

Students' Voice: The Analysis of their Mobility Experiences through Interviews

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Abstract: The European student mobility Erasmus+ Programme was first established in 1987 and, in 1999, the Bologna Declaration aimed to promote the mobility as one of its main goals, focusing on intergovernmental cooperation in the field of higher education. In recent years, the mobility process has become increasingly significant, and a greater number of individuals experienced a mobility period abroad improving knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In addition to this, several international studies show how the Erasmus+ mobility has positive effects on social and individual growth.

For this reason, the aim of this contribution is to focus the attention on the personal development of students from Sapienza University of Rome who spent a mobility period abroad in a non-EU country during the academic year 2019/2020 (last available and complete data before the COVID-19 outbreak). The results of the analysis, carried out by using content analysis, show how personal development as well as the ability to adapt to different contexts can be facilitated by an experience abroad. Furthermore, this can enable one to find a valuable job according to the skills and competences improved in a diverse study environment and can create a number of opportunities for personal growth.

Keywords: outgoing students, Sapienza University of Rome, non-European mobility, internationalization, content analysis

Introduction

In recent decades, the institutionalised academic mobility, managed by higher education institutions in mutual relations and including a certain level of reciprocity (Ballatore, 2010), has become broader and more innovative, providing opportunities for study and/or research periods abroad, as well as traineeships, for both higher education and training students and/or vocational education (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2010; Shkoler et al., 2020).

Especially starting from the Bologna Process (Reinalda & Kulesza, 2006; Crosier & Parveva, 2013; Kraler & Worek, 2021) there has been an ever-greater cooperation between European countries in the field of higher education. Indeed, the Bologna Process played an important role in transforming mobility into a primary goal of higher education policy as a means of consolidating Europe's position in global competition (Papatsiba, 2006). In this sense, individual mobility is the main theme which continues to be in the foreground of studies and analyses, as the "bedrock component of internationalisation agendas in most institutions" (Rumbley & Altbach, 2016: 7), also leading to an improvement of the education programmes, of the research and of the reputation of the university involved in the programme (Hudzik & Stohl, 2009).

Moreover, participating in an academic mobility can enhance personal growth and offer a new way of learning, bringing important changes in young people's lives (Cankaya, Liew & De Freitas, 2018; Nada & Legutko, 2022). Furthermore, thanks to the implementation of courses taught in English and the interaction among local students and students from abroad, academic mobility helps to increase the sense of European identity among participants (Van Mol, 2022). In this sense, a real international community has been created which has also involved people who have passively witnessed these flows and not directly participated in them (European Commission, 2012).

Therefore, following these brief theoretical premises, the aim of the present study is to analyse the impact of mobilities on the personal sphere of students from Sapienza University of Rome who took part in mobility periods in a non-EU country during the academic year 2019/2020 (last available and complete data before the COVID-19 pandemic). It has been decided to focus the attention on mobilities to non-EU countries

because for a young student an experience in a context so different and far from his/her 'comfort zone' could not only be challenging, but also very enriching.

The strong points of academic mobility: why is it so important to do experience abroad?

The advantages of academic mobility are evident and refer to multiple levels. First, it helps academic institutions to increase their international dimension and the attractiveness of the organizations involved (Gao, 2019). In this respect, several research findings show that internationalization could be seen as an indicator of quality of the institution who takes part to these programmes and that international branding is a status symbol nowadays (Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020). Indeed, the universities engaging in academic mobility programmes gain competitive advantages in preparing students to face globalization (Teichler, 2009).

Secondly, the mobility experience can change the life of the people who benefit by it, helping individuals to improve their professional career, and also contributing to their personal and individual growth (Teichler, 2017). As analysed in the Report *Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study* (2019) that focused on almost 77.000 survey responses with reference to the years 2014-2018, students who complete an Erasmus+ mobility for studying or training in another university boost their employability skills, inter-personal and inter-cultural skills, and competences too, as well as their self-confidence, ability to achieve goals, and social and cultural openness.

