

Erasmus Mobility: Fostering Cultural Sensitivity Through Youth Exchange

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Abstract: The recent massive expansion of Tourism has generated intense debate, generally expressing support but, at times, voicing displeasure more than is desirable. This underscores the need for a discussion on sociocultural sustainability. The CultSense project (“Sensitizing Young Travellers for Local Cultures”) addresses these issues, identifying ways to foster young travellers’ cultural sensitivity through education. Students are the next generation of travellers, and Tourism’s future and role as a sustainability driver heavily relies on them and their attitudes. A specific context that illustrates the opportunities provided by education to approach these matters is the European Union’s Erasmus+ programme. This research presents the findings of a study undertaken among Erasmus students, at different higher education institutions across specific European countries (namely Portugal, Spain, and Finland). Following a quantitative survey-based methodological approach, this work was designed to achieve five key objectives: analysing students’ behaviours as visitors at the host community using the Cosmopolitan scale (Saran and Kalliny, 2012), exploring their integration experiences, identifying their perceived benefits of the experience – both for themselves and the local communities, understanding students’ perceptions of their impact on the host community and local culture, and examining the likelihood of students’ perceived benefits affecting their willingness to recommend the host country/region. According to the findings, the highest-rated perceived benefits among Erasmus students were experiencing everyday life, broadening horizons, and developing a thirst for travelling, which strongly align with the concept of cosmopolitanism itself. Students have developed a sense of belonging to the community, particularly among those who completed their mobility in Portugal, as indicated by their more positive outcomes throughout the experience as a visitor. Students overwhelmingly disagreed with the assumption that Erasmus participants hurt local culture and, instead, they viewed their contributions positively. Erasmus students’ positive perceptions during their stay in a foreign country will encourage them to spread the word and make them critical informants about local culture and traditions when they return home. Therefore, this study suggests that investing in more positive Erasmus experiences will create a ripple effect, transforming temporary students into long-term ambassadors, who can advocate for more responsible and culturally aware tourism practices.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Cultural sensitivity, Erasmus+ programme, Mobility, Sustainable tourism, Youth exchange

1. Introduction

Tourism is widely recognized as a powerful driver of economic development and societal promotion. However, it also represents challenges for host communities, impacting them both positively and negatively, and affecting the lives of the residents (Moreira Lima, 2012). Particularly when situations of high visitor concentration are observed in cities such as Amsterdam, Barcelona, Dubrovnik, and Venice, this phenomenon has resulted in complaints and dissatisfaction among residents (Alexis, 2017; Hughes, 2018; Cassinger, 2019; Hempen, 2020). Consequently, the need to investigate and develop strategies that increase visitors' awareness of local cultures, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation between tourists and residents, is imperative (Marques, 2021).

An educational mobility context such as the European Union's Erasmus+ programme represents an opportunity for travel and intercultural exchange that can significantly impact not only participants but also host communities. The youth embody an important demographic segment in this context. Despite the documented benefits of youth travel, research on its impact on host communities remains limited (UNWTO and WYSE, 2011). Furthermore, young travellers are often perceived as merely budget-conscious consumers, which has led many tourism impact studies to overlook their potential as agents of positive change (UNWTO and WYSE, 2008). This oversight is particularly noteworthy as the youth can have a significant impact on tourism demand due to their potential to shape new perspectives within society and the tourism industry alike (Caber et al., 2020). The good practices adopted by young travellers will be maintained in their adult lives, and they will exert an influential effect on their social and professional circles, leading to better tourism practices, now and in the future. This paper, within the scope of the CultSense project, addresses the perceptions of Erasmus students participating in a mobility programme, at different higher education institutions in specific European countries (namely Portugal, Spain, and Finland). The conceptual framework underlying this research suggests that perceptions are

likely to be different according to host countries, and to what students have experienced there; moreover, cosmopolitanism, being more common among students participating in mobility programmes, is also likely to be positively correlated with specific cultural experiences and perceived benefits, for both young travellers and host communities. These hypotheses will be tested.

In addition to this introductory chapter, this paper is organized into four different sections. The literature review focuses on cultural sensitivity in tourism and the role of educational mobility programmes, particularly Erasmus+, within the framework of cosmopolitanism. The methodology adopted is presented in the subsequent section, followed by an analysis and discussion of the results. Finally, the concluding section examines the key findings, acknowledges limitations, and outlines directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Sensitivity and Tourism

Globalization has increased interdependence among people from diverse cultural backgrounds, making the development of intercultural competencies essential (Pintor and Premazzi, 2024). Understanding and respecting different cultures has become crucial in effective intercultural communication (Chen and Starosta, 1998/1999).

