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# Erasmus and Employability

In this part of our book, we will consider one of the conceptual foundations underlying the Erasmus programme: the idea of using intra-European circulation as a means of enhancing employability. This is a complex matter. While in the previous chapter we outlined some contextual issues surrounding Erasmus, including its contribution to supporting the political institutions of the European Union, to advance our understanding of employability we need to engage more directly with the theoretical foundations of education and training systems, and the significance of mobility as practiced by European youth to its development. This involves looking beyond 'employability' as portrayed by policymakers and within stakeholder agencies, including education and training institutions, and considering what the term actually means in regard to supporting the enhancement of labour market competencies, focusing on the example of the internationalized learning habitus.

This is a necessary prerequisit task for this book. Despite the popularity of the term, it has no clear meaning. It is in fact regarded as an almost magical means of helping young people, especially graduates, successfully enter and move within the labour market. It is this 'magic' that makes its acquisition, or rather its enhancement, desirable. This may also explain


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why the term has consistently featured in policy discourse relating to Erasmus and other education and training initiatives: the way to make Erasmus mobility appear beneficial in regard to supporting young people's careers is to advertise the programme as a site for employability enhancement.

This promise is made clear in the introduction to the most recent version of the Erasmus Programme Guide published by the European Commission, with the first objective of a mobility project expected to be to:

> Support learners in the acquisition of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) with a view to improving their personal development, their involvement as considerate and active citizens in society and their employability in the European labour market and beyond. (European Commission 2017, p. 33)

Such a clear statement of intent reminds us of how Erasmus differs from other forms of intra-European circulation. It is a quite purposeful attempt to stimulate professional development, with employability being a key part of this process. Without this learning dimension, exchange visits would be little more than holidays subsidized by the European taxpayer. Furthermore, Erasmus is to be a collective experience that will ultimately contribute to the development of the EU. This means that we are not just talking about enhancing individuals' occupational profiles: Erasmus is about making Europe more employable.

More explicitly, educational profiles and future career prospects should be improved upon completion of a mobility exercise, alongside the acquisition of values such as an increased sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and awareness of what the EC terms the 'European project' and 'EU values' (European Commission 2017, p. 29; see also Chap. 7). To ensure Erasmus mobility functions in these respects, a lot of hard work needs to take place not only on the part of individual movers but also trainers and educators in host institutions, and the people who manage incoming and outgoing mobility (see Chap. 4). This is a major challenge, considering that unlike policy initiatives at national, regional or municipal levels, Erasmus introduces the difficulty of having to work with institutions from a range of different countries, each with its own distinct social,

economic and political characteristics. Therefore, what constitutes enhanced employability will differ according to factors such as the regional labour market chances of the individual mover.

In the remaining part of this chapter we will take a more detailed look at employability as it relates to Erasmus. As a first step, we will try to establish a stable definition of employability reflecting how the concept is utilized within the context of Erasmus, using established ideas from the sociological lexicon. Moving on from this point, we will examine some policy elements of the Erasmus+ initiative that involve attempts to systematically enhance employability. This includes not only undergraduate exchanges but also the potential for participation in mobility projects to contribute to the enhancement of this elusive but extremely valuable property.

## Employability in an International Learning Context

As we have intimated in the opening paragraphs, employability is a concept much used in discussion of education and training systems; a somewhat generic term covering various aspects of the process through which people are equipped for the labour market. However, ubiquitous usage has created difficulties in regard to understanding what educators and trainers mean by the term and what it is they actually need to do in order to the enhance employability of European youth. This is a situation not helped by the fact that definitions used by education and training agencies tend to be descriptive rather than theoretical, not to mention somewhat elastic, for example:

> The combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and to progress during [a] career. [The] employability of individuals depends on (a) personal attributes (including adequacy of knowledge and skills); (b) how these personal attributes are presented on the labour market; (c) the environmental and social contexts (i.e. incentives and opportunities offered to update and validate their knowledge and skills); and (d) the economic context. (Cedefop 2008, p. 77)[1]

What this represents is a demonstration of what employability is at European policy level at an extremely basic level. There is no actually stating of what the 'factors' that enable individuals to progress are or what the secret 'combination' is. The elements that encourage the emergence of employability are described using generic terms such as 'personal attributes', 'environment and social contexts' and 'economic contexts'. We therefore have the basis of a definition rather than an actual characterization of employability itself. As it stands, this definition is opaque, changeable and lacking gravitas.

