

Article

The Importance of Studying Abroad for a Sustainable Education: Research on Mongolian Student Opinions

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Abstract: Student mobility and internationalization of universities have become an important issue for empowering young people and cultural exchange, in line with the quest for implementing a sustainable education. The young generation of Mongolia has a strong desire to study in foreign universities. The aim of this paper is to analyze the opinions of Mongolian learners on studying abroad as displaying the characteristics of sustainable education. According to our quantitative research, a large percentage of university students are very interested in participating in the ERASMUS mobility program of the European Union. However, there are certain challenges to getting into the program, especially for scholars studying in isolated areas who have limited opportunities to obtain scholarship information. As for the graduates from Mongolia who have already participated in the program, their satisfaction with the program is high. The research found that quality education was the most appraised benefit, while the language barrier posed the main challenge during studying abroad, followed by adaptation to the teaching methods of the host university. Findings show that mobile students developed their academic knowledge and enjoyed experiencing new places and cultures. They also acknowledged improving their professional skills for their future careers and adopting a more sustainable lifestyle.

Keywords: studying abroad; ERASMUS program; Mongolian students; European Union; sustainable higher education



Citation: Nyamsuren, K.; Gankhuyag, Z.; Ganbaatar, J.; Marinescu, N. The Importance of Studying Abroad for a Sustainable Education: Research on Mongolian Student Opinions. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 6137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16146137>

Academic Editors: David Manzano Sánchez and GuoJun Ji

Received: 26 May 2024

Revised: 22 June 2024

Accepted: 15 July 2024

Published: 18 July 2024



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1. Introduction

Currently, the primary driver of economic advancement lies in a proficient workforce. The capacity to produce an educated workforce is a key factor in the growth of the knowledge economy. Whereas the economy provides knowledge-based goods, higher education supplies and disseminates knowledge. The key role of knowledge for growth makes it imperative to develop higher education [1]. In the Lisbon meeting (2000) of the European Union (EU), it was declared that the aim is to make the EU the most “dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” by 2010 [2]. In the educational environment, studying abroad was encouraged to incorporate more dynamism, not only for economic reasons, but for its various benefits, such as to develop cultural understanding, to enhance knowledge, and to acquire valuable career skills.

In this context, internationalization of higher education became a major aspect in Europe [3]. The main objectives of exchange programs such as ERASMUS were to foster student mobility within Europe or at international level, and ERASMUS has been very successful in doing so [4]. The first student exchange program between higher education institutions in Europe took place in 1987, and in its first year it already involved 3244 students from all over Europe [5]. The ERASMUS program now comprises several education and

training initiatives alongside the student exchange program, previously called SOCRATES. For over 30 years, students have enjoyed spending semesters in universities abroad under the ERASMUS program [6]. The mobility element encourages students and teachers to gain international experience and leads to deeper collaboration and common projects between universities.

This study analyzes the international mobility of Mongolian higher education students by means of quantitative research from an academic, economic, and social point of view. The paper focuses, in particular, on willingness to study abroad, awareness of scholarship programs, and the benefits and challenges associated with such international mobility with a view to determining the linkage between studying abroad and the development of a sustainable education. The novel character of the research is related to the fact that to the authors' knowledge and according to the literature search performed, there have been no other comprehensive studies conducted on the topic of Mongolian scholars studying abroad and the consequences for the participants.

2. Literature Review

The concept of sustainable education combines economic, social, and environmental aspects, the three pillars of sustainability, into a long-term vision related to education [7,8]. Obviously, it is derived from the two terms of 'sustainability' and 'education', underlining the current necessary shift in thought and behavior to reach a sustainable way of living [9]. According to Sterling (2008), sustainable education means a change in educational culture, which embodies the theory and practice of sustainability in a critically aware manner [10]. Sustainable education challenges society to develop programs that improve quality of life and increase empowerment [11]. As stated by Hays and Reinders (2020), sustainable education is meant to create curricula and methods that instill in people the necessary skills to face challenging environments [12]. Sustainability needs to be embraced in the future as a core paradigm for a quality education [13].

As such, in this paper we uphold the idea of sustainable education as a vehicle for a well-performing, merit-based educational system which is able to sustain itself consistently in the long-term, institutionally and financially, by delivering quality outputs for better and sustainable living.

When judging it from a national framework perspective, sustainable education has been defined in the literature as knowledge delivery that ensures a balanced national development, encompassing both economic and social issues and contributing to fulfilling human needs [14]. The role of quality improvements in education for national economic growth cannot be questioned [15]. If public policy is designed accurately, sustainable education should contribute to higher welfare in social and economic terms for the respective country. The risk is that in an era of globalized relationships, where international education dominates the planet, the primary focus to which education contributes is international development, while national growth remains a by-product, as asserted by Alam et al. [16]. There is a need to increase awareness of a sustainable education, with all its components, with a view to changing attitudes [17] and adopting knowledge and skills for a sustainable future that will change the daily behavior of students [18]. In higher education, the sustainability approach is usually promoted via institutional initiatives and campus activities [19]. A recent survey on Italian students [20] showed that they perceive sustainable education and youth confidence as the major future building blocks for society.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have a key role in sustainability through equipping future leaders with adequate policy measures to reach the established Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [21]. The internationalization of universities, as well as dedicated financial resources for education and research by local and regional authorities, is considered a crucial and integral part of the efforts to achieve the SDGs [22,23].

Nowadays, people in academia have realized the added value of expanding classes away from the solely home university ambiance to fruitful cross-cultural interaction and cooperative project-based learning [24]. The extension of universities' international activi-

ties has increased rapidly in recent years [25,26]. Universities have recognized the benefits of internationalization in the form of enhanced reputation, benchmarking against best practices, and dynamics from diversity [27], and, as such, they have actively encouraged this move, transforming it into a strategic priority [28].

The issue of internationalization in the field of higher education has been extensively commented on in the literature [29–31]. Internationalization has been deemed one of the new types of engagement for ensuring a sustainable higher education [32]. From the Asian continent, China, evidently, has received a lot of attention, with authors showing that internationalizing its higher education has been a government-led effort to enhance the country's position and influence worldwide [33,34]. In a comprehensive review, Tight (2022) has shown that this quest for internationalization has its supporters and critics [35]. It is well known that countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, and China have registered significant numbers of scholars throughout the years studying abroad, especially in the United States, Australia, or Western Europe. Quality education was pursued by students from developing countries to enhance their prospects [36]. Seeking to boost competitiveness in various fields, these students were expected to apply the advanced knowledge accumulated upon returning to their home countries.

The current paper delves into the possibility of studying abroad using scholarship funding. This encourages a merit-based and wider participation of students from all backgrounds (privileged and underprivileged). Also, it avoids the pitfall of talent migration from East to West, where students use funds from their country of origin to access international education, as Alam (2023) suggests [37]. International mobility of students can be considered an investment for enhancing cultural understanding and sustainability in the present intercultural framework. Moreover, encouraging student mobility is an appropriate policy to increase employability in labor markets impacted by globalization. Indeed, there is more research that demonstrates the positive influence of studying abroad on the students' subsequent work life [38].

