

A Comprehensive Examination of ERASMUS Mobility: Motivations, Destination Preferences, and Experienced Outcomes - The Sample of Czechia

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Abstract: This study aims to better understand the ERASMUS student mobility, by exploring students' motivations for participating in the program, their reasons for choosing Czechia for the mobility, and the benefits and challenges they encounter. The study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 ERASMUS mobility students in Czechia during the 2023–2024 academic year. The study highlighted certain benefits and challenges. In terms of benefits, participants reported personal growth, particularly in self-confidence and adaptability; development of intercultural competence, including improved communication skills and openness to diverse cultures; and enhanced career prospects through better language proficiency, problem-solving abilities, and expanded international networks. Regarding challenges, students identified difficulties in navigating cultural and linguistic differences, especially during the initial stages of mobility, as well as practical issues related to arrangements and bureaucracy prior to or at the beginning of their stay.

Keywords: Internationalization, Erasmus Mobility, Motive, Benefits, Challenges

ERASMUS Hareketliliğinin Kapsamlı Bir İncelemesi: Katılım Motivasyonları, Gidilecek Ülke Tercihleri ve Deneyimler - Çekya Örneği

Öz: Bu çalışma, öğrencilerin ERASMUS hareketliliğine katılım motivasyonlarını, hareketlilik için Çekya'yı seçme nedenlerini, hareketlilikten elde ettikleri yararları ve süreç boyunca karşılaştıkları zorlukları derinlemesine incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, nitel araştırma yaklaşımlarından durum çalışması deseni kullanılarak yürütülmüştür. Veriler, 2023–2024 akademik yılında ERASMUS hareketliliği için Çekya'da bulunan 12 öğrenci ile yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular, öğrencilerin hareketliliğe katılımında kişisel gelişim, akademik kazanım ve kariyer olanaklarına yönelik beklentilerin belirleyici etmenler olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Çekya'nın tercih edilme nedenleri arasında ise ülkenin yaşam koşulları, merkezi konumu ve İngilizce olarak sunulan derslerin çeşitliliği öne çıkmaktadır. Katılımcıların deneyimleri, ERASMUS hareketliliğinin özgüven ve uyum becerileri açısından kişisel gelişimlerine; iletişim becerileri ve farklı kültürlerle etkileşime açıklık açısından kültürlerarası yeterliklerine; dil yeterliliğinin artması, problem çözme becerilerinin gelişmesi ve uluslararası ağların genişlemesi açısından ise kariyer olanaklarına katkı sağladığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, özellikle hareketliliğin başlangıcında kültürel farklılıklar, dil engelleri ve çeşitli bürokratik güçlüklerle karşılaşıldığı ortaya konmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Uluslararasılaşma, Erasmus Hareketliliği, Motivasyonlar, Yararlar, Zorluklar

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The internationalization of higher education has attracted considerable attention since the late twentieth century (Gu et al., 2010) and has become a central characteristic of higher education in the twenty-first century, reflecting the growing interconnectedness of societies, economies, and knowledge systems (Knight, 2015). Driven by globalization and intensifying institutional competition, internationalization plays a defining role in attracting talent, enhancing research capacity, developing human capital, and fostering sustainable economic growth (Strielkowski et al., 2021). Accordingly, higher education institutions and policymakers have increasingly integrated international dimensions into teaching, research, and strategic planning in order to improve academic quality, strengthen institutional reputation, and enhance global competitiveness (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Many universities have pursued internationalization to provide a cross cultural learning environments and curricula to their students (Altbach, 2002) and have contributed to the interdependence of different nations and multiculturalism (López-Duarte et al., 2021). As a result, international student mobility, which is defined as the movement of individuals across borders in pursuit of study (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006), has become increasingly prominent. According to the latest available data in 2023, internationally mobile students accounted for 5% of bachelor's enrolments, 15% of master's enrolments, and 24% of doctoral enrolments across OECD member countries (OECD, 2024).

While internationalization was initially associated primarily with the physical mobility of students and staff, it has shifted toward inclusivity and social responsibility to ensure equity, sustainability, and the democratization of knowledge in time (Stein, 2017). Within this context, established in 1987, the ERASMUS program has become a key instrument for advancing internationalization in Europe by promoting student and staff mobility, intercultural learning, institutional collaboration, and social cohesion (Huisman & van der Wende, 2005). Key European initiatives, such as the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and the Bologna Declaration (1999), further contributed to its expansion, reinforcing the European Union's objective of strengthening its position as a globally competitive, knowledge-based society (López-Duarte et al., 2021; Van Bouwel & Veugelers, 2013).

The Program promotes high-quality, inclusive education as well as formal and non-formal learning, to equip participants with the skills and competences necessary for active participation in democratic society, intercultural understanding, and successful work integration. It emphasizes mobility, multilingualism, and experiential learning abroad, supporting the European Education Area, the Digital Education Action Plan, and related European Union strategies. It also supports innovation, bridges knowledge and skill gaps, and enhances social and intercultural competences, critical thinking, and digital literacy, thereby contributing to personal, societal, and professional development of participants (European Commission, 2023a). In line with these objectives, by the end of 2023 the program had facilitated approximately 1.3 million learning mobility opportunities, supported nearly 32,000 projects, cooperated with around 84,500 organizations, and operated with a budget of roughly €4.5 billion (European Commission, 2024a).

These mobility opportunities are particularly relevant today as individuals are required to possess the capability to adjust and adapt to evolving conditions, which requires ongoing growth and development (Savickas et al., 2009). Thus studying abroad is perceived as a way to access high-quality education in internationally recognized institutions and to acquire the skills that are not available in home countries (King & Sondhi, 2018) to better compete in the labor market (Findlay et al, 2017). Individuals participating in international mobility acquire enhanced knowledge and skills, thereby improving their career prospects and employability (Souto-Otero et al., 2019). They experience not only self-discovery but also develop the capacity to navigate, adapt, and develop when they face challenges during their international mobility, which significantly influences their career development (Jon et al., 2018; López-Duarte et al., 2021). Particularly for the students moving to economically more developed and academically superior countries, international mobility plays an important role for future employment migration (Wells, 2014). Furthermore, individuals' language proficiency and soft skills improve during international mobility, contributing to pursuing careers in multinational workplaces, or abroad (Beadle et al., 2015). Thus developing skills in intercultural communication and collaboration and expanding their international networks strengthen graduates' employability (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Pozniak et al., 2025). This is particularly advantageous in today's

globalized world, where many contemporary challenges require cross-border collaboration and advanced problem-solving abilities (Hser, 2005; Potts, 2021).

