced their choice of study 'a lot' or 'completely'. Another 17% said their work placement had influenced their choice 'to some extent'.

Figure 27: Contribution of placement to education (n=154)

Q25 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'



The two most common ways in which work placements influenced study choices were by affirming the learner's choice of vocational area and by giving them confidence to pursue higher education. As one survey respondent put it, '[The placement] was a life-changing experience for me. I am now in year two of a degree in horticulture, having been inspired to do so through the confidence I got from Erasmus+.' Another remarked, 'My placement abroad helped me realise what I wanted to do as a career and helped me make choices about my academic career that I would not have been able to do had I not done the placement.' Another said:

I went on this placement with nearly no French speaking skills which improved significantly because I was thrown into a situation where I had to speak. The place I had my work in was not the best in terms of being warm or welcoming, but it was still an extremely good experience which gave me the confidence to go on to study French at University level and gelled me really close to my class mates in my QQI course. This was one of the best experiences I had and allowed me to really experience another culture.

Interestingly, there was one case where the respondent's mobility experience influenced them to abandon education in Ireland, as they felt the system was inadequate compared to what they had experienced overseas:

My time in Sweden opened my eyes up; they only teach you what you're supposed to be studying there – so you actually learn. In the end it was probably the catalyst for me giving up college here, 'cause there really is no point trying to actually learn anything in Ireland. All you really get is a piece of paper which thinly veils an incredibly saturated learning experience, where you learn seemingly everything you'll never need mixed in with just enough of what you actually went to college to learn to justify another year's funding for the college. I now advise everyone to avoid going to college; the education system stinks from the top to the bottom. I wish I could have learned in the college I went to in Sweden.

Survey respondents also reported impact on their academic performance: 55% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their placements had positively influenced the grades they received in their vocational training (Figure 27). In her interview, Dorota explained how this had happened for her:

People who've done Erasmus+, we cover so much material. [When we returned from placement] the teachers kind of divided us from the group, because we had really worked hard. We were not just sitting around an office – it was hard work with lots of reading and writing. So we did not really have to catch up with what people had done during the weeks [we were away]. They more had to wait for us, than we had to catch up with them. And then we were asked to share our experience more with the group, how the ideas applied, how other people could learn from it. You know, maybe they could be future entrepreneurs? Entrepreneurship was an extra subject, but it was very helpful to do Erasmus+ if you'd like to also persuade them to enrol you in the entrepreneurship class.

I took that entrepreneurship class and it involved public speaking. So [my placement] helped me very much in the second semester. We had a few projects in the English language. We had to do a presentation and so on. And I was like, 'I have that skill now.' And I was great! I did not feel stress.

Progression to Employment

As illustrated in Figure 25, 11% of the group who had completed their VET education were studying at degree level at the time of the survey. Just under 60% of these degree-level students were also working at the same time as they studied: 24% worked in full-time employment and 35% worked part-time.

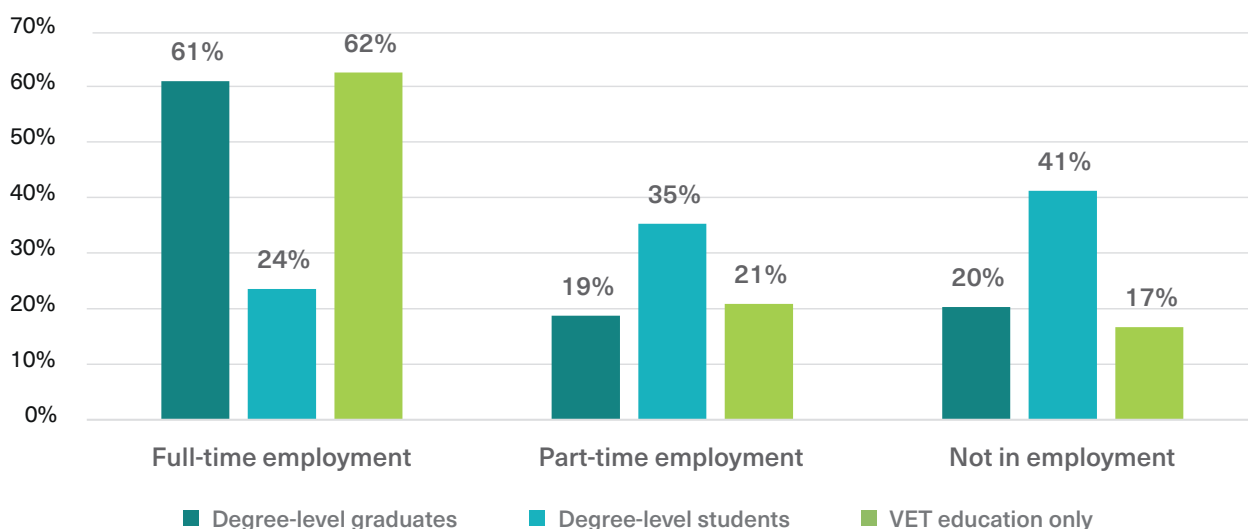
The remaining 89%, made up of both degree-level graduates and those who had completed VET education only, were theoretically available for full-time employment. Overall, 62% of this group were in full-time employment; 20% in part-time employment; and 18% were not in employment.

Splitting this group into those who had completed VET education only and those who had already graduated from degree-level study shows a very slight variation: the degree-level graduates were slightly less likely to be in employment, whether full- or part-time. However, the difference between the two groups is only two to three percentage points.

Figure 28 below summarises the employment status of these three distinct groups who had completed their VET education: degree-level graduates, degree-level students and those who had completed VET education only.

Figure 28: Employment status of respondents no longer in VET education (n=153)

Employment status of respondents no longer in VET education



Unsurprisingly, those who were currently studying at degree level were the least likely to be in full-time employment; they were also the most likely to be in part-time employment or not in employment.

Employment Status

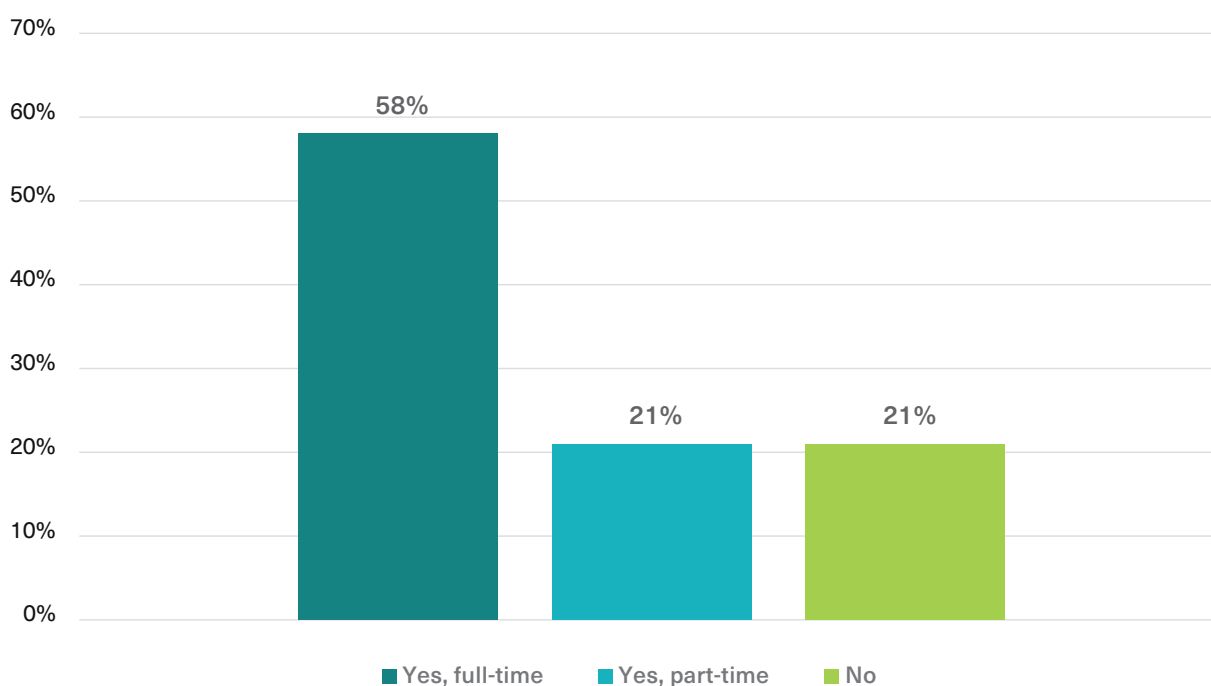
Turning to the employment status and occupations of the respondents who were no longer in VET education, there are two main categories to consider: those in employment, whether full- or part-time, and those not in employment. The latter category can be further divided into those seeking and not seeking work.

