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**BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN
JOBS AND EDUCATION:
AN ANALYSIS ON NEW SKILLS
AND SOLUTIONS**

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Introduction

Bridging the gap between jobs and education: an analysis on new skills and solutions

In a historical moment characterised by rapid technological advancements, global connectivity, and shifting socio-economic paradigms, the intersection between education and employment has never been more critical. The European continent, with its diverse and dynamic job markets, is no exception to this transformative landscape. The gap between the skills acquired through traditional education and the skills demanded by the contemporary job market has grown more pronounced, particularly in the context of the 2023 European Year of Skills. As a result, individuals entering or navigating the European job market today face a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The purpose of this document is to delve into the multifaceted landscape of skills required in the European job market, examining the evolving demands on job seekers, and emphasising the pivotal role of both hard and soft skills. Furthermore, we will investigate innovative solutions, such as micro-credentials, for recognizing and validating informal skills acquired through various life experiences.

1. garagErasmus role in soft skills development and recognition

Since its creation, garagErasmus has focused on skills development in order to empower the Erasmus generation and help them enter the labour market, also thanks to the skills acquired during the Erasmus exchange programme. In fact, students and trainees with Erasmus experience have shown that the exchange in another country has allowed them to expand their bag of skills, mainly linguistic, social and intercultural.

To this end, garagErasmus started working with national agencies, universities, local organisations and companies to provide them with as many tools as possible to develop these skills with the help of experienced trainers and to have them recognised through a certification, which later led to garagErasmus' interest in issuing and recognising micro-credentials.

Many garagErasmus projects have skills development at their core:

- **The + of Erasmus** in Italy and Belgium, in particular the Learning Garage initiative, a series of interactive webinars with experts, aimed at giving young students and alumni in Italy and Belgium tips on job hunting and self-branding developing professional skills in the face of post-pandemic labour market challenges, and the Accelerator initiative aiming at developing intercultural and language skills in exchange students in Italy;
- **Digital Life Learning**, enabling senior citizens to acquire essential digital skills to better participate in society and make their lives easier and to enable students to gain experience in acquiring essential skills in the form of micro-credentials that can then be used in the labour market; 2022-1-IT02-KA220-ADU-000088024
- **Brand Me**, a project focused on increasing youth employment opportunities thanks to the acquisition of personal branding, digital and entrepreneurial skills; 2022-2-PT02-KA220-YOU-000101893
- **Peditory**, aimed at developing peace and conflict resolution skills as new tools for young people from diverse cultural backgrounds to build strong, resilient, respectful and peaceful communities; 2022-2-PT02-KA220-YOU-000097612
- **From school to EU**, promoting cultural and linguistic exchange and civic awareness among students from three secondary schools in Italy, France and Spain to develop digital, intercultural and language skills; 2022-1-IT02-KA210-SCH-000081082
- **Brights**, strengthening and valorising the central role of higher education institutions in achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Green Deal by training students in green skills development to ensure adequate

participation of young people and certifying those skills through micro-credentials; 2021-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000030264

- **EDU2030**, equipping young people with the skills needed to influence EU decisions on SDGs and sustainability; 2021-1-IT03-KA220-YOU-000029128
- **Piramid**, about the importance of intercultural competences in the tourism sector and sharing methods and tools for better management of multicultural environments.

2023 saw two important events in the field of skills and their recognition for garagErasmus: the presentation of its new mission at the annual meeting of the garagErasmus network in September and the involvement in the European Digital Education Hub, which brings together the community working on digital education and provides a dedicated space for their information sharing and collaboration needs. Indeed, the mission of garagErasmus has evolved to make mobility more visible, effective and inclusive, so that more young people can improve their own communities through the skills they gain from their mobility experiences. Within the EDEH, garagErasmus has joined the micro-credentials team, starting with its participation in the European Digital Education Hub community workshop in March.

In addition to these main events, in November, the European Higher Education Networking Summit will take place, where higher education institutions will have the opportunity to exchange experiences, good practices and knowledge on the development of soft skills in higher education and their certification through micro-credentials.

It's in this context of continuing and developing interest in the importance of skills and their recognition, particularly for young people, that this research has been undertaken.