In addition, meaningful interaction with individuals from different backgrounds during their mobility help decrease the feeling of cultural loneliness and strengthen cultural bonds and communication among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Geary, 2016; Sabet & Chapman, 2023). Put differently, international mobility experience contributes to the intercultural competence of individuals. Intercultural competence refers to individual's capacity to act in an effective way in different cultures (Whaley & Davis, 2007) or the ability to think and act in a way that is appropriate in a different culture (Hammer et al., 2003). It emphasizes an individual's progression from a less diverse to a more complex understanding of cultural differences (Hammer, 2015) and the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in an intercultural context (Deardorff, 2006). As intercultural competence is a dynamic construct that evolves through continuous interactions, within ERASMUS program these interactions specifically contribute to students' adaptability, understanding, and cultural awareness (Sabet & Chapman, 2023), as well as challenging prejudiced attitudes and preparing them to live in a globalized world (Pinto, 2018).

ERASMUS mobility offers students significant benefits, providing opportunities to enhance communication skills, intercultural competence, adaptability, and cultural awareness while fostering personal growth and global employability (King & Sondhi, 2018; Pinto, 2018; Sabet & Chapman, 2023). It also provides students a way to access high-quality education in internationally recognized institutions and acquire skills that may not be available in their home countries (King & Sondhi, 2018), helping them to better compete in the labor market (Findlay et al., 2017). However, these benefits do not mean that ERASMUS mobility is without its challenges. Students participating in ERASMUS mobility may encounter a range of difficulties that can influence their learning experiences, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, social integration issues, financial constraints, and bureaucratic challenges (Altıntaş & Sarıçoban, 2023; Kafarski & Kazak, 2022; Knight, 2015; López-Duarte et al., 2021; Perez-Encinas et al., 2017; Souto-Otero, 2013), which may affect both their academic performance and personal development.

A growing body of research has investigated the motivations behind students' decisions to participate in mobility programs, as well as the outcomes of these experiences. These motivations include academic benefits, professional development, cultural exploration, and social opportunities (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; King & Sondhi, 2018). Although economically developed countries attract more international students due to their central position in the global higher education system (Macrandar, 2017), the decision to study abroad is not straightforward; students' choices of host countries are shaped by multiple factors, including language, academic reputation, living costs, and cultural appeal (Sánchez et al., 2006). Recent findings have pinpointed particular secondary core centers that attract mobile students, including countries such as Italy, Spain, Austria, Czechia, Belgium, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, Sweden, and Finland (Kondakci et al., 2018). Among these, Czechia has emerged as a popular destination for ERASMUS participants, receiving over €34 million in higher education funding and hosting 34,677 participants in 2023, marking an increase for the third consecutive year (European Commission, 2024b). However, despite this growing popularity, there is still limited understanding of why students choose Czechia over other European destinations and how they perceive their academic and personal experiences during their stay (Kafarski & Kazak, 2022; Restaino et al., 2020). This study explores Erasmus students' motivations to participating in the program and their experiences in Czechia, which has become a notable destination within the Erasmus program due to its prestigious higher education institutions, rich socio-cultural atmosphere, and central European location (European Commission, 2023b). To address this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the motivations of students for participating in the ERASMUS program?
- Why do students choose Czechia as their ERASMUS mobility destination?
- What benefits do Erasmus students gain during their ERASMUS mobility?
- What challenges do Erasmus students encounter during their ERASMUS mobility?

Method

Research Design

This study aims to uncover students' motivations for participating in the ERASMUS program, their reasons for choosing a particular location, the benefits and challenges they encounter, and how they interpret these experiences. Thus the study was conducted using a case study design, employing a qualitative and descriptive approach to explore the experiences of students participating in ERASMUS mobility. A case study design is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena in depth and understanding participants' perspectives and interpretations within a specific setting (Creswell, 2013). This approach allows for a rich and holistic understanding of the ERASMUS mobility experience in the Czech context, capturing participants' meanings and reflections in their own words.

Study Group

The study group consisted of 12 ERASMUS exchange students from diverse academic disciplines in Czechia in the academic year 2023–2024. The individual student constituted the main unit of analysis to identify similarities and differences in their motivations and experiences during the mobility, as individual perceptions and experiences can differ significantly among individuals. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into their ERASMUS experiences (Patton, 2015). Within this approach, maximum variation sampling was used to ensure diversity in nationality, level of study, and field of study (Creswell, 2013). This diverse participant profile provided a broad perspective on motivations to participating in the program, as well as benefits and challenges experienced.

In addition, criterion sampling was utilized as participants were selected based on specific predefined criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015), which was being undergraduate or graduate students participating in the ERASMUS exchange program for the first time as short-term students in the Czechia. Long-term international students residing in the country and those who had participated in the program more than once were excluded to focus on the perspectives of first-time, short-term mobility students rather than long-term international students.

Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants, ERASMUS exchange students from various countries and disciplines studying at the same university as the researcher were contacted and informed about the study's purpose, emphasizing voluntary participation and explaining that interviews would be conducted in English face to face with audio recording for transcription purposes.

A total of 20 students were invited to participate, of whom 12 consented. Detailed demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of The Participants*

Participant	Gender	Home country	Level of study	Field
Participant 1	Male	Spain	Master's	Computer sciences
Participant 2	Female	Poland	Doctorate	English literature
Participant 3	Female	Portugal	Undergraduate	Psychology
Participant 4	Female	Portugal	Undergraduate	Social studies
Participant 5	Female	Türkiye	Undergraduate	Philosophy
Participant 6	Male	Türkiye	Doctorate	Sociology
Participant 7	Female	Germany	Master's	Social policies
Participant 8	Male	Mexico	Undergraduate	Teaching
Participant 9	Female	Mexico	Undergraduate	International relations
Participant 10	Female	Sweden	Undergraduate	Teaching
Participant 11	Female	Lithuania	Undergraduate	Teaching
Participant 12	Female	Lithuania	Undergraduate	Computer sciences

As seen in Table 1, nine of the participants were female and three were male, representing Germany, Lithuania, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Türkiye. Among the participants, eight were

undergraduate students, two were Master's students, and two were doctoral students in their home universities.