As noted above, both categories can also include degree-level students. More than half the degree-level students were also in employment, and some students who were not in employment said they were seeking work.

With this in mind, 58% of those who were no longer in VET education were in full-time employment. A further 21% were in part-time employment and 21% were not in employment.

Figure 29: Current employment status (n=154)

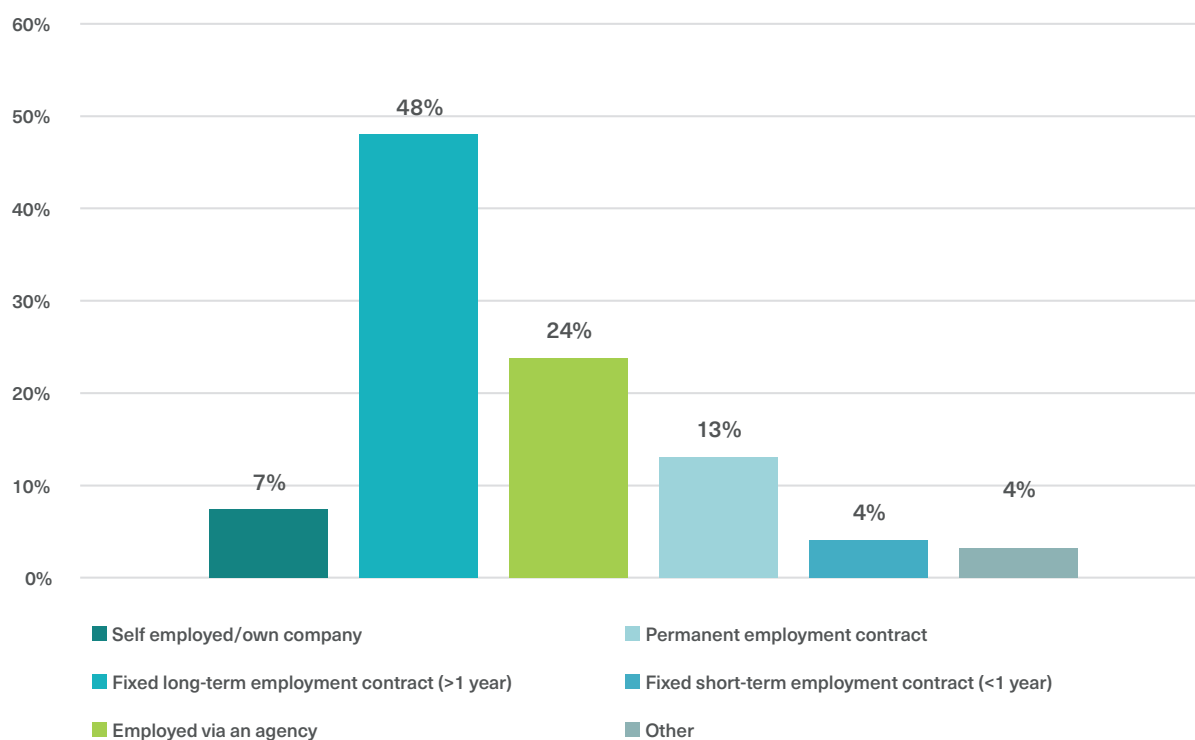
Q27 'Do you currently have a job?'



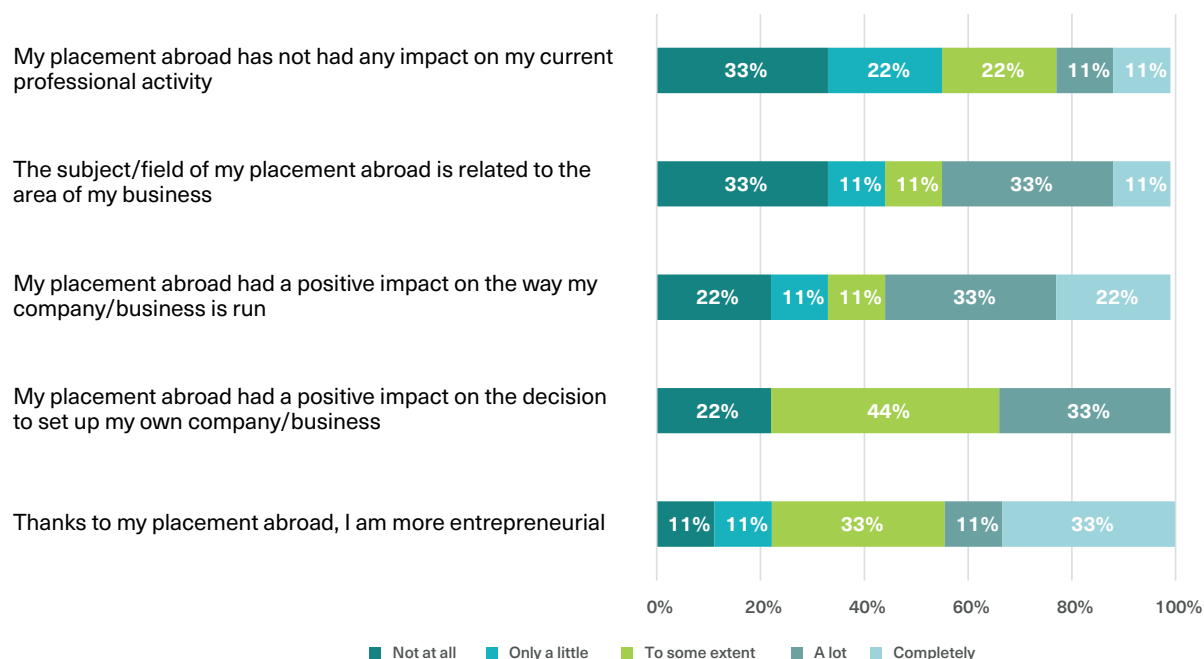
The group not in employment numbered 32 people, 12 of whom described themselves as 'unemployed and not looking for a job' for personal or other reasons. Of the remaining 20 respondents, four were simultaneously in full-time education. A further eight were planning to do postgraduate study and had been unemployed for relatively short periods (seven indicated they had been unemployed 'less than three months').

The remaining group who were actively seeking employment and who were not enrolled in study or planning to do further study numbered eight people. Of these, two had been unemployed for less than three months, five for three to six months and one for more than twelve months.

