International Academic Mobility and Human Capital Development: Evidence from Erasmus Students in an European Higher Education Institution

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Abstract: International academic mobility has become a strategic instrument for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen internationalisation, enhance student development, and improve institutional competitiveness. Beyond its educational dimension, Erasmus mobility also generates tourism flows, positioning international students as academic tourists who contribute to the economic, cultural, and social development of host destinations. Despite its growing relevance, limited research has examined international mobility simultaneously from the perspectives of higher education management, human capital development, and academic tourism. This study investigates how Erasmus students' motivations, mobility experiences, and competency development influence overall satisfaction and destination loyalty. A quantitative research design was adopted using survey data collected from 74 Erasmus students who completed a mobility period at the Pan-European University in Bratislava, Slovakia. Data were analysed through descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The findings indicate that students' motivations positively influence the quality of the mobility experience, which subsequently contributes to higher levels of satisfaction. Participation in the Erasmus programme promotes the development of important transversal competencies, particularly communication, intercultural, social, and language skills, reinforcing the contribution of international mobility to human capital development. The results also demonstrate that satisfied students are more likely to recommend the host destination, although satisfaction does not significantly influence revisit intention. This study contributes to the literature by integrating perspectives from higher education management, academic tourism, and human capital theory. It highlights the strategic role of international mobility programmes in enhancing student competencies, strengthening institutional attractiveness, and promoting host destinations through students acting as informal ambassadors. The findings provide practical implications for higher education institutions and destination managers seeking to design mobility strategies that maximise educational, institutional, and territorial value creation.

Keywords: International academic mobility, Human capital development, Academic tourism, Erasmus programme, Higher education management, Destination loyalty

1. Introduction

International academic mobility has become a strategic dimension of higher education internationalisation, fostering educational cooperation, intercultural dialogue, and institutional competitiveness. Globalisation has accelerated the movement of students, knowledge, and educational services across borders, making study-abroad programmes an increasingly important component of higher education systems (Gallarza et al., 2024; Pinto et al., 2021; Tang, 2021; Tomasi et al., 2020; Unurlu, 2021). Consequently, international mobility is widely recognised as an effective mechanism for developing intercultural competencies, enhancing employability, and promoting personal and academic growth (Masri, 2017; Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2020).

Beyond its educational dimension, international mobility also generates significant economic, social, and cultural impacts on host destinations. International students consume accommodation, transport, gastronomy, leisure, and cultural services, contributing to local economies while participating actively in the social life of host communities (Pereira et al., 2020). This dual role has led to increasing recognition of students as a specific segment of academic tourists, combining educational objectives with tourism experiences (Unurlu, 2021; Martínez-Roget & Rodríguez, 2021).

Within Europe, the Erasmus Programme represents one of the most successful international mobility initiatives, promoting academic cooperation and cultural exchange across higher education institutions. During their mobility period, students engage not only in academic activities but also in tourism-related experiences,

influencing destination image through their perceptions, recommendations, and interactions with local communities. Nevertheless, research has primarily examined Erasmus mobility from educational or institutional perspectives, while the tourism dimension of these experiences remains comparatively underexplored.

At the same time, international mobility constitutes an important mechanism for human capital development. Participation in mobility programmes enhances communication, language proficiency, intercultural awareness, adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, all of which are increasingly valued in global labour markets (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Filipe et al., 2021; Tomasi et al., 2020). Consequently, mobility programmes create value not only for students but also for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen their international attractiveness and graduate employability.

Although previous studies have examined international academic mobility from educational, tourism or internationalisation perspectives, two important research gaps remain. First, Erasmus students have rarely been analysed simultaneously as academic tourists and contributors to destination development. Second, limited research has integrated Human Capital Development and Academic Tourism within a single analytical framework, despite the growing recognition that international mobility simultaneously generates educational, institutional and territorial value. Addressing these gaps contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Erasmus mobility as both a higher education strategy and a driver of destination competitiveness.

This study addresses these gaps by examining Erasmus students at the Pan-European University in Bratislava, Slovakia, from an integrated perspective combining higher education management, human capital development, and academic tourism. Specifically, it investigates how students' motivations influence their mobility experience, how this experience contributes to competency development and overall satisfaction, and how satisfaction affects destination loyalty through recommendation and revisit intentions.