ERASMUS is the flagship program financed by the European Union and the most popular international mobility framework for higher education in Europe. Over 4000 HEIs in more than 30 countries participate in the program [39]. The initiative started in 1987 and since then has enabled more than 10 million students from across Europe to pursue valuable learning experiences in other countries [40]. The program's participation rate is on a rising annual trend, with a few exceptions due to external factors such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the program reached a staggering total of 13.7 million individuals engaged in foreign mobility, as indicated in Figure 1.

Concerning the direction of university student migration, there are 'incoming/inbound mobilities', where foreign students enroll in universities in a specific country, and 'outgoing/outbound mobilities', where students depart from their home country to pursue studies in foreign universities. Within the ERASMUS program, the term 'study mobility' encompasses the movement of various individuals, such as university students and trainees, with the objective of facilitating their academic fulfillment.

Figures 2 and 3 delineate the numbers of student mobilities abroad during the academic year 2022–2023 within the ERASMUS program. The countries with the most significant outbound flows comprise Spain, France, Italy, Germany, and Poland. Conversely, Spain, Italy, Germany, and France have prominent inbound flows. Spain, Italy, Germany, and France emerged as the countries with the highest mobility overall.

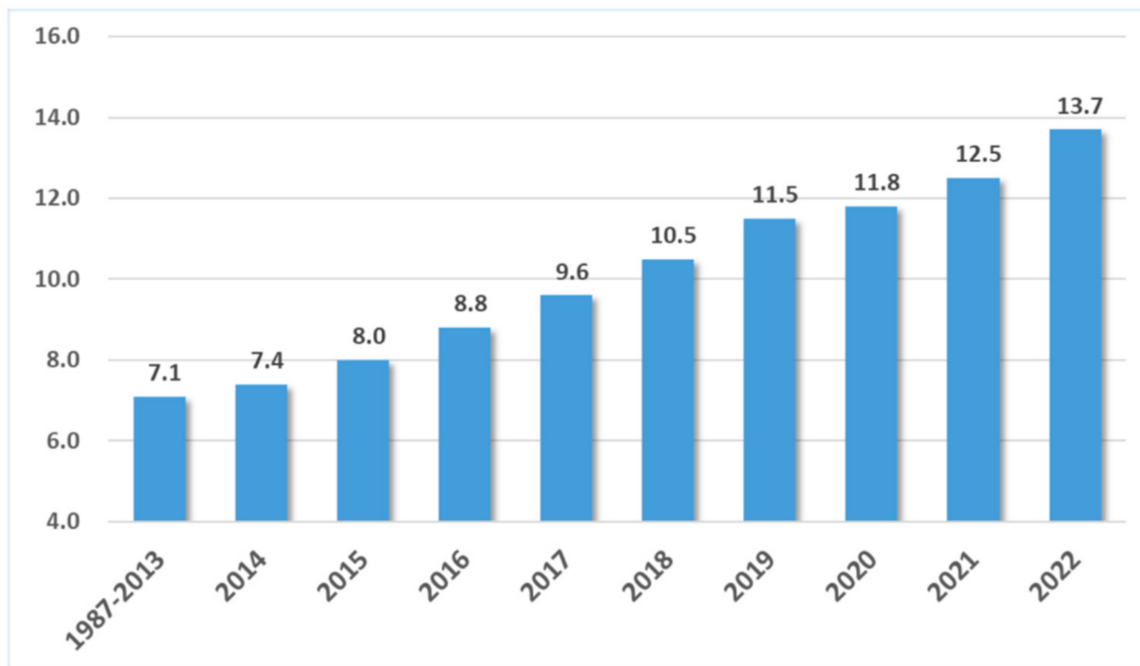


Figure 1. Cumulative ERASMUS mobilities for students and staff (total per year, in millions). Source: ERASMUS Annual Report 2022, European Commission [41].

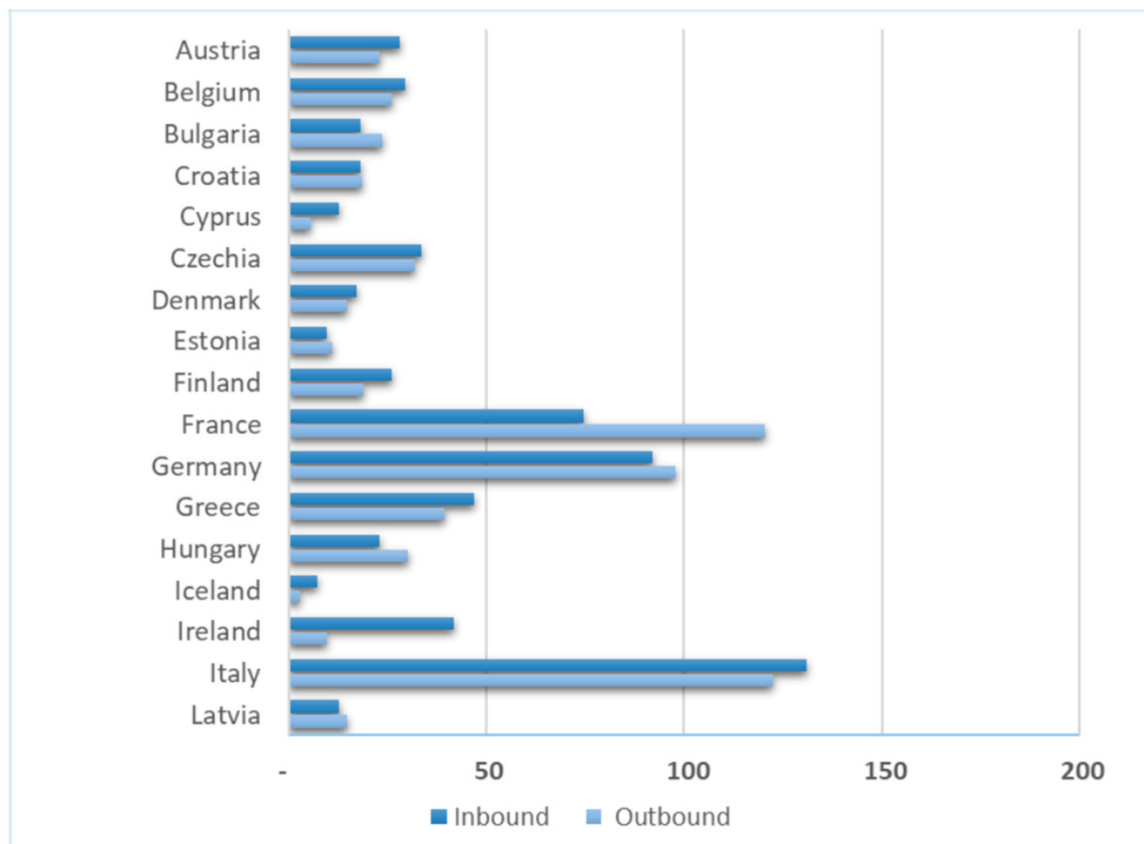


Figure 2. Study abroad mobilities under ERASMUS in 2022, part 1 (thousands). Source: ERASMUS Annual Report 2022, European Commission [41].