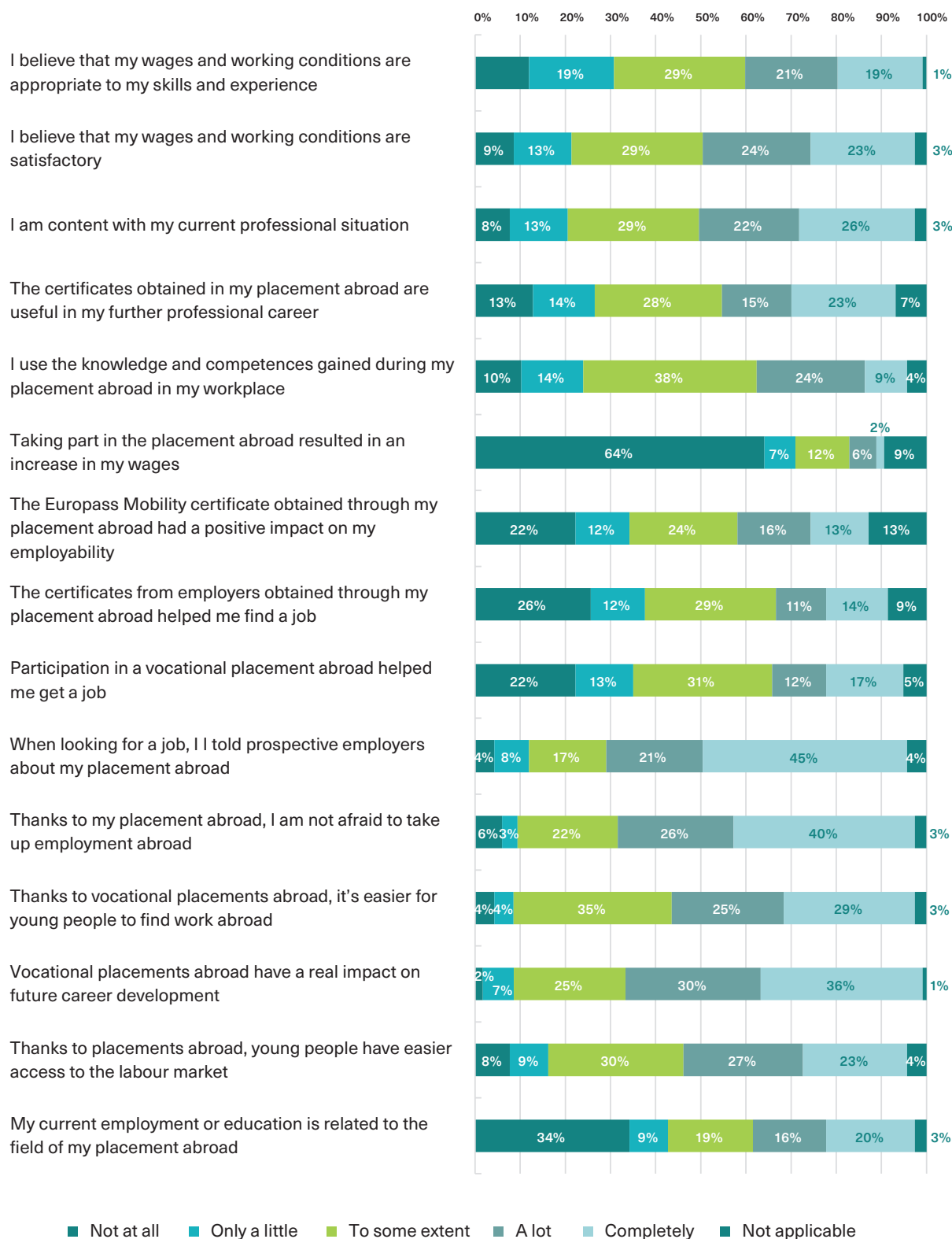
Just under three-quarters of those in employment had permanent or long-term contracts. A small number of respondents (7%) were self-employed or had their own companies.

Figure 30: Current employment situation (n=122)**Q28 'Which of the following best describes your employment situation?'**

While the sample size of those who had their own companies is very small (just nine people), seven of the respondents said they were more entrepreneurial 'to some extent', 'a lot', or 'completely' because of their placements. The same seven also agreed that their placement had a positive impact on their decision to set up their own businesses. All of this group had completed their placements within the previous four years: three in 2015, one in 2016, one in 2017, and four in 2018. None of the respondents indicated their businesses had any other employees.

Figure 31: Influence of placement on own company/business (n=9)**Q29 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'**

In relation to impact of the work placements on employment in general, respondents largely agreed that the effect was noticeable and positive. Just under half agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that young people have easier access to the labour market thanks to placements abroad; more than 65% agreed that vocational placements abroad have a real impact on future career development; and 55% agreed that vocational placements made it easier for young people to find work abroad. Finally, 29% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their participation had helped them get a job, with a further 31% agreeing it had helped 'to some extent' (Figure 32).

Figure 32: Influence of placement on subsequent employment (n=117)*Q32 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'*

In some cases, this connection between the vocational work placement and subsequent employment was exceptionally clear. Oisín, who had not been able to find employment in his chosen field due to lack of relevant experience, found that his three-month ecology placement in Spain opened all the doors he had hoped it would:

I was slightly disheartened even going out to Spain because it was like this really is my last chance for getting a job in the field I want most.

But as soon as I put all this information that I'd gathered, and all the skills I'd acquired, on my LinkedIn account – suddenly it was becoming a hell of a lot more active. There were all these buzzwords that were obviously crucial. There was lots of interest in my CV suddenly, since I'd put on this international research station. Being able to build up your skill set and to give yourself three months working in a biological research station gets you in that mindset again. Then when you're applying for jobs in the evenings or the weekend it just makes it ... it helps, it inspires or pushes you on, I guess.

While I was out there in Spain I was applying and interviewing for positions, and everybody was extremely interested in the placement and the type of work experience I was getting. So when I came back to Ireland I actually had three job offers on the table within two to three weeks, in the field I wanted to be in, with companies I had aspirations to work for.

So I took those interviews, I got offered two positions and I took one. So since Spain I've been gainfully employed full-time. For this line of work, the wage is on the higher end of the wage scale and I had a year review there a few months back and got a wage increase. So I'm quite happy with how things have gone obviously! It 100% made a huge impact.

I know this sounds like I'm making up the perfect success story for this programme, but it literally made a massive difference!

Dorota, who had recently moved to a new position in her retail company, felt the mobility experience had demonstrated to her employer that she was able to communicate well and work well under pressure – both strong requirements of the new role.

At that very point when I finished my work placement I had a job. But it helped me in my job. To be seen by managers that actually I want to develop my career – I want to do something to go higher. So that was actually a very good point for the HR department also, because they saw I want to be more than just a sales assistant or supervisor on the shop floor.

In this [new] job the very important skills they were looking for was communication skills with suppliers. It involves lots of meetings, phone calls. You kinda need to be open for communication. It's not typical office work where people sit down, get your computer out for eight hours. It's seriously active. It's so busy. So they always check how you deal with pressure. The work experience gave them the idea that I have the ability to do that.

Other learners felt there was a clear impact on their future careers, even when the placements had not directly led to related employment. For some, this was because the work experience affirmed that their choice of vocational area was the right one and helped them clarify what kind of work they would seek in the future:

My placement abroad opened my eyes completely on what I wanted as my future career and set in stone that I wanted to do nursing for the rest of my career. It taught me a different and more effective approach to working as a nurse; that patients do not forget their time in hospital when they are poorly. My [host company mentor] taught me that caring for a patient is not just about the

physical and external needs but the emotional needs; especially as often we think just because someone is ok externally... but we never know what's going on mentally. The difference between Swedish health care and Irish health care is beyond clear, and it is in plain sight that they are miles ahead of the Irish health care system. For example, they have enough staff so everyone can get not just one break but three within an 8-10 hour shift. I quote from my mentor, 'If you are exhausted and you are not ready to work you must take a break and sleep for 20 minutes. We will cover you, then you come back and no mistakes are made'. The level of care is outstanding!!! (Survey respondent)

Similarly, the focus groups included several participants who strongly wished to pursue the same occupational area of their placement and were doing so through either employment or further study.

Filip had studied film and documentary and was now studying the same subject to degree level because 'directing is what I really would like to do in the future.' In the same focus group, the two participants who had placements in the IT sector wanted to remain in that sector because 'I like solving problems' (Craig) and 'I like the aspect of software that you can start with the blank page and a couple hours later you have a webpage or a game or something like that. It is fulfilling that way' (Seán). Ellen had a placement in fashion and wanted to 'produce my own fabrics originally designed by myself. To have something where we start from scratch and build up to something very wow. So it's ongoing but I think I'm on the right track.'

