



## EDUCATION

УДК 378.014.24

### *IMPACT OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY: THE LESSONS LEARNT*

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*The results of the survey conducted among EMINENCE Project graduates (2012-2016) in the framework of Erasmus Mundus Programme had been revealed. The aim of the survey was to examine the project's results in the context of the following key positions: a post-project transition to training/work; practical orientation; quality of a training; quality of a research; the role of a university; competence; partnership and exchange of experience.*

*Key words: EMINENCE, Erasmus Mundus, the transition from EMINENCE project to learning/professional activities, practical orientation, quality of a training, quality of a research, the role of universities, competence, partnership, mutual enrichment.*

#### **Introduction**

Erasmus Mundus is a cooperation and mobility programme in the field of higher education that aims to enhance the quality of European higher education and to promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through cooperation with Third-Countries. In addition, it contributes to the development of human resources and the international cooperation capacity of Higher education institutions in Third Countries by increasing mobility between the European Union and these countries [1]. EMINENCE is an Erasmus Mundus project, where EMINENCE is Erasmus Mundus Integration of Neighboring Eastern Regions through Cooperation in Higher Education. The acronym of the project brings a message that the project targets at «eminence», understood as distinction, reputation and importance of future project beneficiaries on their return to EaP societies – so needed for the development of countries aspiring to reach European standards [2] (EMINENCE, 2015).

The EMINENCE idea is that only through multiplication and spreading of gained abroad benefits (knowledge, skills, experience, ideas, scientific resources etc.) their mobility will have wider impact on the capacity of sending partners. Thus, it is important that the lessons learnt from the project should be studied and analyzed.



### **Problem of Research**

After completing EMINENCE (Erasmus Mundus lot 2), the present study aims at evaluating its impact on EMINENCE graduates according to several questions. The topics addressed deal with employability of the students and the career development of staff involved in the mobility. The centrality to the issue of employability has been given in some previous studies in other contexts (Clustering Master courses, 2011 [3]). The main topics studied are: EMINENCE-to-work/ study transition, practical orientation, training quality, research quality, university role, competences, networking and mutual enrichment.

### **Research Focus**

When discussing the employability of EMINENCE alumni, several perspectives have been considered:

- for BA and MA – the transition phase from university to work (so-called early career perspectives), the competences that are required in the labour market, the position that higher education graduates are supposed to fulfill and finally the role of higher education in enhancing students' employability;
- for PhD and, post-doc students – raising the quality of research and academic integrity;
- for staff – enhancing the role of highly skilled professionals in the academic community, contribution towards the development of human resources and the international cooperation capacity;
- improving language, intercultural and social competences and developing transferrable skills;
- mutual enrichment of societies by developing the qualifications of women/men so that they possess appropriate skills, particularly as regards the labour market, and are open-minded and internationally experienced.

### **Methodology of Research**

#### *General Background of Research*

There has been defined a set of categories that each shed light on a specific part of impact in the context of EMINENCE. These categories refer on the one hand to general problems raised in the context of higher education and the transition from university to work (professional orientation) and on the other hand reflect the particularities of Erasmus Mundus as educational programme (the establishing of networks between students and alumni, the issue of mobility and the impact of EM as an excellence programme).

For each topic, relevant key variables were chosen and attributed to the respective methodological instrument.



Table 1

**Topics, perspectives and mobility levels under study**

Topics	Perspectives considered	BA	MA	PhD	Post-docs	Staff
<b>EMINENCE-to-work/study transition</b>	the transition phase from EMINENCE to work/study					
	the position that EMINENCE alumni are supposed to fulfill					
<b>Practical orientation</b>	the competences that are required in the labour market					
<b>Training quality</b>	the role of higher education in enhancing students' employability					
<b>Research quality</b>	raising the quality of research and academic integrity					
<b>University role</b>	enhancing the role of highly skilled professionals in the academic community					
<b>Competences</b>	Improving language, intercultural and social competences and developing transferable skills.					
<b>Networking and mutual enrichment</b>	contribution towards the international cooperation capacity, mutual enrichment of societies by developing the qualifications of women/men so that they possess appropriate skills, particularly as regards the labour market, and are open-minded and internationally experienced.					

