

THE EXPERIENCE OF ERASMUS PLUS STUDENTS ON STUDYING IN POLAND – IMPLICATIONS ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS INTERNATIONALISATION

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Purpose: Internalization of higher education is one of the key challenges Polish education faces since the accession to the EU. Although the volume of international students systematically increases, Poland still lags behind, even in relation to countries in the region. Analysis of the experiences of foreign students regarding their stay in Poland can provide valuable answers in the broader context of factors of success of educational migration in a given country or region.

Design/methodology/approach: To achieve the objectives of this paper, the online survey method was appointed. The questionnaire was delivered to the Erasmus Plus students realizing the exchange programs in one of the HEI's in Poland. The research was conducted in December 2023, 30 correctly completed questionnaires were obtained. The presented study is of pilot nature.

Findings: The results indicate that people visiting Poland within the framework of Erasmus Plus Programme generally positively evaluate their mobility experience. Students from non-European countries are more lenient in their assessment. Respondents point to certain administrative problems, e.g. the need to fully translate the university's system applications into English or the cancellation of courses due to a lack of participants. According to the respondents, Poland has great potential and is interesting due to the low cost of living compared to other European countries, although establishing relationships with Poles is not easy in the opinion of the survey participants.

Research limitations/implications: The presented study is based on a survey completed by 30 people, however there is a balance between student from EU countries and non-European countries. No general conclusion can be drawn hence the research sample is small. Nevertheless, conducted research may contribute to develop hypothesis for more in-depth analysis devoted to the growing role of internationalization in higher education and the growing number of foreign students in Poland.

Practical implications: Referring to the educational, institutional and socio-cultural contexts of the experience of Erasmus Plus students in Poland the paper outlines the implications on the internationalization of higher education, but also invites for the wider discussion about considering Poland as a target country for a long-term migration.

Social implications: The study contributes to understanding institutional and social factors influencing positive experiences of foreigners studying in Poland.

Originality/value: International mobility is one of the important factors for young people in career planning nowadays. Accordingly, the number of students deciding to demonstrate their

ability to work in multicultural environments increases. Due to the growing scale of globalization of education and business it is important to bring the light on the internationalization of higher education in countries that only lately started the path to internationalization as well as analyze the issues related to the adaptation of newcomers in the host countries.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education institutions, international mobility, cultural differences.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education institutions is the “process of including the international, intercultural and global dimension in the process of providing educational services at the academic level” (Chan, 2013, in: Domański, 2017, p. 63).

Internationalization is one of the key strategic challenges for Polish universities at the beginning of the 21st century as data from OECD reports indicate a large distance separating Polish universities from European and Anglo-Saxon universities (Domański, 2017, p. 63).

The essential manifestation of the internationalization of higher education is mobility, considered from the perspective of the subject (mobility of students, academic and administrative staff, mobility of the institution itself) and the object (mobility of the educational programs) (Dymyt, 2018, p. 120). Internationalization means integrating into academic institutions multi-facet changes directed to acquire competences and exchange experience taking place in cultural, linguistic and geographical change by all participants of academic community (Dymyt, 2018, p. 118).

The mobility of foreign students towards Poland as a destination country for an internship, exchange or completion of the entire cycle of studies is systematically increasing. In the academic year 2022/2023, nearly 89.5 thousand foreign students from 180 countries studied in Poland. In 2023 for the first time, according to the data of Central Statistical Office, Polish universities have managed to overcome the significant number of 100,000 foreigners including students arriving in Poland on exchange programs (Stat.gov.pl, 15.06.2023). In the academic year 2023/2024 the number of students from abroad has exceeded 107,000. Most foreigners came from European countries. The largest group were people from Ukraine (46.2 thousand), from Belarus (12.7 thousand) and Turkey (4.8 thousand) (Stat.gov.pl, 17.06.2024). Following the increasing number of foreign students, both the number of foreign lecturers and the number of programs conducted in English in Polish universities increased.

Poland demonstrates many of features of a destination country for immigrants, making migration one of the major challenges for this society over the next few decades – considering Poland having been one of Europe’s most homogeneous societies in terms of ethnicity, race

and religion over the last few decades. The process of turning into a destination country for immigration constitutes a research problem worth to be analyzed.

The main objective of the undertaken research was to analyze the experience of Erasmus+ students on studying in Poland. The concept of “experience” is often used inattentive, as an ordinary language unit however in scientific discourse this concept is multidimensional and complex (Wyka, 1993, p. 5). By experience we will understand here the skills, knowledge and social competences gained through participation in international exchange and the general feelings of the respondents regarding their stay in Poland. Results obtained could bring interesting perspective on the internationalization of HEIs in Poland.

