



ASK Asia Consortium with the support of the Erasmus Mundus programme of the European Union

ASK Asia

Erasmus Mundus Alumni Employability Study
In the Field of Agriculture and Related Life
Sciences

Agriculture
Skills
Knowledge
Asia



ASK Asia project (“Agriculture, Skills, Knowledge in Asia: Competences and Employability of Erasmus Mundus Graduates in Agriculture on the Asian Professional Market”) is an Erasmus Mundus Action 3 project funded by the European Commission (EACEA) in the period from 2013 to 2015.

The objective was to identify specific competences and skills that provide Erasmus Mundus alumni in agriculture-related life-sciences with a comparative advantage in the job market in Asia.

The study is oriented to six countries: Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Various methods of data collection were used:

- ✓ A quantitative online survey with Erasmus Mundus alumni
- ✓ Qualitative semi-structured interviews with employers from both private and public institutions
- ✓ National workshops organised in each of the six countries to conduct focus group discussions on comparative skills and competences with selected representatives of alumni and employers
- ✓ A regional workshop organized to finalize the lessons learnt.

Lessons Learnt

Studying in Europe: positive impact?

The experience of studying in Europe is highly valued by Asian employers and graduates. Compared to students who graduated from programs taught 100% in the home country, Erasmus Mundus graduates:

- ✓ More likely spend shorter times in job search
- ✓ Have better career advancement opportunities
- ✓ Have better employment opportunities in highly paid jobs

Internationalization of EU Universities

European Universities have a chance to be attractive globally as both study and research destinations. However, results show that EU universities themselves remain poorly known unless programmes of cooperation in research or education already exist in the sending countries. There is a negative perception of EU education compared to that in Anglo-Saxon countries. Access to information in local languages, enrolment in EU universities and visa procedures are considered complicated.

Advantages offered by training locally

European study programmes seem to be more successful in preparing students for academia and research positions but less in preparing them for agribusiness and technical jobs in agriculture. Local universities are often seen as more knowledgeable about the domestic business environment, labour market dynamics and the local culture.

The capacity to learn and adapt

Results show that graduates often work in various sectors outside of their specific area of study. Consequently, the capacity to learn and adapt is more highly valued than the knowledge acquired while in Europe per se. Importantly, the methods of teaching in the EU often give broader responsibility to the students in developing their own learning than is done in local universities. Considerably more personal input and/or teamwork is generally required from the students in Europe and their active participation in training is a must; consequently, they tend to develop this very capacity to learn and adapt.

English: essential

The mastery of English as a language of communication and scientific endeavour is seen as a major advantage. Thus, countries where English is the national language are likely to be preferred for study.

Technical skills: not a priority

Surprisingly, the purely technical capacities acquired during training in Europe are not perceived as a major advantage. Many employers consider that on-the-job training and professional experience, combined with the personal capacity to understand and to learn quickly, will easily fulfil the needs.

Horizontal and soft skills: a must

A number of capacities known as “horizontal” or “soft skills” are, on the contrary, especially valued. These are related with management, communication, analytical and critical thinking, a capacity for creativity and innovation, and finally behavioural capacities such as responsibility, leadership and self-confidence.

Practical experience: the skill often wanting

Regrets are often expressed that practical training is not a mandatory part of the academic programme in Europe. Practical experience in the form of credited internships was strongly desired by both students and employers.



Detailed information about the project and full text of the study is available at:

<http://askasia.culs-prague.eu/>

Recommendations

- ① Focus should be given to activities strengthening **horizontal soft skills**. Both EM alumni and employers indicated that the gaining of soft skills is the biggest advantage of intercontinental mobility.
- ② It was pointed-out that alumni with long-term experience abroad need to be prepared for **reintegration and re-adaption** to their country of origin culturally, not least with regard to current professional ethics and expectations.
- ③ Efforts towards better **public relations highlighting the quality of EU higher education** should be given high priority to tackle the misperception that EU education is of lower quality than Anglo-Saxon systems.
- ④ **Practical experience** during a Master's or Ph.D. course linked to industry and the private sector would be most beneficial to all parties (Internships abroad, joint training programmes etc.) **Pre-departure courses** should be actively organized for outgoing students on EU culture and the use of the (English) language followed up by **orientation weeks** after their arrival in Europe.
- ⑤ Different **activities promoting European Higher Education** need to be implemented to attract Asian students to EU universities. An easily accessible and attractive website is a powerful tool to disseminate information about Erasmus Mundus programmes and EU universities.
- ⑥ **An alumni association** is an important component in the promotion of EU education. A strong network of alumni and reintegration policy should be created and expanded in Asia.
- ⑦ **Joint research between European and Asian universities** should be supported during and after the mobility period.
- ⑧ **Visa procedures** for Erasmus Mundus grantees should be simplified. The difficult and costly visa application process de-motivated several excellent candidates.

Conclusions

Overall, there are common positive impacts of Erasmus Mundus scholarships on the future careers of alumni. The feedback from the EM alumni indicated a high appreciation of the **soft skills** gained over the course of their study, such as, in **interpersonal relationships, intercultural communication and leadership skills, team work** and the **ability to adapt** to different working conditions. Apart from the **scientific knowledge** and the degree obtained, alumni definitely improved their **language skills**, which helped them tremendously to increase their **self-confidence** and achieve greater **self-realization**. The enhancement of personal performance in these key dimensions has led them to find better job opportunities after returning to their countries.