Given the fact that alumni of EMINENCE constitute an international and very widespread target group, the data was collected via an online survey conducted in English. This target group is expected to reveal specific information regarding the competences acquired during the mobility, on professional plans and perspectives and on the effects of this project on the labour market and academic field.

The study relies on self-assessment by the respondents. Guaranteeing the technical functioning and the comprehensibility of questions and items, the time necessary to complete this survey was reduced to less than 15 minutes. The survey was implemented through the open source software [docs.google.com/forms](https://docs.google.com/forms).



*Coverage of the survey*

*1. Response*

In April 2016 the invitation was sent out via a list of EMINENCE contacts to 118 alumni. The online survey was filled in by 74 EMINENCE alumni (63%).

*2. Respondents' background*

*2.1. The surveyed home universities*

The respondents represented the following universities:

- Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland);
- University of Montpellier 2 (France);
- Technical University of Torino (Italy);
- University of Porto (Portugal);
- Rovira i Virgili University (Spain);
- Malmö University (Sweden);
- Babeş-Bolyai University (Romania);
- Vitebsk State University named after P. M. Masherov (Belarus);
- Institution of Education «Polessky State University» (Belarus);
- Mogilev State A. Kuleshov University (Belarus);
- Baranovich State University (Belarus);
- Azerbaijan Teachers Institute (Azerbaijan);
- Sumy State University (Ukraine);
- Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University (Ukraine);
- Shota Meskhia State Teaching University of Zugdidi (Georgia);
- Grigol Robakidze University (Georgia);
- Sokhumi State University (Georgia);
- Trade Co-operative University of Moldova (Moldova);
- State University of Medicine and Pharmacy (Moldova);
- Yerevan «Northern University» (Armenia);
- Vanadzor State University (Armenia);

Thus, the surveyed represented 7 EU and 14 universities from partner countries.

*2.2. Distribution by host universities.* The host universities were presented by EU countries (86.5%) and EaP countries (13.5%) (figure 1).

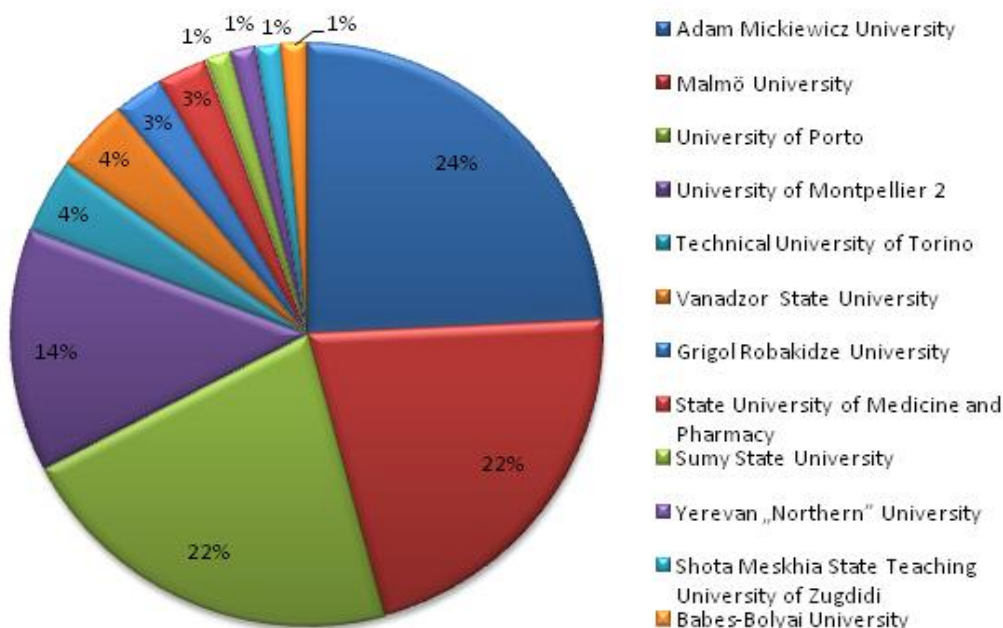


Figure 1. Students' distribution by host university



### 2.3. Distribution by level of mobility.

Among those surveyed were alumni of all the categories: undergraduate (23%), master (28.4%), doctorate (12.2%), post-doctorate (14.9%), and staff (21.6%), which can give a comprehensible picture of EMINENCE impact.

