



## Internationalization of education: motivations and benefits of academic mobility within the Erasmus+ Programme based on the example of Lisbon, Portugal<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The internationalization of higher education is steadily increasing, which can be observed also in the growing number of university students benefiting from the European mobility program European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus+). The author's survey questionnaire was used to investigate the motivations that influence the decision to participate in the Erasmus+ programme and to choose Lisbon as a student exchange city, as well as to learn about the benefits of mobility. Furthermore, the differences between the scholarship holders from Poland and those from other countries were presented. In general, students considered a number of factors when joining Erasmus+. International mobility plays an important role in both personal and educational development. The information obtained on academic mobility may contribute to the development and popularization of the idea of academic exchange programmes among students and may facilitate the planning of promotional activities of the university's international relations offices.

**Keywords:** university students, Portugal, internationalization, international student mobility, Erasmus+

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## Introduction

The internationalization of the educational process is steadily increasing (Cohen et al., 2013; Vildavsky, 2011; Popowska, 2016), which, among other things, is reflected in the growing mobility of students, lecturers, and university staff (Sasin, 2014). Internationalization is a broad term defined as an intentional process of international, intercultural, or global integration for the purpose of post-secondary education, improved quality of education, access to research for all students and university employees, and making meaningful contributions to the society (de Wit et al., 2015; Jibeen and Khan, 2015). In 2018, 5.6 million students chose to study abroad, doubling the number from 2005 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019). This tendency is also observed in Portugal. The country is ranked among the top destinations for academic mobility (Sobral, 2022). Nowadays, academic mobility is one of the basic concepts of education (de Wit and Altbach, 2020). It is defined as a period of studying, teaching and/or research in a country other than the country of origin of the student or academic staff member. The period of stay is limited, and the person returns to his or her home country after the allotted time (Puchkov et al., 2018).

Students deciding to take part in the exchange mobility programme and then on the destination are guided by a variety of motivations that depend on many factors. To understand what motivates students to take part in international mobility programmes and how they choose a particular exchange country, it is necessary to look at the factors that may influence their decisions. As an expert of the European Commission, E. Krzaklewska (2008) developed a model representing students' motivations for participating in the Erasmus+ programme. She distinguished two groups of motivations, the first having an experimental dimension and containing motivations of cultural background and related to personal motivations. This group included motivations such as curiosity about another culture, the desire for entertainment, gaining experience, changing the environment, and personal development. In the second group, the motivations are categorized as those focused on academic and professional development. Students with motivations in this group decide to join the Erasmus programme because they want to acquire knowledge and skills related to their field of study, as well as to learn or improve the use of foreign languages and they expect their stay abroad to enhance their future career opportunities.

Mazzarol (1998) identified push-pull factors that determine the decision-making process of a prospective scholarship holder. Push factors are those that affect decisions to study abroad in the country of permanent residence. These include economic, political, and social factors in the country which the scholarship holder leaves. Pull factors are those that are determined by the attractiveness of a planned educational exchange destination to students. Six such factors were labelled (Mazzarol et al., 1997). Researchers showed that knowledge, availability of information, and prestige of a potential destination are important. Furthermore, students also considered recommendations, positive references from relatives and people who had previously participated in a mobility programme in the country. Other key factors shown by researchers are the costs associated with living abroad (travel, subsistence, security). Social factors related to whether students in the host country have family or friends were an important determinant as well. The fifth is a factor relating to the geography of the host country. The last factor is related to the environment, that is, the climate and lifestyle of the destination.

International academic mobility offers many benefits, opportunities, and experiences that cannot be achieved in any other way (Bodger, 1998). According to Turos (1997), mobility is important for self-education and personal, educational and professional development. During the stay, students find out how important the following are: perceptive skills, scientific knowledge, foreign language skills, establishing interpersonal contacts, and overcoming distrust of others.

With the growing interest in foreign exchange programmes among students, it becomes important to find out what motivates them to join academic mobility programmes. Learning about the benefits of academic mobility will contribute to the development and popularization of the idea of academic mobility among students, which is promoted by international mobility programmes.

