

“They Just Signed and Stamped Papers”: Understanding the Erasmus Student Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Erasmus mobility has become an important feature of higher education in Europe and beyond, with the potential to generate significant changes at individual, institutional and systemic levels. More than three decades after the foundation of this successful program, evaluations reveal that, despite notable progress, several aspects of the Erasmus student experience can be further improved. Based on the lived experiences of Erasmus alumni, in this article, we explore recurrent challenges that emerge in educational mobility and how they could be better addressed. Three key dimensions are identified in the qualitative accounts of former Erasmus students and analyzed in light of previous research: mobility preparation, institutional support for integration, and recognition of study abroad.

Keywords: student mobility, Erasmus, mobility preparation, institutional support, higher education

Globalization, international mobility, digitalization, and demographic change have radically altered the face of higher education (HE) in recent decades. For Europe, the Erasmus program, with its promotion of cross-border mobility among HE students and staff, has contributed much to this change and can be seen globally as championing the internationalization of HE as a strategic and multilateral project. Named after the eminent

Flemish Renaissance humanist, Erasmus promotes European “values” in a wider sociopolitical process of Europeanisation (Carlson et al., 2018) while seeking to equip European citizens with the skills required to increase their employability and thus contribute to Europe’s economic growth (European Commission, 2014).

Launched in 1987 by the European Commission as an exchange program for tertiary education students, the Erasmus program started with a cooperation scheme of 11 European countries and accounted for 3200 student participants in its first year. Its growth during the last three decades has been remarkable, and Erasmus is now considered the European Union’s flagship mobility scheme (Mizikaci & Arslan, 2019). According to the European Commission (2015), by the end of the academic year 2013-2014, Erasmus had supported 3.3 million students since its launch. In 2014, following its continued success, the structure of Erasmus was reconfigured, and it became Erasmus+, a wider program that encourages the mobility of other groups beyond HE students. In three decades of Erasmus+ and its predecessor programs, 12.5 million people made use of the opportunity to study, train, volunteer or gain professional experience abroad (European Commission, 2022).

Despite the obvious success and expansion of the program, evaluations reveal that further developments are necessary, especially in terms of rendering the program more inclusive (Bunescu et al., 2020) and increasing participation of so-called “hard-to-reach groups” (European Commission, 2018a). Regarding the Erasmus student experience, which is the focus of this article, previous evaluations have revealed several areas in need of improvement, especially in terms of mobility preparation (Teichler, 1996) or academic recognition (European Commission, 1997). In a recent report, the European Commission (2019b) observed that even though significant improvements are registered with each new Erasmus evaluation study, some challenges persist and remain difficult to address. More than three decades after the launch of this program, this article seeks to discuss the challenges that Erasmus students continue to face regarding international mobility and how their study abroad experience could be further improved.

Problematising the International Student Experience

Study abroad has been associated with numerous benefits, including enhanced learning (Fang et al., 2016), an opportunity for questioning one’s identity and taken-for-granted assumptions (Osborne, 2012), and exposure to alternative ways of thinking (Chao et al., 2015). The findings of previous studies compiled by Beerkens et al. (2016) reveal that study abroad experiences enhance “cross-cultural proficiency and sensitivity, openness to diversity, as well as interest, understanding, and engagement in global affairs” (p. 185). To this end, the Erasmus program plays a vital role in achieving wider EU objectives linked to the promotion of “European identity” by means of education and culture (European Commission, 2018b). In addition, Erasmus has been associated with the formation of active citizens engaged with global issues such as sustainable development, human rights, and appreciation of cultural diversity (Council of the European Union, 2018a). However, a study by Golubeva et al. (2018) found that while Erasmus students recognize the values of freedom, democracy, equality and cultural diversity built into the overall aims of the program, they considered “active citizenship” and contributing to “civic growth” to be the least important gains of their Erasmus mobility experience. This study is but one example showing that anticipated formative learning outcomes associated with international

mobility do not automatically translate into the ways in which students actually experience their sojourns (Otten, 2003).