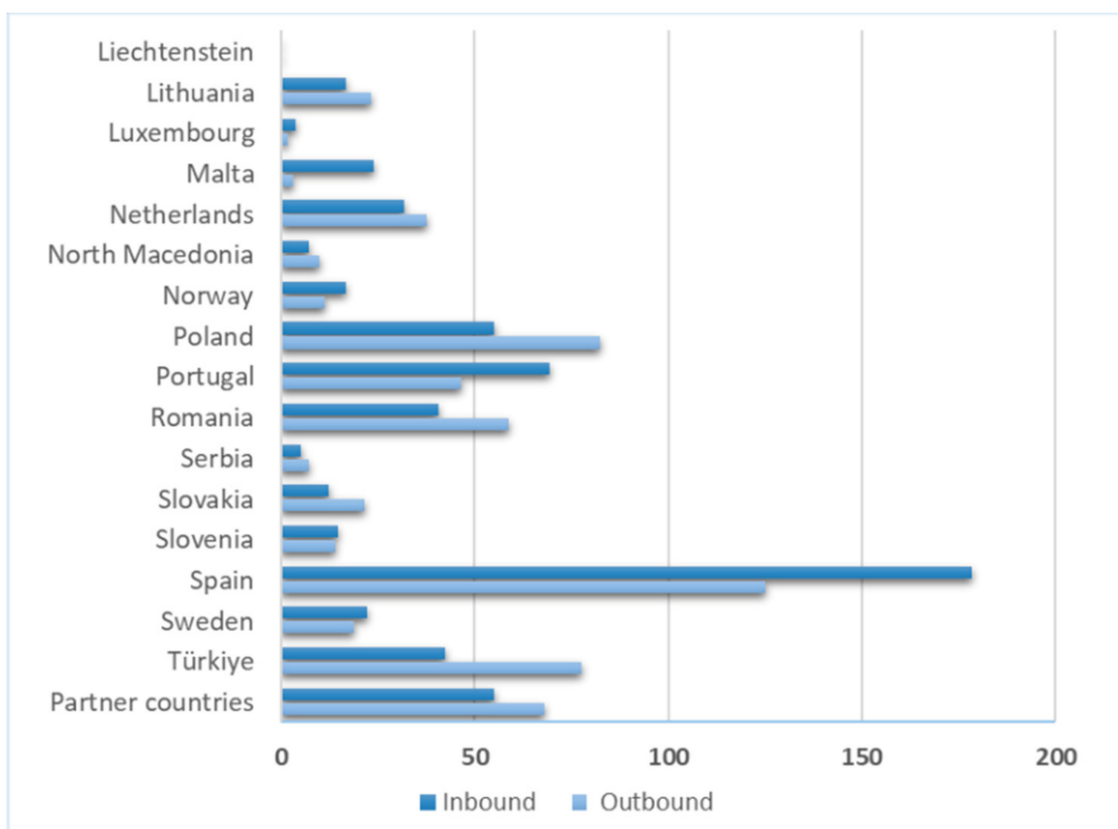


Figure 3. Study abroad mobilities under ERASMUS in 2022, part 2 (thousands). Source: ERASMUS Annual Report 2022, European Commission [41].

After gaining popularity for student mobility inside the European Union, the ERASMUS program expanded internationally when the European Commission launched the KA107 initiative (now called KA171) in 2015. Under this initiative, HEIs from Europe could initiate partnerships with universities around the world for student and staff mobility [42]. Thus, ERASMUS became a true tool of internationalization, and universities in countries such as Mongolia could benefit from incoming and outgoing mobilities financed by the EU in both directions.

In Mongolia, annual scholarship announcements foster bilateral educational cooperation with more than 20 countries through their respective diplomatic missions. Notably, the offer comprises scholarships from 10 European countries. The year 1999 witnessed 5107 students pursuing overseas education, a figure that surged to 27,980 by 2023 [43]. In 2022, some 2345 students were enrolled in European higher education institutions, out of which 10 participants were in the popular ERASMUS program.

Since 1993, the number of government scholarship programs that have been offered every year (see Table 1) has been augmented, and a large number of students have received scholarships in foreign countries. More than 2500 students from Mongolia have been awarded Chinese government scholarships, marking the highest number among countries receiving foreign scholarships. Apart from the scholarships outlined in Table 1, government scholarships from both European and Asian countries maintain their effectiveness. Examples include the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships, Swedish Institute Study Scholarships, Danish, Italian, Czech, Malaysian, and Korean Government Scholarships, and others.

Table 1. Announced scholarships in Mongolia every year.

	Country	Type of Scholarship	Starting Year	Number of Scholarships Received
1	British government scholarships	British Chevening Scholarships	1993	200
2	United States of America government scholarships	Fulbright Foreign Student Program	1994	1500
3	European government scholarships	DAAD Scholarships for Development-Related Postgraduate Courses	1992	321
		Eiffel Scholarships in France	2013	10
		Hungary Scholarship Program	2013	200
4	Australian government scholarships	Australia Awards Scholarships	1993	700
5	Asian government scholarships	Japanese Government Scholarships	2001	384
		Chinese Government Scholarships–Bilateral Program	2012	>2500
		Taiwan Scholarships	2018	1600
		Türkiye Scholarships	1992	1200

Source: Authors' own compilation from official data.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Matter

For universities, an elevated percentage of mobile students represents a mark of good reputation and quality education [44].

A large number of European HEIs consider ERASMUS to be a valuable advantage offered to students enrolled in various programs. Of the different ERASMUS components, study mobility is deemed highly relevant for internationalization by 83% of HEIs [45].

Upon closer examination of European preferences among Mongolian students, it was discerned that Germany, France, Austria, and Italy emerged as primary destinations of interest among prospective international scholars. As of 2023, 903 people went to study in Germany, 745 in Ireland, 245 in Hungary, 149 in Italy, and 96 in France [43]. As shown in Table 2, the flow of scholars studying in the latter European countries has been on the rise since the pandemic. Germany, Ireland, and Hungary receive the highest number of students from Mongolia.

Even though there is no centralized official record of how many persons from Mongolia have participated in the ERASMUS mobility program, the EU Delegation to Mongolia has registered the information of around 100 individuals who benefitted from such mobility. Therefore, the research team undertook a questionnaire survey among the experts of the departments responsible for foreign relations and cooperation of the major universities in Mongolia to enquire about the number of participants in the program from those universities.

The major Mongolian universities joined the ERASMUS program at different stages (see Table 3), after signing inter-institutional agreements with universities from the EU. Students from the Mongolian University of Life Sciences were the first to participate in the program in 2009. Thus, it may come as no surprise that this university records the highest cumulative number of students that enjoyed an ERASMUS exchange abroad (37 persons).

Table 2. Number of Mongolian students in selected European countries in the last 5 years.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Austria	94	16	14	51	68
Belgium	13	3	3	13	8
Bulgaria	23	3	10	6	6
Croatia	4	0	0	7	3
Cyprus	8	2	4	1	5
Czechia	53	14	11	36	56
Denmark	2	0	1	2	5
Finland	7	1	1	5	22
France	69	20	24	67	96
Germany	550	191	278	796	903
Hungary	304	157	269	231	245
Ireland	186	23	112	880	745
Italy	97	34	58	124	149
Latvia	6	0	1	1	0
Netherlands	9	2	1	13	24
Poland	53	6	42	73	30
Portugal	4	0	0	1	1
Romania	14	3	4	5	7
Spain	9	3	4	19	10
Sweden	16	4	8	10	25
Total	1521	482	845	2341	2408

Source: Compiled by the authors from Mongolia National Statistics Office data [43].

