Work Package 2

FINAL REPORT

The Mapping of Literature

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Reimagining the Erasmus Experience (REX)- Erasmus+ project (KA220-HED-0030/2024) - KA220-HED Cooperation partnerships in higher education

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The Mapping of Literature

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This literature review offers a comprehensive assessment of students' Erasmus+ mobility experience across Europe, highlighting its perceived limitations, and proposing areas of improvement based on scholarly research. Erasmus_REX seeks to enhance understanding of the scope, diversity, and underexplored dimensions of the Erasmus+ program, the potential of which may be addressed in policy. To this end, in this review we have reassessed the popularity and pedagogical benefits of the Erasmus+ mobility program from multiple viewpoints to reengineer the students' experience and to meet the expectations of the current generation of students who are potential candidates for international exchange.

The aims and goals of the Erasmus+ program

The literature review identifies the main aims and goals of the Erasmus+ Program as:

- Internationalization,

- Education of a workforce ready for the global market (employability) (EP Lisbon Strategy, 2000),

- To cope with global academic competition,

- The creation of a common educational space (European Higher Education Area, 2010 Bologna Declaration),

- To address societal challenges and social inclusion,

- Symbolically legitimise EU institutions i.e. "institutional branding,"

- To promote active EU citizenship.

Numerous scholars have drawn attention to the challenges associated with the internationalization of education within the European Union. Following the signing of the Erasmus agreement, a significant milestone was the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, which positioned education as a key instrument in the EU's ambition to become the world's most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010. The internationalization of education was perceived as a motivating factor for students,

particularly in countries where national education systems lacked sufficient support or investment in related policy development. For example, Norway demonstrated a degree of reluctance toward embracing internationalization efforts (Bugajski 2009). In pursuit of this broader goal, the Commission of the European Communities introduced rules and regulations aimed at establishing inter-university cooperation programs. The influence of the Bologna Process on these developments has also been acknowledged (De Wit 2000).

The Bologna Declaration articulated a key objective for higher education across Europe: "The strategic document of the European Commission, Europe 2020, sets a national goal for EU members: at least 20% of college graduates must pass through mobility programs up to 2020" (Mujic et al. 2012, 2256). In addition, Nogueiro and Saraiva (2023) argue that the Erasmus+ Programme offered higher education institutions (HEIs) a strategic opportunity to enhance competitiveness and contribute to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These contributions include improving the quality of education (SDG 4), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), addressing climate change (SDG 13), and promoting peace and justice (SDG 16). The 2023 agenda further emphasized objectives such as quality education, gender equality, decent work, and economic growth (Nogueiro et al. 2022).

In conclusion, with reference to the Green Paper, which can be checked out at https://aei.pitt.edu/1226/1/education_mobility_obstacles_gp_COM_96_462.pdf, (June 2025) and delivered by the European Commission, Llurda et. al (2016, 323) state that,

> The Erasmus student mobility programme allocates three explicit objectives to the experience of spending a few months studying in another European country: 1) to benefit students educationally, linguistically and culturally; 2) to promote co-operation between institutions; 3) to contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded and internationally experienced future professionals.

How has the Erasmus Program been studied by researchers?

This part of our report summarizes the main tenets of the existing literature and current debates on the Program regarding the extent to which Erasmus has reached its main aims and goals. A substantial body of literature has examined the history and diverse practices associated with the Erasmus Exchange Program, spanning disciplines such as tourism, language studies, ethnography, and urban and cultural studies. As Cairns observes, "Two main lines of enquiry dominate Erasmus research: the task of quantifying levels of incoming and outgoing mobility on a cross-country basis and the practice of evaluating the impact of foreign study experience on students' subsequent personal development and careers" (Cairns 2018(2), 1).

Our review indicates that much of this scholarship focuses on assessing the program's major achievements and challenges—particularly whether participation rates have increased and whether students have derived tangible benefits from their Erasmus experience, either in their home country or abroad, in terms of further education and employment.

Achievements

There are several themes that have emerged repeatedly during studies on international mobility, which have been compiled by De Benedictis & Leoni as follow:

> Research showed that international mobility contributes to students' personal development (Keogh & Russel-Roberts 2009) through improved problem solving skills (Behrnd & Porzelt 2012), better knowledge of foreign languages (Otero & McCoshan 2006), more self-confidence (Braskamp et al., 2009), increased autonomy and flexibility (Kitsantas 2004; Papatsiba 2005), and future employability (Bryła 2015; Engel 2010; Pareyand Waldinger 2010; d'Hombres and Schnepf 2021), as well as cultural awareness and the formation of individual identity (Oborune 2013; Langley & Breese 2005; Teichler & Jahr 2001). For the case of Italy, d'Hombres and Schnepf (2021) found that international mobility is linked with a higher probability to enrol in postgraduate studies (De Benedictis & Leoni 2021, 3).

Additional outcomes identified by leading scholars include increased levels of student circulation and the formation of European identities as a consequence of participation in the Erasmus programme (Sigalas 2010; Oborune 2013; Van Mol 2013), along with the promotion of "non-formal learning" (Cairns 2019).

Challenges

1. Important keywords emerging from our literature review include polarization, disequilibrium, and discrepancy. These keywords not only pertain to challenges inherent in the Erasmus program but also relate to significant events and trends that have influenced international student mobility across three overlapping waves between 1999 and 2020: The terrorist attacks of 2001,

2. The global financial recession,

3. The economic slowdown in China, Brexit, and the U.S. presidential elections (Choudaha 2017, 825).

In the context of broader political, social, and economic instability across Europe and the world, several critical perspectives warrant reconsideration. One significant outcome

identified is participation disequilibrium. Cairns et al (2018(2), 3) notes the need to:

> look beyond existing studies that target participation…[understand] the curious notion that the programme is financially governed in a manner that seems to do little to actively encourage the inclusion of economically marginal students ... [explore] why economic and cultural impediments to mobility are so persistent… [assess in detail] what influences the decision (not) to participate.

Likewise, Dvir and Yemini (2017, 10) argue that "… fulfilling mobility's transformative potential requires a policy that proactively works to equally distribute opportunities and takes into account the hierarchy of socio-economic privilege and underprivilege".