Several models have been proposed to study the development of cultural sensitivity. Bennett (1986) suggests that developing cultural sensitivity requires not only knowledge and skills but also self-reflection, leading to new understanding, awareness, and attitudes. Papadopoulos, Tilki, and Taylor's (1998) Model of Cultural Competence Development, although originally designed for the health and social care domain, facilitates understanding of the concept. This model outlines four stages: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence. Cultural awareness, as the base of communication, involves the ability to step back from our own perspective and become aware of our cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions (Quappe and Cantatore, 2005). This awareness becomes crucial when interacting with people from other cultures, as individuals see, interpret, and evaluate things differently based on their cultural background.

While the concept of cultural sensitivity has been extensively discussed in fields such as health sciences, in particular nursing (Marques et al., 2023), it remains inadequately conceptualized in tourism studies (Viken et al., 2021). From a tourism perspective, cultural sensitivity is conceptualized as a disposition that can be enhanced and mobilized through reflection on one's own pre-assumptions, cultural norms, and values (Viken et al., 2021). It is a disposition, awareness, mindset, and competence that can lead to more positive (tourism) experiences (Marques and Engberg, 2022) and can be learned or developed (Marques and Engberg, 2022; Viken et al., 2021). Cultural sensitivity in travel is understood at the intersection of intercultural competence, cosmopolitanism, and sustainability (Marques and Engberg, 2022; Marques et al., 2023). For the purpose of this paper, the concept and implications of cosmopolitanism will be adopted, along with its relationship to students' integration experience and their perceived benefits of the Erasmus+ programme.

Considering individuals' behaviour transcending individual cultural and geographical contexts, cosmopolitanism has gained prominence amid globalization and can be applied to diverse situations and contexts. At its core, cosmopolitanism is about culture and the self (Saran and Kalliny, 2012). It represents an orientation and a cultural disposition towards engaging with the Other, involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness regarding peoples, places, and experiences from different cultures (Hannerz, 1990; Saran and Kalliny, 2012, Tomlinson, 1999).

2.2 Education, Cosmopolitanism and Mobility Programmes

(Higher) Education plays a crucial role in equipping young people with tools to navigate cultural differences and engage in healthier and more effective interactions within the tourism context (Marques and Oliveira, 2023). Study abroad experiences, in particular, help students enhance their observational skills, build tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, and adapt more successfully to new cultural settings (Sobkowiak, 2019). These educational programmes not only expose students to different cultural environments but also challenge them to expand their worldviews by engaging with new perspectives.

Moreover, intercultural experiences stimulate students to engage in self-reflection, particularly regarding their own cultural identities, which contributes significantly to their growth in self-awareness. As students interact with diverse cultures, they are prompted to compare their home culture with that of their host country, which encourages the development of greater understanding of both their own and others' cultural norms (Sobkowiak, 2019).

Since 1987, the European Union Erasmus+ programme has been helping students gain skills through study or training abroad, and, at the same time allowing them cross-cultural learning opportunities (Sobkowiak, 2019). Besides the well-acknowledged benefits in terms of educational, professional, and personal growth, Erasmus students will learn about the host country, its culture and people, and have rather different experiences, as visitors in a foreign country (Sobkowiak, 2019; Silva et al., 2022). Exposure to the host culture will push students to reassess and adjust their personal values when faced with unfamiliar social and cultural contexts (Lesjak et al., 2015). This process will, in turn, enhance their ability to communicate across cultural boundaries and develop a deeper appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives (Asoodar et al., 2017). In addition, surrounded by other Erasmus students, they will have many opportunities to get involved in intercultural collaborations (Sobkowiak, 2019).

The impact of these educational experiences extends far beyond individual participants to significantly influence host communities (Silva et al., 2022). Educational experiences in which the youth come to appreciate the places and cultures they visit will minimise the negative impact of tourism and create a more balanced relationship between visitors and residents: as tourists will appreciate more the places they visit and they will be more appreciated by the people who live in those places (Richards and Marques, 2018).