Data Collection and Interview Process

In this study, a semi-structured in-depth interview form was used as the data collection instrument since semi-structured interviews allow participants to elaborate on their perspectives while enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions when necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the data (Creswell, 2013).

The interview form was designed to explore ERASMUS exchange students' perceptions of the motivations for, benefits, and challenges of the mobility. It was developed based on a comprehensive literature review and was reviewed by a subject matter experts and a qualitative research specialist to ensure content validity. The final version included five open-ended questions, which were categorized under the following main themes: perceived motivations for participating in the ERASMUS program, perceived benefits of the program, and perceived challenges of the program. To explore students' motivations, participants were asked: *"What factors motivated you to participate in the ERASMUS program?"* and *"What factors motivated you to choose your ERASMUS mobility location?"*. Regarding the perceived benefits of the program, participants were asked: *"In what ways do you feel that the ERASMUS experience contributed to your personal and socio-cultural development?"* and *"In what ways do you feel that the ERASMUS experience contributed to your academic and professional development?"*. Finally, to understand the challenges faced during mobility, participants were asked: *"What challenges or difficulties did you encounter during your ERASMUS experience?"* During the interviews, the researcher employed follow-up questions when necessary to clarify and expand upon the participants' responses.

The interviews were conducted at the end of the mobility period of the participants and were carried out following ethical and confidentiality guidelines. All interviews were conducted face to face and in English. Participants were encouraged to express themselves comfortably. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were audio recorded. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all interview recordings were anonymized, with names and personal information coded and securely stored. The transcriptions were saved on a secure server, and all recordings were permanently deleted after the completion of the study. Participants had the right to request the termination of the recording at any point during the interview.

Data Analysis

To examine the data, descriptive and content analyses were used. Initially, a framework for analysis was developed through descriptive analysis based on the study's conceptual framework and research questions, allowing the data to be systematically organized and presented clearly (Patton, 2015). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis with an inductive approach, which involved familiarization with the data, coding, searching for initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program. Following this, content analysis was conducted, and emerging codes were examined to identify categories. Categories with meaningful relationships were grouped to form overarching themes, through which the findings were interpreted. To accurately and vividly reflect participants' perspectives, direct quotations representing their views were included throughout the analysis.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies recommended in qualitative case study research were applied. The themes and codes were cross-checked with an expert in educational management to enhance accuracy and interpretation (Yin, 2018). In addition, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review and confirm their responses, helping validate the findings and reduce researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2013). Additionally, direct quotations from participants were incorporated throughout the analysis to authentically reflect their perspectives and provide transparency (Creswell, 2013). These strategies together strengthened the validity and reliability of the study.

Ethical Procedures

The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical approval granted from the home university of the researcher (E-10593708-050.04-14608). All participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process, and participants were given the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

Results

In light of the research questions, the findings were categorized into three sections, namely the motives to participate in ERASMUS, reasons to choose Czechia, and the benefits and challenges of the mobility as seen in Figure 1:

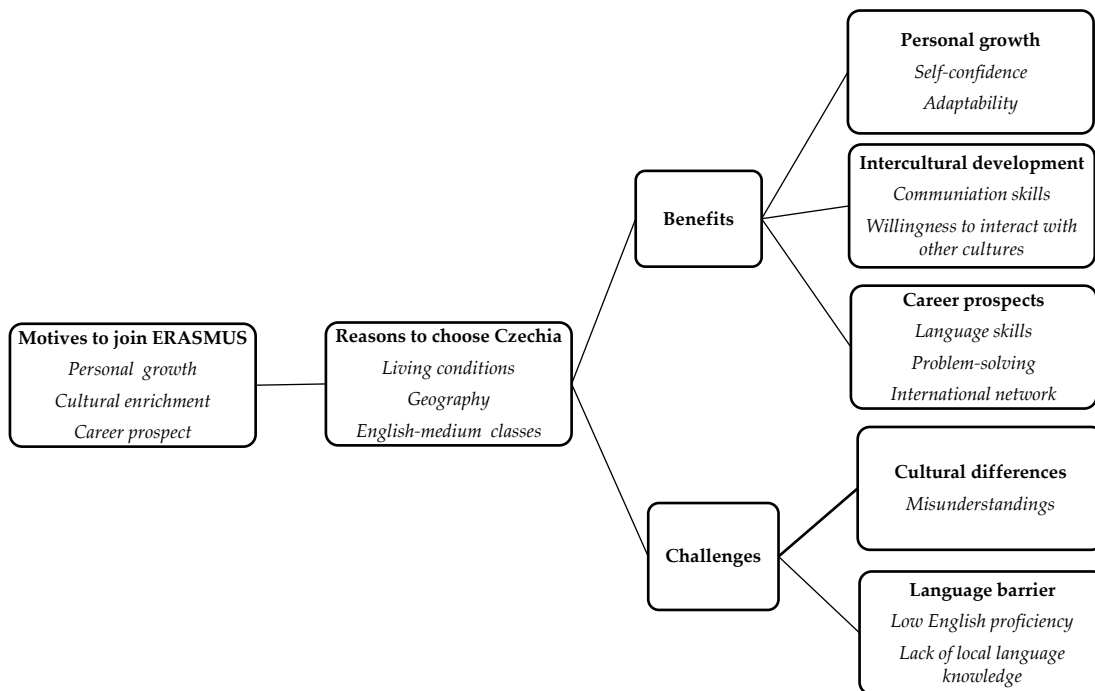


Figure 1. Emerged themes regarding the conceptual framework

Motives to Participate in ERASMUS Mobility

The first sub-objective of the study was to unfold the motives for participating in ERASMUS mobility. The study findings indicated that students expected growth across multiple dimensions prior to their mobility. They anticipated that the mobility experience would offer personal enrichment, exposure to new cultures, and opportunities to advance their future careers, which appeared to strongly shape their decision to participate in the program. Regarding personal enrichment, participants expected that being away from their home country, in other words stepping out of their comfort zone, would provide them with opportunities to manage challenges independently. They assumed that navigating unfamiliar situations would foster their self-confidence and problem solving skills, as well as exposing them to new perspectives, which in turn would contribute their personal growth as stated below:

"Because I cannot learn how to be a global citizen just as traveling countries on holiday. Here, you get to know a country, education system, and the daily problems, so you learn to be global individual... You learn how to survive in a completely different system when you actually live in that system. So I just wanted to take this opportunity for my life." (Participant 2, Poland)

