

## Article

# Unlocking New Horizons: Teacher Mobility and Competence Growth via Erasmus Exchange Programs

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study investigates how short-term international mobility—specifically Erasmus staff exchange—nurtures educational leadership in an increasingly globalized landscape. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 55 educators from European and non-European countries, the research traces the ways mobility experiences reshape professional practice, career trajectories and institutional engagement. Findings show that time abroad enhances intercultural competence, global awareness, and pedagogical innovation—capabilities central to educators who must lead learning in diverse, rapidly evolving contexts. Participants described a renewed sense of purpose and an expanded leadership identity on reentry, positioning mobility as both a personal and systemic catalyst. Nonetheless, persistent barriers—including financial constraints, language proficiency gaps, and uneven institutional support—continue to restrict mobility access. Addressing these inequities is imperative if Erasmus and similar programs are to serve as genuine engines of educational transformation rather than isolated opportunities for the already advantaged. By mapping the link between mobility, leadership growth, and institutional change, this article offers actionable insights for policy-makers and university leaders seeking to embed inclusive, innovation-oriented practices across local and international education systems.

**Keywords:** educational leadership; intercultural competence; international education; Erasmus staff mobility; sustainable education; qualitative study



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## 1. Introduction

Teacher mobility is essential in modern education, enhancing professional development and fostering a globally interconnected academic community. In Europe, international higher education mobility is the most visible facet of higher education internationalization (Horváth et al., 2023). The Erasmus program is the primary driver for mobility in Europe, enabling educators to develop global competencies, intercultural awareness, and pedagogical innovations necessary for diverse classrooms. According to the Erasmus+ Annual Report 2023, the program plays a significant role in supporting international exchanges, improving teaching practices, and creating European dimension courses (European Commission, 2024). In 2017, the Erasmus program supported over 62,500 staff mobilities, marking its 30th anniversary (Horváth et al., 2023). By 2023, the program had significantly expanded, with staff mobility reaching nearly 319,000 participants, highlighting its continued growth and impact in supporting international educational exchanges (European Commission, 2024).

The Erasmus program plays a key role in equipping educators with the skills needed to navigate a globalized educational landscape. It facilitates teacher mobility through Key Action 1 (KA1), which promotes international exchanges and strengthens inter-institutional

cooperation via joint curriculum development and research initiatives (Delmartino & Beernaert, 1998). As the demand for globally competent educators grows, it is essential to investigate how these exchanges contribute to both professional development and the internationalization of education systems (Slatinská, 2023).

Existing research primarily addresses the professional benefits of mobility (Bracht et al., 2006; Janson et al., 2009; Engel, 2010; Mede & Tuzun, 2016; Golovushkina et al., 2021; Horváth et al., 2023) but overlooks the impact on personal transformation, mainly due to the lack of qualitative studies. Quantitative studies tend to focus on measurable outcomes, like improved teaching practices, leaving out the subjective aspects of personal development, such as increased self-confidence and cultural sensitivity (D. Martins et al., 2024). Furthermore, long-term effects, like changes in educators' worldviews and professional identities, are often neglected (Žebryk et al., 2021). To address these limitations, this study will use qualitative interviews to capture the personal and professional development outcomes of Erasmus mobility, providing a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of how mobility influences educators beyond measurable metrics. Since teachers' roles have been broadened and enhanced to include leadership responsibilities (Tian & Huber, 2020), the leadership development gained through international mobilities will also be explored.

Additionally, much of the literature focuses on organizational aspects (Mihaylova et al., 2020; Pinari, 2024), neglecting how intercultural experiences shape individual careers and institutional dynamics. There is also limited attention given to the role of Erasmus in integrating innovative teaching methods, particularly in the context of quality education (Saraiva et al., 2022; Nogueiro et al., 2022), gender equality (Restaino et al., 2021), and sustainable development (Nogueiro et al., 2022).

Through this approach, the study will provide a deeper understanding of how international mobility impacts educators. Specifically, it will examine how mobility contributes to their professional development, personal transformations, and the development of key skills necessary for effective teaching and leadership in a globalized educational environment. Grounded in qualitative research design, the study is structured around the following six objectives:

- O1: To explore how educators perceive the impact of international mobility programs on their professional development, with a focus on the skills acquired and their influence on career trajectories.
- O2: To explore the main obstacles and challenges experienced by educators in international mobility programs, and to understand their strategies for overcoming these difficulties, as well as their views on improving access and participation.
- O3: To explore how international mobility influences teaching practices, student engagement, and institutional development, as perceived by educators.
- O4: To explore how participation in international mobility supports the development of global and intercultural competences among educators, and to identify ways that university programs can better integrate these dimensions.
- O5: To explore how international mobility contributes to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in relation to quality education, gender equality, and institutional sustainability.
- O6: To identify educators' recommendations for improving international mobility programs and enhancing the integration and participation of teachers and students in diverse academic and cultural environments.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, followed by a detailed explanation of the qualitative research methodology used. The findings are then presented in Section 4, with a discussion and conclusion addressing the broader implications of the study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Professional Development Through International Teacher Mobility

Beyond the direct pedagogical benefits, Erasmus mobility programs also foster significant professional development among educators. Specifically, international placements help prospective teachers transition from a student-centered perspective to one where they perceive themselves as teachers, thereby developing their professional identity. Furthermore, such experiences enable educators to recognize the connection between culture and professional practice, often challenging assumptions and fostering greater appreciation and respect for others (Stunell, 2014; Pence & MacGillivray, 2008).