#### Results of Research

##### *EMINENCE-to-work/study transition*

When analyzing different factors of EMINENCE impact, the important factors are: smooth transition phase from EMINENCE to work/study and the position that EMINENCE alumni are supposed to fulfill.

A question addressing the issue concerned the alumni current occupation. As shown in figure 2, the answers demonstrated that the vast majority of the alumni (74.3%) are working full-time or engaged in full-time further study, training or research (63.5% and 10.8% respectively). 6.8% of the respondents are working part-time, 2.7% are due to start work in the near future. 8.1% of the respondents are unemployed and 6.8% have not identified their current occupation or classified them inappropriately (E.g. Erasmus Mundus EMINENCE MA – might be regarded as full-time study etc.).

Thus, EMINENCE shows quite a high level of employment.

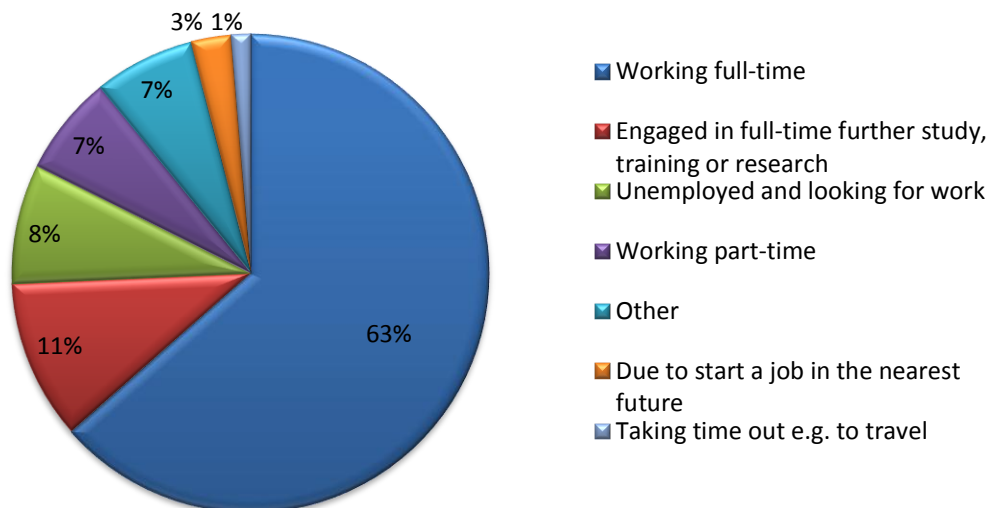


Figure 2. Respondents' distribution by current occupation

The next question addressed was about the connection of work/study programme with the current occupation.

In general, the answers showed that there was a connection (87.9%) close or moderate (70.3% and 17.6% respectively). Though there is some percentage of alumni (12.2%) whose activities in the mobility period were slightly or not at all connected with their current occupation. This can mainly be due to the category of the alumni who have identified themselves as unemployed.

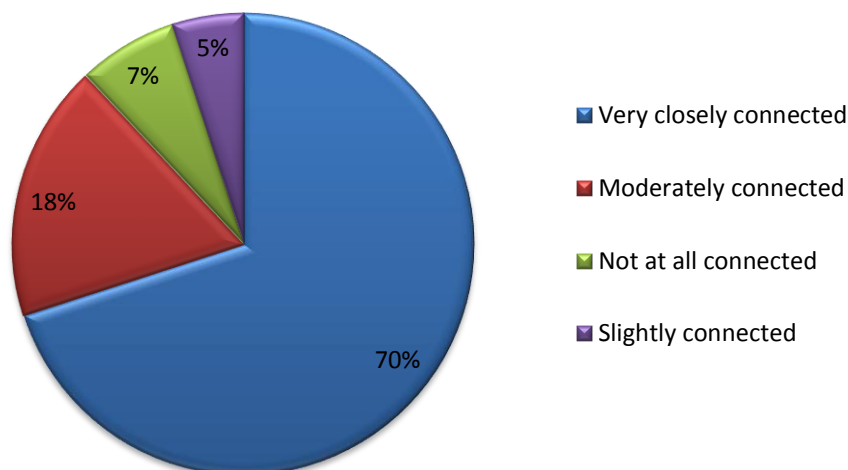


Figure 3. The connection of EMINECE experience with the respondents' current occupation

*Practical orientation*

The issue was addressed in terms of the overall working orientation and the practice-related elements offered within the programme. So, this section deals with the students' impression of the EMINENCE in general and more specifically with the different practical elements of the mobility.

