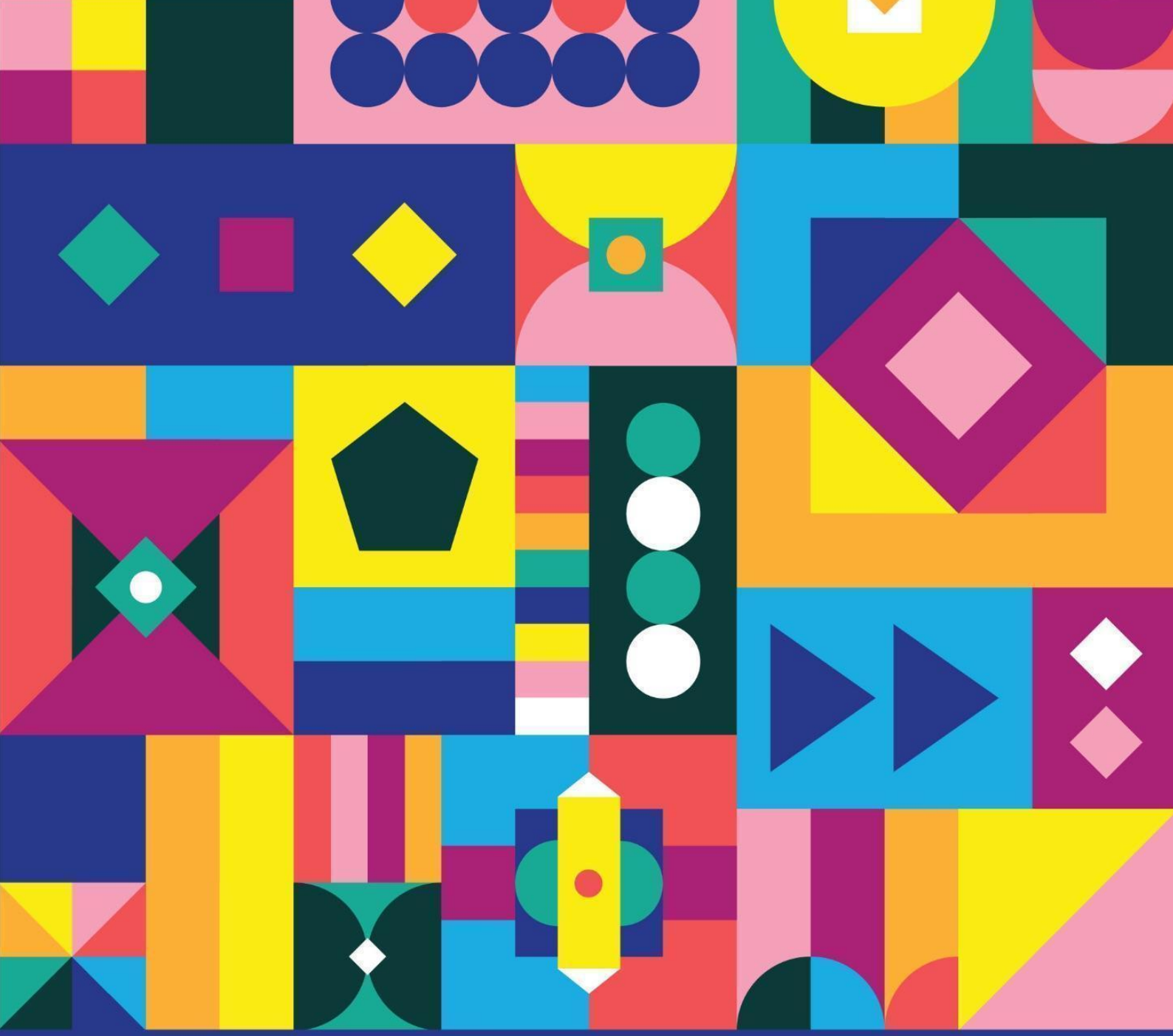


Qualitative Study on the Effects and Perceived Impact of Erasmus+ Staff Mobility in Vocational Education and Training

Research report
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STORIES FOR IMPACT

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Introduction

The overall objective of Erasmus+ staff mobility[1] in vocational education and training is to provide individuals with learning opportunities and to support the internationalisation and institutional development of vocational education and training providers and other organisations active in the field. It also contributes to the creation of a European Education Area.

The objectives of the measure are:

- To improve the quality of initial and continuing vocational education and training in Europe
- To strengthen the European dimension of teaching and learning

As part of the Erasmus+ learning mobility, education staff can go abroad to undertake job shadowing or teaching assignments, or to participate in courses and training. Job-shadowers can learn new practices from colleagues or experts at the host organisation and gain new ideas by observing their day-to-day work. Participants in learning mobilities have the opportunity to train or teach students at a host organisation in another country, and in doing so, to develop their own skills whilst carrying out their tasks and interacting with colleagues. From 2021 onwards, in vocational education and training, it is possible not only to undertake job shadowing and teaching but also to take part in courses and training abroad. This involves taking part in structured training sessions organised by qualified specialists, based on a specific curriculum and defined learning outcomes.

The European Union-funded learning mobility scheme for education staff began in Estonian vocational education and training in 1998. Whilst only 22 staff mobilities in vocational education and training took place in the first application round, this figure now stands at over six hundred per year.

Between 2021 and 2025, nearly 2,600 staff mobility placements were carried out in vocational education and training. Following the easing of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of mobility placements has increased significantly. Whilst there were 103 staff mobilities involving vocational education staff in 2021, the figure rose to 464 in 2022, 712 in 2023, 690 in 2024 and 607 in 2025. The reason for the decline over the past two years is the increased emphasis on student mobility. Specifically, between 2023 and 2025,

[1] Erasmus+ Programme Guide (Version 2: February 2025): https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/documents-and-guidelines/erasmus-programme-guide-2025-version-2



the total number of mobility placements increased slightly each year, whilst the proportion of student mobility placements rose; for example, in 2023 this accounted for 67% and by 2025 had risen to 72% of all vocational education and training mobility placements.

In terms of specific activities, for example, in 2025 there were 498 job-shadowing placements in vocational education and training, 98 instances of participation in courses and training, and 11 instances of teaching at a host institution.

Although Erasmus+ mobility has been taking place in Estonian vocational education and training for over two decades, **there has so far been no comprehensive overview at national level** of the outcomes and impact of staff mobility **during this programme period**, either at the individual or institutional level. Nor were the factors influencing the effectiveness of learning mobility known.

For this reason, the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Agency organised a survey in 2024 [2], the main objective of which was to ascertain the effectiveness of staff mobility – that is, the achievement of the objectives set for the mobility of vocational education staff as part of the Erasmus+ programme and its perceived impact (the impact of learning mobility on education staff's day-to-day work and, more broadly, on developments and changes at the level of vocational education institutions). A supplementary qualitative study was carried out in vocational education and training, the results of which are reflected in this report.

