

GOOD PRACTICES IN ERASMUS + VET MOBILITY PROJECTS

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Abstract

Annually over 120 000 vocational education and training (VET) learners have the chance to go abroad through Erasmus+ programme.

This study covers the Erasmus+ financed mobility VET projects from 2014-2017 and further emphasises on isolating the “good practices projects” and assessing to what extent this label is related with the number of projects presented by a given country.

A first major conclusion is that only a small portion of the projects were labelled “good practice”. Moderately, this label is reliant on the number of projects financed within a given country. Clearly, other variables such as the intentionality in the design, planning and format of a project, the experience in applying to Erasmus+ calls, the management costs per project or the amount of financing asked for each project seems to play a role in turning them into good practice examples or not.

Key-words: mobility, good practices, vocational education and training, projects, Erasmus+

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Introduction

Europe, together with the rest of the world, is facing some changes and challenges impacting significantly on our future. Some of the foremost of these societal megatrends could be seen to be digitalisation and robotization, ecological sustainability, globalisation of value chains, aging populations, migration and increasing international nature of both information, entertainment and people's everyday lives. The positive and negative outcomes of these developments are generally such that they cannot be solved or capitalised on within the framework of a single nation state but require an international or global outlook. (European Commission, 2017d) Furthermore, these trends effect not only politics and our societies at large but also for example the world of work and our schools and institutions of learning. (EPSC, 2017)

The Erasmus+ programme, the European Union's programme for education and training 2014 – 2020, is aiming to answer to some of these challenges and opportunities of a changing world. The overarching goal of the Erasmus+ programme is to foster cooperation between the European countries participating in the programme and thereby contribute to the Europe 2020 strategy for growth, jobs, social equity and inclusion. It has a central role in fostering learning mobility across European borders and thereby give European citizens – young and adult - the forward-looking and XXI Century -focused knowledge, skills and competences needed to prosper in the future world of work.

The history of the Erasmus programme is three decades long. Altogether 9 million people have had the chance to benefit directly from the programme, through either learning mobility in another European country or through cooperation projects to develop the education and training systems of the European countries (European Commission, 2017a). The role of vocational education and training (VET) has successively increased within the Erasmus+ programme, and today already over 120 000 VET students and apprentices go abroad each year (European Commission, 2018a). Despite the well-known brand of the Erasmus+ programme, the high participation rates and the very pertinent task it has been charged with, not much research have

been carried out on the mobility actions within vocational education and training.

This study answers to the recurrent practitioner's and stakeholder's demands, on several *fora*, for more research on VET learning mobility, and thereby complements the already existing, much larger body of research relating to learning mobility in general or higher education exchanges, in particular.

The study analyses the total set of financed projects in all programme countries within the VET sector of the Erasmus+ programme during 2014-2017, and further focuses answer the question: Is there any relation between the number of projects presented by a given country and the number of them labelled as "Good Practice?"

In other words, we have isolated the good practice projects from this total mass and assessing to what degree the number of projects (or other variables) plays a role on it to become a good practice. The data has been accessed through the Erasmus+ Projects Results Platform (European Commission, 2018b).

The conclusion of the study is that only a small portion of the projects were labelled good practice. Partially, this classification is reliant on on the number of projects within a given country. Clearly, also other variables seem to play a role in turning them into good practice examples.

1. Background

Erasmus+ is the current European Union's flagship education and training programme that enables learners and staff in Vocational Education and Training (VET) or in Higher Education (HE) to study or to have a traineeship in a company in a foreign country. Established to last from 2014 until 2020, Erasmus+ merges seven prior programmes and encompasses opportunities for people of all ages, helping them to develop and to share knowledge and experience at institutions and organisations in different countries.

The aim of Erasmus+ is to contribute to the Europe 2020 strategy for growth, jobs, social equity and inclusion, as well as the aims of Education and Training 2020, the European Union 's strategic framework for education and training (European Commission, 2016a).

With three different key-actions (KA), the Learning mobility of individuals (KA1) finances staff mobility (for teachers, lecturers, school leaders and youth workers) but mainly mobility for higher education and vocational education and training students. Until 2020 up to 2,5 million students and staff are expected to benefit from grants to study or train abroad (European Commission, 2016a; 2016b). In this framework, a project is a set of activities with pre-defined objectives, dissemination and results (European Commission, 2017a). The "learning mobility" is a project where participants go to another country to study or training for a set period (*idem*).

Currently the 28 European Union (EU) Member States as well the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey are the programme countries that can fully take part in all Actions of the Erasmus+ Programme. Regarding further countries, from all continents and grouped in twelve regions, they can take part in certain Actions of the Programme, subject to specific criteria or conditions (European Commission, 2017).