In addition to disparities among students, there exists a "polarization of sending and receiving universities" (De Benedictis 2021, 14). Economic challenges in participating countries, alongside the privatization of higher education, have contributed to declining student interest. According to Cairns, "Erasmus … risks excluding itself from universities where funding is lost through students withdrawing from participation" (Cairns 2018 (2), 9). Furthermore, participation rates remain "extremely low" among students with special needs (De Benedictis 2021, 17). Additional factors influencing these trends include Brexit and the rise of nationalist sentiments across the continent.

Finally, the issue of a "gender gap" or "gender bias" in Erasmus mobility has been identified as a significant challenge (Böttcher 2016; De Benedictis 2021). Restaino et al. reports that "... the number of females involved in [the] Erasmus programme is greater than the number of males, even if the position of countries in terms of centrality scores in the network structure remains similar." (Restaino et al. 2021, 173) However, alternative perspectives have also been presented. For example, Flikke (2022) contends that the internationalization discourse within academia presupposes a gender-neutral, merit-based success criterion. According to Flikke, this framing conceals the underlying gender inequalities embedded within the discourse.

Scholars also argue that more recently there have been attempts by the EU to overcome participation issues. For instance, "refugees and asylum seekers are now being explicitly targeted for policy interventions via mobility projects in Key Action 3 of the programme… [for youth unemployment]". Cairns et. al 2018 (1), 8). Furthermore, "the scope for Erasmus interventions is more expansive, including the idea of making students more employable through participating in exchanges" (Cairns et. al. 2018 (1), 9).

Drivers of and Barriers to Mobility

The achievement of the objectives set forth by the Erasmus Program, as well as the

effective addressing of the challenges previously discussed, largely depends on the drivers and barriers influencing mobility. The literature identifies three primary hierarchical levels of factors affecting educational mobility:

1. Global factors, encompassing policy-driven and demand-driven influences,
2. Institutional factors, motivated by internationalization efforts and university rankings,
3. Individual factors, primarily related to career-oriented considerations such as globalization, language proficiency, a sense of adventure, employability, and institutional initiatives.

Erasmus-REX: Redefining the Erasmus experience is mainly concerned with student participation in the Erasmus programme and the literature identifies the following as the major motives of and barriers to individual mobility:

Studies purport that the motivation behind joining Erasmus mobility is largely related to personal profiles, in connection to family and relationship contexts; how the programs are promoted and communicated; and the lived experience at the exchange university (Pineda Herrero 2008). The main motivations for study abroad that stand out are "personal development, broader career opportunities, intercultural assimilation, fun or enjoyment," and the deterrents are "missing family and friends, family and work commitments, language, safety, financial, and graduation concerns" (Payan et al. 2012, 4).

In their article titled "Short-term study abroad: motivations, expectations and experiences of students of Aalesund campus**"** based on a literature review on student motivation, Mørkeset, Å. & Glavee-Geo (2016, 176) argue that, "the predominant outcomes appear to be culture-related constructs, such as intercultural proficiency, openness to cultural diversity, international awareness, international activities, global-mindedness and environmental attitudes".

The characteristics of international study destinations play a significant role in influencing students' choices to pursue education abroad. Those students who demonstrate a desire to enhance their knowledge of different cultures and countries tend to exhibit a stronger intention to engage in study abroad programs than those without such interests (Stroud 2010).

A frequently cited motivation for engaging in study abroad programs is career advancement, as many students seek international experiences during their higher education to enhance their employment opportunities. Similarly, social and cultural capital has been

shown to positively influence students' inclination to study abroad (Dessoff 2006; Relyea et al. 2008).

To sum up, the most prominent motivating factors are personal development and career aspirations, developing English language skills, having relevant industrial experience and being ready for the job market (Payan et al. 2012; Relyea et al. 2008). Furthermore, "getting away from the home campus and experiencing different cultural settings" appears to be a common tenet (Mørkeset, Å. & Glavee-Geo 2016, 180).

Regarding barriers to participation, the primary obstacle is the lack of equitable access to opportunities. Numerous scholars have emphasized the social dimension of Erasmus student mobility, highlighting the program's elitist nature, which tends to favor more affluent students. Arino et al. and Steenstrup argue that students' participation is shaped by the educational and economic capital possessed by their parents (i.e., parents with higher-level education background and higher economic means) as well as the educational, social and cultural capital that students themselves hold (Arino et. al 2014; Steenstrup 2010, cited in Mørkeset & Glavee-Geo 2016). These challenges are further compounded by the promotion of certain destinations characterized by "academic tourism" or "educational tourism" (Quintela et al. 2022; Garcia-Rodriguez and Mendoza Jimenez 2015).

However, popular destinations are usually not very affordable choices. The case of Aalesund campus in Norway illustrates that one of the primary factors influencing students' preferences is cost and location, with the associated lack of adequate funding playing a critical role. In this context, "a key attraction is financial support in the form of a scholarship" (Mørkeset, Å., & Glavee-Geo 2016, 177). These are followed by institutional factors (funding/sponsorship organizations); peers or significant others, past participants and family members and the lack of awareness regarding study abroad programs (Mørkeset, Å., & Glavee-Geo 2016). Equally important are the social and cultural image of the host institution and country, and how the home institution prepares students for the experience (motivates and encourages them or not) (Mørkeset, Å., & Glavee-Geo 2016). Studies have also shown that language competence, issue of communication, and the curriculum (language of education and course content) are among the barriers (Ottesen 2016). Negative experiences reported by previous participants can discourage prospective students from selecting the same destination, as former participants are often regarded as reliable sources of information.

To summarize, the motivations and barriers for student mobility are the following:

Motives and drivers:

- Academic interest (institutional prestige, language skills, etc.)

- Cultural interest (destination choices motivated by tourism or adventure, metropolitan life "as spaces of learning," global citizenship)
- Labour-market and career-related interest (improved access to job market)
- Personal development (intercultural exposure, expanding worldviews, conviviality)

Barriers and challenges:

- Lack of (sufficient) financial support
- Language problems
- Cultural biases, anxieties, and stereotypes
- Lack of communication
- Insufficient information and guidance
- Credit transfer problems
- Lack of affordable accommodation
- Diplomatic barriers (visas etc.)