[2] Effects and Perceived Impact of Staff Mobility in VET: https://eeagentuur.ee/materjalid/erasmus-haridustootajate-opirande-tulemuslikkuse-ja-tajutava-moju-uuring-kutsehariduses/

Methodology

The findings of the two studies referred to in the introduction are combined in this report. The studies examined the role and broader impact of learning mobility in vocational education and training. They also explored its links with institutional development plans and strategic objectives, the impact of Erasmus accreditation compared with the previous project-based model, the adequacy of funding, and the benefits of learning mobility for institutional management, teaching processes and curriculum development. Furthermore, they examined topics such as staff's professional and personal development, motivation, improvements in language skills and self-confidence, and the role of learning mobility in enhancing the attractiveness of the vocational education institution as both an employer and a place of learning.

Research questions for the qualitative study

- What changes has Erasmus accreditation for learning mobility brought about in the organisation of learning mobility and in supporting the development needs of educational institutions, compared with the previous project-based approach?
- How is learning mobility planned, managed and documented in vocational education institutions, and to what extent is it linked to the institution's development plan?
- Is learning mobility used systematically to support staff professional development, and, if so, how is this demonstrated in quality assessment?
- To what extent does the Erasmus+ funding provided to date meet the development needs of educational institutions, and is it sufficient for the continuous development of staff?
- What are the perceived barriers to education staff participating in learning mobility?
- What are career specialists' experiences of learning mobility in relation to the aforementioned topics (including support for their professional development and the use of outcomes both in day-to-day work and at institutional level)?
- What is the impact of learning mobility on teaching processes, teaching practice and curriculum development, and what are the best practices for disseminating the outcomes of learning mobility?

Although the study focused on the learning mobility of education staff, factors related to students' learning mobility also emerged from the interviews, and the most significant of these are included in this report.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 14 October 2025 and 13 January 2026. Participants were recruited using contact details provided by the commissioning body,



with an emphasis on diversity in participant profiles (including types of institutions and experience with learning mobility).

Eleven mobility coordinators and ten school headmasters from 13 vocational education centres took part in three group interviews. Separate individual interviews were conducted with two school headmasters. In addition, a group interview was conducted with career specialists who had participated in learning mobility through one of the Erasmus+ vocational education beneficiaries, namely the Estonian Association of Career Counsellors; two of these specialists work in vocational education institutions and four in other organisations. In all cases, interviewees were selected to ensure that different regions of Estonia were represented. A total of 29 people took part in the interviews.

The analysis of the results was based on summaries derived from the transcripts of individual and group interviews, and the responses were grouped under key themes according to the research questions. Different perspectives were compared to identify patterns and differences in participants' descriptions of the role and impact of learning mobility, the sharing of experiences, participant selection, and the main barriers to and opportunities for increasing its impact. As a key part of the analysis, the results of this study were compared with those of a survey conducted by the Education and Youth Board in 2024.



Summary

Planning for learning mobility has become more systematic in vocational education institutions, but there are significant differences between institutions. In most institutions, planning begins with staff development needs, and learning mobility is consciously linked to the priorities of the institution's development plan. Erasmus accreditation has significantly simplified the planning process: there is less bureaucracy, funding is more secure from year to year, and it is possible to respond flexibly to changes. At the same time, the ongoing vocational education and training reform and the merging of institutions have disrupted the implementation of development plans in some institutions, meaning that the link between learning mobility and the institution's strategic development remains weak in places.

The administrative burden on mobility coordinators is perceived as a systemic bottleneck: project managers face a considerable burden due to unstable information systems, differing reporting requirements for different institutions, and the fact that the start of the project period does not align with the academic year (projects start in June, but in practice, work on the projects cannot begin until September at the earliest). As funding increases, coordination becomes even more complex. Consequently, a larger budget may not yield the expected results without an increase in staff numbers.

The positive impact of learning mobility is felt at both the level of teaching processes and institutional management. Based on their learning mobilities, participants have adopted new teaching methods, materials and tools, or adapted existing ones, and changes have also been made to the spatial organisation of teaching. The impact of learning mobility on curricula is particularly noteworthy: in many cases, experience abroad has provided direct input for the development of new curricula. At management level, learning mobility has led to changes in quality management and the drafting of development plans. The impact is perceived as particularly significant for new teachers: they return inspired and often go on to become leaders of international cooperation themselves.

The dissemination of learning mobility outcomes is uneven across vocational education institutions – good practices do exist, but they are not widely adopted. The reason for this is that sharing is often limited to a small circle (e.g. curriculum meetings) and does not reach a wider audience. At the same time, several successful dissemination methods are highlighted in some institutions: Erasmus+ days, best practice days and regular collaboration sessions.

Participation is mainly hindered by organisational factors, language barriers and a lack of prior experience. The difficulty of finding replacements, insufficient foreign language skills and the lack of suitable learning mobility opportunities were the constraints most frequently



mentioned in the interviews. The main solution proposed was to involve first-time participants in group-based learning mobility for education staff: travelling as a group could help to address both language-related insecurity and uncertainty about participating for the first time, and make first-time participation significantly easier.



Results of the qualitative study

Planning learning mobility

In all vocational education institutions represented in the focus group interviews, annual learning mobility is planned systematically, in several stages. This usually begins with identifying the needs of staff and linking these to the priorities of the institution's own development plan.

'Those interested express their interest, and an application is drawn up on that basis. Once the budget is known, the applications are reviewed and amendments are made where necessary.' – mobility coordinator

The start of learning mobility planning was also described in detail by the headmaster of a vocational education institution. They explained how planning begins with staff development interviews and continues through the staff application system. Before learning mobility is approved, staff must set out their objectives and expected learning outcomes in writing. This ensures a link between the staff member's personal development and the strategic needs of the vocational education institution. The headmaster of the institution also highlighted that learning mobility is planned well in advance of it taking place.

'We try to start planning and submitting applications as early in the spring as possible. When heads of department are planning the academic year and it is known that a particular teacher will be taking part in a learning mobility that week, we try to take this into account when planning lessons.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

In most institutions, priority is given to student participation rather than staff participation, as this is the top priority in the Erasmus accreditation plan. At the same time, efforts are made to ensure the consistent participation of staff, taking into account their preferences, development needs and the frequency of their previous participation. In some institutions, the aim is for 20–30% of teachers to participate each year.

