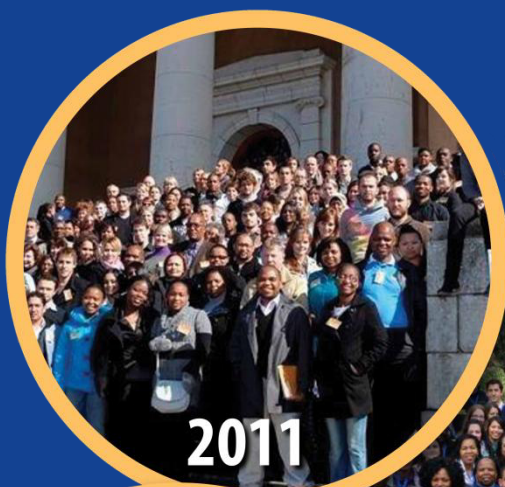


THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION INSTRUMENT PROGRAMME

ERASMUS MUNDUS ACTION 2 – SOUTH AFRICA – TRACER AND IMPACT STUDY

Executive Summary



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“This study was commissioned by the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of South Africa.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.”

“Erasmus Mundus has reached into areas of South African academia and academic life that no other programme has done before.”

- Director of an International Office

“One of the unintended consequences of Erasmus Mundus is that it brought South African universities together in the consortiums and, in the course of the whole process, the coordinators got to know each other and the different contexts of their universities much better.”

- Respondent of an International Office

"The experiences that came with this exchange cannot be traded for anything. I would recommend that anybody, if given the opportunity, should go on such an exchange programme."

- Student beneficiary, NMMU

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction, Background and Objectives

This Tracer and Impact Study has been conducted in the context of the collaboration between European Union and South Africa. The European Union has established a number of programmes that provide opportunities for international cooperation in higher education, and the Erasmus Mundus Programme is among them. South African higher education institutions (HEIs), students and staff of HEIs have been eligible to participate in the Erasmus Mundus Programme since 2011. The programme provides scholarships and mobility grants to students and staff to study, research or teach in Europe.

The overall objectives of Erasmus Mundus Partnerships between South African and European HEIs are to support South Africa's efforts in fostering sustainable development, including pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals and the eradication of poverty and inequality, through mutual intellectual exchanges and cooperation between European and South African HEIs. In particular, the programme aims to contribute to the provision of appropriate high-level skills and strengthen political, economic and cultural links between South Africa and the EU.

In South Africa, the programme is implemented with greater involvement of and cooperation between the EU Delegation and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). DHET has sought to use programmes such as the Erasmus Mundus to respond to South African peculiar challenges and transformation objectives. These include, among others, redress, equity and quality within the system of higher education. Overtime, these transformation objectives have formed an integral part of the eligibility requirements.

Whilst information on how many people have benefited from the South African allocation under the Erasmus Mundus programme is readily available, there has been a knowledge gap in relation to the impact the programme has had in South Africa. For example, issues such as the progression, completion and dropout rates within the programme remained an enigma. There was a paucity of information on the impact of the programme on policy on higher education in South Africa and the impact of the programme on livelihoods of the beneficiaries themselves. Perceptions – either of beneficiaries or policy makers – about the programme were neither examined nor documented in a systematic way.

Meanwhile recent studies on the Erasmus programme in Europe have demonstrated the positive impact the programme has had. One such example is the 2014 Erasmus Impact Study that focused on the "effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions." The study found that students took the mobility because they believed studying abroad enhanced their employability and that the programme enabled them to gain transversal skills that are important to increase their prospects for employment.

However, this study focused on the impact of the Erasmus programme in Europe and not in the partner countries like South Africa. It remained unknown if the same results could be found about the South African leg of the programme. It is against this background that the EU Delegation to South Africa envisaged a study to trace the beneficiaries of the programme and to evaluate the impact the Erasmus Mundus Action 2 (EMA2) programme in South Africa.