Going into detail, as far as employability skills are concerned, according to the European Commission 72% of Erasmus+ graduates stated that the mobility experience had been very beneficial for them in finding their first job, around 80% of Erasmus+ graduates finding their first job after graduation in less than three months. In this respect, previous studies already show that students who have taken part in institutionalised mobility have a better and easier entry into the labour market, get better jobs and higher responsibilities compared with their 'sedentary' peers (Brooks & Waters, 2011). The research conducted by Ballatore and Ferede in 2013, by examining from a comparative perspective participating and non-participating students in a mobility programme, indicates that post-graduate Erasmus participants were more likely to look for opportunities abroad both in Europe and elsewhere. Taking a closer look at the Italian

context, Cammelli (2001), claims that those who have participated in an Erasmus+ Programme managed to find a job and are satisfied with it. It is, therefore, evident that students who did a mobility experience through the Erasmus+ Programme were able to find a job which corresponds to the skills that they have fostered abroad. These latter are related to language competences, cultural and reciprocal understanding, and all the other general skills gained by several means since their return (Barron, Maiworm & Teichler, 1997; Zapotoczna, 2019).

Looking at the improvement of the transversal competences, the European Commission emphasizes that more than 90% of students report that they have opportunities to use their knowledge and skills learned during the mobility period, 86% of them affirm that they undertake challenging tasks and 9 out of 10 reported improvements in adaptability, interactions with people from other cultures, communication skills and intercultural abilities. As underlined by Dervin, “the main purpose could be to observe contexts which demonstrate intercultural encounters and strangeness and deconstruct them through observations, participative observation, as used in anthropology and ethnography. The main idea would be to give students the opportunity to look at themselves and others, as well as to reflect on their own discourse and attitudes [...]. If students realize that, then they will most probably accept the diversity of others more easily and refrain from drawing too many stereotypical conclusions” (2009: 125).

Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that the mobility experience was found to produce a positive impact on academic development, social engagement, and personal development (Velliariis, 2019), even though some studies have focused the attention on the role of the academic mobility in the reiteration of social inequalities both at the institutional and individual level (Noble & Davies, 2009; Findlay et al., 2012; Ballatore & Stavrou, 2017). On one hand, institutional inequalities are perceptible in the alliances between similar institutions (indeed, some destinations are more popular among the students); on the other hand, individual inequalities can be found in the socio-economic status of the students and the related financial possibility to go to a certain country or to another (Draelants & Ballatore, 2014).

However, the subject of the present paper is the added value that an academic experience abroad could give to participants. Indeed, according to Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, “as student mobility programmes are means to connect people around the

world, the programmes provide students with a life-changing experience in several respects, hence the possibility to be prepared for living and working in a globalized world [...]. Student mobility enables students to actively immerse into local cultures, experience “normality” of life and maintain constant socialisation with peers (even outside the classrooms) as well as it allows time for self-reflection” (2020: 15-19).

An overview of mobility opportunities in Italy and at Sapienza University of Rome

According to the European Commission data related to Erasmus+ statistics (2020b), during 2020 (last completed data), 93.688 participants in 1.087 Italian projects benefited from mobility in higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult learning and youth for a total grant amount of €175.56 million. In addition to this, the Erasmus+ Programme supported 122 capacity building projects in the field of education and youth, 22 Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, 73 cooperation projects between higher education institutions and businesses (knowledge alliances) and vocational education and training institutions and businesses (sector skills alliance), 113 collaborative partnership in the field of sport and 39 projects aiming to improve social inclusion and to exchange good practices between the participants.

Looking at the students' mobility flows (Figure 1), it is possible to note that, on the whole, starting from the academic year 2015/2016 to the academic year 2019/2020, 188.479 Italian outgoing students benefited from an academic mobility period abroad, while 134.948 foreign students came to Italy (so-called incoming students). As it can be observed in Figure 1, most of them are students rather than trainees. Moreover, it is possible to note that a small percentage is made up of students or trainees to/from partner countries (these are the countries around the world which are not included in the 34 Erasmus+ Programme countries).

