

Erasmus+ VET Mobility as a Route to the Acquisition of Transversal Skills



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Executive Summary



Background & Rationale to the Report

This report entitled Erasmus+ VET Mobility as a Route to the Acquisition of Transversal Skills explores the increasing importance of Transversal Skills as a way of navigating our complex and rapidly changing world. It highlights the opportunities for Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisations to enhance Transversal Skills through participation in Erasmus+ funded mobility projects. It examines the value of Erasmus+ mobility opportunity as a mechanism for the acquisition of Transversal Skills for VET learners and staff. Lopez & Lopez (2020) conducted a thematic and bibliometric review of research carried out between 2010 and 2020 on transversal competences taught as part of vocational education and training. They conclude that there is currently a lack of research at VET level and that more empirical research needs to be conducted on how transversal competences can be acquired.

This report was carried out under the direction of the National VET Team. VET Team is a national panel of key experts from across the Further Education and Training sector that advises Léargas on VET practice, policy, recognition and accreditation of skills. The members of the VET Team panel are representatives from Dundrum College of Further Education (CFE), Sligo CFE, Blackrock Further Education Institute, Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board (ETB), Galway Roscommon ETB, SOLAS and Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI). The purpose of the VET Team is to promote and support the implementation of EU VET tools in projects funded by Erasmus+.

The report aims to investigate and explore the concept of Transversal Skills, establish any consensus in terms of definition and identify priority Transversal Skills needed to succeed in the new world of work. It also seeks to start the conversation on Transversal Skills within VET, establish what they are understood to be and their level of importance at this juncture.

Audience

This report is intended for Irish VET organisations interested in exploring the area of Transversal Skills and identifying priority Transversal Skills to support VET learners and staff to navigate an increasingly complex world. It is also aimed at new entrants to Erasmus+ programme, undertaking mobility opportunities under Key Action 1, to demonstrate and showcase the transformative benefit of engaging in Erasmus+ mobility for the acquisition of Transversal Skills.

Methodology

This report is based on an expansive, cross-disciplinary literature review covering the fields of Psychology, Education and Business; three focus groups with Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners were carried out and consultation with a group of 18 VET and Adult Education participants of a European Training Cooperation Activity (TCA) on the theme of Transversal Skills also took place.

The Léargas Impact Study: Erasmus+ International Work Placements for Vocational Learners from Ireland, a longitudinal review of VET mobility experience over

an 11-year period, showed that European work placements supported learners to develop Transversal Skills, enabling learners to gain work experience in industries and workplaces that would not have been available to them in Ireland.

A data set from semi-structured interviews conducted as part of Doctoral research on Transversal Skills, carried out in 2021 and 2022, was also analysed and contributed to this report.

Two meetings were held with the National VET Team panel to surface the concept of Transversal Skills and obtain insight from practitioners on the ground. The core purpose of the National VET Team, as described by the European Commission is: “to promote and to support the implementation of EU VET tools in projects funded by the Erasmus+ programme.”

Relevant FET policy was also reviewed to establish the level of emphasis on Transversal Skills. The Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024 highlights several strategic priorities focused around “strengthening links of education and training to the needs of the labour market and workplace upskilling, cross sectoral cooperation”. One of the key strategic priorities for the strategy is building Transversal Skills. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and science (DFHERIS) has also launched the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021 – 2025 which focuses on enhancing learning and training opportunities within the context of apprenticeships. Ireland aims to increase the number of apprenticeships in the educational sector over the next five years to support applied learning for skills development.

Drivers

Post-COVID, there is much uncertainty about what the future of work will look like. The future of work is now referred to as the next normal rather than the new normal, indicating the unrelenting pace of change and rapid digitalisation. The Dublin City University (DCU) Future Skills project refers to this next normal as ‘unscripted’ times, again highlighting the uncertainty that lies ahead – we don’t know what we don’t know – about the shape of the future. This uncertainty can cause deep discomfort for some, and Transversal Skills are a means to moderate that discomfort and provide people with coping strategy for what some see as impending chaos.

Another driver for the focus on Transversal Skills is the critical skills gap reported by managers globally within the new entrant cohort to the workplace and much of this skills gap they identify relates to Transversal Skills,

particularly, adaptability, resilience, self-awareness and communication.

Remote and blended work models resulting from COVID-19 are also driving a need for more focus on Transversal Skills as mental health issues begin to emerge and people begin to experience disconnection and isolation. Transversal Skills are a protective factor for resilience and positive mental health.

Challenges

The lack of clarity around the definition and nomenclature of Transversal Skills continues to present challenges. Myriad terms and labels abound, for example, Uniquely Human Factors (WEF), Soft Skills, Universal Skills and Human-Centred Skills Intelligence (Cedefop) to mention but a few. Researchers in the UK have identified up to 200 individual Transversal Skills, so some degree of structure and classification becomes necessary to drive common understanding. Transversal Skills as a term is clearly understood within Further Education but not well understood, or used, beyond that. A significant Continuous Professional Development programme is necessary to equip VET tutors with the necessary skills to embed Transversal Skills into their programmes.

Another challenge is that the terms Skills and Competences are used interchangeably across the literature. Transversal Skills are more complex than the term skills would suggest. Transversal Competences more accurately capture the layered and complex nature of these ‘skills’. This gave rise to the decision to design a Transversal Skills Competency Framework to unpack/deconstruct what each identified transversal skill might mean in terms of definition, sub-skills and behaviour. This is annexed to this report.

Assessment and validation of Transversal Skills is an ongoing challenge. Reflective Practice is an effective way of tracking the ‘distance travelled’ but is considered too subjective by some and highlights the need for a more robust framework for demonstration of competence.

Findings

It has been continuously reported by past participants of Erasmus+ mobility projects that Transversal Skills are those most valued deriving from the VET placement experience, and that the transformative benefit of these skills impact the individual in their life and work. Confidence, self-awareness and independent

functioning were those skills most reported as valuable from participation in Erasmus+.

Post the disruption caused by COVID, the identification of priority Transversal Skills has shifted from inter-personal (between people) such as collaboration, teamwork and communication to Intra-personal (within self) and include mostly those relating to Emotional Intelligence such as, resilience, self-confidence and self-regulation.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The principal conclusion from this report is that Erasmus+ mobility is a very effective mechanism to support the rapid development and acquisition of Transversal Skills. The competency framework highlights the key Transversal Skills obtained and strengthened through the European work-based placement within VET programmes. The framework is divided into two key sections – Intrapersonal skills and Interpersonal skills. There are four key skills falling under intrapersonal skills: Self-awareness, Self Confidence, Adaptability and Creativity. The four key interpersonal Transversal Skills highlighted are: Communication, Collaboration, Active Citizenship and Empathy.

A key recommendation is that VET organisations make intercultural work placement and Erasmus+ mobility participation an integral part of their programmes and make it a strategic priority for their organisation.



1 Transversal Skills for this new world we live in

Transversal Skills is a complex, cross-disciplinary domain of skills development. It moves beyond the world of work, out into the whole of life. Well-developed Transversal Skills are protective factors for positive mental health as they contribute to psychological stability. These are the skills that ground the individual, that help to navigate challenges and deal with adversity. They underpin resilience and enable people to deal with uncertainty and rapid change. They are also the skills that are distinctly human, and are not, as yet, replicable or substitutable by technology and Artificial Intelligence (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Defining Transversal Skills

Transversal Skills have emerged in the literature as a topic of significant importance for the future world of work. Transversal Skills have been defined by UNESCO (2019) as:

“Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline, or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings; for example, organisational skills. They refer to an individual’s ability to communicate, problem-solve, build and maintain relationships and adapt in times of uncertainty”.

OECD (2018) divides Transversal Skills into 3 separate categories: **Cognitive/Metacognitive**, for example, critical thinking and creative thinking; **Social-emotional** Skills, for example, empathy and responsibility; and **Practical Physical Skills**, such as manual and life skills. The OECD (2018) found that Transversal Skills crosscut all three of the above categories; they are defined as “learned and proven abilities which are commonly seen as necessary

or valuable for effective action in virtually any kind of work, learning or life activity. They are “transversal” because they are not exclusively related to any particular context (job, academic discipline, community engagement, etc.)”

(UNESCO, 2021).

However, the area of Transversal Skills is fraught with issues related to nomenclature, and there is no one agreed or universally accepted definition. While Transversal Skills are widely regarded as important in the post-COVID workplace, the wide-ranging terminology creates confusion which is only exacerbated by a theoretical dispersion and methodological inconsistency, as identified by Marin-Zapata et al. (2021, p. 1) in their systematic review of the Transversal Skills literature. They conclude that this dispersion and inconsistency contributes to the myriad definitions and labels that currently exist and which include Soft Skills, Life Skills, Universal Skills, Human Factors (Medical settings), 21st-century skills, Uniquely Human Capabilities (WEF), C.O.R.E. Skills (Palarmis & Monnot), Transversal Skills (EU and FET), and Human Centred Skills Intelligence (Cedefop).

Additionally, a necessary distinction must be made between the concepts of skills and competencies; throughout the Transversal Skills literature, the terms Skill and Competence are used interchangeably causing a lack of clarity around what is meant by Transversal Skills. Skills is defined as “the ability to use one’s knowledge effectively and readily in execution or performance” and, therefore, stress the actionable, technical knowledge required to carry out an activity. Competencies are defined as “the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviours that contribute to individu-

al and organisational performance,” emphasising a person’s ability to use the full range of acquired skills effectively.

The term Transversal Skills is well understood in the context of Vocational Education and Training, but not recognised at all outside the realm of education. However, the term competence rather than skill better reflects the complex nature of subject matter in that it relates to a combination of attributes, knowledge and experience that provides a deeper, more appropriate description.

Context Drivers for Transversal Skills

Transversal Skills are essential now to empower individuals to navigate a dynamic and interconnected world. These skills are critical to our individual and collective wellbeing and are as central to our social fabric as they are to the needs of the future workplace.

The World Health Organisation defines the consequences of declining mental health as causing absenteeism, presenteeism and great expense in lost productivity annually (WHO, 2022). The reality of new ways of working – blended and remote models - results in the absence of social connections and networks which, in turn, can diminish mental health. Isolation and loneliness within young worker cohorts is increasing. The Lancet (2020), reports that even a period of as little as 10 days can produce a negative and lasting impact on mental health and loneliness has a direct and negative impact on worker emotional commitment and performance.

The importance of Transversal Skills has been highlighted by the OECD (2023) to align with the needs of

the future world of work; these skills are essential to professional development and future employability of VET learners.

Globalisation

The world of work is experiencing a significant disruption; the COVID-19 pandemic and hybrid/remote work have changed how employees work and have significantly impacted the skills required for future success. The new world of work is characterised by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA); this means individuals are working in an unpredictable environment which can be destabilising and cause increased stress.