1.2 Methodology

Tracer Studies, also referred to as graduate surveys or alumni surveys, have traditionally mainly been conducted at institutional level to trace their graduates (i.e. by individual universities, faculties or even departments only). With the growing importance of national and international accreditations and global rankings these studies are increasingly also being conducted at national and international level as well as across academic disciplines at multiple institutions and within programmes for the purpose of quality assurance and curriculum reviews and higher education policy and planning purposes.

The tracer study was inspired by, and sought comparability with, two relevant other tracer and impact studies: The Erasmus Impact Study (2014), conducted by CHE Consult, is a very comprehensive scientific study and it aimed to answer two major questions. Firstly, it analyses the effects of **Erasmus student mobility** in relation to studies and placements on individual skills enhancement, employability and institutional development. Secondly, it examines the effects of **Erasmus teaching assignments/staff training** on individual competences, personality traits and attitudes, as well as the programme's impact on the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions.

Another major, and for the purpose of this study even more relevant, tracer and impact study is the annual Erasmus Mundus Graduate Impact Survey (EM-GIS) conducted by ICU.Net AG. Although following a slightly simplified and more pragmatic approach, this tracer study is highly useful and relevant as it allows for better comparison with Erasmus Mundus (EM) students globally rather than the Erasmus Impact Study, as the latter focuses on intra-European mobility of students only. The EM-GIS measures the impact of EM globally. Comparisons can be made with the results from this SA Tracer and Impact Study.

Preceded by desk research, the tracer study consisted of a quantitative survey and a qualitative research process. The quantitative survey traced all the students and staff from South African universities who have benefitted from the Erasmus Mundus programme since 2011, when the first group of direct beneficiaries took up their scholarships at the selected EU Universities. Since the numbers of both categories of beneficiaries are relatively small, it was decided that no sampling should take place for either of the two groups. Two separate questionnaires had been designed for students and staff, respectively. The final response rate was 248 out of 542 (45,8%): 199 students (out of 432, or 46%) and 49 staff (out of 110, or 44,5%).

The online survey was followed by a qualitative research process, which was intended to supplement the findings of the survey by, inter alia, trying to probe a bit deeper behind some of the possible reasons for the main findings and trends. The research team also tried to uncover some of the broader social and institutional realities behind the statistics, in order to construct a more nuanced and layered context for the overall findings about the impact of the Erasmus Mundus Action 2 (EMA2) programme on its direct beneficiaries, South African HEIs and society at large.

In this first Tracer and Impact Study of EMA2, we have studied the impact of the programme of the first four cohorts (2011-2014) of South African students and staff beneficiaries, who have travelled to EU-universities for the purpose of short-term studies, full-degree studies and staff exchanges. As this is the first study of such a kind in South Africa, it will be serving as a source and benchmark for follow-up studies, as well as potential comparative studies on the impact of international academic mobility on a national, regional and global scale.

1.3 General Conclusions, Policy and Impact

This tracer and impact study was conducted at a time when the EM programme was still ongoing and with many beneficiaries still studying at the various universities, or even yet to depart. It is therefore not yet realistic to consider this study as a comprehensive, authoritative tracer study. Nevertheless, the results generally provide clear trends on the personal, professional and institutional impact of the EMA2 programme in South Africa.

Furthermore, the South Africa tracer study has been inspired, and where possible aligned with the other major tracer and impact studies on the Erasmus and the Erasmus Mundus programme. The results are generally in line with the findings of these studies, even though they are not in all aspects a 100% copy, given the specific context and history of the South African higher education system and environment; and the specific objectives that have been defined for the South African lot of the EMA2 programme.

The South Africa EMA2 programme's specific objectives were to increase the qualifications of staff at higher education through international cooperation in South Africa and to increase graduate output at South African universities. Furthermore, the Calls for Applications for funding of consortia made specific requirements for equal opportunities and representation in gender, population groups and the various universities, including the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs).