Table 3. Participation of Mongolian universities in the ERASMUS mobility program.

	University	Year of Joining the ERASMUS Program	Students Participating in ERASMUS	Students Participating in ERASMUS 2018–2023	Main Study Area of Participant Students
1.	National University of Mongolia	2009	30	20	Mongolian Studies, History and Archeology
2.	Mongolian University of Science and Technology	2016	10	3	Engineering, Architecture and Management
3.	University of Finance and Economics	2016	6	0	Business Administration
4.	Mongolian University of Life Sciences	2009	37	19	Ecology and Economy
5.	Otgontenger University	2017	2	2	Business Administration
6.	CITI University	2014	25	3	Business Administration

Source: Compiled by the authors from Mongolian universities' own data.

In the same year, 2009, the National University of Mongolia joined the program, boasting now a total of 30 participating students. The Mongolian University of Science and Technology and the University of Finance and Economics joined the ERASMUS program later, in 2016. Furthermore, other universities enrolled in the program. Comparing the number of students who participated in study abroad with the total number of students

since joining the program, it can be concluded that the program has increased rapidly in popularity since 2018.

Two distinct categories are delineated based on the duration spent abroad: ‘degree mobilities’, which persist until the attainment of a university degree, and ‘credit mobilities’, which entail continued studies earning credits but lead to the attainment of a degree in the student’s home country. As shown in Table 4, the majority of project proposals submitted by Mongolia were eventually selected. A total of 328 university students, teachers and staff went to European countries between 2015 and 2020. The number of teachers and students moving from European countries to Mongolia was 191.

Table 4. International credit mobilities from Mongolia, 2015–2020.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Project proposals submitted by Mongolia under ERASMUS	19	25	24	32	38	46	184
Selected projects from Mongolia under ERASMUS	9	15	16	19	36	42	137
Students and staff moving to Europe	30	63	44	60	64	67	328
Students and staff moving to Mongolia	20	29	19	35	43	45	191

Source: ERASMUS for higher education in Mongolia Report, 2020, European Commission [6].

3.2. Marketing Research

The study consists of two main parts. First, the research team investigated the willingness of Mongolian university students to pursue studies abroad, particularly by means of the ERASMUS mobility program. The study also examined whether the information about the program is different in urban and rural universities, and what difficulties students face in participating in the program. In the second part, graduates from Mongolian universities who qualified and participated in the ERASMUS program were asked about their satisfaction with the program and the benefits and challenges they encountered at the host universities. Both parts of the study investigated various traits of sustainable education, such as quality academic activities and outcomes as well as important economic and social aspects, through the lens of Mongolian students.

The research conducted is a quantitative study. The research aims to elucidate the perspective of Mongolian students toward studying abroad. More specifically, the first major aim of the research is to investigate the willingness of Mongolian students to study abroad, their aspirations linked to such an endeavor in line with creating a sustainable education, as well as their understanding of the ERASMUS mobility program, and the challenges associated with taking part in it.

As of 2023, the Mongolian Statistics Office reported a total of 113,322 undergraduate and postgraduate level students enrolled in educational programs [43]. Among them, a sample of 817 students from the top eight universities in Mongolia was surveyed using a quantitative methodology of the opinion poll type, following the directives established by the Ministry of Education. Given these circumstances, it is reasonably justifiable to infer that the selected sample fairly represents Mongolian students at a national level.

The research was structured around the following set of specific objectives in line with its first aim and the paper’s theme:

- Determining willingness to pursue studies abroad;
- Identifying expectations regarding participation in a mobility program abroad;
- Assessing students’ familiarity with the ERASMUS mobility program;
- Determining the common problems of qualifying and participating in the mobility program.

The study was based on the technique of opinion polling, using an online computer-managed questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection facilitated by Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), a method preferred by the youth [46,47]. To follow the empirical manner of this study, a non-probabilistic method known as the ‘snowball’ ap-

proach was applied for sampling. Specifically, the research focused on full-time university students registered in Mongolian universities.

The research involved 817 undergraduate and postgraduate students who were enrolled in diverse educational programs across eight esteemed higher education institutions in Mongolia. When resorting to sampling, the level of representativeness is typically reflected by the standard error. In this context, the calculated standard error stands at 5%, whereas the confidence level is 95%. Following the collection of data by means of the questionnaire, the information was processed using a dedicated software program (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 16.0).

As to the university students, 10.5% of the cohort originated from the University of Humanities (UH), while 14% were affiliated with the Mongolian University of Science and Technology (MUST), and 10.2% were from the National University of Mongolia (NUM). Additionally, 14.5% represented the University of Finance and Economics (UFE), with 11.8% affiliated with Otgontenger University (OTU), 27.7% coming from the Mongolian University of Life Sciences (MULS), and 11.4% from the isolated areas located on the eastern and western side of Mongolia, namely Khovd and Dornod universities. The gender distribution revealed that 48.5% were male and 51.5% were female participants. Notably, 92.7% of respondents were pursuing undergraduate studies, while the remaining 7.3% were enrolled in postgraduate studies.

A second major aim of the research was to obtain opinions from Mongolian students who had engaged in international ERASMUS mobilities so as to investigate the positive and negative points of such an experience from an academic, economic, and social point of view and to identify the motivations behind students' decisions for choosing particular destination countries for study abroad.

For the second aim, the research questions were grouped around the following specific objectives:

- Determining the primary elements behind the choice of Mongolian students for a specific country;
- Identifying the preferred destinations of Mongolian students for their ERASMUS mobility;
- Establishing the key benefits associated with involvement in the ERASMUS program;
- Identifying the major difficulties experienced by Mongolian students participating in the ERASMUS program.

Specifically, the focus was on university students meeting the research criteria, namely those who undertook outbound ERASMUS mobility from Mongolia. The eventual sample consisted of 43 outgoing students. In this scenario, the computed standard error stands at 10%, with a confidence level of 90%. Considering the statistical population was approximately 100 individuals, the sample size ideally should have been larger. However, this study is preliminary in nature. Participants in the ERASMUS mobility program who were included in the research studied in the 13 countries listed in Table 5. Among them, the highest number of scholars studied in Italy, Poland, Spain, Austria and the Czech Republic.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the goal was to gather a large number of filled-in questionnaires from Mongolian students who participated in ERASMUS mobility abroad. The sample encompassed 74.4% female and 25.6% male participants. Among them, 23.3% pursued mobility during their bachelor's cycle, 44.2% during their master's degree, and 32.6% during their doctorate. The age distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 6. Notably, the largest portion (41.9%) falls within the age range of 26 to 35 years, followed by those aged between 36 and 45, constituting 30.2% of the total respondents (see Table 6). According to related research, for most of the countries involved in the ERASMUS program, female students outnumber male students [48].

Table 5. Countries where ERASMUS students from Mongolia undertook mobility.