In addition to the VUCA working environment, according to the World Economic Forum (2020), pre-and post-COVID-19, society is experiencing the fourth industrial revolution, a period characterised by deep and rapid technological transformation. Although there have been many positive aspects to Industry 4.0, with increased connectivity and automation transforming global business, this has also resulted in already stressed workers trying to keep pace with the constant, rapid change. To some researchers, such as Fair (2022), Industry 4.0 was considered overly technologically deterministic, where humans were operating in support of technology instead of the other way around.

Industry 5.0 has emerged since the pandemic and is characterised by a stronger symbiotic relationship between humans and machines. Driving the emergence of Industry 5.0 is the creation of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which will enhance workplace processes. However, AI is predicted to automate many of the current administrative roles in the workplace and is predicted

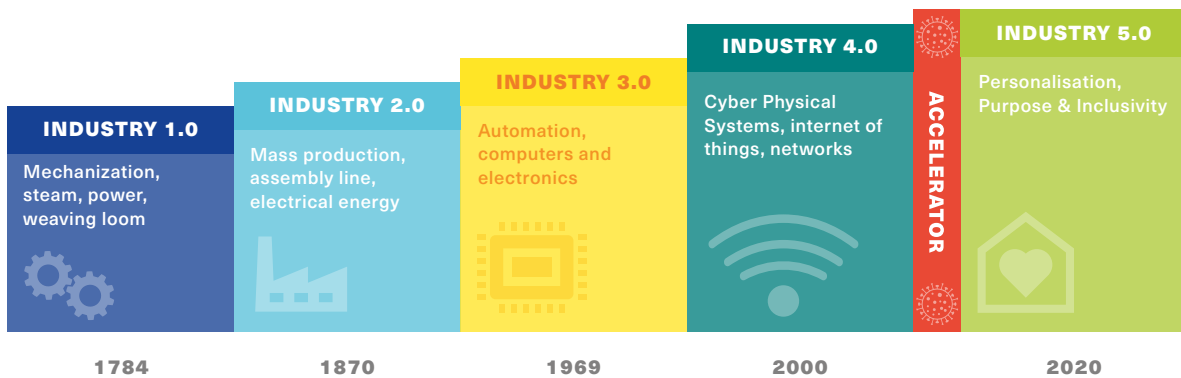


Fig 1: Evolution of Industrial Development (PrismLCC, 2022)

by some to automate up to 25% of the entire workforce. Therefore, although technical skills will be important, there will be a growing need for Transversal Skills, i.e., skills that technology can't yet replace.

Globalisation has resulted in very culturally diverse workplaces and teams; the ability to communicate effectively, work together in a team setting and take initiative are strongly desired by employers (Lopez and Lopez, 2020). Transversal Skills such as emotional intelligence are increasingly important in culturally diverse settings as these skills contribute to solving problems, building strong relationships and fostering a positive work environment.

Transversal skill sets are also critical to strong teamwork; social psychologist, Patrick Lencioni (2006), conducted a study to identify the various non-technical elements which damage team functioning and found the most pivotal of all are related to a lack of Transversal Skills, including absence of trust, lack of commitment, fear of conflict, inattention to results and avoidance of accountability. His research demonstrated that good teamwork relies on enhancing Transversal Skills to build trust, facilitate commitment to the work, openness to challenge, goal-oriented clarity and hold each other to account.

Furthermore, due to the rapid pace of technological change, employers identify a need for greater Transversal Skills, such as creativity, empathy, resilience, and adaptability. Individuals need to be able to navigate the fast-paced technological transformation; Transversal Skills such as adaptability and resilience allow for this as they help individuals navigate changing work environments and evolving job roles. Transversal Skills were of such importance that they were considered 'the number one differentiator' with regard to job applicants for employers across multiple business sectors.

It is important to note that the importance of Transversal Skills goes far beyond that of the workplace. These skills contribute significantly to the development of an individual as a whole and foster personal growth and greater self-awareness as Transversal Skills often rely on self-reflection and introspection, assisting with developing a strong sense of purpose and identity in the process. Furthermore, enhanced communication contributes to building and maintaining meaningful connections and enhancing interpersonal relationships. Improved Emotional Intelligence enables the development of empathy, understanding different points of view and navigating social situations with sensitivity.

Employer Perception of a Skills Gap

Despite the current need for Transversal Skills, employers report a deficiency of these skills within the graduate cohort, negatively impacting their performance in their respective roles (Cukier et al, 2018). Employers have emphasised a lack of problem-solving, critical thinking as well as skills in self-management and self-regulation, for example, stress tolerance, resilience and flexibility. However, an interesting view from Tertiary Education sector considers it to be less a skills gap, than an articulation gap - meaning these skills are not made sufficiently explicit in the education and training provided. Therefore, learners cannot articulate or demonstrate them as competencies to prospective employers.

According to the EU, the future workplace needs, and emerging skills shortages are drivers for this new focus on Transversal Skills. In 2022, 38 occupations report skills shortages. It is a long-term aim of the EU to have 60% of the adult population engaged in skills development on an ongoing basis. Currently, that target is at 37%. To achieve this target, investment is needed in skills development with a strong focus on the needs of industry. Research also suggests that new entrants to the workplace today, will change career, not job, a minimum of three times during the course of their professional life. This will require adaptability to enable people to unlearn and release the comfort of existing knowledge to acquire new knowledge and skills.

The Flash Eurobarometer – European Year of Skills: Skills shortages, recruitment and retention strategies in small and medium-sized enterprises (2023) confirmed skills shortages in SME sectors. Approximately 68% of respondents indicated that Transversal Skills – flexibility, teamwork, communications and critical thinking being particularly important for SME's. Digital skills were also highlighted by employers to be ready for the onset of new technologies.

In addition, high levels of Transversal Skills have been associated with improved mental health and well-being. However, Generation Z – recent new entrants to the workplace today - are reported to experience high levels of anxiety. Due to the high levels of isolation, Generation Z are reported to have little professional and personal resilience. Developing Transversal Skills can create resilience and provide healthy coping mechanisms for anxiety; they strengthen self-confidence and self-compassion, improve communication and trust and enhance individual tolerance of ambiguity. It is, therefore, no surprise that in the Neuroscience Literature, Wellbeing is now considered to be a skill that can be learned (Davidson, 2022).

Priority Transversal Skills

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has described the future economy as the 'emotional economy', meaning the economy will depend on employees that possess 'uniquely human capabilities' (WEF, 2017). These uniquely human capabilities are those Transversal Skills understood within VET. In order to have a successful career in the next 10 years, it will be necessary for learners to anticipate the need to upskill and reskill on a continuous basis and to have the ability to be adaptive and respond quickly to change. Therefore, it will be essential for individuals to become adaptable lifelong learners for the future workplace.

The Transversal Skills that have been suggested and deemed most important are Adaptability, Empathy, Resilience, Self-awareness, Self-confidence and Communication. Recent research has shown that these priority Transversal Skills are divided into two categories: intrapersonal or intrinsic and interpersonal or performative. Post-COVID, intrapersonal skills have gained priority as they are more closely associated with wellbeing and are critical to enabling people to deal with uncertainty and rapid, unrelenting change. OECD (2019) specifically highlights the need for learners to increase their capabilities beyond knowledge and skills to incorporate awareness, values, imagination, moral maturity and responsibility.

Empathy has been suggested by many as the priority transversal skill; improvement of overall health and social

adaptation is strongly channelled through empathy as it forms the foundation for moral development. From a neurobiological lens, demonstrating positive Transversal Skills such as empathy, causes a chemical connection between individuals at a neurological level. This Law of Resonance states that when one object vibrates at the same frequency as a second object, vibrational synchrony results. When we talk about being in harmony with others, it is therefore less a metaphorical, and more a scientific, perspective. Such is the importance of Empathy, and this connection results in enhanced emotional commitment and retention as positive mood orientation allows individuals to receive information effectively and respond flexibly and creatively. However, a study undertaken by the Association of Psychological Science, with data from over 14,000 students reported that Empathy levels have dropped by 40% over a 20-year period (2010). It therefore becomes necessary to address this depletion of empathy within education systems, as enhancing empathy levels is connected with prosocial behaviour and overall wellbeing as opposed to low levels of empathy being related to poor social adjustment and aggression.

Figure 2 below, presents the priority Transversal Skills as identified by VET professionals in the focus groups and in the TCA. Adaptability, communication, creativity and resilience were those most voted as important. However, an interesting second tier Transversal Skills identified include: confidence, empathy, emotional intelligence and regulation, collaboration and teamwork.

What are the 5 most important emerging Transversal Skills?



Fig 2: Priority Transversal Skills identified by VET professionals



Fig 3: Priority Transversal Skills deriving from Erasmus+ Mobility experience as identified by a group of European VET and Adult Education professionals.

TCA event participants were asked to develop a definition of Transversal Skills.

What is FET policy saying about Transversal Skills

Ireland's Further Education and Training system covers multiple areas of education, such as post-leaving cert courses, vocational education and training, apprenticeships, adult education and community education services. The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act (1999) defined further education and training as 'education and training other than primary or post-primary education or higher education and training' (Irish Statute Book, 2022). The Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Sports (DFHERIS), newly established in 2020, defines Further Education as follows: 'Further education covers education and training which happens after second-level schooling, but which is not part of the higher education system' (DFHERIS, 2022).

Within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland, the main providers of VET are 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) countrywide. Responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating FET programmes at ETBs lies with SOLAS, Ireland's Further Education and Training Authority.

Further Education and Training in Ireland is experiencing significant reform. The new FET strategy (2020-2024) for Ireland states that the world is being transformed by a series of megatrends: globalisation; digitalisation; ageing demographics and climate change. These megatrends are further impacted by the anticipated increase in the use of Big Data; Automation and Augmented Reality. Skills will need to evolve rapidly to enable people to navigate the emerging employment landscape.

The strategy further highlights that 'FET provides a continuum of learning opportunities from Level 1 to Level 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), focused on both core and specific skills development, accompanied by a range of learner supports to facilitate the active inclusion of all citizens' (SOLAS, 2020, pg.21). SOLAS states that over 200,000 unique learners engage in FET each year and that the 'vast majority of learners (100,000) are engaged in foundation skills (NFQ Levels 1-2) with 40,000 availing of 'bridging skills' and 60,000 focused on vocational skills (SOLAS, 2020, pg.24).