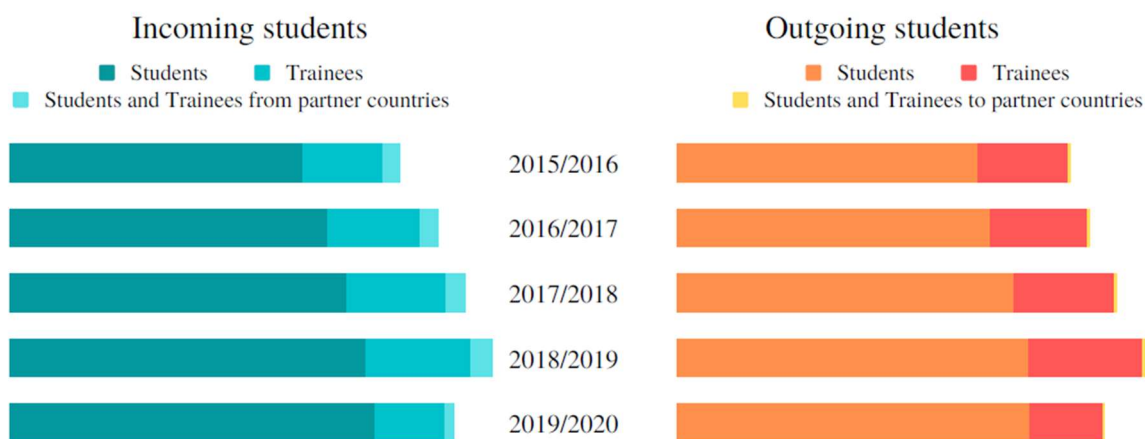


Figure 1. Incoming and outgoing mobility flows in Italy (%)

In this respect, it is important to underline that in 2015, Erasmus+ opened the possibility for students or staff to spend part of their academic path in other higher education institution (HEI) from all over the world and not only from Europe. For this purpose, the International Credit Mobility Programme (ICM for short) provide to all European institutions the chance to implement mobilities with partners around the world by signing an inter-institutional agreement. This led to support both for student mobility (for studies and for research) and staff mobility (for teaching and for training) in any subject area or academic discipline (European Commission, 2020a). Thus, the extra-European mobility could be seen as one of the main factors that contributes to the improvement and the integration of the internationalisation process that builds an intercultural and global dimension into the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2017). In this respect, “the term *process* is deliberately included to underscore the continuous and ongoing nature of internationalization; the verb *integrating* is used to ensure that internationalization is central, not marginal to higher education in today’s world; finally, the term *purpose* is used to refer to the overall role and objectives that higher education has for a country or a region where individual institutions have specific mandates and missions” (Gürüz, 2008: 139).

However, even though the percentage of this extra-European mobility is not so significant compared with the number of students and trainees from and to Europe, analysing the absolute value, it is possible to note that, as far as the incoming students from partner countries are concerned, there was an increase of 31.2% (from 304 students in 2015/2016 to almost 400 students in 2018/2019) while, with regards to the Italian

outgoing students, the increase was equal to 19.9% (from 1.138 students in 2015/2016 to 1.365 students in 2018/2019). Unfortunately, data from the academic year 2019/2020 show a kind of “reversal” (146 students and trainees from partner countries and 614 students and trainees to partner countries), which is explained by the difficulty created by spread of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the field of the higher education too (Farnell, Matijević & Schmidt, 2021; Bista, Allen & Chan, 2022).

Among all the Italian higher education institutions, Sapienza University of Rome is ranked in the top 3 Italian universities for incoming and outgoing mobility (Agenzia Nazionale Erasmus+ Indire, 2019). At Sapienza several mobility programmes are available, and, above all, we can find the Erasmus+ Programme that allows students to spend 3-12 months at one of the 500 partner universities throughout Europe. There are approximately 2,000 scholarships available thanks to over 1,500 bilateral agreements that Sapienza has signed since 1987 with European universities.