Country	Female	Male	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Austria	1	3	4	9.3	9.3	9.3
Bulgaria	1	2	3	7.0	7.0	16.3
Czechia	3	1	4	9.3	9.3	25.6
France	3	0	3	7.0	7.0	32.6
Finland	2	0	2	4.7	4.7	37.3
Germany	2	0	2	4.7	4.7	42.0
Italy	8	1	9	20.8	20.8	62.8
Poland	2	3	5	11.6	11.6	74.4
Portugal	1	1	2	4.7	4.7	79.1
Romania	1	0	1	2.3	2.3	81.4
Türkiye	2	0	2	4.7	4.7	86.1
Spain	5	0	5	11.6	11.6	97.7
Netherlands	1	0	1	2.3	2.3	100
Total	32	11	43	100	100	

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 6. Age of the surveyed respondents.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 18–25 years	5	11.6	11.6	11.6
26–35 years	18	41.9	41.9	53.5
36–45 years	13	30.2	30.2	83.7
46 years and above	7	16.3	16.3	100
Total	43	100	100	

Source: Authors' own research.

4. Results

The first part of the study analyzes the aspirations and motivations of Mongolian students to pursue studies abroad in order to enhance their education and improve their career prospects. Elements that impact the motivation of students toward mobility abroad vary on a country basis, depending on economic, social, and cultural features [49]. In recent years, the desire of students and young people to study in foreign universities has grown rapidly.

The majority of undergraduate and graduate students in our survey expressed their willingness to study in a foreign university. A notable observation from the research is the substantial interest expressed by a majority of 82.7% of participants in pursuing academic opportunities abroad within their respective fields, a high-quality education being the major driver (Table 7).

When asked about their preferred study destinations, a total of 32.4% of all respondents expressed a desire to study in European countries. Meanwhile, 27.7% of students indicated an interest in studying in Asian countries, 27.1% in America, and 11.3% in Australia. Only 1.5% of respondents selected other options. There is no essential difference in educational level concerning the regions where students are interested in studying abroad (Table 8).

Table 7. Willingness to study in foreign countries.

		Do You Want to Study in a Foreign Country?			Total
		Yes	No	Don't Know	
Education level	Bachelor	78.2%	8.1%	6.4%	92.7%
	Master	4.5%	0.2%	2.6%	7.3%
Total		82.7%	8.3%	9.0%	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 8. Preferred region for study abroad.

		Which Region Are You Interested in Studying in?					Total
		America	Europe	Asia	Australia	Other	
Education level	Bachelor	25.2%	30.1%	25.6%	10.4%	1.3%	92.7%
	Master	1.8%	2.3%	2.1%	0.9%	0.2%	7.3%
Total		27.1%	32.4%	27.7%	11.3%	1.5%	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

When students evaluated their knowledge and information about the ERASMUS mobility program, 3.1% answered “very good”, 5.8% “good”, 14.3% “acceptable”, 18.2% “poor”, and 58.6% “very poor”. In other words, 76.8% of the students do not know the program. Although students want to study in European countries, it is common that they do not have information about ERASMUS mobility, a major program for studying abroad. Looking at this by grade, knowledge of the program increases as the grade progresses, with students in grades 1 and 2 having the least knowledge of the program (Table 9).

Table 9. Knowledge about the ERASMUS mobility program.

		Very Good	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Very Poor	Total
Grade	Freshman	1.1%	2.0%	5.6%	8.0%	26.8%	43.5%
	Sophomore	1.2%	1.6%	4.2%	5.8%	15.8%	28.5%
	Junior	0.6%	1.7%	3.4%	3.5%	11.1%	20.4%
	Senior	0.1%	0.5%	1.1%	1.0%	4.9%	7.6%
Total		3.1%	5.8%	14.3%	18.2%	58.6%	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

A significant majority of students (76.5%) expressed support for the ERASMUS mobility program (see Table 10). There is notably high anticipation among them for their university to offer opportunities to participate in the program.

Table 10. Willingness to participate in the ERASMUS mobility program.

		If the School You Are Studying in Offered a Long-Term Exchange Program to Study in European Countries, Would You Choose to Study Abroad?			Total
		Yes	No	Don't Know	
Education level	Bachelor	70.0%	6.6%	16.0%	92.7%
	Master	6.5%	0.4%	0.5%	7.3%
Total		76.5%	7.0%	16.5%	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 11 highlights the top 10 countries in which the students surveyed would like to study. Germany (17.7%), France (11.4%), Austria (6.9%), Italy (5.9%), and Ireland (4.0%) received the most votes as the European countries where students would like to study. No major differences toward the preferred countries were found according to the educational level of students. However, the majority of engineering students were interested in studying in Germany.

Table 11. Ranking of countries as the preferred destination for study.

	Countries	Number	Percent
1.	Germany	145	17.7%
2.	France	93	11.4%
3.	Austria	56	6.9%
4.	Italy	48	5.9%
5.	Finland	33	4.0%
6.	Ireland	33	4.0%
7.	Sweden	32	3.9%
8.	Switzerland	28	3.4%
9.	Belgium	26	3.2%
10.	Hungary	25	3.1%
11.	Other	298	36.5%

Source: Authors' own research.

More than 51% of participants pointed out that foreign language skills will improve while studying in foreign universities. Also, 40.3% of respondents recognized the importance of getting to know a new culture and studying in a new place, while 36.4% emphasized improving academic knowledge and successful learning (Table 12). This perspective encompasses the expected social and economic development of individuals, and is closely associated with the holistic benefits of a desired sustainable education in the home country.

Table 12. The importance of studying abroad.

	Education Level		Percent of Cases	
	Bachelor	Master		
Importance of studying abroad	Increasing knowledge of foreign languages	48.3%	3.1%	51.4%
	Making new friends	26.5%	1.6%	28.1%
	Better learning	33.5%	2.8%	36.4%
	Getting to know new cultures and places	36.7%	3.6%	40.3%
	Other	11.2%	0.7%	11.9%
Total	92.6%	7.4%	168.1%	

Source: Authors' own research.

The study conducted among university students from isolated regions in Mongolia, specifically Khovd University in the west and Dornod University in the east, revealed significant challenges stemming from their remote location. Limited access to the internet and occasional lack of information regarding study opportunities abroad were identified as major hindrances.

Despite these obstacles, an overwhelming majority of participants, comprising 89.2% of the total sample, expressed a strong desire to pursue studies abroad within their respective

fields of study. However, a significant issue emerged as their majors did not align with available scholarship programs (Table 13).

Table 13. Challenges to study abroad for participants in a mobility program.

	The Universities						Universities in Isolated Areas	Percent	Percent of Cases
	UH	NUM	MUST	UFE	MULS	OTU			
Language difficulties	2.3%	2.0%	2.3%	3.0%	9.5%	3.1%	6.5%	28.7%	44.0%
Financial difficulties	2.4%	3.2%	5.0%	3.7%	6.3%	3.2%	6.2%	30.0%	46.0%
Lack of information	2.1%	1.3%	1.0%	3.1%	5.7%	1.3%	3.7%	18.2%	27.9%
Scholarship criteria	2.1%	0.7%	1.7%	2.2%	3.5%	0.6%	3.0%	13.8%	21.2%
University requirements	1.2%	0.5%	0.7%	1.2%	2.8%	0.6%	2.3%	9.0%	14.3%
Total	10.1%	7.7%	10.7%	13.2%	27.8%	8.8%	21.7%	100%	153.4%

Source: Authors' own research.