The aim of this study was to gain information about the motivations influencing the decision to take part in a foreign exchange programme (Erasmus+) and the choice of Lisbon as the city of student exchange. The study also aimed to identify the benefits of student mobility. An additional aim of the study was to gain information about statistically significant differences between motivations and benefits among scholarship holders from Poland and those from other countries. The following research questions were posed to achieve the research aim:

- What were the motivations of prospective scholarship holders of international exchange programmes and what were their reasons for choosing Lisbon as the location for their international mobility?
- What benefits were observed by students participating in academic mobility programme in Lisbon?
- Are there differences in motivations for participation and benefits of Erasmus+ programme between Polish scholarship holders and those of other nationalities?

## Methodology

The quantitative method of the diagnostic survey was applied with the use of the author's own questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted among students taking part in the Erasmus+ programme at universities in Lisbon. The work was complemented by the study of the author's own experiences gained during her stay within the Erasmus+ programme.

The survey data was collected from March to May 2020. The questionnaires were created in English on Google Drive using Google Forms, and then posted on Facebook, in groups for international students in Lisbon. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed through instant messaging to the author's friends from different countries, who also participated in university programmes abroad in Lisbon, with a request to send it to other Erasmus+ students.

The study included a random sample of 60 (49 female and 11 male) students who were taking part in the Erasmus+ programme between January 2016 and March 2020 at all universities in Lisbon. The only criterion for inclusion in the study was the fact of participation in the Erasmus+ programme in the period specified above. There are thirty-three universities located in Lisbon, out of which three are among the five visited by the largest number of Erasmus students each year (European Commission, 2016).

The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first included questions related to students' motivations and, more specifically, to the factors that influenced students' decision to take part in the exchange programme and the determinants of choosing Lisbon. This section also included questions about the benefits of the stay. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions pertaining to gender, nationality, degree, and a question about the length of stay in Lisbon.

Statistical methods were used to analyze the results. Non-parametric U Mann-Whitney test with correction for continuity was used to evaluate the differences between the means because the requirements of normal distribution were not met in Lilliefors test. Classic significance levels were used: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$  (Statistica 13, StatSoft, Inc. 2014).

## Results

The most numerous nationality group was Poles (38.3%). Italians and Slovenians (8.3% each), Spaniards and Greeks (6.7% each) started their studies in the Portuguese capital, which is also confirmed by the data of the European Commission, which enumerates students from Poland, Italy, Spain as those who most often come to study in Portugal within the Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2018). Other nationalities of students accounted for 5% of the respondents or fewer (Hungarians, Romanians, Croats, Bulgarians, Slovaks, French, Germans, Turks, Danes, Austrians, Lithuanians, and Belgians). More than half of the study group (60%) studied in undergraduate programmes and 35% did an exchange during their graduate programme. Furthermore, 3.3% were students of third-level studies and the remaining students went abroad for student internship (1.7%). An overwhelming percentage of the foreign students from the group surveyed (80%) participated in the exchange programme for one term, 18% of the students studied educational tourism for two terms, and 2% declared that their exchange lasted shorter due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Polish students from the Erasmus programme statistically significantly more often declared that the reason for their participation in the programme was the need to improve their foreign language skills and to combine studying with travelling, whereas students from other parts of the world statistically significantly more often decided to participate in the programme because they wanted to experience something new and change their current environment (cf. Table 1). This question required scholarship holders to select up to three factors.

Table 1. The reasons for participating in the Erasmus+ programme and the differences in responses between the group of students from Poland and other countries