2. Methods

The main question posed in the paper address the experience of Erasmus Plus students of studying in Poland. The components of the experience include both institutional aspects such as the diversity and quality of courses offered by the academic institution, contact with teachers and administrative support, as well as non-institutional factors of a socio-cultural nature – e.g. the affordability, of the ease of establishing contacts and relations with locals, living conditions, cultural offer of the region, etc.

To achieve this objective the online survey method was used. The questionnaire was sent to participants of the Erasmus+ program, who were enrolled in exchange program at the Silesian University of Technology in the winter semester of the academic year 2023/2024. The research was prepared and conducted in December 2024 with the assistance of Erasmus students as part of seminar devoted to intercultural queries conducted by the author in the fall semester 2023. The questionnaire was completed by 30 people from European and non-European countries, 2/3 of respondents were females. The questionnaire included the questions concerning the motives for choosing Poland and the Silesian University of Technology as a place for academic exchange, satisfaction with the offer and level of courses, satisfaction with the campus infrastructure, meeting expectations regarding the stay in Poland, and considering Poland as a target country for long-term migration. No general conclusion can be drawn hence the research sample is small. Despite the small research sample, the answers provide interesting implications on the process of internationalization of higher education institutions in the Polish context an may contribute to development of hypothesis for more in-depth study of quantitative character.

3. Erasmus Programme as a community mobility instrument

For many years, the European Union has been pursuing an educational policy that promotes the growth of student mobility in the spirit of “Europe without borders” - internationalization allows building bridges between European countries and cities. The flagship instrument of this policy is the Erasmus Programme – European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students established in 1987. In the first year of operation, as many as 3200 students from 11 European countries participated in the international exchange, and the programme has constantly been evolving: today, it is one of the European Union's most visible success stories with 15 million people participating since 1987 (Erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu, 2024). “International student exchange implemented within the Erasmus program is one of the most important elements of the modern model of higher education” (Walesiak 2009, p. 105).

The original goals of the program announced in 1987 were aimed at achieving long-term close cooperation at the community level. The objectives of the Programme specified in Article 2 of the Council Decision include: 1) achieving a significant increase in the number of students from universities spending an integrated period of study in another Member State, while ensuring equality of opportunity for male and female students as regards participation in such mobility; 2) promoting broad and intensive cooperation between universities in all Member States; (3) improving the full intellectual potential of the universities in the Community by means of increased mobility of teaching staff, thereby improving the quality of the education and training provided by the universities with a view to securing the competitiveness of the Community in the world market; (4) strengthening the interaction between citizens in different Member States with a view to consolidating the concept of a People's Europe; (5) ensuring the development of graduates who obtained direct experience of intra-Community cooperation, thereby creating the basis upon which intensified cooperation in the economic and social sectors can develop at Community level (Brown, Guereño-Omil, Hannam, 2014, p. 13). The main objective of this educational programme was to improve the level of education and strengthen European countries.

Since the establishment, the programme has expanded both in terms of methods of cooperation as well as the number of countries engaged. Erasmus Plus – an extension of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students – supports mobility in education, training, youth and sport in Europe and beyond (Erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu, 2024).

The importance of the international mobility for future professional development is one of the factors contributing to the systematical growth of this phenomenon. “Participation in international student mobility for a period of studies abroad constitutes an important element of university education and has clear implications for professional careers of graduates” (Bryła, Domański et al., 2014, p. 7). International mobility can benefit to the professional career

development in various aspects, including expanding of skills and knowledge, development of international network, improvement of adaptability and flexibility, improvement of language skills or personal development.

4. Research results

Thirty people attending Erasmus Plus international exchange programme filled in the online questionnaire; 46,7% of the respondents were residents of European Union countries (7 females and 7 males), while 53,3% of students came from non-European countries (13 females and 3 males). A detailed breakdown of students by country of origin is presented in Figure 1.