In beginning to fill-out what constitutes employability, we can with reasonable ease elaborate upon the 'knowledge and skills' dimension as some of these aspects are not hard to identify: gaining qualifications and other forms of accreditation, completing training courses, becoming proficient in foreign languages, undertaking a work placement or simply gaining a better understanding of how a workplace functions. The common element in these actions is that their successful realization improves labour market chances through making people desirable to employers. But this is still a descriptive view, neglecting recognition of the process taking place within learning environments.

## Employability Actors

To overcome this limitation, we need to consider the link between the skills acquisition process and an ability to enter and remain within a labour market. To make this happen, there needs to be a connection between (potential) employees and employers. The process of coordinating the needs and wishes of these two actors is absolutely integral to enhancing employability. In regard to who helps make this connection, we can point towards (at least) two sets of additional parties. The first is relatively prominent: educators and trainers who should be able to convey to those in education and training what employers want in terms of skills and abilities. The second party is less perceptible, consisting of the people who oversee regulation of labour markets, including policymakers.

Policymakers play an indirect but extremely important role in employability through, making decisions about funding education and training

institutions, investing in infrastructure and regulating working conditions. However, they are also subject to outside influence, for example, from lobbyists or the media who may seek to influence labour market regulation for the benefit of vested interests. Taking into account the different roles played by these actors, we can now say that employability involves linking together (potential) employees and employers, with input from mediating parties such as educators and trainers, all of whom are dependent upon the existence of labour market conditions conducive to job creation and job security.

Individuals seeking work must therefore work hard to become employable through engaging with educators and trainers, while employers must provide suitable and sufficient opportunities, guided by legislative demands. That all four parties are required to work together explains the complexity of employability. Neither is the process of enhancing employability passive, since all four sets of actors must be making a simultaneous effort. Without meaningful input from any one of these parties, employability fails to emerge, making this property fragile and vulnerable.

## Employability as Synergy

What we are suggesting is that employability is a form of synergy that emerges when these parties successfully co-ordinate their efforts to create employment. Regarding where this process takes place, we can identify learning and training environments where the acquisition of formal credentials takes place, including universities. We can also hypothesise that there is a more subtle introduction to the world of work taking place, whether this be business, industry, science, the public sector or another occupational field. This may entail educators and trainers letting young people know that employment is *not* like student or school life and that expectations and attitudes need to be adjusted accordingly. Employability is therefore not *just* about accreditation but also teaching people to understand what employers want and how to orientate oneself towards meeting these expectations. While this task can be undertaken via informal and non-formal learning outside the classroom,

including interactions with peers and members of local communities, helping to formally explain social networking can play a crucial role in the employability process; for example, educators transmitting information about how to act within a workplace as well as news about possible opportunities.

Using Erasmus as an example, we can see that there is potential for an undergraduate exchange or involvement in a *Youth in Action* type project (see Chap. 7) to contribute to employability, albeit with a Europeanization dimension not present in initiatives grounded in national or regional contexts. Exchange students and project participants need to fulfil their learning responsibilities while employers ought to recognise the value of international experience. Educators play the crucial mediation role between these two parties, telling students what employers require of incoming staff, while the EU is an external arbiter of sorts in supporting the programme.[2] Facets of employability supported by Erasmus vary according to issues such as the exchangees' field of study or the theme addressed in a project, but a common feature relates to an ability to work internationally. This is not just a matter of improving fluency in a foreign language but extends to making contact with a culturally diverse range of people and better appreciating the values of other societies; qualities observed in other forms of student circulation and conceptualized as a form of 'mobility capital' (Hu and Cairns 2017).

Another vital consideration is that we cannot talk about the creation of employability in terms of a young person being a blank slate. Among groups such as students and graduates, and no doubt elsewhere, this quality already exists. In fact, very few people can be considered not to possess any significant degree of employability; perhaps children and the retired who are not expected to work for certain moral or legal reasons. It therefore becomes redundant to talk about the number of people in specific population who have 'employability' or a desire to produce a greater number of employable individuals. What educators and trainers do is cultivate an already existing quality. To understand employability we therefore need to accept that we are engaging in a process of skillfully managing qualities that are already present through building capacities and dispensing educational qualifications. This explains why policy discourse emanating from agencies such as the EU

always makes reference to enhancing or strengthening employability, not creating it.