This research is the result of collaboration between the garagErasmus working group and its 22 member universities. Working together, we have drawn on our collective expertise and experience to take an in-depth look at the challenges and opportunities facing the Erasmus generation in successfully integrating into the European labor market. Drawing on diverse experiences and knowledge, we sought to provide a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of skills in demand, the difficulties faced by young adults, and the role of micro-credentials in bridging the skills gap. We hope that this research will not only contribute to the ongoing discourse on skills recognition, but also serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, educational institutions, employers and, most importantly, young people who aspire to thrive in today's dynamic employment landscape.

2. Skills Required in the European Job Market

The European job market is currently undergoing significant transformations in response to global economic shifts, technological advancements, and evolving societal dynamics. As the world becomes more interconnected, European employers are actively seeking a new generation of professionals who possess a versatile skill set to navigate these multifaceted challenges. Industries are rapidly adapting to automation, digitization, and globalisation, which has reshaped the demand for specific competencies. The World Economic Forum (WEF), one of the most renowned international organisations in the realm of public-private cooperation, has recently unveiled its highly anticipated "*Future of Jobs Report 2023*." In this year's report, insights have been gathered from 803 companies, which collectively have a workforce of over 11.3 million employees. These companies represent 27 industry clusters and hail from 45 economies spanning various regions worldwide. The report provides a thorough analysis of the repercussions stemming from ongoing disruptions in the labour market and offers a five-year projection concerning technology adoption, employment trends, and the evolving skill landscape. However, before looking at what skills are critically essential for entering the European job market it is necessary to mark a distinction between hard and soft skills, as provided by the European framework for skills recognition and development. The framework distinguishes between hard and soft skills as hard skills typically encompass technical competencies and specific knowledge relevant to a particular job or industry and are often acquired through formal education and training programs. In contrast, soft skills, often referred to as transversal or employability skills, include interpersonal, communication, problem-solving, and adaptability skills, among others. Soft skills are recognized as essential for overall employability and professional success, as they enable individuals to navigate diverse work environments and contribute effectively to teams and organisations.

Here below you can find a highlight of the ten skills most highly valued by the World Economic Forum which for the purpose of this report we divided into hard and soft proposing also some additional ones that we believe are worth taking into consideration.

2.1 Most in-demand hard skills in 2023 by WEFForum

- **Technological literacy:** proficiency in utilising technology, particularly in an era of digital transformation, is an imperative hard skill set. Job seekers should be adept at navigating digital tools, software, and platforms relevant to their industry.

- **Quality control:** quality control remains pivotal in ensuring the highest standards in products and services. Professionals who can uphold quality are essential in maintaining customer satisfaction.

Other hard skills worth mentioning

- **Language skills:** given the diverse and interconnected nature of Europe, multilingualism is highly valued. Proficiency in languages, especially English, is often considered a fundamental hard skill, enabling individuals to work effectively across borders and communicate with international clients and colleagues.
- **Project management:** Effective project management skills are crucial for overseeing tasks, budgets, and timelines. Employers value professionals who can efficiently plan, execute, and monitor projects to successful completion.

2.2 Most in-demand soft skills in 2023 by WEForum

- **Creative thinking:** creative thinking is considered indispensable in industries seeking innovative solutions. Job seekers are encouraged to cultivate their creative problem-solving skills, as they play a pivotal role in driving competitiveness and efficiency.
- **Resilience, flexibility, and agility:** the rapidly changing landscape of industries requires professionals who can adapt to unforeseen challenges, bounce back from setbacks, and demonstrate unwavering determination in the face of adversity.
- **Motivation and self-awareness:** employers value individuals who exhibit strong self-motivation and self-awareness. These qualities drive personal growth and effectiveness in the workplace.
- **Curiosity and lifelong learning:** a natural curiosity to explore new knowledge and a commitment to continuous learning are assets in a job market where information and technologies evolve at a rapid pace.
- **Empathy and active listening:** effective interpersonal skills, including empathy and active listening, are essential for building positive working relationships and understanding diverse perspectives.
- **Leadership and social influence:** the ability to lead and inspire others, as well as exert positive social influence, is highly coveted by employers across various sectors.
- **Analytical thinking:** the ability to analyse complex issues, identify patterns, and draw meaningful conclusions is highly regarded. Employers seek individuals who can approach problems methodically and make data-informed decisions.