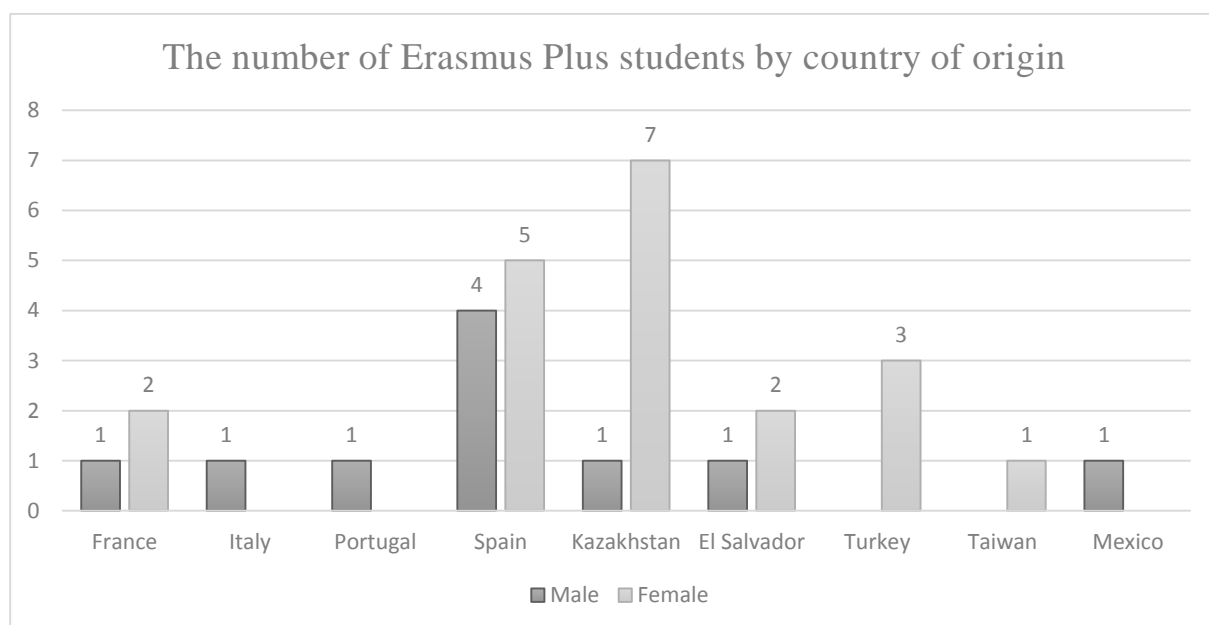


Figure 1. The number of Erasmus Plus students by country of origin.

The reasons for choosing Poland as a location for an international exchange were primarily affordability of living (9 answers), variety of educational offer in Poland (9 answers), obtaining a Schengen visa and the possibility of traveling outside Poland (8 answers), as well as recommendations from close people (6 answers) (the question was of multiple choice). As far as the choice of the university was concerned, for almost half of the students (14 people) it was the only one available to complete an international exchange under the framework of the Erasmus Plus Programme (*I didn't have other options, (...) it was the only partner university, it is the only Polish university that has an agreement with my home university etc.*). For 26% of respondents (8 people), the main reason was study offer available at the partner university – courses in line with the curriculum of the studies at the home university, more diverse offer than in other HEI's available, subjects related to the educational specialties. Personal

recommendation was the reason for choosing the university for 10% of the respondents (3 persons), while other answer was given by 13% of the respondents (4 persons).

The overall assessment regarding the fulfilment of expectations regarding the stay in Poland is rather positive in this group of respondents (Figure 2).