While “international student experience” remains a complex and largely undertheorized notion, it is important to clarify its meaning in this paper. The experience of international students is usually understood along the dichotomy of academic/nonacademic experience (Qadeer et al., 2021). Regarding the academic dimension, research has primarily focused on international students’ adjustment to a different academic environment and the corresponding “learning shock” (Gu, 2005). The academic experience of international students is often presented as similar to that of other higher education students, albeit with “added stressors of second language anxiety and adapting to a new educational environment” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 702). The experience of students inside the campus/classroom is often analyzed in terms of teaching and learning practices (Carroll & Ryan, 2007), clashes between different academic cultures (Parnter, 2022), or institutional preparedness to address cultural diversity (Nada & Araújo, 2019).

With increasing awareness that “learning takes place in contexts beyond the classroom and beyond university walls” (Montgomery, 2009, p. xiii), research has also documented the learning experiences of international students in nonacademic contexts (Nada et al., 2018, Nada & Legutko, 2022). However, the nonacademic aspect of the international student experience is often conceptualized around the difficulties of living and studying in a foreign country, such as “culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to unfamiliar social norms, eating habits, customs and values (...), isolation and loneliness, homesickness, and a loss of established social networks” (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002, p. 363). Much of this research tends to replicate already deep-seated “deficit” approaches toward international students (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), either viewing them as “culprits” who fail to adapt to their host environment (Taylor & Ali, 2017) or as “fragile entities who are in constant need of support” (Nada & Araújo, 2019, p. 1601). While it is important to go beyond such reductive and contradicting views of international students and recognize their agency in shaping the mobility experience, it is also fundamental to consider the institutional and political conditions in which Erasmus exchanges take place. For this reason, the current paper will primarily focus on the academic aspect and, more specifically, on three key dimensions of the Erasmus student experience that are discussed in more detail below: provision of study abroad preparation, institutional support for socioacademic integration, and formal recognition of study abroad.

Key Aspects of the Erasmus Student Experience

With the increase in the number of students taking part in study abroad programs worldwide, the need to prepare these students through the provision of intercultural and foreign language preparation has become more evident. Good preparation before departure has been shown to influence the quality of the upcoming experience (Byram & Dervin, 2009). Ten years after the inception of the Erasmus program, Coleman (1997) noted that preparation in terms of students’ linguistic and cultural capital is “all-important”, and recent research on mobility preparation confirms that this observation remains valid. For example, Hernández (2019), who explored Irish Erasmus students’ everyday linguistic,

social and cultural integration in Spanish HE, concluded that predeparture preparation is key in helping students integrate, build relationships, and leave their own cultural comfort zone.

Research has repeatedly shown that being exposed to “other” social and cultural environments does not necessarily mean that international students will engage in intercultural learning (Otten, 2003). In fact, being abroad solely provides the opportunity (Chang et al., 2013), and bringing together students with diverse cultural backgrounds is not a guarantee of intercultural interaction (Shaw, 2009). In this context, preparation is key in ensuring that the opportunities provided by physical international mobility are not lost.

Due to the nature of international experiences as a journey into unfamiliar academic, social and cultural environments, many mobility students report feelings of stress while adapting to the host country and university (Rienties et al., 2012). Higher education institutions (HEIs) should therefore actively intervene to improve the learning experience of their international students (Vande Berg et al., 2009). In this context, it is important to understand whether Erasmus host universities assume a prominent role in the socioacademic integration of their students by actively supporting them in overcoming the challenges inherent to the international experience. Certainly, due to differences in academic cultures and pedagogical approaches across Europe (Reichert, 2009), support regarding academic aspects is crucial, but so is support linked to the social dimension of the Erasmus experience (Perez-Encinas et al., 2017), for example, in the establishment of new social networks abroad (Schoe et al., 2022). In fact, previous research has shown that social integration plays a fundamental role in improving academic success and vice versa (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