- **Dependability and attention to detail:** Attention to detail, combined with a sense of dependability, ensures accuracy and reliability in tasks and projects, which are highly valued traits by employers.

Other Soft Skills Worth Mentioning

- **Communication skills:** Strong communication skills, both verbal and written, are vital for effective collaboration and client interactions. Clear and concise communication fosters teamwork and customer satisfaction.
- **Teamwork and collaboration:** The European job market places a premium on individuals who can work harmoniously in diverse teams. Collaboration skills, including the ability to listen, share ideas, and resolve conflicts, are highly valued.
- **Emotional intelligence:** Understanding and managing emotions, both one's own and those of others, is a valuable skill. Emotional intelligence enhances interpersonal relationships, leadership effectiveness, and overall workplace well-being.
- **Cultural competence:** In a culturally diverse continent like Europe, cultural competence is essential. It involves respecting and understanding diverse perspectives and adapting to different cultural norms.
- **Problem-solving and critical thinking:** The ability to analyse complex problems, think critically, and propose innovative solutions is essential. Employers seek individuals who can adapt to changing circumstances and make informed decisions.

Top 10 skills of 2023



1.  Analytical thinking	6.  Technological literacy
2.  Creative thinking	7.  Dependability and attention to detail
3.  Resilience, flexibility and agility	8.  Empathy and active listening
4.  Motivation and self-awareness	9.  Leadership and social influence
5.  Curiosity and lifelong learning	10.  Quality control

Type of skill

■ Cognitive skills
 ■ Self-efficacy
 ■ Management skills
 ■ Technology skills
 ■ Working with others

Source
World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2023.

Note
The skills judged to be of greatest importance to workers at the time of the survey

We can observe that 8 out of the top 10 skills highlighted by the World Economic Forum can be categorised as soft skills. This underlines the increasing significance of soft skills in the European job market. Therefore, in the next chapter, we will specifically focus on exploring and addressing the critical realm of soft skills, which play an indispensable role in shaping employability, job market competitiveness, and organisational success across Europe.

2.3 A case study: the Brand Me project

An interesting case study to analyse can be represented by the Brand Me project dedicated to enhancing youth employability and professional development by strengthening personal branding skills. The Brand Me project partnership, consisting of the organisations Associação VR de Marketing (Portugal), Innovation Education Lab (Romania), Efektas Group (Lithuania), garagErasmus Foundation (Italy), VAEV (Austria), and INDEPCIE (Spain), worked together to facilitate youngsters entry into the current labour market, reduce employment mismatches, inspire career development, promote civic engagement among European youth, and enhance their professionalism, recognition, and competitiveness. The study conducted by the Brand Me partnership involved questionnaires targeting HR staff, educational institutions, career guidance and employment organisations, and stakeholders in 6 different European countries. The responses collected from at least 40 participants per country aimed to gain insights into the skills required for successful integration into the labour market. The study identified several other skills valued by employers, complementing the 10 skills highlighted by the World Economic Forum. These skills encompass both hard and soft skills, including leadership, proactivity, initiative-taking, dedication, commitment, multi-tasking, self-esteem, self-awareness, adaptability, creativity, eloquence, critical thinking, motivation, a can-do attitude, marketing, sales, emotional intelligence, social media proficiency, presentation, and communication skills.

2.4 Comparison with previously highlighted skills

When comparing the 12 most in-demand skills identified by the Brand Me study with the 10 skills highlighted by the World Economic Forum, despite the difference in scale, several commonalities emerge. Both sets of skills recognize the significance of analytical thinking, creativity, motivation, self-awareness, communication, and emotional intelligence.

- Analytical thinking and critical thinking align with analytical thinking mentioned by the World Economic Forum.

- Creative thinking and creativity are synonymous and emphasise the importance of innovative problem-solving.
- Motivation and perseverance correspond to motivation and self-awareness, emphasising self-motivation and commitment.
- Communication and writing skills match the communication skills highlighted in the previous section.
- Emotional Intelligence, mentioned in the Brand Me study, also underlines the importance of emotional intelligence in the workplace, similar to empathy and active listening from the World Economic Forum's skills.