Drawing more attention to the Erasmus+ Student Mobility Program and its related endeavours, recent scholarship provides significant inputs on factors affecting destination choices. Destination choices are largely shaped by:

- The image of the receiving university/city/country (i.e., popular tourism destinations; leisure and travel motives)
- Adventure and curiosity vs. safety concerns
- Past participants and family members
- Existing information on university websites
- Cost of living and accommodation
- Language of education
- Future employability
- The country's overall position in the global hierarchy

Main research themes in the field

To gain deeper insight into the positive and negative aspects of the Erasmus Exchange Programs from the students' perspectives, and to explore innovative approaches for enhancing and expanding the program, researchers and critical scholars worldwide have concentrated on the following key research themes:

1) *Professional development and career planning*

Based on our review, acquiring skills to be competitive in the European and global job market appears to be one of the key factors that prompt students to join an Erasmus exchange program. It seems that more students would be interested in Erasmus programs if it provided employment opportunities (and had clear guidelines explaining how), integrated into its system through internships, postgraduate "further study activities", etc. Some scholars have questioned if mobility experiences of students could support their professional experiences later on (Robin 2019). Recent research indicates that educational policies are increasingly influenced by the dynamics of the global market economy, emphasizing the need for acquiring new competencies to navigate globalization's challenges and meet labor market requirements. For example, Ineta Luka underscores the significance of developing cognitive, social, and practical skills, a focus reinforced by frameworks such as the OECD Education 2030 initiative and related European policy strategies (Luka 2019).

Another important point made by scholars has been to ask in what different ways Erasmus mobility programs could "support students in their efforts to acquire skills that will contribute to their personal development and increase their employability" (Ardielli and Rybarikova 2020, 9)? While most studies recognize student mobility as an experience closely tied to personal identity and growth within an academic context, it also plays a crucial role in providing a skill set to the students by which they would adapt to professional life (Pleyers and Guillaume 2008). Thus, student mobility is intimately connected to expectations regarding professional mobility. For example, for Simoes et al. (2017, 697), "In fact, the goals of internationalization include both blurring national frontiers and preparing students for professional paths in a globalized world, making international careers becoming more and more desirable and a natural consequence." According to the author, "students seem to be quite aware of the positive implications of mobility in their professional careers and of the set of skills developed during that period" (Simoes et al 2017, 696). Research demonstrate that students also embrace this particular aspect of Erasmus and that mobility students are usually aware of the demands of the international labor market and behave accordingly (Ballatore 2017; Gérard and Voin 2013), but the role of host institutions in this process - providing incoming students with required skills at the global scale - are particularly highlighted (Finell 2015).

Such findings have led scholars to further explore the link between Erasmus and individual career planning (Ece 2019, Engel 2012); the degree to which former mobility students have been employable (Moro et al 2014); in which line of work early career former mobility students have been employed after graduation as well as their further study activities (Maiworm and Teichler 1996). However, there are also challenges that affect mobility experiences negatively, such as economic difficulties and lack of funding (Wieczorek 2020).

This literature review has also revealed conflicting results about the link between participating in Erasmus programs and employability. For instance, Parey and Waldinger (2011, 195) argue that “studying abroad increases an individual's probability of working in a foreign country by about 15 percentage points.” Likewise, (Kabanbayeva et al 2019) contend that through academic mobility, the mobility of the workforce will also improve. Iriondo’s research findings also indicate that “the salaries of participants are higher than those who have not participated” in Erasmus student exchange programs (Iriondo 2020). Recent scholars have challenged the overall view across the EU circles that former students participated in Erasmus would have better chances of being employed (Craciun et al 2020). According to the research carried out by (Granato & Schnepf 2024), Erasmus experiences have no significant effect on postgraduate employability. Similarly, C. Van Mol has written that there exists "… little empirical evidence for a causal link between participation in the Erasmus programme and increased aspirations towards the international labour market…The results indicate that those who participate in the Erasmus programme are already more inclined towards future geographical mobility and international jobs before participating" (Van Mol 2014, 295).

Despite the findings of various studies, most of the aforementioned works do not critically assess the commonly assumed direct connection between labour market outcomes or employability and participation in Erasmus student mobility programs. A substantial body of literature addresses related topics such as the “global knowledge economy” (Gürüz and Zimpher 2011), labor globalization, neoliberal economic policies, and the commercialization and internationalization of education, alongside the framing of students as a globally available labor force (Aba, D. 2013). As Mol (2014, 120) notes, “The promotion of intra-European mobility was ... an essential part of the Lisbon Strategy to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Parliament 2000).”At this point the most critical question one should ask is to what extent higher education institutions prioritize the kinds of social and professional skill sets that the global labor market demands from students to meet (Holmberg 2023, 9; Lupu and Oniciuc 2006)? In her article titled “Political and Individual Rationales of Student Mobility: A Case-Study of ERASMUS and a French Regional Scheme for Studies Abroad,” Vassiliki Papatsiba states that “… changes in HE are shaped by pressures coming from the market and its interests rather than by political planning ...”, which is indicative of the growing influence of “the market mechanisms and the increasing spirit of utilitarianism” (Papatsiba 2005, 183).

Such tendencies also bring about the marketization of language skills. According to Vasilica Mocanu (2023, 1, 6, 20), “the construction of multilingual identities” as well as the requirement of certain language skills enforced through Erasmus exchange

programs in fact respond to the expectations of the neoliberal system, whereas courses and workshops on "Entrepreneurial and Communicative Skills" are in demand (Heinz and Chylkova 2018).

