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Highly Skilled Italians' Experience with Erasmus Mobility: Opportunities vs. Challenges

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ABSTRACT

How did the highly skilled Italians who chose to live abroad benefit from participation in the Erasmus program? How did they define and describe their experience with Erasmus, especially advantages and disadvantages? After conducting 51 semistructured and in-depth online interviews with highly skilled, spatially mobile, emigrant Italians, we used Atlas.ti to analyze each phrase, word, and context in which "Erasmus" appeared. More than two thirds of the interviewees had experienced the program, a substantial number of whom wanted to work in international environments and achieved their goals. A few returned to the city or country of their first Erasmus mobility experience. We argue that the mobility component of the Erasmus program provided the confidence required to be independent and the insight needed to make international comparisons. It also perpetuates the desire to travel abroad (to become spatially mobile) as participants sought additional international environments after the first Erasmus mobility experience, gaining additional self-confidence as a result.

Keywords: Erasmus, highly skilled, higher education, return, youth (spatial) mobility

In this paper, we aimed to examine the responses given in 51 interviews conducted online with highly skilled Italians abroad between November 2020 and March 2021. We defined "highly skilled Italians" as graduates at higher education institutions(s) in Italy, specifically four universities: University of Pisa, University of Siena, University of Florence, University for Foreigners of Siena (the four grand, old universities of Tuscany). We aimed to shed light on the motivation behind engagement in Erasmus mobility as well as its consequences

as reflected in the words of the highly skilled Italians living and working (or studying) abroad.

Two thirds of our participants had engaged in Erasmus programs for training or higher education or had used Erasmus funds to complete master's theses. Our research question is as follows: How did the highly skilled Italians (among the interviewees) who chose to live abroad benefit from participation in the Erasmus program? How did they define and describe their experience with Erasmus, especially advantages and disadvantages?

We aimed to highlight the evolution of the Erasmus program and the fruitful results of having developed international networks as young people returned to the cities of their initial Erasmus experience during their higher education in Italy. Return to the Erasmus cities provided them with the possibility of work opportunities within their grasp because they had already lived in those places and were accustomed to the culture, language, and environment. We also found that all interviewees spoke of their Erasmus context differently, making conscious comparisons between (a) Italy and other countries, (b) Italian higher education institutions and those of other European countries, and (c) their past and current selves. The results also demonstrate that what they experienced as they completed their Erasmus mobility abroad was rooted in nonhomogeneous, historically, and philosophically diverse methods of teaching and learning.

In this context we also argue that highly skilled Italians live and work abroad not only because Erasmus leads the way to such a lifestyle but also because they are discontented with the undergraduate system at their home universities. Even if they were satisfied with the higher education system in Italy, they still wanted to combine the strong theoretical background they gained while pursuing undergraduate degrees with more practical and varied pedagogical approaches outside Italy. A commonality among those who had gone abroad with Erasmus and those who had not was that most of them indicated the following during the interviews: "I have always wanted to go abroad."[1] Hence, Erasmus seemed to serve as a motivator for "going abroad" but not necessarily the main cause or main mode of spatial mobility per se. We argue, therefore, that Erasmus was a stimulus, but not a reason to move abroad for a long period, one combined with other contextual factors: (a) discontent with universities and the structure of the labor market, (b) a view of Italian higher education as outdated, perhaps still efficient but failing to offer myriad innovative possibilities.

We first focus on the literature on Erasmus; second, we explain our methodology; third, we analyze the results, and finally, we explore our contribution to the literature, emphasizing the original parts of the paper and offering further suggestions for research as well as policy implications.

[1] This was an answer that was often given when we asked participants, "How did you decide to go abroad?" They typically indicated not one reason but a mix of reasons, one of which was "wanting to go abroad" from a young age.