Beyond Europe, there are also a number of programmes which allow students to spend a mobility period in non-EU countries, such as: the Erasmus+ ICM Programme (described above) where partner countries and consequently, destinations, may differ every year since they depend on the approval of the project proposal (in fact, every year Sapienza applies for partnerships with nearly 300 institutions all over the world); the bilateral mobility agreements between Sapienza University of Rome and other universities that, thanks to funding provided by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), allows Bachelor's, Master's and PhD students (who are not on scholarships) to enjoy a period of studies abroad, either to take exams or work on their theses, in one of over 200 non-EU universities that have bilateral agreements with Sapienza.

The interviews, which have been analysed in this work, have been conducted with students who have spent a mobility period abroad within the last two mentioned programmes beyond Europe.

“Like living 3.000 lives in one”: academic mobility seen by students

As previously mentioned, the academic mobility experiences of students from Sapienza University of Rome were analysed through in-depth interviews, which is a technique used in qualitative research. The interviews were based on a pre-established

set of open questions which gave students the chance to better explain their personal point of view about the mobility experience, summarized in Table 1, and it includes individual interviews with a small number of respondents in order to find out their perspectives on a specific idea, programme, or situation (Azam, 2022).

Table 1. Dimensions and questions used for the interviews

Dimension	Questions
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Where have you been?” • “What exchange program have you been involved with?”
Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What were you expecting from this experience before arriving?”
Personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How was communicating with natives or with other international students?” • “Did you meet someone special that you are still in contact with?” • “Do you have any special memory?” • “Would you do it all over again?” • “What piece of advice would you give to someone that has yet to go?”

Source: Elaborated by the author

In this paragraph, we illustrate the results of the research carried out on 25 Bachelor’s and Master’s students’ interviews, the participants belonging to different faculties, both STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities). The interviews, carried out mostly in Italian and part of them in English too, have been examined through context analysis strategies. In this respect, since the 1990s, computer-assisted content analysis has made the most use of the increased potential of software. This can be divided into two large families: *a*) the first one is characterized by the fact that each step of the analytic activity is mediated by a work of interpretation and theoretical elaboration (Computer-aided qualitative data analysis software); *b*) the second one is characterized by the fact that the activity of interpretation is mainly concentrated on the output of the analysis largely automatic and mediated by the application of statistical techniques (Statistical analysis of textual data).

Following this last approach, the collected material of the present research has been analysed with the use of the software T-LAB, a statistical and graphical tool for text analysis that allows the examination of textual data as if it were quantitative. The textual corpus that has been taken into account is composed of 19,747 occurrences (words token), 3,216 forms (lexical units), 1,994 lemmas (labels or/and tags with which the

lexical units have been grouped and classified), 1,773 hapaxes (words which occur only once in a corpus) (Lancia, 2012). All the used keywords are the ones with an occurrence value greater or equal to the minimum threshold of 7.

On this matter, the content analysis carried out has been able to highlight not only the most frequently used terms in the text but also the strength of the associations between the different words (Neuendorf, 2017). Therefore, firstly, a purely descriptive procedure has been implemented which offers an overview of the vocabulary used by the students, emphasizing the terms with the highest number of occurrences (Table 2); then, word association analysis was implemented, starting from the lemmas with the greatest number of occurrences.

Table 2. Words with the highest number of occurrences

Lemmas	Occurrences
Experience	147
Leave	139
People	96
Life	90
University	78
Italy	74
Language	74
Reality	65
Time	58
Know	57

Source: Elaborated by the author

As it can be seen from Table 2, the words that students used the most in their interview refer more to the human aspect than to the academic one, since words like “University”, “study”, “exam” are characterized by a lower number of occurrences. So, starting from this preliminary analysis, it is possible to examine, as far as the first three keywords are concerned, the associations that they have with the other terms to check how co-occurrence relationships determine the local meaning of the selected word/central lemma (Lancia, 2007). Generally, the analysis of the association between words is based on coefficients that are used as weighted measures of the co-occurrences. In T-LAB, specifically, the association index is given by the cosine similarity, the formula of which is as follows:

$$C(X, Y) = \frac{X \cap Y}{\sqrt{X} + \sqrt{Y}}$$

where the cosine similarity between each pair of words (X, Y) is defined as the ratio of the amount of their co-occurrences.