"You know even you're not living with your family; you know that they can come immediately if you need them. So you continue to depend on them. But when you're away, I mean when you're in a different country, you're on your own. They cannot just show up, it's a four-hour flight here. That's why I always wanted to live beyond my comfort zone and ERASMUS helped me for it. In a country

where I cannot speak the language and in a culture was just pushing my limits.” (Participant 3, Portugal)

In addition, participants expressed that cultural exploration was another key motivator for joining the ERASMUS program. They anticipated that immersing themselves in a new cultural environment and interacting closely with people from diverse backgrounds would enhance their cultural awareness and understanding. The findings revealed that participants, particularly those who faced travel difficulties due to visa restrictions (e.g. Turkish participants) or financial constraints, as well as students whose university education had partially continued online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, viewed ERASMUS mobility as an opportunity not only to overcome these challenges but also to foster personal growth. They perceived university education as a process to contribute to their cultural enrichment as well as their academic development, so they anticipated that engaging directly with a culturally different environment would broaden their perspectives and enhance their cultural competence, as stated below:

“I always wanted to live in Europe. Turkey is not EU member and our culture is different from Europeans so I always wanted to live in Europe and when I had the chance, I just got it. I knew that this five-month-period would help me travel, learn, and change.” (Participant 5, Türkiye)

“I live in a very close country but I know that the life here and there is pretty different. I’ve heard about the life in Czechia from my friends having studied here before and I also wanted to experience the culture here.” (Participant 7, Germany)

“It’s not always easy for me to travel different countries because my family is not very rich. I just thought why not go to Czechia for one term and enjoy travelling countries nearby with ERASMUS grant. So I’m here.” (Participant 11, Lithuania)

“I was a student at university during Covid-19 pandemic so I was locked at home for more than 1 year. But I hoped to socialize as much as getting knowledge during my university years. I am a last year student and wanted to come here and benefit from the social and cultural advantages before I end up in working.” (Participant 3, Portugal)

The last motivation participants highlighted for joining the ERASMUS program was the anticipation of enhanced career and academic opportunities. They perceived the mobility as an opportunity to access diverse academic environment, develop their foreign language proficiency, and gain broader perspectives through close interaction with different academic and social practices. They also assumed that exposure to different educational systems, teaching methods, and cultural approaches would prepare them for future professional challenges as well as providing them certain career-related advantages. Particularly students aiming to work in international companies and those hoping to pursue career abroad expected to benefit from this period of study abroad, as stated below:

“For a better job for sure. In my country if you have spent some time abroad, you’re one step ahead. That’s why I just wanted to give it a shot.” (Participant 1, Spain)

“I believe I can learn new ideas and improve my perspective when I communicate students from other countries. I’m sure it will help me in my job search when I go back.” (Participant 5, Türkiye)

“For my Master’s studies, I though seeing another educational culture and meeting scholars and students from different background would be helpful. So I’m here.” (Participant 7, Germany)

“I want to work in an international corporation and having the experience in a different country attracts these corporations, I suppose. So I wanted to use this experience as an advantage on my CV.” (Participant 8, Mexico)

“I already know 3 languages and I believe studying in a European country will help me to find a job in Europe after graduation... I want to work in Europe after university, and I thought this mobility could help me meet some people or contact some companies when I was here. You know it’s always easier to reach someone when you’re available for a meeting with short notice.” (Participant 9, Mexico)

Reasons to Choose Czechia For ERASMUS Mobility

The second sub-objective of this study was to reveal the factors motivating students to choose a particular location, Czechia, for ERASMUS mobility. The findings of the study affirmed that living conditions, the location of the country, and the availability of English-medium-instruction were the primary reasons motivating students to choose Czechia over other countries for their semester abroad. Regarding living conditions of Czechia, participants highlighted factors such as safety, economic affordability, and a culturally rich environment were influential in their decision-making. Particularly female students indicated safety as the major consideration while deciding on their mobility location as they wanted to feel safe while traveling

and living alone in a foreign environment. They stated that their perception of Czechia as a safe destination was shaped by former ERASMUS students' posts on social media and online forums, as well as by the experiences of their own friends who had previously lived in the country. Economic affordability was another decisive factor. Students viewed Czechia as a country with low cost of living compared to other European destinations (e.g. the Netherlands, Austria), which they believed would allow them to spend their budget more comfortably. This affordability was especially meaningful for students from less privileged economic backgrounds, as it enabled them to actively participate in social life, cultural events, and travel without economic pressure. Finally, participants viewed Czechia as a country offering a rich social and cultural life, an expectation shaped by the impressions they gathered online and from former ERASMUS students who had previously lived there. They anticipated that the abundance of festivals, artistic events, and opportunities for everyday intercultural encounters would allow them to engage actively with local traditions and communities, which in turn would contribute to their cultural improvement in addition to their personal and academic growth. Consequently, all these factors related to the living conditions in Czechia allowed them to envision a mobility period that would be enriching and sustainable, as stated below:

"It's a safe city actually. I've never felt in danger here in any time of the day even at nights when I was in public transportation. But in Rome for instance even my Italian friend asked me not to take the metro as it was not totally safe at night. But here it's really safe." (Participant 2, Poland)

"Definitely security was important for me. As a girl who would be living abroad for the first time I checked which countries were more friendly towards foreigners, and Czechia was one the safest countries on the list." (Participant 5, Türkiye)

"It's cheaper compared to other countries. I had the chance to go the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain too. But I wanted to live financially comfortable 5 months so I came here." (Participant 3, Portugal)

"Well I don't come from a rich family, so it's always hard for me to spend some money on cultural events or travel. Here the cost of living is pretty cheap, so I could spare a good amount of my grant to socialize and travel. Actually almost every week I go some other countries and it feels great." (Participant 7, Germany)

"As I said I wanted to learn different cultures in abroad and Czechia has many cultural events, festivals, etc. so I came here. Every day I join different events and visit various places, it's really great to meet all those people and learn their life... Even I realized when I read the forums before coming here that Czechia had a rich cultural life with all those festivals, art displays, concerts, and so on, I was amazed when I joined them. I attended an event 2 weeks ago, for instance, it was incredible. There were musicians from 10 different countries and thousands of people, locals, university students, etc. I loved it. It was a great experience for me as a sociology student." (Participant 6, Türkiye)

"I think semester abroad is a period to improve yourself culturally more than academically. That's why I checked countries with rich cultural life. I wanted to go to Austria but it was far more expensive for me but when I searched the social media and blogs, I saw that there were great events here in Czechia, too. Then I decided to come here, to have fun." (Participant 11, Lithuania)