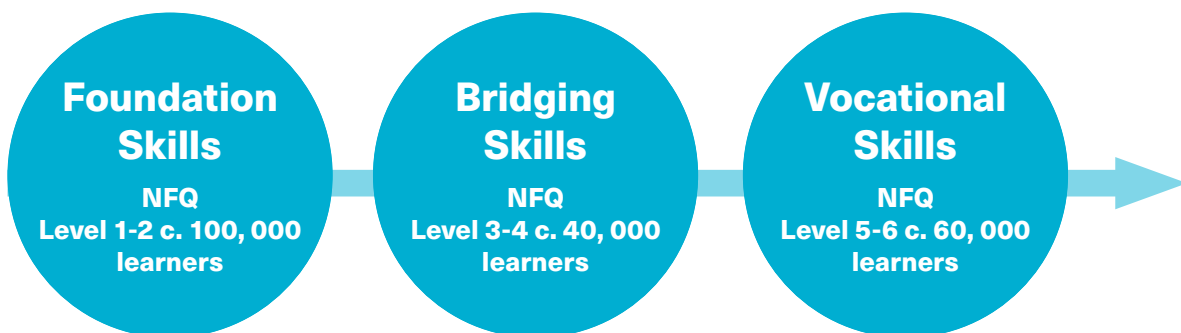


Fig 4: Type of Provision within FET (SOLAS, 2020)

In Ireland, VET falls under the broader arena of Further Education and Training (FET) and while both offer opportunities for skills development and career advancement, VET programs are primarily aimed at upskilling learners for the labour market. FET has a broader focus and aims to provide individuals of all ages with a range of skills, including vocational skills, general education, personal development, and career progression opportunities. Their programmes encompass a wider range of educational levels and outcomes to VET. VET programmes within FET include: -apprenticeship training, combining off-the-job training (in ETBs and institutes of technology) and on-the-job training (with an employer).

The Erasmus+ Programme's objectives in the field of education and training clearly complement the strategic priorities of the FET Strategy. This includes strengthening links of education and training to the needs of the labour market and workplace upskilling, cross sectoral cooperation. Erasmus+ is specifically acknowledged within the Strategy as a mechanism to facilitate an international dimension to work placement. It states that "Learners should be able to avail of these types of vocational offerings in new integrated colleges of FET, with existing facilities consolidated to achieve this".

The Strategy sets out several Strategic Priorities, including: 1. Building Skills 2. Fostering Inclusion and 3. Creating Pathways, all of which are closely aligned with Erasmus+ and are embedded in the work of Léargas within their own strategic priorities.

Apprenticeship Training

Traditionally, apprenticeships within FET were concentrated in the construction/engineering sectors. However, new, post-2016 apprenticeships, have been extended to include other sectors such as Hospitality, Transport, Retail, ICT and Finance designed as an occupational skills development training model designed to meet the needs of local employers.

DFHERIS launched the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-2025 in 2021 wherein the Irish Government aims to increase the footprint of apprenticeship across the education sector over the coming five years, ensuring that apprenticeships are open and accessible and are seen as a viable and exciting path to skills and qualifications. The impact of the experiential learning associated with apprenticeships is well recognised for the positive benefits and accelerated skills acquisition which accrue to learners, employers and society alike. Employers can foster a pipeline of talent specifically related to their needs and learners have the benefit of enhancing their

knowledge in an applied setting and being job ready.

While Erasmus+ is mentioned under Key Deliverable 3: An agile system, responsive to workplace change and evolving skills needs (pg. 46), it does highlight the benefit of access to international placement as a way to respond to the needs of the future workplace:

'Deliver pilot programmes for access to international placements for apprentices through existing Erasmus+ placements or, where a programme is suitable, through international on-the-job placements'(pg. 46)

Léargas aims to engage with the goals of this plan via the National Apprenticeships Office.

Off-the-job Training

Training takes place both on-and off-the job and leads to awards spanning NFQ levels 4 to 6. Trainees may include school leavers, older learners, the employed and the unemployed; post leaving certificate courses (PLCs), delivered in ETB colleges or second-level schools; they comprise general and/or vocationally oriented education. Typically, training is in areas such as technical knowledge, personal/core skills and some work experience; PLCs lead to an NFQ level 5 or 6 award.

The development of Transversal Skills is high on the agenda for the European Union, with European policy aiming to support and advance Transversal Skills acquisition. The European Commission has declared 2023 as the "European Year of Skills", placing skills, including Transversal Skills, at the forefront of its political agenda.

Although multiple European countries have lifelong learning strategies for the development of Transversal Skills in place, current European policies emphasise the need for a more cohesive approach throughout Europe; this has been undertaken through two separate policies:

- The European Skills Agenda (2020) – is focused on national skills strategies where all stakeholders are involved, and a whole government approach is undertaken with regard to the design and implementation process.
- The Osnabrueck Declaration (2020) – this declaration looks to foster cooperation between stakeholders at sectoral, regional and national levels, in addition to social partners for the development of national skills strategies by 2025.

In the 2016 National Skills Strategy, Transversal Skills is mentioned multiple times. The National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016) refers to Transversal Skills as the “building blocks for the development of the hard or vocational or technical skills required to succeed in the labour market”. The report states that the skills identified by enterprise include innovation, creativity, teamwork, communication, business acumen, and entrepreneurship (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.33). The Strategy also contends that ‘there is a rising demand for higher level cognitive and interpersonal skills.

The European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience is an initiative to support the green and digital transitions and ensure a strong recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. It recognises the impact Artificial Intelligence (AI) will have on future jobs and the subsequent need for upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning for individuals. To this end, VET systems are crucial to ensuring that individuals have the correct skills for a changing labour market. The European Skills Agenda highlights that around 50% of learners are VET learners in the EU and therefore,

“Europe needs agile, resilient and future-proofed VET systems, which can support young people to manage their entry to a changing labour market and ensure that adults access vocational programmes tailored to the twin green and digital transitions” (2020).

The initiative supports VET to become a global reference point for skills development, with a stronger connection to other educational institutes and greater mobility opportunities and partnerships with employers. It further focuses on enhancing work-based learning to increase the employability of graduates and addresses the digital readiness of VET institutions and teachers.

2023 – The European Year of Skills

The European Year of Skills conference, in Sweden in 2023, strongly emphasised the importance of Transversal Skills development, with many experts offering insight on future skills needs.

The conference highlighted the imperative to develop cross-sectoral skills, including Transversal Skills, and that policy should focus on their development in applied settings. This is also congruent with the research carried out for this report where VET tutors advocated for an integrated approach to the teaching of Transversal Skills and that these skills be taught in an applied setting. It was emphasised that in order for the development of these skills to be effective and sustainable, there needs to be

a strong alignment of policy and practice. Long-term high-level governmental commitment and cross-party cooperation are also critical to the successful design and implementation of an integrated national skills strategy.

Maunsell (2023) suggests that ‘there is evidence of a new paradigm occurring at further and higher education levels – where learning modules and research projects encourage a multidisciplinary approach’ (p.5). He further suggests that modules including Work Experience, Communications, Teamwork and Personal and Professional Development contribute to the development of Transversal Skills. Maunsell (2023, p.5) points out that there is a range of modules delivered across FET which include group work, project work and experiential learning methods that support the development of Transversal Skills. He cites the research of Lopez and Lopez (2020) who contend ‘that properly planned work experience, underpinned by good theoretical knowledge acquired in class develops and reinforces the Transversal Skills of learners’ (Lopez and Lopez, 2020).

Work-based placement has been integrated into many VET programmes over many years and there is much expertise within VET as to the effective management of provider/employer partnership which is central to the success of the placement experience for the learner. However, much of the focus has been on the vocational nature of the placement with less attention given to the Transversal Skills acquisition that accrue from the experience. The exception to this has been in the Erasmus+ Mobility Projects where a VET learner undertakes a work placement in another country and where there is recognition of the Transversal Skills that derive from an experiential learning experience of this type. It has been shown time and time again, that the positive impact of Erasmus+ placement for all participants often rests in the acquisition of Transversal Skills but this is particularly evidenced in those beneficiaries who experience fewer opportunities.

Erasmus+ and Léargas supports to acquire Transversal Skills

Léargas – The National Agency for European Programmes in Ireland

Established in 1986, Léargas manages international and national exchange programmes in education, youth and community work, and vocational education and training. These exchanges connect people in different communities and countries and bring an international dimension to the work of organisations across Ireland. Léargas is the National Agency for Erasmus+ in Adult Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Youth and Sport. It is also the National Agency for the European Solidarity Corps and manages other European initiatives such as eTwinning, EPAL, Youth Wiki, Eurodesk, National VET Team and the Peace IV funded project, CASE.

Over the past 35 years, Léargas has established a national and international reputation for effectively managing significant levels of funding to support international collaboration and exchange. It has built a reputation as delivering a friendly and supportive approach to programme applicants and beneficiaries. The organisation works under the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Education, and the Department for Arts, Tourism and Sport.

Léargas has articulated its strategic vision in its Strategic Statement as:

An inclusive Ireland where we all can participate in and enjoy the transformational value of national and international lifelong learning experiences and be supported to

reach our potential.

Léargas is the National Agency for the management of several European-funded programmes including Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, and the CASE project funded under Peace IV along with the Strategic Initiatives eTwinning, EPAL and Youth Wiki and Support and Network Functions Eurodesk and National VET Team.

It is noteworthy that the commitment from Europe to the development of young people, including VET learners has spanned 36 years and numerous iterations of programmes over those years. The current programme, Erasmus+, is the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. It provides funding and support for organisations to carry out European projects that align with its objectives and that encourage European exchange, cooperation and learning. Erasmus+ offers a range of opportunities for learners, apprentices, teachers and other educators to improve their knowledge, skills and competences. The current iteration of the Erasmus+ programme runs from 2021 to 2027 and carries with it a total budget of €26.2 billion, an increase of €11.5 billion on the previous Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020. Erasmus+ supports lifelong learning of diverse groups of people of all ages, and Léargas, as the National Agency, offers opportunities for all sectors including early years, schools, youth work, volunteering, vocational and adult education and sport.

As the National Agency for the delivery of Erasmus+ in Ireland, Léargas articulates its purpose in its strategic statement as:

‘Our purpose is to enable international collaboration and exchange. We promote and fund intercultural, collab-

orative projects between Ireland and other countries. All our work serves to advance national and European policy. We facilitate good working relationships that spark awareness and appreciation of inclusion, diversity, digital transformation and environmental sustainability across social, cultural and educational domains. We promote the value of international collaboration and exchange in education, training, and youth work. We make international cooperation and learning accessible to a wide range of people and organisations. We contribute to the implementation of policy and practice in education, training, adult education, volunteering and youth work. We provide opportunities for the development of new skills for active participation in society and education. We support the strategic development of organisations and the personal and skills development of individuals.'

Léargas has three key Strategic Priorities:

Strategic Priority 1 – People Matter

The main objective is to increase participation by promoting Léargas and conveying the power, for individuals and organisations, of national and international learning experiences and their wider societal impact.