However, negative intercultural experiences are also documented. For instance, Ehrenreich (2006) found that teaching abroad could be a source of disappointment for language assistants who were far from home. Despite these challenges, teaching abroad remains a valuable practice for both professional and personal development, with teachers gaining a less ethnocentric perspective because of their international experiences (Deardorff, 2006).

These transformative experiences often lead to increased confidence, a stronger sense of professional identity, and greater resilience in the face of challenges. Żebryk et al. (2021) highlight how participation in the Erasmus program encourages teachers to gain new insights into their practice and become more deeply engaged in their educational communities. Moreover, Erasmus mobility programs play a critical role in promoting intercultural competence—an essential skill in today's globalized classrooms. By interacting with colleagues and students from diverse backgrounds, teachers enhance their understanding of different cultures and communication styles, which is vital for effectively engaging with a diverse student body. As classrooms become increasingly multicultural, the development of intercultural competence enables teachers to be more responsive to the varied needs of all learners (Slatinská, 2023).

Considering the existing research, this study sets out to qualitatively explore how international mobility shapes educators' professional development through international teacher mobility (O1).

### 2.2. Challenges in Teacher Mobility

While the benefits of Erasmus mobility programs are clear, there are several challenges that need to be addressed to fully maximize their impact. One of the primary barriers to participation is the logistical and financial constraints teachers face, particularly in countries where funding for professional development is limited. P. C. Martins et al. (2024) highlight that while many European teachers express strong interest in participating in Erasmus mobility projects, the lack of institutional support and financial resources often prevents them from fully utilizing these opportunities.

Furthermore, while virtual exchanges offer greater flexibility, they require teachers to have strong digital literacy skills and a readiness to engage with new technologies. Ovtšarenko et al. (2024) emphasize that effective participation in virtual exchange programs necessitates familiarity with digital tools and adaptability in teaching approaches.

In addition to financial and digital barriers, institutional support remains a crucial factor in facilitating teachers' participation. More than half of respondents in a study by Janson et al. (2009) reported that while their institutions provide adequate administrative support, they fall short in providing substitutes for teaching duties, further hindering participation in mobility programs.

In conclusion, one of the main issues for investigation emerging from the literature is to qualitatively examine the barriers that educators face before and during international mobility experiences (O2).

### 2.3. Impact of International Mobility on Teaching and Institutional Practices

International mobility has increasingly been recognized as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and institutional transformation. Empirical evidence suggests that participation in international mobility enhances reflective teaching and supports the adoption of inclusive, learner-centered approaches. Teachers involved in intercultural education projects describe improvements in their ability to manage diverse classrooms, increased sensitivity to students' social and emotional needs, and the integration of culturally responsive practices (Biasutti et al., 2021). These transformations are enabled through structured collaboration within transnational communities of practice, which serve as spaces for professional exchange and innovation (Dooley & Villanueva, 2006; Biasutti et al., 2021).

Beyond individual change, mobility experiences often trigger institutional development. Returning educators frequently initiate curriculum adjustments, propose new teaching strategies, and act as intermediaries in developing international partnerships (Labriola & Mangione, 2013; D. Martins et al., 2024). Their contribution aligns with Knight's (2004) conceptualization of internationalization as a strategic institutional process that fosters competitiveness, quality, and intercultural engagement. In this context, educators operate as knowledge transmitters and as leaders of organizational learning and reform.

Research also reveals that teachers' international experiences positively affect student engagement. Teachers returning from Erasmus projects report implementing active learning methods, introducing global perspectives in the curriculum, and enhancing communication with students (Biasutti et al., 2021). Such practices support the development of intercultural competence among students, preparing them for participation in global societies (Sanderson, 2011).

However, the benefits of teacher mobility must be considered alongside its structural implications. Appleton et al. (2006) highlight the potential risks of brain drain, where highly skilled educators are "creamed off" from lower-income countries, potentially weakening national education systems. While mobility may empower individuals and enrich host institutions, ethical concerns emerge when mobility patterns reproduce global inequities. This tension underscores the importance of reciprocity, reinvestment in source systems, and equitable access to mobility opportunities (Knight, 1997; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004).

After analyzing the studies mentioned above, it is important to investigate in this article how educators perceive the impact of international mobility on their teaching style, student interaction, and broader institutional practices (O3). In addition, the study will examine educators' views on students' readiness for international exchange and identify measures that could facilitate greater student participation in mobility programs.

### 2.4. Teacher Mobility and Professional Development

The role of teacher mobility in enhancing professional development is well-documented in the academic literature. Erasmus mobility programs are designed not only to broaden teachers' pedagogical skills but also to deepen their understanding of diverse educational frameworks and methodologies. In the context of teacher education, the scholarly literature emphasizes the link between mobility and the development of intercultural competence (Diehr, 2013; Egli Cuenat & Bleichenbacher, 2013; Egli Cuenat et al., 2016; Smolicic, 2013; Stunell, 2014). These studies demonstrate that mobility experiences can enhance the intercultural character, especially when such experiences are carefully structured and supported. To mitigate potential challenges, some scholars argue that educators need appropriate preparatory guidance and tools for analysis. For instance, in second-language teacher training, Egli Cuenat et al. (2016) highlight the use of comprehensive materials before, during, and after mobility, culminating in a mobility portfolio; Diehr (2013) similarly analyzes

an Erasmus practice program that incorporates pre- and post-training courses, evaluated through portfolios.