'We give priority to students first, but that does not mean staff are overlooked. Before submitting an application, we consult with heads of department to agree on where to send staff, who should go, and for what purpose. We then take the funding we've received into account and review our plans and options again.' – mobility coordinator



Learning mobility and the development plan

The link between learning mobility and an institution's development plan varies considerably. In some institutions, international cooperation is included in the development plan as a separate strand. In others, whilst international cooperation is one of the objectives, it is not a top priority and is overshadowed by other priorities. The situation has been further complicated by the current vocational education and training reform and the resulting mergers of institutions. In several institutions, this has completely halted the implementation of development plans, and some institutions do not currently have a valid development plan at all. This makes the strategic planning of learning mobility difficult.

'Our vision is to be a centre of excellence in applied education recognised at European level, which requires international cooperation and the opportunity to learn from others. International cooperation is a specific objective of our development.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

'During the term of the previous development plan, learning mobility and international cooperation were naturally linked to it. However, following the merger of the schools, there is no current development plan.' – mobility coordinator

Data entry

When submitting a funding application, the institution's mobility project manager, or mobility coordinator, is responsible for entering the details of planned mobility activities and managing the entire process from application to reporting. The job title may vary from institution to institution: the Erasmus+ Agency uses the term 'Erasmus mobility coordinator' in line with the programme's terminology, but vocational education institutions decide on the job title themselves.

Employees' mobility requests and the necessary details are collected mainly digitally, via online forms or email. In some organisations, it is still possible to submit an application on paper. Mobility coordinators send employees the specific conditions and key points to which they must respond.

'We first gather participants' preferences and ideas, which they usually submit by email. We also send them the conditions and key points they need to address.' – mobility coordinator

Several institutions have introduced a structured application period during which staff complete forms setting out their development goals. In one institution, each department within a study programme has an international cooperation contact person who submits a list to the mobility coordinator at the beginning of the academic year.

Erasmus accreditation



All interviewees in the focus group considered Erasmus accreditation to be an important factor in simplifying planning and clearly highlighted its benefits. Compared to the previous project-based approach, where each activity required a separate application and a lengthy processing period, accreditation offers significantly greater flexibility. If a planned activity is cancelled or a participant withdraws, a replacement can be found quickly. Furthermore, accreditation enables longer-term planning: institutions can plan learning mobility over a period of several years. This simplifies both the involvement of staff and the alignment of learning mobility with the vocational education institution's strategic objectives.

'This simplifies the application process. If not all plans can be implemented within a single year, they can be developed further for the next round and carried out later. This makes the programme more sustainable.' – mobility coordinator

'After receiving accreditation, submitting annual applications is significantly easier, as there is no need to write projects in such a detailed and extensive manner. The final phase of the project is therefore also somewhat simpler.' – mobility coordinator

Systematic organisation of learning mobility to support the professional development of education staff

In general, the school heads and mobility coordinators of vocational education institutions who took part in the focus groups agreed that learning mobility is an important and consistent part of supporting staff development. One participant described how, in their institution, staff development is at the heart of the internationalisation strategy. In another institution, it was emphasised that learning mobility has become an expected part of the working year for staff.

As a hallmark of a systematic approach, it was noted that institutions have learnt to better highlight the impact of learning mobility and to apply it in their day-to-day work. It was emphasised that good ideas do not remain mere ideas, but that their implementation is actively monitored. To this end, collaboration days are held, during which staff who have participated in learning mobility share their experiences and demonstrate how what they have learnt has influenced the development of their curriculum, their work with students or collaboration with colleagues.

As regards the reflection of learning mobility in the revised quality assessment process, the headmasters of vocational education institutions did not view the evidence-gathering process as a particular cause for concern. Quantitative indicators (such as the proportion of staff who have participated in learning mobility and whether demand exceeds supply) were seen as the main evidence, alongside staff satisfaction surveys and individual feedback. In addition to quantitative indicators, the spontaneous reflections provided during interviews conducted as part of the quality assessment process are also regarded as valid evidence.

According to one participant, providing evidence is self-evident. Namely, if learning mobility takes place, this is in itself evidence that participation is being facilitated, and interviews allow the topic to be explored further.

'During the evaluation, we talk to teachers, and they usually share their own experiences of learning mobility, such as visiting Italy and what they learnt there. If a teacher's eyes light up, that is already a clear sign of the impact, and the necessary documentation is available anyway.' – mobility coordinator

Funding and resources for learning mobility

Funding

Assessments of the adequacy of funding vary from institution to institution. Some interviewees felt that demand exceeds the level of funding, particularly in the case of students. At the same time, several noted that the real limiting factor is not money, but finding suitable times within the vocational education institution's work schedule. One example cited was a situation where the mobility coordinator effectively works alone and the current level of funding is sufficient for their workload, but if funding were to increase, another project manager would certainly be needed. Supplementary funding rounds have helped to address funding shortfalls, and in some institutions the strategy has been adjusted – for example, by shortening the duration of learning mobility – to send more participants within the same budget.

'We usually organise a competition where there are more applicants than places available. We have also requested additional funding, but at the same time adjusted the duration of learning mobility so that more participants can be given the opportunity. For example, we have shortened the usual five-week learning mobility period for pupils to three weeks, and the two-week period for teachers to one week.' – mobility coordinator

'If the workload were to increase any further, we would need extra staff. We're pretty much at our limit – the mobility coordinator is probably already doing the work of about 1.3 people at times.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

One headmaster of a vocational education institution highlighted the workload associated with hosting incoming trainees as a significant problem: when foreign trainees come to the institution, supervising them takes up a considerable amount of teachers' time, and there is currently no funding for this. The headmaster felt it was necessary for the costs of hosting incoming trainees to be better covered in future.



'Admissions are very labour-intensive. There should be a dedicated person for this. We could also provide more financial support to our staff who take on trainees in their classes.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

Workload

The administrative burden on mobility coordinators is a significant problem that directly affects the organisation of learning mobility. The instability of information systems leads to a situation where reports from those who have participated in learning mobility may disappear from the system, and data has to be re-entered repeatedly. In addition, mobility coordinators are burdened by constantly changing document formats (which entails the need to amend internal forms or systems and make new forms available to staff) and by the fact that the reporting requirements of the Ministry and the Erasmus+ programme do not align, meaning that the same information has to be submitted to multiple places in different formats.

Examples given included the fact that learning mobility data must be entered into the Tahvel study information system, but it is not possible to add alumni data there. Another example is a situation where a staff member completes a business trip expense report on the State Employee Self-Service Portal, uploads travel documents there, and then submits the same documents for learning mobility reporting, either internally within the institution or, in the case of sustainable travel, to the agency. One interviewee specifically mentioned the project's start date being out of sync with the academic year: as the project begins in June, the first three months are essentially inactive, and planning for learning mobility can only begin, at best, in September.