With regards to the word “experience”, the term with the highest number of occurrences, it is possible to note based on Figure 2 that this word is strongly linked to the type of the programme (“Erasmus”, “abroad”, “academic”) and to the perception of the experience (“beautiful”, “change”, “opportunity”). Indeed, a mobility period to a non-European country is an opportunity of a lifetime, which can radically change the future outlook of the students who decided to participate in it (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Dolga et al., 2015). As some students said, “it is not a waste of time because it is a kind of personal training that makes you grow as a person” (student who spent a mobility period in Russia) and “it allows personal development in a way that would not have been possible by staying at home. It gives a great sense of independence and expands your world views, offering the opportunity to learn a new language and culture” (student who spent a mobility period in Australia).



Figure 2. Word association with “Experience”

Nevertheless, deepening this analysis through a sequential one by considering the positions of the various lexical units relative to each other and allowing to represent and explore any text as a network, it is possible to underline that specific terms are used before the experience while other words are used after the mobility experience took place. As Figure 3 reveals, before the experience students are, in a certain sense, anxious about the new situation that awaits them, whereas after the experience, also described as

“unforgettable”, they declare that they feel a change and improvement in their own personality. In the words of other students, “well, before leaving I was very curious because I was about to leave for America, a place I had never been before. I expected to see new things, but at the same time I was a little scared because it meant staying away from home for a long time, but, in the end, it was absolutely satisfying because I had so many experiences, it was a justified curiosity” (student who spent a mobility period in the United States of America); “I was a bit worried at the beginning but I expected to see something different and to enter into a completely new context. This scared me a bit and that’s what I liked the most because I got to know a different culture and to adapt into a different place. I went out of my comfort zone and it was wonderful, since I met people from all over the world and friends with whom I am still in touch” (student who spent a mobility period in Argentina).

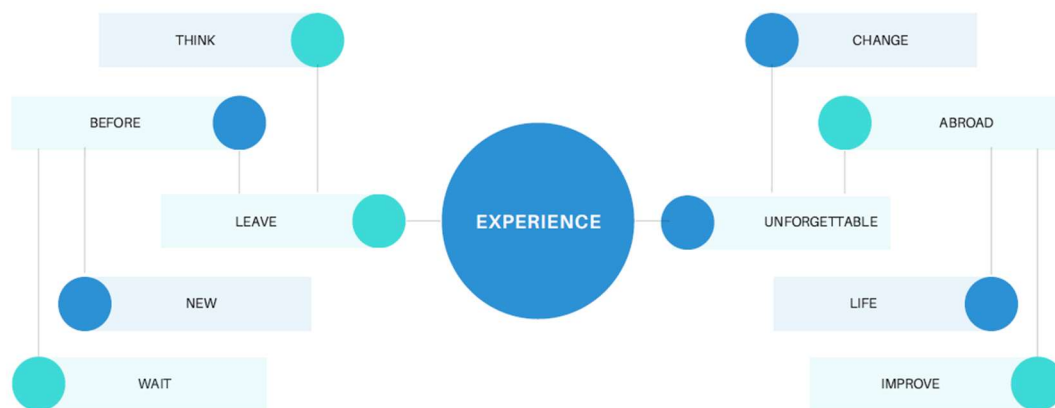


Figure 3. Sequence analysis with “Experience”

Proceeding with the analysis of the association with the second lemma with the highest number of occurrences within the textual corpus examined, we note that “leave” is linked to words like “live” and “discover” (Figure 4). However, the deepening of this lemma also reveals a particular attention to the academic field which is clearly an important step for a student’s career. It is connected to the university path as well and this has been confirmed by the fact that they ask for advice from students who already did a mobility period abroad (this pattern is also confirmed by the sequence analysis with the word “leave”). Following an extract of a student interview: “I would suggest getting in touch with another student who already spent a mobility period abroad in order to be

prepared and not to be too anxious because it will be a remarkable experience” (student who spent a mobility period in China).