Financial constraints were cited by 46% of participants as an important hurdle. Furthermore, language barriers emerged as a notable challenge for 44% of participants, while 27.9% encountered obstacles associated with information accessibility when considering educational pursuits abroad. Fairly similar results on the challenges encountered can be found in the study of Tuvshingerel (2012). The financial outlay of Mongolian students abroad reveals expenditures ranging from 0.8 to 16.8 thousand dollars for tuition fees and 3.0 to 12.0 thousand dollars for personal expenses, resulting in an aggregate expenditure between 4.6 and 27.5 thousand dollars [50]. According to the results of our research, students ranked financial difficulties in the same position, which sheds light on the fact that to establish sustainable education, policy makers definitely need to ensure a solid financial background as a starting base for academic performance.

The second part of the study investigates the attitudes and expectations of Mongolian students concerning their decision to pursue studies abroad. These factors encompass various elements, including the prestige of the HEI based on its teaching and research endeavors, the appeal of the host country, associated expenses, employment prospects, as well as the presence of relatives and friends in the destination country. The benefits and challenges to studying abroad are associated with the economic and social aspects included in sustainable education. To investigate these factors, the authors employed the analysis of dichotomous responses. No missing data were found regarding the variable pertaining to the attitude toward participating in ERASMUS, and no discernible gender disparities were observed in the motivations for participation.

Recognizing the pivotal emotional drivers influencing university students' decisions to opt for studying abroad, alongside improving the conditions for mobility, is crucial for formulating educational policies, regulations and guidelines aimed at attracting a wider participation in such programs. Such experiences yield societal, economic, and professional development benefits, enhancing academic performance and refining students' skills, while also fostering the cultivation of empathetic international attitudes conducive to cooperation.

When delving into the realm of international scholarships, some essential aspects to examine are the emotional motivations guiding university students toward pursuing a period of studying abroad. Upon examining the motivations behind students' decisions to engage in academic mobility abroad, besides the appeal of the chosen country and the prestige of the host university, a significant majority of respondents (32.6%) opted for the academic offering and the scholarship itself. The second most prevalent rationale was the willingness to study abroad, with master's and bachelor's students particularly expressing a desire to study in foreign country.

An intriguing discovery was that the prestige of the host university was perceived twice as significant by doctoral candidates compared to bachelor's students, a trend likely

attributed to the greater maturity in their educational journey. Master's students did not consider university reputation to be a decisive factor. Another factor is the country chosen for study. Master's students, especially, considered specific countries in which to pursue their academic endeavors. Only a small fraction of individual respondents, constituting 7%, cited proximity to family and relatives in the destination country as a motivating factor for studying abroad (Table 14).

Table 14. Reasons for the choice of studying abroad.

	Study Cycle			Total Responses	Cumulative Percent
	Bachelor	Master	PhD		
A particular country	0.0%	14.0%	2.3%	16.3%	16.3%
University reputation	4.7%	0.0%	7.0%	11.7%	28.0%
Scholarships and invitations to study in certain universities	7.0%	14.0%	11.6%	32.6%	60.6%
Acquaintances in the host country	2.3%	4.7%	0.0%	7.0%	67.6%
Willingness to study abroad	9.1%	11.6%	7.0%	27.7%	95.3%
Other	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	4.7%	100%
Total	23.1%	44.3%	32.6%	100%	

Source: Authors' own research.

The predominant desires expressed by respondents in connection with studying abroad were to acquire valuable information and enhance academic performance for future career prospects, alongside the desire to explore new locations and immerse oneself in a different culture. These motivations, central to the idea of building a sustainable education in the home society, were equally distributed between genders. A majority of 95.3% of respondents opted for gathering precious knowledge and improving their academic record, which would be useful for their professional career, as the main expectation, with a slightly higher frequency for males. Another major expectation revolved around exploring novel destinations and becoming acquainted with a diverse culture, as indicated by 53.5% of participants in the ERASMUS mobility program. Additionally, 37.2% of respondents anticipated forming new friendships, while 25.6% were drawn to the opportunity to learn a new language while studying abroad (Table 15).

Table 15. Expectations related to the period of studying abroad.

	Gender		Total Responses	Percent of Cases
	Male	Female		
Accumulate knowledge and enhance academic profile	10.9%	33.7%	44.6%	95.3%
Learn a new language	2.2%	9.8%	12.0%	25.6%
Make new friends	6.5%	10.9%	17.4%	37.2%
Experience new places and cultures	6.5%	18.5%	25.0%	53.5%
Other	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%	2.3%
Total	26.1%	73.9%	100%	214%

Source: Authors' own research.

During their adjustment to studying abroad, students encounter a variety of emotional and behavioral obstacles throughout their time in the host country. Various studies have acknowledged such adjustment difficulties [51]. When questioned about the primary challenges they encountered, participants expressed significant difficulties with insufficient

proficiency in the language (35%), adjustment to educational methods and assessment techniques (17.5%), and assimilating into the university setting and academic approach (15%).

Interacting and collaborating with instructors and peers (15%) and adjusting to a different cultural environment (12.5%), including hurdles in forming social connections and exploring unfamiliar locales, were also cited (see Table 16). However, some of the participants answered that they did not experience any difficulties while participating in the mobility program (20% of cases).

Table 16. Challenges during the period of studying abroad.

	Study Cycle			Total Responses	Percent of Cases
	Bachelor	Master	PhD		
Lack of proper language skills	5.9%	11.8%	9.8%	27.5%	35.0%
Adapting to a new culture	2.0%	3.9%	3.9%	9.8%	12.5%
Adapting to the university environment and learning style	2.0%	5.9%	3.9%	11.8%	15.0%
Adapting to school procedures and assessment methods	5.9%	2.0%	5.9%	13.7%	17.5%
Communicating and cooperation with teachers and students	0.0%	3.9%	7.8%	11.8%	15.0%
Other	0.0%	5.9%	3.9%	9.8%	12.5%
None	3.9%	5.9%	5.9%	15.7%	20.0%
Total	19.6%	39.2%	41.2%	100%	127.5%

Source: Authors' own research.

Finally, 12.5% of graduates faced various other challenges, citing issues such as difficulties in finding accommodation, socializing and exploring new places in the host country, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated curfews, which had strong negative effects on mobility programs, including ERASMUS. Once campuses were locked down, international scholars studying abroad experienced a shocking revelation far from their familiar home environment. Even if they were in need of assistance, most HEIs were unprepared for a serious health situation and had to improvise to keep the ERASMUS program going for both incoming and outgoing students [52]. In COVID-19 times, 60% of universities switched to online mobilities instead of physical mobilities [53]. During the COVID-19 confinement, students found themselves in a new situation, one they had never faced before [54]. In such a period of crisis, many students experienced more than the usual emotional, social, financial and legal obstacles that influence their decision on studying abroad [55].

For a study mobility to be considered successful by participants, certain factors pertaining to the host university must be effectively implemented and addressed. A significant majority of respondents regarded the educational aspect, encompassing overall quality of methodology, learning infrastructure and the student–teacher dynamic, as the most gratifying facet of studying abroad (56.1% of cases). Additionally, over a quarter of the participants perceived the school environment and dormitory services favorably (26.8% of cases), with positive evaluations also extended to the relation between teachers and administrators (14.6% of cases). Along with the arrangement of excursions for students (9.8% of cases), the existence of shows and events on the campus (7.3% of cases), and the canteen services (4.9% of cases) were also valued. There were no significant discrepancies between responses from university students at the three levels (Table 17).

