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Students' experience of Double Degree programmes: motivations and perceptions of skill acquisition

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Abstract

The implementation of collaborative and double degree programmes has been promoted in higher education since the 1970s as an internationalisation strategy for networking between universities. The value of the Double Degree experience is unanimously recognised by European and international institutions, but data on the evaluation of this experience from the students' perspective, their motivation to take part in these programmes and the perceived skills that can be acquired through this experience seem to be scarce. Through a pilot questionnaire designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data, this study aims to investigate these aspects - students' motivations and perceptions of the skills acquired - in relation to their participation in a Double Degree programme. The results of this survey can contribute to increasing students' and stakeholders' awareness of the benefits of Double Degrees and to improving the quality of teaching and services in these programmes.

Keywords: *Internationalisation; higher education; Double Degree programmes; mobility experience; employability skills; soft skills.*

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are among the main actors involved in the internationalisation process, as they determine strategies and activities to promote their international dimension not only locally, but also globally, thanks to globalisation dynamics. At the regional and national level, collaborative programmes are seen as means to contribute to an increase in a country's status, competitiveness, and capacity building (cf. Knight, 2008). The implementation of collaborative and double degree programmes has been promoted in higher education since the 1970's as an internationalisation strategy for networking among European universities in the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) and transatlantic relations between Europe and USA. Double degrees can bring a number of benefits, not only because they foster student mobility and institutional networking, but also because the knowledge transfer created by partner institutions becomes a bridge between different content materials, teaching methods, and ultimately, different cultures.

From an institutional perspective, universities can enhance their reputation through partnerships with other renowned institutions. For students participating in this experience, one of the perceived benefits of these programmes is the acquisition of a range of skills that can make graduates more likely to be employed in the future (Jones, 2014). Double degree programmes also represent an investment in terms of time and funds for the institutions involved in the process, and a challenge for students who have to change their learning environment and step out of their comfort zone. The value of the double degree experience is unanimously recognised by European and international organisations (cf. European Commission 2022), but data on the evaluation of this experience from the students' point of view, their motivation to participate in these programmes and the perceived skills that can be acquired through this experience seem to be scarce. With a view to improving the quality of the teaching and services provided in a Double Degree programme, this study aims to investigate these aspects – students' motivations and perceptions of skills acquisition – in relation to their participation in such a programme, through a pilot questionnaire designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The results of this survey may contribute to improving the students' and practitioners' awareness of the existing programmes, and better inform other stakeholders about the benefits of double degrees.

2. Literature review

The first double degree programmes in Europe were launched in the late 1970s and probably originated from the pre-Erasmus Joint Study Programme, which ran from 1976 to 1984 (European Commission, 2020). Initially, double degrees were developed to open labour markets in other countries to graduates (European Commission, 2020). According to the literature, the terminology used to define double degrees is similar, but not always

unanimous. In Knight's book on higher education, joint and double degrees are given the same definition: "An arrangement whereby providers in different countries collaborate to offer a program for which a student receives a qualification from each provider or a joint award from the collaborating providers" (2008, p. 105). In a later publication, the scholar differentiates the two types of programmes, indicating that a double degree programme awards "two individual qualifications of an equivalent level upon completion of the collaborative programme requirements established by the two partner institutions" (Knight, 2011, p. 301). Whereas, in a joint degree programme, a joint diploma is conferred upon completion of the collaborative programme requirements set by the partner institutions (Knight, 2011, p. 300). International double degrees are offered by two higher education institutions, located in different countries, which have collaborated to develop an integrated curriculum where students' credits are recognised in the administrative system of both institutions. Students attend classes and study at the two (or more) partner institutions (i.e. 1 home institution + 1 institution abroad). At the end of the study programme, each of the institutions issues a degree certificate to the students.