'Looking at the mobility coordinator's workload, I reckon that half of their stress – and probably just as much of their working time – is spent wrestling with the information system. It's quite common for reports from those who have been on learning mobility to simply disappear.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

'The Ministry has one set of requirements in some cases, and Harno has another – these can even be contradictory. We have to report to both.' – mobility coordinator

'Our national agency, Harno, realised that if our staff member submits a secondment application via the State Employee Self-Service Portal and indicates that it is an Erasmus+ programme, we are spared the need to draw up a separate grant agreement for them. However, when it comes to eco-friendly travel, there is an additional burden: although the staff member submits bus and train tickets and other necessary documents via the portal, this is not sufficient and additional declarations must be completed.' – mobility coordinator

Several respondents expressed concern that the Ministry, as the school authority, is not sufficiently aware of the actual scale of learning mobility, its organisational complexity or its benefits. Interviewees called for more active communication and awareness-raising to ensure sustainable policy support for the programme. Furthermore, it was noted that, given the turnover of officials within the Ministry, it is important to provide regular written or oral updates.

'It is not fully appreciated just how widespread learning mobility in vocational education is at present, nor what its benefits are. It would probably be necessary to provide an explanatory briefing on this point.' – mobility coordinator

Disseminating the results of learning mobility

All vocational education institutions have developed different methods for sharing the outcomes of learning mobility (see Figure 1).

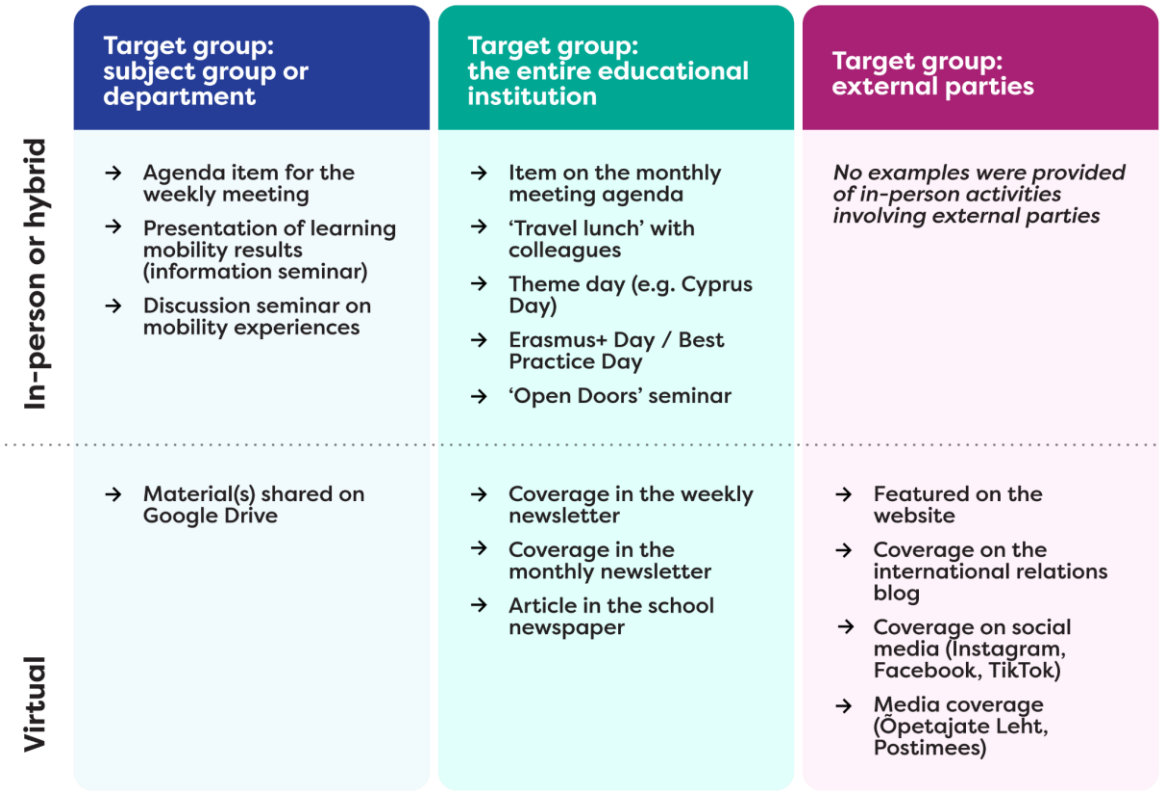


Figure 1. Methods of disseminating the results of learning mobility described in the interviews

The most common methods are departmental meetings, weekly newsletters, blog posts and social media channels. Several institutions organise special events for sharing experiences

(e.g. Erasmus+ Day, Best Practice Day, or a 'travel lunch' introducing the food culture of the learning mobility destination country). Experiences are also shared through one-to-one conversations with colleagues.

'In December, we have Erasmus+ Day, where everyone who has taken part in a learning mobility this calendar year gives a brief overview of what they learnt and what they have taken back into their everyday lives.' – mobility coordinator

'Once a month, we hold staff collaboration sessions where everyone comes together. During these sessions, we review what we've observed and what we've learnt.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

'For example, it is our practice that when catering teachers take part in learning mobility in Cyprus, for instance, the school organises a theme day where local dishes are prepared. This encourages students to engage more deeply and work harder. Short presentations are also given. In addition, videos have been shown and exhibitions organised.' – mobility coordinator

Career specialists also highlighted a range of methods for disseminating results:

- Within organisations: sharing experiences via newsletters and at meetings, as well as organising an annual 'methods fair' to showcase the methods learnt during learning mobility.
- Outside organisations: the Estonian Career Counsellors' Association's summer days and Harno's 'Akadeemia ampsud' event series, as well as regional seminars for career specialists.

'In my own case, I've noticed that I've had the opportunity to encourage other career specialists to go and to reflect more deeply on why they are undertaking learning mobility. I would emphasise that this is part of their personal professional development as specialists.' – career specialist

In many cases, sharing experiences is standard practice among participants: every staff member undertaking learning mobility knows in advance that, upon their return, they must share their experience, whether through a blog post, a presentation at a departmental meeting or an in-house training session. One headmaster of a vocational education institution highlighted that they promote Erasmus+ learning mobility in their weekly newsletters, which feature the experiences of both staff and students.

'We have tried to ensure that this reporting is systematic, not random. Every staff member who takes part in a mobility programme knows that they are also taking on a responsibility. We expect the whole school to benefit from this, and that it is not merely a matter of the participant's personal development.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution



At the same time, the mobility coordinators acknowledged that the sharing of experiences often takes place only in small circles during curriculum meetings, and the results may not reach a wider audience.

'The exchange of experiences mainly takes place within curriculum groups, across different specialisms and among teachers themselves. We have tried to do this at general meetings as well, but this has not happened so far.' – mobility coordinator

Factors hindering and facilitating participation in learning mobility

Those who took part in the interviews described both factors hindering and facilitating participation in learning mobility (see Figure 2).