All these mobilities are financed through broader projects, presented by promoters to National Agencies (NA). The demand for Erasmus+ funding largely exceeds the funding available (European Commission, 2017a), so these NA under strict rules and regulations, select and rate the projects according several European criteria. However, the successful projects rate is due to three main variables: the experience in applying to Erasmus+ calls, the management costs per project and the amount of financing asked for each project (European Commission, 2017a).

Among the selected projects, some are labelled as good practices and undertake some European and national usefulness.

According the European Commission (2018c) a “Good Practice” is a project which is particularly representative of what Erasmus+ finances, in terms of objectives, activity formats, target groups, outputs and results. So, in other words, “Good Practices” are those projects that can be disseminated, as good examples, among the National Agencies and future applicants.

Within tangible guidelines (European Commission, 2018c), the purpose of gathering and showcasing good practices is to: a) increase the impact of the selected good practices examples, by transferring their results to other target groups (stakeholders, decision-makers, etc.), b) give an indication of the sort of projects that Erasmus+ Programme is likely to funding, c) promote quality in education, training and youth, d) allow the National Agencies and Commission staff to acknowledge and further disseminate the activities supported and the results achieved by the Programmes.

The selection of these Good Practices is led every year, based on a set of six qualitative and quantitative criteria (European Commission, 2018c). Keeping in mind that good practices should be representative of the aims and objectives of the actions covered by the Erasmus+ Programme, the six criteria (European Commission, 2017a; 2018c). are:

- **Impact:** the activities funded inspire other applicants to implement similar activities. The scope and the size of the project as well as evidence for interactions with other Erasmus+ actions and/or other European Programmes as well as with policy development should be considered;
- **Transferability:** the results produced by the project can be clearly applied in other contexts and benefits other different sectors;
- **Innovation:** the project implemented innovative working methods and/or a genuine series of activities which lead to novelties in terms of results (i.e. knowledge, know-how, practices);

- Sustainability: there is suitable or reliable evidence that the project methods and results will be continued after Erasmus+ funding has ended and will reach new targets;
- Communication: the project activities and its results can be clearly understood in assorted formats by a wide public and have a visible presence;
- Financial management: the projects have been managed in an accurate way by the beneficiary from a financial point of view.

2. Literature Review

More evidence is available on mobility, in general, than on VET mobility, in particular. Yet, from the literature revision, we can state that one key and transversal inference is that mobility has clear and powerful benefits for society, for learners, for VET systems and for the labour market but has, as well, some constraints.

Nevertheless, the European Commission periodically finances external evaluations and studies to assess the ongoing status and on the impact of Erasmus+. Those are the main sources of evidence that we used in this work (European Commission, 2007; 2014; 2016a; 2017a).

The dissemination of projects is a major source of marketing tool for the international mobility promotion and increasing in general but as well, for Erasmus+ in particular (European Commission, 2007; 2017a). Ruffin (2012) found that outcomes of mobility projects were very useful to integrate the issues of internationalisation and mobility into VET institutions, as well as to institutions, for entrepreneurs and to raise the awareness about them in general.

In addition, the European Council (2011), argued for a European benchmark on learning mobility accompanied by relevant indicators that could help to encourage and monitor the progress of Member States towards the aim of increased mobility abroad, as well as to identify examples of good practices. In the same sense, and in view

of policy making, the Council Conclusions (Council of the European Union, 2014) recommended to Member States to implement the monitoring of the progress and performance of learning mobility abroad, including by collecting qualitative information (indicators) on examples of good practice, as the basis for evidence-based policy making.

One of the major helpfulness of knowing how much projects and how many of them are good practices is the opportunity to set quality assurance and effectiveness of the upcoming projects (European Council, 2014; European Commission, 2007, 2013a). The UK National Agency for Erasmus+ recommended that only the main quality applications were funded (Ecorys, 2013). This recommendation was based on the European Quality Charter for Mobility (European Commission, 2006). This text is reference document for quality assurance applied to all people planning, providing or undertaking mobilities abroad (European Commission, 2007; 2014). Dissemination is an essential portion of all funded projects and this action should help to raise awareness among stakeholders about the activities and highlights of the outcomes of each good project (European Commission, 2007).