Factors	Total (%)	Polish Erasmus Students (%)	Other Nationalities (%)	P
Willingness to gain new experiences – life experiences	56.70	39.13	67.57	<b>0.0153*</b>
Developing language skills	48.30	65.22	37.84	<b>0.0195*</b>
Desire for personal development	36.70	43.48	32.43	0.1939
Possibility to combine learning with traveling	35.00	47.83	27.03	<b>0.0503*</b>
Willingness to make international acquaintances – the cultural aspect	31.70	26.09	35.14	0.2319
Curiosity about the world	30.00	34.78	27.03	0.2621
Learning to be independent	15.00	17.39	13.51	0.3412
Possibility of including the scholarship in the Curriculum Vitae	13.30	17.39	10.81	0.2330
Expecting a ,relaxed' academic term/ year abroad	8.30	4.35	10.81	0.1894
Willingness to change the environment	8.30	0	13.51	<b>0.0328*</b>
Recommendation from a friend who participated in the program	3.30	4.35	2.70	0.3646
Possibility of grants, university scholarships	1.70	0	2.70	0.2134

\*  $p < 0.05$

Source: own research.

Respondents were also asked a question aimed to find out what had guided them in choosing Lisbon as their student exchange city. This question required the respondent to select three main motivations (cf. Table 2). Polish students were statistically significantly more likely to decide to go on an academic trip to Lisbon because of the city's location, which creates travel opportunities, while students of other nationalities were statistically significantly more likely to indicate interest in the country as a motivation for choosing Lisbon.

Table 2. The reasons for choosing Lisbon as the Erasmus + programme destination by scholarship holders from Poland and other countries

Factors	Total (%)	Polish Erasmus Students (%)	Other Nationalities (%)	P
Mild and favorable climate	70.00	73.91	67.57	0.3012
Interest in Portugal	38.30	21.74	48.65	0.0186*
Positive feedback about the destination	30.00	21.74	35.14	0.1354
Cultural aspect	25.00	30.43	21.62	0.2218

Factors	Total (%)	Polish Erasmus Students (%)	Other Nationalities (%)	P
Location of Lisbon, which offers extensive travel opportunities	21.70	34.78	13.51	<b>0.0259*</b>
Cost of living in Portugal is lower compared to other countries available for selection	21.70	17.39	24.32	0.2632
Touristic attractions of the destination	20.00	21.74	18.92	0.3953
Opportunity to meet people from all over the world	20.00	21.74	18.92	0.3953
A wide university offer – a wide range of interesting subjects	16.70	21.74	13.51	0.2028
By accident	16.70	8.70	21.62	0.0958
Entertainment considerations	10.00	13.04	8.11	0.2680
A small selection from foreign universities	10.00	13.04	8.11	0.2680

\* p < 0.05

Source: own research.

The undoubted motivations of the scholarship holders are reflected in the benefits of mobility that they observed. To find out the positive aspects of mobility, respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale how each aspect of the exchange reflected the benefits they received. The students participating in the exchange programme observed many positive aspects after their mobility stay ended (cf. Table 3). Such benefits as becoming familiar with the labour market in the host country, gaining new knowledge, experiences, and skills related to the field of study were statistically significantly more often declared by Polish scholarship holders. This may indicate that Polish students, compared to foreigners, were more focused on educational and professional opportunities.

Table 3. Benefits of the Erasmus+ program in Lisbon observed by the scholarship holders from Poland and other nationalities

Benefits	Total	Polish Erasmus Students	Other Nationalities	P
Unforgettable travel memories and experiences	4.80	4.70	4.86	0.2593
Getting to know Portugal, the country of Erasmus program (culture, language)	4.68	4.74	4.65	0.5734
Increasing independence and self-confidence	4.60	4.43	4.70	0.2903
Establishing contacts on an international scale	4.58	4.43	4.68	0.1145
Improving language skills	4.42	4.57	4.32	0.1866
Acquiring new knowledge, experience and skills related to the field of study	4.35	4.61	4.19	0.0609

Benefits	Total	Polish Erasmus Students	Other Nationalities	P
Developing soft skills (e.g. adaptability, teamwork, stress tolerance)	4.33	4.39	4.30	0.6764
Changing perspectives for the future	4.33	4.30	4.35	0.7348
Increasing career opportunities in the future	3.92	4.04	3.84	0.4108
Knowledge of the labour market in the host country	3.75	4.09	3.54	0.0132*
Increasing openness and intercultural awareness	4.53	4.43	4.59	0.4871

\*  $p < 0.05$

Source: own research.