The integration of global perspectives into curricula, the unrestricted movement of labor within Europe, and the goals of higher education institutions to enhance graduate employability have brought about important concepts such as academic and student migration as well as how certain "migration paths" for students did not prove useful (Ballatore 2020). In her article titled "When the Eramus Generation Meets the Precarious Generation: The Transnational Mobility of Italian and Spanish Youth" Raffini (2014, 140) has argued that,

> Indeed, in the current context of economic crisis, mobility is more and more experienced by highly skilled youth from Southern European countries, as individual strategies to deal with precariousness, unemployment, and under-qualified jobs. As a result, mobility can be seen as an obligation, more than a choice, and as a form of brain drain from Southern to Central and Northern European countries, more than a carrier of horizontal Europeanization.

2) *Erasmus students as "cultural ambassadors" ("brand ambassadors") participating in "academic tourism" ("educational tourism")*

In parallel with the gradual alignment of HEIs with neoliberal economic policies in the world, international students are inevitably "involved in broader urban processes such as the tourism industry, marginal gentrification or entrepreneurial creativity, thus becoming a new class of transnational urban consumers" during mobility (Calvo 2018, 2142). Many scholars have reflected critically on this theme: Erasmus mobility students as tourists (Garcia Laborda 2007); "studentification" of the cities and towns of Europe (Azeitiero 2022); the role that students play as active participants in tourism as well as mobility (Banegil-Palacios et. al., 2018); students playing a part in culture tourism (Buczkowska 2013); and types of culture tourism that particularly aim at mobility students (França et al 2023). Such developments contribute to the transformation of urban environments. In their abovementioned work, França et al discuss that in Lisbon the promotion of the city as a centre of innovation and creativity results in gentrification and the increase of prices in the housing market (França et al 2023). Realizing that Erasmus mobility students are a strong driving force for urban change and the tourism industry, travel agencies and transport providers would accelerate this process (Gheorghe et al, 2017), which create a continuous economic impact. Longer-term visits (including Erasmus) may attract additional visits both by the student and family members if their first impressions of the city and the university as tourists are positive (Pawlowska & Roget 2009). Reyes Chavez uses the concept of "super-mobility" to define such situations where students go for mobility more than once (Reyes Chavez,

2023).

Some scholars view this tendency negatively, questioning whether the aim here is "sponsored vacation" and leisure or personal and professional growth (Juvan and Lesjak 2011, 23, 26). Asking a similar question, "Education first" or "tourism first"? Though their research was not Erasmus-specific, Kosmaczewska and Jameson argue that, according to their findings, "... students were motivated by 'tourism first'" (Kosmaczewska & Jameson 2023, 143). Finally, according to Pavlina (2021) Erasmus students' social media usage in Prague, proved that educational topics were of lower priority during their Erasmus mobility.

Some studies emphasizing the positive influence of growing student interest in European cities and cultures propose that "Universities should consider working with the tourism sector to offer activities related to local culture," including language learning opportunities (Clemente-Ricolfe & Garcia-Pinto 2019, 72). In the Spanish context, Rodriguez Zapatero et al. (2017) highlight the significance of language tourism for the overall economy of the country, particularly in connection with Erasmus mobility. For the same purpose, Lacovino et al. (2020) suggest the development of a virtual reality application aimed at promoting tourism through Erasmus students' real time experiences of a place.

Interestingly enough, though, "contrary to what can be observed in other types of tourism, the results suggest that academic tourism depends mainly on determinants that are not strictly economic" (Rodriguez et al 2012, 1583). What determines the destination choices of many Erasmus students are popular sites of international culture and education tourism (Cerdeira-Bento, 2014; Garcia Rodriguez et al, 2013). As well as career and employment goals, the climate plays a considerable part in student preferences, and especially the countries in the Mediterranean. According to research carried out by Rodriguez Gonzalez et al (2011, 427), "evidence suggests that despite the academic purposes behind the inception of this programme, there is a real danger of misusing public funds to finance leisure pursuits." Thus students mainly have two criteria while recommending a place to peers: educational mobility and tourism experience (Ribeiro, 2023). A popular destination also influences how universities approach partnership. Simoni and Geogoudaki argue that "… the cultural profile of the city influences the content of the international partnerships of the university and motivates exchange students from abroad" (Simoni & Geogoudaki 2020, 213).

3) Social inclusivity

Who can and cannot participate in Erasmus? Do students simply eye popular tourism destinations, or are they rather career-oriented? Guðmarsdóttir et al (2023) cite students' socio-economic background, gender, and disability status among major obstacles for

mobility. Main keywords that emerge in such studies are financial and gender inequality, affordability, physical accessibility, and application and selection processes. The shared view is that there are inequalities present among universities, mobility destinations, and those created by the international labour market, which then reflect on HEIs.

According to Guðmarsdóttir et al (2023, 2), "research on participation in international student exchanges consistently indicates that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to complete stays abroad compared to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds." Likewise, Ballatore and Ferede (2013, 525, 531) argue that, "compared with sedentary students, Erasmus students engaged in more academic and leisurely travel and have higher socio-economic status (SES) and that "more attention needs to be paid to international student migration around the world, not just in terms of south-to-north flow, but also stressing migration within and among northern and southern regions."

This imbalance embedded in the Program might later be reflected in the employability patterns of the participating students. Economic crises have also had a notable impact on the ability of parents to financially support their children, further exacerbating the already limited financial assistance provided through the Erasmus program. As Cairns (2017, 728) notes, "exchange students ... [are] increasingly viewed as tourists and consumers as well as learners." In support of this perspective, Çırak Karadağ (2021, 321, 326) observes that "the students who participated in Erasmus+ program had significantly higher parental income and education levels…" than those who did not participate.

As discussed in the previous section of our review, academic tourism underlines "the importance of the attraction factors linked to the destination rather than those associated with the academic center" (Garcia-Rodriguez and Mendoza Jimenez, 2015, 175). In response, studies have investigated if it would be possible to take advantage of this situation and also create a balance among all host universities and cities? While some studies express optimism that "the resounding success of the Erasmus program can serve as a benchmark in future educational tourism projects" by offering "mobility and ease of access" (Bunghez 2022, 1) to the labor market, this perspective also raises concerns. Specifically, it may compromise the broader success of the program by making it less accessible to students from lower-income backgrounds and by contributing to an uneven distribution of mobility across destinations.