The opinions of the main stakeholders involved in double degree programmes were analysed in a couple of cross-countries studies (Culver et al. 2011, 2012). Culver et al. (2011) examined the strengths and weaknesses of a sample of dual- and joint-degree programmes at the graduate level in the United States, Sweden, Italy, and Germany. Their findings suggest that the primary reasons for implementing such programmes are the possible benefits for both students and their institutions: while students can add an international element to their education through direct exposure to another culture and educational system, their institution can increase its visibility and reputation through partnerships with other universities. In a follow-up study (Culver et al. 2012), four different stakeholder groups provided insights into their own perceptions of double-degree experience. According to the students and alumni interviewed, the double degree could make them more employable, representing a way of widening their pool of job opportunities, in both the countries in which they studied, and as proof of their proactiveness and willingness to do more than their peers. In contrast, the group of teachers was less convinced that the double degree could improve students' employability.

In another study (Wiers-Jenssen, 2012) on the employability of students who have had a mobility experience compared to those who have not, it was pointed out that a degree obtained abroad is neither an advantage nor a major disadvantage. "This also indicates that the 'added value' of a full degree abroad is not fully convertible to a domestic setting and that some employers may be sceptical toward foreign education" (Wiers-Jenssen, 2012, p. 485). From the students' perspective, double degrees present the advantages of boosting their career opportunities, having international study and life experience, and the impression of receiving "two degrees for one", as the workload and tuition fees may be lower than in a traditional degree (Knight, 2013).

3. Method and data collection

The data collection technique used in this pilot study was an exploratory questionnaire (cf. Creswell, 2014), as it was the most suitable tool to investigate the opinions of Double Degree students. The main research questions that guided the study were meant to uncover students' motivations for participating in a Double Degree programme, and their perceptions of the value of the experience, in terms of the acquisition of mobility skills. Of these, the present paper will consider the following questions:

RQ: What are the main motivations for students to enrol in a Double Degree programme?

RQ: What are the students' perceptions of the employability and mobility skills they developed the most during this experience?

The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed questions, and was structured in a series of sections based on the main aspects to be explored. The first section started with an open-ended question on the students' motivations to enrol in the Double Degree programme. This required students to state the reasons for their choice, with no predetermined category from which to choose. Another section of the questionnaire aimed at discovering students' perceptions of the skills that can be developed during a Double Degree programme. The available literature on employability and mobility skills – conceived as a mix of soft skills and intercultural competence – was helpful in formulating the close-ended questions. The list of items was adapted from a European study on the skills that students should gain through mobility. The study is the result of an Erasmus+ Programme co-funded project called 'Erasmus Skill Project', which took place between 2018 and 2020, with the aim "to prepare students before their mobility abroad for pursuing their studies under the Erasmus+ Exchange Program and to help them assess their learning curve before, during and after this mobility experience as well as to better understand the skills developed from this experience".¹ Participants were asked to rate a list of items according to a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was 'not important' and 5 was 'highly important'.

The anonymous, Internet-based questionnaire was first sent at the end of March 2022 to students currently enrolled in Double Degree programmes at four selected universities in Italy, Germany and France, which have established such programmes among themselves. A total of 90 e-mails with the questionnaire invitation were sent to the students' institutional addresses, using the e-mail address received when they enrolled in the programmes. Of these

¹ Intellectual Output 2 of the Erasmus Skills Project (2018-2020). ERASMUS + Project number: 2018-1-ES01-KA203-050439. Erasmus+ Key Action 203 - Cooperation for innovation and the Exchange of good practices; Strategic Partnerships for higher Education. Retrieved from: https://www.erasmuskills.eu/eskills/tools/self-assessment-questionnaires/_intro/ES_IO2_Final_Report.pdf

