

EVALUATION OF LATVIAN STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

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Abstract. *The objective of contemporary education is to enhance the competitiveness of graduates not only in the local market but also at the European Union scale; therefore, stronger co-operation with foreign education and research institutions can significantly improve the knowledge and skills of Latvian students, which can gradually contribute to Latvia's competitiveness in high value added activities within global value chains. This, of course, underlines the increasing importance of foreign language skills. In fact, knowledge of the English language in today's labour market is taken for granted, and the competitiveness of those employees, who can speak at least three foreign languages, including one of the Scandinavian languages, is increasing. The aim of the research was to identify Latvian students' learning experience in European countries in scope of short study mobility programmes. Based on the secondary information sources such as statistical data aggregated by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia and Flash Eurobarometer Report No466, the authors have analysed Latvian students' mobility destinations and intentions of studies abroad. The research findings suggest that currently there is a contradiction between students' personal intentions and their real behaviour. The countries that are currently most often chosen as study mobility destinations rather offer valuable cultural experience than practical skills that could be useful in academic and professional work.*

Keywords: *higher education, knowledge economy, European Union.*

JEL code: *I23; I25*

Introduction

Knowledge as a resource is increasingly becoming one of the key determinants of society's development. The experience of leading economic systems shows that it is important to invest resources in educating the public. A significant pre-requisite for the knowledge economy is the quality of higher education (adequate material and technical resources, remuneration of the teaching staff, as well as constant improving of study programmes, students and lecturers' competences (Panina, 2008) as well as

availability of exchange of experiences both among local and international higher education and research institutions and businesses.

According to an OECD survey (2017), today innovation is the key driver of productivity growth and essential in capturing higher value added from participation in global value chains. In 2015, Latvia invested only 0.6% of GDP in research and development, among the lowest in the OECD countries. Thus, business-driven research and development is particularly weak. Less than one-fifth of product and process innovations are completely new to the market. One factor limiting the innovation performance of Latvian firms is the low co-operation between businesses and higher education and research institutions (CSB, 2016). In Latvia, co-operation with foreign firms and research institutions is particularly important but is rare.

Stronger co-operation with foreign research institutions would facilitate transfer of the advanced technologies from the advanced OECD economies and contributes to Latvia's competitiveness in high value added activities within the global value chains. This, of course, underlines the increasing importance of foreign language skills. In fact, knowledge of the English language in today's labour market is taken for granted, and the competitiveness of those employees, who can speak at least three foreign languages, including one of the Scandinavian languages, is increasing. The Russian language does not lose its meaning, too. Either we want it or not, it is still important for those working in Latvia (NRA, 2017). Moreover, in the OECD Economic Survey of Latvia (OECD) it is emphasized that Latvia's government should identify which education programmes currently are effective in promoting co-operation between businesses and research institutions, particularly international co-operation with foreign firms and research institutions. Since Latvia has become a Member State of the European Union, a wide range of study opportunities in the European education area for Latvia higher education institutions have become available and annually involve an increasing number of programme participants taking advantage of international exchange.

Based on the secondary information sources such as statistical data aggregated by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia (MoE) and Flash Eurobarometer Report No466, the authors have analysed the experience of Latvian students' learning in the European education area. The **aim of the research** was to identify students' learning experience in European countries. The specific **research tasks** were: 1) to identify the main trends and study destinations of Latvian students' mobility; 2) to analyse Latvian students' language skills and expectations of students' mobility programmes.

1. Student mobility in the EU partner countries and its objectives

Today in higher education institutions, student mobility is available in any subject academic discipline. To ensure high-quality mobility activities with maximum impact on the students, the mobility activity has to be compatible with the student's degree-related learning and personal development needs. The study period abroad must be part of the student's study programme to complete a degree at a short cycle, the first cycle (Bachelor or equivalent), the second cycle (Master or equivalent), and the third or doctoral cycle. In order to better support students to acquire the skills necessary for their future, a partnership between the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes has been established. This partnership will provide and promote further traineeship opportunities for students and recent graduates who wish to acquire digital skills and competences required to perform jobs and thrive in an economy and society, which is being continuously digitally transformed. Students and recent graduates from all disciplines are invited to apply for a traineeship in these domains. These traineeships are expected to take place in the EU Member States as well as in Horizon 2020 associated countries (European Commission, s.a.).