These commonalities highlight on two very different scales, the consensus among employers and organisations regarding the importance of these skills in the modern job market. Employability is enhanced when individuals possess a combination of technical proficiency, personal assets, and soft skills. The synergy between these skills equips individuals to excel in their careers and contribute effectively to their organisations, making them highly sought-after candidates in the labour market.

The Role of Soft Skills in Employability

Soft skills, as evidenced by both findings, play a crucial role in employee research and are highly valued by employers. They include qualities such as leadership, adaptability, creativity and emotional intelligence, which are essential for effective collaboration, problem solving and harmony in the workplace. Soft skills enable people to meet the challenges of the modern labour market, especially in diverse and dynamic environments. According to the Brand Me report, 79% of the employers surveyed agreed that soft skills are more important than job-related training. This proves once again that soft skills are crucial in today's job market: people with strong soft skills are better equipped to embrace change, learn new skills and tackle complex challenges, ensuring long-term career success. Here are four reasons why soft skills are of great importance in entering the labour market.

- **Transferability:** Soft skills transcend industry boundaries and job roles, making them valuable assets that can be applied in various positions, organisations, and sectors. In contrast, hard skills often pertain to specific roles or industries, limiting their applicability elsewhere.
- **Teamwork enhancement:** Many professions necessitate collaborative efforts, and soft skills like effective communication, empathy, and cooperation are fundamental for fostering teamwork. While hard skills might be indispensable for individual tasks, they may not necessarily contribute to a harmonious and productive team environment.

- **Career advancement:** Soft skills often distinguish high achievers from their peers, playing a pivotal role in career progression. While hard skills may open doors initially, it's one's soft skills that pave the way for continuous growth and exceptional performance.
- **Leadership:** Effective leadership hinges on the possession of robust soft skills like adept communication, empathy, and effective problem-solving. While hard skills may be pertinent to leading a team, it's the soft skills that enable leaders to inspire and motivate their team members.

In conclusion, although hard skills are central the cultivation of soft skills proves to be equally critical for workplace success. Employers are increasingly prioritising these interpersonal competencies in their hiring decisions, acknowledging their pivotal role in building cohesive teams, and guiding individuals along their career paths.

3. Challenges faced by young adults in accessing the job market in Europe

While Europe boasts a diverse and vibrant job market, there are several common difficulties that young adults often encounter. Entering the job market as a young adult in Europe can be a challenging endeavour, marked by several hurdles and obstacles. One of the most glaring challenges is the persistently **high youth unemployment rates** in certain European countries. As of August 2021, Greece, Spain, and Italy reported youth unemployment rates of 32.5%, 28.2%, and 29.2%, respectively, according to Eurostat. These statistics underscore the uphill battle young adults face when trying to secure employment. Moreover, the struggle to find employment, coupled with economic uncertainty, can have detrimental effects on the **mental health** of young adults.

As employers often prefer candidates with prior work experience, the "experience trap" is a common conundrum for many young adults. The trap reflects the paradox of youngsters just embarking on their careers who are getting multiple rejections due precisely to their lack of experience, thus hampering their initial foray into the job market.

Educational mismatch is another prevalent issue as young adults may find that the skills they've acquired through education don't align with the demands of the job market. This discrepancy can leave them either overqualified or underqualified for available positions, contributing to high levels of unemployment or underemployment. Furthermore, precarious work arrangements add to the challenges faced by young adults. They are more likely to be offered temporary or part-time positions, often lacking benefits and job security. Such positions provide little stability and make it challenging to plan for the future or achieve financial independence. Another often overlooked aspect is the **skills gap**. While young adults may possess technical qualifications, they might lack essential soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. In an evolving job market, these skills are increasingly valued and can significantly impact employability.

Additionally, **geographic mobility** can be a barrier. Some European regions offer more vibrant job markets than others, requiring young adults to relocate. This step can be financially burdensome and emotionally challenging, particularly for those not well-prepared for such a move. Similarly, **language barriers** also come

into play in a continent as linguistically diverse as Europe. Young adults seeking employment in countries where they aren't proficient in the local language face considerable hurdles in securing a job.