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it integrates perspectives from higher education management, human capital theory, and academic tourism within a single analytical framework. Second, it provides empirical evidence on the competencies developed through Erasmus mobility and their relationship with students' experiences and satisfaction. Third, it offers practical implications for higher education institutions and destination managers seeking to maximise the educational, institutional, and territorial value generated by international mobility programmes.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses. Section 3 describes the methodology, Section 4 presents the empirical findings, and Section 5 discusses the main conclusions and implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Mobility

International academic mobility has become a strategic pillar of higher education internationalisation, enabling universities to strengthen international cooperation, improve institutional attractiveness, and enhance graduate employability. Within Europe, the Erasmus Programme represents one of the most successful mobility initiatives, promoting academic exchange while fostering intercultural understanding and European integration (European Commission, 2020).

Human Capital Theory considers education, training and international experience as investments that enhance individuals' productivity, employability and long-term economic performance (Becker, 1964). Within higher education, international academic mobility represents an important mechanism for developing transversal competencies, intercultural awareness, adaptability and global citizenship, all of which are recognised components of contemporary human capital (OECD, 2017). Consequently, Erasmus mobility should be understood not only as an internationalisation strategy but also as a strategic investment in the development of human capital for both individuals and higher education institutions.

Previous research identifies academic, personal, and professional development as the main motivations for participating in international mobility programmes (Masri, 2017; Надирова, 2018; Lesjak et al., 2015). Students seek opportunities to improve language proficiency, experience different educational systems, expand international networks, and enhance future career prospects. Beyond academic learning, mobility experiences contribute to the development of transversal competencies, including intercultural communication, teamwork, adaptability, independence, and critical thinking (Rodríguez et al., 2013; Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Tomasi et al., 2020; Filipe et al., 2021).

From a higher education management perspective, these competencies represent important forms of human capital. Universities increasingly recognise mobility programmes as strategic investments that improve graduate employability, institutional reputation, and international competitiveness (Scott, 2015). Consequently, international mobility should be understood not only as an educational activity but also as a mechanism for creating value for students, higher education institutions, and society.

2.2 Student Mobility and Academic Tourism

The idea of academic tourism relates to travel driven mainly by educational goals that also includes activities like cultural exploration, leisure pursuits, and temporary stays in a host location. Compared to traditional tourists, academic tourists usually stay longer in places and interact more extensively with local communities.

Students involved in international mobility programmes often exhibit tourism behaviours, such as visiting cultural sites, travelling within the host country, and engaging in leisure activities. As a result, they can have significant economic and cultural impacts on host destinations. Analysing international students as academic tourists thus offers an interdisciplinary view that connects tourism studies with higher education research.

Tourism research emphasises the importance of motivation in influencing travel behaviour. According to the push–pull framework introduced by Crompton (1979), individuals are pushed to travel by internal motivations and pulled by the appealing features of specific destinations. Push factors include internal motivations like the desire to escape, learn, or develop personally, while pull factors are related to destination traits such as cultural attractions, infrastructure, and reputation (Lee, 2009; Nikjoo & Katabi, 2015).

This framework has also been widely used in studies of academic tourism and student mobility (Filipe et al., 2020; Martínez-Roget & Rodríguez, 2020; Deyà-Tortella et al., 2020; Unurlu, 2020). In this context, push factors include students' motivations for gaining international experience, exploring cultures, and learning languages, while pull factors refer to the features of the host destination or educational institution.

International mobility is therefore closely linked with tourism experiences undertaken during the stay abroad. These experiences shape students' perceptions of the destination and may influence their satisfaction levels. In tourism research, satisfaction is a key outcome of travel experiences and is commonly associated with behavioural intentions such as destination recommendation and revisit intention (Deyà-Tortella et al., 2020; Preko et al., 2018).

2.3 Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty

Satisfaction is widely recognised as one of the strongest predictors of destination loyalty. Tourism literature consistently demonstrates that positive travel experiences increase visitors' willingness to recommend destinations and, in some circumstances, revisit them (Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

This relationship has also been examined in academic tourism. Students who report positive mobility experiences generally express higher levels of satisfaction and stronger recommendation intentions towards both the host university and destination (Deyà-Tortella et al., 2021; Filipe et al., 2021). However, revisit intention appears to be less consistent among international students because future travel decisions are frequently influenced by financial resources, geographical distance, professional opportunities, or the desire to experience new destinations.