The Erasmus+ Project Results Platform (European Commission, 2018b) displays a common and accessible environment for disseminating most project results whilst also highlighting good practices and success stories (European Commission, 2017a). The platform is used to inform the work of policy makers at EU level (European Commission, 2017a) however, the foremost constraint is the lack of complementary to external reference materials that could encourage users (*idem*). At national level, the evaluation is also constructive about the strategy, applying clear rules (defined by the European Commission) for the selection of good practice examples. However, the evidence of the project results effectiveness is not clear, when the policy makers are not involved in the project itself (*ibidem*). Almost all National Agencies mainly disseminate examples of good practices to potential applicants or beneficiaries, and rarely they inform policy making bodies (*ibidem*). The usefulness of “Good Practices” is also included in the European Social Fund (ESF) legal basis and regulations (European Commission, 2013b). It recommends to potential applicants to

taking up good practices from Erasmus+ and to further develop them under ESF (European Commission, 2013b; 2017a; 2018a).

All Erasmus+ projects selected as good practices are clearly identified in the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform (European Commission, 2018b) and are easily accessible for consultation for all publics. The good practice examples are used by the Member States to illustrate the actions and results of the programme and are promoted on the European Commission websites (European Commission, 2017b).

3. Results and Discussion

We have used the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform (European Commission, 2018b) that covers data from 2014 until 2017. This database encompasses the description of 13,429 projects of VET learner and staff mobility. This dissemination platform offers a comprehensive overview of all projects funded under the Erasmus+ programme. Moreover, is a tool that could be used by to share and monitor projects' achievements (European Commission, 2017b).

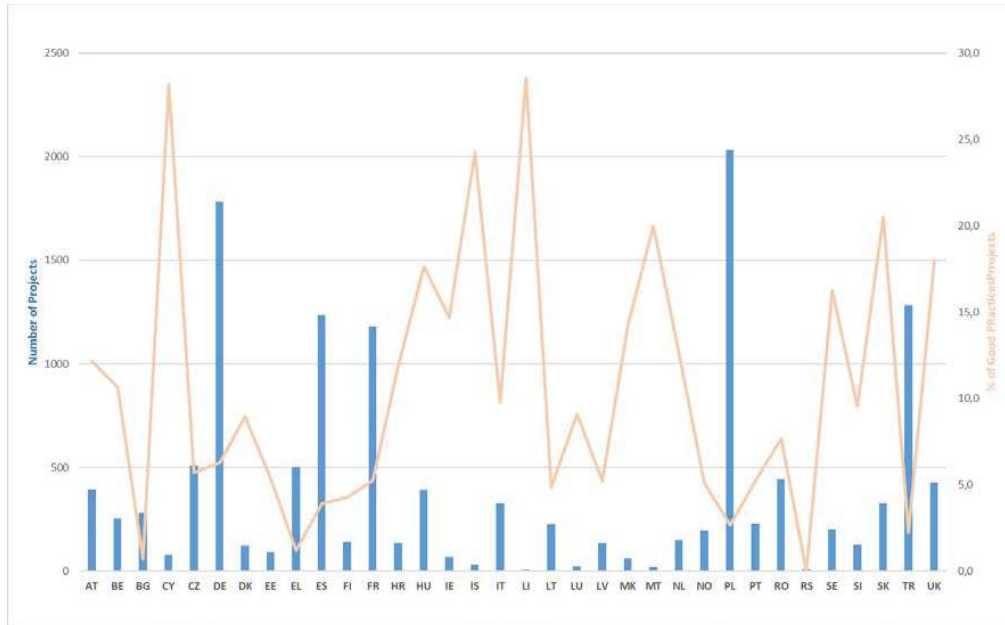
The number of projects financed per country is related to the budget assigned to each National Agency, within European Union budgeting criteria (European Commission, 2017b, 2018a). This means that there is no fixed number of financed projects, but instead a fixed annual budget. The distribution of the projects (and the percentage that were considered "Good Practice") among the 34 participating countries (28 EU Member States plus Iceland, Lichtenstein, Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey) is displayed in the table 1 and Graph 1.

Table 1. Projects and Good Practices per country (2014-2017)