Scholars also indicate that "… mobility habits and behaviour are relatively homogenous in Europe and are determined especially by socio-economic drivers" (Fiorello et al 2016, 1104). How could then the Program create equal opportunities for students and the democratization of mobility? To tackle the financial inequality among students in accessing Erasmus student exchange and increase participation, Salome Gvetadze

(2014, 3) suggests "the establishment of an EU Student Loan Facility for cross-border mobility as a policy measure on EU level." Palma I Munoz (2019, 230) proposes a similar policy on the level of *student housing* arguing that "… university policies for improving the living conditions of students… require an increase in public spending and a system of scholarships and grants that guarantee equity and equality in access." For them "access to university housing [is] an essential element to address the challenges raised by the European Union regarding Higher Education in relation to mobility (recognition of degrees, homologation, cultural and linguistic exchange, …) and the social dimension (equity, access, equal opportunities, scholarships and grants, …)".Addressing inequalities in the institutional or university level, Granato and Schnepf (2024, 638) investigate how inequalities in mobility are inherently related to the selection process, and "how the program organization at the degree course level is associated with socioeconomic disparities in student mobility". Likewise, Privarova and Toma (2016) discuss the challenges that are created by the ways in which the Erasmus Program is funded.

Such dynamics also impact education within students' home institutions, especially considering the disparities between the students who do or do not participate in exchange programs (Ribeiro 2021). In this regard, conducting a comparative study examining both personal and financial barriers faced by participants and non-participants would generate valuable outcomes for future policy making (Souto-Otero et al. 2013). An additional factor worth investigating is the imbalance in participation rates among various scales related to the size of settlements students live or study (villages, small towns, large cities, etc.) (Labella-Fernandez). As was noted earlier, "the participation of students with special needs in the program remains extremely low," which highlights a sensitive yet critical concern within the Erasmus mobility framework (De Benedictis & Leoni 2021, 1).

4) Unevenness in student mobility flows

As was mentioned under "barriers to mobility," the disparity between sender versus receiver countries and universities has been increasingly addressed in the literature. Authors have raised the issues of unevenness and disparities with the mobility location choices (Lage et al 2017). For instance, according to Breznik et al (2023), among the selected cases examined, the countries that are both good receivers and senders are Spain, Italy, and Germany; countries considered good receivers only are Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Portugal; and finally, in the good senders only countries category are Belgium and the Czech Republic. In analysing such disparities, Ballatore (2008, 60) argues that "despite the principle of reciprocal exchanges, concrete relations between academic institutions are based on logics of 'selective affinities' that both reveal the relatively elitist nature of the scheme and reinforce existing migratory

imbalances between the countries concerned" which are France, UK and Italy). According to Özberk et al (2017, 2401), "… incoming students prioritized the university-related factors while outgoing students prioritized the factors related to social environment." Likewise, in Schnepf and Colagrossi's point of view (2020, 436), "Results show that while student characteristics like ability and social status are important predictors of Erasmus mobility, they only explain one part of unequal uptake. In addition, social segregation of universities and fields of study contributes to the unequal mobility pattern…" For instance, research carried out by Van Mol and Ekamper (2016) demonstrates that mobility students are usually prone to choose capital cities of the Continent or other large metropolises.

At this point, it is important to consider the internal dynamics of how inter-university agreements are established. For example, Türkiye, as a candidate country, joined the Erasmus Program relatively late in 2004 compared to most other participants. By the time Türkiye was included, many key partnerships had already been formalized, potentially leaving Turkish universities with fewer available options. Research by Selickaite and Reklaitiene (2015, 49) supports this argument. They have pointed out that, "countries, which had joined the European Union in earlier stages of enlargement, have a rather uniform distribution of incoming and outgoing Erasmus students (-1%), whereas the states, which joined the EU later, have more outgoing than incoming students (-14.4%)."

On a related note, Ballatore asks an important question (2011, 149): 'Does the Erasmus program democratize access to mobility and the associated "career opportunities"'? In fact, Erasmus has also created new hierarchies between universities. As Ballatore's work shows, the Erasmus program has generated an atmosphere of competition whereby various universities try to attract more attention of students and instructors, and she observes an increasing "trend towards social specialization of study paths and destinations" (Ballatore 2011, 149). Furthermore, the universities' motivation to be a part of Erasmus usually reflects their broader desire to have a "world-class university" status and rise in the rankings (Rider et al 2021; Van Mol 2021, 1146). Globalization, transnational education, global citizenship, intercultural competence, international mobility, and internationalization at home are the main drivers that push such trends in alignment with market demands.

5) Language competence (both before and after mobility)

Another prominent issue discussed in the literature concerns language—both the medium of instruction and the local languages spoken in host cities. This raises the question of how language learning can be effectively supported before and during Erasmus experiences. In response, several scholars have highlighted the introduction of "online linguistic support platforms" to enhance language acquisition during mobility

(Florentina-Cristina 2018, 53, 55), while also emphasizing that language education should be able to accommodate diverse and nuanced approaches (Fuentes Gonzalez 2020). Hessel points to the potential for Erasmus mobility to contribute meaningfully to second language development and identifies key themes such as "English use anxiety," "intercultural self-efficacy," and the "sustainability of language gains" (Hessel 2016). Similarly, Pereira et al. (2024) stress the importance of strengthening prepatory steps for learning foreign language, and finally, Mulcar (2019) draws attention to students' attitudes toward learning English as another critical factor.

6) Curriculum-related issues and credit transfer

This issue could be considered of practical or technical nature at first sight, but it has broader implications in mobility experience across the EU. According to Langan (2009), The Erasmus Program aimed at mediating the differences of curricula across European countries by utilizing student exchange programs and therefore building a common ground. Therefore, curriculum-related issues, including course content, language of education, and credit transfer between home and receiving institutions, are issues that needed to be addressed. The resolution of such issues often requires seamless communication between the receiving and sending institutions and goodwill from both. Major issues and challenges cited by scholars include course quality (Balyasin et al 2016); "mobility and curricular creativity" (Damascelli 2015); student placement (Akkaya 2010); the course content (Ottesen et al 2016); acceptance and transfer of education credits earned abroad (Privarova & Toma 2016); the transfer of the course credits (Grove 2011); and evaluation processes (Bruno & Dzennana 2014).