In the focus groups, several categories of barriers were clearly identified by both mobility coordinators and institution managers. Workload management and arrangements for covering absent colleagues were the most frequently mentioned constraints. It is difficult for staff with young children to travel, and additional allowances do not cover all situations. Other barriers include insufficient foreign language skills and the resulting lack of self-confidence. It was noted that this is a greater concern for older staff members. Furthermore, one organisation's manager emphasised that finding and arranging an individual mobility opportunity for each employee takes a great deal of time and is an obstacle in itself, significantly increasing the mobility coordinator's workload.

'It's not possible to go whilst juggling work and private life. There are all sorts of reasons, such as dogs, children, spouses, but also the workload.' – mobility coordinator

'People are afraid they'll struggle with English in a foreign country. It's easier in a group – nobody wants to go completely on their own.' – mobility coordinator

'Those who have been there always want to go again, because they've had the experience. But for those who haven't, that final nudge is missing when it comes to going on a learning mobility. They simply don't have the time.' – mobility coordinator

'Taking part can cause complications, for example, if you need to take a child with you and arrange childcare for them. Although there are separate grants available for participants with fewer opportunities, you may not necessarily qualify for them.' – mobility coordinator

'When it comes to arranging cover for lessons, the question arises as to who will cover them. We have also used Erasmus funds for this and tried to resolve the situation by having teachers cover for one another.' – mobility coordinator

Several practical solutions were mentioned as factors encouraging learning mobility. Going as a group is one of the most effective ways of involving staff who feel uncertain. Planning well in advance, in turn, helps to overcome the bottleneck of finding replacements.

'In a way, my favourite learning mobilities have been those where I was the only person from my own country to take part. You really do interact with the locals and get to experience as much as possible. All that 'I'm scared, there's a language barrier, and what am I, an old person, doing going abroad to study now?' is certainly an obstacle for some. When I got my current job, I immediately organised a trip for the whole department precisely because it's always braver to go as a group at the start. Going as a large group like that really does help sometimes.' – career specialist

'Alongside planning day-to-day teaching, we organise around 45 learning mobilities a year. We try to find times when the need for cover teaching is as minimal as possible. For example, when students are on work placements.' – mobility coordinator

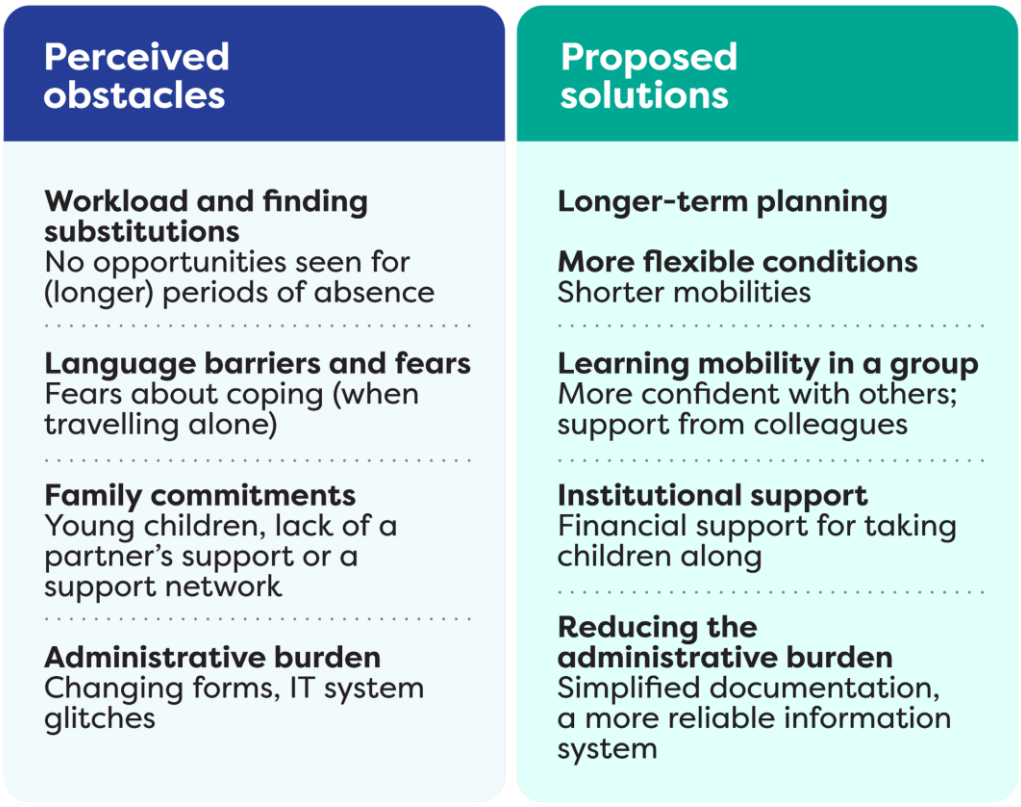


Figure 2. Perceived obstacles and proposed solutions described in the interviews

In addition, simplifying the agency's reporting and application process was seen as a solution (e.g. reporting forms could be worded more simply and be more understandable to those participating in learning mobility). Reducing the perceived administrative burden would make

organising participation considerably easier for mobility coordinators and participants. It was also highlighted that flexibility in accreditation has already created conditions in which it is possible to respond quickly to changes.

The perceived impact of learning mobility

Figure 3 summarises the main perceived impacts of learning mobility.