Building on this, participation in Erasmus mobility schemes allows educators to engage in different cultural settings, collaborate on teaching, and develop instructional techniques that can be directly applied in their classrooms. These transformative experiences enable teachers to adapt to the evolving needs of diverse student populations and embrace innovative teaching practices (Ovtšarenko et al., 2024). Slatinská (2023) further underscores the role of virtual exchange programs (VEPs) and blended intensive programs (BIPs) in fostering global competencies among educators. By combining technology with face-to-face interaction, these programs support the development of critical skills, such as creativity, digital literacy, and critical thinking—skills essential for educators in the 21st century. Through these programs, teachers not only refine their teaching methodologies but also gain a deeper understanding of global issues and cross-cultural dynamics, which are crucial for creating inclusive and effective learning environments (Slatinská, 2023).

Additionally, P. C. Martins et al. (2024) emphasize that the Erasmus program is central to the European Commission's strategy for enhancing teacher professional development. These programs provide teachers with opportunities to engage in international collaboration, share best practices, and expand professional networks. Such collaborative environments are vital for fostering a culture of continuous improvement in teaching, ensuring that educators remain at the forefront of educational innovation (D. Martins et al., 2024).

Hence, the present study focuses on understanding educators' perspectives on how international mobility fosters global and intercultural competences essential for teaching in a globalized educational environment. The study also seeks to identify what competencies are considered most valuable for educators working in diverse and international contexts (O4).

### 2.5. Erasmus and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Erasmus programs are also aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality). According to Nogueiro et al. (2022), Erasmus mobility projects contribute directly to the achievement of these goals by enhancing the quality of education and promoting inclusivity. The program encourages the development of educational practices that are not only effective but also equitable, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality learning opportunities.

Furthermore, Erasmus mobility programs support the European Union's broader educational agenda, which aims to create a more integrated and internationally competitive education system. The European Commission has emphasized that mobility is essential for fostering innovation in teaching, enhancing the quality of education, and promoting social inclusion (Davydovskaia et al., 2021). Erasmus programs thus play a key role in advancing the EU's vision for education and ensuring that European educators are well-equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

In conclusion, one of the main issues for investigation emerging from the literature is to investigate how educators perceive the contribution of international mobility programs—such as Erasmus—to the achievement of key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and the promotion of inclusive, sustainable institutions (SDG 16) (O5).

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, appropriate for examining the complex, situated, and subjective dimensions of international academic mobility. Focusing on the Erasmus staff mobility program, the study aims to capture the experiential depth and

nuanced perspectives of participating educators. The study is reported in line with the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al., 2014), ensuring full disclosure of the context, methods, and analytic decisions.

The research follows an exploratory and deductively informed approach, with objectives structured around six interrelated dimensions derived from the literature, namely professional development (O1), barriers and challenges (O2), institutional and student impact (O3), competency formation (O4), alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (O5), and policy and practice recommendations (O6). These objectives informed the topic guide and the initial coding matrix. The dimensions were selected based on recurring themes in prior research on teacher mobility and international education (see Section 2). Each was translated into open-ended questions in the interview guide, ensuring that data collection was aligned with the study's conceptual framework while allowing participants to elaborate freely.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 55 educators (34 Romanian, 21 non-Romanian) who had participated in Erasmus mobility. Sampling aimed for diversity in academic rank, mobility experience, and regional affiliation, with specific attention to including voices from underrepresented countries and institutions, particularly from Eastern and Southern Europe. Recruitment was conducted through professional networks and snowball referrals. Sampling ceased when the information depth was deemed sufficient to address the study aims (Malterud et al., 2016).

Interviews were conducted online via video conferencing platforms and lasted between 45 and 60 min. The interview guide, informed by the prior literature, included open-ended questions addressing motivations, intercultural experiences, pedagogical shifts, leadership development, and sustainability or equity considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and validated by participants through transcript review. Participants provided written informed consent and could withdraw at any time.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, supported by NVivo 15 software. A deductive coding scheme, based on the predefined thematic framework, guided the initial coding phase. Through descriptive-focused coding, relevant data segments were identified, categorized, and refined into thematic clusters aligned with the research objectives. In line with Saldaña's (2016) approach, first-cycle coding included descriptive and in vivo methods to capture key ideas and participants' language, followed by second-cycle pattern and axial coding to refine categories and develop broader themes. Analytic memos were used throughout to reflect on coding decisions and track emerging insights. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the process, documenting positionality and interpretive decisions to ensure transparency and minimize bias.

## 4. Results

This section presents the qualitative findings regarding educators' experiences in the Erasmus program, structured into themes, subthemes, and corresponding codes. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

It is noted that the purposive sample (N = 55) is weighted toward Eastern Europe (61.8% Romanian participants); therefore, the findings should be interpreted as analytically, rather than statistically, generalizable.

To obtain an overview of our complete coding frame, a word cloud in NVivo was generated, encompassing every code assigned across all interviews. This helped us identify the most salient concepts before proceeding to the detailed thematic analysis. Figure 1 displays a word cloud of all codes across the research (NVivo). The size of each word corresponds to its total frequency in the coding matrix, highlighting which concepts were most frequently raised by participants.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of educators (N = 55).