Bartha and Gubik (2018, 3) emphasize that "better planned Erasmus processes (pre-, during and postmobility activities such as departure, course choice, staying in a host country, etc.) and better communicated career opportunities and labour market values of the mobility could considerably contribute to an increase in the number of outbound students." Furthermore, enhancing support services may help address challenges related to the student experiences abroad and facilitate a smoother mobility process (Castanheira, 2023). At a more administrative level, Garcia Murias et al. (2016, 71) highlight the necessity for clearly defined guidance policies relating to the mobility actions and exchange programs. Addressing inconsistencies in course credit recognition upon students' return to their home institutions is also critical (Grove, 2011). Michalcewicz-Kaniowska (2017) identifies such similar challenges as "learning subject-specific foreign vocabulary" and "getting credits for subjects different from the home syllabus" as part of these difficulties.

On the more personal level, there are various actors whose contributions are vital to the process. Kucukcene and Akbasli (2021) draw attention to the significance of information acquisition and the application process, as well as the role of coordinators

in each university, whereas Fidan and Karatepe (2021) point to the need for an orientation program that would help students to fully immersed in what an Erasmus mobility entails. According to (Pineda Herrero et al, 2008), "The most important factors are related to the family and relationship context, the features of programmes and the promotion that takes place within the actual university environments". Indeed, past student mobility experiences are decision-influencing factors (Mujic et al 2012). Therefore, Erasmus students' "acculturation experiences with campus discrimination (an acculturative stressor), academic support (a mediator of acculturation) and academic satisfaction (an outcome of acculturation)" need to be carefully considered in revising and reforming the existing orientation programs (Mikulas and Jitka 2019).

Various studies have proposed strategies to address these challenges. One notable approach is the implementation of international credit virtual mobility (ICVM) programs, which aim to reduce "financial and social selectivity" within Erasmus and broaden access to participation (Lopez-Duarte et al. 2023). Additionally, Carrero (2017) identifies a shared characteristic among many participants: "an average grade and a search for independence." To enhance student motivation, it may be worth reevaluating the definition of "academic success," particularly if current criteria place emphasis on performance above the average grade.

7) Personal growth, intercultural exchange, integration, and identity

Several studies indicate that students participating in the Erasmus mobility program believe "they have widened their social circles, experienced personal growth, accrued new knowledge, and begun to perceive their own imagined communities differently" (Prieto-Arranz et al 2023) based on their perceptions about the host city, country, and institution. These findings also touch upon broader themes such as individual, national, transnational, and European identity. In line with this, Nada and Legutko argue that "participating in an Erasmus exchange can indeed enhance personal growth and lead to transformative learning" (Nada and Legutko 2022). Such personal development often goes hand in hand with the acquisition of intercultural competencies and the enhancement of students' professional trajectories. According to Cirugeda et al., students acquire essential skills to become "… more independent to solve problems, to collaborate with other people from different backgrounds, to communicate in a foreign language, and to expand their worldview" (Cirugeda et al. 2024). As students spend time together, they form lasting networks and "cooperation patterns" (Gadar et al. 2022). Gökten and Emil note that Erasmus fosters openness to experience and promotes "intellectual cooperation" (Gökten and Emil 2024). At the same time, students may face challenges related to "lifestyle, faith, and friendships in a different socio-cultural environment" (Gül 2018), along with "intercultural communication barriers" (Keles et al. 2013). As a result, scholars have emphasized the importance of incorporating cultural

diversity and local particularities into the curriculum and pedagogical approaches of host institutions (Gonzalez et al. 2016).

Erasmus mobility also influences students' perceptions of a European identity. Bryla identifies "feeling more European" as one of the main drivers for student participation in Erasmus such as "… improving their foreign language skills, making international friends, enhancing their intercultural understanding, becoming more mobile, independent, self-confident" (Bryla 2015). Mol has studied the "sense of European identity" in relation to "migratory aspirations." His research shows that mobility experience elevates identity from an abstract concept to a concrete one: "This experience of Europe adds a social dimension to the political and cultural definition of the term and is the result of socialisation processes that are characterised by internal and external identity observations" (Mol 2024). According to Mol & Wauters, this can be understood as an "experience-based Europe" (Mol & Wauters, 2011).

Yet, has Erasmus truly contributed to the formation of a shared European identity? Several studies argue that Erasmus Programme has not yet succeeded in fostering a "transnational European identity" comparable to the development of national identities (James 2019). In their work on English as Lingua Franca (ELF), Mocanu and Llurda (2024) similarly argue that students did not experience a significant increase in their sense of European identity after their Erasmus participation.

8) Geopolitics and security concerns

Although the literature on this topic is not as extensive as in other areas covered in this report, issues related to geopolitics and security seem are emerging as important concerns for the future of exchange programs. Regional conflicts near Europe, along with international terrorism and xenophobia, may negatively influence student mobility. Research has shown that terrorist attacks had a noticeable impact on some universities in Brussels and Paris (Dostál et al 2018).

There is also the other side of the security concern. The Swedish case illustrates how perceptions of security risks may reduce the incentive to host international students. Following the introduction of new tuition fee policies by Swedish HEIs, the number of international students from low-income countries has declined, with mobility becoming concentrated mostly among academic staff and doctoral students (Nilsson & Westin, 2024).

Yet conflict, while a serious factor, does not always deter international student mobility. In Israel, where violent conflict is frequent, a significant portion of international students reported that they chose to study there because of their ideological or religious affiliations with the country (Ben-Tsur 2009). Moreover, international student mobility

can also occur as a consequence of, or in response to, geopolitical, economic, and social crises in various countries (Yang, 2022). In such contexts, the reproduction of human capital is seen as essential, and both inbound and outbound student mobility are regarded as potential solutions.

9) *Digitalization of mobility programs*

The existing literature spans a wide range of topics, including remote opportunities for intercultural learning—often framed as "internationalization at home" (hereafter, IaH) (Beelen and Jones 2015) or "mobility without moving" (Alario-Hoyos and Kloos 2019) —as well as hybrid mobility formats such as "blended intensive programmes" (O'Dowd and Werner 2024).