The second motivating factor that participants considered while selecting the country for their ERASMUS mobility was identified as the geographic location of the country. They perceived the short term international mobility as a period to travel different places. Students, particularly those from countries outside the European Union and those living in geographically distant areas even within EU member states, preferred Czechia due to its central location in Europe and easy access to other destinations. In other words, the ability to easily explore different cultural contexts in varied locations was closely tied to their vision of ERASMUS as a transformative experience, extending the university setting beyond to foster a sense of belonging to a broader European community. As a result, they stated having considered spending their semester abroad in a country that made it easier to travel and to engage in such explorations was an important motivator to choose Czechia, as stated below:

"The opportunity to travel more was the main reason actually. Czechia is just in the center of Europe and you can go wherever you want in few hours. As I wanted to visit some different countries during ERASMUS, so I came here. It's perfect." (Participant 4, Portugal)

"It's literally in the middle of Europe. You can go anywhere here, even by bus or the train. So I just came here so I can easily travel to Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and so on." (Participant 5, Türkiye)

"It was actually geography that attracted me the most. It's close everywhere so I can easily travel Europe. And the mountains, caves, nature, and that awesome architecture ... all were really appealing to me." (Participant 8, Mexico)

"The location of the country was also important for me because I'm from Mexico, you know. It's not easy to travel to Europe. It takes

a lot of time and financial effort. So I said to myself, if you're going to stay in Europe for a while, please make it not one country but the whole region. And I'm happy for this idea, I've already been to seven or eight different places, and more are on the way." (Participant 9, Mexico)

The last key factor shaping students' choice of Czechia as their mobility destination was the availability of a wide range of courses taught in English and accessible information in English on the university websites. Taking English-medium courses was not only an essential prerequisite for ERASMUS students, particularly those with limited proficiency in other European languages to achieve academic success and actively engage in their host institutions, but it was also a significant source of motivation. Students considered studying in English as an opportunity to strengthen their language proficiency, a skill they believed would contribute to their future academic and career pursuits. Consequently, some participants explained that although they were also interested in other nearby countries such as Germany, Austria, or Italy, they felt discouraged by the academic settings in these countries because most universities there required proficiency in the formal language of the country, which they did not possess. Czechia, by contrast, offered them the assurance of following their studies in English. In addition to language of instruction, the accessibility of information during the application process itself also played a significant role while choosing their mobility location. Several students noted that Czech universities' websites were comparatively more user-friendly in English, which made navigating the system and completing the necessary procedures much easier. One participant even contrasted this with the attempt to apply to a Polish institution, explaining that the limited English-language support on the website created a barrier to accessing necessary information easily, as stated below:

"I had other choices, but most of the courses were not in English there, but here there were many course options in English so I preferred to come to Czechia and continue my subject specific courses as well." (Participant 1, Spain)

"Because of English courses actually. I could go to Italy or Germany as well. But they ask language proficiency in their language, so I came to Czechia as there are many courses in English." (Participant 5, Türkiye)

"The number of courses in English is very high here. In some universities, there are fewer department-specific courses. I study high school teaching in Sweden and want to take courses directly related to my major and could find many courses that would contribute my academic progress here." (Participant 10, Sweden)

"I was planning to go to France at first, but it was really hard to find information you need without French knowledge and I gave up." (Participant 4, Portugal)

"I could go some other states like Poland but it was really hard to navigate on their websites. I also checked universities in Poland for example, but most of the courses were in Polish. Even there were English ones, and I couldn't understand some details so I preferred the country with more English courses and better information on the website." (Participant 8, Mexico).

Benefits of Participating in ERASMUS Mobility

The third sub-objective of the study was to reveal the benefits of ERASMUS mobility. Regarding this, the first benefit of ERASMUS mobility was identified as personal growth in terms of self-confidence and adaptability. Participants emphasized that leaving the familiar environment of their home country and stepping outside their comfort zone required them to navigate new challenges independently, which strengthened their confidence in managing unfamiliar situations. Furthermore, they highlighted that having continuous interaction with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds was perceived as a transformative experience that broadened their worldviews and encouraged them to critically reflect on their own cultural identity. This exposure not only enabled them to appreciate and embrace alternative perspectives but also fostered their adaptability in cross-cultural contexts, as stated below:

"I should definitely say the biggest benefit for me was the opportunity to teach in some courses. I am a doctoral student and I need to do presentations, lead discussions, I mean I should be able to give a lecture. And I got this chance during my semester here. One of the professors let me lead some of the lectures, the ones I was interested in, and it really helped my self-confidence. I just realized that yes girl, you can be a lecturer. It's amazing." (Participant 2, Poland)

"I come from a country where there are people from very different countries, like those from America, other parts of Europe, Asia, Middle East, etc., but I never lived that close to those people actually. I was familiar with them outside, like streets, markets, etc. But here I shared a room with them, I shared the bathrooms, and the kitchens. I am now more aware that these differences are richness. It was weird when I saw a group of people cook interesting stuff in the kitchen. But now they offer me some and I taste and even eat them with my bare hands. It's amazing to learn different cultures closely." (Participant 3, Portugal)

"I've studied in my hometown and lived with my parents, so I always get help from them if I need. But when here, I realized I was

alone. If I need something, I need to solve it. I become a real adult here.” (Participant 4, Portugal)

“I had a stereotypical idea on how certain people behave. But here I’ve realized this is not the case at all. You know actually all are very similar and also very different. I’ve met many people from different backgrounds, I know people from Germany, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, France, Spain, and so on. It’s really great to talk to them, learn from them, understand their ideas. It’s awesome, especially for a philosophy student like me.” (Participant 5, Türkiye)

“I remember when I first came here, I went out for a while, but I was a bit stressed and afraid to get lost, so could only go to an area of 500 meters because I was afraid. In time it became 1 kilometer, then 2 kilometers. After a week or two, I could really feel comfortable getting around. I realized how I started to believe I can navigate and sort out my problems in a foreign place. I began to believe in myself more. I believed because I saw that I could speak more easily and confidently. At first, I was afraid to ask even where the bus stop was. Of course I knew English but I was not very used to speak in English. I was afraid to ask or say something. In the first classes for example, I didn’t say anything. Actually I knew the topic and the answer for the questions because I also took some master’s level courses and I had already taken them in Turkey, but I was really shy, even scared of talking.” (Participant 6, Türkiye)