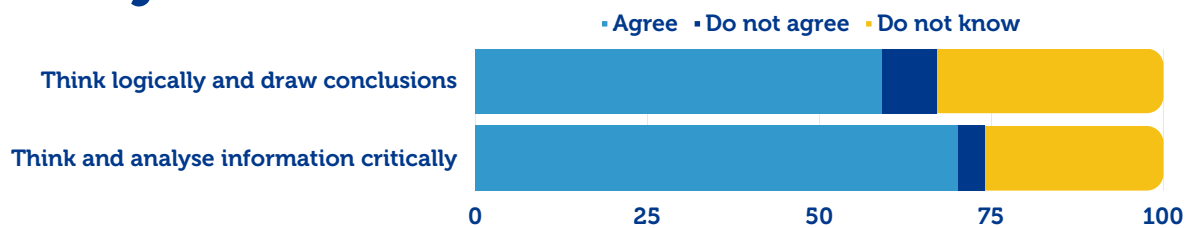
3.1 gE's profiling of the Erasmus Alumni skillset

Erasmus alumni are generally well-positioned to tackle several of the challenges mentioned above due to the transformative experiences they gain during their international mobility. In this sense, garagErasmus network has worked extensively to highlight and value the soft skills that alumni acquire during their mobility. The above-mentioned project "the plus of Erasmus" aims specifically at creating awareness among alumni on what are the soft skills that they acquired during their mobility and providing the tools to leverage these new skills to enter the job market.

As highlighted in the Erasmus impact study of 2014 on "*Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions*" Erasmus students and alumni often acquire a competitive edge in the job market by developing cross-cultural communication skills and adaptability through exposure to diverse cultures and languages. This makes them better equipped to handle language barriers and geographic mobility challenges. Furthermore, Erasmus alumni typically build a strong skill set that includes soft skills like teamwork, and problem-solving. These skills are invaluable when addressing the experience paradox and the skills gap issues. Employers highly value these skills in young adults entering the job market, as they contribute to effective collaboration and problem-solving. The international exposure gained during Erasmus's experiences also fosters self-reliance and resilience which is crucial in navigating the precarious work arrangements and the pressure to find employment that young adults often encounter.

To complement and update the data of Erasmus impact study of 2014 garagErasmus asked its member universities to gather valuable insights on the soft skills gained by Erasmus students and alumni following their international mobility experiences. Our member universities collected post-mobility questionnaires from more than 2,500 students, providing a rich and diverse source of data that offers valuable insights into their experiences and skill development during their international mobility programs. These students, representing diverse fields of study and backgrounds, provided us with firsthand accounts of the soft skills they acquired during their international mobility experiences. Here below you will find the results of the questionnaires divided into different skill groups.

Analytical skills



The data from post-mobility questionnaires for Erasmus students regarding analytical skills is quite insightful. It appears that a significant majority of students agree that their international experiences have enhanced their ability to think logically and draw conclusions, with 59% of respondents expressing agreement. Additionally, an even larger proportion, 70% of students, believe that they have developed the skill to think critically and analyse information effectively.

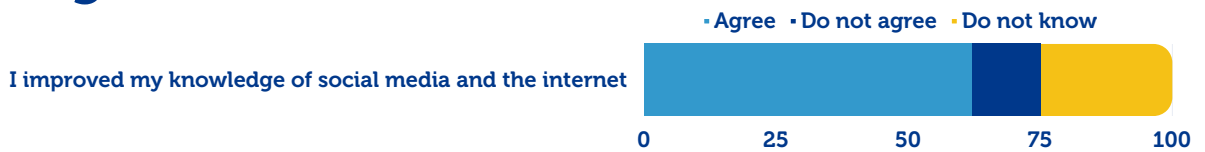
These findings indicate that Erasmus experiences are positively correlated with the development of analytical skills. The majority of students perceive an improvement in their ability to think logically, draw conclusions, and critically assess information after participating in the program.

