

ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME – CONTEXT FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' COMPETENCES

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the positive aspects that active participation in the Erasmus+ project "Different but together" has on students are highlighted. In the project initiated and coordinated by the Technological High School "Gheorghe Șincai" from Târgu Mureș (Romania), high schools from Italy, Greece, the Czech Republic and Turkey participated as partners. The activities carried out and the impact of international activities on the students were briefly analyzed. Data collected through the observation method and with the help of three tools (Erasmus Journal, questionnaires applied after each mobility, mini-essays on the Erasmus experience) were analyzed. The analysis of the results highlighted the overall positive impact of these project, which cover a broad plan, ranging from students' personal and intellectual growth to the development of active European citizenship skills.

Keywords: *intercultural education, multicultural education, cultural education, experiential learning, national identity, local identity*

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INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus programme was launched in 1987 at the initiative of the Council of the European Communities with the aim of fostering student mobility and international cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe (Council of the European Communities, 1987). The name of the programme was inspired by the study travels undertaken by the philosopher, theologian and humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1465-1536) to European countries. Initially, the programme allowed European students to study for a year at universities in other European countries. Starting from the pilot programme carried out between 1981-1986, the programme gradually expanded to include new directions and areas for international partnerships (Ruszel, 2018). Since 1995, the Erasmus programme has been incorporated into the European Commission's Socrates programme, alongside the other two educational programmes: Comenius, dedicated to school education, and Grundtvig, dedicated to adult education (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 1995).

Since 2014, the programme is called Erasmus+ (Erasmus Plus). Under this title, a first programme with funding for the period 2014-2020 has been carried out, and a second programme, extended for the period 2021-2027 is currently underway (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021). The Erasmus+ programme has supported participating countries in valorizing

talent, social capital, original initiatives in the fields of university education, school education, adult and youth education and also vocational education (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013). Erasmus+ operates through the perspective of lifelong learning, as this type of learning is essential in today's knowledge-based society characterized by rapid change and constant evolution of technologies and information.

The Erasmus+ programme has a set of guidelines, referred to as "priorities" that reflect the European Union's [EU] commitment to improving education and training for young people, as well as promoting European unity and diversity. Currently, the main priorities are as follows: "inclusion and diversity" which aims to promoting equal opportunities and access for all, fostering an inclusive environment, embracing diversity, and ensuring equity for everyone; "digital transformation" which seeks to support EU citizens in developing the digital skills necessary for everyday life, to stay informed and appropriately engage with digital content; "the environment and fight against climate change" which focuses on developing environmental skills to support sustainable development; and "participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement" which encourages active and ethical citizenship while cultivating social and intercultural abilities (European Commission, 2024).

In Romania, the National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training (ANPCDEFP) has the main responsibility for managing education and training programmes co-financed by the European Union. This agency manages the Erasmus+ programme as well as other initiatives supporting the mobility of students, teachers and staff in the field of education and training.

In this study we aimed to analyze, first of all, the activities carried out in the Erasmus+ project "Different but together" implemented at the "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School from Târgu Mureș, from 2019 to 2022. This project (reference number 2019-1-RO01-KA229-063163_1) is part of the Key Action 2, being a KA229 type project, a strategic partnership aimed at supporting the exchange of good practices. The initially approved implementation period was two school years, from September 2019 to August 2021. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic were counterbalanced by the possibility offered by the ANPCDEFP to extend the project, so the project was extended throughout the 2021-2022 school year. Second, in this study we analyze the impact that the participation in the Erasmus project had on students involved in international activities.

METHODOLOGY

Participants. The application was submitted by the coordinating school of the project, "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School from Târgu Mureș. The partner high schools are located in countries within and outside the European Union: Secondary Vocational School of Engineering (*Stredni odborné učiliste elektrotechnickej*) from Plzeň (Czech Republic), Verona Trento Institute of Superior Education (*Istituto di Istruzione Superiore Verona Trento*) from Messina (Italy), Technical and Vocational High School No. 4 (*4 EPAL Kavalas*) from Kavala (Greece) and 'Suleyman Demirel' Anatolian High School (*Süleyman Demirel Anadolu Lisesi*) from Ankara (Turkey).

The target group of the project included 125 students (aged 15-18) and 100 teachers from all the five participating schools, who physically participated in the travels and international activities. The teachers included in the target group have diverse specializations: geography, biology, history, English language, economics, special education, mathematics, and others.