Although previous studies have explored motivations, satisfaction and destination loyalty separately (Lesjak et al., 2015; Deyà-Tortella et al., 2021; Filipe et al., 2021; Martínez-Roget & Rodríguez, 2021), relatively few have integrated these constructs with Human Capital Development within a single analytical framework. Addressing this gap provides a broader understanding of international academic mobility as a process simultaneously generating educational, institutional and tourism-related outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Conceptual Model

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between international academic mobility, human capital development, student satisfaction, and destination loyalty. The conceptual framework assumes that students' motivations influence the quality of their mobility experience, which subsequently affects satisfaction and behavioural intentions towards the host destination. Based on previous research on international academic mobility, academic tourism, and destination loyalty (Lesjak et al., 2015; Martínez-Roget & Rodríguez, 2021; Filipe et al., 2021), four research hypotheses were formulated:

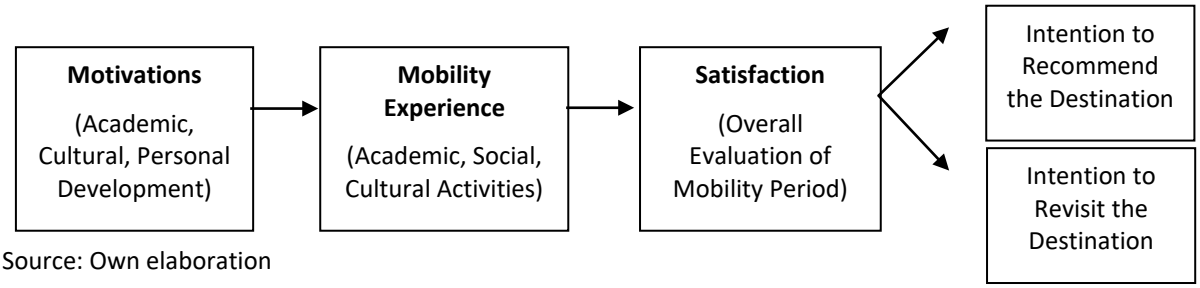
H1: Students' motivations positively influence the quality of the mobility experience.

H2: The mobility experience positively influences students' overall satisfaction.

H3: Students' satisfaction positively influences their intention to recommend the host destination.

H4: Students' satisfaction positively influences their intention to revisit the host destination.

Based on these relationships, the conceptual model proposed in this study assumes a sequential relationship between motivations, mobility experiences, satisfaction, and destination loyalty outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework proposed in this study. The model assumes that students' motivations influence the quality of their mobility experience. In turn, the perceived mobility experience affects overall satisfaction, which subsequently influences destination loyalty outcomes, namely the intention to recommend the destination and the intention to revisit it in the future.



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Erasmus Mobility Experience and Destination Loyalty

3.2 Questionnaire Design

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from previous studies on international academic mobility, academic tourism, tourist behaviour, satisfaction, destination loyalty, and human capital development (Lesjak et al., 2015; Deyà-Tortella et al., 2021; Filipe et al., 2021). The questionnaire comprised four sections i) respondents' socio-demographic and academic characteristics; ii) motivations for participating in the Erasmus programme; iii) mobility experiences, tourism behaviour, and competencies developed during the mobility period; iv) satisfaction and destination loyalty. All attitudinal items were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree")**.**

3.3 Sample and Data Collection

The empirical study was conducted at the Pan-European University in Bratislava, Slovakia. The target population comprised 317 incoming Erasmus students who completed a mobility period between the academic years 2012/2013 and 2021/2022. Data were collected online between 9 June and 6 July 2022 through the University's International Relations Office. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. A total of 74 valid questionnaires were obtained, corresponding to a response rate of 23.3% (Table 1)**.**

Table 1: Sample datasheet

Study population	**International students of Pan-European University (from 2012/2013 and 2021/2022)**
Application location	Pan-European University, Bratislava, Slovakia
Population dimension	317 incoming students
Sample dimension	74 respondents
Sample period	June 9th to July 6th of 2022
Data collection instrument	Google Forms online survey
Type of questionnaire	Survey by questionnaire
Error	10%
Confidence level	95% with a z-value of 1.96
Response rate	23,3%

Source: Own elaboration

Although relatively small, the sample is appropriate for the exploratory objectives of this study and is comparable to previous research on academic tourism and international student mobility (Deyà-Tortella et al., 2021; Filipe et al., 2021).