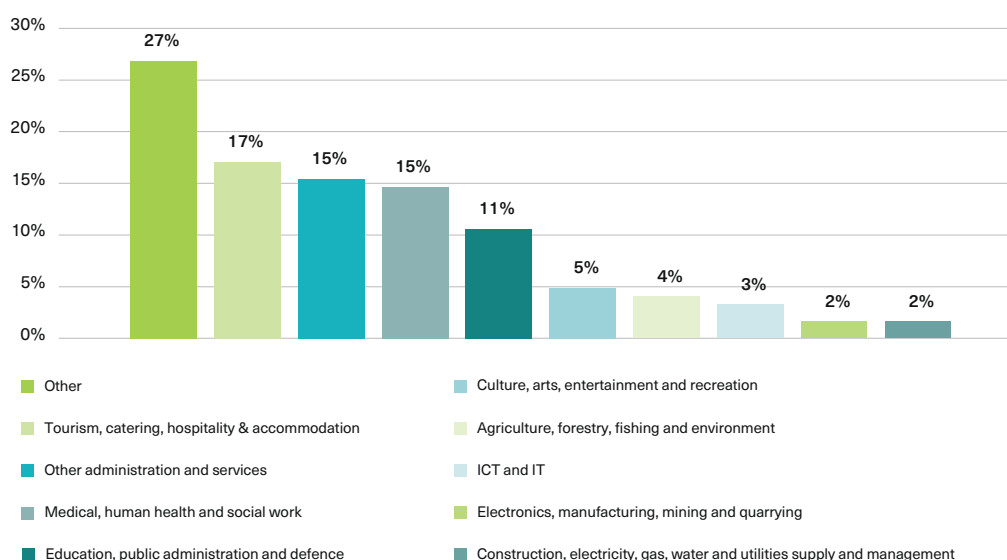
As one survey respondent put it, 'I can't emphasise enough how important my three-month placement was. This placement allowed me to gain valuable experience while also being funded. It was the leg up my life and career needed.'

Occupations and Occupational Change

Among those who were employed either full- or part-time, the most common occupational area listed was 'other'. For those who did choose a category, the biggest was 'tourism, catering, hospitality and accommodation' at 17%, followed by 'other administration and services' at 15% and 'medical, human health and social work' at 15%.

Figure 33: Current occupational area of those in full- or part-time employment (n=122)

Q31 'Which occupational area do you currently work in?'



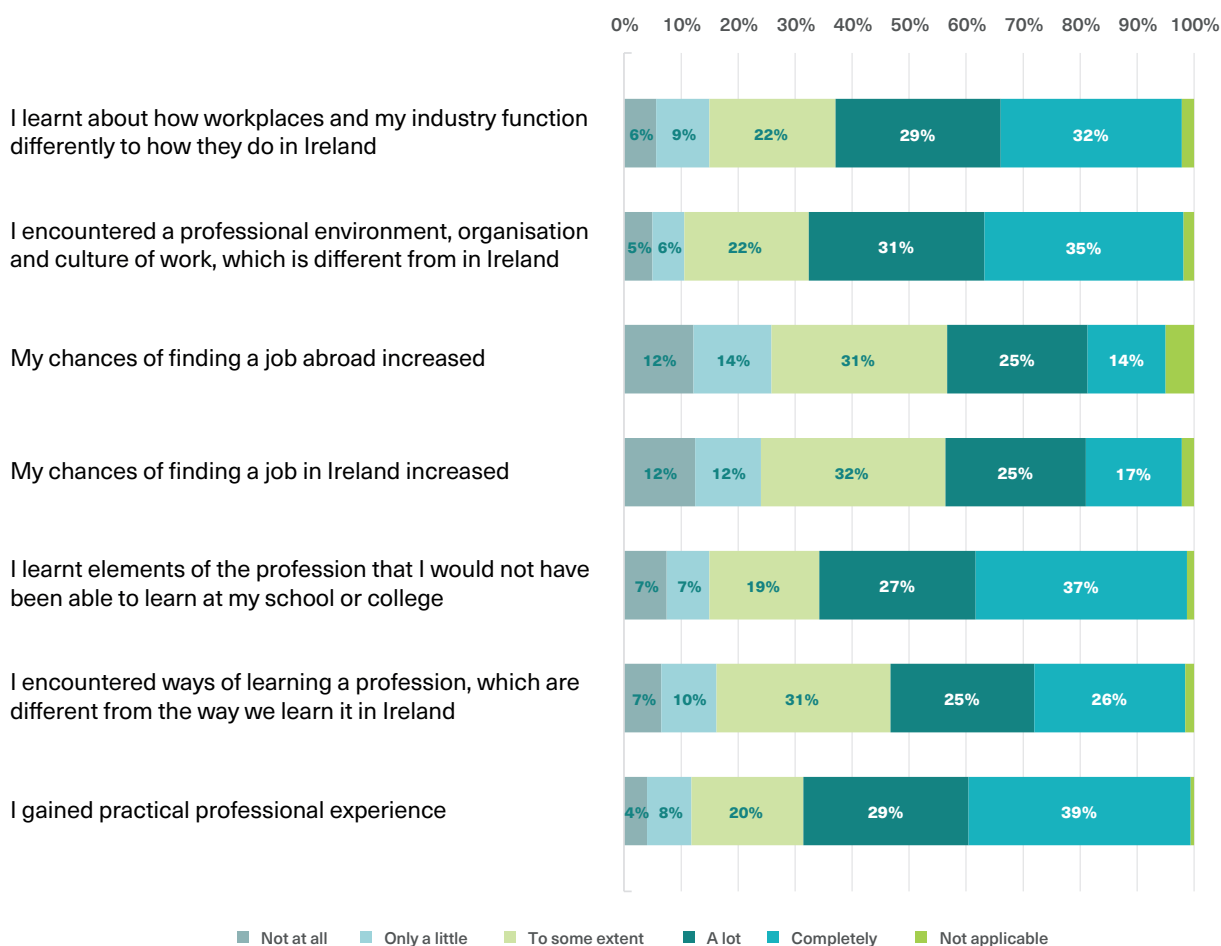
Comparing current occupations with occupation at the time of placement as shown in Figure 16, the most notable change is the increase of the 'other administration and services' category from 6% to 15%. Other proportions remain relatively stable. However, comparing the occupations of only those in full- or part-time employment with their placement occupations shows a high degree of occupational change in this group: only 12.5% were working in the same occupational area as their placement.

This percentage is considerably lower than the rate of agreement with the statement 'my current employment or education is related to the field of my placement abroad' (Figure 32). Roughly one-third of respondents agreed with this 'a lot' or 'completely'. Just under a third said their current employment or education was related 'to some extent' or 'a little', while 34% said it was 'not at all' related. The comparison is not perfect because the statement asks about 'education or employment' rather than just employment, but it seems clear that participants in mobility experiences do not necessarily go on to work in the same field as their placements.

Against this, there is the fact that 70% of respondents agreed that the training or work placement abroad had increased their chances of finding a job. Some 42% agreed 'a lot' or 'completely' that their chances of finding a job in Ireland had increased, and a further 32% agreed 'to some extent'. The figures for perceived increase in the chances of finding a job abroad were 39% and 31% respectively (Figure 34).

Figure 34: Contribution of placement to employment (n=317)

**Q12 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
'Thanks to the training or work placement abroad ...'**



This seeming contradiction is encapsulated by one survey respondent who had a three-month placement in culture, arts and entertainment and who was now working in medical, human health and social care. Her comment on the placement was that 'It was a great set-up and I had a wonderful experience. It has really helped me getting work back in Ireland.'

So why would respondents who **don't** stay in the same field as their placement feel that the placements increase their chances of getting a job? Analysis suggests that this may be because placements serve different purposes for different participants. As discussed above, some participants have a very direct connection between the work they do on placement and in their subsequent careers. Others take a more circuitous route.

Some of those who had changed occupational area since their placements did so because they were in part-time work: in Focus Group B, Steven had studied business at both VET and degree level, but his part-time job was in retail. However, he felt that this could be a stepping-stone to entering the business world: 'I hope to get something in the [business] department. I'm working retail at the moment so if a position opened up there maybe – I'm gonna work my way up.'

Aedín from Focus Group A, who said that her placement had taught her that she did not want to pursue the vocational area she had been studying, was unsure about her future direction but wanted it to include an intercultural element: 'I'm not 100% sure yet. I probably would like something in languages because I like to travel a lot. So if I could get a job at an international company or work for the EU or something.'

Others who did not wish to stay in the same vocational area had different reasons for this. Grant said he had tired of his field, having worked in it for several years: 'At the time [of the placement] I did want to work on tourism. And I did do all the tourism jobs. Now I'm tourism'd out! So I work in a bank now, and it's grand.'

Aoife said that she had changed her vocational area because she had multiple interests, and would be open to changing her career again: 'I did want to get into recruitment, so for now that's what I want to do. But you never know in the future.'

