

Erasmus+ Program in Vocational Education: Effects of European International Mobility in Portuguese Vocational Schools

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Abstract : The creation of the Erasmus Program in 1987 represented a milestone in promoting and funding international mobility in higher education in Europe. Its effects were so significant that they influenced the creation of the European Higher Education Area through the Bologna Process and ensured the program's continuation and maintenance. Over the last decades, the escalating figures of participants and funds instigated significant scientific studies on the program's effects on higher education. More recently, in 2014, the program was renamed "Erasmus+" when it expanded into other fields of education, namely Vocational Education and Training (VET). Despite being now running in this field of education for a decade (2014-2024), its effects on VET remain less studied and less known, while the higher education field keeps attracting researchers' attention. Given this gap, it becomes relevant to study the effects of E+ on VET, particularly in the priority domains of the Program: "Inclusion and Diversity," "Participation in Democratic Life, Common Values and Civic Engagement," "Environment and Fight Against Climate Change," and "Digital Transformation." This latter has been recently emphasized due to the COVID-19 pandemic that forced the so-called emergency remote teaching, leading schools to quickly transform and adapt to a new reality regardless of the preparedness levels of teachers and students. Together with the remaining E+ priorities, they directly relate to an emancipatory perspective of education sustained in soft skills such as critical thinking, intercultural awareness, autonomy, active citizenship, teamwork, and problem-solving, among others. Based on this situation, it is relevant to know the effects of E+ on the VET field, namely questioning how international mobility instigates digitalization processes and supports emancipatory queries therein. As an education field that more directly connects to hard skills and an instrumental approach oriented to the labor market's needs, a study was conducted to determine the effects of international mobility on developing digital literacy and soft skills in the VET field. In methodological terms, the study used semi-structured interviews with teaching and non-teaching staff from three VET schools who are strongly active in the E+ Program. The interviewees were three headmasters, four mobility project managers, and eight teachers experienced in international mobility. The data was subjected to qualitative content analysis using the NVivo 14 application. The results show that E+ international mobility promotes and facilitates the use of digital technologies as a pedagogical resource at VET schools and enhances and generates students' soft skills. In conclusion, E+ mobility in the VET field supports adopting the program's priorities by increasing the teachers' knowledge and use of digital resources and amplifying and generating participants' soft skills.

Keywords : Erasmus international mobility, digital literacy, soft skills, vocational education and training

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