Answering the question about the degree of EMINENCE practical orientation, most alumni noted its high level (59.5%) or moderate level (32.4%) (figure 4).

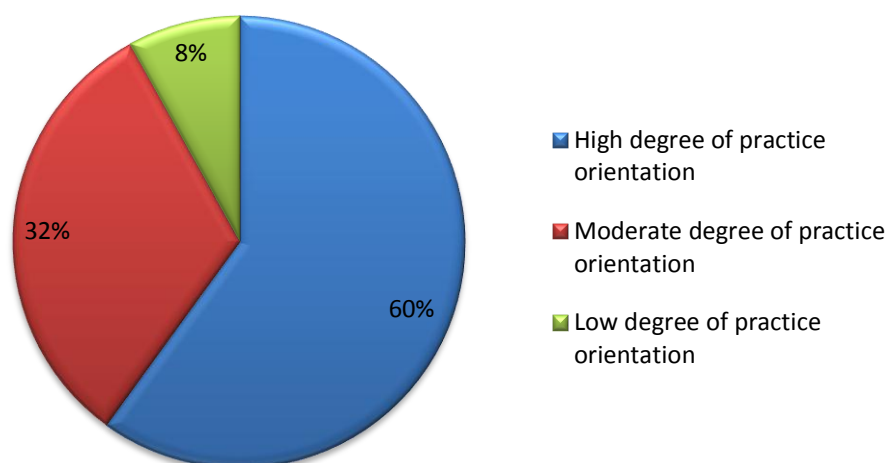


Figure 4. Practical orientation of EMINECE mobility for the respondents

The respondents note that that they have benefitted from EMINENCE in terms of increased expertise in the field (48.6%), greater confidence (41.9%), higher salary (14.9%), and job promotion (9.5%) (figure 5).

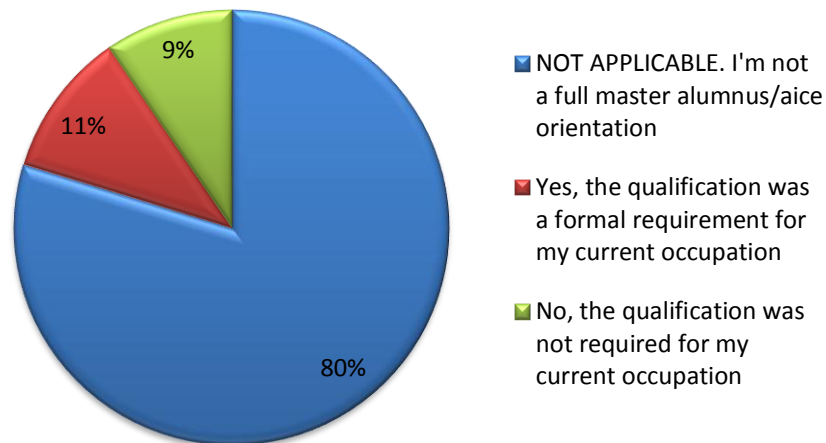


Figure 5. The benefits respondents gained from EMINENCE mobility

### Training quality

This section deals with the role of higher education in enhancing students' employability. It mainly concerns master students. That is why, for other categories of the surveyed the question was not applicable. Out of the Master students, for half of them the gained qualification was a formal requirement for their current occupation (see figure 6).