e-mails, 20 were returned by the system because the e-mail addresses were no longer valid, resulting in 70 e-mails actually delivered to the students. To ensure that all students received the invitation, a second set of 42 e-mails was also sent to the e-mail addresses used at the home institution, of which 7 were returned by the system and 35 were valid. After a few weeks, a reminder message was sent to complete the survey. Thirty-five students, who were either in the outgoing or incoming mobility phase at the time, answered the questionnaire. The respondents were 20 males (57.1%) and 15 females (42.9%), the majority of whom were between 23 and 25 years old (26 students), 6 between 26 and 28 years old and 3 between 20 and 22 years old. Some students attended their Double Degree programme between the 2020-22 academic years, so they were close to the end of the programme when they filled out the questionnaire, while others enrolled in the 2021-22 academic year and will conclude it in the 2022-23 academic year, thus providing very up-to-date answers about their experience. Below, the analysis of the results presents the students' views.

4. Results

One of the initial sections of the questionnaire aimed to discover why students are motivated to participate in double degree programmes, through an open-ended question. The students' responses were analysed through content analysis (Schreier, 2012) and classified according to thematic labels, and the main motivations that emerged were: "living abroad and seeing other cultures" (11 answers), "increasing employability and career opportunities" (9), "enriching the curriculum vitae" (6). These themes can be associated both with intrinsic motivation, such as curiosity and the challenge of discovering another country and another culture, and with extrinsic motivation, given by external rewards (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Other themes found were related to the type of extrinsic motivation, driven by the acquisition of skills or the conscious improvement of an activity: "to broaden and improve my knowledge" (5 answers), "to acquire new skills" (5) and "for the structure of the programme" (5). Others were related to the benefits and final results of the programme (extrinsic motivation), such as "to gain international experience" (4 answers), "to obtain a double degree" (4), "to network (meet new people)" (4). Other extrinsic motivations cited less often were "reputation of the business school" (2), "to improve English proficiency" (2), "the opportunity to work in the host university's country" (1); while the fact that "it was the only available double degree programme to choose from" (1) shows an amotivation (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000). The students' responses seem to indicate a mix of intrinsic motivations, such as experience abroad and the acquisition of skills and knowledge, and extrinsic motivations, such as future career opportunities and the attractiveness of one's CV if one holds two degrees from different universities. In the study, these views were confirmed by a subsequent close-ended question, in which students were asked to rate the importance of these motivations in their decision to participate in a Double Degree programme.

One of the closed-ended questions on students' perceptions of skill acquisition contained a set of seven items adapted from the 'Erasmus Skills Project' (cf. par. 3): intercultural awareness, global citizenship, resilience, openness and curiosity, empathy and tolerance, creativity (i.e. thinking outside the box), and academic knowledge. Students were asked to evaluate which competences they felt could be most acquired in a mobility experience, answering the question: "Which of these 'mobility skills' can be developed during a Double Degree experience?". The large majority of the respondents (77%) indicated that 'intercultural awareness and knowledge' can be highly developed, while the possibility of developing 'global citizenship' was rated as 'highly' by 23 students (66%) and as 'very' by 10 (28,6%). The students also expressed similar ratings for 'resilience', which 66% rated as 'highly' and 28,5% as 'very' likely to be developed, followed by 'openness and curiosity' (62% as 'highly' and 26% as 'very' likely). Other skills, instead, received mixed ratings as 'empathy and tolerance' was rated as 'highly' likely to be developed by 51% of respondents, while 23% rated it as 'very' and 20% 'moderately' likely. The acquisition of creative skills, meant as a way of 'thinking outside the box', was considered as 'highly' likely developed by 16 students (46%), and 'very' and 'moderately' by 8 students each. Finally, only 43% of the students felt that 'academic knowledge' could be 'highly' developed, while 7 'fairly' and 12 'moderately', making it the competence least associated with mobility, in the list provided to the students. The results of their responses can be seen in the figure below (Figure 1).

