

Eötvös Loránd University

# Understanding and Addressing the Mobility Gap in Higher Education

Desk Research Report

**Erasmus GAP - Understanding and Addressing the Mobility Gap in Higher Education. Desk Research Report.****Authors:**

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## Content

Executive summary .....	4
Introduction.....	7
Research method .....	8
Results.....	10
Global, regional, and national trends influencing international student mobility .....	10
Global trends influencing international student mobility .....	10
The growing scale of ISM on the global and European levels .....	10
Internationalisation as a trend in response to globalization .....	11
The effects of global level crises on mobility flows.....	11
Diversification of mobility forms for widening participation .....	12
Regional (European) trends influencing student mobility.....	12
European policymaking and international student mobility.....	12
The Erasmus(+) programme.....	13
National characteristics and factors influencing student mobility .....	14
Country-specific political, socio-economic, cultural and geographic characteristics.....	14
Country-level policy agendas and discourses on student mobility .....	14
Structural differences.....	15
Convergence and divergence between European and national policies on ISM .....	15
Institutional-level factors as barriers and drivers for ISM .....	16
Academic factors .....	19
Institutional network.....	19
Academic culture .....	20
Teaching and evaluation methods.....	20
Curricular issues.....	21
Field of studies .....	21
Academic preparation .....	22
Strategic factors.....	22
Institutional characteristics .....	22
Internationalisation strategies .....	23
Mobility portfolio.....	23
Regulations .....	24



Selection criteria .....	24
Operative factors.....	24
Support services .....	24
Financial support .....	25
Individual-level factors as barriers and drivers for ISM .....	26
Demographic and socio-economic factors.....	29
Cost-related factors.....	30
Social networks.....	31
Cultural and mobility capital.....	31
Psychological factors.....	32
Conclusions .....	33
Bibliography .....	34



## Executive summary

**Inclusion** has been defined as one of the **horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027**, yet in the Erasmus+ 2021 Annual Report, it is stated that **8% of higher education learners** who had a **mobility experience** were considered as **having fewer opportunities**. While this information is important to identify the mobility outreach, it does not allow a full understanding of whether all students represented in the overall HE student population are represented in the student mobility population. This data is essential to grasp how effective the inclusion and diversity measures are in fostering the participation in mobility of students from diverse backgrounds.

4

The **Erasmus Gap** project therefore aims to draw attention to the **gap between students with realistic mobility opportunities and those without**. The Erasmus GAP project is designed to provide data and tools that could help higher education institutions to adopt an inclusive approach, as well as to find solutions to **remove or reduce barriers and create opportunities for underrepresented student groups**, making student mobility accessible to a wide range of participants. The visualisation of the large-scale data sets collected from different European countries aims to help HEIs and national agencies to develop their own instruments in order to fully seize the importance of this gap. The outcomes of the Erasmus GAP project will also play a key role in the Erasmus+ midterm and other political debates around the level of financing of the Erasmus+ project in view of such vital topics as greater European inclusion and cohesion.

In order to understand the reasons behind the aforementioned gap and identify the factors that impede and facilitate participation in international student mobility, the Erasmus GAP consortium carried out a systematic literature review **at three levels**. **At the macro level**, factors such as national and global trends can act as significant drivers for international student mobility. The increasing **global interconnectedness** and internationalisation of higher education are the driving forces behind the growth of ISM. As **economies and labour markets** become increasingly globalised, higher education institutions and governments are promoting international student mobility (ISM) as a means of developing graduates who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. **Periodic global crises**, such as economic downturns or the global pandemic, have a significant impact on the trends observed in ISM. While some countries are actively promoting outbound mobility through strategic internationalisation, global crises have led to the adoption of virtual exchange as an alternative, reshaping how students gain international experience.

Many studies included in the systematic literature review confirm that **the role of higher education institutions in students' participation in mobility programmes is less understood**. It is evident that academic factors can play a driver for ISM. The **institutional networks** stimulate the expansion of international collaboration and provide students with mobility options that align with their academic and personal objectives. However, students' destination choices are not solely determined by their preferences; they are also constrained by the limitations imposed by institutional agreements. Furthermore, the **academic culture of universities**, particularly when it encourages international exchange at an early stage of a student's studies and is supported by robust institutional systems, plays a pivotal role in promoting mobility. Furthermore, differences in **teaching and evaluation methods** between countries can present challenges for students, as discrepancies in academic approaches may impede their ability to adapt and succeed. It is therefore essential that curriculum design, including the **integration of mobility windows**, is undertaken in order to adequately prepare



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students for international experiences. A further key element in the context of international student mobility is the **academic preparation** of the students, which encompasses both **cultural adaptation and guidance** on mobility. Effective preparation is essential to assist students in negotiating new academic environments, mitigating culture shock, and optimising their learning abroad.

The **characteristics of the institution** also have an impact on participation, as universities with greater resources and more extensive international connections are more likely to offer a greater number of mobility opportunities. The **internationalisation strategies** of HEIs play a crucial role in promoting international student mobility and **diversifying mobility opportunities**. These strategies ensure that institutions prioritize ISM and offer a wide range of mobility options across all study fields and academic levels. **Institutional regulations** are essential for supporting ISM, as they help manage concerns about study delays and ensure the quality assurance of the mobility experience. Furthermore, there is need for more inclusive **selection criteria** for ISM programmes, beyond academic performance, to ensure fair access for students from all backgrounds. **Comprehensive support services**, both academic and financial, are essential to fostering a more inclusive and accessible environment for international student mobility.