Some survey respondents were clear that they very much wished to work in the area they had studied and had their work placement in, but they were unable to do so:

*As many of the previous survey questions are about employment and as I have answered that I am not working in the area I studied that is simply because as bad as the Irish health care system is with their chronic need for nurses ... they make it impossible to get into a level 8 nursing degree from whatever angle you approach either CAO, mature student, aptitude test, QQI distinctions or scholarships it is made impossible and just because you did not receive 500 Leaving Cert points does not mean you are not good enough or that you don't want your nursing course more than anything in the world! **Survey respondent***

*The course itself was poor and under rated by employers in the field. By going abroad, it gave me an edge over my fellow students but it was the course's reputation that kept me from employment. **Survey respondent***

The other principal reason that participants feel placement had a positive impact was because the soft skills they developed were transferable to other areas. Dorota was working full-time and studying part-time, and stated that her Erasmus+ experience had helped her improve her job situation with her current employer and put her on the right path to achieve more in the future.

Erasmus+ was brilliant because they kind of fed us with knowledge on how to come up with a pitch, how to come up with an idea, where to start. When you can apply that, you know how to actually behave in the business environment.

I am doing what I'm interested in. For the level of experience, the wage is fair. But it's not enough! That's why I wanted more experience! For now, it's fine. Because I'm still in the process of getting myself into society. It really takes a long time. I know that it will take a long time, a couple of years. But I want more. That's why I keep educating myself and developing my language as much as I can.

In Focus Group B, Tara was now working full-time in a hotel and found herself using the communication style she had developed on her placement: 'I think I wouldn't have learned to slow down my English. Because now I'm on the phone with people from other countries all the time, in the hotel where I work. You have to really slow down your English. You can make a difference by talking a lot slower and I learned that over there.'

Other participants from the in-person research group felt that having experience of working in another country was an advantage in itself, because it demonstrated an ability to cope with an unfamiliar situation. Participants felt this was attractive to employers, but also inspired personal confidence and faith in one's own abilities.

- The benefit of it all is that you went to a different country and it's a completely different way of life, from driving on the wrong side of the road to the way they manage things. Fair enough, we're all in the EU but the way they do things is completely different to what we do here.
- And I think the language barrier as well would be the main one for your problem solving. From how you get around, the little things, having a conversation with a colleague – I think that would make someone more employable, having work experience in a different country. *Seán*
- I think, not so much for me, but what I saw in a lot of other people was it gave them a lot of confidence. Because if you know that you've been chosen to go on this thing because of how well you did in your assignments or how well you presented in an interview, then it gives you a lot more of a feeling of responsibility and that you feel like you're being trusted with money, with faith that you can go over there and do a good job to represent your country and your school and everything. And then as well once you've done it and you come home, when you're, like, oh actually I went to a country that I've never been to before and I worked with people I've never met before, with maybe a language I don't speak and then it gives you the confidence to be, like, actually if I ever did want to do something, that I could. I could go to a company I'd never been to and it would probably be fine. So it gives you more, like, self-confidence to realise actually it's not impossible to do something that seems impossible. *Aedín*
- When you're at home you know where you're going. If someone says, 'You're going out to Tallaght', you know how to get to Tallaght, you're used to it. But over there you don't know where the bus goes from, you don't know the bus stop. The way people drive over there is crazy, it's completely different. Everything's a challenge. *Tara*

Role of Work Placement Experience in Job-seeking

Almost two-thirds of survey respondents agreed ‘a lot’ or ‘completely’ that they had told prospective employers about their placements when they were seeking work. Another 17% agreed they had told prospective employers ‘to some extent’ (Figure 32). There was a general feeling among respondents that a placement ‘makes my CV more attractive to employers’, but one also commented that they would like more assistance with ‘support on bringing the skills to life professionally.’ Another commented, ‘In two interviews I had after the Erasmus+ experience, there didn’t seem to have as much value placed to a two-week Erasmus+ placement. Although the short two-week experience may not be “measured” as equivalent to a long-term task/employment, the gains were intrinsic and real.’

This may be an area where sending organisations could provide some guidance or instruction to help VET learners ‘package’ their experience for presentation to employers.

Looking to the in-person research group, those who were in employment emphasised the importance of using LinkedIn and other networks to help secure interviews, as well as the need to draw connections between the skills acquired on work placement and the requirements of a job.

- I always put it on my CV. I’ll always do it. I actually uploaded my presentation and our report to my LinkedIn profile. It really makes a difference when they scroll down your profile and they see that you attend workshops, attend a work placement, that you are active. *Dorota*
- If you go in for a job interview and say, ‘I haven’t just stayed on the one little small island, I’ve been around the world and gone to different countries and seen different work cultures – I’m aware of how different people function’, it looks good. *Steven*
- It was an amazing experience, one that I will always remember, and a fantastic opportunity that I’m very grateful for. I strongly believe that it opened my eyes, and allowed me to be immersed in another culture and a different way of doing things, that I otherwise wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do so. I have been asked about it in several job interviews (as it is on my CV) and it did make me stand out from other contenders. *Survey respondent*
- At an interview I had for a similar position which would mean monitoring invertebrates on numerous farms in England, the fact that I had the technical language that I’d learned and acquired while there through the identification of different specimens and even the pinning – those words mean a lot during an interview. I believe it was just having that kind of ability to speak in that manner that got me through a lot of the interviews and got me, as I said, two offers. *Oisín*

Dorota also commented that she was very nervous about public speaking before her placement and felt her development in this area helped her perform better in job interviews.

Because an interview is like public speaking, right? If you would ask me before (my placement) to have an interview with you I would be really stressed. I would do it but I would not be comfortable. So this was like a cold shower. And [my placement] is always at the back of my head because it was such a positive experience for me that I just keep reminding myself. It’s been a few years but I’m so grateful for it.

Participation in Erasmus+ projects is generally recognised through the awarding of a Certificate of Participation, but can also be recognised through the Europass Mobility document. This is a standard document used in the EU and EEA to 'record knowledge and skills acquired in another European country'. More than a third of survey respondents said that the certificates they had obtained were 'a lot' or 'completely' useful in their further professional career. One commented, 'The certificate I acquired allows me to work in any multi-national company in the whole of Europe and I passed with distinction of which I am very proud.' The in-person research group were less positive about the certificates they had received, and this may be an area where sending organisations could provide clearer information to participants on how such certificates may be used.

- They gave me a certificate with the date and that I took part in Erasmus programme etc. I haven't really used it but I have it. *Dorota*
- I know the name; I don't necessarily know much about it. I had a kind of a booklet that was Europass I think? I can't remember now because it was three years ago, but it might have been related to Europass. I just can't remember, sorry. *Mark*

Overall Satisfaction and Likelihood to Recommend Mobility to Others

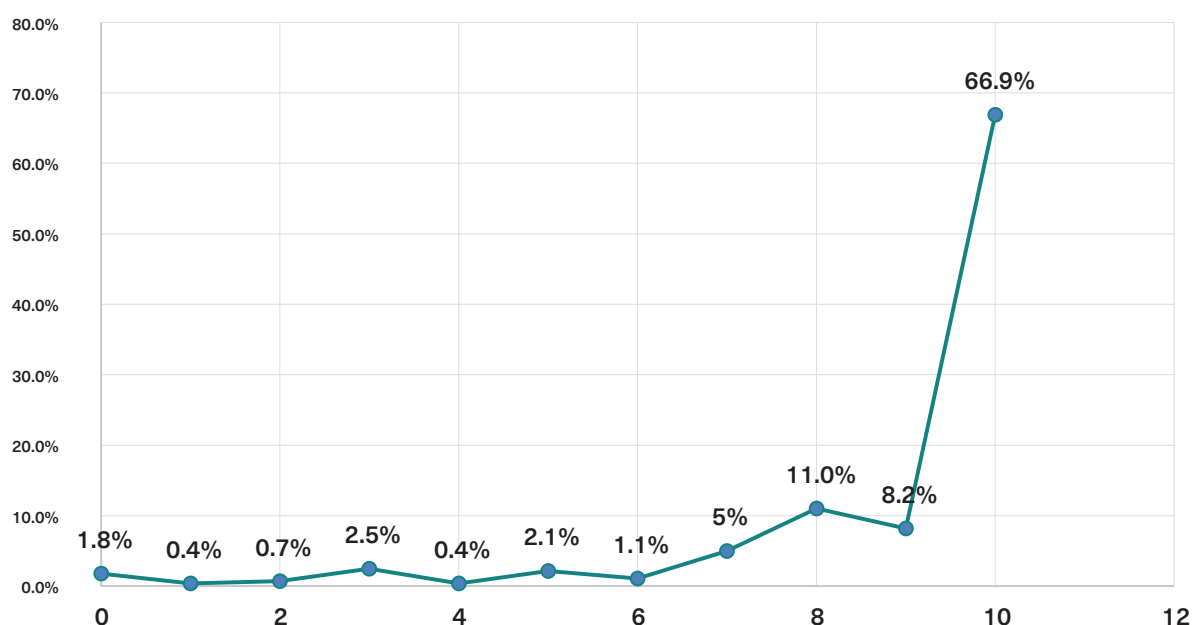
Finally, it is worth considering how participants in vocational placements abroad present the experience to their peers. More than 90% of respondents said that they shared their knowledge and experience with others after they returned (Figure 18). Using a method called the Net Promoter Score²⁴ allows us to see how this experience may have been presented.