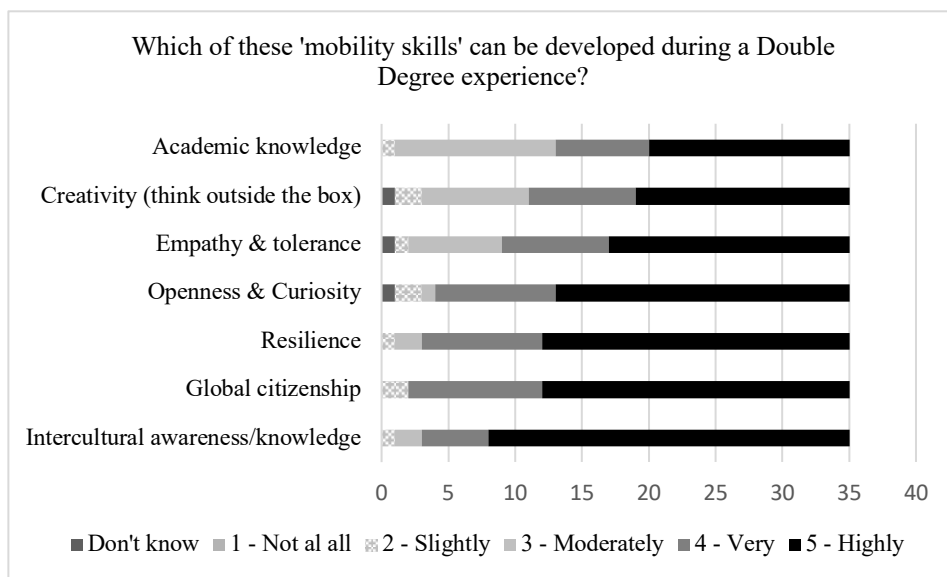


Figure 1. Students' perception of the acquisition of 'mobility skill' during a Double Degree programme.

The analysis of the findings, part of which has been presented here, revealed a number of aspects related to the double degree experience that open the way for further reflection on the impact of these programmes for the students and institutions involved.

5. Discussion

As the results from this study show, students are motivated to participate in Double Degree programmes because they feel that they can acquire both knowledge and skills, as well as intercultural and soft skills, considered as ‘highly important’ by half of the participants. Their responses are in line with research that states that exposing students to different cultural contexts through mobility experiences can help them question their identities, values and beliefs, and help them improve their personal growth and self-efficacy, along with their intercultural competence (Jones, 2014).

It is not unexpected that students who enrol in international mobility programmes are motivated by the possible acquisition of these skills, as it is equally true that these programmes attract students who already possess such skills and are drawn to mobility as a way to further develop them (Jones, 2013, p. 102). In fact, it has been shown that mobile degree students constitute a select group in terms of their prior exposure to international experiences, because they are more likely to have lived abroad and to have parents who have lived abroad (Wiers-Jenssen, 2012). Furthermore, it appears that the skills acquired through students’ international mobility initiatives are the type of general employability skills sought by employers (Jones, 2013). To support students in becoming more aware of their skills, it might be beneficial to involve them in some preparatory activities before their departure for their mobility, and after their return. An example of such activities is provided in the ‘Erasmus Skills Project’ mentioned before (cf. par. 3), where pre and post self-assessment questionnaires were created to help students assess how and which mobility skills they improved during their experience abroad. A similar assessment activity could be created to meet the needs of Double Degree students, who should be able to emphasise the value of their international experience, and make their CV’s stand out not only because of the presence of two degrees awarded, but also because it indicates a goal-oriented, highly motivated and competent candidate.

To bridge the gap between the skills sought by employers and those acquired by students, it is crucial to raise awareness among the main stakeholders involved in the process – i.e. students, universities, graduates and employers – so as to reflect on the pathway leading to the development of students’ employability skills, and to better understand employers’ expectations (Succi & Canovi, 2020). This is especially important when students have participated in an international mobility programme, because graduates need to be able to adequately present the broad range of their competences, through relevant examples from

their own experience, during the recruiting phase, and then be able to convert their skills into observable and value-adding behaviour once they are hired.

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