The issue of institutional and curricular differences across countries is linked to another important aspect of the Erasmus student experience: the validation and recognition of study abroad. The accessibility and common recognition of study achievements, credits and (joint) degrees is seen by the European Commission as the most important criterion for the success of student mobility (Teichler, 2004) and has been a cornerstone for implementing the so-called Bologna Process (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). The importance that recognition assumes in the European HE area is underlined by the references made to this issue in related policy documents. For instance, the Council of the European Union (2018b) has launched a recommendation precisely on mutual recognition, not only of educational degrees but also of “outcomes of learning periods” abroad. Similarly, “removing obstacles to the recognition of qualifications, both at the level of schools and higher education” emerges as a key element of the European Education Area, a place “in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 11). Certainly, the work conducted at the European level in rendering educational qualifications more comparable, improving quality assurance mechanisms, and encouraging validation of learning periods abroad has been notable. In this sense, it is important to understand if recognition issues that were identified as main barriers to intra-European student mobility decades ago (Dalichow, 1987) are still an issue.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the challenges that Erasmus students continue to face and how their study abroad sojourns could be improved, this article draws on the lived socioacademic experiences of Erasmus alumni as conveyed via interviews. According to Wilson (2011), research on the Erasmus experience is usually centered on the immediate period after the actual sojourn has taken place, while the long-term impacts and reflections remain largely unexplored. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the ways in which Erasmus alumni report on their international experience several years after their mobility. Furthermore, working with accounts of alumni allows valuable insights into student experiences during a period when Erasmus+ experienced rapid expansion, which saw increased commitments in terms of funding, the optimization of strategic partnership building and credit mobility, as well as concerted actions to enhance study abroad, HE capacity building, and quality assurance (European Commission, 2019a).

To date, most studies on the Erasmus program are based on quantitative data (Sigalas, 2010), and in those cases in which mixed methods are used, qualitative elements are often added in an ancillary fashion (Engel, 2010; European Commission, 2014). In this study, to complement the already existing spectrum of quantitative results about the Erasmus program, we prioritized qualitative data. To this end, semistructured interviews were conducted with young people in their 20 s and early 30 s who “went on Erasmus” during their tertiary studies.

Interviewees were selected through a combination of maximum variation sampling (to illustrate experiences of students from different countries of origin and Erasmus destinations) and convenience sampling (given that the lead author was immersed in a professional setting where numerous Erasmus alumni were available). In this process, research participants from different countries were included in the study, while diversity was also sought at the level of Erasmus destination countries. In line with our qualitative approach, the objective was not to obtain findings that are generalizable toward populations but toward theory (Bryman, 2012) while providing concrete and actionable recommendations for practice and policymaking. To conduct a detailed analysis of each participant’s experiential accounts and understand how such detailed and in-depth descriptions relate to each other, we focused on a limited number of research participants.

In-depth qualitative accounts of their experiences as international students were therefore collected from nine Erasmus alumni coming from different European countries. Some research participants were engaged in Erasmus mobility once, while others went abroad twice in the framework of the same program. Most interviewees were abroad between 2011 and 2015, and all spent at least one academic semester abroad. More information about the research participants and their Erasmus exchange(s) is available in Table 1.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Against the background of previous research findings on the Erasmus student experience, qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) was then conducted on the resulting written accounts. The main objective was to understand the main challenges reported by Erasmus alumni and how the international experience of future Erasmus students could be improved. While the interview guide contained questions about other aspects of the international experience, such as interactions between international and local students and (in)formal learning

outcomes of the Erasmus sojourn, to achieve the aforementioned objective, the content analysis followed a deductive logic focused on three a priori defined themes: 1) mobility preparation; 2) socioacademic integration and support; and 3) formal recognition of study abroad. The coding process was iterative and rooted in multiple rereadings of the interview transcripts to identify those statements that fit into one of the three themes.

Table 1: Details of research participants and their Erasmus exchange(s)

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Erasmus destination(s) and year of mobility
Arianna	Italy	France (2015), UK (2012)
Charlotte	France	UK – Northern Ireland (2015), Norway (2015)
Donata	Lithuania	Italy (2011)
Gerhard	Netherlands	UK (2012)
Janica	Croatia	France (2014)
Karolina	UK	France (2015), Spain (2015)
Liidia	Estonia	Italy (2007)
Megan	Ireland	France (2015)
Santiago	Spain	Turkey – twice (2013)

RESULTS

Predeparture Preparation

Recent research shows that even before embarking on their mobility, students can experience different challenges (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019) and that predeparture preparation can increase their chances of having a meaningful and successful sojourn (Byram & Dervin, 2009). Beaven and Livatino (2015) emphasize the importance of preparing language courses to provide students with the basics of the local language and/or the language of instruction. To this end, our findings show that most interviewed students were given the opportunity to enrol in language courses prior to their departure.