THE ERASMUS EFFECT

Italy joined the Erasmus program in 1987. By 2019, incoming students and trainees numbered 29,516, and the number of trainees and students sent abroad from Italy was 41,235, of whom a total of 30,786 were students and 9,929 were trainees (European Commission, 2020). The Italian university sending the most Erasmus students abroad is the University of Bologna, followed by the University of Padova and Roma La Sapienza. Of all the projects related to Erasmus mobility, "in 2019, [a total of] 86,469 participants in 1,066 Italian projects benefited from mobility in higher education, vocational education and training" (European Commission, 2020, p. 1). EU countries have been categorized according to the Erasmus mobility flows: Italy along with Spain, France, and Germany (the top three participating countries) are good receivers and good senders. In other words, they attract students, and they balance the outflow of students in the Erasmus mobility programme with high inbound mobility (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020). These countries are regarded as "long-term runners," that is, early joiners to the Erasmus program, the first signers of the Bologna Declaration, which established the networks and links necessary to be able to send the students abroad as well as receive them.

The literature on the mobility component of the Erasmus program (reasons and consequences) is abundant. The history of Erasmus indicates that it was once an elite program but eventually transformed into one for the masses (Teichler, 2002). At the time of this writing, Erasmus+, as it is now known, had "an estimated budget of 26.2 billion euros, and 70 per cent of the budget supports mobility opportunities in a lifelong learning perspective" (European Commission, 2022). International student mobility schemes have been an important part of EU higher education policies (Ferencz & Wächter, 2012), and Erasmus has been one of the most significant parts of these policies. Currently, Erasmus+ involves three types of key actions: (a) learning mobility for individuals, (b) cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices, and (c) support for policy reform (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020).

The benefits of Erasmus mobility projects vary. Learning languages (Fombona et al., 2013; Kolb, 2014; Senci et al., 2018) is just one of them; however, not all participants have benefited from language acquisition to the same degree. In Italy students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have typically benefited more from studying abroad in terms of language acquisition (Sorrenti, 2017). In addition, Erasmus social networks have been quite important in the lives of young people because they have extended beyond the Erasmus period (Van der Mol & Michielsen, 2015). The positive side also included internationalization (Samuk et al., 2021) and the opportunity for self-growth (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Mutlu, 2011) as well as the "Erasmusization" process that has remained with the individuals long after they have completed their Erasmus programs. Developing interpersonal and intrapersonal competence was a part of this process, in which students learned how to communicate better in cultural contexts different from their own (Flander & Korada, 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2021).

Many factors have influences participation in study abroad (Netz, 2021). Not everyone has benefited from the Erasmus experience, considering the

macroeconomic context (Cairns, 2017; Van der Mol & Timmerman, 2013) and the sociodemographic characteristics of the students (Netz et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lack of family assistance, the lack of economic means (Schnepf, 2018; Souto-Otero, 2008; Van der Mol, 2014), and other structural barriers (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2019; Teichler, 2004) could prevent young people from considering the mobility component of the Erasmus program as an option. Those who benefited from Erasmus mobility have found the grant insufficient, and most of those who have participated in the Erasmus program had parents who had graduated from higher education institutions (Souto-Otero, 2008); hence, family background mattered (Krzaklewska 2008). In fact, at the time of this writing, only 1% of all students in Europe were spatially mobile (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2018).

As a result of Erasmus mobility opportunities, the chances of finding a job increased (Bracht et al., 2006; Bryla, 2015; Standley, 2015; European Commission, 2018) when seeking employment abroad (Parey & Waldinger, 2011). Therefore, Erasmus+ added considerably to participants' personal and professional development (Cairns, 2014; Cairns et al., 2017, 2018) in line with the motivation of the students who chose to engage in an Erasmus program (Cuzzocrea and Krzaklewska 2022; Duffy et al. 2003; Keogh & Russel-Roberts, 2009; Lesjak et al., 2015).