The mobility projects have been organised through SA-EU Partnerships. Beneficiaries and stakeholders at institutional and policy level are unanimous in their assessment that the partnership model and the relatively broad definition of eligibility in terms of beneficiaries and academic disciplines has been the key success for the EMA2 programme in South Africa and will serve as the framework and legacy for sustained collaboration between South Africa and the EU, as well as improved institutionalisation of internationalisation at South African HEIs.

It has also been expressed that if there had not been a specific lot for South Africa, the participation would have been far lower and South Africa would have lost out disproportionately against African countries with traditionally higher international mobility.

However, due to the competitive nature of the Calls for Applications for funding of consortia, the EU and South African institutions which already had existing collaborations and/or were more experienced in EU-proposal writing, were initially in a better position to develop applications that met the requirements as stipulated in the Calls. As a result, the first partnerships were almost exclusively coordinated by EU-institutions in Belgium and The Netherlands and, in South Africa, by universities in the Western Cape. Hence, especially in the initial years, mobility was not equally spread across participating countries and universities. For example, the top-3 destination countries hosted 65% of the students. These imbalances are equally reflected in the composition of the respondents in this survey.

In both the student and staff surveys, respondents were asked if they are living with a disability. Six students and four staff responded this was the case. One respondent reported major issues affecting performance (low class attendance). All others reported no major issues or minor issues that eventually got resolved.

The EMA2 programme is currently the largest comprehensive international academic mobility scholarship programme which is specifically targeting and defining numbers of scholarships exclusively accessible to students and staff in South Africa. Other bilateral and/or global scholarship programmes are either considerably smaller in terms of number of available scholarships and/or are not as comprehensive as EMA2. The programme that comes closest in terms of numbers is the collaboration between South Africa and Cuba for the training of medical doctors. However, in terms of overall student mobility (including privately sponsored studies) from SA to other countries, the US remains the most popular destination.

While the mobility of students and staff under EMA2 programme will continue to run for a number of years, the academic mobility between South Africa and the EU will be integrated in the “Erasmus +” programme. In Erasmus + there will be no more room for a Partnership structure as in EMA2 and mobility grants will be allocated to all participating EU-countries. Many universities in the EU and SA have expressed concerns on the future sustainability and maintaining the broad access that was possible under EMA2.

It was also observed that EMA2 is increasingly in competition with other scholarship/mobility programmes and that South Africa is also developing linkages with the other BRICS countries. Also, universities are (re)-prioritising their focus areas in their internationalisation strategies, with some universities clearly focusing on Africa, and using international partnerships (e.g. through Erasmus Mundus) to position themselves within the African continent.

1.4 Impact on Student beneficiaries

The students who have participated in this tracer and impact study are generally representative of the population, although some deviations (up to 5%) have been found in gender and population distribution: more females and more whites have completed the survey than they were represented in the actual beneficiaries. However, as no major correlations have been found during cross-tabularisation we assume that the results among student beneficiaries are representative in terms of impact.

As mentioned, the initial composition of the EU-SA Partnerships was highly biased towards institutions that were building on existing relationships and the capacity to develop proposals that met the requirements as stipulated in the Calls for Proposals. As an unintended effect the majority of student mobility was initially focussed on The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, who collectively hosted more than 65% of the respondents. Initially the representation of the South African home universities was not in balance, as the top-6 (out of 25) universities were the home of close to 60% of the respondents and the top-3 home universities were all located in the Western Cape. Social sciences was the pre-dominant academic discipline (over 32%), followed by Business Studies and Management Sciences. Respondents were equally distributed across full-degree and short-term/exchange studies, while the majority went for Master's Degree programmes.

Overall satisfaction levels with the EMA2 programme are very high. The respondents show a **great overall satisfaction** with the Erasmus Mundus programme. 151 respondents (84.4%) are satisfied or very satisfied. Less than 10% is dissatisfied. However, the satisfaction levels do vary across a number of items. No significant correlation has been found with year of departure or destination countries and/or universities. In comparison with their global counterparts South African student respondents are

less satisfied though. South African students are 5-6% less satisfied and in the global study only 5% is not satisfied (against 10% from SA).