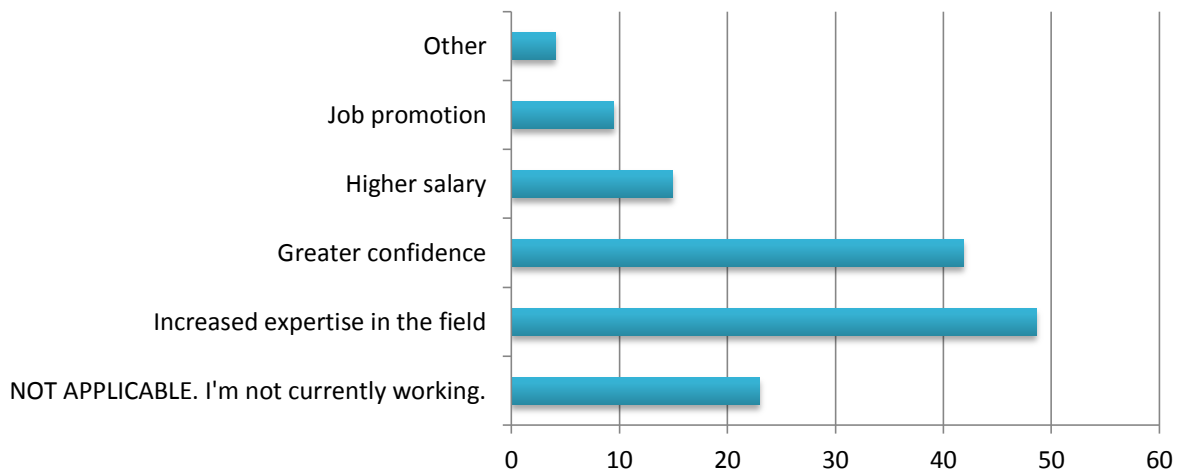


Figure 6. EMINENCE mobility as a formal requirement for the current occupation

The matter of qualification recognition is connected with the sector the alumnus is working in. In most cases, with some exceptions (7%) the diplomas are fully recognized in private sector (81%), only in some cases (12%) they are fully recognized in state owned sectors (see figure 7)

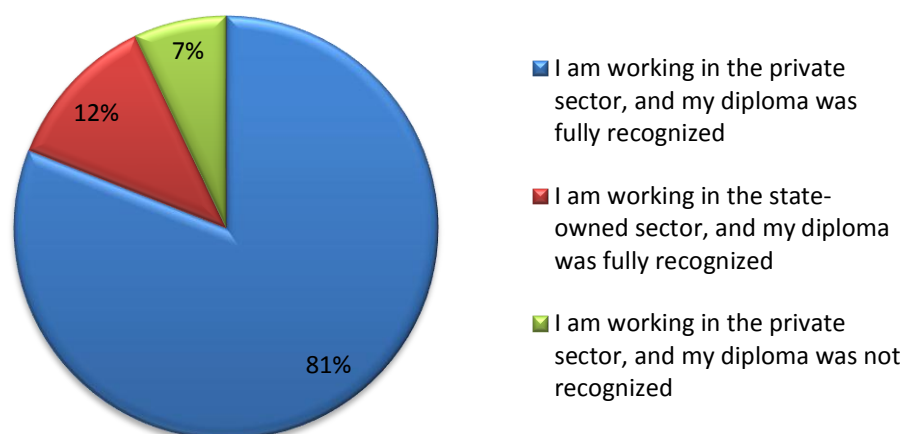


Figure 7. Recognition of the diploma at the labour market

The quality of training depends on the variety of forms used. The respondents marked the extensive use of guest lecturers. Input from professionals (52%), meetings, visits, forums, fairs (24%), some of them noted Internships and practical projects with employers (9.5%) and Job preparation and career advice (9.5%). In rare cases there was involvement of employers in course planning (5%).

#### *Research quality*

This section deals with raising the quality of research and academic integrity and mainly concerns PhD and post-doc students, as well as academic staff.

First of all, it studies the increase in the research output in terms of academic publications and conference presentations.

The respondent self-assessment demonstrated that they have prepared for publishing 1 or more papers (90%), got a new understanding of the quality of academic publications (71%), and collected useful material for further research (76%).

As to conference presentations, they reported presenting EMINENCE research project at 1 or more conferences in the host country (57%), presenting EMINENCE research project at 1 or more conferences in the home country (71%), and presenting EMINENCE research project at 1 or more conferences in the country other than home or host (42%).