Research linking cosmopolitanism and Erasmus students (e.g. Salomão et al., 2022; Cicchelli, 2011; Fidolini, 2013; Bilecen, 2016) reveals a complex relationship between mobility, cultural exchange, and the development of cosmopolitan identities. Despite the significant role of international mobility programmes in enhancing intercultural competence (Pintor and Premazzi, 2024), recent research on the Erasmus+ programmes and cosmopolitanism presents intriguing and seemingly contradictory results. On the one hand, a study by Salomão et al. (2022), exploring the relationship between consumer cosmopolitanism and the decision to enroll in the Erasmus+ programme, indicates that higher levels of consumer cosmopolitanism actually decrease the likelihood of students enrolling in the programme. On the other hand, a study conducted by Cicchelli (2011) with French Erasmus students, analysing how Erasmus students develop a cosmopolitan relationship with the world, highlights how these students developed a broader understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures. Fidolini (2013) discusses Cicchelli's work on how travel experiences, particularly through the Erasmus+ programme, contribute to the cosmopolitan socialization of European youth. The research underscores the importance of these experiences in shaping a transnational view of cultural processes and aiding the transition of youth into adulthood with a cosmopolitan outlook.

Moreover, Cicchelli (2013) emphasized the role of exchange programmes reinforcing European mobility among students, fostering a sense of European identity and mutual understanding. Bilecen's study (2016) focuses on international doctoral students in Germany and how their study abroad experiences foster cosmopolitan identifications. The research highlights the value these students attribute to cultural differences and their ability to navigate multiple cultural perspectives, a phenomenon termed "multifocality". Flexibility and the aptitude to adapt to various cultural contexts are identified as key competences developed through these experiences.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach, combining secondary data analysis through literature review with primary data collection. An online survey was conducted using the Qualtrics platform, between March 31 and May 23, 2023. The survey targeted incoming Erasmus students participating in mobility programmes at higher education institutions across specific European countries, namely Portugal, Spain, and Finland.

3.1 Research Questions and Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was developed through modifications to the CultSense survey (CSS) (Marques et al., 2023), incorporating validated scales from multiple sources. The survey includes different aspects of cultural sensitivity, such as intercultural competence, cosmopolitanism, travel benefits, and perception of interactions (Marques and Oliveira, 2023). For the purpose of this paper, only a selection of variables was considered, namely the scale of cosmopolitanism (Saran and Kalliny, 2012), as well as elements from the WYSE survey (2018). Additional analysis and further exploration of the survey results will be discussed in other publications.

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire, which was applied in English, was sent to the Erasmus coordinators of the universities involved in the CultSense project, to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions, along with agreement. The survey link was emailed to incoming Erasmus students via the Erasmus coordinators at the participating universities.

The sections of the questionnaire whose results will be analysed in this paper are as follows:

- Participant Information: collects data on participants' gender, nationality, type of study programme, mobility period, area of studies, and home and host universities;
- Cosmopolitanism Scale (COSMOSCALE): a unidimensional six-item scale (likert type from 1 - Strongly Disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree), as proposed by Saran and Kalliny (2012) to measure cosmopolitanism and adopted in various tourism studies (Ewers and Shockley, 2023; Morán-Huertas et al., 2021; Zulkifle and Aziz, 2023);
- Integration Experience: question focused on the students' experiences during the process of integration within their Erasmus mobility, through 6 items (likert-type scale from 0=no contact at all to 10=a lot of contact);
- Students' perceived benefits of the Erasmus mobility experience, through 11 items (likert-type scale from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree);
- Students' perceptions of Erasmus students' impact on the host community and local culture, through 3 items (likert-type scale from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree);
- Advocacy and Promotion: students' likelihood to recommend their host country to others upon returning home.

3.2 Data Analysis and Respondents' Profile

Data was analysed through Qualtrics and additional analyses were performed with SPSS 29, namely descriptive and inferential analyses. Kruskal-Wallis' tests were conducted to compare results among host countries, and Spearman's tests were used to test the hypothesis of a relationship between cosmopolitanism levels and both integration experiences and perceived benefits.

The survey yielded 53 valid questionnaires, with a sample predominantly composed of female Erasmus students (69.8%), attending courses in Portugal (49%), Spain (15%), Finland (26.4%), and others (9.4%). Most were experienced travellers, as 62.27% had travelled abroad more than four times over the previous five years.

The respondents' educational backgrounds were very diverse (e.g. Engineering, Computer Science, Psychology, Social Services, Food Science, Arts and Culture, Media Communication), being Tourism and Leisure the most frequent courses (24%), followed by Business Administration (16%).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Cosmopolitanism

The COSMOSCALE (Table 1), used to measure cosmopolitan attitudes, demonstrated high reliability in this study ($\alpha = 0.813$), consistent with Saran and Kalliny's original study ($\alpha = 0.78$) and prior studies (e.g. Morán-Huertas et al., 2021: $\alpha = 0.84$). The table presents the results to statements measuring cosmopolitanism, including willingness to talk and learn about other cultures and the importance of having favourable views of other communities to reduce global conflict (Saran and Kalliny, 2012). The results indicate that Erasmus students show high levels of openness and respect towards diverse cultures. The mean scores on items such as "I think it's good to spend time with people willing to talk and learn about other cultures" ($M = 4.66$) and "I think if people had a positive attitude towards other communities, there would be less conflict in the world" ($M = 4.68$) suggest a strong inclination towards intercultural engagement.