Characteristics	n	%
Academic Rank		
Professor	26	47.3%
Associate Professor	14	25.5%
Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Adjunct Prof.	11	20.0%
University Assistant/Assistant	2	3.6%
Coordinator (non-specific academic title)	2	3.6%
Geographical Distribution		
Romania	34	61.8%
Europe (non-Romanian)	9	16.4%
Asia	4	7.3%
Africa	1	1.8%
Latin America	4	7.3%
Multiple Regions/Unspecified	3	5.4%
Mobility Interval		
<5 times	17	30.9%
5–10 times	29	52.7%
>10 times	9	16.4%

**Figure 1.** Word cloud of all codes across the study.

As illustrated in Figure 1, key terms, such as students, skills, quality, support, and events, appear largest, indicating that these were the dominant topics in our data. Secondary but still prominent themes include communication, international, cultural, knowledge, and activities. This holistic lexical map confirms that participants most often discussed issues around student experience, skill development, and institutional support. It also served as a roadmap for selecting our focal themes (e.g., leadership, interculturality, and program design) for deeper analysis.

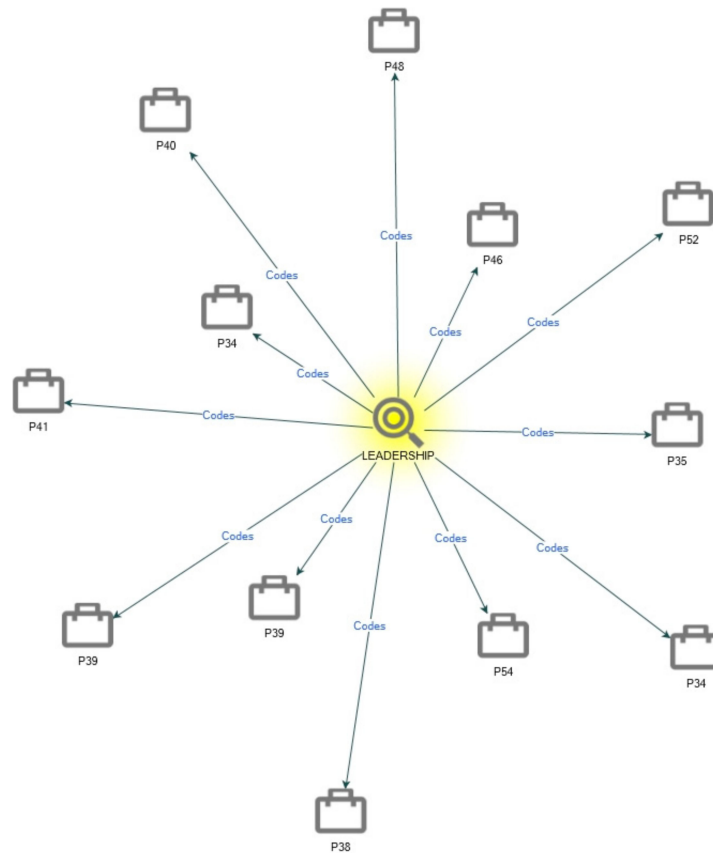
Regarding leadership, some insights into how international mobility can empower educators as agents of change and support the advancement of leadership were also offered. A qualitative thematic analysis of all interviews was conducted using axial coding in NVivo. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of “Leadership” codes across cases. Each arrow originates from the central Leadership node and points to a participant folder, indicating that at least one excerpt from that interview was coded as Leadership.

To illustrate thematic nuances, some exemplary quotations are presented for the role and impact of international staff mobility, as follows:

*“Enriches syllabus, develops student skills, connects learning to real-world issues. Supports leadership development and international collaboration.” (P39)*

*“Strongly influenced career direction. Took on new responsibilities and promoted programs at national level. Gained recognition and leadership roles.” (P34)*

*“Massive impact—led to international project leadership and expert roles.” (P48)*



**Figure 2.** Mind-map of leadership codes across participant cases (NVivo).

The results of the thematic analysis, including the key themes, subthemes, and illustrative coding elements derived from interview data, are detailed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes, subthemes, and references.

Themes	Subthemes	References *
The role of international mobility for professional development	Internationalization value	Development = 29; teaching methods = 19; students = 7; research = 6; collaboration = 6; exchange = 5; opportunities = 5
	Mobility impact	Teaching methods = 11; career development = 8; research = 6; systems = 5; project = 5; collaboration = 5; knowledge = 3; skills = 4
	Skills gained	Teaching = 29; communication = 25; language skills = 23; collaboration = 21; awareness = 20; adaptability = 19; flexibility skills = 8; project management = 7; teamwork skills = 3; digital skills = 1
	Career influence	Projects = 26; career awareness = 11; research = 10; involvement = 3

Table 2. Cont.