The positive influence of studying abroad decreased between the 1980s and 2005 despite the high participation during this period (Teichler & Janson, 2007). Hence, the value of studying abroad could change over time depending on the participation levels and changes in the globalized labor market (Netz, 2021). When seeking employment, not all were affected positively by the study-abroad experience. For instance, those who studied business administration benefited more from the study abroad than those pursuing other majors (Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2020). Furthermore, if the country of origin had a strong labor market and a strong higher education system, graduates' potential to improve their careers in the labor market could be limited even if they studied abroad; in fact, "international prestige hierarchies" could lead to the stratification of results for those who studied abroad (Van Mol et al., 2020). These facts aligned with research showing that higher-income countries received the most mobile students from low-income countries (Macrander, 2017). For instance, labor market returns were higher in Italy than in the UK (d'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021); besides, employers valued internships over studying abroad (Van der Mol, 2017).

According to specific works on salary and employability, international student mobility (ISM) could affect employability and salaries positively (Aina & Casalone, 2020; Aina & Pastore, 2020). Participating in a study abroad programme does not delay students' time to graduation, which is particularly relevant for the Italian context, where the duration of studies is among the highest in Europe. Whether better graduation marks of Erasmus participants reflect a higher accumulation of human capital or are rather driven by other mechanisms related, for example, to differences in exams and grading standards among home and host institutions, remains an open question (Granato et al., 2020, p. 19). More research comparing the home and host institutions' effects on graduation success is needed.

Last but not least, Erasmus students could be considered "consumers, tourists, and learners" (Cairns, 2017); hence, the economic benefit for the receiving countries is undeniable (Kondakçı et al., 2018) because International Student Mobility (ISM) is highly influenced by the economic interests of the countries that both sent and received. Sometimes this economic dilemma, which involved more consumerist and touristic aims in the host societies, could lead to an incorrect perception of Erasmus+, where learning should come first and the scholarships should be sufficient to think of the program with a broader vision instead of only the materialistic one (Cairns 2017). This is an important point because participants in Erasmus have been disproportionately more privileged if socioeconomic classes were considered (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013).

Our contribution to the literature at this point is related to the links and ties with the Erasmus networks that paved the way for finding jobs abroad (Bryla 2018) as well as internationalization via Erasmus mobility (Samuk et al. 2021). Moreover, we also observed a tendency to return to Erasmus cities because the young people had learned the languages and knew more about those cities where they had once been Erasmus trainees or exchange students: Now they came to work.

In the next section we discuss our methodology, and the analysis follows three main themes: decisions to go (or not go) abroad, advantages and disadvantages of Erasmus mobility, and return to the Erasmus cities with a professional outlook.

METHOD

Data were collected from semi structured, in-depth interviews. A total of 51 interviews were conducted in Italian with highly skilled Italians abroad. Participants, who were chosen via a form prepared by the researchers in Google documents, were graduates of four Tuscan Universities: The University of Pisa, the University of Siena, the University of Florence, and the University of Siena for Foreigners[i]. Of the 87 people who responded on the Google form, 77% were women, and 23% were men.

LinkedIn Premium was used to reach individual participants to be able to represent the graduates of these four universities in Tuscany. LinkedIn served as a purposeful tool when imbalances occurred in the sample between the graduates of diverse universities and gender-related differentials, for example, men answering more than women or vice versa. Finally, the research participants were required to sign a consent form before the meeting, and their permission to record their voices was asked just before the interview. The whole research process was approved by the ethical board of the university where the main researchers were situated.

The interviews took place online between November 2020 and April 2021 and lasted on average 70 minutes. During the interviews open-ended questions were asked to elicit information about the participants' background and experiences with study- and work-related mobility. Participants were also asked

about their first experience abroad and whether or not they had participated in the Erasmus programme.

Because the questions were open-ended and semistructured, they allowed sufficient space for the research participants to expand their answers. The interviews, therefore, had a character somewhere between semistructured and nonstructured.

The interviews were transcribed in Italian by the authors but not verbatim. Before the analysis, direct identifiers such as names, place names, and workplace information were removed from the data. The direct quotations included in this paper were translated into English by the first author.