Creative Thinking



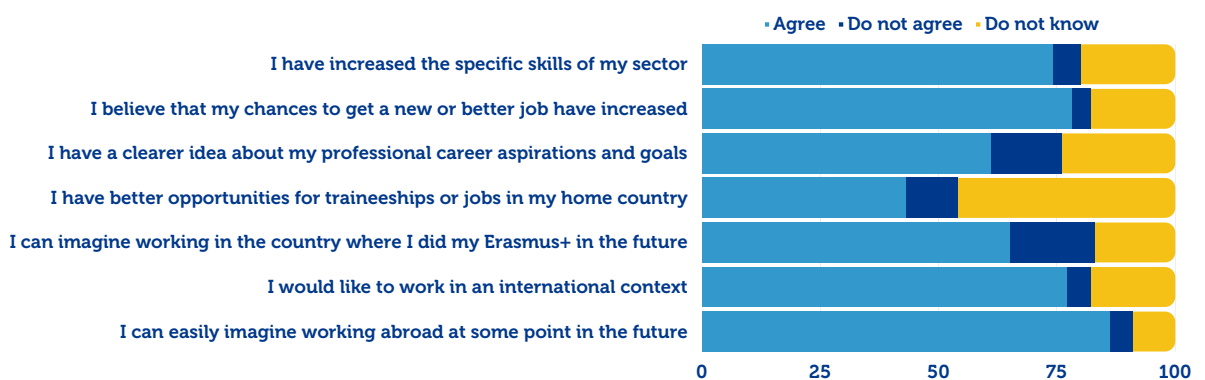
A significant majority of students agree that their international experiences have enhanced their creative abilities. Firstly 79% of students out of the total respondents agree that they can find solutions in difficult and challenging contexts. This suggests that the exposure to different cultures and academic challenges during their mobility programs has contributed to their problem-solving skills. Secondly, 64% of students agree that they can develop an idea and put it into practice, indicating that they have gained confidence in their capacity to turn creative concepts into tangible outcomes. Lastly, 62% of students express agreement with the statement that they can express themselves creatively. This implies that the international exposure and multicultural interactions provided by Erasmus have stimulated their creativity.

Digital skills



62% of students agree with the statement regarding the improvement of their knowledge of social media and the internet suggesting that the international exposure and academic experiences during their mobility programs have contributed to enhancing their digital literacy.

Career Awareness



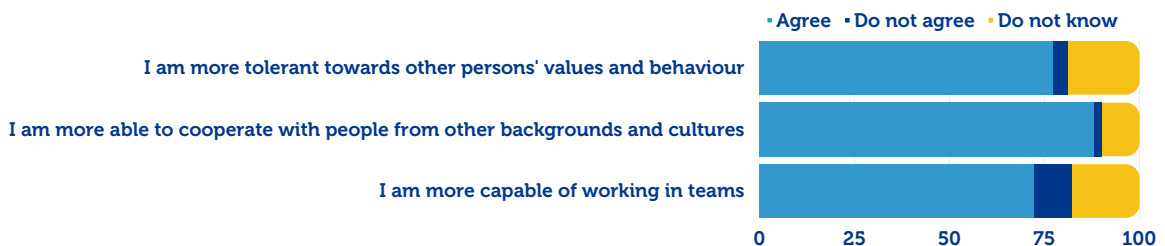
The data related to career awareness demonstrates student's positive perceptions regarding their career prospects and aspirations. A significant percentage of respondents agree with statements indicating increased sector-specific skills (74% of students), and improved job prospects (78% of students), but only 61% of students have clearer professional career goals. Furthermore, the data shows that a substantial portion of students would like to work in international contexts (77% of students) and can envision working abroad in the future (86% of students). Erasmus students are thus more open to diverse and international job opportunities as a result of their mobility experiences. However, only 43% of students think they will have better opportunities for traineeships or jobs in their home country highlighting the distrust in the job market probably caused by the high unemployment rate and precarious employment.