Themes	Subthemes	References *
Obstacles and challenges in international mobility	Mobility challenges	Administrative issues = 10; language barriers = 9; travel = 4; academic systems = 4; no barriers = 2; timing issues = 2
	Cultural management	Support = 13; cultural differences = 12; challenges = 6; interaction = 5; attitude = 4; communication = 4; experience = 4
	Barrier reduction	Processes = 14; support = 13; predeparture = 5; cultural differences = 2; funding = 4; exposure = 2; mobility = 2
	Hybrid programs	Hybrid programs = 19; physical mobility = 14
Impact on the institution and students	Student impact	Student engagement = 19; teaching methods = 7; teaching topics = 6; awareness = 5; experiences = 5; skills = 4
	Teaching changes	Methods = 9; student interaction = 5; teaching style = 5
	Method modernization	Methods = 17; students impact = 8; examples = 7; teaching style = 6; case studies = 5; collaborative = 3; tools = 4
	Student preparedness	Support = 12; mobility formats = 5; challenges = 4; sharing = 4; alumni meetings = 2; mentoring = 2
Mobility and global competences	Competence development	Intercultural skills = 14; teaching = 6; awareness = 6; empathy = 5; language skills = 2; thinking = 2; digital skills = 1
	Global teaching skills	Language = 28; thinking = 25; experience = 13; awareness = 8; digital skills = 7; interpersonal skills = 1
	Curriculum changes	Courses = 34; collaboration = 17; case studies = 8
Mobility and sustainable development goals	SDG contribution	Education = 17; equality = 11; experience = 4; inclusive = 4; development = 3
	Policy impact	Sustainability = 15; institutional practices = 3; ecological policies = 1
	Socioeconomic impact	Institution growth = 9; cultural impact = 2; economic impact = 1; social impact = 1
Improving mobility programs	Program improvement	Mobility improvement = 10; increase funding = 7; support = 6; processes = 5; programs = 5; tracking impact = 3; student = 3; alumni = 2; courses = 2; mentors = 2; teaching hours = 2
	Integration support	Programs = 25; support = 13; host involvement = 11; courses = 9; events = 5; activities = 4
	Participation initiatives	Mobility incentive = 11; promotion = 8; recognition = 4; stories = 4; student involvement = 4; experiences = 3; networks = 3; support = 3; activities = 2; awareness = 2; groups = 2; impact tracking = 2; information = 2; partnerships = 2; presentations = 2; teaching = 2
	Additional comments	Cultural exchange = 2; evaluation = 4; experience = 7; mobility = 4; satisfaction = 2; students = 1; systems = 2

\* References = number of coded excerpts.

### *Theme 1: The Role of International Mobility for Professional Development*

Theme 1 addresses Objective 1. The statements of participants regarding the role of international mobility in their professional development were grouped into four subthemes: internationalization value, mobility impact, skills gained, and career influence (Table 2). These subthemes reflect how Erasmus mobility was perceived as a transformative experience that shaped participants' academic practices, competencies, and career trajectories.

In relation to internationalization value, most educators emphasized how Erasmus supported their personal and institutional development. Development and innovation in teaching practices were frequently mentioned (n = 29). One participant stated that the program "Plays a major role in developing best practices, motivating teachers and students, improving teaching methods and interaction, and refining research methods." (P17). Several participants also underlined the program's role in facilitating collaboration and expanding research opportunities (n = 6). Another shared that "It has enhanced international exposure, improved interactions with diverse students, and provided research opportunities. It also helped a PhD student access better resource." (P44).

The subtheme of mobility impact focused on the direct outcomes of the experience. Educators most often described changes in their teaching methods and perspectives on academic systems (n = 17). For instance, one participant explained that "Developed new teaching practices, cultural adaptation, global context understanding." (P22). Others highlighted career-related benefits, as follows: "Backbone of academic development. Enhances employability, job access, and international project involvement." (P39) or "Positively impacted professional development and confidence." (P33).

Under skills gained, participants reported a wide range of competencies developed as a result of their mobility. Teaching (n = 29) and communication skills (n = 25) were most frequently mentioned, followed by language proficiency (n = 23) and adaptability (n = 19). One educator shared the following: "I became much more confident in teaching in English and communicating across cultures" (P17). Another noted that "The experience pushed me out of my comfort zone—I had to adapt quickly to new environments, and that changed the way I now manage my time and teaching" (P28).

Finally, career influence emerged as a key subtheme. Many participants discussed how their Erasmus mobility experiences contributed to long-term career advancement, particularly through project involvement and international visibility (n = 26). One stated that the program "Encouraged pursuit of international opportunities and engagement in global academic projects" (P7). Others emphasized how their career paths had expanded, as follows: "Strongly influenced career direction. Took on new responsibilities and promoted programs at national level. Gained recognition and leadership roles." (P34) or "It broadened my career perspective influencing my specialization choices; it encouraged me to get involved in international projects and take on new responsibilities." (P53).

### *Theme 2: Obstacles and Challenges in International Mobility*

Theme 2 addresses Objective 2. Participants' opinions on the challenges faced during international mobility were grouped into four subthemes, namely mobility challenges, cultural management, barrier reduction, and hybrid programs (Table 2). These subthemes illustrate the complexity of international academic mobility, revealing both structural and personal barriers, as well as evolving models of participation.

In the mobility challenges subtheme, participants most frequently cited administrative difficulties (n = 10) and language barriers (n = 9) as key issues encountered during their mobility experiences. One participant explained that the "Main challenges include language barriers, administrative issues, and adjusting to different educational systems." (P52). Another shared the following: "Unfortunately, language barriers. I think that I could

do more if I were more fluent in English and/or French" (P51). A few respondents also mentioned travel complications, including "travel logistics when destinations are remote or poorly connected" (P35), and differences in academic systems, such as "adaptation to different educational systems was challenging" (P7). Some reported facing no barriers (n = 2), suggesting varied experiences depending on the context and host institution.