On the part of individual learners, there is also a requirement to make effective decisions about which capacities and credentials to focus upon, and the task of locating an appropriate learning environment. The range of options can be considerable, not to mention confusing, and there may not be a clear idea as to which paths actually help improve labour market chances. There is the additional wildcard of personal choice and the selection of learning options according to what may be an extremely subjective criteria; with the exception of societies wherein occupational pathways are effectively proscribed at a very young age, young people will generally make decisions about future employment according to what appeals to them most rather than following an employability maximization principle. The input of 'employees' into the equation can therefore be hard to anticipate. Understanding employers' contribution to employability is another elusive element. This is a diffuse group, involving a large range of organisations spread across a wide geographical area, whose input may be difficult to obtain. The relationship between employers and educators/trainers may also be tenuous; for example, how do they actually learn about what employers require of future workers? But it is only when alignment exists between these parties, enabled by other external influences, that synergy happens and people find themselves entering and hopefully staying within the labour market.

## Estimating Employability

While employability has been extensively referenced in academic publications and policy documents, a degree of pragmatism prevails in regard to how this quality is to be measured. For instance, language learning has historically featured prominently in the analyses of various authors about Erasmus and other forms of international student exchange (Coleman 1998; Mattern 2016), as does the idea of equating employability with what are termed 'soft skills', encompassing social and cultural awareness of what is required in the workplace (Krzaklewska 2010). Much work on employability however tends to focus on student

perspectives (Tomlinson 2008; Tymon 2011) or employment outcomes (Parey and Waldinger 2011), limiting what we can conclude about the process itself in terms of examining the inputs from students and employers.

A major exception is the Erasmus Impact Study, with an approach that emphasises student orientations towards work and employers' perspectives (Brandenburg et al. 2014). The employability variable for students in this study is built from selected personality traits of respondents, specifically 'Tolerance of Ambiguity', 'Curiosity', 'Confidence', 'Serenity', 'Decisiveness' and 'Vigour'. These are qualities that most of the surveyed employers found important for the recruitment and professional development of their employees (Brandenburg et al. 2016, p. 14). This is an approach to employability that hence endorses our view that this faculty emerges from an imaginative negotiation between future employee and employer. In the case of the Erasmus Impact Study, the emergence of employability is demonstrated in a range of abstract values among students and the identification of more concrete traits from employers, notably an 'Ability to Adapt and Act in New Situations', 'Analytical and Problem-Solving Skills', 'Communication Skills', 'Planning and Organisational Skills' and 'Team-Working Skills' (Brandenburg et al. 2016, p. 15).

While policymakers may be most interested in the results emerging from the analysis, the value of the Erasmus Impact Study for researchers is in recognising the multi-faceted nature of estimating employability; in this case, emphasising the inputs from students *and* employers. We should not however neglect the intermediary role played by educators and trainers. With Erasmus, there is the specific goal of cognisance of international trajectories for future work, training and study, including circulation between different EU member states. Using terms borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu 1990), this idea has been discussed in relation to the spatial movement of undergraduates and the process through which they become able to enter a global field of work and study opportunities (Cairns et al. 2013). In helping this process happen, the learning institution can fulfil a function that supplements formal teaching through maintaining a mobility favouring habitus, including the provision of practical information about how to move and where to

go in order to find the most appropriate opportunities. This can extend to providing access to individuals with prior mobility experience to act as role models, making students aware of what is required of them should they be seeking work abroad, providing insight into issues such as lifestyles, values, dispositions and expectations of everyday life in other countries.[3]

Following on from this position, for Erasmus, the quality of the educational institution and of the learning exercise matters a great deal. This is particularly true when an institution is able to demonstrate the value of acquiring an international perspective on work to students seeking to become more employable. Just as family members and friends are able to show how moving abroad opens-up access to a better range and sometimes a better quality of opportunities, institutions that host Erasmus students can give incomers the chance to develop a more global, or at least a more European, outlook. Equally important is the experience of living and studying alongside students from other European countries and interacting with people from the host community in projects and placements. While it is tempting to dismiss international conviviality as little more than having fun, this can in fact be a very effective means of learning about the reality of life in other countries, in addition to making contacts with people who may help support subsequent episodes of international work and study (Feyen and Krzaklewska 2013).