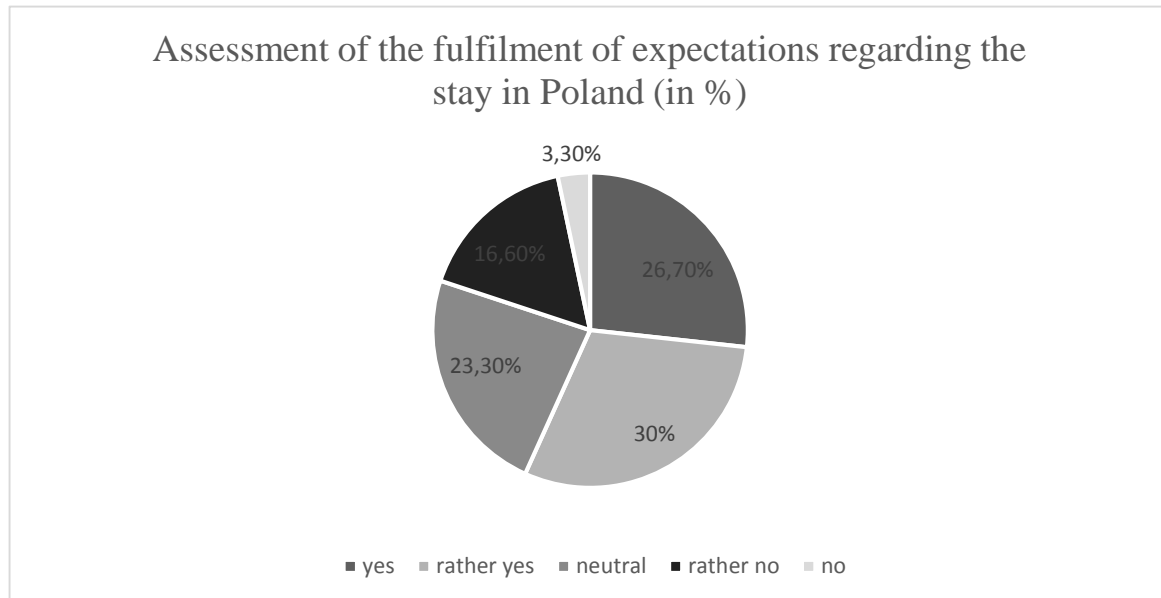


Figure 2. Assessment of the fulfilment of expectations regarding the stay in Poland (in%).

More than half of the respondents (57,6%) believe that their expectations regarding the mobility experience in Poland have been fulfilled. Only one person is dissatisfied with stay, complaining mainly about the organization issues, courses cancelled due to the lack of participants, deficit of information about course content, the quality of conducting classes in English. Eight students (26,7%) indicated a “definitely positive” experience of studying in Poland, 4 of whom came from EU countries and 4 from non-European countries. In justifying their answers, the respondents specified, among *others*, that: *the courses were very interesting and had new information* (non-EU resident); *It is very comfortable here, I really like the study programs and people are kind* (non-EU resident); *I feel that both universities and Poland are underrated* (EU resident); *I'm having a great time here, everyone is so nice, and teachers are very understanding with Erasmus students* (EU resident); *I had no real expectation, but it was far better than I could have expected in term of student life and travel etc.* (EU resident). The respondents who assess their stay in Poland as rather meeting expectations mainly point to certain organizational deficiencies, like not many courses available due to the lack of participants (non-EU resident), lack of sufficient information about the organization of the campus and individual departments (non-EU student), slow administration (EU resident). Students who chose a neutral answer (staying in Poland neither meets nor fulfills expectations) drew attention primarily to organizational issues - e.g. the lack of a full translation into English of all university applications, a long waiting period in connection with the circulation of documents, or the low standard of dormitories in relation to the price. Yet rather negative experiences also pointed to organization – e.g. the need to independently manage with the

organization of the academic year, class schedule or travel arrangements to faculties located in other cities, cancellation of courses due to the lack of participants, etc. As far as the assessment of teaching staff is concerned, 70% of students is satisfied with the competencies and qualifications of academic teachers (including 33.33% who expressed high satisfaction about this issue). It is worth noting that as many as 80% of students appreciate the language skills of academic staff (Figure 3).