The Erasmus Programme, which today can be regarded as great success, started during the Delors' presidency, and nowadays Erasmus has certainly become the most known programme across Europe and is one of the 2017 flagship initiatives of the European Commission. Over the past 30 years, the programme has given 9 million people an opportunity to study, train, volunteer, or gain professional experience abroad (European Commission, 2017a). Since 1987, the overall budget of the programme has increased significantly. Looking at the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), it is clear that European decision-makers are willing to allow more and more young people to benefit from this experience. Owing to this budget increase, the Erasmus programme is expected to give extended opportunities for individuals to study abroad, which will be raised from slightly below 500 000 in 2014 to above 800 000 in 2020, totalling over 4 million learning mobility opportunities throughout the period 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2017b).

2. Latvian students' mobility trends

In Latvia, the students' mobility is gradually increasing; however, the specific weight of students who had studied abroad in Erasmus+ or other mobility related programmes was only 2% in the 2016/2017 study year. The top 5 higher education institutions that have shown the highest activity in the students' mobility promotion are the University of Latvia (LU), Riga

Technical University (RTU), Stradins University (SU), Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LLU), and Turība University (TU), which have the widest network of co-operation partners in the European Union and its partner countries such as Turkey, Norway, Liechtenstein etc. Although Erasmus co-ordinators at the higher education institutions are working actively to encourage students to apply for mobility programmes, often there are many objective and subjective justifications for low students' activity. Very often as objective justification for the students' reluctance is a language barrier, which is one of the main reasons why the students cannot manage studies abroad. However, the analysis of the most often chosen students' mobility destinations according to the statistical data of the MoE convincingly shows that among the most desired countries there are Germany and Spain, followed by the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Portugal, and France. In fact, the countries where the English language is the primary language (UK, Ireland) or the second official language (Cyprus, Malta) have been very seldom selected for mobility, although they are active mobility partner countries. Among partner institutions, the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark) were also rarely chosen as students' mobility destinations. In the above-mentioned five Latvian higher education institutions that have been the most active in students' mobility activities, in LU, RTU, and SU, the greatest number of students in 2016/2017 had chosen Germany for their receiving country, while LLU students convincingly had chosen the Czech Republic, but TU – France.

3. Latvian students' experience and language skills on the background of the EU-28 countries

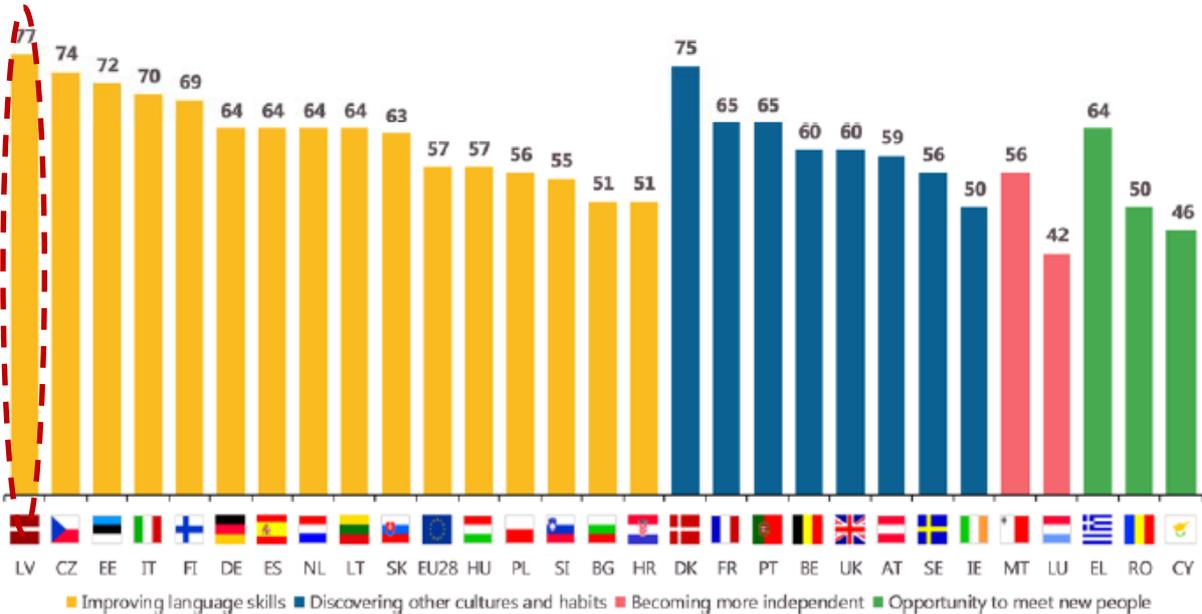
In its Communication of 22 May 2018 on Building a stronger Europe, the European Commission has emphasized that the European Education Area has three main components:

- promoting cross-border mobility and cooperation in education and training;
- helping to overcome unjustified obstacles that make it more difficult to learn, train or work in another country with the aim of realising the “free movement of learners”, and creating a genuine European learning space;
- supporting the Member States in improving the inclusive, lifelong-learning based and innovation-driven nature of their education and training systems.

In scope of this message, the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Youth, Sport and Culture has also conducted an extensive survey “The European Education Area”, which is published in the report

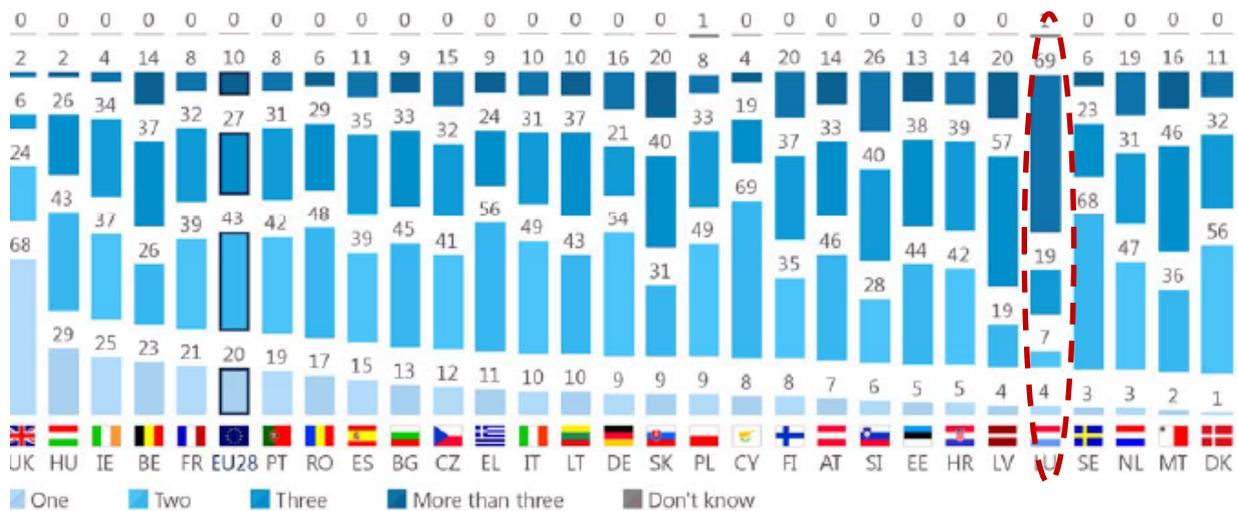
Flash Eurobarometer 466 (2018). The findings of this research are very useful and reflect each country’s students’ current expectations and needs regarding education opportunities. Further, on, the authors will focus on the Latvian students’ experience in international mobility programmes.

On the question “what do you think are the three main benefits of your experience abroad”, Latvian students have most convincingly claimed that improving language skills has been most beneficial for them, and this answer is also characteristic to those youngsters who represent countries, which are most chosen by Latvians for their international mobility – the Czech Republic and Germany, while students from English speaking countries such as the UK, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus are more looking for the new culture exploring and opportunity to meet new people.