Strategic Priority 2 – Partnerships Work

The main objective is to continue to nurture and strengthen our relationships, at EU, national and local levels. The intention is to work in various forms of partnership, to increase participation in international exchange and collaboration and meet the priorities of policy and programmes.

Strategic Priority 3 – Programmes Transform

The main objective is to maximise the transformational power of programmes and, through vigilant funding administration and support to a diverse range of people and organisations.

The Supportive Approach

In the delivery of its strategic priorities, Léargas has historically adopted a supportive approach in its interactions with all relevant stakeholder sectors. One key element of this approach comes from their knowledge of the sectors into which they work - in this case, the FET sector - and their proximity to the projects. Léargas is widely reported by project beneficiary organisations as being very helpful, easily accessible and always engaging in a positive developmental way with projects.

Léargas understands the important difference between just providing information and leveraging that engagement to enable communication and knowledge sharing. This approach is also highly participative, in terms of methodology and in the spirit of collaboration, it encourages partnerships, openness, innovation and creativity which are equally relevant and applied to all the fields supported by Léargas.

New entrants to the Programme

All the work of Léargas serves Irish and European policy and is in line with the key priorities and values of the Erasmus+ programme. Central among these European values is Inclusion and in pursuit of being inclusive, Léargas encourages and supports new organisations embarking on Erasmus+ activity for the first time. This has a two-fold motivation; firstly, to ensure that the programme is fully inclusive, open and accessible to those who have little or no prior experience and secondly, to ensure that the programme continues to reach new organisations and support them to avail of funding by highlighting the transformative benefit of participation which has been repeatedly emphasized across all programme reporting.

Accreditation

Within the implementation structure of EU programmes there are quality labels, competence frameworks and accreditation that can help to address the sustainability of innovative work taking place within VET. Such tools relate to the priorities of the programmes which are:

- Inclusion and Diversity
- Digital Transformation
- Environment and Fight against Climate Change
- Participation in Democratic Life

Erasmus+ accreditation gives organisations access to

learning mobility opportunities under the Programme's Key Action 1. It is awarded to organisations that have a long-term strategic vision to develop their organisation, through organising regular high-quality mobility activities. Key Action 1 supports organisations in delivering professional and personal development opportunities for learners, teachers, trainers and other education staff. Its primary purpose is to ensure that these organizations meet specific standards and criteria necessary to effectively engage in impactful international mobility activities that will contribute to development of their internationalisation strategy. The benefits of accreditation are stable funding, expanding partnerships, the flexibility of organisations to develop their own strategy, opportunity to explore and grow in the process, and an investment into the future that will raise the quality of teaching and learning in the organisation. For example, one accredited regional College of Further Education has committed to sending large-scale numbers on intercultural work placement each year. They have committed that every programme will offer an intercultural vocational placement in the college directly as a result of having experienced the benefits accruing to both learners and staff from participation in European mobility projects.

VET organisations are evaluated on their capacity to provide high-quality, relevant, and well-structured mobility activities for learners and staff. The benefits of Erasmus+ accreditation are twofold: for the National Agency overseeing these projects, it ensures that competent and capable organizations are entrusted with the responsibility of facilitating international mobility; for the VET organisations, there is a competitive advantage for organisations with accreditation, they have already established their credentials and provide assurance of quality standards to the National Agency and their annual application process is more streamlined.

Refining expertise around mobility and embedding intercultural work placement into the strategy and practice of the organisation via the accreditation process enables colleges to overcome the barrier presented by the fact that most colleges only have their students for one academic year and, therefore, are challenged

around the programme timelines, which can be longer.

Mobility Opportunities within Erasmus +

Mobility is a key component of the Erasmus+ programme and increasing the mobility of young people in Europe is a stated aim of the Erasmus+ programme. Key Action 1 (KA1) is a strand of Erasmus+ that supports the mobility of learners and staff providing opportunities for pupils, students, trainees and young people, as well as for teachers, trainers, youth workers, sports coaches, staff of education institutions and civil society organisations to undertake a learning and/or professional experience in another country.

Mobility for Vocational Education & Training

By promoting international mobility and cooperation between educational institutions and businesses, it is the aim of Erasmus+ to build a more cohesive and competitive European VET sector while supporting learners in their personal and professional growth.

Erasmus+ offers a diverse range of mobility opportunities for VET staff and learners providing practical, on-the-job learning in their chosen area, language learning opportunities to learners on mobility placement through the Erasmus Online Language Support (OLS) tool and opportunities for exchange of good practice for staff mobility participants.

Opportunities within VET KA1

SHORT-TERM LEARNING MOBILITY OF VET LEARNERS

In the context of VET, this means a European placement period for VET learners and recent graduates at a learning host provider or traineeship in a company, usually between 10-89 days in duration, where the project has been developed with a partner organisation that organises the placement and in-country support for the VET learner.

LONG-TERM LEARNING MOBILITY OF VET LEARNERS - ERASMUSPRO

ErasmusPro offers a unique opportunity for VET learners and recent graduates to gain international experience by undertaking long-term work placements or apprenticeships of 90 to 365 days in duration in companies in

Europe. It fosters the development of a highly skilled and adaptable VET workforce, equipped with cross-cultural competence and practical skills necessary for today's competitive job market.

SKILLS COMPETITIONS

VET learners can participate in international sectoral events in which competitive demonstration of skills is central for promotion, recognition and exchange of experience, know-how and technological innovations in VET. Funding is also provided for staff, mentors or experts accompanying the learners during the activity.

Staff Mobility under KA1

JOB SHADOWING

VET staff can travel to another country for job shadowing for a period of between 2 and 60 days to have a practical learning experience by shadowing their peers in the host environment.

TEACHING AND TRAINING ASSIGNMENTS

Teaching and training assignments are undertaken whereby teachers and tutors can teach or train in the host institution for a period between 2 and 365 days which has been shown to have very positive impact on both personal and professional development of participating staff.

COURSES AND TRAINING

VET staff can also participate in courses and training to develop their expertise and broaden their perspective of the Education and Training system in Europe. These courses are between 2 and 30 days in duration with a maximum of 10 days being funded by Erasmus+. In addition to improvement in overall learning performance, the Mobility activities within Key Action 1 projects aim to increase employability opportunities for participants, enhance various important Transversal Skills such as self-esteem, self-empowerment and intercultural awareness; and strengthen digital competencies and foreign language skills. These activities also drive a sense of European identity and encourage active citizenship.

Staff and participating organisations also benefit from activities undertaken on the KA1 projects. Benefits accruing to staff include improved understanding of policies, exposure to practices and systems across VET in Europe, enhanced competencies in education and training, improved understanding of all types of diversity and enhanced motivation and satisfaction in their respective roles. At an organisational level, the activities provided by KA1 assist in achieving greater alignment to the needs of the learners and trainees and

enable organisations to operate at an international level which contributes to improved management capability, internationalisation strategies and increased allocation of financial resources toward KA1 projects. Reciprocity is favoured under Erasmus+ – that is that partnerships operate a two-way process in regard to KA1 activities where possible.

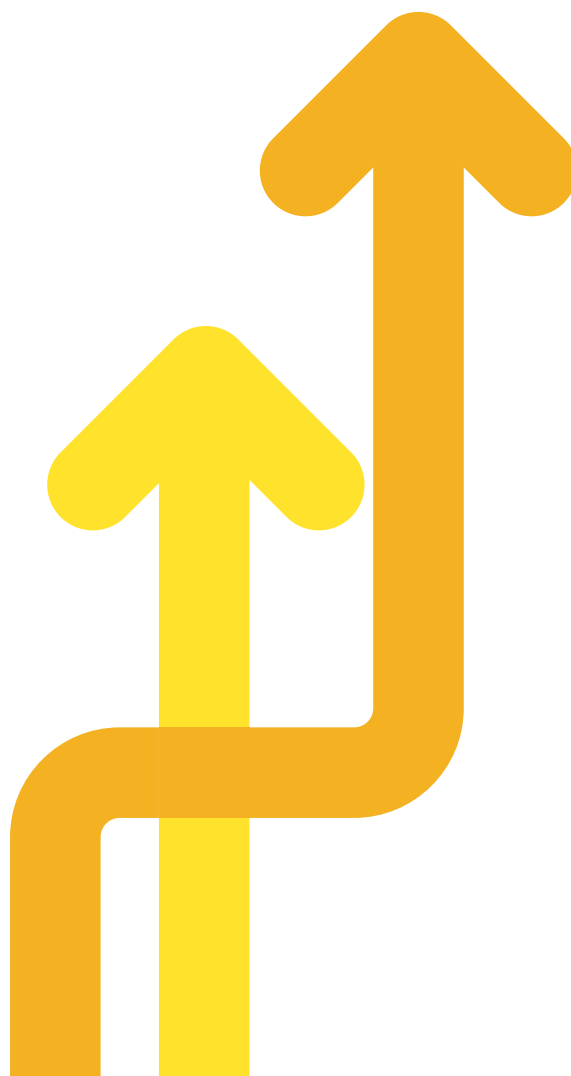
Other Supported Activities

INVITED EXPERTS

Additional opportunities provided by Erasmus+ include support to invite expert guests to share expertise and experience to help improve the teaching, training and learning at the receiving organisation. These experts can include policymakers, education experts or experts from other arenas relevant to the work of the institution.

PREPARATORY VISITS

A preparatory visit is a visit to a prospective hosting organisation by staff from the sending organisation with the purpose of better preparing a learner or staff mobility activity. Each preparatory visit must have a clear reasoning and must serve to improve inclusiveness, scope and quality of mobility activities.



4 Benefits and Impact of Erasmus+ VET Mobility

Over thirty years of VET mobility programmes, the transformative benefit of transnational placements has been highlighted and well-documented as a positive contributor to learners' social and personal development skills. There is much evidence to support the transformative benefit of participation in a European work-based placement. Participants continuously prioritise the Transversal Skills experience as the most valued outcome derived from placement. The specific Transversal Skills highlighted by learners may change from person to person. This is, in part, what makes the whole area of Transversal Skills so challenging. The challenges in defining, identifying priority Transversal Skills and assessing Transversal Skills progression has given rise to the need for a competency framework for Transversal Skills based on those accruing to mobility project participants. The framework, developed as part of this research, identifies the key transversal competencies and seeks to provide a definition and behavioural example for each. See Annex Two.

The focus on Transversal Skills is not to devalue in any way the technical learning related to their field of study. However, it is notable that in evaluating the placement experience, it has been the acquisition of Transversal Skills and the impact of these skills on the confidence, self-awareness and independent functioning of the learners that have been most reported at learner, teacher and organisational levels. This is where the transformation is evident. Even when learner does not remain in their vocational area, the Transversal Skills acquired from the placement experience are still seen as having value.