## Discussion

Students consider many factors when deciding to participate in international mobility programmes (Monteiro and Pereira, 2016; Biñas-Henne, 2011; Juvan and Lesjak, 2011; Sova, 2017; Dragomiletskii, 2018). The present study have proved that scholarship holders of the Erasmus+ programme in Lisbon were most often driven by cultural and experiential factors and by the need for entertainment, personal development, and relaxation rather than by the motivations related to educational or professional development. This has been also shown in some previous studies (Findlay and King, 2006; González, 2011; Teichler, 2004; Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014; Lesjak et al., 2015; Kosmaczewska, 2021). The willingness to gain new experiences and the desire to learn a foreign language (Krupnik and Krzaklewska, 2006; Maiworm and Teichler, 2002) were the most common reasons for taking part in the Erasmus+ programme. At the same time, students coming from Poland were statistically significantly more likely to decide to participate in the programme due to their desire to improve their foreign language skills. The factor which equally often determined the participation in the programme was the need for personal development, including learning independence, increasing self-confidence, openness, and soft skills (Maiworm and Teichler, 2002).

Student mobility programmes are focused on the countries attractive due to their climate (González, 2011; Mazzarol et al., 1997). Portugal attracts many international students every year and Lisbon itself is among the twenty cities in Europe that were the most frequent destinations for international students in 2012–2013 (Van Mol and Ekamper, 2016), which demonstrates the city's prominent level of internationalization. Lisbon is characterized by cultural diversity, with an amazing atmosphere, so everyone in the city feels comfortable. Therefore, it is understandable why the most frequently



declared motivation for choosing Lisbon among the respondents was the climate of the city. Undoubtedly, with the friendly and mild subtropical Mediterranean climate and its location in the south of Europe, in the vicinity of the Atlantic Ocean, Lisbon offers attractive conditions, also for enjoying tourist activities (Gierak, 2017). This was also one of the main reasons for the foreign students' departures. Comparable results were obtained in previous studies (Sin et al., 2016; Mészáros, 2011), which have shown that location, climate, and range of leisure activities are the factors that mainly influence the choice of Portugal as an exchange country. These factors played a more significant role in the choice of Portugal than the good reputation of the host institution, which was also observed in this study. The image of a country is critical when choosing a tourist (here educational) destination (Matiza and Slabbert, 2020).

Approximately one-third of the surveyed students declared that the interest in the country was important to them when choosing an exchange city, and a similar percentage (35%) also indicated that the motivations for their participation in the Erasmus+ programme were the opportunity to combine studying with travelling and visiting the country. This shows that students are interested in the country in which they implement international mobility programmes. Previous studies by Pawłowska et al. (2009) showed that 96% of international students travel outside their exchange city. As demonstrated in a study by Lesjak, students' willingness to travel plays a very important factor in their decision to participate.

Although individual students are characterized by different motivations that guide them in their decision to take part in an international mobility programme, each student observes a wide range of positive outcomes (European Commission, 2017). Among most respondents, the greatest observed benefit of the exchange was the memories and experiences brought about by travelling. Undoubtedly, travel itself allows a person to learn a lot about themselves and the place they are visiting, its culture, language, and the community (Lesjak et al., 2015). While travelling, students have the opportunity to learn through experience (Huang, 2008). For international students, travel is an important part of their foreign exchange, which has been supported by previous research showing that tourism is a significant aspect of student mobility (Kłopotowska, 2020; Martinez-Roget et al., 2013; Gardiner et al., 2013; Vukić, 2015).

Many of the benefits observed from the scholarship stay abroad are also related to the personal development of the students, who reported that their

independence and self-confidence increased, which had also been observed in some previous studies (Bracht et al., 2006). A large group of international students in Lisbon enumerated important aspects of the exchange such as increasing openness, awareness of, and tolerance for cultural differences, and establishing contacts on an international scale (Atalar, 2020; Wiśniewski and Bukalska, 2013). Krzaklewska stressed that academic mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ are mostly aimed at building the European identity and at developing intercultural skills of exchange participants, rather than increasing the generation of highly educated young Europeans (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013).