In defining pathways to employability, we can therefore see that Erasmus occupies a very promising and perhaps under-appreciated position, with the additional dimension of providing an entrée to various forms of intra-European circulation including work placements, internships and actual jobs (Cairns et al. 2017). Employability hence becomes conjoined with internationalization in the programme, with exchange visits representing a means of opening-up spatial horizons. Such a position also places emphasis on finding international employers and linking them with internationally employable graduates. This means that skills and credentials must be internationally transferable, explaining the existence of ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) within Erasmus (European Commission 2015), and the emphasis on capacities such as foreign language proficiency. Such internationality makes employability via Erasmus arguably more valuable, or at least valu-

able in a different manner to nationally-grounded skills, although this property may be difficult to acquire due to the spatial complexity of the relationships involved.

## Theorising Employability

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the word 'employability' is extensively used in discussion of education and training systems, and in works published by the EU pertaining to Erasmus. However, as we also revealed, there is no coherent or shared idea as to what the term signifies beyond describing certain expectations of how the employability enhancement process should function. The lack of a theoretical grounding for 'employability' has led to an ad hoc approach in regard to supporting this process among policymakers and stakeholders in the education and training fields. In this section of our discussion, we will try to move beyond a position where employability is defined somewhat retrospectively, describing what has happened within education and training, and move towards a more prospective approach that can help us provide clarity for initiating the process of enhancing employability in future policy and practice. A first step is to recognize employability as a process that takes place during a learning experience, Erasmus or otherwise, rather than focusing on outcomes emerging from education and training stages that have been completed. This means looking at employability at a more abstract level than is usual in discussion of education and training systems at European level, and considering the idea that employability can be understood as a reflexive learning process.

Taking a reflexive approach to employability in Erasmus involves acknowledging the internal processes that take place during stays abroad rather than looking for signs of anticipated outcomes at the end of exchanges; a departure from the theoretical positions taken in prior studies of Erasmus. For example, the researchers who designed the previously cited Erasmus Impact Study took what was basically a psychological approach to employability, focused on finding evidence of the emergence of attitudinal indicators relating to orientations towards work and qualities associated with internationalization, supported by the use of statisti-

cal analysis. This is a good way of making international employability quantifiable for policymakers and stakeholders, who can observe the extent to which these aspects of employability have been enhanced among students who have completed Erasmus, with additional reference to the extent to which such attributes are consistent with what employers are looking for in employees. But in taking this approach we learn less about *how* employability was enhanced during an Erasmus exchange, not to mention aspects of employability that do not fit the list of personality traits previously detailed. Also missing is observation of the interaction between different parties in the employability equation, especially the role played by international peer groups, although arguably this issue could be explored via focus groups.

A reflexive approach to international employability recognises both the internal process of change and the social interactions that take place between and within peer groups. What happens amid a cohort of Erasmus students during exchanges, work placements and voluntary activities undertaken contemporaneously matters to seeking an understanding of how to support internationalized employability. Erasmus is not simply a case of being immersed in another country or a different community in isolation. A mental repositioning of oneself and one's aspirations is taking place through 'working' with educators, trainers, international peers and people within the host community.

If the idea is to move away from work and study trajectories defined by a national or regional grounding and onto a global plane, then an external point of reference is required in order to endorse ideas that show the correct way to do it. This process is not just about learning a foreign language and becoming more aware of business opportunities abroad but also understanding the nuances and idioms of other countries, and becoming acquainted with how people actually behave, and work, in other cultures. But it is not only a mental process that is initiated. There are tangible elements that underpin this aspirational shift: making actual contact with people in and from a range of different countries, some of whom may come to play an instrumental role in subsequent mobility exercises and cross-border transactions.

Reflexivity during Erasmus, or other forms of educational exchange for that matter, provides a representation of the idea that there is a need

to open-up minds during stays abroad, with specific emphasis on widening the spatial parameters of ambitions. However, the exchange visit itself is just the beginning of a process that may lead an individual to work in foreign places and meaningfully interact with people from a geographically diverse range of locales in their subsequent careers. The practice of reflexive mobility, when learnt effectively, can potentially extend throughout the rest of the life course; not just during education, training and the early stages of a career but until retirement. And that students and trainees are concurrently undergoing equivalent processes during exchange visits makes international employability a shared experience. This is the potential contribution of Erasmus to the establishment of a culture of free movement within the EU: making the European youth population, or certain select members of the European youth population, better able to envisage future spatial circulation in their lives (see Chap. 8).