“You know I’ve grown up in a different country. At home when I need something, my parents just sort it out. But here you’re alone and learn how to deal with your issues. It was hard at the beginning in fact, I even asked for help from the consultant to feel myself okay but now I know I am strong enough to be able to live in a different, a foreign place” (Participant 8, Mexico)

Another important benefit of ERASMUS mobility was the development of intercultural competence, particularly regarding communication skills and openness to engaging with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Participants emphasized that sharing daily life with peers from different national and cultural contexts required them not only to recognize and respect perspectives distinct from their own but also to value these differences as part of the richness of global diversity. Through continuous interaction, they gradually became more attentive to culturally appropriate forms of communication. For instance, they became more aware of what might be appropriate or inappropriate to say or do in various contexts. They highlighted that this process of awareness about the meaning across cultural boundaries enhanced their sensitivity in communication and fostered a greater willingness to initiate and sustain intercultural interactions, as stated below:

“It’s the same thing again that I said before. I learned to communicate with people from different countries and cultures without prejudice. As I said, at first it was weird when I saw a group of people cook interesting stuff and eat with bare hands. I was just like ‘what?’. But after a while, they offered me some food, explained they eat some traditional foods in specific ways, etc. So I was like, ‘yes it’s their culture.’ I mean I even enjoyed the food they offered. It’s something important.” (Participant 3, Portugal)

“Culturally it’s been an amazing semester. It’s almost the end of the semester now and I’ve joined almost all those international day events. I learned the food, music, clothes, etc. of people from different places. I’ve tried Chinese food, Spanish dances, etc. It’s really great, you know. It’s kind of a world tour in the same place.” (Participant 6, Türkiye)

“You know every week we have an international day event at the university. Students from different countries prepare the food, music and dances of their countries. We all learn that culture. It’s an event that I cannot see in Mexico easily. I liked it. I learnt Turkish dances, Chinese dishes, and so on.” (Participant 9, Mexico)

The final benefit of ERASMUS mobility was identified on career prospects, particularly through the improvement of language proficiency, problem-solving abilities, and the expansion of international networks. Participants highlighted that engaging in academic study and daily life in a foreign language setting significantly contributed to their linguistic competence, which they regarded as a crucial asset for their professional life after graduation. They also viewed the ability to communicate effectively in culturally-various settings as essential for integration into international work communities, where collaboration depends on both technical expertise and intercultural sensitivity, as stated below:

“Since I came here, my English has improved and I think it’s important for my career as well. I was not very confident when I first arrived here even though I knew English. But now, I can easily and confidently explain myself both in classes and in social life. This five-month-period really helped me practice speaking English.” (Participant 4, Portugal)

“I have met many people from different countries like Finland, Germany, Spain etc. and I not only started to speak more fluently but also feel more relaxed while talking to them. I think it is great for my career when I go back to Turkey.” (Participant 5, Türkiye)

“I already knew English and French before I came here, but I had the chance to use these languages in both academic and general situations more. Now I hope to continue my Master’s here in Europe.” (Participant 9, Mexico)

In addition to language development benefits, participants emphasized that managing unfamiliar situations during their mobility strengthened broader competencies such as problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability. They stated that they had to deal with many unexpected challenges, such as navigating

bureaucratic procedures, adapting to a new lifestyle, and handling interpersonal and cultural misunderstandings, all of which required them to think creatively, change strategies when needed, and find immediate solutions. Participants interpreted all these experiences as opportunities to improve the skills that are highly valued in dynamic professional settings, as stated below:

"I just realized that work atmosphere and communication among academics are actually different here from where I came from. People are more friendly back in Portugal but here I realized I need to be more serious and calm if I want to work in Central Europe." (Participant 4, Portugal)

"Being away from your own country, your comfort zone helps you to learn how to solve your own problems. I am here with many other international students, and I learn new ideas to deal with a problem here." (Participant 6, Türkiye)

"I can take courses in different faculties as an ERASMUS student here and I think it's a great advantage for me, I prepare myself better for work life after graduation. I told you before, I learned to survive on my own here because I dealt with many problems, changing from swapping my room with another one to get a transportation pass without knowing Czech language. Yes they helped me personally, but I think they also helped me professionally. You know all these surviving skills are good to learn for your future." (Participant 11, Lithuania)

Furthermore, participants emphasized that ERASMUS mobility offered more than temporary social interactions; it provided an entry point into building future international networks that could extend well beyond the duration of their mobility. Participants highlighted that they had the opportunity to connect and meet peers and professors from a broad range of backgrounds during their mobility, and interpreted these networks as potential bridges to postgraduate study opportunities, international internships, or career pathways in international settings, as stated below:

"Through one of my peers, I met a guy in a company here. He actually helped me find a part-time job in a tech company. It's really great for me because I knew before I came here that technology companies were good here in Czechia. I'm really happy to be able to contact them in a way and hope to find a permanent job here after the mobility." (Participant 1, Spain)

"It's always better to study and live abroad for your career. That's why I'm here. Actually, I've contacted some companies and hope to be able to get some contact before I leave." (Participant 2, Poland)

"One of the professors has mentioned about a project they will start next year, and he suggested me to apply for it. I really hope to join this project next year. I'm planning to extend my period actually if I can find a part-time job here. I think it is good for me because I will work with an international group before I complete my PhD." (Participant 6, Türkiye).

"I had the chance to take a practical teaching course here and I really appreciate it. I gave English and Spanish lessons in an elementary school for this course and met three different teachers of English language and had the chance to experience teaching Czech students. I think it's a great opportunity because I know about the teaching career here and have certain contacts if I want to do something after graduation here in Czechia." (Participant 8, Mexico)

Challenges of Participating in ERASMUS Mobility

The final sub-objective of the study was to examine the challenges ERASMUS students encountered during their mobility. Participants highlighted that the difficulties of navigating cultural and linguistic differences, which contributed to their intercultural competence development in the long run, were considered as particularly demanding during the initial stages of mobility. They emphasized that especially outside the academic environment, adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms posed significant obstacles. Particularly, students from Poland, Portugal, and Türkiye emphasized that social behavior and communication styles in Czechia were more formal and rigid compared to their home cultures. As a result, they found it difficult to adapt to these aspects during their relatively short stay. Moreover, all students reported that everyday interactions, such as navigating social expectations or interpreting nonverbal cues often became sources of uncertainty, which showed how cultural differences could initially lead to feeling of isolation and challenge despite being enriching in the long term, as stated below:

"I come from Portugal and we are more relaxed I suppose, both in our daily life and in our studies. You know, we have a vivid life. But here everything and everyone looks more serious. I don't mean it's disturbing, of course, but it seems a bit different for me." (Participant 4, Portugal)

"I really like Czech people, they are helpful actually. But when I first came, I was a little surprised because they were pretty serious and cold. Well I'm from Türkiye and we have a friendly attitude when we first meet, so it took me a while to get used to their style." (Participant 6, Türkiye)

"It was really difficult to understand the cultural norms at the beginning. You don't know the language, you don't understand the

body language, I mean it may be different from your own, so it was hard to understand what was happening around me at first."
(Participant, 11, Lithuania)

Additionally, language barrier emerged as a significant challenge at the initial period of their mobility, particularly for participants with limited English proficiency. In the early phase of their mobility, engaging with academic content in English resulted in difficulties, complicating the transition to a new educational environment. However, as their mobility progressed, participants reported noticeable improvements in their English language skills, which facilitated greater academic confidence and participation. On the other hand, not speaking the local language, Czech, remained a consistent barrier outside the university setting throughout their stay. This limitation affected not only practical aspects of daily life, such as navigating routine actions and services but also hindered deeper cultural integration, as participants sometimes felt excluded from fully engaging with local communities and social networks, as stated below:

"You know, the language. At university, everything is okay but when you're in a market or so on, it's hard to communicate. Especially the elderly workers, they don't understand English, so it's a bit difficult when you are alone or have no internet connection."
(Participant 1, Spain).

"When I first arrived, for instance, I needed to change my room but it took 3 days to complete it because I don't know Czech and the person in charge doesn't know English, so I had to wait a friend to translate for me." (Participant 2 Poland)

"In the first classes for example, I didn't say anything. Actually I knew the topic and the answer for the questions because I also took some master's level courses and I had already taken them in Turkey, but I was really shy, even scared of talking." (Participant 6, Türkiye)

Finally, participants highlighted challenges related to practical arrangements, both prior to departure and during the initial phase of their mobility experience. Securing accommodation was noted as particularly difficult, as rental flats were often unaffordable in relation to the ERASMUS grant, and the limited number of dormitory places, especially for those beginning their mobility in the spring semester created further obstacles. In addition, students from outside the European Union, such as those from Türkiye and Mexico, highlighted that dealing with bureaucratic requirements, including visa procedures and health insurance arrangements, posed considerable stress prior to their mobility, as stated below:

"I was planning to rent a flat for my stay here but I couldn't do it at the very first because the rental houses were very expensive for me to pay. So I had to stay in the dorm, but you know I'm a master's student and of course most of the students are in the undergraduate level at the dorm, so they are a bit younger, I was not very happy with it. Fortunately, I could find a flat mate when the courses began and left the dorm quickly in a few weeks." (Participant 1, Spain)

"Of course one of the biggest hardship before I came here was getting the visa. Türkiye is not in the European Union, so I had to get a national visa to study here. I applied for the visa in October, but I couldn't learn the result of the application until the beginning of February. Actually, I began to think that I would not be able to come because the courses would start on February 14 in my faculty and I got my visa on February 5. So it was really stressful, both waiting for the result and arranging everything very quickly when I got the visa." (Participant 6, Türkiye)

Conclusion and Discussion

This study investigated the experiences of ERASMUS exchange students in Czechia, focusing on their motivations for participating in the mobility program, the factors influencing their choice of destination, and the benefits and challenges they perceived during their mobility. By addressing these dimensions, the research aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how international exchange programs influence students' personal, cultural, and career development while also highlighting the specific advantages and limitations of ERASMUS mobility and Czechia as a host destination.

The study findings indicated that students' primary motivation for participating in the ERASMUS mobility program was personal and professional development, which aligned with previous research (Asoodar et al., 2017; Hadis, 2005; Lesjak et al., 2015; Souto-Otero, 2008). Participants reported that their motivation to participate in ERASMUS mobility stemmed from the expectation that even a short period of study abroad would promote personal growth by pushing them beyond their comfort zones and requiring them to address social and academic challenges independently. They also anticipated that the experience would support their academic development and future career prospects through exposure to different educational and professional environments, and by enabling them to expand their international networks.

These expectations reflect the conclusions of prior studies that ERASMUS mobility provides certain personal, cultural, and professional development opportunities for participants (Krzaklewska, 2008; Pozniak et al., 2025; Waters et al., 2011). In addition, students were motivated to join ERASMUS in order to engage with diverse cultures and improve their cultural knowledge. They believed that such intercultural encounters would contribute not only to their personal enrichment but also to their ability to navigate and succeed in increasingly globalized academic and professional contexts, supporting the results of earlier studies (Keogh & Russel-Roberts, 2009; Sova, 2017). Building on this expectation, it could be interpreted that students viewed ERASMUS mobility as a means of strengthening their future academic and career prospects, reinforcing the idea that participation in such programs functions as a professional development strategy as well as a personal growth and cultural learning experience. These findings are consistent with the findings of Teichler and Janson (2007) and López-Duarte et al. (2021), who emphasized the career and intercultural competence benefits associated with ERASMUS mobility.

While the primary reasons for participating in ERASMUS mobility centered around the expectations of personal development, cultural enrichment, and career opportunities, their choice of Czechia as the mobility destination instead of other countries was identified as the favorable living conditions of the country, such as location, economy, and safety, as well as the availability of a wide range of English-medium courses. The affordable cost of life and safety were the main motives for students to choose the country for their ERASMUS mobility, highlighting how practical considerations strongly shape international study decisions. This preference reflects the pattern in which financial and personal security are pivotal when students evaluate potential destinations, suggesting that beyond academic or cultural factors, the perceived affordability and safety of a host country significantly influence mobility choices. Such findings echo earlier research indicating that pragmatic concerns including the financial situation of the host country are important for both short-term and long-term international mobility (Beerkens et al., 2016; Souto-Otero et al., 2019). The current study concluded that Czechia was appealing particularly to students from economically less strong countries, such as Türkiye and Mexico, which was consistent with the conclusion of Button et al. (2005) who expressed that students from developed countries choose other developed countries for their mobility, while it is not usually the case for students from developing countries because of the high cost of living in these places. The study findings also have affirmed that location of the country attract students to choose Czechia for their mobility because they intend to use their semester abroad not only for academic, professional, and cultural benefits but also for travel and exploration opportunities, which aligns with earlier studies (Teichler, 2004; Lesjak et al., 2015). This finding indicates that for many students, the value of mobility extends beyond learning, encompassing adventure and leisure motivations.