In terms of **expectations and motivations** the South African students ranked the improvement of future careers prospects as the main reason to apply for an EM scholarship. This was followed by the opportunity to study and live in Europe and to improve international networks. Transversal skills such as intercultural competences, and academically related objectives and motivations were rated as relatively less important.

However, in terms of **impact** as perceived by students, they responded that the greatest impact has been on transversal skills such as personal growth and intercultural competences. Career development was rated much lower than in relation to their expectations. Overall, SA graduates reported a higher impact on all aspects compared to their global counterparts.

This is also reflected in the features that, according to students, the EM-programme is lacking: contacts to potential employers, mentoring and preparation for the job market. However, in comparison with the results from the global EM-graduate impact study, SA-graduates rated these as less lacking than their global counterparts (even though the order of importance is the same).

However, there appears to be a discrepancy between the features of the EM programme (or what it is lacking), the perception of the impact on their careers and the actual employability of EM-graduates. The employability of EM-graduates is high. Only 17% of the recent graduates are currently unemployed (and seeking work), while close to 64% is (self)-employed. Although it is difficult to compare graduate short-term unemployment rates with long-term unemployment rates (which are around 6%), these figures are consistent with results from the global Erasmus Mundus impact studies. Secondly, 89% of the respondents indicate that EM has had a positive or very positive impact on their employability. During interviews students illustrated this in terms of finding meaningful employment and the ability to negotiate a better salary.

The majority of the graduates who are employed indicate that they are working within South Africa (85%); this percentage is much higher than the figures found in the global EM Impact study. However it has to be noted that there is a requirement to return to SA. It looks like this requirement is not strictly adhered to. This percentage of returnees is much higher though than the figures found in the global EM Impact study. Possible explanations include personal motivations such as family reasons (South African beneficiaries are relatively older than global EM-beneficiaries), and the less favourable employment opportunities in Europe (especially in social sciences).

The conclusions in terms of discrepancy between perceived impact measured through satisfaction surveys and other methods of measuring effects is consistent with the methodological observations made in the Erasmus Impact Study.

In terms of academic achievements of short-term exchange students it appeared that the respondents had in general great difficulty in answering questions on credits earned and credit transfer. Only 12 respondents could at all indicate how many ECTS credits they had earned at the EU-university. From follow-up questions it appeared that only 5 respondents knew how many ECTS were recognised at the home institution. Of these 5 respondents only one respondent indicated that full credit transfer had been in place at the time of the survey. During the student interviews it appeared that the situation was not as bleak as resulted from the online survey and quite a few students had been able to

negotiate/arrange credit transfer upon return to their home institution. However, it appears that despite the fact that learning agreements are in place, or have to be in place, credit transfer and academic recognition of studies abroad remains an important challenge in the SA-EU student mobility. However, the issues and challenges described are not that different from the early days of the Erasmus programme within Europe.

For full degree students (mainly Masters, as not many have completed their full PhD yet) an almost perfect correlation was found between overall scheduled duration and actual duration, which means that study progress is almost according to schedule. A few extensions seem to have occurred.

As the impact could be influenced by processes, preparation and support by the home and host institutions, students were also asked to report on these aspects. The majority (over 61%) of the respondents reported the application process as “fair” while a smaller proportion found it to be either difficult or easy. Over 67% of the respondents rated the institutional support during the application process as good or very good.

Students were also asked to rate the level of support they received from the South African universities. Although the majority is positive (around 38%), this is one of the areas where students are relatively the least satisfied (close to 23%). However, no significant correlation has been found with year of departure or home universities (the universities that were listed most by those who rated the support as poor or very poor were among the universities that sent most of the students).

The level of support on arrival and during settling in provided by the EU-universities was consistently rated higher than the support provided by the South African Universities. More than 70% of the respondents rated these as good or very good, while less than 15% rated them as poor or very poor.