Goal and objectives. The goal of the project was that by developing students' intercultural competences, they will contribute to the transformation of a multicultural environment into an intercultural one, in which people belonging to different ethnic groups value each other. To achieve this, students participated in activities aimed at understanding and respecting the unique traditions of various ethnicities across Europe. By understanding their own national values and exploring the connections between different ethnicities and nationalities, the project aimed to create an

educational environment that fosters the development of the necessary skills to transform students from simple inhabitants of a multicultural city into responsible European citizens capable of appreciating and harnessing cultural diversity.

The main objective of the project aimed to developing intercultural competences among the students and teachers from the five schools involved in the project, in order to promote intercultural dialogue and to value the ethnic diversity of each country represented in the project. The other two objectives aimed at improving the language, communication and social competences of the direct beneficiaries of the project, improving the management capacity of the project teams from the schools involved, and developing institutional relations with local authorities.

Instruments. Three instruments were used for collecting the information: the Erasmus journal, questionnaires applied after each mobility, and mini-essays about the Erasmus experience.

The Erasmus journal was an instrument used exclusively for the Romanian students. This journal is a log-book that accompanied our students in all their mobilities. Every day throughout the week of international activities, from the moment they left the country until they come back, the students had the task of writing in the journal, documenting their observations and thoughts about the activities, personal reflections, and descriptions of their experiences. This journal was a notebook with unlined sheets, which facilitates the creative expression through writing, drawing, sketching, scrapbooking, etc.

The questionnaires applied after each learning mobility aimed to provide feedback from students and teachers in order to evaluate and further improve the participants' experiences. The participants' experience was evaluated by collecting their opinions on the positive and negative aspects of the mobility, the quality of the programme, the activities carried out, the support provided by the organizers. The questionnaires included some questions about the participants (country of origin, whether they were students or teachers), as well as questions about the way the mobility was organized. Students and teachers were asked to rate the mobility, considering the organization, duration of activities, the conformity with schedules and the safety of participants, and to justify the rating given. They were also asked to assign a grade and provide justification regarding the content of the mobility, the relevance of the topics and activities, the balance between different types of activities, and the achievement of objectives.

The *mini-essays* represent an unexpected and unplanned tool, spontaneously created at the initiative of the Romanian students involved in the project. A relatively large number of students (about 70) expressed their desire to get involved in the organizing of the international activity hosted by our high school, from the detailed design of the activities to the actual organization and implementation, thereby demonstrating the positive numerical impact of these international activities. Once the activities concluded, 12 students spontaneously expressed their joy about being active participants in the project by writing mini-essays in the form of thank-you letters addressed to the team of teachers who coordinated the project. These mini-essays can be used in the evaluation of the effects of the activities by teachers and researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Learning activities organized in high schools. The activities aimed at achieving the project objectives were diverse in terms of implementation and the methods used. In each of the five high schools, the following activities took place: workshops focused on traditional crafts; study visits to economic agents that leverage local potential (bakeries, craftsmen's fairs, the violin factory in Reghin, etc.), international cooking competitions, decorating the "Erasmus Corner", publishing the project magazine, posters and photographs exhibitions, the implementation of activities from the eTwinning

project etc. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online activities were carried out: a photography exhibition, a cooking competition, a kahoot game in the framework of the Erasmus Days.

A series of activities were organized in the high schools to disseminate and increase the visibility of the project's results: creating and distributing flyers with information about the project; participation in Erasmus Days; presentations at national symposiums; articles publishing in local media and online (on the high school's blog, on Instagram and Facebook pages).

Learning activities organized during the mobilities to other countries. Considering the international learning activities, the project title "*Different, but together*" was the motto for five weeks focused on intensifying learning and cooperation, as well as on creating contexts for meaningful moments (Hobai, 2022).

The students from the "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School from Târgu Mureș involved in the project went on international learning activities, called "mobilities", to the partner high schools from the four countries: Italy (5 students; 3 teachers), Turkey (5 students; 3 teachers), Czech Republic (5 students; 2 teachers), Greece (6 students; 3 teachers). Each one-week learning mobility aimed to achieve the following objectives: understanding the natural conditions (specificity of the landforms; characteristics of the rivers, lakes, and groundwater; the role of vegetation in the landscape, etc.); familiarizing with cultural landscapes, local culture and identity; becoming acquainted with the specific elements of that country concerning traditions, customs, values, history, gastronomy etc.