The findings of the study also revealed the benefits of ERASMUS mobility, including enhanced personal growth, strengthened intercultural competence, and career prospects for participants. To begin with, being away from their comfort zone and managing both social and academic challenges fostered students' personal development by reinforcing self-confidence, problem-solving skills, and adaptability to unfamiliar situations. These results are in line with the prior studies concluding that ERASMUS has an impact on students' knowledge and skill development (Amendola & Restaino, 2016; Asoodar et al., 2017; Nada & Legutka, 2022). The findings of this study also indicated that ERASMUS mobility contributed participants' intercultural competence through improving their awareness of and the ability to adapt to different cultures. They reported accessing the opportunity to learn and embrace ideas different from their own, which was consistent with prior studies (Lesjak et al., 2015; Sova, 2017). They also noted that their communication skills improved during their study period because they learned to become more adaptive and open minded towards different cultures. These results were in line with the earlier studies of intercultural competence component (Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 2012). Finally, the findings indicated that ERASMUS mobility contributed participants' career prospects improving language skills, fostering problem solving skills, and broadening their network. Participants expressed that their language proficiency improved through immersion in an academic and social environment where they had to use English actively. This finding is in line with the prior studies concluding that ERASMUS mobility contributes to participants' ability to communicate effectively in international contexts (Amendola & Restaino, 2016; Asoodar et al., 2017; Nada & Legutka, 2022). In addition, participants

highlighted that their problem solving skills developed since they had to navigate academic and social challenges independently, which could be valuable to strengthen their capacity to handle complex situations in their future professional settings (Jon et al., 2018; Potts, 2021). Students also emphasized that ERASMUS mobility offered a multicultural social environment and opportunities for them to build international networks, which in turn increased their interest in global issues and strengthened their willingness and confidence to pursue employment in international companies. This finding suggests that even a short term experience not only broadens participants' personal horizons but also reshapes their professional aspirations by positioning them to perceive themselves as competitive candidates in a global labor market. These findings are consistent with prior studies revealing that international mobility experience helps participants to establish more multicultural networks (Schoe et al., 2022) and enhances their chance to be recruited abroad or in international companies (López-Duarte et al., 2021; Pozniak et al., 2025).

Finally, the study results indicated that participants encountered various challenges, including language barriers and cultural differences during their stay, as well as bureaucratic and accommodation-related difficulties prior to or at the beginning of their mobility. Students indicated that they encountered challenges due to their limited English proficiency and lack of local language- particularly outside the academic context. They emphasized that not feeling confident while communicating in English in an academic environment especially in the early phase of the mobility complicated the transition to the new academic environment. This finding supports earlier studies concluding that that ERASMUS students especially studying in non-English-speaking countries face initial linguistic challenges affecting their academic and social interactions due to limited English proficiency or lack of knowledge of the local language although measurable linguistic improvements are observed eventually (Altıntaş & Sarıçoban, 2023; Llanes et al., 2016; Schoe et al., 2022). They also added that even though English often functioned as the lingua franca in the academic environment, such as campus and dorms, everyday interactions, including shopping, navigating public services, or forming friendships with local peers continued to be challenging throughout their mobility since they demanded at least a basic grasp of the host country's language. Without this, students often reported feelings of dependency, isolation, or exclusion from authentic cultural experiences. This echoes the findings of Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) and Shue et al. (2022), who noted that social distance because of the lack of language knowledge reduced the meaningful cultural integration of international students into the mobility location. Furthermore, students noted that linguistic challenges intensified further with cultural differences, particularly at the initial phase of the mobility. Certain behaviors considered polite or respectful in their home country were sometimes interpreted differently, creating misunderstandings or discomfort, and they had to adapt to unfamiliar social norms, academic practices, and interpersonal communication styles. These findings are in line with earlier studies revealing that differences in cultural norms and habits challenge international students and delay their social integration into the host country as they struggle to align their own cultural identities with the expectations of the host society (Kafarski & Kazak, 2022; Llurda et al., 2016; López-Duarte et al., 2021; Souto-Otero, 2013).

Recommendations

- Considering that students participate in the ERASMUS program not only for their personal and academic development but also to enhance cultural awareness and acquire intercultural competence, the mobility experience could be enriched through the workshops, courses, and extracurricular activities organized at the host institution to bring participants from different countries together.
- Considering that ERASMUS mobility is perceived as contributing to future career prospects, career support programs specifically designed for ERASMUS students could be organized at the end of their mobility period.
- Since travel opportunities are perceived as contributing to students' personal and cultural development, universities may collaborate with local businesses and other institutions to design travel plans within the mobility period, enabling students to explore the host country as well as neighboring countries more effectively.

- Given that one of the key factors influencing the choice of city or country for ERASMUS mobility is the cost of living, and that students from low-income families or countries tend to prefer destinations with lower costs, additional financial support beyond standard grants could be offered to economically disadvantaged students. Such measures may help prevent students from abandoning mobility opportunities in their desired destinations due to financial constraints.
- To mitigate the challenges often encountered at the beginning of the mobility period due to cultural differences, pre-departure preparatory programs similar to the orientation sessions provided at host universities could also be organized by home universities before departure.
- To address the difficulties arising from the lack of proficiency in the local language—particularly in non-academic settings—and to strengthen integration into the host culture, compulsory language courses related to the host country could be implemented. This would not only allow students to earn academic credits but also support their adaptation to daily life and minimize potential challenges.
- To reduce language barriers encountered in non-academic settings on campus (e.g., cafeterias, dormitories), universities could strengthen the recruitment of English-speaking staff across all relevant units to better support international students.

Implications and Limitations of The Study

It should be noted that the findings discussed in the study are applicable merely to incoming students who joined short-term ERASMUS mobility for the first time in a particular city in Czechia. Therefore, it could be inferred that the outcomes of research conducted on long-term students, ERASMUS participants with previous mobility experience, or those attending in a different city might vary. Despite the limitations, it is believed that these findings may reveal students' motives to join the program, reasons to choose a particular location for short-term ERASMUS mobility, and the benefits and challenges of their ERASMUS mobility experience.

Declarations

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