In terms of predeparture preparation regarding administrative and other practical issues, some interviewees revealed that their institutions did not provide them with any type of support in terms of socioacademic integration, a shortcoming that they had to compensate by doing their own preparatory research. The following comments by Liidia (an Estonian Erasmus student in Italy) and Santiago (a Spanish Erasmus student in Turkey) are illustrative of the predeparture experience of most interviewees:

Apart from the name of the institution that I was going [to], there was nothing, nothing at all! (...) I only did it myself like [using] Google. (Liidia)

No, there was no solid preparation from the side of the institution. I just did my research. (Santiago).

These statements are rather concerning in light of previous observations indicating that international students' practical preparation, alongside sociocultural and academic needs, is an important part of the experience abroad (Bartram, 2008). In fact, Bartram (2009) notes that academic learning needs are often given primacy, which raises questions regarding the fulfilment of other needs that international students have, including more practical needs such as bureaucratic procedures, finding accommodation, and navigating unfamiliar urban spaces. Some of our interviewees also indicated that they highly valued the practical information and support they received in view of their academic experience, for example, regarding credit conversion and other relevant "technicalities".

They explained how the exchange is going to work, like the more administrative side of it. (...) because I studied in the UK, so they explained to us how the marks are going to work and convert them into ECTS. (Karolina)

We had very useful seminars on technicalities, and they were very helpful. (Donata)

In addition to scoping at the degree to which students felt prepared for the more tangible and "technical" aspects of their sojourn, we also sought to understand if any type of training was provided to students toward the more intangible and complex dimensions of their mobility, such as "international" and "intercultural" experience. As indicated in a previous section, adjustment to and blending into a socioculturally diverse environment is often assumed to be a natural byproduct of students' international experience; however, it continues to be rarely seen as something they ought to be prepared for. Our data reveal that, indeed, predeparture preparation regarding the benefits and challenges of the upcoming international and intercultural experience does not seem to be a widespread practice. In fact, no interviewee recalled being provided with such training, either before or after departure. This finding is in line with previous research indicating that predeparture courses for international students that combine practical preparation with intercultural training are rare (Penman & Ratz, 2015). Considering the important role of preparation in ensuring that Erasmus students take advantage of their experience abroad, the relative absence of preparation in terms of "practical" and "administrative" skills and the almost complete omission of cultural awareness training predeparture are surprising.

Institutional Support for Socio-Academic Integration

Being offered support from the host university has been shown to be crucial for Erasmus students, especially at the beginning of the sojourn when they have to adjust to a new academic environment, country and culture (Gresham & Clayton, 2011) and are faced with multiple challenges linked to finding accommodation or coping with administrative or financial matters (Teichler, 2004).

In this context, we sought to understand if host institutions were consistent in supporting incoming Erasmus students. Similar to the previous dimension of analysis, the data indicate diverse experiences ranging from students who felt highly supported and were able to quickly integrate into the new academic and social environment to students who found the support provided to be insufficient or even disoriented and lost. A particularly

positive experience with the host institution was shared by Charlotte, a French student who went on Erasmus to Northern Ireland and Norway.

In both universities, both in Norway and in Northern Ireland, there was an integration week. (...) We had so many activities! It was truly well-organized. (...) Therefore, I felt truly welcomed. (Charlotte)

A similar account was provided by Arianna, an Italian student who went on Erasmus to the UK and France. The excerpt below refers to her experience in the UK, where she perceived the academic shock to be more intense; hence, access to a reliable support system provided by the host university was even more appreciated.

All exchange students were treated as first-year students, so we had to go there a week in advance to go through a fresher's week. (...) All the activities that were going on were presented to us, so we were truly supported by the university in that sense. We were also provided with extra classes for learning how to, for example, write an essay in English... or even language classes. Therefore, from that point of view, the host university was truly welcoming, but the cultural shock was also quite big. (Arianna)

However, other interviewees did not share the same views on the support received from the host university in improving socioacademic integration. For instance, Megan, an Irish Erasmus student in France who experienced problems with the accommodation provided by the host university, recounted:

I went to talk to the Erasmus coordinator in the [host] university, and she told me there was nothing she could do, that I could just have to sort it out myself! (...) And I did not truly get any help from my home college either. They said: "You have to sort it out with your Erasmus coordinator in France"; but she also did not help... she said: "You have to call your home college". (Megan)

Although it has been known for many years that accommodation is among the most frequently reported problems by Erasmus students (Bracht et al., 2006), in this case, neither the host nor the home institution provided a solution regarding this essential aspect of the experience. In addition, both institutions gave up on their role of supporting this student by arguing that the responsibility for addressing such issues lay with the other institution, or indeed, with the student herself. This generated feelings of confusion and abandonment, which strongly marked Megan's evaluation of her overall Erasmus experience.