The first international learning activity of the students and teachers from the "Gheorghe Șincai" Technical High School in Târgu Mureș took place in December 2021, in Messina, Italy. The students took guided tours of important cultural sites in Messina (the Regional Interdisciplinary Museum, the Astronomical Clock Tower, the Cathedral of Messina, the Sacratio di Cristo Re, the Church of Santissima Annunziata dei Catalani) and Taormina (the Ancient Theatre). They also went on a study trip to the Etna Volcano, participated in social activities, including a karaoke session featuring world-famous Italian songs, and they performed a stage play illustrating the message of our project.

The second international learning activity within this project took place at the end of March 2022, in Ankara (Turkey). Students sang with the Sdalanka Choir of the Anatolian high school, explored the city's mosques, participated in a marbling painting workshop, visited museums (Anatolian Civilization Museum, Ankara Castle, Anıtkabir - Atatürk Mausoleum, Independence War Museum) and discovered the uniqueness of Cappadocia.

The third international learning activity took place in April 2022, in Pilsen (Czech Republic). Students and teachers explored the historical sights of Pilsen, visited a castle (Velhartice Castle), a baroque pharmacy (White Unicorn Pharmacy in Klatovy) and the city of Prague (during an interactive guided tour) and participated in museum workshops at the Franciscan Monastery from Pilsen.

On the last international learning activity of the project, in June 2022, students and teachers went to Kavala in Greece. Here, beside the school activities, they visited the town of Kavala, as well as other historical sights from the region of Macedonia: ancient ruins (Philipi archaeological site), churches (Baptistery of St. Lydia in Thyatira), monasteries (Agios Pandeileimon) and museums (Archaeological Museum of Thassos); they observed the sea and the coastal relief with spectacular beaches and cliffs.

The international learning activities carried out by the students in other countries contribute to increasing the amount of information specific to regional geography (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2010), to developing the ability to explore, present and represent the urban space (Ursu et al., 2019) and provides the premises to represent ideal urban spaces (Dulamă, 2012, 2013). Other studies carried out in Romania show the benefits for students of studying particular urban gardens as models of territorial micro-development (Dulamă, 2010), of representing the identity of some cities in photographs and in the texts selected in posters (Sanislai et al., 2016).

Learning activities organized in "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School, as the hosting school. At the beginning of March 2022, an international learning activity took place at the Romanian high school. Students and teachers from Turkey (5 students and 3 teachers), Greece (10 students and 4 teachers) and Czech Republic (5 students and 2 teachers) participated in this activity. They were joined by 70 students and 20 teachers from Romania who were involved in the actual organization and running of the activities. The Italian high school team missed this activity due to the tense international situation caused by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Various activities were organized: a cultural treasure hunt through the city, sprinkled with playful tasks; an *Activity* game for discovering specific Romanian elements; planting a symbolic Erasmus forest in the courtyard of the high school; painting a portion of the school courtyard outer wall of the courtyard during a mural painting workshop, visiting cultural sights in the city (the Palace of Culture, Teleki Library, the Ethnographic Museum). By directly observing buildings of cultural and historical significance, as well as urban cultural landscapes, students discover the specificity and identity of places, deepen their knowledge about the local history, and enhance their cultural education (Dulamă et al., 2016; Dulamă & Sanislai, 2016; Ilovan et al., 2018a,b; Maroși et al., 2019). Activities outside the city included thematic visits to the Turda Salt Mine, Sighișoara, Brașov and the Bran Castle.

The students participated in dance workshops where they became familiar with the dances from the countries of their fellow students. The central element of this international meeting was the show dance, in which the students performed traditional dances from their countries. The performance, held in the concert hall of the Mureșul Professional Artistic Ensemble, one of our school's collaborators, ended with an artistic moment of symbolic value, when students from all the participating schools danced together a traditional Romanian dance. The students demonstrated that, through dedication and sustained effort, they can connect with each other in a common place, showing respect for the traditions of each country and for the common heritage that binds people together, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or nationality differences.

The results of the project activities were both tangible and intangible. The results can be grouped into several categories: feedback from participants (through mobility evaluation questionnaires, participants satisfaction questionnaires administered during all the course of the project), research materials (articles and studies presented at conferences and published in educational journals), specific dissemination materials (website, social media accounts, photos, Power Point and video presentations, vlogs, articles in the local press, articles on high school blogs and websites, photo and painting exhibitions, project magazine, artistic works - marbeling paintings, clay objects, murals paintings and drawings, Erasmus corners, project logo etc.); new partnerships and collaborations with partner high schools.