Data were coded according to thematic analysis. We found three themes among the reasons stated for studying abroad: (a) decisions to go abroad or not (personal and financial reasons) with Erasmus mobility, (b) advantages and disadvantages of Erasmus (learning vs. cost, comparison of diverse higher educational systems, independence in transition to adulthood vs. dependence on the family for funds), and finally, (c) return to the Erasmus city (the element of familiarity).

RESULTS

DECISIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATING IN AN ERASMUS MOBILITY EXPERIENCE

Despite rare examples in the literature, some young people were prevented from participating in Erasmus+ for personal reasons. Elena, a female graduate student in the UK, who worked in Germany, said, "I was planning to go on an Erasmus trip, but I was just getting over a break-up with my first boyfriend." Participating in Erasmus might also have meant that couples could be split up or sent to live in diverse situations. If one partner chose to participate in Erasmus and the other did not, both might have chosen not to participate. If one partner went abroad and the other did not, the situation put a strain on the relationship. Although this is just one example, it shows that the relationships (e.g. friendships, family, partners) that one has in the home country, affect to a certain extent the decision to participate in Erasmus or not. This result is in line with the survey findings interpreted in Souto-Otero et al. (2013, 7) which demonstrate that "those who did not consider taking part in the program are much more likely not to speak a foreign language and feel that personal relationships are a barrier to participation more often than those who considered participation in the program."

Some avoided the Erasmus program because they did not want to change their university program schedules (including graduation deadlines). An Italian female PhD student in Finland, Sandra said: "I wanted to do Erasmus, but I didn't. . . . I didn't want to get behind with my exams. I didn't want to waste time with Erasmus, . . . so I did a summer internship instead." Sandra's statement showed that not all Erasmus experiences (despite years of Erasmus integration in EU higher education systems) were compatible with people's plans and university programs. In fact, some believed that Erasmus was a waste of time if the programs

did not sufficiently coincide or if participating in Erasmus prolonged bachelor's and master's studies. Not all courses taken abroad counted; sometimes the number of courses students could take in a semester was limited. When participants returned from the Erasmus program, some found that they must take another semester's worth of coursework to qualify for graduation.

Among the reasons to go abroad with Erasmus, curiosity in different cultures and dissimilar higher education systems was a very strong element that emerged in the interviews. Participants' curiosity was directed not only at cultures different from their own but also at intercultural experiences per se. The research participants stated their desire to see how higher education systems operated abroad. For instance, in the case of a chemical engineering student, seeing other ways of conducting research was important for her, so she decided to participate in the Erasmus program. A female PhD graduate in France, Angela said:

> My first experience abroad took place a while ago. When I did Erasmus in 2013–2014, one type of placement allowed me to do a lab experience. I left home to experience life first and then to understand what was going on outside Italy and what I could gain from it. During the second year of my master's degree, I took part in the Erasmus placement and did my internship, after which I wrote my thesis. I graduated from biology.

This interview shows a response to a first experience abroad with an Erasmus mobility program.

The Erasmus experience also allowed young people to participate in a range of higher education systems, work in a variety of types of labs, or engage in internships that could contribute insights when they write their theses. Science students benefited substantially from observing a multiplicity in scientific institutions. As noted above, the intrinsic desire for (spatial) mobility and the opportunity to discover what "going outside Italy can offer" young people was also quite an important motivator to study abroad in addition to curiosity about other cultures (including a possibility for intercultural communication and less exam-driven higher education); therefore, the element of curiosity requires further study with all the cultural, social, and professional meanings that it entails.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ERASMUS

When reviewing the literature, we considered several sides of Erasmus as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the program. Our findings aligned with the relevant literature in both results and analysis.

One of the major advantages of an Erasmus program was learning languages (Brecht et al., 1993; Fombona et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2020; Kolb, 2014; Magnan & Back, 2007; Senci et al., 2018). A male graduate student in Spain, who had earlier completed an Erasmus program there, Marco said:

> I knew the language because I had done an Erasmus right here in Spain in 2016. During my first experience I didn't know the language, but I learned it when my program extended to one full academic year. I hope to get a Spanish language certificate soon while also improving my English, thanks to the international context I am in.