Respondents were asked to use a scale of 0–10 to rate their likelihood to recommend a trainee placement abroad to other vocational learners to help them enter the labour market. In this method, people who rate 9–10 are considered to be enthusiastic supporters of the programme or 'promoters'. People who rate 7–8 are considered satisfied and are termed 'passives', and those who rate 0–6 are considered 'detractors'. The Net Promoter Score comes from subtracting the percentage of 'detractors' from the percentage of 'promoters'. This can range from –100 (if everyone is a detractor) to +100 (if everyone is a promoter). Three-quarters of survey respondents were promoters, with 16% passives and 8% detractors. This makes an overall Net Promoter Score of +67.

²⁴ <https://www.netpromoter.com/know/>

Figure 35: Overall Net Promoter Score (n=281)

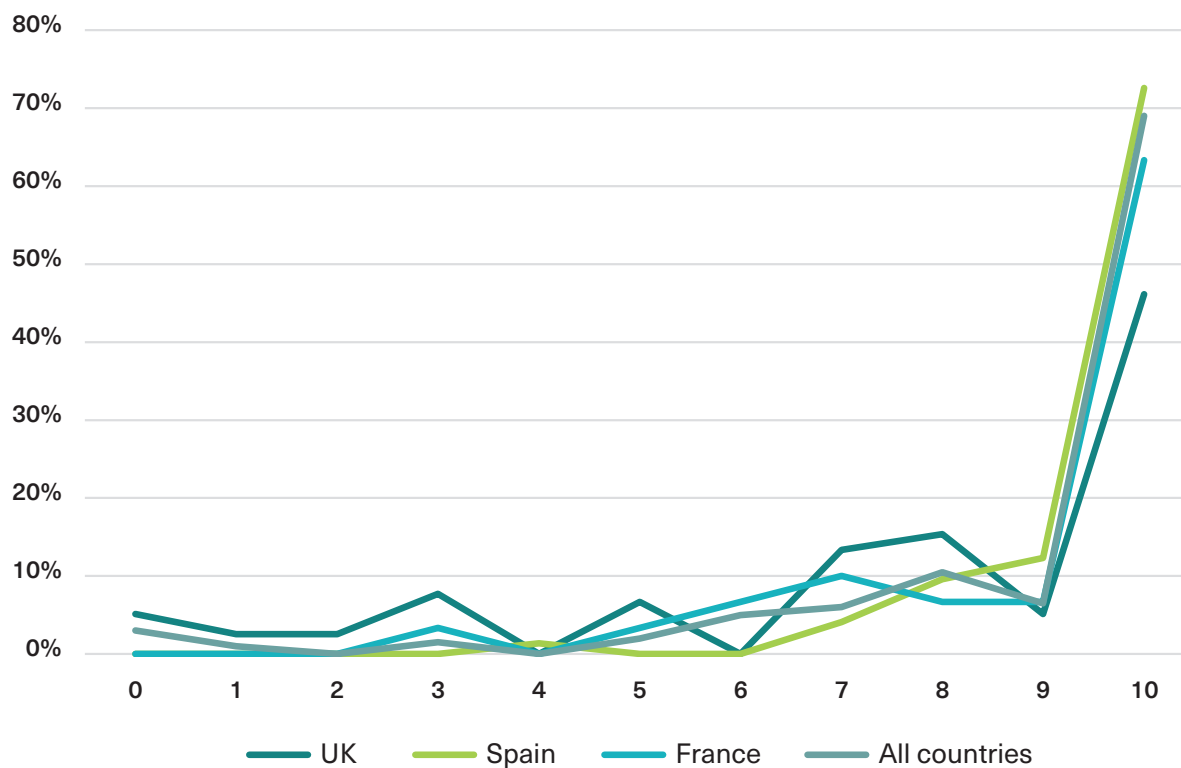
Q40 'On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 is not at all and 10 is definitely, how likely are you to recommend a trainee placement abroad to other vocational learners to help them enter the labour market?'



The Net Promoter Score can also be used to look at the effect of variables, such as placement destination and duration. Comparing the ratings of those who went to the UK, Spain and France (the three most popular destinations) with the overall group shows that those who went to the UK were the least likely to highly recommend the placements, and those who went to Spain were the most likely. The reasons are not totally clear: it may be that a more visibly 'different' culture is more attractive than a more familiar one, but this hypothesis would require further investigation.

Figure 36: Likelihood to recommend placement; comparison of UK, Spain, France and all countries (n=281)

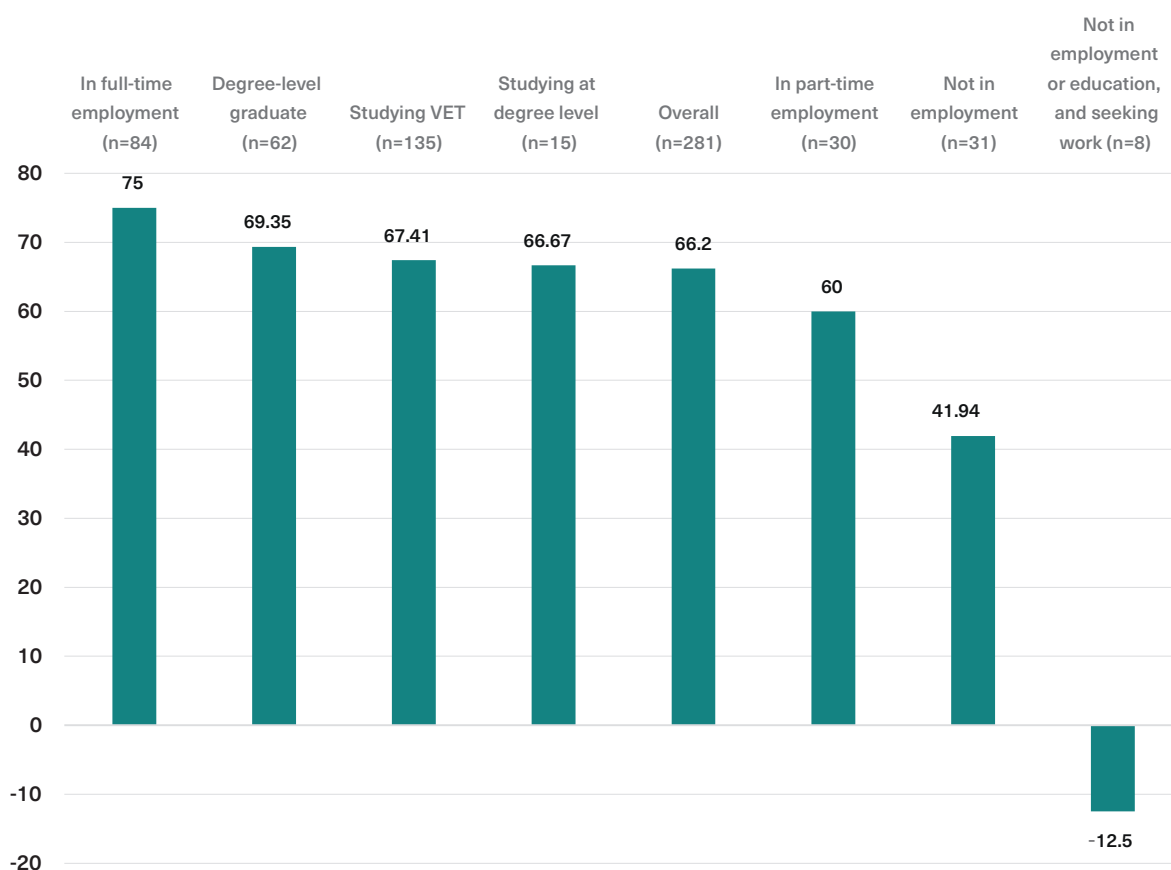
Q40 'On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is definitely, how likely are you to recommend a trainee placement abroad to other vocational learners to help them enter the labour market?'