Analysis of the Erasmus journal. This tool served multiple functions. First of all, the journal played a role in stimulating students' motivation to reflect on their international experiences, to analyze them carefully through the filter of critical thinking, to identify their strengths and benefits, but also the weaknesses of the activities, aspects highlighted as benefits of the journals in the literature in the field of educational sciences (Dulamă, 2008).

The role of the journal was to document and illustrate the international experience by describing the learning and socializing activities of the mobility days or other relevant experiences from that week. In the context of the journal, the students wrote various types of texts: informative texts, descriptive texts, narrative texts (Dulamă, 2010b). The texts written by the students are authentic, representing personal or group experiences that the authors had in diverse environments (natural and anthropical environments, rural and urban environments, agricultural and industrial environments (Dulamă, 2010a). By enabling students to read what students from previous mobilities had written, the journal becomes a source of information. Students discover the places their classmates visited and learn from the experiences they shared.

The journal had a creative function, providing a space for personal reflection, allowing the students to express their thoughts and feelings related to their intercultural experiences, and to share their successes or challenges encountered. By actively filling out the pages of the journal, it also served a role in learning by doing (Dulamă, 2006, 2008a) and in their personal development, as it helped to strengthen their writing and reflection skills, as well as to raise awareness of the influence of various experiences on one's self.

For example, at the departure from Messina, when the eruption of the Etna volcano occurred (on December 14, 2021), everything was covered with a layer of volcanic ash and the students put their fingerprints in their diary using this ash. In this case, the students describe a unique experiential learning situation in which they form representations through the direct perception of the effects of a volcanic eruption. The students from Romania learn about volcanic eruptions from texts (Dulamă, 1996), by watching films (Dulamă & Gurscă, 2006), and by observing photographs (Dulamă & Roșcovan, 2007) and schematic drawings (Dulamă, 2010b,c).

Some students preferred to draw instead of writing their impressions as a text; thus, the journal contains sketches of representative buildings. Drawing as a learning method is a recommended strategy to be used by students in order to increase the quality of their learning (Pahome, 2023). The journal also includes entry tickets to various tourist attractions, bus tickets from the visited countries, pressed flowers, plane tickets, stickers, and so on.

Messages written by students from other countries, thoughts of students from Turkey, Czech Republic, Italy to our students were included in the journal ("Dear Romanian friends, [...] the friendships I have made have changed my life and made me happier than ever" - Arda from Turkey; "I believe I will never forget this experience and I will always remember all of you" - Ahser from Turkey).

The Erasmus Diary has proved to be a valuable tool for recording the impact of Erasmus projects, but also a collective work that preserves as writings a memory of some "unforgettable" weeks in the lives of our high school students. Looking back and re-reading the texts written in the journal, they reveal the excitement, the emotions, the enthusiastic moods of young people, some of whom were away from their families for the first time, in another country for the first time, or on their first plane flight or subway ride or for the first time in direct contact with young people of the same age from another country. Without exception, all expressed in writing the joy of participating in this project, recognizing the opportunity they had and the importance of this project for their emotional and intellectual development.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses. The positive effects of students' participation in international activities were also highlighted by the responses given in the questionnaires distributed at the end of each of the five learning mobilities. After the international activity hosted by Romania, when asked "What do you take home from this mobility?", the responses from students from other countries gave answers such as "Happiness!", "Memories and new friends.", "Beautiful memories and a piece of Romania in my heart.", "We sang, we danced, we painted. I will never forget these days!", "We may be different, we may speak different languages, but when we are all together we have fun and understand each other."

Studies conducted on Erasmus projects implemented at the university level highlight the positive impact of these experiences on career development through internationalism, the enhancement of the intellectual understanding and awareness of different cultures, increased resilience, and a greater willingness to work abroad or accept global job assignments (Dolce et al., 2023). The responses from our study demonstrate that exposing students to other cultures and in situations where they experience communication and socialization with students with very diverse cultural backgrounds contributes to the increasing of students resilience.

The team-based approach of the most of activities and the involvement of all students in group activities encourages them to collaborate, to overcome language barriers (with English being the main language of communication), and it significantly enhance their ability to connect with others.

The challenge of adapting to a new environment creates opportunities for personal growth, increases self-confidence, fosters adaptability and promotes independence ("I experienced what it's like to make new friends, to be more confident, and to create unforgettable memories").