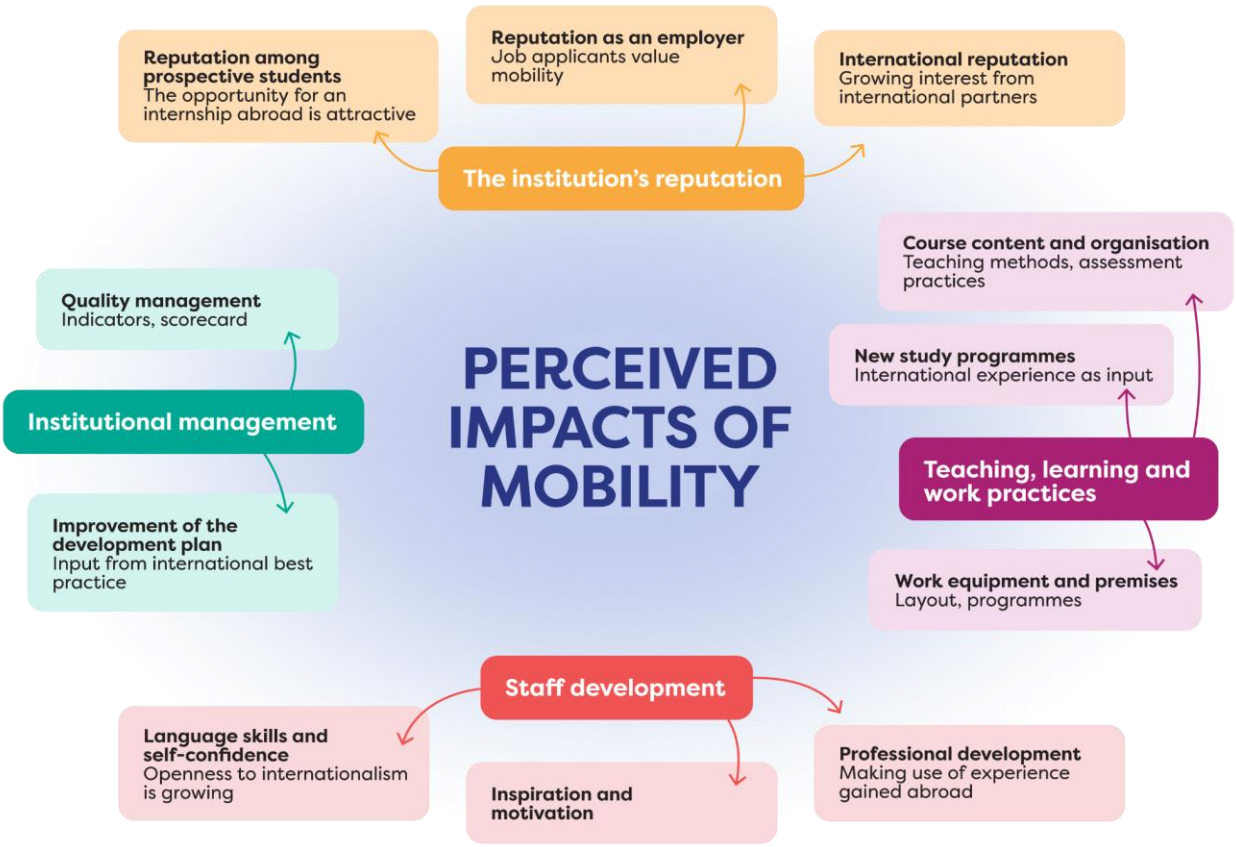


Figure 3. Perceived impacts of learning mobility most frequently highlighted in the interviews

All the categories shown in the figure are described in more detail below.

Impact on teaching and learning processes

The impact of learning mobility on learning and the learning environment is tangible and multifaceted. Interviewees emphasised that experiences gained abroad are not treated as isolated experiences – they are systematically channelled back into the development of the institution's teaching, reaching curriculum working groups and influencing both the quality and organisation of teaching. The changes affect teaching methods, assessment practices

and the physical learning environment (including the layout of rooms and the procurement of teaching resources). It is important that participation in learning mobility is purposeful and that the expectation to bring the knowledge gained back to the institution is clearly articulated. Learning mobility has also had a significant impact on the development of new curricula – in many cases, learning mobility has provided direct input into the creation of a new curriculum.

'IT teachers visited the Netherlands, after which even the layout of their classrooms became more logical and new programmes were introduced. The same has been true in catering – in the bistro, the way food is served became more logical.' – mobility coordinator

'Floristry teachers have been the most active and have brought about a great many practical changes. For example, new teaching methods are now in use.' – mobility coordinator

The impact of learning mobility on curricula is very direct and concrete – it is not limited merely to improving existing curricula, but in some cases has been a prerequisite for the creation of an entirely new curriculum. One headmaster of a vocational education institution cited the creation of a particular curriculum as an example: before the head of department began drafting the curriculum, they first visited Ireland and Denmark to observe how the equivalent curriculum was delivered in those countries, and gained insights from these visits without which drawing up the curriculum would have been considerably more difficult.

Sometimes, however, international experience provides the inspiration to develop a longer-term vision. This is true even in cases where there is no immediate opportunity to apply what has been seen and learnt within one's own institution.

'For example, I was very impressed by vocational secondary education in Sweden. I visited a technical upper secondary school where everything is thought through down to the smallest detail and you are given a personalised programme. Will we ever get to that stage in our own education system?' – career specialist

Learning mobility also has a significant impact on teachers' attitudes and the development of a learner-centred approach. Teachers have drawn inspiration from abroad on how to consciously create a certain atmosphere and culture of communication within a group, and how to better support students with different needs (including those with fewer opportunities and special educational needs). Learning mobility has also provided practical approaches to addressing contemporary social challenges in education.

Impact on management processes

At management level, learning mobility has provided input into the development of quality management, performance measurement and the drafting of the development plan. In several institutions, managers have made specific visits to observe how the implementation

of development plans at other European vocational education institutions is managed and what indicators are used (including tools such as the balanced scorecard). The ideas gathered have been directly incorporated into the institutions' new development plans. Targeted learning mobilities have also been organised for project managers to learn how to manage larger projects (including learning mobility projects) by observing practices at other schools through job shadowing.

'In 2019, the issue of sustainability was made very clear to us in Europe, as it was not yet at the level it could be. We gained insights into methods for managing the implementation of development plans, including the balanced scorecard, as well as useful input for our own development plan.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

Staff development and motivation

Staff's personal development is seen as one of the most important outcomes of learning mobility. Learning mobility develops language skills, boosts self-confidence, broadens participants' world views and increases openness to international cooperation. The impact is particularly significant for new teachers and those who have not previously worked in an international environment.

'Learning mobility has a particularly significant impact on new teachers: you find yourself in an international environment, and this forces you to be even more observant. They always come back feeling very inspired.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

'It was really exciting to visit a vocational school in France, because some subjects are taught at a completely different level depending on the culture. For example, in construction, France has huge historic buildings with sculptures. Their cookery training is also quite different.' – career specialist

'Teachers have also become more confident about going abroad to teach. After undertaking learning mobility, job shadowing and classroom observation, there are several examples of teachers going abroad themselves to deliver practical lessons and teach in a foreign language and environment.' – mobility coordinator

Several interviews highlighted that Erasmus+ learning mobility opportunities are seen as a key means of motivating staff. In institutions with limited budgets, providing international further training with Erasmus+ funding is even easier than finding the money to send staff on local training courses. In some cases, it is even cheaper to send a staff member abroad for a placement with Erasmus+ funding than to pay for training in Estonia.