Table 17. Appreciated services at the university where studying abroad.

	Study Cycle			Total Responses	Percent of Cases
	Bachelor	Master	PhD		
Education (quality)	12.2%	18.4%	16.3%	46.9%	56.1%
Accommodation conditions	6.1%	10.2%	6.1%	22.4%	26.8%
Canteen/Food	4.1%	0.0%	0.0%	4.1%	4.9%
Communication with administrative services	2.0%	8.2%	2.0%	12.2%	14.6%
Organized shows and events	4.1%	2.0%	0.0%	6.1%	7.3%
Other extracurricular activities	2.0%	4.1%	2.0%	8.2%	9.8%
Total	30.6%	42.9%	26.5%	100%	119.5%

Source: Authors' own research.

When asked about the stressful aspects related to studying abroad, two primary issues emerged in students' responses. Several students expressed dissatisfaction with educational services (39.4% of cases), especially concerning the difficulty of exams, organization of information, and diverging teaching methods, with a consistently high rate reported across all three academic levels. Master's and doctoral students rated high their dissatisfaction with extracurricular activities (27.9% of all cases). Unlike the other two academic levels, over 10% of master's level students were negatively impressed by the communication with the management staff (Table 18).

Table 18. Non-appreciated services at the university where studying abroad.

	Study Cycle			Total Responses	Cumulative Percent
	Bachelor	Master	PhD		
Education (difficulty)	7.0%	18.6%	13.8%	39.4%	39.4%
Accommodation conditions	4.7%	4.7%	0.0%	9.4%	48.8%
Canteen/Food	2.3%	2.3%	4.7%	9.3%	58.1%
Communication with administrative services	2.3%	4.7%	0.0%	7.0%	65.1%
Organized shows and events	4.7%	2.3%	0.0%	7.0%	72.1%
Other extracurricular activities	2.3%	11.6%	14.0%	27.9%	100%
Total	23.3%	44.2%	32.5%	100%	

Source: Authors' own research.

Asked about their satisfaction with the ERASMUS mobility program, a majority of 81.4% of participants reported being completely satisfied, 16.3% expressed satisfaction exceeding 75%, and 2.3% indicated satisfaction levels ranging from 51% to 75% (see Table 19). No answers were recorded for satisfaction levels under 50%, meaning that none of the respondents had strong reasons to dislike the study abroad experience.

The interrelationship between satisfaction with study abroad and age of participants was investigated and illustrated by means of a scattergram (Figure 4).

Interestingly, the level of satisfaction increases with age: youngsters between 26 and 35 reported some cases of moderate satisfaction, more mature students at master's level (36–45) showed a higher level of general satisfaction, while senior doctoral students (over 46) were the most satisfied with the experience of studying abroad.

Table 19. Satisfaction resulting from participating in the ERASMUS mobility program.

	Number of Students	Percent of Cases
100%	35	81.4%
76–99%	7	16.3%
51–75%	1	2.3%
26–50%	0	0
Under 25%	0	0
Total	43	100%

Source: Authors’ own research.

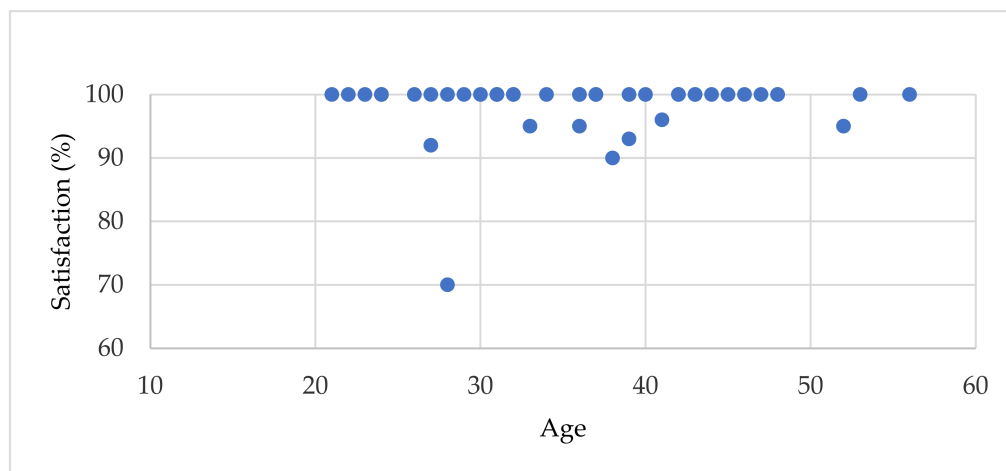


Figure 4. Scattergram of the relationship between satisfaction rating and age of respondents. Source: Authors’ own research.

When relating satisfaction level with the host country of the mobility by means of clustering the respondents for the countries with higher representation, more in-depth conclusions emerged. Students who undertook mobility in France expressed 100% satisfaction. Very close, Italy and Austria displayed almost total satisfaction, with a few exceptions, related to the assessment methods used in the host university. In the case of Poland, a notable outlier appeared due to communication problems with fellow colleagues and teachers, while Spain showed a lower satisfaction level compared to other countries, typically because accommodation conditions were considered not entirely suitable by the students who pursued a mobility there (Figure 5).

The research infers that students from Mongolia who participated in the ERASMUS program were highly satisfied and felt that it had a positive impact on their careers. A last query was concerned with the influence of the period of study abroad on adopting a sustainable way of living, from an economic, social, and environmental point of view. Consistent with the main traits of sustainable education, the majority of respondents (93%) were in favor of this outcome, while only 7% rejected it. The scholars viewed their period of study abroad as a valuable investment to enhance the quality of their education, perform better in their future career, including employment prospects, and adopt a more environmentally friendly lifestyle in their personal life.

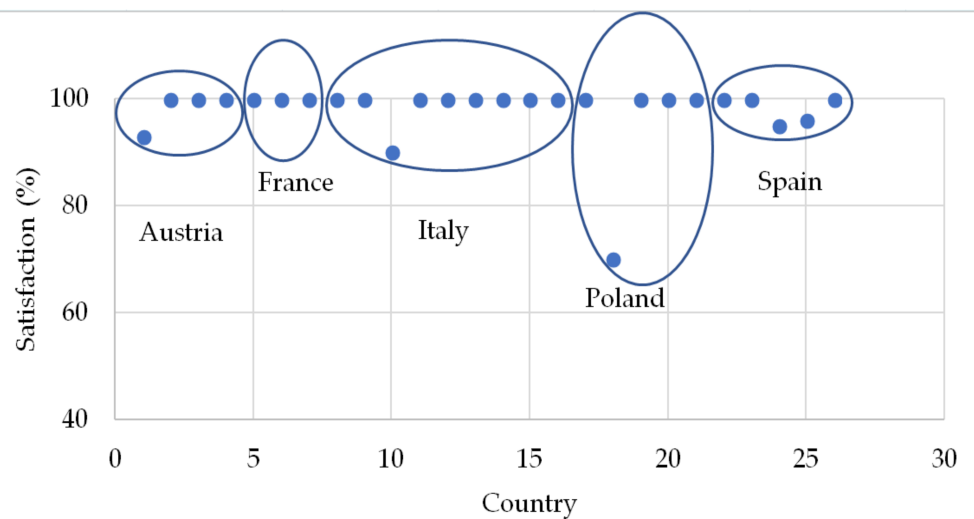


Figure 5. Scattergram of the relationship between satisfaction rating and destination country. Source: Authors' own research.