Country	Projects	%	Good Pract	% Good Practice
Austria	395	2,9%	48	12,2%
Belgium	254	1,9%	27	10,6%
Bulgaria	282	2,1%	2	0,7%
Czech Rep.	509	3,8%	29	5,7%
Croatia	135	1,0%	16	11,9%
Cyprus	78	0,6%	22	28,2%
Denmark	123	0,9%	11	8,9%
Estonia	94	0,7%	5	5,3%
Finland	140	1,0%	6	4,3%
France	1179	8,8%	62	5,3%
FYROM	63	0,5%	9	14,3%
Germany	1783	13,3%	112	6,3%
Greece	502	3,7%	6	1,2%
Hungary	391	2,9%	69	17,6%
Iceland	33	0,2%	8	24,2%
Ireland	68	0,5%	10	14,7%
Italy	328	2,4%	32	9,8%
Latvia	134	1,0%	7	5,2%
Liechtenstein	7	0,1%	2	28,6%
Lituania	226	1,7%	11	4,9%
Luxembourg	22	0,2%	2	9,1%
Malta	20	0,1%	4	20,0%
Norway	195	1,5%	10	5,1%
Poland	2033	15,1%	54	2,7%
Portugal	229	1,7%	12	5,2%
Romenia	443	3,3%	34	7,7%
Serbian Rep.	9	0,1%	0	0,0%
Slovakia	327	2,4%	67	20,5%
Slovenia	126	0,9%	12	9,5%
Spain	1234	9,2%	48	3,9%
Sweden	203	1,5%	33	16,3%
The Netherlands	151	1,1%	19	12,6%
Turkey	1284	9,6%	29	2,3%
United Kingdom	429	3,2%	77	17,9%
Total	13429	100%	895	6,66%

Source: Erasmus+ Project Results Platform

Graph 1. Number of Financed Projects per Country (2014-2017)



Source: Own calculations over Erasmus+ Project Results Platform

In percentage, Poland (15,1%), Germany (13,3%), Spain (9,2%), France (8,7%), and Turkey (9,6%) are the countries that have more projects, what is coherent with the inner population and budgeting criteria dimensions. On the other hand, Cyprus (0,6%), Iceland (0,2%), Luxembourg (0,2%) Malta (0,1%) and Serbia (0,1%) have the lower percentage of projects. This means that more populated countries have a higher budget (so likely more projects) and lower populated countries have lower budgets (so likely less projects).

Only 6,66% (895) of the 13429 projects were considered “Good Practice” under the European Commission (2018) guidelines.

With these figures, a question arises regarding the label “Good Practice”. Therefore, to check if there is any relation between the number of projects presented (or other explanatory variables) and those that were considered “Good Practice”, we have decided to apply the Simple Regression Analysis (with $N=34$)³. In other words, we tried to

³ According Morris (1985), for a margin of error of 5%, with a confidence level of 95%, with a response distribution of 50%, the minimum observations is 32. In our sample we have 34 full observations, so we can perform with confidence a simple regression analysis.

infer if the number of projects of each one of the countries has any relation with the number of projects labelled has “Good Practice” and in case of a positive answer if we can estimate the number of future projects with this label. We have tested H_0 (There is no relation between the number of projects and the label “Good Practices”), being H_1 – There is a relation between the number of projects and the label “Good Practice”.

The single independent variable (“Projects” = x) was used to predict the value of a dependent variable “Good_Pract” (= y) or to attempt to model the relationship between the two variables by fitting a linear equation to the observed data.

The regression statistics is described in Table 2.

Table 2. Regression Statistics

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0,685648572
R Square	0,470113964
Adjusted R Square	0,453555025
Standard Error	19,66826557
Observations	34

For the 34 observations, the correlation coefficient (Multiple R) shows that the linear relationship is 0.68⁴ (close to 0.7). According Ratner (2009) values between 0.3 and 0.7 indicate a moderate positive linear relationship through a fuzzy-firm linear rule. On the other hand, values between 0.7 and 1.0 indicate a strong positive linear relationship via a firm linear rule (Ratner, 2009). So, our Multiple R indicates a clearly moderate/strong positive linear relationship between the two variables.

4 A value of 1 means a perfect positive relationship and a value of zero means no relationship at all (Wagner, 2016).

The Coefficient of Determination (R^2) tells that 47% of the variation of y-values around the mean are explained by the x-values. In other words, 47% of the values of “Good-Practice” fit the model.

In other hand, the Anova output is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Anova

<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
1	10982,53971	10982,53971	28,390344	7,6449E-06			
32	12378,90146	386,8406707					
33	23361,44118						

<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95,0</i>	<i>Upper 95,0</i>
12,0812	4,303777431	2,807112724	0,0084422	3,314680635	20,84769614	3,314680635	20,84769614
0,03606	0,006767547	5,328259003	7,645E-06	0,022274202	0,049844287	0,022274202	0,049844287