Figure 4. Word association with “Leave”

Finally, as far as the third specific lemma is concerned, there is evidence to suggest, looking at Figure 5, that the word “people”, being strongly linked with other words such as “contact”, “moment”, “meet” and “know”, concerns the human dimension of the mobility (the same issue is confirmed by the sequence analysis too). In the words of the students: “if I think to my experience abroad, I have to say that at first I was very scared. The first time I entered the classroom, I could not understand anything, but thanks to the other students and to the professors, I had the chance to become part of university life and I had the most memorable time of my life” (student who spent a mobility period in Japan) and “I would like to say that one of the most beautiful moments is finding ourselves in this experience with other students who maybe come from completely different countries and who study completely different things, but we are all animated and united by the same desire to have a new experience, we all feel the same motivation and, therefore, it is impossible not to build social relationships” (student who spent a mobility period in Lebanon).

According to De Federico (2008), the friendships which are formed in a foreign context thanks to a mobility experience abroad, are exceptionally important as people with different ideological backgrounds can redefine their sense of belonging to certain groups and places.



Figure 5. Word association with “People”

Furthermore, in order to carry out a deeper analysis to emphasize the aspects underlined by the students, a thematic analysis of the elementary contexts was implemented, a tool that made it possible to construct a representation of the contents of the corpus by composing clusters, each of which is characterized by a set of keywords closely related to each other.

The thematic analysis of the elementary contexts allows, in fact, to construct a representation of the contents of the corpus through a few significant clusters, each of which: a) consists of a set of elementary contexts characterized by the same keyword patterns; and b) is described through the lexical units (words, lemmas or categories) that best characterize the elementary contexts from which it is composed. Therefore, it can be stated that the result of the analysis proposes a mapping of isotopy (iso = same; topoi = places) understood as “general” or “specific” themes characterized by the co-occurrence of semantic traits. For this reason, each individual cluster, marked by sets of lexical units that share the same reference contexts, allows the reconstruction of “a thread” of the discourse within the overall texture made up of the corpus.

The software provided a five-cluster solution (Figure 6).