#### *University role*

The staff (academic and administrative) who have benefitted from EMINENCE reported that their current position in the organization is chief executive (10%), middle management position (26%), low management position (21%), non-management position (43%). With quite a high percentage of managers in the academic field, there may appear new prospects for their acting as agents of change (see figure 8).



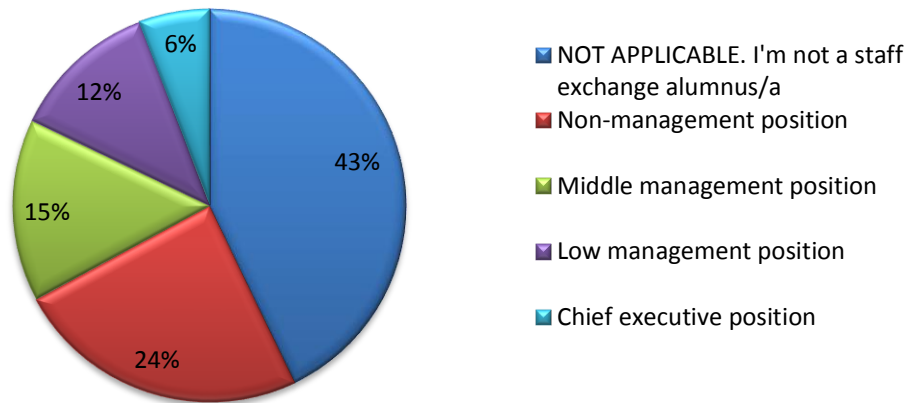


Figure 8. Current position of EMINENCE staff alumni

Moreover, they reported that they regard possibility of returning to the host university in the future (21%), disseminating the good practices acquired during the mobility period at their place of work (68%), possibility of further collaboration with peers at the host university (68%), institutional cooperation with other consortium members (37%), implementing new learning/teaching approaches (63%), implementing new administrative/professional technics (53%).

### Competences

This section deals with the impact EMINENCE had on improving language, intercultural and social competences and developing transferrable skills.

Obviously, the impact of EMINENCE is defined by the alumni's their skills (soft and hard) and the special qualifications that make them different from their competitors. The assessment of competences is a crucial element of the present study. For this purpose, the alumni were asked what competences they acquired during the EMINENCE, and which of these are the influential for their present position. The competences were grouped around academic integrity, ability to work in a team, ability to work in multicultural environment, realizing the necessity for continuing professional development, and establishing partnerships

The answers distributed as follows: multicultural environment and continuing professional development (78.4% each), academic integrity (66.2%), ability to estimate partnerships (55.4%), team work (48.6%) (see figure 9).

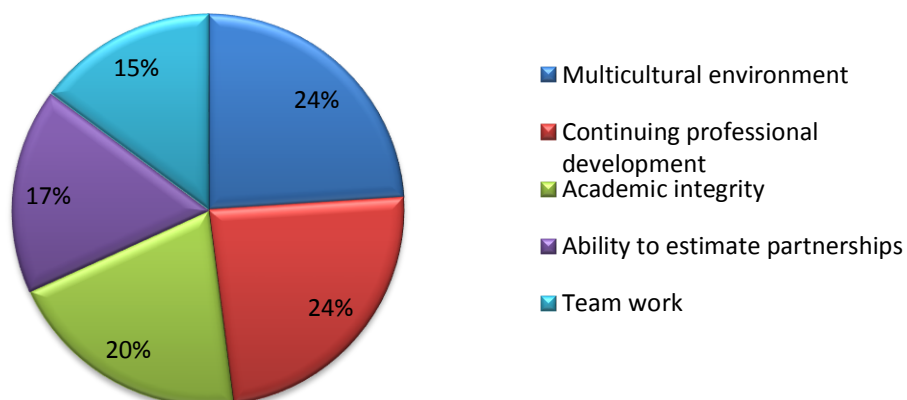


Figure 9. Groups of competences developed through EMINENCE mobility



The next analyzed question focused on transferrable skills gained during the mobility. The list of transferrable skills was drawn from *Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education: Employability, Transferable Skills and Learning for Life* [4]. The overall provision of competences in EMINENCE is assessed highly positively. Out of all items, «Interpersonal skills (ability to interact successfully with a wide range of people)» has the highest rating (58.1%). Further competences which alumni appraise highly are: oral communication skills (41.9%), problem-solving skills (39.2%), organizational skills (39.2%), critical thinking skills (35.1%), team working skills (35.1%), analytical/logical thinking skills (33.8%), independent working skills (31.1%), leadership skills (24.3%), negotiating skills (21.6%). Turning towards the deficits, persuading skills (13.5%), mediation skills (12.2%), entrepreneur skills (5.4%) show lower rates. Nonetheless, they are still in the positive range (see figure 10).