1.5 Impact on Staff beneficiaries

Females comprise over 61% of the respondents. This is an adequate representation of the gender balance amongst staff beneficiaries. Overall, the number of female beneficiaries has been double the number of males. Close to 62% of the staff beneficiaries were older than 45 years. Less than 13% were younger than 35 years. Over 55% of the respondents indicated they are white. This distribution can be attributed to the age distribution and the academic staff composition at South African universities and their opportunity to capitalise on existing linkages with European universities.

The academic staff members were asked to indicate their professional employment level. The majority was employed at senior lecturer level or higher. No junior lecturers were amongst the respondents. Social sciences were again the major academic discipline (37,5%). The majority went for a period between two and four weeks.

As was the case with student beneficiaries, the majority of the staff beneficiaries also originated from a limited number of home institutions. The Top-3 sending institutions hosted over 53% of beneficiaries and three Western Cape universities were in the Top-4, while these three (Western Cape) universities represented over 51% of the beneficiaries.

In terms of destination countries, again a small group of popular countries emerged which hosted far more staff than any other. Unlike for the destination countries for students, Belgium ranks highest, while Sweden, Germany and The Netherlands rank second, third and fourth respectively. These Top-4 countries comprise the destinations of close to 72 % of the respondents.

Building international networks, international experience and research collaboration were the three major motivations that stood out as the source of motivation for applying for an EM scholarship. The main purpose of the stay at the EU-university was related to research collaboration and other academic work with colleagues in the EU.

Although the majority was satisfied or very satisfied (67,4%), a relative large proportion (30,5%) indicated that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied in relation to their expectations. This was considered to be very high in relation to other answers and other studies. However, this relative high dissatisfaction only relates to expectations. Overall satisfaction ratings are much higher (70%) and also the dissatisfaction levels are significantly lower (8,6%). During interviews it appeared that much of the dissatisfaction in terms of expectations was also related to other issues such as arrangements, costs of accommodation and dealing with bureaucracies in the EU countries. Some other issues mentioned occasionally were the limited availability of the hosts (busy agenda's, although understood while seeing the nature of work and other commitments in practice).

Respondents were initially asked how, in general, EM had contributed to their personal and professional development. As in the case of students, the greatest impact has been on personal growth. This is followed by subject related expertise. In terms of specific aspects in relation to professional development, the contributions to research related issues were the most often mentioned.

In terms of impact on the department, faculty or university, the greatest impact was to facilitate more long-term institutional collaboration and the production of more internationally oriented research through joint research programmes.

The vast majority of the respondents (more than 95%) indicated that their home university values international exchanges like the Erasmus Mundus programme and they indicated unanimously that they would recommend the EM-exchange programme to colleagues.

1.6 Impact on Higher Education Institutions

The process of internationalisation at universities in South Africa has been taking place in a broader context whereby all of them have been forced over the past two or three decades to change quite dramatically, in response to a whole new set of major national and international changes and challenges. All this change had to be done at the same time that universities in South Africa faced a range of major challenges relating to the transformation of their institutions. In addition, reforms included the highly complex mergers of higher education institutions that took place during the early 2000s. These mergers consumed a lot of institutional energy and had far-reaching consequences for all the institutions concerned. In some affected institutions the internationalisation agenda either “fell through the cracks” or was put on hold during this difficult period; and later had to be resurrected.

Each university has its unique set of international partners, with some of the more established universities having a really impressive array of partners across the world. At most of the universities visited, the management of international relations and agreements is an ongoing process, with new strategic priorities for international exchanges continually evolving.

Now, however, the trend appears to be in the direction of fewer, but more strategic international partnerships. Senior managers at some of the universities have been demanding evidence of the concrete benefits delivered by particular bi-lateral partnerships, before recommitting to renewing agreements or forming new ones.

The changing priorities appear to be, once again, influenced by geopolitical changes and considerations, which include a clear inclination towards the exploration of more South to South collaboration, with universities in SADC and (rest of) Africa remaining the priority focus. Increasingly, though, eyes are also being turned towards Asia – more specifically China and India; and the BRICS countries more generally.