'We regard Erasmus as part of our staff motivation package. Subsequent feedback shows that, in an organisation with a limited budget, staff highly value the opportunity to undertake further training abroad. Several teachers have said that they work at our school precisely

because they can take part in study abroad programmes through us.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

'Learning mobility significantly boosts the school's appeal. When the headmaster/teacher is recruiting new teachers, the opportunity to take part in learning mobility is a major selling point that makes candidates' eyes light up. We also see during admissions interviews that the chance to undertake a work placement abroad is a major draw for students.' – mobility coordinator

It was also mentioned that it is not always just what is adopted from elsewhere that is valuable – sometimes the greatest benefit lies in the realisation that Estonian vocational education is actually of a high standard. This leads staff to view their home environment with fresh eyes.

'After every learning mobility, there have been observations about just how well we're actually doing from our organisation's perspective. In other European countries, they're highly specialised in specific target groups and are experts in narrow fields. We, however, have such a broad scope, which is actually very enriching.' – career specialist

The impact on the work of career specialists in particular has been varied. Several specialists highlighted that they were able to delve deeply into specific topics. Examples included inclusive education, the role of emotional and social support at different levels of education, and support for mental well-being in educational institutions. Some respondents noted that exposure to different education systems broadened their understanding of what education can achieve and placed the Estonian system in a wider European context. Examples included Sweden's applied upper secondary education with individualised curricula, the cultural depth of vocational education in France, and the challenges faced by remote areas in Austria.

In addition to gaining substantive knowledge, the specialists' confidence in coping with new situations grew. In particular, several people noted, with regard to language use, that they had stopped worrying about their foreign language skills and discovered that they could manage perfectly well in a foreign language. Exposure to specialists and methods from other countries (e.g. 'ice-breaking' exercises, welcoming/onboarding methods and practices for hosting groups) provided concrete tools. At the same time, several respondents emphasised that the deepest value of learning mobility lies not only in acquiring new methods, but also in self-reflection – developing a clearer understanding of one's professional role and position within the field – and in the courage to put this knowledge into practice.

'I received a virtual reality programme for anxious students who are unable to attend in person. In vocational education, it is very important to have a sense of the space where I am going to be learning. I received tools from a Latvian adviser on how to use this kind of virtual

tour with these students. And, in fact, also the realisation of just how many things can fall within the remit of a single career specialist.' – career specialist

'It's good to step back every now and then and take a fresh look at your work, yourself and your methods. Perhaps you've slipped into a comfort zone because you're using the same approach all the time. There are actually a great many methods in your toolbox. A study visit reminds you of that, too.' – career specialist

Wider impact

Learning mobility has contributed to shaping the international reputation of institutions and Estonian vocational education and training. Active participation in learning mobility activities has led to a situation where Estonian vocational education institutions have themselves become attractive study destinations. Study groups and school leaders from other European countries are visiting them in ever-greater numbers, keen to learn from local practices.

'Afterwards, someone from the host country contacted me to ask if I'd be willing to write an article. Of course, I wrote it. This was followed by a visit here from their Norwegian colleagues, the career specialists.' – career specialist

Future outlook for learning mobility

The future of learning mobility was discussed in relation to both staff and students. Interviewees from vocational education institutions saw future opportunities mainly in three areas: ensuring that all vocational students undertake at least a short international work placement; expanding group-based learning mobility for both teachers and students; and deepening international cooperation by establishing long-term partnerships. There was also a call for Harno to play a more active role in bringing together Estonian vocational education institutions for collaborative visits.

'I would like group placements – mainly for students – to become the norm. We have made particular use of this for students with special educational needs.' – mobility coordinator

'Ideally, every vocational student should have the opportunity to complete part of their work placement abroad. There could also be more cooperation projects at staff level, so that the majority can gain experience of international cooperation.' – mobility coordinator

'Several Estonian schools could go abroad together to gain experience, so that they can bring their knowledge back to Estonia collectively. Such collaborative trips and partnerships between schools are very welcome, and Harno has also played an important role in organising them.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution



Several interviewees highlighted the inclusion of students with special needs. They emphasised that whilst group-based learning mobility is the best way to involve them, this is constrained by the limited capacity of partner institutions to host groups (usually one to two students at a time). Sending them alone is not suitable in many cases.

'The number of students with special needs for whom it is very difficult to organise individual mobility placements is constantly increasing. Some experience anxiety; for them, even buying a train ticket at a ticket office can be a huge challenge. They too should have the opportunity to go and participate.' – mobility coordinator

The headmaster of one vocational education institution proposed the idea of a multi-stage system for student mobility. In the first stage, students would undertake a one-week group visit to another vocational education institution, accompanied by a teacher. In the second stage, they would undertake an individual work placement abroad.

The headmaster of another vocational education institution envisages a future model where vocational students can spend half a year studying a specific part of the curriculum that is not taught in Estonia. Both headmasters would also like to involve more foreign teachers.

'It would be good to bring in more foreign teachers on a short-term basis. There are a few positive examples of using Fulbright and other scholarships, where a teaching assistant provides language support, but this practice could be more widespread. We want to develop specialist skills in particular. For example, an Italian chef could come for two weeks to teach pasta-making. This would enrich teaching and learning and be exciting for the young people.' – headmaster of a vocational education institution

Comparison with the results of the quantitative study

The findings of this study are compared below with those of a previous quantitative study entitled 'Study on the effectiveness and perceived impact of Erasmus+ learning mobility for education staff in vocational education and training'.

Planning for learning mobility

The quantitative study did not directly address the planning process for learning mobility as a separate topic. The qualitative study complemented this aspect of the learning mobility research by highlighting the internal logic of planning and organisational differences between institutions.

The qualitative study demonstrated that, within institutions, planning begins with identifying staff needs and is linked to the priorities of the vocational education institution's development plan. It was noted that Erasmus accreditation has significantly simplified



planning and increased flexibility – replacements are easier to arrange, and longer-term planning is possible. At the same time, however, vocational education reform and institutional mergers have disrupted the implementation of development plans in some institutions, making the planning of learning mobility more complex.

This study also revealed another management practice – institutions integrate the planning of student mobility into the drawing up of timetables as early as the spring.

Funding and resources for learning mobility

The quantitative study did not cover the topic of funding and resources; the qualitative study provided important additional insights in this regard. It emerged that demand exceeds the available funding (particularly in the case of students). In this regard, institutions have applied for funding in additional funding rounds, and some have shortened the duration of learning mobility to send more participants within the same budget. However, some interviewees noted that the limiting factor in organising more learning mobilities is actually finding suitable time slots within the vocational education institution's work schedule. It was also mentioned that the mobility coordinator's workload would increase with greater funding, and in that case, a new staff member would need to be recruited.

The impact of learning mobility

The quantitative study showed that the development resulting from learning mobility is more evident at the individual level than at the institutional level. The majority (89%) of participants reported an increase in work motivation, the development of professional skills and changes in teaching practice. At the level of the vocational education institution as a whole, some changes were perceived to a lesser extent, particularly regarding the use of digital tools and opportunities, and the application of developed digital competences in management processes.