The benefits and impact highlighted relate to personal development, language skills, social and cultural competence. Many learners make lifelong friends from the placement experience. The longer-term placement

of three months plus is seen as helping the learner progress their career and particularly helpful for those sectors that have high barriers to entry e.g., graphic design is reported as a profession that is challenging to break into in Ireland and a transnational placement can have direct benefit in such situations.

'Your Transversal Skills get you the job'. (VET tutor)

Transversal Skills also ***'assist the learner to make the jump from education to the workplace'. (VET Practitioner)***

Participating VET organisations have become more sophisticated and informed on best practice in the delivery of mobility opportunities to learners via the programmes they offer. Through European partnerships developed from partner findings seminars or study visits supported by European Programmes, VET organisations in Ireland have had the opportunity to exchange good practice and learn from other European countries.

The process of a VET mobility and Transversal Skills

The process of the VET mobility from pre-departure preparation through execution of the placement to post-placement follow-up, fosters the development of Transversal Skills at each stage of the process. From the outset, the learner must engage with the process by applying to be selected for a European placement opportunity. The VET learner usually must write an application, identifying why they are interested and promoting themselves as meriting consideration. This requires a degree of **self-confidence** as the learner

must write an application to put themselves forward, discussing how they relate to European values and demonstrate the emotional resources and capability to undertake a new intercultural experience.

There are key phases of the preparatory process which promote Transversal Skills for example, **building a team (relationships)** of the VET learners who will go on placement; it requires the learner to make **independent preparations to travel**; getting ready for the technical aspect of the placement and to build relationships with people at the host partner institution. The experience of the placement itself presents a range of new experiences such as **navigating a new environment (adaptability)**, perhaps a new language and acclimatising to a different food; for some, navigating transport (**independence**) in another country can present a challenge which has to be overcome.

Accommodation on placement may require the learner to **live with new people (self-awareness, self-promotion)** and require them to **take on responsibility at work**. Understanding instructions in another language or negotiating conditions in a different culture (**intercultural competence**) constitute new experiences for the VET learner. Domestic arrangements such as living with others, getting to know new people and **managing the day-to-day of living independently** in another country all call on, and create the conditions for the development of, Transversal Skills. Such skills include self-awareness, self-confidence, intercultural awareness, openness to change, acceptance of difference, active listening and self-reliance to mention a few. A VET mobility can also cause the learner to look differently at their own identity and perceptions about themselves as they are reflected against another cultural environment.

VET organisations and colleges that are experienced in managing VET mobility are adept at preparing the VET learner for this experience. Even with informed preparation, the VET learner can still experience challenges in situ, but it is by overcoming these challenges that personal growth occurs. Many participant reports from VET mobility highlight the positive impact of the experience by referencing their acquisition of Transversal Skills as evidenced in the words of VET project beneficiaries:

‘Through Erasmus, I’ve gotten to know myself more as a person through so many different ways. I have gained a better knowledge of what values are most important to me in living a happy life. I have felt able to express myself fully in relationships, my style, my personality and in daily activities’.

Another particularly impactful quote about hope for the future, from a VET learner returning from their placement experience:

‘I have gained a lot of hope that my future is going to be bright, I will succeed once I conquer my fears head on and regardless of what my wellbeing tells me, I am always capable’.

Impact of Learner Mobility

Benefits pertaining to their technical skills are highlighted where the partnership is well established with strong common understanding of the predicted outputs. Participants also reported that a European work placement contributed favourably to their employability when the placement was directly relevant to their area of interest and was accurately matched to their skills level. The pre-requisite to achieve this is found in a solid, well managed European partnership. Other participants report that confidence gained from participation in European work placements can encourage participants to pursue higher education.

Particularly impactful were the placement experiences of those experiencing fewer opportunities, who may not have travelled outside of Ireland before. In almost all cases, participants highlight the value of the Transversal Skills acquired as the most impactful elements of the placement experience. With this cohort in particular, the role and value of accompanying persons was highlighted. Accompanying persons, funded as part of inclusion supports, are those who accompany young people to their European placement to help them settle in and assist them to problem-solve where necessary. Léargas has also provided mentor training for accompanying persons so that they are fully supported in discharging their duty of care to the VET learner.

Feedback from the Léargas **Impact Study: Erasmus+ International Work placements for Vocational Learners in Ireland** is particularly salient because it accessed feedback from EU placement beneficiaries/participants (via VET Tracer Study) which tracked learners over an 11-year period. Frequently, the value of the work placements is not fully recognised until several years after the fact. This study recognised the pivotal role the work placement had on the future direction of participants’ lives.

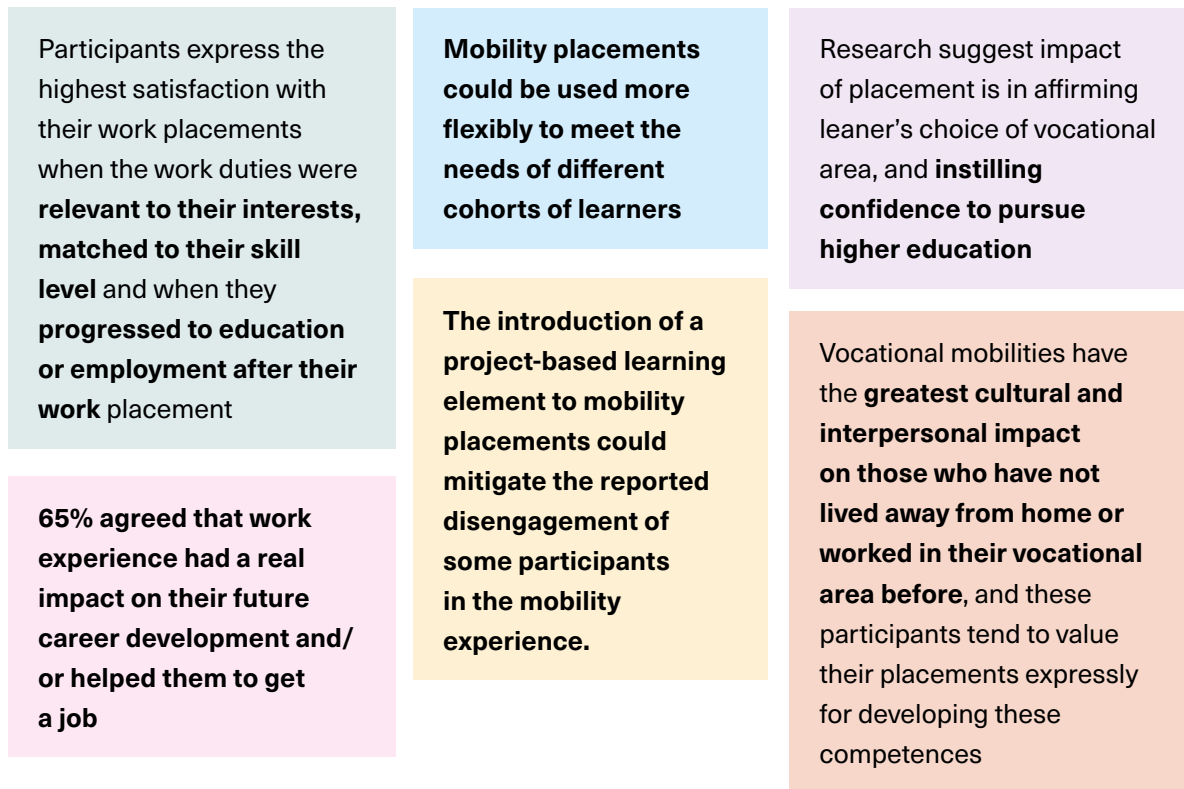


Fig. 5 Tracer Study Impact Data on VET Mobility

Findings from the Impact Study report

- A highly positive or positive experience was reported by 92% of participants from VET placements.
- More than 75% of participants reported an improvement in communication as a direct result of placement as well as enhanced team working skills and ability to work in an intercultural and international setting.
- Over half of all participants reported acquiring skills for their profession that they would not have been able to learn in traditional teaching methods at school or college.
- More than 65% concluded that their placement had a significant impact on the development of their future career.
- 55% found their work experience positively impacted their grades from vocational training programs.
- Lastly, an important finding from participation in VET placement was that almost 66% of participants expressed that their placement time had helped them get a job.

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

Focus Group Feedback

The experience of living in and negotiating another cultural environment is reported to enhance participants' Transversal Skills. There was much consensus within VET organisations that have experience of international placement regarding the positive value and transformational experience that accrues to the learner from a European work placement activity within Erasmus+:

'Phenomenal,, no learner comes back having had reduced skills having gone on an Erasmus project. You know, [...] they would all have enhanced skills, because from negotiatingin a foreign language, from finding their way,, working with other people, from leadership skills, working with other people when they're there, interpersonal skills'. (VET Tutor)

'Transformed' was the word most used, with regard to this experience:

'We know when they come back, they're going to be different kids.'(VET Tutor)

Another tutor highlighted that:

'The participants will run into difficulties, have arguments – all part of the learning. The placement experience is a little microcosm of life'.

Another commented on the fact that in the context of experiential learning, nothing can be considered as standard. Different learners will have different metrics of success. For some, perhaps those with fewer opportunities, the success metric may be getting to work on time or overcoming the challenge of the unfamiliar. For others the success metrics may be more sophisticated for example, some participants performed so well during their placement, that they were offered jobs in the host organisation on completion of their VET programmes.

'Transversal Skills are acquired through experience'.

In general, the consensus from the organisational perspective is that:

'Real time learning experience needs lots of wrap-around supports to be effective'.

VET learners and recent graduates identified the following Transversal Skills as the primary benefit of undertaking a European work placement: resilience, self-reliance, empathy, independence, social development with international peers, dealing with challenge, communication, self-confidence and adaptability. One placement participant highlighted:

'Experience of new cultures, adaptable mindset, more appreciative of the people I met and naturally developing a want to learn more and experience more.'

Another participant reported that they: **'Became hugely independent; learned a lot about who I am, what I value and who I want to be; Broadened my mind and allowed me to gain perspective regarding the 'bubble' I grew up in'.**

Other intrapersonal Transversal Skills were highlighted by a participant who reported the benefits of their placement experience as:

'All in all, I feel much happier as a person and have surprised myself in all good ways. (...) **I have gained a lot more confidence in myself as a person**, both my personality and also my ability in dealing with challenging situations. I have also **developed a greater appreciation for certain things in my own life and have a greater value for the people in my life'.**

Participants referenced developing an adaptable mindset, the ability to sustain relationships and use their empathy identifying other benefits as:

'I had the opportunity to learn a new language, deal with new situations with empathy and build new relationships and learn how to make them long-lasting'.