5. Discussion

Studying abroad is expected to have a valuable impact on the economic and social development of participants and their respective communities. The experience and good practice gathered while studying in a foreign country and environment is a key component of a sustainable education, leading subsequently to a sustainable way of living in the home society. Naturally, ERASMUS-supported temporary study in a European country should have a positive influence on the students' life and career after graduation, notably on their employment and work, but also on their social activities as citizens, on their family life, and in other areas [56].

In our research, the most positive outcomes among participants in ERASMUS mobilities were related to personal and professional development, cultural enhancement, and foreign language skills. Accumulating knowledge in the form of quality education was cited by Mongolian students both as a perceived benefit by those desiring to study abroad as well as a real-time experienced benefit by those who had already undertaken ERASMUS mobilities. This is consistent with findings from a study on Turkish students who stressed academic, professional, and individual development as the salient benefits of studying abroad [40]. The competitive side of the academic career was perceived as a main asset by Singapore and Malaysian students as well [35]. In contrast, Australian students appreciated the practical experience most [27]. The sharing of cultural ideas and values, appreciated by Mongolian students, was highlighted as a key benefit of studying abroad in the seminal paper by Teichler (2004), alongside international communication and discourse [56].

An international mobility to the EU has, moreover, a Europeanization effect in as much as it influences the social profile of students [57]. It is also reasonable to assume that participants in the mobility program will enjoy an increased knowledge of the EU [58] and its values, such as inclusion and diversity, active participation in democratic life, and the fight against climate change. The findings also revealed that Mongolian students achieved a better environmental awareness after their study period abroad. These characteristics form a solid ground for establishing a sustainable education in the students' home countries.

However, as the present research revealed, there are many obstacles to studying abroad, with financial and linguistic the most prominent ones, followed by lack of information and difficulty in adapting to academic methods in the host university. The link between student attitudes and their reasons to study in a foreign country were analyzed extensively by Sanchez, Fornerino, and Zhang (2006) using expectancy theory. The results included four categories of obstacles, familial, financial, psychological, and social, irrespective of the nationality of students. The motivations were also similar, albeit the particular combination of stimuli for studying abroad varied on a country basis [59]. Using a large database

of students from seven European countries, Souto-Otero et al. (2022) also captured the financial barriers as an overall challenge when pursuing study abroad, followed closely by personal barriers, such as comfort factors, anxiety, and lack of proper information [39].

In contrast, Chinese students raised concerns about the dominance of the English language as a challenge related to studying abroad, fearing also that internationalization will lead to 'Westernization' [35]. In a broader context, several authors stressed the difficulty of recognition of qualifications as a challenge following study abroad and the more subtle consequences of a possible 'brain drain', with affluent and well-prepared students being lured by recruitment offices of fee-based top universities [28,37].

Regarding long-term exchange programs offered by their respective institutions to study in European countries, an impressive 84.9% of respondents indicated their willingness to participate. The findings emphasize the keen interest among students of isolated universities in seizing international academic experiences, despite the challenges posed by geographical constraints. Expanding opportunities for young students not only secures their brighter future but also profoundly influences national development by means of a sustainable education. Specifically, revitalizing rural areas necessitates ensuring equal access to information for young individuals residing, learning, and working in underprivileged regions. The escalating urban–rural gap stemming from rural depopulation demands focused attention. Interestingly, students exhibited a great interest for the ERASMUS mobility program. This finding highlights the students' proactive engagement with international opportunities via scholarships.

An ERASMUS impact study [45] shows that 92% of companies are looking for personality characteristics such as confidence, communication skills, problem-solving, tolerance, and decisiveness when making a recruitment decision. Various tests demonstrate that ERASMUS students display a better mastery of these characteristics. After their study period abroad, the difference in values obtained in tests rises by 42% compared with the student average. ERASMUS students are half as likely to experience unemployment compared to their home peers, and a reasonable time after graduating, their unemployment rate is significantly lower. This is consistent with the economic component of sustainable education, demonstrating the proof of a better financial outcome for the graduates who have undertaken a period of study abroad within the mobility program.

Given the limitations of the present research, which was centered only on the Mongolian case and had a relatively small sample size, the authors intend to build on the findings by conducting a more extensive, grounded study in the future, incorporating a broader sample that includes students from other Asian countries involved in exchange programs for studying abroad with the European Union. Such a study will also enable valuable cross-cultural comparisons for future directions in this research area.

6. Conclusions

Studying abroad is an enriching learning experience because of the active engagement of students with other people in the new environment [60]. This research contributes to the literature of internationalization of higher education by means of a quantitative study conducted among Mongolian students in the broader context of advancing the sustainable character of education. By adopting and applying the best practices of host countries in terms of economic, social, and environmental aspects, such students form the backbone of a sustainable education meant to increase the development of their careers in the home country.

In recent years, a significant proportion of high school graduates in Mongolia have desired to study at foreign universities. The results of the present research show that the majority of Mongolian students want to study in European countries. Despite the students' interest in studying in EU member states, they commonly lack awareness of the ERASMUS mobility program, even if this constitutes a significant opportunity in this direction. When compared to other scholarship programs in Mongolia, enrollment of students in the ERASMUS program appears disproportionately low, especially in underprivileged areas,

highlighting the need for heightened awareness and better preparation among students in the future to diminish their potential fears stemming from an information gap. This calls for a stronger nationwide information campaign on behalf of European institutions as well as Mongolian universities and the Ministry of Education, to promote the significance and the benefits of the program, including in the isolated areas. Policy makers in education should also consider complementing the various scholarship schemes from abroad with national funds to increase affordability and to overcome the financial barrier, which emerged from the study as the main deterrent for enrolling in a study program abroad. As a positive sign, investigating the major Mongolian universities which were represented in the research, there is an obvious rising trend of students who have participated in the program during the last five years.

As part of the research, the opinions of graduates who undertook an ERASMUS mobility were surveyed. Overall, the majority of graduates who participated in the study were female. This is a fact not limited to this program; other scholarship programs also have a majority of women. Another academic paper [48] highlighted the same gender disparity, noting that female students were better represented in the ERASMUS mobility program. Graduates were expected to develop their academic skills, improve their professional skills, and experience new places and new cultures. The language barrier was the most pressing problem for the graduates during their period of study abroad, and the second was adaptation to the teaching methods of the host country. Some alumni, especially scholars who were studying abroad during the year 2020, pointed out that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was very difficult for them to learn online, find a place to stay, get to know new places, and communicate with people. However, the vast majority of graduates from Mongolia who have participated in the mobility program abroad declared themselves highly satisfied, with satisfaction rating increasing with the age of respondents.

Author Contributions: This paper is a result of close cooperation between the authors K.N., Z.G., J.G. and N.M. All authors have equally contributed, reviewed, and improved the manuscript. All authors have revised the final manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The publication of this paper was funded by the Otgontenger University, Mongolia, funding no. 2026961.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Otgontenger University, Mongolia (protocol code 01/01.04.2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy reasons.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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