Table 1: Results of the cosmopolitanism scale (COSMOSCALE) (n = 50)

Statements	Min.	Max.	M	St. Dev.	Cronbach's α
I think it's good to spend time with people who are willing to talk and learn about other cultures.	3.00	5.00	4.66	0.557	0.813
I think I respect other people's culture the way I respect mine.	2.00	5.00	4.62	0.697	
I think if people had a positive attitude towards other communities, there would be less conflict in the world.	3.00	5.00	4.68	0.513	
I think that to be successful one needs to be able to use materials, information, knowledge, etc. from other cultures.	3.00	5.00	4.42	0.673	
I am ready to learn about other cultures through listening, observing, thinking, and reflecting.	3.00	5.00	4.66	0.626	
I think reading about world events is worthwhile.	2.00	5.00	4.44	0.705	

Statements	Min.	Max.	M	St. Dev.	Cronbach's α
Min.: minimum; Max.: maximum; M: mean; St. Dev.: Standard Deviation					

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Kruskal-Wallis' test results (Table 2) reveal no statistically significant differences between host countries ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2: Kruskal-Wallis' test results of COSMOSCALE between host countries

	n	M	Md	MR
COSMOSCALE				
Portugal	25	27.32	29.00	26.26
Finland	8	27.33	27.50	29.75
Spain	12	28.63	29.00	23.92
Others	5	26.80	28.00	18.70
Total	50			
Kruskal-Wallis' test results: H=2.048; df=3; p=0.563				
n: cases; M: mean; Md: median; MR: mean rank; df: degrees of freedom; p: significance level				

Source: Author's own elaboration.

4.2 Integration Experience

As shown in Table 3, Erasmus students had more contact with other Erasmus students ($M = 7.99$ on a 1-10 scale) than with local people ($M = 4.79$). They also had more contact with local food and drinks ($M = 6.43$) than with local customs ($M = 4.65$) or local dress code ($M = 3.80$). This suggests that although Erasmus students had some opportunities to interact with the local culture, they did not achieve complete immersion in the host community. However, their contact with foreign cultures through their international peers sensitized them and allowed them to learn about cultural diversity as stated in 4.3.

Table 3: Erasmus Students' integration within their Erasmus mobility (n = 53)

	Min.	Max.	M	St. Dev.	rho
Other Erasmus Students	1.00	10.00	7.99	2.27	.015
Local friends and family (whom you knew before the trip started)	0.00	10.00	2.00	2.87	.006
Local people (excluding family and friends)	0.00	10.00	4.79	2.78	-.137
Local food and drinks	0.00	10.00	6.43	2.93	-.024
Local dress code	0.00	10.00	3.80	2.95	-.081
Local customs	0.00	10.00	4.65	2.72	-.296*
rho = Spearman correlation; *Correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2 tailed)					

Source: Author's own elaboration.

According to Spearman's test results (rho in Table 3), the students who demonstrate higher levels of cosmopolitanism have had less contact with local customs.

4.3 Perceived Benefits of the Erasmus Experience

The research identified significant personal development outcomes from the Erasmus experience. The Erasmus+ programme had notably impacted on students' personal growth, as illustrated in Table 4. Key areas of reported development included "broadening horizons" ($M = 4.47$) and "developing a thirst for traveling" ($M = 4.47$), highlighting the transformative potential of the Erasmus experience in fostering global-mindedness. High scores in "enhanced open-mindedness" ($M = 4.31$) and "increased tolerance" ($M = 4.20$) suggest that the programme encourages positive personal change.

Table 4: Perceived Benefits of the Erasmus Experience (n = 51)

Statements	Min.	Max.	M	St. Dev.	rho
I somehow contributed to the places I visited	1	5	3.71	0.923	.256
I gained a feeling of belonging	1	5	3.98	1.029	.102
I appreciated better the local culture	1	5	4.18	0.865	.476**
I interacted with local people	1	5	3.96	1.076	.170
I experienced everyday life	1	5	4.41	0.876	.246
I learnt a language	1	5	3.37	1.248	.169
I became more trusting	1	5	3.69	0.969	.160
I became more tolerant	3	5	4.20	0.722	.414**
I became more open-minded	2	5	4.31	0.860	.412**
I broadened my horizons	2	5	4.47	0.784	.008
I developed a thirst for travelling	2	5	4.47	0.731	.198
rho = Spearman correlation; **Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2 tailed)					

Source: Author's own elaboration.