Leadership skills



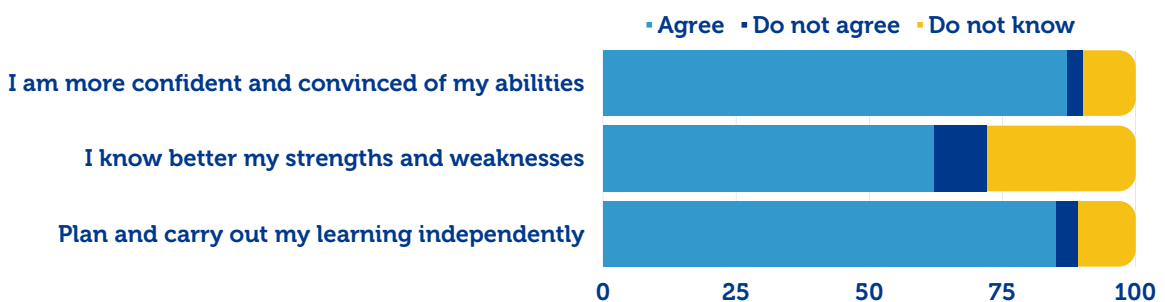
The data on leadership skills, gathered from post-mobility questionnaires for Erasmus students, indicates a positive impact on their leadership abilities following their international experiences. A notable portion of students agrees that they are better equipped to handle high-responsibility work tasks (59%) and are more capable of planning and organising tasks and activities (78%). Additionally, many students report an improvement in their decision-making skills (67%).

Collaboration and teamwork skills



An overwhelming majority of respondents agree with statements indicating increased tolerance towards diverse values and behaviours (77% of students), improved capacity to cooperate with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures (88 students), and enhanced teamwork capabilities (72% of students).

Self-awareness skills



Students reported positive developments in their self-awareness skills. Specifically, 87% of students agreed that they are now more confident and convinced of their abilities. Additionally, 62% of students indicated that they have a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, while 85% expressed that they can plan and carry out their learning independently.

Ethical awareness and active citizenship



Erasmus's experiences have a great impact on the cultural and ethical awareness as well as active citizenship of students. A significant 89% of students agreed that they now recognize the value of different cultures. Furthermore, 65% expressed increased interest in daily global events, while 53% reported enhanced interest in European topics. Additionally, 47% of students mentioned feeling more European after their mobility period, indicating a stronger sense of European identity. In terms of social and political awareness, 51% agreed that they are now more aware of these concepts. However, when it comes to active participation in community affairs, opinions varied, with 41% expressing their intent to engage more actively, 23% disagreeing, and 36% remaining uncertain about their future involvement.

Resilience, flexibility and agility



An overwhelming 91% of students agreed that they are now more able to adapt to and act in new situations, indicating a heightened level of adaptability. Additionally, 88% of students reported increased open-mindedness and curiosity about new challenges, suggesting greater flexibility and agility in facing new experiences.

The gE members universities' survey highlights how Erasmus students emerge from their international mobility experiences better equipped to face a range of challenges, including geographical and language barriers. As shown by post-mobility questionnaires, these experiences help them navigate geographical and language barriers, as many of them are multilingual and eager to pursue career

opportunities beyond their home countries. However, even though they possess a substantial repertoire of soft skills, they are not immune to the broader structural challenges that persist in the European job market. Challenges such as high youth unemployment rates and the prevalence of precarious work arrangements continue to impact their employment prospects. Moreover, while they carry a substantial baggage of soft skills, these competencies may not always receive the necessary recognition to be a valuable asset in the competitive employment landscape. Recognizing the importance of bridging this gap, the next chapter will delve into strategies for enhancing the recognition of these soft skills through micro-credentials.

4. Micro-Credentials and Recognition of Informal Skills

In the ever-evolving landscape of education and employment, micro-credentials have emerged as an important tool for both learners and employers. These reduced-size, specialised certifications offer a flexible and responsive approach to skill acquisition, making them highly relevant in today's dynamic job market. Micro-credentials hold the potential to revolutionise the recognition of informal skills, providing a structured framework to validate competencies that individuals often acquire through life experiences, such as volunteering, internships, or extracurricular activities. Unlike conventional degrees, which require years of study, micro-credentials can be earned relatively quickly. This speed and specificity make them a valuable tool for individuals seeking to upskill or reskill for a changing job market. One of the key advantages of micro-credentials is their ability to recognize and validate informal skills.

Many individuals, including Erasmus students and alumni, acquire valuable competencies through informal experiences like internships, volunteer work, or self-directed learning. However, these skills often go unrecognised by traditional education and hiring systems. Micro-credentials offer a means to formally acknowledge these abilities, providing individuals with a tangible credential to showcase their expertise. Moreover, micro-credentials are closely aligned with industry needs as they are often developed in collaboration with employers and professional associations, ensuring that the skills they represent are relevant and in-demand. This alignment with the job market enhances the employability of individuals, as they can acquire skills that are directly applicable to their chosen field.