The concept of IaH has been widely discussed in international education studies since the 2000s. Given resource constraints, opportunities for physical mobility remain inaccessible to the majority of students worldwide, and this situation is unlikely to change in the near future. To address this, the European Commission has incorporated IaH into its higher education policy since 2013 (European Commission 2013). Emphasizing that internationalization should not be limited to physical mobility, the Commission supports the development of international curricula and the incorporation of global perspectives into teaching and learning, enabling non-mobile learners to benefit as well. The aim of this approach is to ensure that all students, whether mobile or not, acquire intercultural competencies. Beelen and Jones (2015, 69) defined the concept as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments". While acknowledging its advantages, Schueller and Bulut Sahin (2022) argue that virtual student mobility is not a full substitute for physical mobility. Although it can broaden access, it also introduces new forms of inequality in its current implementations.

Mobility restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Munoz and Manuel Luque Revuelto 2023) have underscored the growing importance of digital tools in enhancing the Erasmus mobility experience. Digital mobility initiatives have transformed international education by facilitating virtual exchanges and online collaboration. Woicolesco et al. (2022), for example, highlight how Brazilian universities use virtual models to promote global learning at home, thereby making mobility more accessible and sustainable. Their study adds evidence from Brazilian higher education to the literature on IaH. After the COVID-19 pandemic, many "technology-mediated internationalization strategies" were adopted (Woicolesco et al. 2022, 222).

Moreover, scholars examined efforts to "add efficiency to Erasmus bureaucracies" through digital platforms (Cardoso & Seruca, 2019) and nd emphasized the broader digitalization of administrative procedures, which has contributed to time savings and

reduced paper consumption (Lopez-Nores et al. 2022). Increasingly, technological infrastructure is considered essential for effective communication, as reflected in studies showing that the quality of institutional websites influences students' university choices (Senci et al. 2018).

There is also growing scholarly interest in leveraging digital tools to enhance the Erasmus experience more broadly. This includes the use of virtual reality (VR) and e-learning, particularly in language education contexts (Frias et al 2011), as well as the evaluation of the "Virtual Mobility" programs (Ruiz-Corbella and Alvarez-Gonzalez 2014). Comparative studies of distance education master's programs across Europe, Latin America, and Asia show that virtual mobility fosters educational inclusion, supports intercultural competence, facilitates academic collaboration, and strengthens global networking among students and institutions (Ruiz-Corbella and Alvarez-Gonzalez 2014). Preparatory digital storytelling activities—such as learning colloquialisms from foreign peers—have also been suggested for students prior to physical mobility (Gabaudan 2014). Finally, Klemencic et al. (2017) introduces the concept of digital ethnography as a method for centering student voices. Their *ErasmusShouts* web application was designed to collect richer and more authentic qualitative data about the Erasmus student experiences. This approach allows students to document their experiences in real-time and in their own words.

Solutions to improve student participation

The formation of a unified Europe has been one of the key driving forces behind the Erasmus Program. However, this overarching vision has, at times, led to a tendency toward standardizing educational procedures, potentially at the expense of recognizing and valuing the cultural nuances and specificities of individual host institutions and participating countries. Bartha and Gubik (2018), for example, argue that,

> … in the course of promoting the Erasmus programs in Europe, cultural diversities of European countries need to be taken into account. Instead of adopting common communication, promotion and direction strategies, programs taking into account national specificities need to be elaborated (Bartha and Gubik 2018, 11).

Interculturality is a critical consideration for both educators and students within the Erasmus mobility context. Carlo underscores "the importance of cultural appropriation in teaching" (Carlo 2013), while Kiapekaki (2020) explores themes such as otherness and stereotypes in relation to national and European identity among Erasmus students from Greece. Other scholars note that students often face emotional challenges when adjusting to unfamiliar environments (de Carlo and Diamanti 2013). Moreover, the

benefits of studying abroad are not without potential drawbacks. In her work analysing the risks that students perceive during their study abroad period, Amarie (2015) finds that students face "risks relevant to study abroad, such as destination and time risk, financial and legal risk, and moral and return risk." For some students, these risks may in fact become barriers to participation. Major solutions and proposals offered in the literature to increase student participation and interest can be summarized as follows:

1) **Pre-mobility programs**, including those conducted online (Gabaudan 2014), have been shown to facilitate intercultural connections across EU countries by familiarizing students with local cultural nuances and colloquialisms. Research suggests that previous multicultural and international experiences facilitate how the students understand the local culture of the host country (Fiske, 2006). This supports the argument that early exposure to other cultures—particularly those of the host institution—prior to the exchange can ease students' transition and enhance their motivation to participate. In addition, the welcoming efforts and orientation practices implemented by host institutions play a crucial role in how quickly incoming students adapt to their new environments. However, some scholars argue that the Erasmus experience alone may not be sufficient to dispel existing stereotypes. For instance, Šifrar Kalan (2020) looked at the perception Slovenian university students have of Spanish culture and language, how their stay in Spain affected their perception on stereotypes they held about Spain. Even Slovenian students in higher education with an advanced Spanish language level have a stereotyped image of Spanish language and culture. These students' Erasmus mobility experience reinforced their stereotypical perceptions showing it is difficult to overcome stereotypes.

2) **Creative pedagogical strategies** would give students agency as main actors of the mobility experience, both in the classroom and outside of it, i.e., by focusing on digital storytelling/active use of individual blogs (Gabaudan, 2014).

3) **Short-term initiatives** such as summer or winter schools and workshops can help extend and reinforce the Erasmus experience, particularly when considering its inherently temporary, intensive, and dynamic character. The challenges students face in adapting to new environments are, in part, a reflection of the structure of these programs. In response, several authors have advocated for innovative pedagogical strategies, both within and beyond the classroom, to support students during mobility. A central question remains: how can those in a foreign country feel a sense of belonging, and how can their reflections be meaningfully acknowledged? In this regard, students should be regarded not simply as visitors to be accommodated, but as active participants and contributors within the Erasmus community (Anquetil 2011).