## Reflexive Mobility?

As we noted in one of our previous books, the concept of reflexivity was used extensively by a previous generation of sociologists in an attempt to make sense of how people construct their identities in late modern societies (Cairns et al. 2017, p. 19; see also Cairns 2014). Popular theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck adapted the concept to help explain how lifestyle choices were made in late modern societies under the rubric of 'reflexive modernization' (e.g., Giddens 1991; Beck et al. 1994). This became a prominent and influential perspective, attempting to explain how certain individuals map and plan their lives through the contemplation of different possibilities.[4]

Our approach is markedly different in regard to context, with our main concern being learning environments with an international dimension in the present day. Erasmus constitutes one specific habitus which provides a site for the emergence of a form of reflexivity tied to mobility. This is because it is a learning environment populated by people who are practicing mobility, who are also becoming aware of future applications of intra-European circulation in their professional careers and personal lives. Within this context, there is an opportunity for

intertwined intercultural exchange and personal development that may extend to an expansion of professional aptitudes. Such a process, what we might term a form of internationalised employability, is however dependent on the individual receiving validation from international peers, and perhaps also educators and (more indirectly) employers, with additional social support from agencies such as the Erasmus Student Network (see Chap. 5). A sense of employability thus emerges from the learning experience during the course of an exchange visit, with an enhanced state of job readiness recognised by these actors, who essentially perform the function of validation mechanism. This explains why reflexive learning is always a collective experience, and underlines the importance of undertaking Erasmus exchanges and participating in mobility projects alongside other learners undergoing the same process.

Furthermore, there is another reflexive process enabled by the collective framework of the programme. Although this is sometimes discussed in terms of Europeanization or the spreading of European values, it would be more accurate to say that Erasmus encourages a cohort effect based on shared mobility experience to emerge. Erasmus cannot 'make' Europeans or define a youth generation in terms of specific European values but it can bring certain like-minded people together, who can then mutually re-enforce their shared liking of Europe. The convivial nature of exchanges thereby enables cosmopolitan identities to take a more concrete form, with exchange students enhancing their international employability inter-dependently. Whether by accident or design, the collective nature of Erasmus exchanges is a very clever piece of mobile learning.

A less tangible, but no less important attribute concerns acquiring an element of self-confidence about the future; it is almost as if a new sense of destiny is created. While this may be mistaken for arrogance, a degree of optimism is always required to see through the practice of reflexivity, extending to self-rationalization when initial failure is encountered. Unsuccessful attempts need to be mentally re-branded as challenges to be overcome, and when they are overcome, redefined as success. Lessons are thereby learnt through hardship as part of a trial and error philosophy, a process sometimes conceptualised in terms of resilience. It is not simply

a change in attitude that is needed but a determined effort to ensure a more profound transformation takes place. And this process takes place during a sustained period, with the typical undergraduate exchange lasting between three and twelve months, with its impact felt for many subsequent years.

Bringing this part of our discussion to a close, we can (re)define international employability in Erasmus as a form of reflexivity due to the platform being a site for internal and peer referential learning. In our research context, it is practiced during tertiary education or within mobility projects by students, trainees and volunteers during foreign exchange visits. In principle, an international learner becomes more aware of what is required in order to succeed abroad, with one reference group being fellow exchangees. In practice, to be internationally employable means having a better awareness of the possibilities of working abroad and working with people from abroad. There is hence a kind of circularity in mobile learning related to the physical act of living outside a country of origin tied to a mental repositioning process taking place at the same time.

## Employability in Practice

In the final section of this chapter, we will discuss examples of how employability is being encouraged in different aspects of Erasmus, essentially providing a preview of what is to come in the later chapters of the book as well as an illustration of the employability learning process previously discussed, focusing on universities and non-formal learning contexts respectively. In the first case, we will consider the views of educators, including individuals involved in the management of undergraduate mobility, moving on to look at mobility projects taking place as part of actions previously associated with the EU funded *Youth in Action* initiative but now integrated into Erasmus+. While this selection may seem somewhat ad hoc, we wish to demonstrate that a desire to enhance employability is transversal in the programme.

## Undergraduate Employability

To begin, we will look at what is to most people the most familiar aspect of the programme: undergraduate exchanges. This is a form of what the EU codifies as 'credit mobility' as students receive ECTS recognition for the work they undertake during stays abroad (European Commission 2015, p. 8), as part of Erasmus+ Key Action 1: *The Mobility of Individuals*, which covers the 'mobility of learners and staff' (European Commission 2017, p. 11). The stated aims of this type of circulation include a desire 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,' with additional reference to the internationalization of tertiary education institutions and co-operation between international partners (European Commission 2017, pp. 26–29).