The cultural management subtheme captured educators' interactions with cultural environments abroad. While institutional support (n = 13) was appreciated by many, cultural differences (n = 12) were often identified as challenging, particularly in teaching or administrative contexts. One participant stated the following: "At first, the academic culture was hard to navigate. The way students interact with teachers was very different from what I was used to" (P54). Others highlighted how attitude, communication, and initial expectations influenced their ability to adapt, as follows: "Managed with flexibility and positive attitude; deeper understanding emerged over time." (P38).

In the subtheme of barrier reduction, participants discussed mechanisms that helped ease their mobility experience. The most frequently mentioned factors were simplified processes (n = 14) and ongoing support (n = 13). Predeparture briefings and orientation sessions (n = 5) were also identified as helpful. One educator noted the following: "Having a better premobility orientation on expectations and culture would be helpful" (P28). Although fewer participants brought up funding (n = 4) and early exposure to international settings (n = 2), these were also seen as enablers of smoother transitions.

The final subtheme, hybrid programs, reflected on evolving forms of mobility in response to recent global changes. Hybrid formats (n = 19), which combine physical and virtual components, were viewed as both an opportunity and a compromise. One participant reflected that "Hybrid mobility is useful, but physical mobility offers deeper cultural immersion." (P37). Still, others expressed preference for physical mobility (n = 14), emphasizing the value of onsite participation, as follows: "Physical mobilities are irreplaceable; virtual feels artificial and lacks personal value." (P14) or "Prefer physical mobility for deeper cultural and academic immersion." (P44).

### *Theme 3: Impact on the Institution and Students*

The third main theme addresses Objective 3 and explores how international mobility affects not only educators but also their institutions and students. Data from participant interviews were grouped into four subthemes, namely student impact, teaching changes, method modernization, and student preparedness (Table 2). These categories reveal how experiences gained abroad are transferred into teaching practices, institutional development, and student outcomes.

In the student impact subtheme, participants most frequently mentioned increased student engagement (n = 19) as a direct result of their international experiences. Educators described how exposure to new academic environments motivated them to make their courses more interactive and student-centered. One participant shared the following: "After my mobility, student curiosity and participation improved." (P27). Other effects included changes in teaching methods (n = 7) and topics covered (n = 6), as well as raising students' awareness of global contexts (n = 5) and offering them new experiences (n = 5) and skills (n = 4) through classroom internationalization. One participant explained that "Students became more conscious, shared experience, got jobs more easily." (P11).

The subtheme teaching changes reflects how mobility led to adjustments in pedagogical approaches. The most common change was the adoption of new teaching methods (n = 9), with additional references to student interaction (n = 5) and shifts in teaching style (n = 5). One educator explained that "Mobility has made me more innovative in terms of teaching methods and more adaptive to diverse student needs." (P52).

Method modernization was another key outcome, highlighting broader curricular and instructional updates. Participants often referred to updated teaching methods (n = 17), including incorporating examples (n = 7), tools (n = 4), and case studies (n = 5) from host institutions. Some also mentioned greater collaboration with colleagues (n = 3) and stronger awareness of student impact (n = 8). As one participant described, “Interactive methods improved outcomes; I became more of a team leader than a formal teacher.” (P20).

The fourth subtheme, student preparedness, addressed how institutions prepare and support students for mobility. Many participants discussed the role of institutional support structures (n = 12), such as premobility counselling or follow-up sessions. A few emphasized the importance of flexible mobility formats (n = 5) and discussed challenges (n = 4) students often face. One participant noted the following: “Many students are ready, but personal mentoring is important to help overcome self-doubt.” (P54). Sharing experiences (n = 4) and developing peer support mechanisms, like mentoring (n = 2), were also seen as ways to enhance the student journey.

#### *Theme 4: Mobility and Global Competences*

The fourth theme addresses Objective 4 and explores how international mobility contributes to the development of global competences among educators and impacts curriculum design. Participant insights were organized into three subthemes, namely competence development, global teaching skills, and curriculum changes (Table 2). Collectively, these findings underscore the role of mobility in equipping educators with the skills, perspectives, and content needed to prepare students for a globalized world.

In the competence development subtheme, participants most frequently referred to the development of intercultural skills (n = 14), describing how international exposure helped them better understand diverse student needs and classroom dynamics. One participant stated that “Each mobility pushes participants out of their comfort zone and enhances global competence” (P15). Other areas of development included increased teaching awareness (n = 6), enhanced empathy (n = 5), and to a lesser extent, improved language skills, critical thinking, and digital skills (n = 1). These responses point to a multidimensional evolution of educator competences that extends beyond technical knowledge. One participant noted that “International mobility enhances empathy, openness, joy, tolerance, lifelong learning.” (P20).

The subtheme global teaching skills reflected a more applied perspective on competence development, particularly in classroom contexts. The most cited area was language use in teaching (n = 28), followed closely by fostering critical and reflective thinking (n = 25). Several participants linked these skills to their ability to internationalize classroom discussions. One explained that “I encourage students to think globally now” (P2). Other skills mentioned included teaching-related experience (n = 13), increased global awareness (n = 8), and use of digital tools (n = 7), with one participant emphasizing the following: “After Erasmus, I incorporated more digital platforms to stay connected with colleagues across borders” (P27).