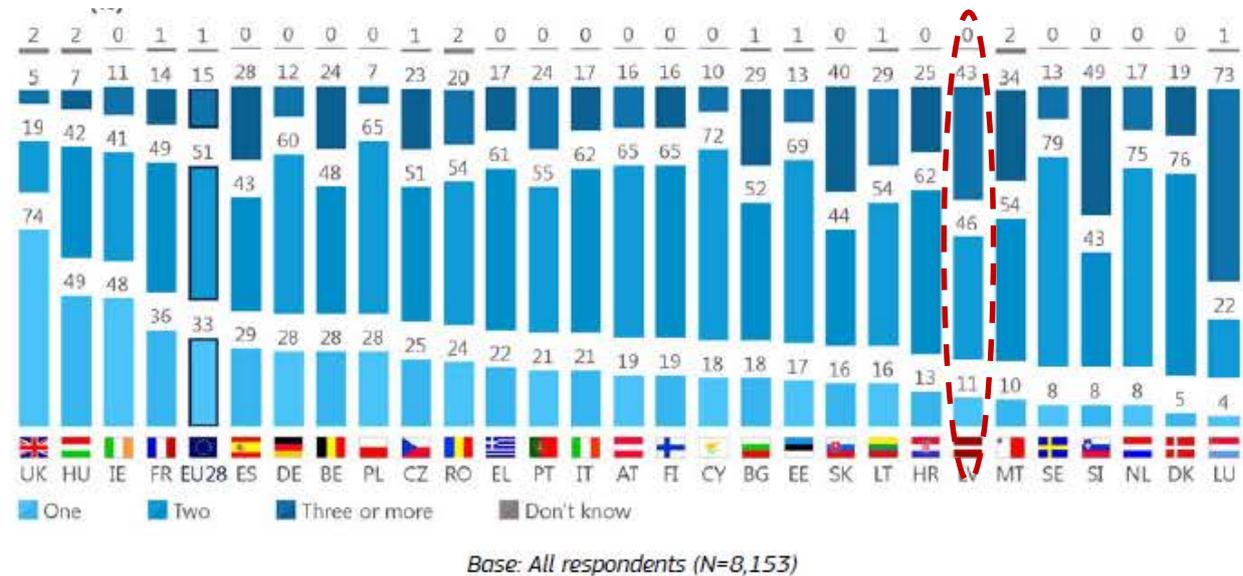
Base: Respondents who had an experience abroad (N=2,127)
 Fig. 1 Main benefits of experience abroad, %
 (Source: EC, Flash Eurobarometer 466, 2018)

Asked about languages spoken and read, including the respondents’ mother tongue, Latvian respondents reflected comparatively better results – the majority of the surveyed respondents speak three languages, which is not so typical on the background of the EU-28 average and compared with the other two Baltic States – Estonia and Lithuania, which could be explained by larger Russian minority existence in Latvia.



Base: All respondents (N=8,153)
 Fig. 2 Languages spoken and read by respondents, %
 (Source: EC, Flash Eurobarometer 466, 2018)