According to Spearman's test results (rho in Table 4), there is a moderate positive association between the levels of cosmopolitanism and the perceived benefits. Students who demonstrate higher levels of cosmopolitanism also perceive that, to a greater extent, they have "appreciated better the local culture", "became more tolerant", and "became more open-minded".

As for differences between host countries and perceived benefits, the Kruskal-Wallis test revealed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), only with regard to the statement "I gained a feeling of belonging." (Table 5). Students taking their mobility period in Portugal reported stronger feelings of belonging compared to their peers.

Table 5: Kruskal-Wallis' test results of the statement "I gained a feeling of belonging" between host countries

	n	M	Md	MR
I gained a feeling of belonging				
Finland	13	3.31	3.00	18.31
Spain	8	3.75	4.00	21.13
Portugal	25	4.44	5.00	32.34
Others	5	3.80	4.00	22.10
Total	50			
Kruskal-Wallis' test results H=10.242; df=3; p=0.017				

Source: Author's own elaboration.

4.4 Perceptions of Erasmus Students' Impacts on Host Community and Local Culture

According to Table 6, students overwhelmingly disagreed with the assumption that Erasmus participants hurt local culture and customs ($M = 1.58$) and instead viewed their contributions positively ($M = 4.26$).

Table 6: Perceptions of Erasmus Students' Impact on host community and local culture (n = 50)

	Min.	Max.	Mean	St. Dev.
Erasmus students hurt local culture and customs	1	5	1.58	0.87
Erasmus students do not mingle with local people	1	5	2.46	1.08
Erasmus students contribute positively to the places they visit	3	5	4.26	0.72
1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree				

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Kruskal-Wallis' test results reveal no statistically significant differences between host countries ($p > 0.05$), and none of these items correlate with Cosmopolitanism levels.

Moreover, 98% of participants expressed a willingness to recommend an Erasmus experience at their host city. This high advocacy rate suggests that Erasmus students are likely to become influential ambassadors for their host destinations, extending beyond mere information sharing to active promotion of cultural exchange and tourism development. Erasmus students' positive perceptions during their stay in a foreign country will encourage them to spread the word and make them critical informants about local culture and traditions when they return home. More than mere informants, Erasmus students emerge as excellent ambassadors of a given destination with the power to influence others positively.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted perceived impact of educational mobility programmes on both the students and the host communities. Participants overwhelmingly acknowledged the positive impact of their presence in host communities, firmly rejecting the assumption that Erasmus students disrupt local cultures. Instead, they recognized their willingness to suggest the country/region as a host destination, positioning themselves as potential ambassadors for cultural exchange, fostering tourism development and promoting cultural understanding. The reliability of the COSMOSCALE further validates the robust measures employed in assessing cosmopolitanism.

Overall, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding international education, highlighting the transformative potential of the Erasmus experience in shaping students' cultural sensitiveness and promoting global citizenship. The research reveals that Erasmus students serve as influential international promoters of their host countries and regions, while enriching their host communities through the exchange of knowledge, habits, and cultural practices. This bidirectional cultural sharing fosters mutual understanding and cultural wealth, creating a more interconnected and empathetic global community.

In the broader context of sustainable tourism development, this research underscores the potential of educational mobility programmes to shape a new generation of culturally sensitive and responsible global citizens. Education and cultural immersion are presented as powerful tools for creating a more understanding, sustainable, and interconnected world.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, offering valuable insights for various stakeholders. Firstly, local authorities and governments should develop specific programmes to enhance Erasmus students as valuable assets for international promotion and cultural diplomacy. Secondly, higher education institutions should strengthen their role as cultural bridging institutions. By facilitating meaningful interactions between international students and local communities, universities can enhance both groups' cultural sensitivity and global awareness.

This study's insights into cultural sensitivity within the Erasmus programme are limited by a small sample size of 53 students, a demographic bias towards female participants, a focus on specific countries (Portugal, Spain, and Finland), and the biases inherent to self-reported data, which potentially affect the generalization of the findings.

Future studies could explore the long-term impacts of these exchanges, quantify the economic benefits to host regions, and investigate how to scale these positive effects to other forms of educational and cultural exchange programmes. Strategies that enhance immersion into local culture will ensure more holistic international experiences, mutually beneficial not only for students but also for the host communities.

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