Impact of Staff Mobility

Prior to the research carried out by McLoughlin (2021), there was very little research carried out on the impact of mobility for staff. In his research, which focuses on the contribution of the staff mobility experience and its impact on leadership development, **"Exploring the impact of Erasmus+ staff mobility on educational leadership and professional development in FET"**, he recommends that key stakeholders such as DFHERIS, SOLAS and ETBI should integrate continuous professional development opportunities for Erasmus+ into strategy documents. McLoughlin cites Rumbley (2015) who highlights the cross-disciplinary nature of intercultural practice and asserts that:

"Intelligent internationalisation demands the development of a thoughtful alliance between the research, practitioner and policy communities".

A recommendation from the McLoughlin research states that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for Erasmus+ staff needs to be prioritised and not treated as an add on or substitution for other professional learning opportunities. It should be integrated into the CPD strategy of the overall VET institution.

In his evaluation and analysis of the impact of Erasmus+ mobility for staff, McLoughlin highlights the significant and positive impact on staff reported from the personal interactions with other tutors from partner institutions and “pointed to the lasting ‘ripple effect’ of some staff mobilities along with the reciprocity and mutual benefits for both partner institutions” A variety of Transversal Skills were reported to have been developed or strengthened from the staff mobility; teachers reported enhanced capability and pedagogical methods from various methods implemented such as coaching/ learning methods and transformative methods undertaken; this approach contributed to enhanced teacher agency and professional autonomy. A diverse range of people from different backgrounds were brought together, enhancing knowledge sharing and developing international communities of practice.

McLoughlin’s findings identify the importance of emotional intelligence competencies – which are also constituents of Transversal Skills - related to enhancing self-reliance and self-confidence and the consequent positive impact on teacher performance thus highlighting that Transversal Skills accrue to adults as much as they do to young people from an Erasmus+ international mobility.

Given that recent research has identified as many as two hundred transversal or transferable skills - the term used to describe these skills differs even between Ireland and the UK – transversal vs transferable - a stronger focus on the priority Transversal Skills that are developed through VET mobility participation is needed. This gives rise to the need for a competency framework specifically focused on VET mobility to help establish a definition for the individual competencies identified and behavioural markers to demonstrate competency. This will strengthen the argument that VET mobility is a direct conduit for the rapid acquisition of Transversal Skills for the VET participant.

Irish FET educators can also enhance their skills and knowledge online through the Erasmus+ community EPAL and eTwinning. Social Inclusion is an area of particular focus on both the EPAL and eTwinning platforms, with numerous resources and good practice case studies available.



The Big Challenge - Recognition and Assessment of Transversal Skills

Evolution of Transversal Skills

Although Transversal Skills are now becoming widely recognised as important for work and life and are being prioritised across European and Irish policy, they are underrepresented across the entire education system. Their importance is also under-recognised in the workplace, and Transversal Skills have been continuously undervalued in favour of technical skills development in CPD. FET tutors reported in 2022 that almost all of CPD training is focused on technology. However, post-COVID, this is beginning to change.

The growth of interest and recognition of Transversal Skills presents a challenge for educators in that the teaching for knowledge is no longer enough to meet the needs of learners for what is now being called the 'Next Normal'. There is some suggestion in the research that the most significant transversal skill could be tolerance of ambiguity. Psychology research shows that people deal better with change, even negative change, if they know beforehand what to expect. The uncertainty of what the DCU Futures Project calls 'unscripted' times causes deep discomfort for some; Transversal Skills can moderate that discomfort.

Assessment of Transversal Skills is an ongoing challenge within VET. Tutors report that curriculum-based assessment requirements constrain the inclusion of Transversal Skills. They are included in relevant modules where possible, but the priority focus is on what, in any module, will be assessed.

Transversal Skills are often associated with Health, Wellbeing and Happiness; these skills can be resistant to classification. Highlighting the concept of lifelong

learning, the following are some of the instruments and methods to aid the recognition and assessment of Transversal Skills:

Approaches to Assessment and Validation of Transversal Skills

EUROPASS

Europass highlights the significant role of VET in the EU's commitment to combatting the social, economic and environmental issues faced today. Europass offers a range of services to assist individuals, institutions and employers. Europass supports learners in search of educational or work opportunities across Europe through the provision of free multilingual tools to support individuals in their lifelong learning; they provide information resources for study and work abroad and a Europass e-Portfolio to assist with job opportunities CVs and enable individuals to record their mobility experience. Europass also connects individuals with learning and employment opportunities through its interoperability feature. Additionally, Europass provides digitally signed credentials for institutions to provide learning credentials and qualifications to learners and tools such as the Europass Certificate Supplement to support institutions and employers in understanding the skills and qualifications already obtained by individuals through VET.

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

The TRANSVAL - EU project is one of the largest European policy projects concerned with Transversal Skills. It aims to explore various innovative approaches to the assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL). This project is piloted in 5 countries

– Italy, Austria, Lithuania, Poland and Belgium. It has approximately 30 partners, some of which include research institutions, adult education providers, ministries and public authorities. It is focused on multiple Transversal Skills such as communication, problem solving and cooperation. This project aims to build the capacity of practitioners and counsellors on Transversal Skills and to enhance cross-sectoral collaboration to build coherent VNFIL systems and processes. Good practice will be shared at a regional, national and European level to ensure long-lasting impact.

ASSESSING LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Educational Research Institute and the European Training Foundation (ETF) also facilitated an additional workshop at the European Year of Skills Conference in Sweden, which emphasised methods and tools for assessing learning outcomes and particularly focused on Transversal Skills. Participants at the conference engaged in a self-reflective experience, sharing their views on using different methodologies to develop their Transversal Skills. The outcomes presented aimed to facilitate teachers and all working in the education field to support their learners in developing such skills. The workshop focused on the scaffolding methods developed under the ETFs Creating New Learning (CNL) initiative. It also examined the development and assessment of Transversal Skills by the Skills Audit Method, developed by the Educational Research Institute. This method looks at identifying, describing and documenting learning outcomes and using this information to create development plans for various further educational and career paths.

While there are a multitude of methods to assess the development of Transversal Skills, the most effective assessment approaches require a ‘learning outcomes’ approach – focused on knowledge, skills, responsibilities and autonomy.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflexivity and reflective practice are key to the assessment of the acquisition of Transversal Skills, even though reflective practice is subjective and not always considered sufficiently robust as an assessment method. Reflexivity needs to be accompanied by some more robust data gathering to confirm skills or demonstration of same. There is general agreement that while the focus on skills acquisition is important, both reflective and assessment approaches need to focus more strongly than heretofore on the learner **experience**. This is supported by the fact that final participant reports for mobility projects – placement – almost exclusively focus on experiential learning and the Transversal Skills as those being most transformative.

Reflective practice is essential to developing Transversal Skills because it enables individuals to reflect on the self, learn from experiences and apply new perspectives to future situations. When reflective skills are applied, the individual strengthens the competency of self-awareness. The **Anticipation-Action-Reflection cycle** (AAR) highlighted by the OECD is a reflective practice focusing on improved thinking and being proactive, taking action that aligns with long-term goals for enhanced collective wellbeing.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS

In June 2022, the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted a Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. Micro-credentials are short courses tailored to individual needs, providing critical skills in a short time. Micro-credentials are a type of modular learning, giving learners the flexibility to build a professional development portfolio that is unique to their needs. As the workplace is characterised by rapid change and will need constant upskilling, there needs to be more effective recognition for tailored training that provides more flexible, innovative and inclusive approaches to learning and which responds to labour market needs in a timely manner.

Micro-credentials reflect a holistic process to recognise and provide accreditation throughout the system for industry-based learning (Nic Giolla Mhichíl et al., 2021). It is defined as ‘smaller units of assessed learning recognised by higher education institutions and other trusted credential-bearing agencies or professional bodies’ (pg. 5).

An emerging area, Micro-credentials offer many benefits such as short lead-in times to certification, flexibility in learning, and skill provision in new and expanding areas.

In 2021, Skillnet Ireland, in conjunction with DCU, published a report on the implementation of Micro-credentials, ‘A Micro-Credential Roadmap: Currency, Cohesion and Consistency’. This report examines how Micro-Credentials can contribute to the upskilling and reskilling demands of the future workplace and meet the needs of employers and employees alike. It also provided feedback from the first survey of Irish employers on employees regarding their perception of the potential of micro-credentials as a system to support skills development. The report also provides a roadmap of recommendations to establish Ireland as an international centre of excellence in the micro-credential space.

These recommendations include:

- Provide pilot programmes focused on co-design and, co-development, and delivery with other trusted providers
- National funding to support further in-depth research
- Advance understanding across all relevant stakeholder groups

The report aligns with the outcomes of the European Commission's **'Skills Agenda for Europe'** (2020), which identifies micro-credentials and the adoption of digital badge technology as key building blocks to develop Transversal Skills and promote new lifelong and life-wide learning pathways. Micro credentials and digital badges may make lifelong learning more accessible:

'They can increase permeability between different education pathways/systems and improve flexibility'.

'...smaller forms of credentialed learning (such as Micro-credentials), when embedded in a coherent framework, may deliver more flexible, stackable and transformative learning experiences for both employees and employers'.

Gamification

Gamification is another assessment method for Transversal Skills demonstrated by a game called Fligby. FLIGBY has been found to be an effective tool in developing various Transversal Skills such as conflict management, leadership and emotional intelligence (Almeida and Buzady, 2022). FLIGBY can be used primarily to develop skills in dimensions such as leadership, conflict management, diplomacy and emotional intelligence. Research findings indicate a large correspondence between the Transversal Skills fundamental to the twenty-first century and the assessment dimensions recorded by the FLIGBY game in a higher institute setting.

Challenges to the Development of Transversal Skills via VET mobility

Although Transversal Skills are becoming more widely recognised as a core need for the future of work with European and Irish policy focusing on methods for the development and assessment of these skills, the teaching and assessing Transversal Skills is not straightforward. In most research, assessment and recognition is reported as a challenge because of the social and emotional nature of these skills and the subjectivity inherent in assessing progression.

It was reported that 65% of FET tutor participants indicated that the focus on Transversal Skills in QQI accredited modules was inadequate. There are differences within the system with regard to the emphasis on Transversal Skills. While pointing out the minimal value placed on Transversal Skills within the structured education system, tutors reference the importance of these skills, not just for work, but for coping with life's challenges. Tutors also cite an example of the points system in second level education being the:

'...antithesis to the basic tenets and practices of group, team and societal action. When students don't achieve their points goal from Leaving Certificate they are 'left devastated often with little of the Transversal Skills vital to surviving such challenges'

The OECD (2023) has highlighted three main challenges for the development of Transversal Skills.