Learning a language and returning to the city provided a sense of continuity and a motivation to continue to excel in the language as in the case of our research

participant. In addition, learning English in an international environment added value according to highly skilled Italians. Marco wanted to add to the language skills that he had acquired during his first Erasmus internship abroad, eventually earning a language certificate.

For the research participants another advantage related to acculturation into the Erasmus sites, which entailed learning the language, knowing the city, meeting people, and acquiring insider knowledge about the local culture. To do his master's work, Marco returned to Spain, content with the culture and liveability of the city he chose. He said:

> The first experience was an internship, thanks to the Erasmus traineeship project. I got on very well. We did many activities together, and I was always invited by them [employers] to discover secret places in the city and to get to know the city even better and to widen my circle of relationships. During the experience they helped me a lot. Thanks also to the living arrangement I had with one of the managers, I had the opportunity to compare work experiences and benefit from suggestions that helped me grow as a person. Every comparison for me was synonymous with ideas or analysis of a different perspective.

New horizons were indeed a part of this experience, and those who wanted to experience life abroad were also open to learning about new cultures and new worlds. Serena, a female master's student in Brussels, said:

> Erasmus opened the world to me. In fact, I recommend it to everybody. Unfortunately, in my class, we had 150 students, and only five were willing to leave Italy! . . . I feel more confident because I learned to speak English, which opens many doors. . . . I liked the higher educational system in Italy, but it was much more theoretical. I did exams in Italy, studying from books with as many as a thousand pages. Here we don't have books, only slides.

According to this Erasmus master's student the courses abroad were considerably lighter when compared to offerings in the Italian higher education system.

Serena noted that during her master's program with Erasmus in Belgium, she was very content to have been a part of a different world but that the higher education system there was quite different from that of Italy, where students were expected to read many pages and work harder. She found the graduate courses in Belgium more practical (hence, less theoretical) and easier. Although this experience may have been uncommon in all EU countries and their master's programs, this assessment was a point of emphasis during her entire interview.

Regarding economic difficulties associated with participation in Erasmus programs, some students underscored the necessity of their family's economic support, without which they would have been unable to study abroad. For instance, Antonella, a female PhD student in the UK, said: "Among other things, the postgraduate Erasmus is a completely inadequate grant, offering enough to pay only two thirds of my rent. I was fortunate to have parents willing to make sacrifices to help me." Antonella referred both to the difficulties of participating in the Erasmus program without economic support from parents and the advantages she gained from it, specifically self-growth and learning how to

"endure" abroad. Learning how to be independent abroad was important to the participants in general. Antonella's case was not an exception.

Furthermore, while the research participants sought opportunities to learn other languages and discover "their true selves," they were also able to compare aspects of higher education at home and abroad, finding that requirements in Italy were much more demanding in terms of exams and readings, albeit quite theoretical and perhaps less practical. In many of the interviews, this distinction between the practical and the theoretical, the dichotomy between foreign and Italian higher educational system was confirmed. Nevertheless, for many reasons, Valentina, who worked in Belgium at the time of this writing, did not regret her decision to participate in the Erasmus program abroad. She suggested that doing so was a good experience for her, and she drew comparisons between the French and the Italian higher education systems:

> I went to Science Po Lille, which is an important center in Europe. My thesis was in French, and . . . beside doing research for my thesis, I took four more exams than what my curriculum required; but I was pleased. Academically, it didn't help me that much. It helped me more from a cultural standpoint. The exams were much easier. I had little to do, and I'm sorry to say it, but in Italy the professors want much more.

Almost all experiences with foreign higher education were considered positive by the research participants, but they thought the Italian system was much more difficult; the courses they took abroad did not meet the standards they expected from an academic point of view.