Comparing the Net Promoter Scores of the various subgroups, however, shows that there are some very clear patterns in likelihood to recommend the placements. The highest score (75) is from respondents who went on to full-time employment. By far the lowest (-12.5) is from those who were not in employment or education and who were seeking work.

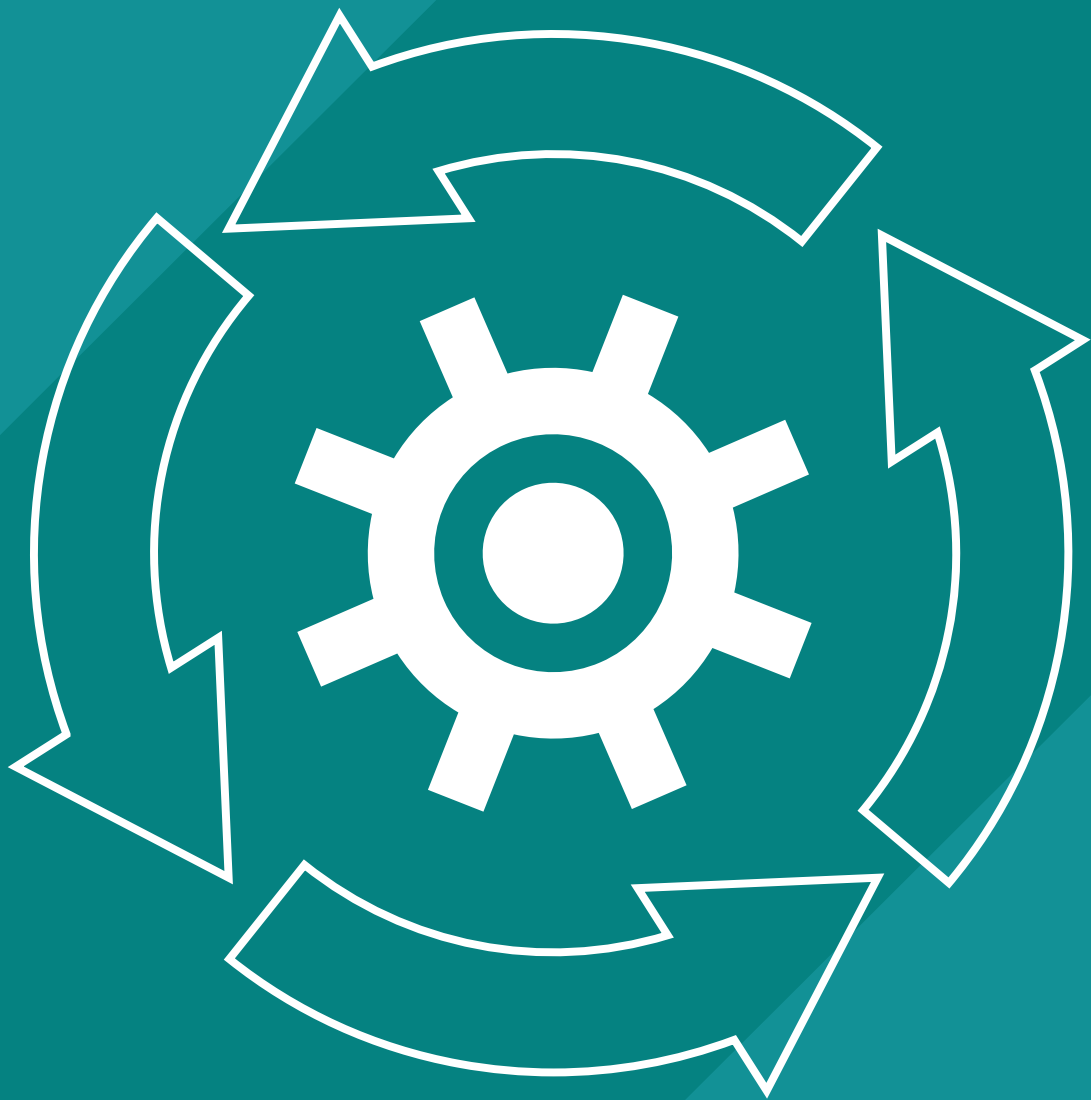
Figure 37: Net Promoter Scores; comparison of subgroups

Q40 'On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is definitely, how likely are you to recommend a trainee placement abroad to other vocational learners to help them enter the labour market?'



This suggests a strong correlation between a vocational learner's likelihood to recommend a mobility placement with their personal employment situation. As mobility placements are designed to bring learners closer to the world of work, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who have ultimately found employment feel more positively about their experience.

Six: Conclusions



Conclusions

The FET/VET system in Ireland serves both to develop specific vocational skills and to contribute to broader education and societal goals. Erasmus+ and other mobility programmes do the same: the key benefits for participants are the development of competences and skills, and the broadening of horizons and development of new personal and professional connections.

Mobility placements are effective at developing self-confidence and independence, along with soft skills such as communication, team-working and time management. This is particularly evident among younger participants, those who have not lived away from home before and those who have not worked in their vocational area before.

These are also attributes and skills that are in demand among Irish employers. The Irish Business and Employers Confederation 2018 paper 'Future Ready: Improving Graduate Employability Skills' defined 'employable' people as those who:

not only know their technical area or specialism but can also apply the knowledge and skills they have in varied and dynamic situations which allow them to develop their skills further. Capable people are deemed confident in their ability to:

- take appropriate action effectively;
- explain what they are hoping to achieve;
- engage successfully in life and work with others;
- continue their learning through their experiences in a changing world.

In general, mobility destinations are concentrated in Western Europe: Spain, the UK, France and Scandinavia are the most popular countries. However, mobilities significantly increase participants' likelihood to work in other countries, with more than two-thirds of survey respondents stating that they were not afraid to work or study abroad as a result of their placements.

Vocational mobilities also offer first-hand experience of being 'alien' in a different country, culture and work environment. This experience helps to increase participants' empathy with those in similar situations in Ireland.

While mobilities improve foreign language skills to a certain extent, the effect is more pronounced when participants have an existing grounding in the language that they can build on. The Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support tool does not appear to fulfil this function for participants, and there is demand for additional language instruction prior to placement. Interestingly, mobilities also increase participants' awareness of their own language and communication skills through the process of adjusting register and pace to better engage with non-native speakers.

Erasmus+ mobilities have a lasting impact on personal and professional contacts, with many participants developing close ties not only with their co-workers but with the peer group they undertook the placement with.

Placements in general have a beneficial impact on the personal and professional lives of participants, by increasing self-confidence and independence. This can help participants to enter the labour market

as they feel more capable of performing in pressured situations such as interviews and entering new work places.

There is a high level of overall satisfaction with European mobility programmes among participants, and a high degree of satisfaction with the mentoring and support provided by sending organisations and employers.

The main findings of this study show that this satisfaction is derived from:

- provision of funding, structure and support for participants
- provision of meaningful, relevant work duties that are appropriate to the learner's skills and clearly communicated to them in advance
- a sense of personal commitment to the sending organisation and host employer on the part of the VET learner
- the individual learner's stage of professional and life experience.