Policy discourse on Erasmus is less forthcoming about how employability aims are to be put into practice. There is mention of a need to improve the quality of teaching and learning of languages, but we need to bear in mind that most Erasmus participants are not language students. Improving fluency is a bonus dimension of an exchange visit rather than the main purpose. We cannot therefore define international employability in Erasmus as being only linguistic. Neither do people generally enter the labour market more readily solely on the basis of having improved their fluency in French, German or Italian. The 'definition' of employability implied within undergraduate exchanges hence reflects the situation identified earlier in this chapter, with policies lacking a clear and comprehensive understanding of what exactly is required.

In regard to what is happening within the undergraduate exchange programme, Chap. 4 will take a look at the management of incoming and outgoing mobility using material gathered from a recently completed project conducted in Portugal. Significantly, discussion of the link between Erasmus and employment was present in the interviews conducted with university staff members. For example, the following extract is taken from an interview conducted with the Head of International Relations at one of Portugal's largest private universities, explaining how her institution makes links with the workplace:

> […] we have training, and we give support at international level for employment. Then we have one office, which is in charge for training in employment at national level, then we have another one that is in charge for the entrepreneurship projects. To support our own students and to regulate, to create their own businesses. And then we have since last year, a new office that is the result of the new law for international students' recruitment in Portugal. So we have the new office, that is, the admissions office.

The university is therefore acting as a point of reference and font of information in regard to employment, with emphasis on the international dimension of work. It is also interesting that reference is made to giving support to entrepreneurship, and that the emphasis is very much on entering the field of business. We can therefore deduce that *certain* practical aspects of employability are being encouraged via this office, with the most prominent example being specific aspects of developing a business career. However the most important finding from the interviews was the high degree of pragmatism in regard to meeting the policy goal of enhancing employability through Erasmus. Mobilizing the 'employability' signifier in project applications is viewed as an effective way of accessing additional funds from the National Erasmus Agency, an important matter where shortfalls are being experienced due to university budget cuts. This situation is explained by the mobility coordinator of one of Portugal's most prestigious public universities:

> I think some months ago, that Erasmus had cuts, budget cuts. Severe budget cuts. The university, itself. If we are talking only about one project, the traditional [undergraduate] one let's say for Europe, then I would say that our budget was cut. But then we submitted a project in consortia with other universities in Portugal, focused on employability. To get more traineeships, more scholarships for our students that want to go for placements. And also for teachers and for officers that work in the international office or in other areas in the university.

If we were being cynical, we could argue that 'employability' discourse is being used to protect the employment of Erasmus officers rather than improve the labour market chances of undergraduates, but this practice

is no different from how other agencies within the Youth Sector operate. Securing funding is the bottom line. We therefore need to be realistic and acknowledge the importance of Erasmus as a funding stream for universities and, as we shall explore later in this book, a font of support for a range of stakeholders involved in the organisation of mobility-related projects (see Chaps. 7 and 8).

Discussing this matter further with incoming and outgoing mobility officers, the enhancement of employability among students was related by a colleague of the above interviewee to the amorphous area of 'soft skills.' Specific reference was made to an aspect of employability we have already noted, enhanced language skills, with level of fluency tested before and after an exchange visit via on-line evaluations. The reason for doing so was specifically related to what employers are looking for in new recruits:

> It's a component that employers value more, so […] a mobile student, is said to have more employability opportunities. Has more potential to be employed in the future. So all these combine together, I don't know if this makes sense, but it's our perspective.

It is less clear how international relations departments obtain their information regarding employers' expectations. It may be that the link between Erasmus students and employment is not being made as firmly as it might be, and that decisions are taken without reference to robust evidence on employability enhanced by mobility. If reflexive learning practices are indeed taking place, they also need to be measured through comprehensive evaluation rather than short online questionnaires. What this situation means is that is a lot of 'good work' taking place within Erasmus frameworks may be passing undocumented and unrecognized, somewhat negating the positive impact exchange visits can make on students' lives.