I thought it was pretty terrible! I only realize now looking back that I was kind of depressed when I was in France. (Megan)

Other students reported that while some support was provided, it did not cover all the relevant aspects of their lives as Erasmus students. In the quotation below, Janica, a Croatian Erasmus student in France notes that, beyond administrative matters, no other support mechanisms for exchange students seemed to be available at the host university.

The university itself did not offer any Erasmus special introductory classes. Regarding academic integration and courses, (...) there was no special place for Erasmus students, (...) which was a bad thing because I did not know how the

university works. There was just the administrative office, which was helpful, (...) but from their side that's it: they just signed and stamped papers. (Janica)

This view is complemented by other interviewees, who report being ill-informed or even lost regarding essential aspects of their Erasmus experience. For instance, Karolina (from the UK, who studied in France and Spain) acknowledged:

Academically, there was no communication whatsoever with Erasmus students. We were completely lost on how to enrol, (...) what forms we have to fill out, what courses we can enrol on. (...) We had no idea when a course was cancelled. [As] Erasmus students, we were completely lost. Nobody knew what was happening. (Karolina)

In many cases, the lack of institutional mechanisms aimed at improving students' socioacademic integration and supporting them in the initial stages of their international sojourns seems to have been compensated by the support provided by other organizations, namely, the Erasmus Student Network.

What helped a lot was that there was an Erasmus Student Network (ESN) which was very very active (...) and from the first week they organized events, (...) so [the] social part was covered by the ESN. (Janica)

In other cases, the university recommended that students contact such organizations, which indicates that HEIs may be actively relying on the support of NGOs to ensure a better experience of their Erasmus students.

The university soon provided us with contact with the Erasmus Students Network. They organized many activities, and therefore, in terms of my social life, they were very supportive. (Santiago)

The above quotes show that the support provided by the Erasmus Student Network was greatly appreciated and helped students develop a sense of community and belonging at their host institution. While entrusting student-led organizations with the sociocultural integration of Erasmus sojourners is a valid approach, host universities should not abandon their crucial role in supporting incoming students in regard to facing administrative and academic challenges and differences. This view is shared by Rienties et al. (2012), who encourage HEIs to go beyond social integration and specifically address the adjustment of international students to new academic contexts and cultures.

The diversity of experiences in terms of perceived institutional support and orientation is evident in the presented data. This raises concerns regarding the extent to which receiving support in achieving a certain level of socioacademic integration may not be guaranteed to all Erasmus students, since according to our interviewees, this varies significantly from host institution to host institution. This finding is rather concerning when connected to previous research on this topic, which has consistently shown that poor socioacademic integration is likely to have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Rienties et al., 2011).

Recognition of the Period Abroad by Home Institutions

Despite the importance attached to the accreditation, recognition and validation of students' learning achievements at the European level, research on international student mobility has indicated that joint recognition remains a critical issue within the framework of the Erasmus program. In an earlier study, Teichler (2004) found that almost 20% of Erasmus students report serious problems in obtaining recognition and getting their credits transferred to the home institution. More recent findings indicate that despite compatibility efforts in the context of the Bologna Process, "recognition is not always a reality in practice" (Souto-Otero et al., 2013, p. 73) and varies nationally according to legal traditions and quality assurance measures (Yung-Chi Hou et al., 2017). In this context, we asked participants how they experienced returning to their countries and seeing their periods of study abroad recognized by the home university.

The findings reveal that for most students, the recognition process was very simple, and it occurred automatically upon returning to the home country or even before.

Regarding the [grade] conversion, I just opened my online account of my [home] university, and there was a new tab with my Italian grades, like the conversion [already] made. No problem! (Donata)

Similarly, Karolina did not experience any problems in getting her semesters abroad recognized, since a preliminary validation of the mobility had been provided by the home university before departure.

In my home university, they just recognized what I did because they had validated it in the beginning of the year. (...) We had to send the courses that we [would] take [abroad] back to our university and they would validate them. (Karolina)

This constitutes a "by the book" example of a simple and direct validation process, aligned with EU recommendations, according to which "the outcomes from a learning period abroad at higher education level in one Member State are automatically and fully recognized in the others, as agreed beforehand in a learning agreement" (Council of the European Union, 2018b, p. 3).