3.4 Data Analysis and Variables

The analysis concentrated on descriptive statistics and comparative interpretation of the results. Due to the limited number of items used to measure some constructs, exploratory factor analysis was deemed inappropriate for this study. This approach provides a clear understanding of students' perceptions and experiences while maintaining methodological consistency with the dataset's characteristics. Therefore, the data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

Data analysis primarily relied on descriptive statistics to characterise the sample and summarise respondents' perceptions of their mobility experience. Frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were calculated to identify the most significant motivations, experiences, and perceived outcomes of participation in the Erasmus programme. For variable sets with an insufficient number of items, exploratory factor analysis was not conducted. In cases where item coverage was sufficient (motivations, skills development, and satisfaction), exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was employed as a heuristic, data-reduction technique to explore dominant underlying dimensions within this specific Erasmus context, rather than to confirm latent constructs. Sampling adequacy and factorability were assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical results of the study, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis used to test the proposed hypotheses.

4.1 Sociodemographic and Academic Profile

The sample comprised 74 Erasmus students, predominantly female (64.9%), aged between 22 and 30 years (72.9%). Participants represented 21 nationalities, with Italy (27%), Spain (14.9%) and France (9.5%) accounting for the largest groups. Most respondents were undergraduate students (78.4%) who completed a study mobility period during one academic semester. The majority were enrolled in Law, Media, Economics, Informatics and International Relations programmes (Table 2).

Table 2: Sociodemographic profile

Gender	**N**	**Total %**		**Country of Origin of Erasmus Students**	**N**	**Total %**
Female	48	64.9%		Albania	3	4%
Male	26	35.1%		Austria	1	1.4%
				Azerbaijan	3	4%
Age	**N**	**Total %**		Cambodia	1	1.4%
19-21	12	16.2%		France	7	9.5%
22-25	28	37.8%		Georgia	1	1.4%
26-30	26	35.1%		Germany	1	1.4%
31-35	7	9.5%		Greece	3	4%
>35	1	1.4%		Indonesia	2	2.7%
				Italy	20	27%
Students' Employment Status	**N**	**Total %**		Kyrgyzstan	3	4%
Employed by another	23	31%		Laos	1	1.4%
Self-employed	5	6.8%		Latvia	1	1.4%
Unemployed	7	9.5%		Malaysia	5	6.8%
Student	27	36.4%		México	1	1.4%
Student worker	11	14.9%		Montenegro	1	1.4%
European volunteer	1	1.4%		Peru	2	2.7%
				Portugal	4	5.4%

Gender	N	Total %		Country of Origin of Erasmus Students	N	Total %
				Spain	11	14.9%
				Taiwan	1	1.4%
				Turkey	2	2.7%

Source: Own elaboration

4.2 Mobility Motivations and Competency Development

Students' motivations for participating in the Erasmus programme were primarily related to personal enrichment and international experience. The most frequently reported motivations were the opportunity to gain new experiences and knowledge (55.4%), travel and leisure opportunities (48.6%), and living in another country (44.6%). Academic prestige, access to higher education and developing an international career were considerably less relevant (Table 3). These findings confirm previous research suggesting that international mobility is mainly driven by cultural, experiential and personal development motivations rather than purely academic considerations (Lesjak et al., 2015; Masri, 2017).

Participation in the Erasmus programme also contributed to the development of important transversal competencies. Communication skills (40.0%), social skills (42.9%), intercultural competences (34.3%) and language practice (32.9%) were the competencies most frequently identified by respondents (Table 4). These findings reinforce the contribution of international mobility to human capital development by enhancing competencies that are increasingly valued in international labour markets (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Filipe et al., 2021; Tomasi et al., 2020).