Interpersonal, intrapersonal, and self-developmental changes are inevitable in the experiences of highly skilled young Italians who participate in Erasmus programs. Valentina said that before Erasmus she never thought of going abroad, but her perspective on life outside Italy changed completely following this experience. She said:

> Erasmus changed my perspective on life. Before participating, I would never have wanted to go abroad, but then I realized that confronting other cultures is fundamental for my personal growth. Once away from home, I realized that Italy is still very much behind in this respect. In Rome, even though we have the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) or other important [international] institutions, we have no truly international context. We also have the economic factor, but I wouldn't call it the main one. If I had wanted to stay in Italy, I could have done so, and I would have found a job. Being economically independent was important to me.

She also stated that Italy had organizations that are supposedly international, but when she compared them to her experience with the Erasmus program, she concluded that they are not sufficiently internationalized. She stated:

> What has stayed with me the most from Erasmus has been the relationships, the culture, the language. And then I found the guy I am still with. I used to know French, but I studied it in secondary school. Now I manage to get by at work with the French I learned during my Erasmus experience. It's my third language, and I speak quite well.

The advantages to studying abroad always outweighed the disadvantages, as the interviews suggested. The disadvantages merely involved (a) having to depend on family for financial support because the grant was insufficient and (b) the perception of less rigorous academic programs abroad. Nevertheless, all Italian Erasmus participants admitted that they gained many advantages in terms of language skills and internationalization.

RETURN TO THE ERASMUS SITE WITH A PROFESSIONAL PURPOSE

Sometimes an affinity with a place and a culture and an urge to engage in serious work life was the impetus to return to a particular city. We saw that few participants returned to the same city, but many went abroad again (for professional reasons or studies). Only two of our 51 research participants returned to the same city: They loved these cities, they learned the language during their Erasmus programs, and they wanted to return to experience professional life there. Moreover, the previous acculturation into the place made the return that much easier.

Marco said that he was already familiar with the city and to return there was not a major burden for him: "I was already familiar with the reality of Valencia, so I decided to go back, convinced that I wanted to continue my studies in a foreign country." He was an example of those who were satisfied with the Erasmus training experience, making return to the same city.

Another interviewee, Maria, a female manager in a multinational company, found a job via her Erasmus networks; having learned the language and having loved the city, she returned to work in a multinational company: "I liked the city [Prague], so I returned after having found a job when a friend recommended a multinational company. I already spoke Czech."

In these two cases, loving the cities, knowing the culture via the first Erasmus mobility experience, creating a network with international and local friends abroad, and wondering how a professional life in the city of their initial Erasmus experience would be like were sufficient reasons for the research participants to return and enter the labor market or pursue more professional study. Last but not least, "love for the city," which reflected their positive experiences there, familiarity with its layout, knowledge of popular spots and locations where the Italian diaspora and social life could be found, made readapting and reintegrating all more convenient for them.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we aimed to examine the past and present experiences of highly skilled Italians abroad. As noted above, we defined "highly skilled Italians" as graduates of higher education institutions. Our research questions were as follows: (a) How did the highly skilled Italians (among the interviewees) who chose to live abroad benefit from participation in the Erasmus program? (b) How did they define and describe their experience with Erasmus, especially advantages and

disadvantages? To answer these questions, we conducted 51 semistructured interviews online. Various themes were examined, among which was the theme of Erasmus and the first mobility experience abroad. Erasmus-related quotations were thematized via Atlas.ti, and the predominant themes emerged from the data: (a) decisions to go abroad or not (personal vs. financial considerations) with Erasmus mobility, (b) advantages and disadvantages of Erasmus (learning vs. cost, comparison of diverse higher educational systems, independence in transition to adulthood vs. dependence on the family for funds), and finally, (c) return to the Erasmus city (the element of familiarity).