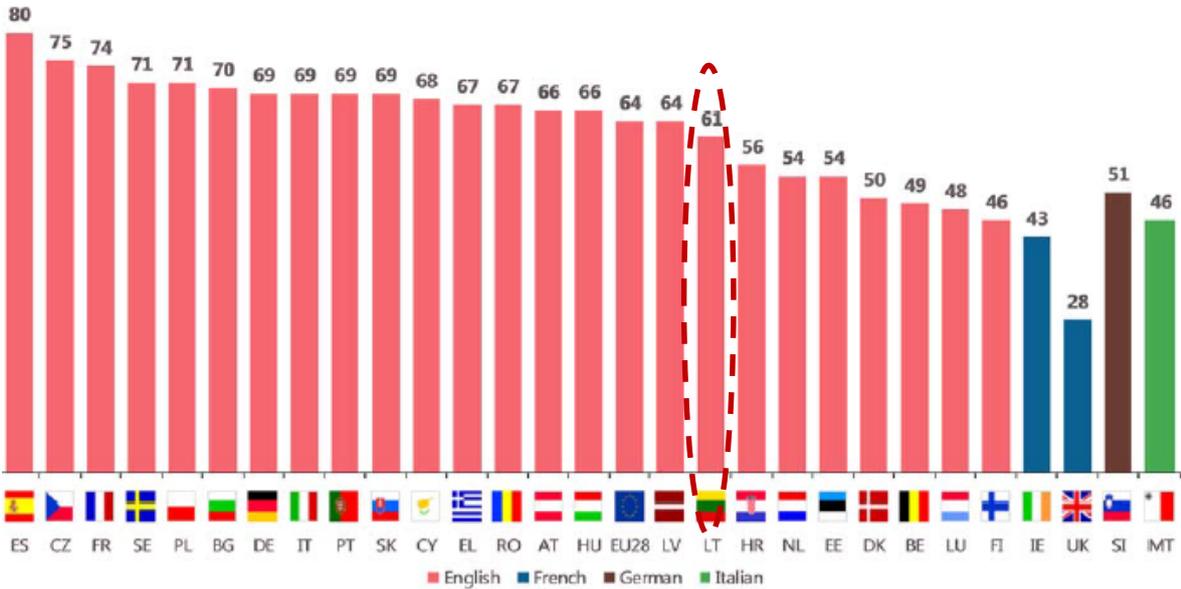
Regarding the number of languages indicated as comfortable enough to follow the studies (including mother tongue), Latvian respondents again are highlighted by their abilities to follow studies in three or more languages (43%), which lags behind only Slovenia and Luxemburg.



Base: All respondents (N=8,153)
 Fig. 3 Number of languages indicated as comfortable enough to follow studies, % (Source: EC, Flash Eurobarometer 466, 2018)

Although in most cases knowledge of three languages is again explained by the existence of a substantial Russian minority in Latvia, nevertheless, this should not be taken as granted, as the responses of other students indicate growing interest in learning the Russian language – e.g. 39% of Cypriots claimed their interest and need to learn Russian, which was also mentioned

by Finland's respondents (33%), Slovakia, Slovenia (both 25%), and Austria (24%), which generally increases the current competitiveness of Latvian students in Europe's labour market.



Base: Respondents who would like to improve their command of a language they have already learned (N=6,879)

Fig. 4 Command of languages that respondents would like to improve, (%) (Source: EC, Flash Eurobarometer 466, 2018)

In relation to the students' needs and intentions to further improve their command of languages, it turned out that the majority of Latvian students (64%) still consider that their English language knowledge needs to be improved, which suggests that their attitude is more critical than the one of Lithuanians and Estonians who are already quite satisfied with their current English language knowledge.

Conclusions and suggestions

The analysis of Latvian students' learning experience suggests that despite the fact that Latvian students lack self-awareness and are generally modest; their language skills are above average compared with the other Baltic States and the EU-28 average. Moreover, participation in Erasmus+ and other international programmes convincingly helps to improve language skills, which was claimed by 77% of the Latvian respondents.

Although 64% of the Latvian respondents have claimed their need to improve English language knowledge, still the majority of students had chosen non-English speaking countries as their mobility destinations. This gives evidence that there is a contradiction between the students' intentions and their real behaviour. Despite the growing demand for Scandinavian languages skills in Latvia owing to proximity, close economic and cultural

ties with the Scandinavian countries, the choice of these countries for study mobility has been very rare among Latvian students.

Since 64% of the Latvian respondents have claimed their need to improve English language skills, it would be advisable to motivate students to apply for study mobility in those countries where the English language is the primary language or the second official language, thus not only improve language use for daily needs, but master the written, academic, professional, and standard English language that is demanded in the labour market in Latvia. The current experience of the authors shows that although 90% of the university master level students speak English, only small part of them are able to independently write a report or short abstract on their master's thesis. Moreover, most of them find it difficult to participate in an international conference with an oral presentation on their research findings. Therefore, the task of Erasmus co-ordinators is to convince students to choose such mobility destinations, which would be the most useful for their further academic or professional work.

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