These moves towards repositioning and more strategic partnerships may eventually have a bearing on future relationships with universities in Europe, especially when the Erasmus+ programme comes into play.

There was one area of complete consensus, viz. that the Erasmus Mundus programme has really broadened access to international scholarships for post-graduate students and staff exchanges, across many disciplines; and *where these had never existed before*. The costs of international study opportunities and academic exchange programmes are generally prohibitive for South African universities, even for the more established and better-resourced universities – especially given the present exchange rates.

It was found that an International Office cannot be a stand-alone or ‘add on’ operation in a university’s broader structures. In cases where the researchers found this to be the case, such International Offices proved quite isolated and not very effective. On the other hand, it became clear that universities where the top leadership/ executive management prioritises and drives the internationalisation agenda hard and centrally, appear to do much better in terms of the promotion, uptake and proper utilisation of international exchange and mobility programmes like EM.

The ideal situation is, of course, that the notion of internationalisation, including the pursuit of international exchanges, research collaboration and study opportunities, should eventually become a normal part of a university’s identity and activities. Apart from the more established universities, where the notion of internationalisation has become reasonably entrenched, some of the universities of technology have also made great progress in this regard and have used the EM programme very strategically to further advance their internationalisation and larger transformation and capacity building agendas. At the HDIs, the situation in this regard can best be described as different positions on a continuum – ranging from excellent operations to various stages of development and progress at some of the other HDIs.

Although the directors and senior staff at the International Offices of some universities had been aware of the larger Erasmus programme in Europe, it appeared to have caught many of them a bit off guard when it became available/ and was heavily promoted in South Africa in 2010. Apart from having to form consortiums (which was not a well-known approach in South African universities at the time),

each university then had to decide rather quickly on an institutional response to the opportunities offered by EM; and where to locate it within their institutions. In retrospect, it is clear that each institution responded according to their particular institutional needs (and capacity) at the time. Some institutions used the EM as a tool for staff development; whilst others placed EM in Graduate and Research Offices to help develop the university's research capacity.

Although the partnership/ consortium approach was not well-known/ or much used in universities in South Africa, before EM introduced the concept; many EM coordinators and other senior staff in the various International Offices lauded the eventual benefits and outcomes of the process – some of them probably unintended. The general feeling is that everybody learned a lot through it, especially about each other's institutions. This is a particularly significant outcome in a country with a history of a very diverse, historically divided higher education sector.

South African International Offices were unanimous that there were no other international scholarship and staff exchange opportunities available in South Africa, even vaguely comparable to those offered by EM. It is therefore clear that nothing on the scale and breadth of this programme can be sustained/ or be sustainable when it comes to an end. Universities in South Africa simply do not have the kind of resources required for a programme like this – even the more established and better-resourced ones, which may have a few more options compared to most of the HDIs, but still nothing compared to EM. At some of the HDIs, the answer was very simple: "We have no other scholarships."

It is therefore with a sense of disappointment that many of the EM coordinators have to start considering their universities' options post-EMA2. There is a certain sense in which EM coordinators feel that they have just really started to understand the consortiums and learnt to work well with their South African and European partners; have built up a momentum around the EM programme; and that EM now is so much better known in their institutions – amongst both students and staff.

There was agreement that the EM programme and consortiums facilitated the exploration of new bi-lateral partnerships. EM made it possible to get to know potential new partners, before committing to formal agreements. Some of the new and existing bi-lateral partnerships may well be able to leverage new sources of funding that could benefit a handful of staff and possibly post-graduate students – even potentially through Erasmus+ – but they could presumably never deliver the kind of broad-based opportunities that EM made available to students and staff in South African universities.

Erasmus+ was not very well known in some universities, especially in some of the HDIs. Where it was better known, it was felt that the way this programme works, viz. on the basis of signing many different bi-lateral agreements; appears to be "on a collision course" with the general trend whereby the more established universities are moving towards fewer, but more strategic partnerships. Some respondents hoped that there could have been a bit more continuity between EMA2 and Erasmus+, with elements of the old system – especially the consortia model - retained in the new one.