- Firstly, policymakers tend to focus on Transversal Skills development in young people, incorporating these skills into their curriculum as opposed to focusing on the continuous development of Transversal Skills for people of all ages and in all stages of life.
- Secondly, despite the importance of Transversal Skills, these skills are cross-disciplinary and not limited to any specific occupation or field; therefore, developing such skills must cross multiple areas of the curriculum. However, current learning models do not support this integrated approach, with the system favouring single-subject lessons. Furthermore, the education system in Ireland prioritises academic subjects and standardised testing, which tend to measure content knowledge as opposed to skills development. This can result in a loss of focus on Transversal Skills. The strong focus on academic content can overshadow the importance of various Transversal Skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and problem-solving. Therefore, current assessment methods are not fit for purpose. However, developing valid and reliable assessments that can capture the complexity of various Transversal Skills such as empathy, adaptability, or teamwork is a complex task.
- Thirdly, although there is growing attention and recognition of Transversal Skills in the world of adult learning, many adults already have strong Transversal Skills obtained throughout their life. Recognition of prior learning is required to validate these skills.

Mobility Project Management Logistics

The timing of placement can be very challenging to integrate into the academic year. Some organisations run placement in June, but the bigger challenge is in terms of teachers' time and the lack of any support for substitution. Some organisations report that even if they have the resources (money), there are too few substitutes available within the system to allow the project to take place.

Another significant issue pertaining to VET mobility and the assessment of Transversal Skills is the duration of placements. Often, the placements offered are up to a year in duration, with reflective journals presented upon completion of the course. Although reflective practice is an excellent method for strengthening self-awareness, many students do not recognise the significant impact and skills gained from their mobility experience until some years after the fact. The behavioural shift is a gradual and interactive process. Developing self-confidence and self-awareness continues over the whole life span of the individual (Newman, 2016).

The preparatory process for participation in Erasmus+ mobility can take a lengthy period of time, especially for those undertaking it for the first time. The challenge for VET organisations is that they have access to their students usually for one academic year, which brings challenges of fully including the learner in all aspects of the preparatory and final evaluation processes. This process becomes more efficient and speedier as the organisations become more experienced but still represents a challenge in managing a KA1 mobility project end-to-end. Preparation strategies are also very important to support independent thinking and self-reliance. Ensuring that projects are not 'leader-led' and that learners undertake critical parts of the preparation phase themselves or by working in small groups both promotes the acquisition of Transversal Skills and brings the teacher/tutor into the role of facilitator of learning.

Furthermore, many students need to enhance their skills for reflection so that they are able to effectively articulate the skills and competencies they have obtained. Given the subjective nature of Transversal Skills acquisition, structured reflective practice needs to be embedded within the system, in mobility project preparation and maintained throughout the project duration. However, many educators did not receive adequate training in Transversal Skills throughout their own education and this now calls for focused professional development

for tutors to equip them to facilitate the development of Transversal Skills.

The FET strategy 'Future FET: Transforming Learning' (SOLAS,) states that "Assessment tools can play their part in this, and this data can be complemented by the creation of a 'distance travelled' tool which captures and measures 'soft' or 'transversal' skills development of learners" (p.57).

'.....which is called the distance travelled tool, which is to see basically how far somebody has progressed with a focus on Soft Skills only in their programme of learning'.

It is worth noting that the benefit accruing to the young participant from a VET mobility experience is often not fully recognised by them until a significant period of time has elapsed and they can look back and reflect on the benefit. Many have identified their placement/exchange as a pivotal moment in their lives, three to five years after the fact. This highlights the challenge for FET referenced earlier in that they usually only have the learner for a period of one year. Therefore, gathering some medium and longer-term impact data can be challenging.

When learners are on placement, they are acquiring their Transversal Skills while carrying out their role. They are being guided, mentored, and coached by a member of staff who contextualises their learning for them and with them. The reflective practice activities undertaken during the placement which form part of the assessment submission – reflective journal – is a way for the learner to chart their development during the placement.

'So, they do personal and professional, supervision..... there's actually a book even on supervision and leadership in childcare. And that covers, you know, communication, professional practice, it covers organisation, it covers curriculum, the importance of play, child-centred approaches, interactions'. (VET Tutor)

However, relative to the 200,000 annual FET participants, very few get the opportunity to undertake intercultural mobility or placement. According to one provider participant, the opportunity needs to be mainstreamed and be made more visible: The **'Benefit of international mobility activity / work placement is not visible. Very challenging to move this practice out into the mainstream'**.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Bridging the Skills Gap

Across the literature and the research participant responses, there is acknowledgement of the importance of Transversal Skills for the current and future workplace. There is new recognition of the value of Transversal Skills resulting from the experience of rapid change in the work environment, and the disconnection and isolation experienced by employees in new models of work e.g., blended or remote working. There is a need for employers, and managers in particular, to have better levels of Transversal Skills themselves and be prepared to lead their people differently going forward.

Erasmus+ offers a strategic route for organisations to develop the Transversal Skills needed by VET learners to ready themselves for the world of work and a future that is characterised by rapid change. Participation in Erasmus+ mobility has been found to assist with a range of Transversal Skills development including creative thinking, communications, self-promotion and adaptability, in a funded, organised and safe manner.

There is much to consider from a VET systemic point of view in bridging the Transversal Skills Gap. It must begin with what learners will need to learn to prepare them for society and the world of work. In terms of research, the domain of Transversal Skills continues to suffer theoretical and methodological dispersion as well as a significantly confused nomenclature. Having a common understanding of the priority Transversal Skills to be taught within VET; leveraging the opportunities under KA1 of Erasmus+ to accelerate the acquisition of these skills for VET learners and staff and developing innovative ways to embed these skills within curricula

are all key considerations going forward. A common language and shared understanding are needed across the domains of education, training and employment. This will also require a new philosophy of learning and teaching to deliver a socially inclusive education and training system.

Transformative Experience

The strongest message coming from this report is that the rapid acquisition of Transversal Skills is facilitated by participation in a European Placement opportunity supported by Erasmus+ KA1 mobility funding. Feedback consistently uses words like 'transformative' 'incredible experience' 'phenomenal'. It is widely agreed by both learner and teacher that mobility experiences can be life-changing in many instances. Erasmus+, coupled with the support of Léargas, provides opportunities to VET learners that might never otherwise be accessed. This is especially true for learners with fewer opportunities where extra funding and extra support is made available in order to prioritise the participation of those who might not otherwise get the opportunity.

Learner mobility experience is reported to have the most positive cultural and interpersonal impact on those with fewer opportunities or those who have not lived away from home, and these participants highlight the value of their placements in terms of developing Transversal Skills. Aligning with the outcomes of the Impact Tracer Study (2021), research suggests key impact of work placement lies in affirming learner's choice of vocational area, and instilling confidence to pursue other education and professional pathways.

The Léargas Supportive Approach

The supportive approach by Léargas has served to build significant capacity in Irish organisations across all fields of education. VET organisations have embedded intercultural exchange and work placement practice into the strategy of their organisations with the support and expertise of Léargas. Many organisations have fulfilled the criteria to become an accredited organisation within Erasmus+ and have acted as multipliers and ambassadors for the value of Erasmus+ mobility out into the sector with the support from Léargas.

While technical skills are important to the preparation of learners to be job-ready, the evaluation of the learner experience from Erasmus+ goes well beyond the placement skills acquired to consider the value of the whole experience. A significant element of the benefit and value of the placement relates to the enhancement of self-awareness, well-being and positive health benefit accruing to the learner/participants from the intercultural experience.

A recent concept of ‘Surfacing’ Transversal Skills is emerging, meaning to ‘bring these skills to light (DCU Futures project). The Transversal Skills conversation is not about a substitution of knowledge but more about the juxtaposition between the technical vs. the transversal, or hard skills vs. soft skills and demands a ‘polarity thinking rather than a zero-sum approach’. It is never one or the other but rather two dichotomies that are equally important and need to co-exist.

Assessment

Assessment will continue to be a challenge and while reflexivity, properly taught and executed well, is an effective record of the distance travelled, it is not considered to be robust enough given the social and subjective nature of these skills. New and innovative ways to facilitate the demonstration of capability of these types of skill will need to be developed. The recently reformed Europass instruments create an opportunity for long-term tracking of skills developed, the accumulation of micro-credentials and can assist the individual to create a record of learning that is recognised by employers.

Educators may need to focus on ‘inner readiness’ or ‘change readiness’ measures to address this assessment gap given that the future workplace, and world in general, is characterised by rapid and unrelenting change.

Teaching of Transversal Skills

Teaching of Transversal Skills needs to be undertaken in an applied context; this is, what appears to be most effective for Transversal Skills development and there was strong consensus on this from employer, provider, and policy perspectives. There was consensus from tutors that the online environment was suboptimal as a medium for teaching these skills as much of the sensory data was unavailable because of the constraints of the online environment.

Teaching strategies need to be context specific and involve multiple stakeholders: providers, employers, peers, mentors and other knowledgeable adults all combine to determine the best methodological approach for developing these skills in the learner. An integrated approach to teaching Transversal Skills is favoured but critiquing the benefits and challenges of this approach in the current context of FET provision is needed. Other approaches include Social and Emotional Learning, Project-based, Experiential Learning and Apprenticeship as alternative teaching strategies for effective Transversal Skills delivery. A challenge for FET relates to the short timelines, as learners generally spend one academic year on an FET programme and **“these types of skills are slow to acquire, require iteration and behavioural or mindset shift, all of which take time.”** (VET tutor)

VET tutors indicated that they were confident to teach Transversal Skills, but also indicated that they had received little or no training to do so. Currently, according to them, most of the continuous professional development within FET is focused on ICT.

The National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies as a strategic objective the development of a new framework for levels 5 and 6 with at least 30% of these new programmes being work-based or having a placement component; there will also be different mechanisms of delivery and CPD for staff.

‘The confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training and PLCs offered in two very distinct settings (training centres and FE colleges), must be replaced by a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40).

This aligns with the current research findings around the value of project-based-learning, integrated teaching, and transnational placement. The key challenge in respect of embedding Transversal Skills into curricula relates to agreeing definitions, providing space within the curriculum, monitoring strategies and assessment protocols.