In the curriculum changes subtheme, educators described how mobility experiences translated into course design and delivery. The most frequently noted change was the development or adaptation of lectures (n = 34) to reflect global perspectives. Participants also reported increased collaboration in curriculum development (n = 17) and greater use of case studies drawn from international contexts (n = 8). One educator reflected that “Solving study cases in international teams are a great way to interact with different cultures” (P51).

#### *Theme 5: Mobility and Sustainable Development Goals*

Theme 5 addresses Objective 5. This theme explores how international mobility contributes to the advancement of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the areas of education, institutional policy, and socio-economic

outcomes. Participant responses were categorized into three subthemes, namely SDG contribution, policy impact, and socioeconomic impact (Table 2). These findings illustrate how mobility programs, like Erasmus, are perceived not only as educational experiences but also as strategic instruments for broader societal transformation.

In the SDG Contribution subtheme, educators most frequently mentioned contributions to quality education (SDG 4) (n = 17), citing improvements in teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and international awareness among students. One participant remarked that the program “Provides access to quality teaching, advanced tech, and global skills for employment.” (P17). Other educators emphasized gender equality and inclusiveness (SDG 5 and SDG 10), with references to promoting equality (n = 11), sharing inclusive practices (n = 4), and supporting educational development in underrepresented contexts (n = 3). One respondent stated that the program makes a “Strong contribution to inclusive and equitable education, gender equality, and reducing inequality.” (P37).

The policy impact subtheme focused on sustainability within institutional practices. The most cited topic was sustainability awareness and action (n = 15), often linked to curriculum content or project partnerships. Fewer participants discussed tangible institutional changes, such as shifts in institutional practices (n = 3) or the implementation of environmental policies (n = 1). One educator noted that the program “Improves sustainability through exposure to ecological policies.” (P46).

In the socioeconomic impact subtheme, participants described how mobility contributes to broader development goals. The most cited area was institutional growth (n = 9), reflecting increased capacity, reputation, and partnerships through Erasmus engagements. A few respondents also acknowledged cultural impacts (n = 2), as well as minor but relevant mentions of economic and social impacts (n = 1 each). As one participant put it, “All benefits gained are reflected in future student and teacher activities, with socioeconomic impact” (P5).

#### *Theme 6: Improving Mobility Programs*

The final theme addresses Objective 6 and considers participants’ suggestions and opinions on how international mobility programs, particularly Erasmus, can be improved for both educators and students. Responses were organized into four subthemes, namely program improvement, integration support, participation initiatives, and additional comments (Table 2). These findings highlight the importance of enhancing program structure, institutional support, and engagement strategies to maximize the effectiveness of mobility experiences.

In the program improvement subtheme, participants proposed specific ways to enhance the functioning and impact of mobility programs. The most frequently mentioned recommendation was improving the mobility process itself (n = 10), with many advocating for increased funding (n = 7) and better support systems (n = 6). One participant emphasized the need to “Simplify bureaucracy, increase funding, diversify destinations.” (P14). Other suggestions included improving administrative processes (n = 5), expanding programs (n = 5), and implementing better mechanisms for tracking the impact of mobility (n = 3). One mentioned the need to “Shift focus from reporting to real impact. Less paper, more action.” (P55). There were also mentions of the importance of student engagement, alumni networks, teaching-hour flexibility, and mentor programs (n = 2 each).

The subtheme of integration support focused on institutional measures to better integrate mobility within academic experience. Participants highlighted the need for stronger programmatic structures (n = 25), ongoing support (n = 13), and more active host institution involvement (n = 11). One educator reflected that “Host universities should provide support services, mentors, language classes, and intercultural events.” (P20). They also pointed to the role of courses (n = 9), events (n = 5), and extracurricular activities (n = 4)

in facilitating academic and cultural integration. One mentioned the need for “Orientation, buddy system, cultural and social events.” (P45).

In the participation initiatives subtheme, respondents offered ideas to increase mobility uptake. The most common recommendation was to create mobility incentives (n = 11), followed by improved promotion strategies (n = 8) and the formal recognition of participation (n = 4). Some educators suggested using personal stories (n = 4) and student involvement (n = 4) to generate awareness and motivation. One shared the following suggestion: “Promote results via podcasts, live sessions, media” (P12). Other suggestions included increased institutional support, developing partnerships, tracking impact, and enhancing information dissemination (n = 2 each).

Finally, the additional comments subtheme gathered broader reflections that did not fall neatly into the previous categories but offered valuable insight. Participants described the value of cultural exchange (n = 2), the need for better evaluation mechanisms (n = 4), and shared personal experiences (n = 7) and satisfaction (n = 2) with the program. One respondent noted that “International mobility is the most fulfilling experience of my career.” (P46).