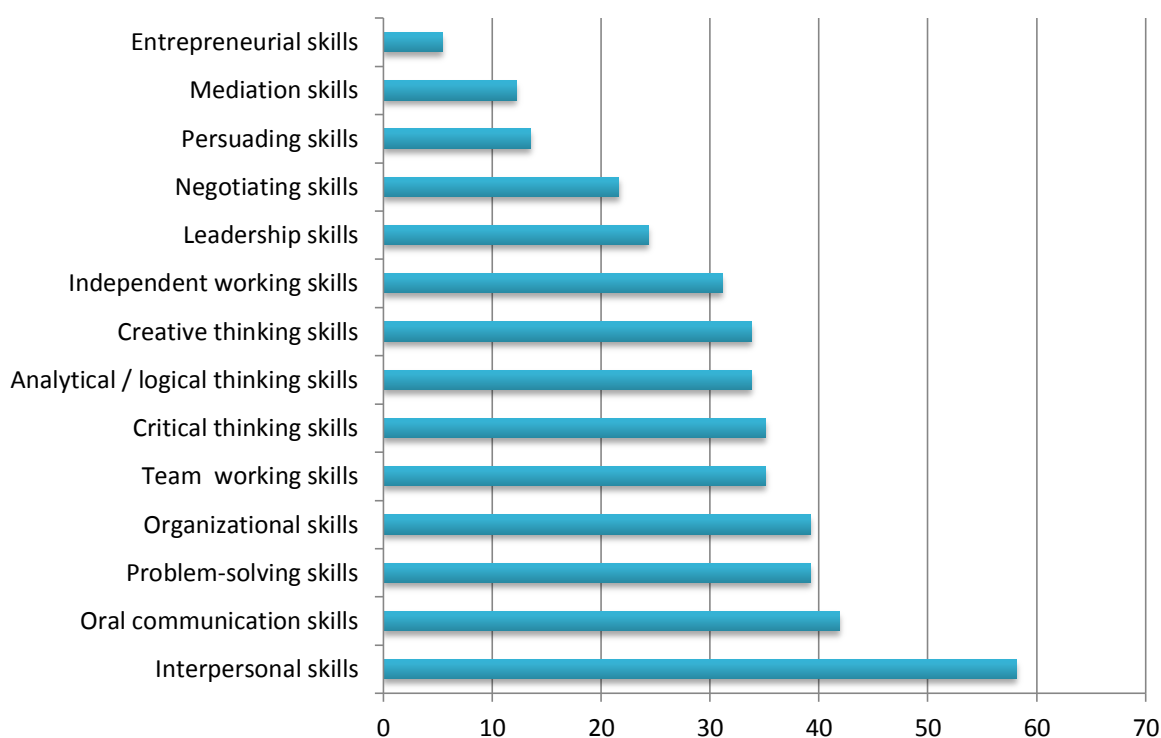


Figure 10. Transferrable skills gained by EMINENCE alumni

#### *Networking and mutual enrichment*

This section deals with contribution towards the international cooperation capacity, mutual enrichment of societies by developing the qualifications of women/men so that they possess appropriate skills, particularly as regards the labour market, and are open-minded and internationally experienced.

Based on the fact that network-building with professionals is one of the most important sources of future perspectives and one of the issues EMINENCE should provide for, the

Alumni were asked if they have established or participated in any professional networks during their academic mobility. The vast majority of alumni stated that they have established Erasmus Mundus contacts (75.7%). The next broad groups are



Contacts connected with social activities, hobbies etc. (45.9%) and Academic community (other than Erasmus Mundus) (41.9%). Smaller groups are Professional club membership (8.1%) and other contacts (see figure 11).