Gerhard, a Dutch student who went on Erasmus to the UK, also had a positive experience and observed that the willingness of universities to recognize periods of study abroad may be linked to the active promotion of mobility in some HEIs. In this case, simple validation procedures may emerge as a means to increase the overall attractiveness of the Erasmus program:

I did not have any problem at all in getting my courses recognized. At least in my country at the time they truly wanted bachelor students to go on Erasmus. (...) I think that whenever you went on Erasmus and you did a few courses and you passed them, they were just very much inclined toward validating them, because it's something that they truly want to promote among students. (Gerhard)

Even though experiences with course validation were predominantly positive across the interviewees, a few students seem to have experienced shortcomings in this process, mainly linked to slow administration procedures and subsequent delays in obtaining the converted grades:

[Grade conversion] took three months! The [conversion] was a mess but everything you did was recognized. (Charlotte)

Another student mentioned that despite not experiencing any difficulties with course recognition upon her return, the content of some of the courses taken abroad had to be previously discussed with individual teachers who would then decide on their validation, a practice that contradicts the assumptions of automatic recognition.

We had to provide an entire list of class content and then the program of the class that we were attending [abroad], and then the lecturer had to approve it. (...) In the end everything truly depended on the professors thinking if the exam done in England was enough or not for the Italian program. (Arianna)

One student shared an example of a highly problematic process of nonrecognition that culminated in the need to retake all exams at the home university, as if the period abroad and its learning outcomes had been erased. According to this interviewee, the lack of recognition had serious consequences:

I also had a lot of problems in finding courses in France that would be recognized later because no one actually knew what they could recognize or not. Afterwards, when I came back, I had to redo all the tests. (Janica)

Drawing on Janica's experience, the lack of recognition ended up penalizing this student for having decided to engage in Erasmus mobility, forcing her to take exams linked to courses that she did not have the opportunity to attend while abroad:

They treated my French semester as optional courses, and I had to do all the exams from my Croatian semester when I got back. (Janica)

Built into the Erasmus program, study abroad periods should not be considered an optional or extra qualification requiring additional effort from students but an integrated part of their regular study program (European Commission, 1997). As noted by Dalichow (1987), the Erasmus program emerged precisely as a response from the European Commission to a series of calls for more academic recognition made by different European educational stakeholders. The pledge that study abroad periods will be fully recognized "is now a key component of the Erasmus Charter which participating universities must sign when committing to participation in the program" (Jones, 2017, p. 561). However, failure to ensure proper recognition by Erasmus partner institutions constitutes a particularly concerning finding. Even though such cases may not constitute the norm in many European universities, it is nevertheless surprising that such failures in formally recognizing learning periods abroad continue to emerge in the accounts of Erasmus alumni.

Final Remarks and Recommendations for Improving the Erasmus Student Experience

The fact that the research participants of this study were engaged in Erasmus mobility in the past and retrospectively shared their experiences with us allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how the Erasmus program and HEIs have been evolving over the years. For instance, some students shared the impression that their home and host universities

might not have been as-prepared for accommodating the needs of Erasmus students as they may currently be, underlining that their experience could have been different had they engaged in Erasmus mobility today. In this sense, having focused on the experience of Erasmus alumni who describe international mobilities that have taken place several years ago questions the relevance of our findings today. Considering that Erasmus is a dynamic program that is the target of numerous policy initiatives and innovations, we sought to understand whether the issues raised by these alumni, which are related to previous mobilities, are still relevant. Findings based on more recent evidence on international exchanges indicate that our conclusions remain valid in the current context and support our observation that more work is needed at institutional and policy levels to improve the international student experience. Regarding our first and second dimensions of analysis, mobility preparation and institutional support, Chan et al. (2018) noted that exchange programs continue to overlook the importance of predeparture preparation, while Guardado and Tsushima (2021) encountered accounts of students who were not provided any predeparture preparation. Regarding Erasmus exchanges in particular, preparatory programs for mobility appear to remain rather infrequent or emerge in a project-based fashion (Brassier-Rodrigues, 2020) and not as part of sending institutions' core strategy. Moreover, in a study about intercultural interactions in Erasmus students, Hessel (2021) identified a need for stronger institutional support, especially concerning mobility preparation. Regarding the third analytical dimension, recognition of study abroad, our findings are also aligned with recent evidence indicating that recognition issues are still perceived as drawbacks by many Erasmus participants (European Commission, 2019b).