For Erasmus alumni, who may have diverse international experiences and a wide range of informal skills, micro-credentials provide a pathway to bridge the gap between their education and employment goals. Alumni can leverage micro-credentials to formalise the soft skills they've gained through international mobility experiences, such as adaptability, cross-cultural communication, and resilience. By earning micro-credentials that align with their acquired skills, Erasmus alumni can present a well-rounded profile to potential employers, showcasing their ability to thrive in dynamic and multicultural work environments. However, it's essential to acknowledge that while micro-credentials hold the potential to be a valuable asset for bridging the gap between education and employment, they are still a relatively new and evolving concept and there are several challenges to address in order to make micro-credentials an effective solution for Erasmus alumni and other learners.

garagErasmus recognized the significance of these challenges and actively participated in the Europea Digital Education Hub community workshop in Spain in March 2023. This summit served as a platform for key stakeholders in the international micro-credential community to convene and discuss the current state and future prospects of education and employment in Europe. With the active involvement of 110 practitioners, policymakers, and thought leaders representing a diverse range of 70 public and private entities, who all engaged in the Micro-Credentials Masterclass, a collective declaration emerged. This declaration emphatically calls upon European governments, educational institutions, accreditation authorities, learner representatives, and employers to respond proactively to the multifaceted challenges posed by societal transformations and technological advancements. In particular, institutional leaders are being called upon to play a pivotal role in the advancement of micro-credentials.

Institutional leaders are urged to take bold steps towards massively expanding the implementation of micro-credentials within their educational institutions. This expansion should not be arbitrary but should be driven by a strategic analysis of how micro-credentials can effectively contribute to the institution's overarching goals. By aligning micro-credentials with their strategic vision, educational leaders can ensure that these credentials become an integral part of their institution's educational offerings.

Furthermore, institutional leaders are encouraged to engage in cross-sectoral collaboration when it comes to the design and enhancement of micro-credentials. Recognizing that the challenges and opportunities presented by micro-credentials extend beyond individual institutions, leaders should actively seek partnerships and collaborations with stakeholders from various sectors. This collaborative approach will not only foster innovation but also help bridge knowledge and skills gaps in Europe. In addition, institutional leaders should work towards widening access to Europe's education systems and standards. This can be achieved through various means, including the development of entrance-level micro-credential courses. By offering such courses, institutions can make formal education more accessible and relevant, especially in the midst of ongoing economic transformations.

Policymakers also have a crucial role to play in the advancement of micro-credentials. They are called upon to accelerate the alignment of micro-credentials with established qualification frameworks, as outlined in the European Union Council recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials. This alignment is essential to ensure that micro-credentials are widely recognized and accepted across Europe, contributing to a harmonised

educational landscape. Policymakers should take the lead in organising sector-wide and cross-sectoral knowledge-building initiatives. By bringing together experts and practitioners from different sectors, policymakers can create a conducive environment for sharing best practices, addressing challenges, and fostering a collective vision for the future of micro-credentials in Europe.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our analysis has shed light on several critical aspects of the evolving job market, the challenges faced by young people in accessing employment opportunities, and the unique skill sets acquired by Erasmus students through their international experiences. We firmly believe that micro-credentials have the potential to play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between education and employment, offering a viable solution to recognize and validate the diverse range of skills possessed by individuals. However, we acknowledge that the successful implementation of micro-credentials requires more than just individual efforts. It necessitates systemic reforms aimed at addressing the structural challenges faced by young job seekers, such as high youth unemployment rates and precarious work arrangements. Micro-credentials, in this context, can serve as a valuable tool for providing trustworthy recognition of skills, enhancing employability, and facilitating smoother transitions into the job market. As we move forward, it is imperative that both educational institutions and policymakers work collaboratively to embrace micro-credentials as part of a comprehensive strategy for preparing the youth for the demands of the modern job market. By combining the flexibility and recognition potential of micro-credentials with systemic reforms, we can create a more inclusive and responsive employment ecosystem that empowers young individuals to navigate their career paths with confidence and competence.

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