Table 3: Motivating factors for Erasmus Mobility

Motivating factors	N	Total %	% Cases
MF1- Travel and leisure opportunities	36	16.2%	48.6%
MF2- Exit the comfort zone/escape	21	9.5%	28.4%
MF3- Curiosity	5	2.3%	6.8%
MF4- Opportunity to have new experiences/knowledge	41	18.5%	55.4%
MF5- Meet new people	18	8.1%	24.3%
MF6- To learn or improve a language	25	11.3%	33.8%
MF7- Prestige	0	0%	0%
MF8- Experience of living in another country	33	14.9%	44.6%
MF9- Learn about different cultures	11	5.0%	14.9%
MF10- Experience different educational systems	6	2.7%	8.1%
MF11- Get a special academic education / differentiated training	3	1.4%	4.1%
MF12- Access to higher education	0	0%	0%
MF13- Develop the academic career	2	0.9%	2.7%
MF14- Increase employment perspective	3	1.4%	4.1%
MF15- Improve the curriculum	10	4.5%	13.5%
MF16- Developing an international career	0	0%	0%
MF17- Opportunity to establish international contact networks	4	1.8%	5.4%
MF18- Influence of social context (friends/colleagues/relatives/teachers)	1	0.5%	1.4%
MF19- Availability of scholarship	3	1.4%	4.1%

Source: Own elaboration

Table 4: Skills Developed during Erasmus Mobility

Skills developed	N	Total %	% Cases
SK1- Intercultural competences	24	11,4%	34,3%
SK2- Communication skills	28	13,3%	40,0%
SK3- Social skills	30	14,3%	42,9%
SK4- Practice a new language	23	11,0%	32,9%
SK5-Tolerance	3	1,4%	4,3%
SK6-Money management	12	5,7%	17,1%
SK7-Time management	3	1,4%	4,3%
SK8-Organization skills	8	3,8%	11,4%
SK9-Decision-making skills	7	3,3%	10,0%
SK10-Conflict resolution skills	1	0,5%	1,4%
SK11-Problem-solving skills	14	6,7%	20,0%
SK12-Creativity	2	1,0%	2,9%
SK13-Personal identity development	16	7,6%	22,9%
SK14-Emotional development	8	3,8%	11,4%
SK15-Development of critical thinking	4	1,9%	5,7%
SK16-Develop observation skills	1	0,5%	1,4%
SK17-Teamwork skills	4	1,9%	5,7%
SK18-Increased confidence	11	5,2%	15,7%
SK19-Multifaceted vision of the world	11	5,2%	15,7%

Source: Own elaboration

4.3 Mobility Experience, Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty

The results indicate that Erasmus students actively engaged in tourism activities during their mobility period. More than half of the respondents (58%) considered themselves tourists while studying abroad. Most travelled extensively within Slovakia and neighbouring countries, particularly Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic, while also participating in nightlife, cultural events, gastronomy and city tours. These findings reinforce the concept of international students as academic tourists who combine educational objectives with tourism experiences.

Overall satisfaction with the mobility experience was high. Students expressed particularly positive evaluations regarding transportation, safety, the destination itself, social integration, accommodation and the university environment. Reliability analysis demonstrated good internal consistency of the satisfaction scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$), allowing the construction of a composite satisfaction index with a mean score of 3.99 (Table 5).

Destination loyalty results indicate that 93.2% of respondents would recommend Bratislava as a tourism destination, while 75.7% would recommend the host university. These findings suggest that positive mobility experiences strengthen destination attractiveness through students acting as informal ambassadors.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of the Satisfaction Index

Variable	Mean	Mean (S.D.)	Min	Max
Satisfaction with mobility experience	3.99	0.61	2.17	5.00

Source: Own elaboration

The findings demonstrate that Erasmus mobility extends beyond its educational function by contributing significantly to Human Capital Development. Participants reported substantial improvements in communication, intercultural interaction, language proficiency and social competencies, confirming that international mobility fosters the development of transversal skills increasingly valued in contemporary labour markets. These findings are consistent with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which considers education

and international experience as strategic investments that enhance individual productivity, employability and long-term career prospects. They also reinforce previous research highlighting Erasmus mobility as an important mechanism for developing intercultural competence, adaptability and global citizenship (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Filipe et al., 2021). From a higher education management perspective, these competencies strengthen institutional internationalisation strategies while enhancing graduates' preparedness for increasingly global and multicultural working environments.