Despite these ongoing shortcomings, the accounts of Erasmus alumni presented and analyzed above suggest that significant progress has been made in improving the socioacademic experience of Erasmus students since the foundation of this program. This assessment aligns with previous "official" reports and evaluations of the Erasmus program (European Commission, 2014, 2018a; 2019a), which indicate a tendency toward improvement regarding the different challenges referred to by Erasmus students throughout the years.

The area in which the experiences of the interviewed Erasmus alumni were predominantly positive is linked to validation and recognition of study abroad. For most interviewees, the conversion of the grades acquired during the Erasmus sojourn occurred automatically and unproblematically, with no need for their intervention, and the results of the study abroad periods were successfully integrated into their academic trajectories. Accounts of less positive experiences do not include problems with recognition as such but issues linked to prolonged bureaucracy and subsequent delays in being provided with proof of formal certification. However, one research participant seems to have been denied full recognition of the study abroad period. This account, even if coincidental, has to be seen as a serious recognition failure that contradicts not only the principles of automatic recognition (Council of the European Union, 2018b) but also the very rationale behind engaging in educational mobility (European Commission, 1997). Another concerning finding is linked to accounts of recognition procedures that do not seem to be embedded in bilateral or cross- institutional practices but depend on the decision of individual teachers. In this sense, before becoming an official Erasmus partner institution that gives students the opportunity to engage in Erasmus mobility, universities should ensure that recognition and validation of the learning period abroad will be guaranteed. At the same time, to avoid

arbitrary decisions on study validation and recognition, all relevant stakeholders, including administrative staff and teachers, should be made aware of how recognition processes are organized between Erasmus partner institutions.

Regarding the role of HEIs in providing socioacademic support, the experiences of Erasmus alumni are indicative of the diversity of institutional cultures among European universities (Reichert, 2009). Particularly regarding academic support, students' accounts vary significantly, ranging from feeling lost due to differences in teaching, learning and assessment approaches to experiencing generous support and academic hospitality when negotiating an unfamiliar environment at their host universities. Regarding the social dimension of the Erasmus experience, our data indicate that this is often assured and facilitated by grassroots student organizations and NGOs (notably the ESN) rather than being a deliberate attempt by host institutions to ease students into a new environment. While we acknowledge the significance of international mobility as a valuable informal learning experience that enhances students' sense of agency and independence (Rizvi, 2011), our findings reveal that there is room for improvement in terms of institutional support for Erasmus students beyond academic and administrative matters. Given that academic and social experiences are tightly entwined (Rienties et al., 2011), HE institutions should assume a more active role in assisting Erasmus students to overcome the challenges that may arise during their sojourns and in helping them to have more meaningful international experiences, both within and beyond the university walls. Given that successful practices are already in place in many Erasmus partner institutions, more attention should be given to the exchange of best practices among academic and nonacademic staff; the proactive engagement of student unions, local NGOs and charities; and collaboration between universities and municipal councils and social and cultural institutions.

Furthermore, preparation for the upcoming international experience is an area that requires particular attention in the framework of the Erasmus program. Despite clear evidence that the widely acclaimed benefits of engaging in an international experience are not "self-evident and self-fulfilling" (Otten, 2003, p. 13)—especially when no preparation for the upcoming experience is provided (Hernández, 2019)—our findings suggest that predeparture preparation does not seem to be a common practice among Erasmus partner institutions. If any preparation is provided at all, it tends to be limited to foreign language instruction or clarification of administrative aspects, while excluding functioning in a foreign setting and making the most of the intercultural environment facilitated by the Erasmus experience. To some extent, there also seems to be a prevailing misunderstanding between partnering Erasmus institutions as to who is in charge of providing student preparation and support, to what extent, and which dimensions of the anticipated sojourn "experience" this might entail. Sending institutions participating in the Erasmus program should therefore not only expand their offer of predeparture preparation and training to cover intercultural and diversity issues but also ensure that communication with host institutions is frequent and purposeful and that shared responsibilities are clearly mapped out and agreed upon.

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