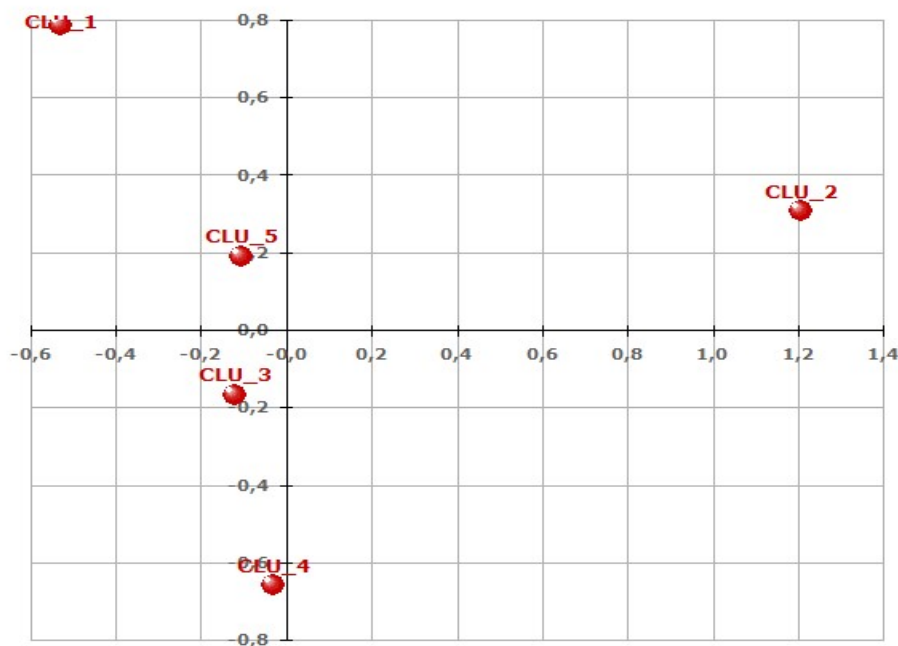


Figure 6. Distribution of clusters on the Cartesian plane

Figure 6 shows that, within the Cartesian plane, there are two clusters (the third and the fifth) which, probably due to the equality of the contents, are very close to the origin of the axis; on the contrary, the distance between the first, the second and the fourth clusters suggests that these are characterized by different themes. Going into more detail, it is possible to note that the third cluster is characterized by terms such as “reach”, “language” and “scholarship”, while the fifth cluster is characterized by words like “Italy”, “return” and “memory”. The breakdown of these clusters and the analysis of the words that make them up, clearly shows how they refer to an organizational sphere of the academic experience (respectively, before and after the academic mobility) since together they explain 62.54% of elementary contexts. Otherwise, the first cluster refers to more psychological issues since it is characterized by terms such as “fear”, “discover” and “challenge” which are typical elements of the pre-departure period. In addition to this, the fourth cluster (that alone explains 15.27% of the elementary contexts) is denoted by the positive impact that mobility has had in the lives of the interviewed students, the latter being characterized by terms such as “people”, “know”, “create”, “encounter” which perfectly shows the feelings at the end of the mobility period. Finally, the second cluster, which explains the lowest percentage of elementary context of the textual corpus

(10.6%), refers to the more formal and administrative aspects of the entire academic mobility process (“degree”, “program”, “semester”, “research”, “lesson”).

Conclusion

As it is shown in this work and underlined by the empirical results of this research, the mobility experience is a crucial event in the career of a university student, not only from a professional point of view but also from the individual one. Indeed, the mobility experience can be considered both an innovative practice for learning as well as a chance to improve the students’ own international identity. The mobility period abroad not only helps students of all ages and backgrounds to develop and share knowledge and experience at institutions and organizations in different countries but also helps them acquire transversal skills, which is a specific added value essential for international profiles ready to face global challenges, as highlighted in the interviews and therefore from the voice of the students.

By enhancing skills and intercultural awareness also through the facilitation of people becoming engaged citizens, the academic mobility can be seen as a cultural intelligence process (Kim, 2017) in the sense of “capability to function affectively across national, ethnic, and organizational cultures” (Livermore, 2015: 4). In this respect, there are four elements that characterize the process of cultural intelligence: *a) the motivation*, that is the enthusiasm to acquire knowledge about a new culture; *b) the cognition*, that is the learning aspect of a nation and its habits, beliefs, behaviors and values; *c) the behavior*, that describes the ability to act appropriately and accordingly in a range of culturally different situations; *d) finally, the metacognition*, that takes into account the lessons learned about the new culture factoring them into a new perspective (Van Dyne et al., 2012; Gooden, Doreen & Creque, 2017).

Overall, the statistical output of the present study confirms that student mobility can be seen as one of the most powerful drivers for change and improvement in higher education. In recent years both the incoming and outgoing flows of mobility (particularly from outside Europe) are even more consistent, demonstrating that the essence of higher education can be viewed as not being confined by borders since the concept of knowledge and the logic of science are universal. In this sense, the universities are more international in scope than most other organizations, and many scholars harbor cosmopolitan views

(Teichler, 2012). Likewise, thanks to the new Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 which is evolving itself and will have almost double fundings compared to the past editions (70% of the funds will be earmarked for mobilities in Europe and beyond its borders whereas 30% will be dedicated to cooperation projects), more and more students should consider participating in this study abroad opportunity (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021).

Therefore, under the slogan “*Enrich your life, open your mind*”, Erasmus+ becomes a powerful learning experience which offers development opportunities for all participants, since the key priorities of the new Erasmus+ Programme are also designed to reach young people with specific needs of fewer opportunities and aims to actively involve them in the project and in society itself.

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