Students declared that during their scholarship stay in Portugal, they deepened their knowledge of the culture and language of the country. This means that they were able to achieve what was one of the main motivations for their academic mobility. Hadis (2005) points out that it is important for a student taking part in an international mobility programme to be exposed to diverse cultures and lifestyles at the place of mobility. This scholar noted that in this way, students develop their interests and become more open-minded while their curiosity about international issues increases, and when they return to their residence country, they are more focused on studying or work-related activities.

Students were less likely to perceive benefits related to professional development, such as the opportunity to become familiar with the labour market in Portugal, and relatively few students felt that the experience of international mobility enhanced their future career opportunities. This may take place because their motivations for leaving were different and they focused on other aspects of the exchange during their mobility stay. The largest group consisted of students at the first stage of their university education, who are just entering the labour market. The related results of their mobility study were presented by Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005), who showed that about half of the surveyed scholarship holders observed benefits related to future employment compared to 97% who observed benefits related to personal development. Furthermore, as shown in previous studies, it is easier for students after participation in mobility programmes to be employed (Żebryk et al., 2021; OECD, 2019; Alejziak 2018; European Commission, 2017) and start working for higher salaries (Messer and Wolter, 2007; Liwiński, 2019). The competencies acquired during the exchange are appreciated by future employers (Bryła, 2014; Dąbrowska-Resiak, 2019). Although benefits of a professional nature are not directly perceived by students, the remaining

experiences, skills, and knowledge will indirectly translate into their later professional and academic careers.

However, if benefits at the educational and career-related level were observed, then Polish Erasmus+ programme students in Lisbon tended to observe these benefits to a greater extent than students from other countries. The survey conducted among university students Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2011) shows that scholarship holders from Poland, compared to those from Belgium, Turkey, Italy, Lithuania, Spain, Hungary, Greece, and France, are more satisfied with the exchange in terms of learning. Undoubtedly, this proves that Erasmus+ students from Poland consider their studying abroad as an opportunity to increase their skills related to the field of study and as a time during which they have an opportunity to find out more about the labour market in the host country. The differences in perceived benefits of exchange programmes regarding labour market awareness in Portugal between Polish students and students of other nationalities may also stem from the fact that a significant percentage of the Polish (especially young) population declares their intention to seek employment abroad (Gi Group, 2023). However, these are mere conjectures, and far-reaching conclusions could only be drawn after collecting a larger amount of data and more extensive research material.

For a participant, the aim of the Erasmus programme, and, more specifically, of Key Action 1: Learning Mobility of Individuals, is to achieve at least one of the outcomes set by the European Commission (European Commission, 2011). The present study showed that not one, but many benefits were observed by the beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ programme in Lisbon. This confirms the postulates of the European Commission, which stresses that staying abroad and taking part in an international mobility programme should become an inseparable part of education.

## Conclusions

The internationalization of higher education is steadily increasing, so it is important to find out what motivates students when they decide to participate in the programme and when they choose their exchange destination, and to look at the benefits of the programme.

1. Many factors influence a student's decision to join an international exchange programme, including experimental, educational, personal, cultural, and entertainment factors. When choosing Lisbon, the schol-

arship holders were most often guided by the climate and their interest in the Portuguese culture.

2. International mobility plays a significant role in the development on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and educational levels.
3. The willingness to improve a foreign language and the possibility to combine learning with tourism activities were statistically significantly more frequent reasons for the participation of Polish students in the Erasmus+ programme compared to those of other nationalities.
4. Compared to foreigners, Polish students more often observed positive aspects of the programme in terms of education (by developing the skills and knowledge related to their field of study) and career (by becoming familiar with the labour market in Portugal).
5. The information obtained through academic mobility may contribute to the development and popularization of the idea of international exchange programmes among students, which may directly influence or even facilitate the decision-making process for students who consider participation in an international exchange programme.

The results of the survey may help plan the promotional activities of the university's international relations offices. The results of the study will also help increase the community's awareness of the idea of international mobility programmes, and, more specifically, the motivations for participation in them and the benefits they offer.

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