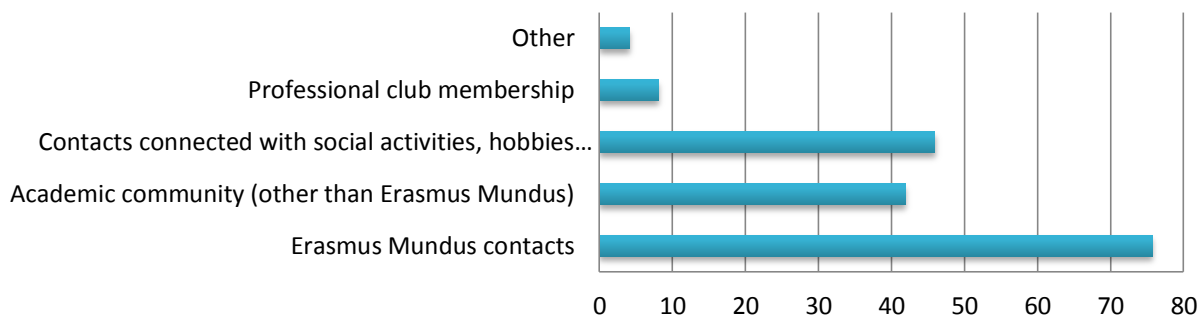


Figure 11. Professional networks established during EMINENCE mobility

The main benefits from EMINENCE can also be understood from the alumni's extended answers to the question: What is the most valuable gain or benefit to your professional career from EMINENCE? We'll provide the most typical answers:

«The feeling that you too can be a part of Europe and can have an access to its unique culture».

«Personal and professional elevation that creates the final product which can meet the challenges of new era».

«Increased expertise in the field of Information Systems».

«Improving communication skills in French, acquiring skills of analysis and critical thinking, increase confidence in my professional potential and ability to integrate in different communities and establishing partnerships».

«Independence in Life».

«Changed perception of myself, other people and the world in overall».

«Continual improvement of my teaching and research skills in an academic environment by keeping up on new and innovative teaching methods and strategies with a main focus on a modern European experience in the organization of the educational process».

«Personal and professional growth, experience gained and travelling».

«Being involved in the local coordination team of the project I have gained a lot of experience in the mobility projects. At the University of Porto, I acquired new approaches of teaching a foreign language and methods and ways of holding lectures in an interesting way. I am going to share my experience among my colleagues and hope to make some changes in the field of effective teaching. I am grateful to the selection committee and to the organizers of my mobility».

«Experience of living independently gained through studying abroad».

«My understanding of mobility, research activity and teaching has been changed into a positive one. My self-appraisal as a researcher and scientists is now better, and I am now highly-motivated, as I have never been at my Home University. I found a friendly environment and brilliant professionals that supports interesting topics in my field of interests. Now I know exactly that the life goals are achievable and I established higher goals, as a person and as a researcher».



«The most valuable gain, benefit to my professional career from EMINENCE is the experience, gained in Malmo Sweden University, positively influence to my work. First of all I tried to bring my teaching methods to methods that are used in foreign European universities and, in particular, Malmo University. Thank You!»

«Eagerness to participate in other international programs and create my own international research team».

«2 years of my full MA studies at Adam Mickiewicz University had an important overall impact on my personal and professional growth. I improved my Polish language, communication and time-management skills that I find very important for my current life in Poland, as well as for the future in general».

«Finding the true passion and ways of achieving things».

### **Conclusions**

Though EMINENCE shows a high degree of employment and the alumni report smooth transition from EMINENCE to work/study some improvements are recommendable:

✓ The correlation of the work/ study program with further career prospects should be taken into account at the selection stage.

✓ The higher level of practice orientation through links to professionals and work experience (a kind of internship) during the mobility course of studies could be assured by host universities.

✓ The involvement of previous alumni in course planning (e.g. participation in the advisory board) can be a useful instrument in order to adapt the programme to the participants' expectations and needs.

✓ More active forming international groups for further projects; providing more skills for applying for research funding.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research is part of dissemination of the EMINENCE (Erasmus Mundus) project supported by Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. We are deeply grateful to all the EMINENCE alumni for their cooperation.

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Received: February, 1

Accepted: March, 1