So, the linear regression equation is given by:

$$y = 12,081 + 0,036 \text{ Projects}$$

or

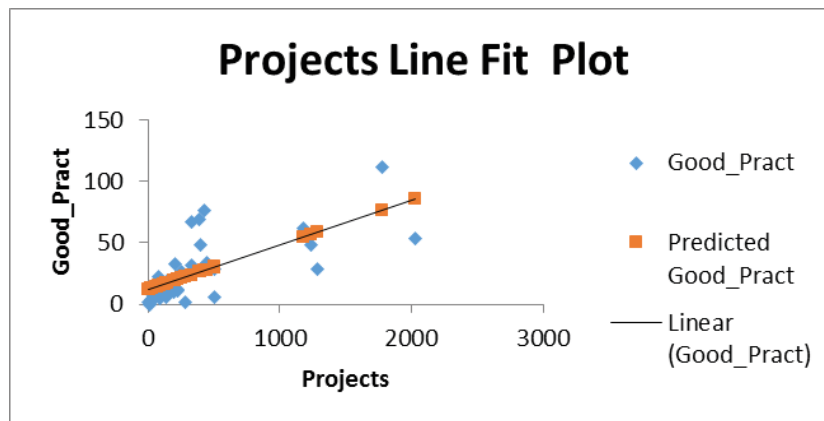
$$\text{Good_Pract} = 12,081 + 0,036 \text{ Projects}$$

The question whether the correlation is statistically significant was also assessed. Using a $\alpha = 0.05$ and looking up to P-value it is clearly lower (7,645E-06), so it can be concluded that the correlation is statistically significant (Corty, 2013). Since the p value is smaller than .05, we reject the null hypothesis H_0 (that the two variables are unrelated). In other words, there is a relation between the two variables.

The effect size of the correlation was assessed by the coefficient of determinations (R^2) and is equal to .47. This means that only 47% of “Good Practices” projects are explained by the number of Projects developed (conversely, 53% of the variation in reading scores cannot be explained and therefore is most likely explain by other variables such as: design, planning and format of a project, the experience in applying to Erasmus+ calls, the management costs per project or the amount of financing asked for each project).

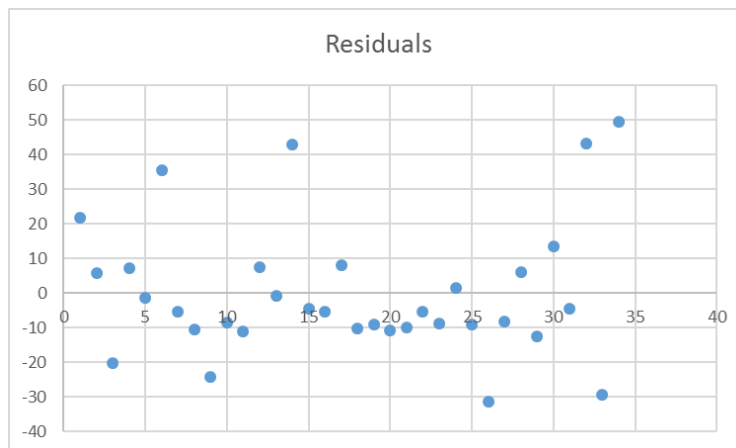
The fitted line plot (Graph 2.) illustrates this inference by graphing the relationship between “Projects” and “Good Practices”.

Graph 2. Line Fit Plot



Regarding the residuals, they illustrate the difference between the regression’s predicted value and the actual value of the output variable. As we can state by the residuals plot (Graph 3.) the values are mainly displayed and centred around zero, so it is more likely that our regression equation is valid (Wagner, 2016).

Graph 3. Residuals



Conclusions

In this article, we first explored, in a period of four years, if the number of Erasmus+ Mobility projects is related with the label of “Good

Practices”. Furthermore, we explored how the regression model can illustrate that relation and what are the possible inferences.

As expected, we found that the number of projects financed per country varies with the population size and the budget assigned by European Commission to each National Agency. So, more populated countries lean towards to have a higher budget (so more expected financed projects) and lower populated countries have lower budgets (so less expected financed projects). This is in line with other studies findings (European Commission, 2014; 2017a). In European Union, only 6,66% of the projects financed, in the period of four years, were considered “Good Practice”.

The regression model shows that almost half of the explanations (47%) for a set of projects to be labelled as “Good Practice” is due to the number of projects presented by a given country. Thus, we can conclude that there are at least 53% of likelihoods to turn them into “Good Practices” that are due to other variables, possibly such as: the intentionality in the design, planning and presentation of a project (from the applicant’s point of view), the experience in applying to Erasmus+ calls, the management costs per project or the amount of financing asked for each project (European Commission, 2017). This conclusion points out that promoters and National Agencies should pay incisive attention not only to the number of projects per country, but also to other explanatory variables if they intend to have mobility projects labelled as “Good Practices”.

This is not a straight conclusion, but a drift to future applicants, as the European Commission may change the criteria, measurement and meaning of “Good Practices” from call to call (European Commission, 2017a).

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