Some of the findings resonate with previous research. For instance, the lack of family assistance and the lack of economic means (Schnepf, 2018; Soutu-Otero, 2008; Van der Mol, 2014) remained a reason for not participating in Erasmus programs; in fact, most of our research participants indicated that they received help from their families (Krzaklewska, 2008). Not losing time, and going through relationship difficulties were added to the reasons of non-participation. Second, Erasmus networks extended beyond the Erasmus period (Van der Mol & Michielsen, 2015) to the extent that via these networks finding jobs and convenient residential options are always a part of the picture if one returned to the Erasmus city. Third, the research results also confirm the benefits gained from the Erasmus experience, which include integration into international labor markets (Bracht et al., 2006; Bryla, 2015; European Commission, 2018; Parey & Waldinger, 2011; Standley, 2015) and learning languages (Brecht et al., 1993; Fombona et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2020; Kolb, 2014; Magnan & Back, 2007; Senci et al., 2018) while developing intercultural skills and gaining self-confidence (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Mutlu, 2011). Our results regarding decisions to go abroad resembled those of Granato et al. (2021), who suggested that participating in a study abroad programme does not delay students' graduation plans; yet, we found that those who did not participate in Erasmus programs considered their graduation dates and schedules when they determined that the time abroad could be time "wasted".

As indicated above in the analytical part of the paper, the internationalization of the Italian universities with Erasmus+ was inevitable (Rugge, 2019); therefore, we cannot discuss only brain drain in the case of highly skilled Italians. We must underscore the tremendous change in higher education in Italy during the last two decades with its face turned towards EU countries, Erasmus programs, and the circular migration of scientists and international networks of professors (Alberio & Berti, 2020). Thus, universities have been influenced positively by internationalization. Even if skilled young Italians want to go abroad and experience research or other training or work experiences there, they are also positively motivated by the networks that universities and professors have established. Consequently, Italians had opportunities to make comparisons between diverse higher education systems and decided that Italian higher education offers good quality with its emphasis on theoretical premises; whereas, abroad they had more opportunities to practice and experiment with independence and autonomy. The research results demonstrate that they saw these two understandings of higher education systems as complementary. At the same time,

they found the bachelor's and master's courses abroad less burdensome because they are less theoretical and academically less challenging. Those who were involved in Erasmus, underlined that they were impressed with how practical and multi-dimensional the Erasmus programs compared to the Italian higher education system where the theory and books reign in learning and grading. It would not be wrong to say that they appreciated the benefits of both systems, and they liked the idea of combining theory with practice when they were abroad.

In conclusion, the social and cultural capital (including learning languages) that highly skilled Italians gained during their Erasmus experiences abroad helped them acquire economic capital later; therefore, the return to the familiarity of their Erasmus sites assisted them in using their previously earned social and cultural capital to obtain more economic capital (jobs or scholarships). Moreover, we presented reasons for not engaging in an Erasmus program, such as relationships, personal lives, and reluctance to interrupt studies if not all the courses taken abroad were accepted for credit at the home institution, credits they would need if they wanted to graduate at the end of their journey.

The limitations of this paper are the lack of gender analysis and analysis of differences between countries visited for Erasmus. However, our sample having a female majority, is not representative of the whole Italian context for outgoing Erasmus students. Additionally, the paper's findings are limited to those who graduated from four major Tuscan universities. Different countries visited during Erasmus, were not described during the interviews, as the context of these (e.g. Czech Republic, France, Spain) countries were not a part of the semi-structured interviews. However, these limitations show also the gaps in our research that can be filled by future scholarly papers.

Future scholars can focus on how perceptions and expectations of the mobility component of Erasmus youth programs have evolved and how the social, cultural, and economic capital that accompanies the Erasmus experience has changed in comparison with that of previous generations of Erasmus participants. Future researchers may take a deeper look into the reasons other than economic ones for avoiding Erasmus, such as relationships, youth transitions, differences in higher education systems, fear of losing a year or credits, among others. Finally, the meaning of curiosity from an intercultural perspective before, during and after Erasmus (Dolce et al. 2023) requires further exploration with all its sociological dimensions as our research results reveal.

Note

Appendices for this article can be found on the JIS website at https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis

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[i] These four universities were chosen as they were the ones involved in the research project funded by Regione Toscana and the project concentrated only on the graduates of these four universities from Tuscany region.