## 5. Discussion

Mirroring the six objectives, our analysis revealed the following: (O1) Erasmus mobility acts as a powerful catalyst for educators’ professional development, expanding pedagogical repertoires and career horizons; (O2) participation is still hindered by funding shortfalls, heavy paperwork, and uneven digital readiness; (O3) returnees transfer their experience into richer teaching practices, higher student involvement, and, in some cases, curriculum or partnership innovations; (O4) mobility demonstrably strengthens global and intercultural competences, such as language fluency, critical thinking, and empathy; (O5) educators perceive specific contributions to SDG 4 (quality education) and, to a lesser extent, SDGs 5 and 10 through more inclusive pedagogies and sustainability awareness; (O6) practitioners recommend streamlined administration, increased financing, organized integration support and systematic impact tracking to maximize the program’s value. Across these themes, leadership engagement surfaced as an amplifier that converts individual gains into institutional change.

Evidence on professional development converges with large scale survey work indicating that Erasmus mobility accelerates skill acquisition and networking (Horváth et al., 2023; European Commission, 2024). The qualitative findings reported here complement those metrics by exposing identity shifts and renewed professional purpose that quantitative studies have seldom captured (Žebryk et al., 2021). In this respect, the present study extends earlier outcome-oriented analyses (Bracht et al., 2006; D. Martins et al., 2024) from the realm of demonstrable competencies to the reflective dimension of teacher development.

Regarding barriers and challenges, some financial constraints, administrative complexity, and uneven digital readiness replicate the impediments documented by D. Martins et al. (2024) and echo the digital literacy caveats raised by Ovtšarenko et al. (2024). The picture appears less optimistic than that presented by Janson et al. (2009), who described institutional support as generally adequate, suggesting that progress on streamlining Erasmus procedures may have stalled.

Findings on teaching practice and institutional development align with Biasutti et al. (2021), who reported that mobility participation stimulates pedagogical innovation and strengthens student engagement. When interpreted through Knight’s (2004) “internationalization at home” lens, the present evidence situates mobility triggered change at the organizational level, highlighting the teacher’s role as an agent of institutional learning. Concerns over brain drain, emphasized by Appleton et al. (2006), emerged only sporadically, indicating a context-specific rather than systemic risk.

Results concerning global and intercultural competence corroborate the gains identified in virtual and blended programs (Slatinská, 2023) and reinforce the value of structured preparation and post-mobility reflection proposed by Egli Cuenat et al. (2016) and Diehr (2013). The persistence of calls for better scaffolding suggests that existing portfolio tools remain underutilized or unevenly adopted.

Insights into Sustainable Development Goal alignment mirror those of Nogueiro et al. (2022), with the strongest links observed to SDG 4 and secondary connections to SDG 5 and SDG 10. Limited evidence of policy level uptake supports Davydovskaia et al.'s (2021) contention that SDG integration in Erasmus projects is often aspirational rather than systemic, underlining the need for institutional mechanisms that translate individual initiatives into strategic action.

Finally, recommendations for program improvement, including additional funding, structured reintegration, and impact dashboards, are consistent with organizational analyses that stress the importance of leadership and monitoring frameworks (Mihaylova et al., 2020; Pinari, 2024). Such measures also resonate with the European Commission's current emphasis on simplified procedures and data-driven quality assurance (European Commission, 2024), offering a practicable route from isolated mobility experiences to institution-wide, SDG-relevant change.

## 6. Conclusions

Guided by an interpretive perspective, the study highlighted how educators reframe professional identity and enact leadership in transnational settings via exchange programs abroad. The study data suggest that participants perceived their international mobility experience as a transformative experience for academic practices and career advancement. This encompasses the development of intercultural competences, innovation in teaching, more self-confidence, higher global awareness, and finally a better leadership identity.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. Practically, three levers emerged for policy and institutional action, namely (1) microgrants or tuition waivers for under-resourced staff; (2) structured reentry and feedback workshops with peer assistance; and (3) leadership owned impact-tracking dashboards aligned with SDGs 4, 5, and 10. Moreover, education institutions are urged to invest in modern technology to enhance the digital readiness of staff and to ensure the possibility of hybrid, flexible, short-term exchange, so as to increase participation from people with limited mobility and the groundbreaking use of online platforms for common mirror classes among partner universities. Theoretically, the findings posit a virtuous cycle in which competence gains (O4) mediate the link between individual development (O1) and institutional innovation (O3), offering a pathway model for future quantitative testing.

As for the limitations of the current research, the study's transferability is bounded by sample skew (62% Romanian participants), which may overrepresent experiences from Eastern Europe, as well as self-report bias, as narratives were collected retrospectively, and single-wave interviews, which cannot capture longitudinal change. Triangulation with classroom observations and administrative data would strengthen causal inferences.

Future investigation and research are needed to delve deeper into the consequences of international mobility in the academic environment. Longitudinal designs should follow educators from predeparture to 24 months post-return to chart the durability and diffusion of mobility sparked change. Comparative studies contrasting virtual, hybrid, and physical formats are needed to weigh cost, carbon, and intercultural depth. Finally, equity-focused analyses that disaggregate outcomes by discipline, gender, and institutional prestige can expose blind spots and guide targeted support.

Based on their experience, participants in international exchange show an improved employability record, becoming more competitive in the job market. This is just an intermediary step for the formation of global leaders, ready to take responsibility, capable of adapting to complex challenges that arise from diverse cultural contexts and of working in the international realm, a valuable feature in today's professional environment. Therefore, Erasmus staff mobility remains a potent catalyst, but its systemic value will be realized only when leadership structures channel individual learning into equitable, SDG-driven transformation at the institutional level as well.

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