After the learning mobility from Turkey, in response to the question asking for the justification of the grade given for the mobility, the highest score was awarded by the majority of the students; the answers indicated that the students realized they were involved in learning activities that foster interpersonal relationships:

"All the activities were relevant, interesting, engaging and brought us new information about Turkey and Ankara. At the same time we created strong bonds between us, the students."
(Răzvan)

"The content of the meeting was fantastic, because we learned so many things about Turkey, about the natural environment, religion, food. There were also a lot of activities, we had both practical activities and study trips, and we were always engaged with the other students in doing something together." (Alexandra)

Other studies find that participation in an Erasmus exchange can indeed enhance personal development, generate significant changes in young people's future decisions, in the international orientation of aspirations, enhance their awareness of cultural diversity and foster a desire to participate in new international learning experiences (Nada & Legutko, 2022). Although students' participation in Erasmus exchanges has on the whole generated positive effects, however, studies point to the need for cultural preparation prior to participation in the actual mobility and even to a 'post-Erasmus syndrome' referring to readjustment difficulties after students' return (Asoodar et al., 2017; Granato et al., 2024; Janson et al., 2009; Önen, 2017).

The information collected through questionnaires was used to modify and optimize future international learning activities, by solving the problems faced by the participants and improving other mentioned aspects. The answers from the questionnaires made it possible to assess the impact of the learning mobilities on students' personal and professional development, language skills, intercultural competences and professional relations. The feedback obtained helped the organizing schools to maintain their quality standards and align with the requirements and expectations of the participants. The results gathered through the questionnaires were also used in reports to ANPCDEFP, demonstrating the effectiveness and impact of the Erasmus+ programme. The questionnaires represented an essential tool for the continuous improvement of the Erasmus programme and for ensuring the most beneficial experience for all participants.

The mini-essays showed a spontaneity that reflected the level of development of initiative and involvement among Romanian students. Their texts were a testimony of how the project contributed to their readaptation to social life after the restrictions imposed by the pandemic (Flavia). Through the project, the level of cohesion among students increased (Diana). Students became aware that these mobilities could have long-term implications, positively influencing their future professional life (Tania). They recognized the contribution of these experiences to the development of general knowledge (Vlada) and to the development of communication and language skills (Stefania). The students made friends and were pleased that, through the mobilities, they were able to see their friend again, thus exploring the potential of an international friendship to be lasting (David).

"With the help of this project we managed to get closer to our colleagues, which I didn't think would be possible after these years of pandemic." (Flavia)

"Through Erasmus, students who only greeted each other in the hallways ended up taking care of each other." (Diana)

"The Erasmus mobility helped me to create a different vision of the world, [...], to communicate with people from different countries, [...], it helped my personal development,

and I am convinced that I am gaining experiences that will later help me on a professionally level." (Tania)

"I had the opportunity to learn fascinating things about different nationalities and we proved that in the end, we are all Different but together!" (Vlada)

"It helped me in improving my social and communication skills and it helped me to be more open minded." (Ştefania)

"I met up again with my friends from Greece, and that made this week very nice and truly unimaginable." (David)

CONCLUSIONS

The involvement in Erasmus projects has many positive effects on the students participating in international activities. Our study reveals several significant effects:

(1) the development of intercultural skills, as a result of the fact that the students had the opportunity to interact with people from various cultures, thus learning to appreciate diversity and adapt to different environments; in this way the experience contributed to increasing tolerance and global understanding;

(2) improving language skills by involving the students in real contexts where they had the opportunity to practise their foreign languages;

(3) personal development in international experiences in which students are encouraged to develop problem-solving skills and to be more proactive, thus increasing their self-confidence and personal autonomy;

(4) improving students' academic performance by providing new perspectives on studied subjects and by stimulating critical thinking and creativity through collaboration with colleagues from other countries;

(5) creating professional and personal networks by collaborating with students from other schools, thus giving them the opportunity to make friends from all over Europe, which may lead to future collaboration;

(6) the contribution to the local community by encouraging students to become active and responsible citizens, by raising awareness of social and environmental issues;

(7) employment opportunities arising because international experiences are valued by employers, due to the increased ability of students to work in an international environment and to the enhancement of students' capacity for effective communication which are advantages in the labor market.

The analysis of the effects that participating in the Erasmus project has on the students reveals a profound impact in various areas, from personal and academic development to the creation of international connections. These experiences not only enrich students' knowledge and skills but also contribute to shaping them as responsible and engaged citizens in a globalized society.

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