4) **Training key actor and support mechanisms** would help ensure higher student participation. Students often approach mobility programs with diverse expectations,

including access to clear and sufficient information, assurances regarding the safety and practicality of the destination, a positive perception of the host institution and its academic offerings, as well as anticipated support—both financial and emotional—from peers, home universities, and host institutions.

To this end, several studies highlight the importance of mobilizing key actors and support mechanisms. Their engagement is particularly valuable in fostering a sense of security and increasing interest among less extroverted students. These actors include "embassies/consulates, health authorities (e.g. for vaccination), study abroad coordinators and lecturers" (Mørkeset, Å., & Glavee-Geo 2016, 177). Participating institutions must ensure that information related to mobility opportunities is clearly and comprehensively communicated. This involves engaging relevant stakeholders and optimizing communication channels. As noted in the literature, the content provided on institutional websites—whether schools, colleges, or universities—plays a critical role in raising awareness about potential destinations (Mørkeset, Å., & Glavee-Geo 2016). Former participants also play an important role as a source of information. While in preparation, relevant actors must be aware of and meet the students' expectations, that is what they expect before and after their mobility, from an Erasmus experience.

5) **Increasing digitalization and adopting virtual reality and e-learning** in language education within Erasmus exchanges has the potential to broaden the scope of mobility. These tools not only enhance students' linguistic preparation and intercultural competence before departure but also provide more inclusive and flexible learning environments. In doing so, they increase accessibility for students who may face financial, physical, or logistical barriers to participation.

The development of virtual reality (VR) applications further strengthens the appeal of specific destinations by offering immersive and interactive previews that enable prospective students to explore key cultural and educational aspects remotely. Such technological innovations can function as powerful promotional tools, helping students make more informed choices and fostering greater interest in underrepresented or less accessible destinations.

6) Klemenčič et al. propose **digital ethnography as an innovative method** to amplify student voices within the Erasmus mobility context. Their initiative, ErasmusShouts, is described as "a web application, which engages Erasmus students as auto-ethnographers and prompts them to reflect on, and record their lived experiences of Erasmus mobility" (Klemencic et al., 2017). Such a platform not only facilitates personal reflection but also enables the collection of rich, qualitative data on student experiences. By positioning students as active narrators of their own mobility journeys, digital ethnography offers valuable insights into the complexities of international education education—insights that traditional quantitative methods might overlook.

7) Lopez Duarte et al. (2023) suggest **the implementation of international credit virtual mobility** (ICVM) programs, which have the potential to address issues of "financial and social selectivity" within the Erasmus framework. By providing accessible and flexible virtual mobility options, ICVM can broaden participation to include students who might otherwise be excluded due to economic or social barriers. In this way, ICVM may help democratize mobility, making it more inclusive and equitable for a diverse range of students (Lopez-Duarte et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it remains debatable whether the objectives of mobility can be fully achieved through such virtual formats.

8) **Positive discrimination in funding** is essential to addressing and mitigating social inequalities that affect student participation in mobility programs. By allocating financial resources strategically, disadvantaged and underrepresented students who might otherwise face significant barriers can be better supported.

Schnepf and Colagrossi (2020) challenge the notion that Erasmus mobility inequality is solely due to student choice. Their research highlights the structural barriers within higher education institutions and calls for policy reforms to make international mobility more inclusive. They find that while personal characteristics like ability and social capital matter, institutional factors—such as the university and field of study—play a substantial role in explaining unequal mobility uptake. Moreover, disadvantaged students tend to cluster in universities and fields of study with lower Erasmus participation rates, aggravating their disadvantage. In its current funding mode, Erasmus grants are often allocated based on previous mobility levels, which disadvantages universities with low past participation. Therefore, Schnepf and Colagrossi (2020) recommend the following policy revisions: to redistribute Erasmus funds more equitably across universities, to target universities and fields with high proportions of disadvantaged students, and to expand mobility opportunities to reduce social selectivity.

9) **Pluralizing forms of mobility** represents a promising strategy to expand the inclusivity and reach of the Erasmus mobility program. Messana (2024) suggests that one effective approach is to broaden the forms and methods of mobility by leveraging digital technologies more extensively, thereby integrating "physical and virtual mobilities" to enhance students' "mobility pathways." The student mobility experience has notably evolved, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Messana (2024) observes, French universities are developing new course formats that have links to the "internationalisation at home" approach and forms of mobility "without moving". Addressing the gap in interaction between international and local students, especially within Erasmus exchanges, these initiatives of the hybrid formation aim to foster inter-cultural dialogue and language learning, where students (local and international) are

paired to create a video or podcast in two languages (French and English). The online activities included tasks via Moodle (reading, listening, watching), interviews or portraits of their partners, collaborative research and content creation. Messana argues that the diversifying the means and modes of training allows flexibility that serves different users (students) and their needs through synchronous and asynchronous learning modes (2024, 3).

In contexts where international travel is not feasible for the students, "digital home-based internationalisation" offers a viable alternative (Brassier-Rodrigues 2022). Brassier-Rodrigues argues that more hybrid versions of the internationalization will be come across in the near future so much that "a new mobile habitus is underway" (2022, 138). This concept of "remote" internationalization is especially pertinent for students facing accessibility challenges, as highlighted by Moreau and Arneton in their study for the virtual reality (VR) training of the ICT subjects (2022).

Concluding remarks: Outcomes and policy recommendations

This report presents the results of a comprehensive literature review aimed at identifying the key directions that subsequent work packages of the ERASMUS_REX project will pursue to redefine the Erasmus experience. The findings presented in the report, along with their critical interpretations by the project team, are intended to provide a foundation for discussion and to inform the development of recommendations designed to make mobility experiences easier, more rewarding, more appealing, and better aligned with the values of current and prospective participants. We anticipate that, grounded in these insights, major stakeholders—including universities and policymakers—will be equipped to evaluate the popularity and pedagogical benefits of the Erasmus+ mobility program from multiple perspectives, ultimately enabling the redesign of the student experience to address the evolving needs and expectations of the new generation of international exchange candidates.

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