The qualitative study confirmed the findings of the survey and provided specific examples. For example, the quantitative study addressed curriculum development (62% of participants perceived an impact), whilst the qualitative study highlighted several such instances: one curriculum was developed following mobilities to Ireland and Denmark; the layout of catering classrooms was altered following a visit to the Netherlands; floristry teachers implemented new methods immediately after taking part.

Career specialists who took part in learning mobility perceived the impact on their work primarily in terms of a broader professional perspective, an expanded practical 'toolkit', and increased self-confidence. For example, counselling tools were brought back from the learning mobility, such as strength and occupation cards and board games, which can be used to establish contact with students, articulate their strengths, and make sense of

different fields of study and the world of work. On the other hand, learning mobility helped career specialists to reflect more consciously on their role, move beyond their comfort zone and view their work within the broader framework of the education and labour market systems.

At management level, the qualitative study revealed a new aspect: learning mobility has provided input into the drafting of development plans and the measurement of performance. For example, managers familiarised themselves with the indicators used by European vocational education institutions and with the balanced scorecard approach. The qualitative study revealed that the impact of learning mobility is particularly significant for novice teachers – they return inspired and become more confident about going abroad to teach. At the same time, the quantitative study showed that staff with less work experience are, unfortunately, less likely to take part in learning mobility – it is important to support them.

Dissemination of learning mobility outcomes

Most of the dissemination methods noted in the quantitative study were also mentioned in the qualitative study. In addition, the following dissemination formats were highlighted: Erasmus+ Day (all participants from this year give a presentation), Best Practice Day (teachers and pupils share their experiences together), a 'travel lunch' (where, alongside the sharing of learning mobility outcomes and experiences, food from the mobility destination country is served for lunch), and monthly teacher collaboration sessions.

Factors hindering participation in learning mobility

The quantitative study identified the main barriers as a lack of sufficient information about learning mobility opportunities or their organisation within the educational institution, a lack of suitable learning mobility opportunities, insufficient foreign language skills, and work-related reasons. The qualitative study revealed partly similar barriers: language barriers, the planning of day-to-day work, and the complexity of participation due to family reasons.

Future prospects for learning mobility

The quantitative study did not include specific questions about the future. The qualitative study provided additional insights into this aspect. The interviews highlighted several opportunities that are already available within the programme but are not known to all educational institutions and therefore remain underused. The idea of a multi-stage system for student mobility, proposed by the headmaster of one vocational education institution, envisages that the first stage would involve a group visit to another vocational education institution accompanied by a teacher, and the second stage an individual work placement abroad. This would make international experience more accessible even to more cautious students.



A related issue that emerged was that of students with special needs, for whom undertaking individual learning mobility may be difficult and for whom group placements would be more suitable. A vision was also put forward whereby vocational students could, in future, spend half a year – similar to the model for degree-level higher education – studying specific parts of the curriculum that are not taught in Estonia.

Furthermore, the qualitative interviews revealed a clear need to raise awareness among policymakers: according to the interviewees, the awareness of the Ministry and school authorities regarding the actual scale, organisational complexity and benefits of learning mobility is insufficient. This is an aspect that the questionnaire survey was unable to identify, but which is important for supporting sustainable policy-making for the programme.



Proposals and recommendations

The findings of the study show that Erasmus+ learning mobility plays an important role in vocational education, supporting the professional development of education staff, the renewal of teaching processes and the strategic development of vocational education institutions. At the same time, it became apparent that the planning, implementation and dissemination of the results of learning mobility do not take place in a consistently systematic manner across all institutions.

It is therefore recommended that **learning mobility be treated more consciously as part of a school's development activities**, rather than merely as a separate area of activity or an opportunity for individual development. The objectives of learning mobility, the selection of participants and the expected outcomes should be clearly linked to the institution's development needs and strategic priorities.

To enhance the effectiveness of learning mobility, it is **important to strengthen the systematic nature of its planning**. The study revealed that the substantive impact of learning mobility is most clearly supported by early planning, which begins with identifying staff development needs and is linked to the organisation of work for the academic year even before specific mobility activities take place. Such an approach helps to prevent organisational obstacles, supports better planning of cover arrangements, and increases the likelihood that what is learnt during learning mobility will subsequently be incorporated into teaching, curricula and the institution's development activities.

The study also clearly highlighted the need **to reduce the administrative burden associated with organising learning mobility**. In several institutions, the workload of mobility coordinators was described as a major and persistent problem, exacerbated by the instability of information systems, the need for duplicate data entry and differing reporting requirements. It is therefore advisable to seek ways to simplify and harmonise reporting processes and **to increase staffing levels**. Otherwise, whilst the volume of activities may increase, their quality may deteriorate and their substantive impact may diminish.

Significant attention needs to be paid to disseminating the results of learning mobility. Although the study showed that vocational education institutions use various methods of sharing experiences, this often takes place inconsistently and is limited to a small circle of colleagues. It would therefore be sensible **to make the sharing of experiences a natural and**



systematic part of learning mobility, so that the knowledge and experiences of staff returning from learning mobility reach not only their immediate colleagues but also the broadest possible audience across the institution. This would help to strengthen the impact of learning mobility at the level of the entire organisation and support the dissemination of good practices.

Based on the study, there is also a need **to more consciously reduce the factors hindering participation in learning mobility**. The most frequently cited obstacles were organisational difficulties, language barriers, uncertainty and a lack of experience. To alleviate these barriers, **more flexible forms of participation should be introduced** than has been the case to date (including group-based learning mobility), which may be a suitable solution for both first-time participants and students with special needs. It is also important to provide participants with adequate preparation and support so that international experience is accessible to a wider range of education staff and students.

To maximise its substantive impact, **learning mobility should be more widely recognised as a tool for the development of the institution as a whole**. The study confirmed that the impact of learning mobility is most clearly evident where the knowledge gained from international experience is consciously channelled into the school's day-to-day work, the organisation of teaching, curriculum development and management practices. It is therefore justified to assess the effectiveness of learning mobility not only in terms of the volume of participation but also in terms of the substantive changes that have been implemented within the institution as a result.

It is important to raise awareness among educational institutions of solutions that make international experience more accessible and flexible, and of the possibilities for implementing them. Those interviewed cited examples such as a multi-stage learning mobility model, the expansion of group-based learning mobilities, and the more systematic inclusion of students with special needs. The development of longer and more purpose-driven learning mobilities was proposed as a way forward.

It also became apparent that **awareness among school leaders and policymakers needs to be raised** so that the actual scale, organisational complexity and impact of learning mobility are better understood. It is therefore advisable to pay greater attention to consistently explaining and highlighting the value of learning mobility at the decision-making level.