4.4 Correlation and Hypothesis Testing

Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association between mobility experience and recommendation intention ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.05$), whereas no meaningful relationship was found with revisit intention (Table 6).

Regression analysis supports the proposed conceptual model (Table 7 and Table 8). Students' motivations positively influenced the quality of the mobility experience (H1), which in turn contributed to higher levels of satisfaction (H2). Satisfaction significantly increased students' intention to recommend the destination ($\beta = 0.123$, $p = 0.010$), supporting H3. However, no significant relationship was found between satisfaction and revisit intention ($\beta = 0.024$, $p = 0.804$); therefore, H4 was not supported.

Overall, the findings indicate that Erasmus mobility contributes simultaneously to student development, destination promotion and institutional internationalisation, reinforcing the strategic role of international academic mobility within higher education management.

Table 6: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
Mobility experience	1		
Recommendation intention	0.30*	1	
Revisit intention	0.03	-0.11	1

* $p < 0.05$

Source: Own elaboration

Table 7: Regression Results for Satisfaction and Recommendation Intention

Variable	β	t	p
Satisfaction index	0.123	2.64	0.010

Source: Own elaboration

Table 8: Regression Results for Satisfaction and Recommendation Intention

Variable	β	t	p
Satisfaction index	0.024	0.25	0.804

Source: Own elaboration

Overall, the results suggest that Erasmus mobility experiences play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of the host destination and their willingness to recommend it to others. However, the findings also indicate that positive mobility experiences do not necessarily translate into intentions to revisit, highlighting potential differences between academic mobility behaviour and traditional tourism patterns.

Beyond their educational outcomes, the findings reinforce the role of Erasmus students as academic tourists whose experiences generate value for host destinations. High levels of satisfaction and recommendation intention suggest that international students act as informal destination ambassadors, promoting destinations through positive word-of-mouth and personal networks. These results support previous research on academic tourism and indicate that international mobility simultaneously creates educational, institutional and territorial value. Consequently, Erasmus programmes should be understood not only as higher education initiatives but also as strategic instruments for destination promotion and international visibility.

5. Conclusions

This study examined international academic mobility through the complementary perspectives of higher education management, human capital development, and academic tourism. The findings confirm that Erasmus students represent a distinct segment of academic tourists whose mobility experiences generate educational, institutional and territorial value. Beyond academic activities, international students actively engage with host destinations, contributing to cultural exchange and destination promotion.

The empirical results support the proposed conceptual model. Students' motivations positively influence the quality of the mobility experience (H1), which in turn enhances overall satisfaction (H2). Satisfaction significantly increases students' intention to recommend the destination (H3), confirming previous research on destination loyalty. However, satisfaction does not significantly influence revisit intention (H4), suggesting that loyalty patterns among international students differ from those of conventional tourists and are more strongly influenced by future educational, professional and personal opportunities.

The findings further demonstrate that Erasmus mobility contributes to Human Capital Development by strengthening communication, intercultural, language and social competencies that enhance graduate employability while supporting higher education internationalisation strategies.

From a practical perspective, universities and destination management organisations should strengthen collaboration to design mobility programmes that integrate academic excellence with cultural and tourism experiences. Recognising international students as long-stay academic tourists and informal destination ambassadors can simultaneously enhance institutional attractiveness, destination competitiveness and territorial value creation.

These findings also have important implications for higher education management and destination governance. Universities should recognise Erasmus mobility as a strategic investment that extends beyond internationalisation by strengthening human capital, institutional attractiveness and international competitiveness. Likewise, destination management organisations and local authorities should actively collaborate with higher education institutions to maximise the educational, economic and territorial benefits generated by international student mobility.

Despite the limitations associated with the sample size and the focus on a single higher education institution, this study provides empirical evidence that Erasmus mobility represents a strategic investment in Human Capital Development while simultaneously generating educational, institutional and territorial value. These findings highlight the importance of Erasmus programmes not only as educational initiatives but also as strategic management instruments that strengthen institutional competitiveness, foster destination governance and contribute to sustainable territorial development.

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