Financial support from European programmes enables learners to take up work experience abroad when they might not otherwise have the opportunity, but the structure provided by a regulated programme, and the emotional and practical support from sending organisations and host employers are equally essential. Learners who are nervous being away from home, who have physical or mental health difficulties or who have caring commitments might struggle to independently arrange a work placement – even if they had the financial capacity to do so. Staff of VET sending organisations have shown consistent and exemplary support for their learners, and have been quick to solve problems. This is a real strength of the VET system in Ireland, and it enables learners to develop and exercise their independence in a relatively protected environment. In this way, mobility programmes also strongly support social inclusion.

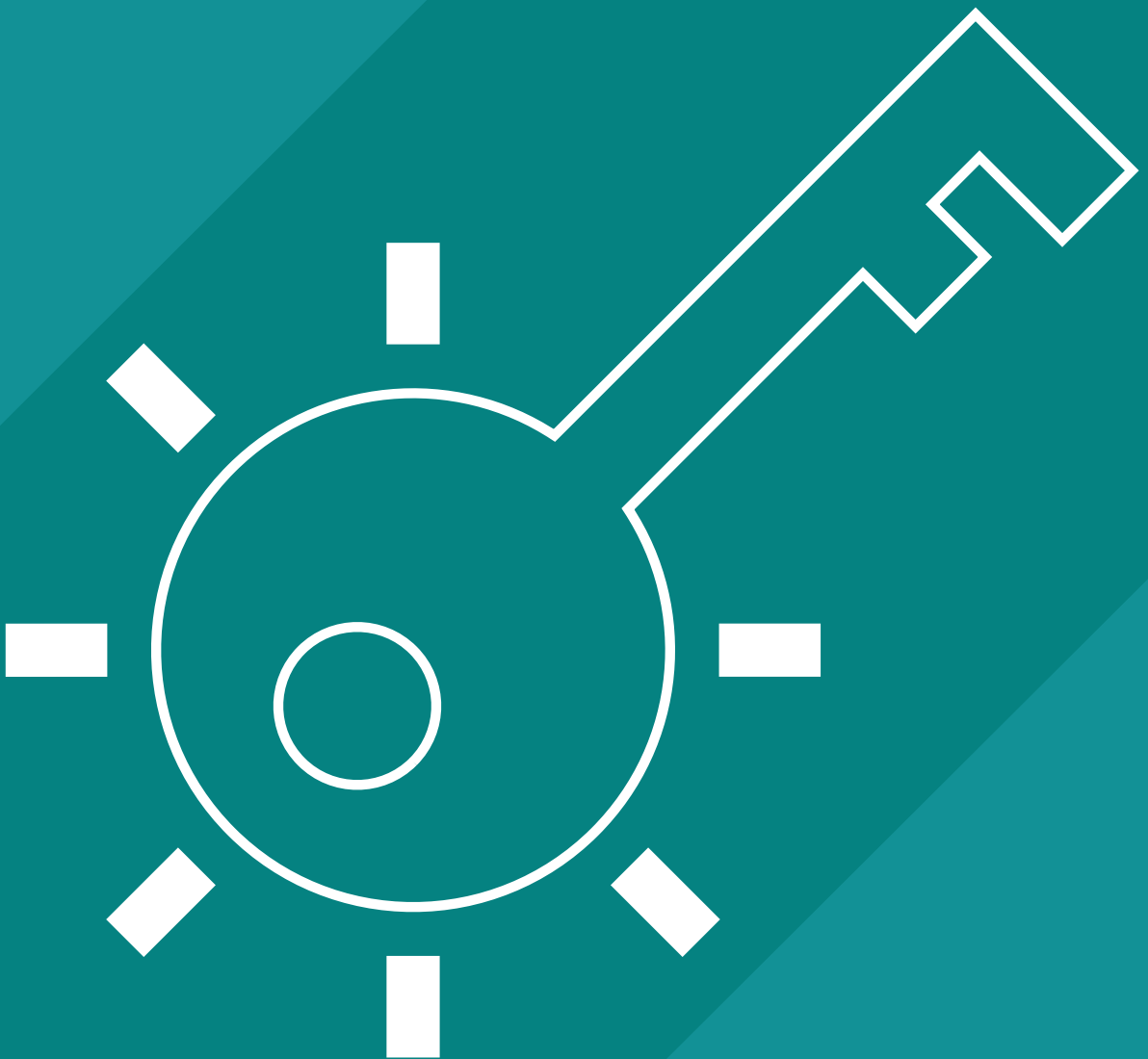
Participants express the highest satisfaction with their work placements when the work duties were relevant to their interests, matched to their skill level and when they progressed to education or employment after their work placement. Prior discussion of duties between the sending and host organisations and between the sending organisation and learner is the most effective way to realise this high level of satisfaction.

Participants showed a strong sense of pride in their selection for a mobility placement, particularly when selected through a competitive process. When accompanied by recognition of the work involved in organising placements, this pride translated to a strong sense of commitment to the sending organisation and host employer. Conversely, participants felt ashamed of peers who did not value the placements.

Vocational mobilities have the greatest cultural and interpersonal impact on those who have not lived away from home or worked in their vocational area before, and these participants tend to value their placements expressly for developing these competences. Placement durations of a month or less are therefore very appropriate for this group. However, participants who have more extensive professional and life experience were more likely to value the placements for the development of their vocational skills and contribution to their overall career path.

It is evident that even short-term mobility placements have a profound effect on the competences, skills and attitudes of participants long after completion, and that they provide pathways into education and employment.

Seven: National Recommendations



National Recommendations

1. Peer-to-peer connection should be further supported and encouraged, particularly online through sharing of information on social and professional networks. It is relatively common practice among project coordinators to invite previous mobility project participants to speak to prospective participants in person about their experiences, through open days and information events. Connecting peers in this way not only allows the authentic voice of the learner to be heard, but is an effective channel for passing on practical advice. Participants are highly receptive to hearing from people who have been through the experience before.
2. Targeted, vocationally oriented language instruction would substantially enhance the experience of participants who have an existing knowledge in the language of their destination country and those who undertake longer mobility placements. The current Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support (OLS) system is not fulfilling this function and there is strong demand for tailored language instruction. This should be strongly considered for any future programme.
3. The introduction of a project-based learning element to mobility placements could mitigate the reported disengagement of some participants in the mobility experience. Learners who are not genuinely interested in the placements can be demotivating for others, and can damage the reputation of an organisation with host employers. Working on the practical aspects of arranging mobilities – booking flights, securing accommodation, communicating with host organisations and employers – could help trainees to take more responsibility for themselves and feel more involvement in the project as a whole.
4. Participants would benefit from greater guidance on how to present the value of their mobility experience to employers in CVs and interviews. Some participants struggle to articulate the connection between their work placement and the skills required for the workplace, and may need help in mapping their personal outcomes against employability skills. This may be a resource that Léargas and perhaps other National Agencies, or a group of sending organisations, could develop.
5. Mobility placements could be used more flexibly to meet the needs of different cohorts of learners. The majority of CFEs arrange short-term placements towards the beginning or middle of a participant's course of learning, which have a profound effect on their cultural and interpersonal competences. This is particularly the case for younger or inexperienced learners. However, older or more experienced learners may be better served by longer-term placements that take place towards the end of study or after graduation. It should be recognised that managing longer-term placements places additional demands on organisations to monitor and support participants, and therefore may not be feasible for all organisations. However, organisations might consider the benefits of longer-term placements for learners and the possibilities to accommodate these: for example, organisations may operate projects with a mix of durations or even be able to amend durations in consultation with their National Agency.
6. The Irish vocational sector in general, and VET learners in particular, should be made more aware of the opportunities that exist for them under European mobility programmes. The National Agency could seek to work with high-level stakeholders such as SOLAS and ETB Ireland to develop a joint sustained message on access to these programmes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who contributed their time and experience to this study, particularly the VET learners who took part in interviews and focus groups. My sincere thanks also go to the project coordinators who helped arrange focus groups in their colleges.

I am grateful to my colleagues in Léargas and the project partners – particularly the project coordinator, Michal Pachocki – for their support. Finally, I thank my late father Dr Gerard Hughes for his guidance and notes on the text.

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