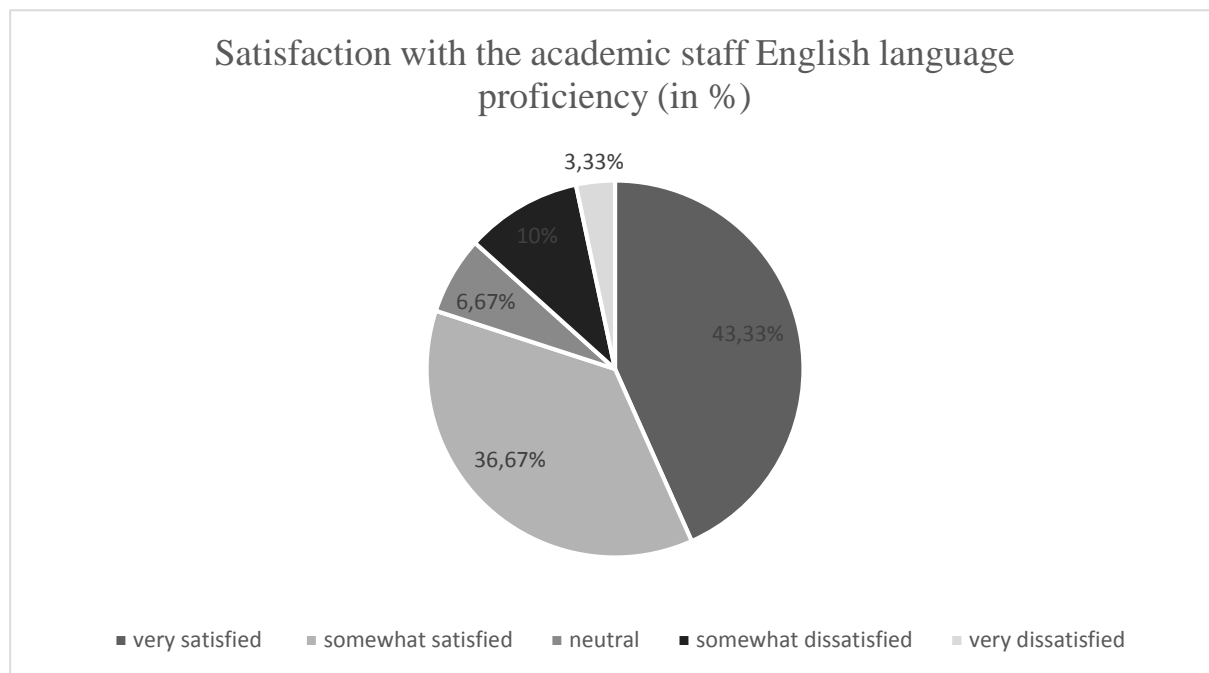


Figure 2. Satisfaction with the academic staff English language proficiency (in%).

Erasmus Plus students also positively evaluated the course offer – 80% of respondents expressed a moderate or high degree of satisfaction with the educational proposal. Respondents are more critical of modern teaching methods – as many as 16.7% found the teaching methods somewhat unsatisfactory and very unsatisfactory, and for another 16.7% the methods were neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory. It should be noted that students from EU countries were less satisfied with the methods. In turn, almost 60% of students positively and very positively assessed the attitude of academic staff towards students studying at the university under the framework of Erasmus Plus Programme.

Living conditions and infrastructure were rated definitely very high: as many as 80% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the campus and its infrastructure, with 60% declaring a high level of contentedness. As for the region and opportunities for spending free time - here the ratings are also high: as for 60% of respondents the offer of Upper Silesia region is very good or rather good. When asked "If you had the opportunity, would you stay to study and work in Poland?" 53% of respondents answered affirmatively, while 23% gave a negative answer – all the respondents who answered negatively came from EU countries (France, Spain, Portugal). In support of their positive responses, the respondents indicated: *Poland has great opportunities not only academically but also professionally, where is easy to progress in both*

fields; I love Poland and I see it as ideal to be able to maintain a normal and calm life, the only bad thing is the language; I really like this country, and I found that studying here less stressful than in my home country; It is a very good place and Poland have a lot of opportunities; I like the fact that Poland is very cheap and safe country rather than other European countries. Maybe If I had more friends here, I would have stayed; After this experience I have realized that Polish students are very qualified in their studies. I am sure that there is a good working future. In justifying negative answers, respondents mentioned: Even though has a lot of good things, there's still a lot of barriers that don't make Poland workable and livable; (...) the zloty is very weak compared to euro and polish is one of the hardest languages so I would much rather go to another European country to study or work; Study yes, live and work here no. We have far better living conditions in France and countries around it (Germany, Switzerland). It is also worth noting that 90% of respondents (27 students) positively assessed their experience of staying in Poland, which is clearly a good result in the context of the ongoing internationalization of higher education in Poland.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the presented study was to examine the experience of foreign students participating in the international mobility under Erasmus Plus Programme at one of the universities in the Silesian Voivodeship. In terms of foreigners' interest in the region as a location for part or all of their studies, the statistics show that Upper Silesia is still inferior to the Masovian or Lesser Poland Voivodeships, where cultural and tourist aspects are an additional motivator (Stat.gov.pl, 17.06.2024). However, in Upper Silesia the number of foreigners participating in the students' exchange under the framework of Erasmus Plus Programme, or students deciding to complete the full cycle of education is systematically growing.

Although the research sample was small and the study is of preliminary character, conducted research may contribute to the development of more in-depth study, wheatear the results show some important aspects of studying in Poland in the opinion of foreigners. Erasmus Plus students assess the institutional and social aspects of education in Poland quite well, while also drawing attention to administrative shortcomings (e.g. lack of sufficient information in English). The respondents mostly positively assess both the academic staff, the educational offer and the infrastructure of the campus. Certain differences were observed in the assessment of the experience of staying in Poland between students from EU and non-European countries – the latter see great potential in Poland and the region in terms of affordability of life and opportunities for professional development, while the former perceive worse conditions than in their home countries. People from EU countries were also more critical

of organizational issues and the educational offer. In open-ended responses, the respondents also drew attention to problems resulting from the organization of HEI system – including the student's independent responsibility for familiarizing themselves with the class schedule or getting to classes in another city etc. Nevertheless, 90% of respondents considered their stay in Poland as fulfilling.

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