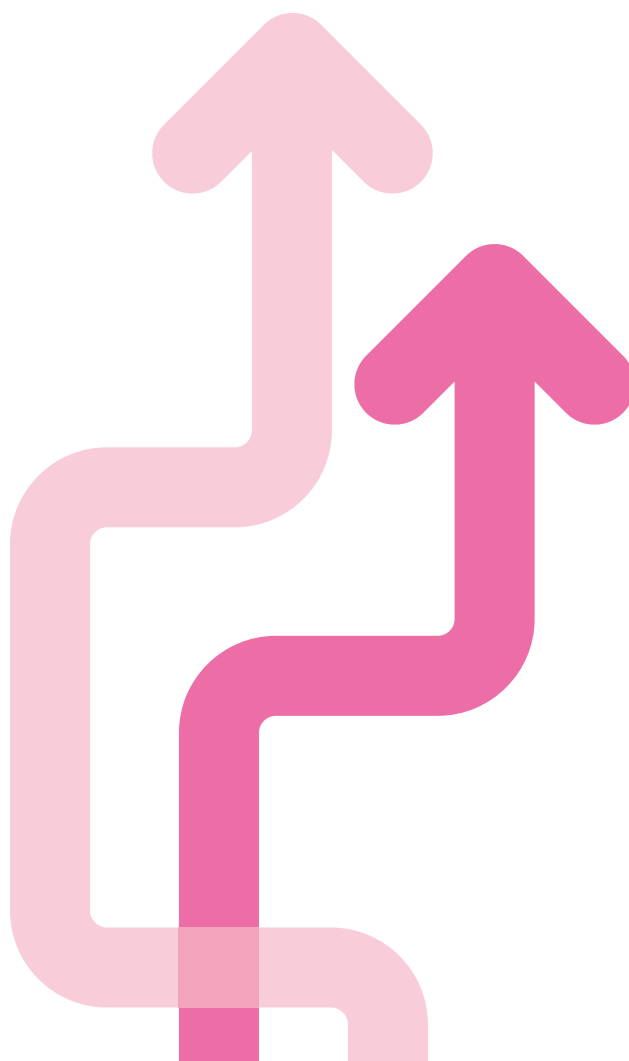
Recommendations

By way of recommendation, it is suggested that:

- Awareness be heightened of Erasmus+ as a great vehicle to support the rapid the development of Transversal Skills
- New entrants continue to be supported and prioritised for inclusion in the programme in order to continue to extend the reach of Léargas and Erasmus+ into the community. This is based on the principle of social sustainability and inclusion and aligns with the priorities of Erasmus+.
- VET organisations work to embed intercultural work-placement opportunities into the strategic fabric of the organisation and work to provide as many of their VET learners and with the transformative experience via mobility projects. The multiplier effect accruing to organisations via staff mobility is evident in the improvement of organisational knowledge around the value of Transversal Skills and VET provision is enhanced.
- VET organisations develop an integrated approach to teaching Transversal Skills. This has implications for team teaching and significant requirements around coordination. One Dublin-based College of Further Education piloted an integrated approach to teaching both technical and transversal content with considerable success in 2021-2022.
- Continuous Professional Development programmes focused on the teaching of Transversal Skills be developed for VET Teachers and tutors.
- A strong focus on the prioritisation of Transversal Skills in future projects is recommended. Transversal Skills acquisition is what participants report as the most valuable and positive benefit deriving from the intercultural placement.
- Commitment is required from senior leadership to embed intercultural placement and EU partnership as a strategic pillar of the organisation. Intercultural learning as a methodology for working with learners could be integrated into the teaching strategies of VET organisations.

- New and innovative ways to facilitate the demonstration of capability for Transversal Skills will need to be developed to complement the more subjective reflective process.
- While VET has good working relationships with their industry partners, some of these partnerships are ad-hoc or dependent on individual relationships. VET could continue to work to build strong, strategic relationships with Industry to ensure sustainable relevant and valuable placement experiences for VET learners.
- It has been suggested as an aspiration for the VET sector that intercultural placement under Erasmus+ be a mandatory element for relevant VET programmes.

Effective Transversal Skills provide high levels of personal agency for learners and teachers alike. A common language and shared understanding are needed across the domains of education, training and employment. This could be supported by the development of a **Transversal Skills Competency Framework**. An example of a Transversal Skills Competency framework is offered at Annex Two, as an initial step to deepen the understanding of Transversal Skills



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ANNEX ONE

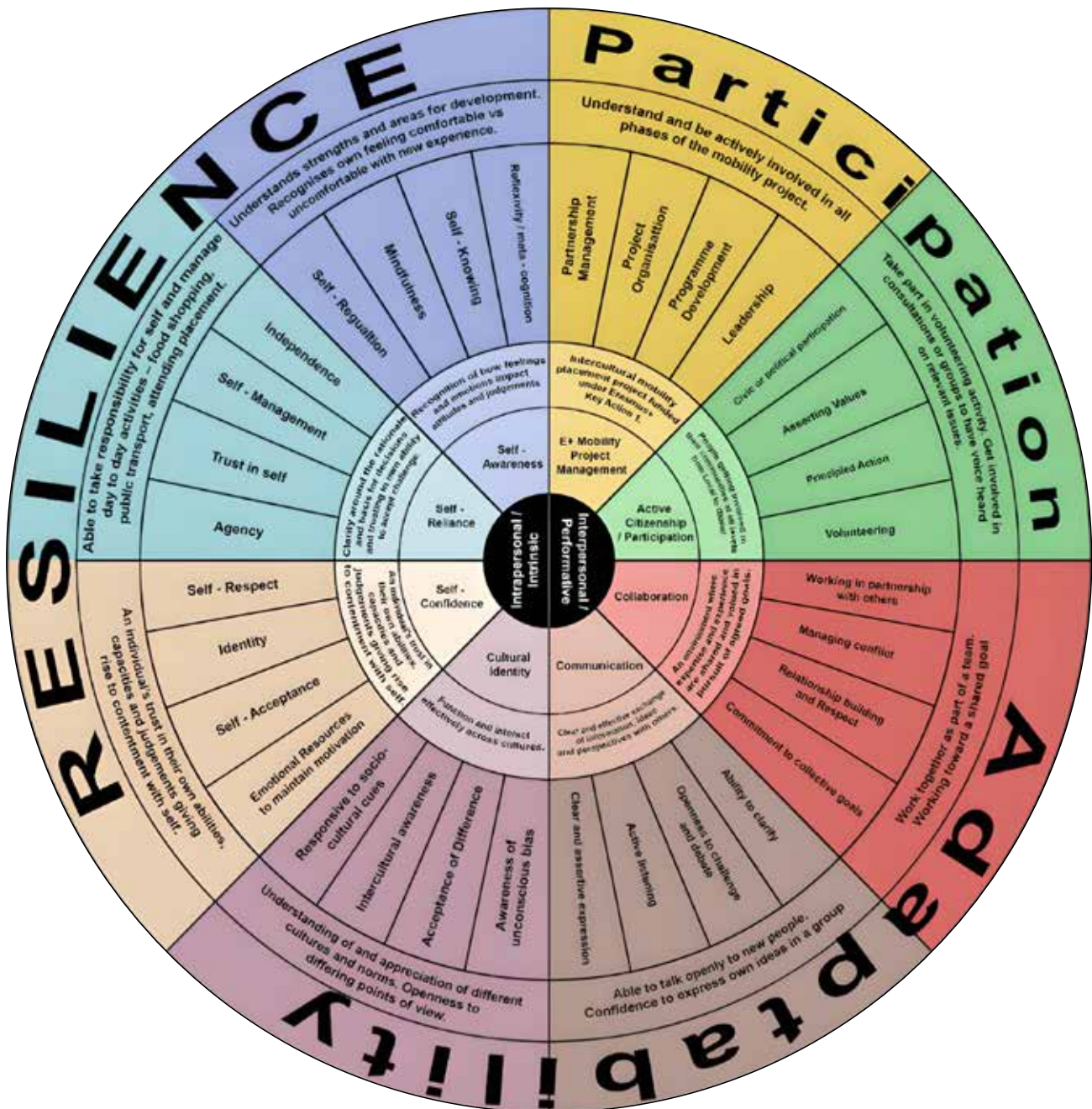
Transversal Skills Competency Framework

Abbreviations

Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
Erasmus +	EU Programme to support education, training, youth and sport
ESC	European Solidarity Corps
ETB	Education and Training Board
EQF	European Union European Qualifications Network
EU	European Union
FESS	Further Education Support Service
IFF	Institute for the Future
Léargas	Irish National Agency for European Programmes
NFQ	National Framework Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SOLAS	State agency for Further Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WEF	World Economic Forum

ANNEX TWO

Transversal Skills Competency Framework



Introduction to the Competency Framework for Transversal Skills

The competency framework focused on identifying the key priority Transversal Skills from the research and build them into a competency model. Researchers in the UK are working on developing approximately 200 Transversal Skills so crystallising those that best relate to mobility for VET learners presents a challenge.

THE FRAMEWORK IDENTIFIES 8 CORE TRANSVERSAL SKILLS:

4 are intrapersonal/intrinsic: **Self-awareness; self-confidence; self-regulation and Cultural Identity**

4 are interpersonal/performative: **Communication; Collaboration; Project Management; Participation.**

Each competency was defined, four related sub skills were identified and then some behaviours were identified to demonstrate the competency. Other, higher priority, competencies that may yet be identified can be included or substituted in for those currently on the competency wheel.

Active Citizenship – people getting involved in their communities at all levels from Local to Global

- Civic or political participation
- Asserting values
- Principled action
- Volunteering

Behaviours - take part in volunteering activity. Get involved in consultations or groups to have voice heard on relevant issues.

Collaboration – an environment where expertise and experience are shared and valued in pursuit of agreed goals.

- Working in partnership with others
- Relationship building and Respect.
- Managing conflict
- Commitment to collective goals

Behaviours - work together as part of a team, working toward a shared goal.

Communication – clear and effective exchange of information, ideas and perspectives with others.

- Active listening
- Clear and Assertive expression
- Ability to Clarify
- Openness to challenge and debate

Behaviours – able to talk openly to new people. Confidence to express own ideas in a group.

Cultural identity - an individual's identity as a member of a group with shared characteristics, which often (but not always) include racial, ethnic, or geographical origins.

- Intercultural awareness
- Acceptance of difference
- Awareness of unconscious bias
- Responsive to socio cultural cues

Behaviours - Understanding of and appreciation of different cultures and norms. Openness to differing points of view.

Self-confidence – an individual's trust in their own abilities, capacities and judgements giving rise to decisive action and

- Contentment with self.
- Self-acceptance
- Self-respect
- Identity

Emotional resources to maintain motivation.

Behaviours – open attitude to trying new things without too much fear. Ability to integrate into new setting. Sense of adventure.

Self-Reliance – clarity around the rationale and basis for decisions and trusting in own ability to accept challenge.

- Independence
- Trust in self
- Agency
- Self-management

Behaviours – Taking responsibility for self and manage day to day activities – food shopping, public transport, attending placement.

Self-awareness – recognition of how feelings and emotions impact attitudes and judgements

- Reflexivity
- Mindfulness
- Self-knowing
- Self-regulation

Behaviours - understands strengths and areas for development. Recognises own feeling, comfortable vs uncomfortable with new experience.

E+ mobility project management – understanding the phases of an Erasmus+ placement project and activating accordingly.

- Leadership
- Programme Development
- Partnership Management
- Project Organisation

Behaviours – understand and be actively involved in all phases of the mobility project.