## 'Youth in Action' Employability

Looking at employability elsewhere in Erasmus, reference is made to this property in respect to other aspects of the programme. As we will come

to discuss in Chap. 7, initiatives that previously formed part of the *Youth in Action* programme (2007–2013) are now under the Erasmus+ umbrella. The understanding of employability here is however somewhat vague. For example, in its programme guide, employability was conceptualised in *Youth in Action* somewhat descriptively as something pertaining to 'creating more and equal opportunities for all young people in education and in the labour market' (European Commission 2012). The onus was therefore on encouraging inclusive access to labour markets as opposed to engaging in a process of skills enhancement and capacity building.

Readers already familiar with the *Youth in Action* programme will know that it integrated a broad range of mobility projects, typically orientated around the Erasmus core themes of interculturality and employability, expressed in terms of creating opportunities for young people to acquire competences. Also emphasised was the instrumental use of non-formal and informal learning with a European or international dimension. The former refers to learning situated outside the formal educational curricula while the latter relates to activities young people undertake on a voluntary basis that aim to foster personal, social and professional development. The *Youth in Action* programme guide also acknowledged a strong lifestyle dimension to informal learning, with activities integrating a leisure dimension, and these actions intended to be complementary to formal education, constituting an additional rather than a substitute for formal sites of learning (European Commission 2012, p. 6).

Due to factors such as the short duration of projects, the enhancement of employability is likely to be limited. It may be that these mobility projects provide opportunities to activate the convivial dimension of learning about work, thus providing a means of passing on values and understanding in respect to the workplace. Also emphasised are activities organised by the European Voluntary Service (EVS), involving unpaid participation in projects engaged with areas such as youth work, cultural activities, social care and environmental protection. The empirical material discussed in Chap. 7, taken from interviews with past participants, also stresses the civic value of such exchanges, although there are indications of employability being supported in the accounts of the respondents. The contribution of these projects is, to borrow a term from the previously cited *Youth in Action* programme guide, 'complementary', not

just in regard to formal education but also other sites for employability. It may be that they provide an orientation period or an opportunity to think differently about future directions. That mobility projects strongly emphasise the social dimension of Erasmus may also mean participants becoming more attuned towards the idea of working in spheres that make a positive contribution to society. Therefore, taken in isolation, spending two weeks abroad in a project or several months abroad as a volunteer might not amount to much in regard to becoming job-ready, but being within a contemplative space, in this case a structured but non-formal learning environment, might open-up the possibility of insights into future career directions emerging.

## Conclusions

In reaching a conclusion, the nagging suspicion exists that employability, specifically international employability, as supported by the Erasmus programme is not being adequately treated in the current range of mobility actions, one reason being a reluctance to appreciate what employability means in theory and in practice. What we have argued is that while the term is over-used, its realization is under-developed, often without much thought about what actually needs to take place in order to enhance the employability of learners. This enhancement process is a complicated and delicate matter, requiring a great deal of considered input from potential employees and employers, mediated by the contributions of educators and trainers and dependent on effective policymaking in regard to regulating the labour market. To fully appreciate employability and how it is made, we must begin to look at the contributions of all these parties and the process of bringing them together for the mutual benefit of individuals and societies.

While taking a modest view of international employability, equating it with a measurable increase in foreign language capacity, may make sense from an evaluation point of view, such a limited approach can only yield limited results. More emphasis needs to be placed on strengthening the relationship between the (potential) employee and employers. In the two examples we cited in the closing part of the discussion, relating to employ-

ability in undergraduate exchanges and *Youth in Action* mobility projects, we also acknowledge the role of educators and trainers, many of whom may need more guidance, as well as the support of the European institutions. What Erasmus does seem to do well is create opportunities for international conviviality, which may help spread knowledge about working internationally. We can therefore see some value in what is currently taking place, in both formal and informal learning, about both of which we shall learn more in the proceeding chapters.

## Notes

1. This position is ably demonstrated by the online Cambridge dictionary which boldly declares that 'employability' is 'the skills and abilities that allow you to be employed,' without elaboration. See http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/employability
2. The Erasmus Programme Guide does not actually provide a definition but recognises that employability involves making links between graduates and the labour market (European Commission 2017, p. 150).
3. In practice, research with students planning to undertake outward mobility for work and study reveals that other environs such as peer and family networks may actually function more efficaciously as mobility habitus, particularly were parents or siblings have prior experience of living in different countries (Cairns et al. 2013).
4. Contemporaneously, other reflexivity theorists, including Margaret Archer (2008, 2012), emphasized the interplay between structure and agency and the idea that there is an 'internal conversation' taking place that validates and contextualizes choices.

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