The systematic literature review identifies five themes pertaining to key **individual-level factors**. **Demographic and socio-economic factors** have been extensively covered in the existing literature and have constituted the focus of research for a considerable period of time. The role of **cost-related factors** and financial barriers in contributing to the mobility gap and their close relationship with socio-economic factors are also widely explored. Furthermore, **social networks**, including family, friends, and community ties, as well as **cultural or mobility capital**, such as language proficiency and prior mobility experiences, are significant areas of focus. **Psychological factors**, including motivation, personality traits, and the development of personal and intercultural skills, also play a pivotal role in students' decision-making processes regarding study abroad.



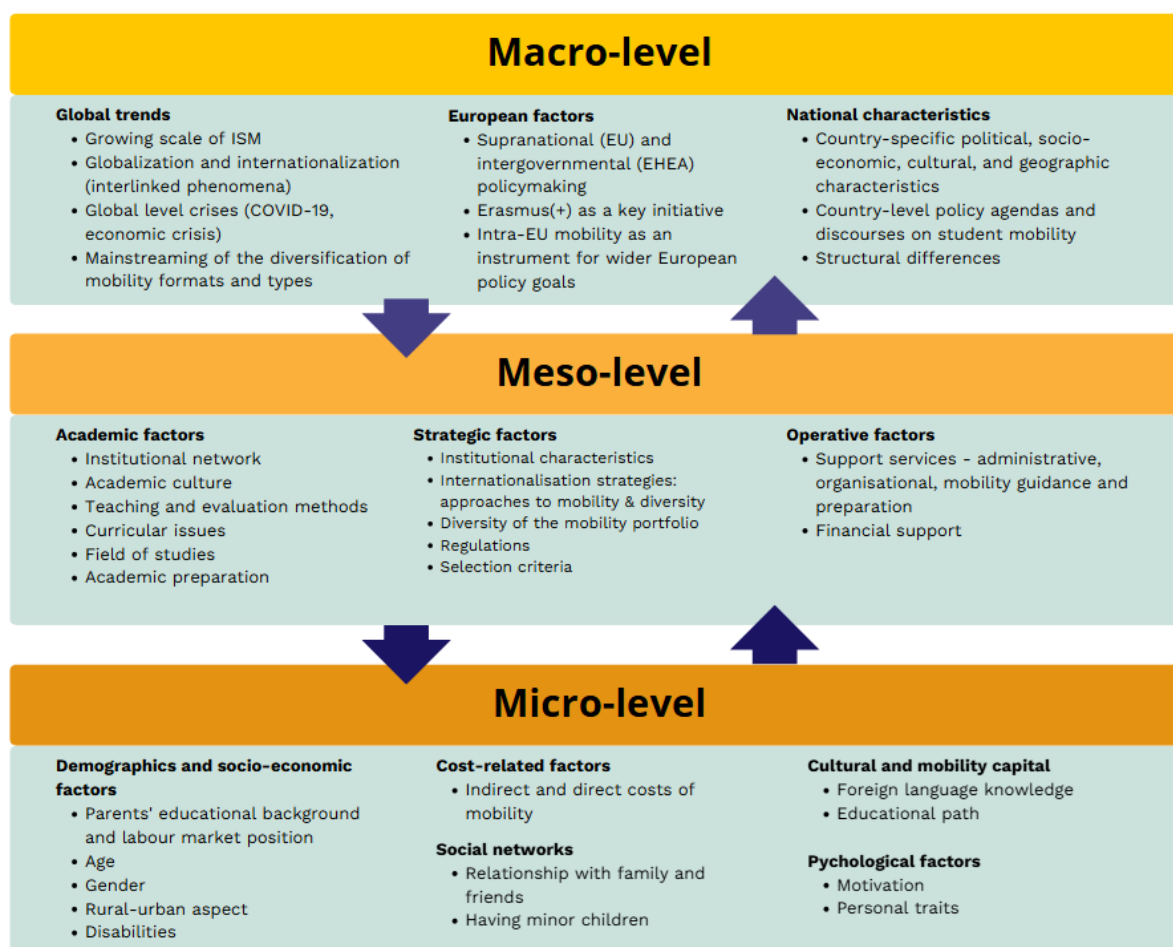


Figure 1 - Results of the desk research report (own source)



## Introduction

**Inclusion** has been defined as one of the **horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027**, yet in the Erasmus+ 2021 Annual Report, it is stated that **8% of higher education learners** who had a **mobility experience** were considered as **having fewer opportunities**. While this information is important to identify the mobility outreach, it does not allow a full understanding of whether all students represented in the overall HE student population are represented in the student mobility population. This data is essential to grasp how effective the inclusion and diversity measures are in fostering the participation in mobility of students from diverse backgrounds.

7

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One of the first project aims are to construct an Inclusivity Toolkit **for HEIs to review their existing approaches** as to what factors and dimensions they take into consideration in the process of **designing and implementing their inclusive mobility agendas**. The Inclusivity Toolkit is set to **encompass a survey tool and a set of guidelines and recommendations on data to be collected** and their usage for inclusive mobility agendas. This Toolkit is anchored in **an actual inventory** that provides university leaders and internationalisation experts with an up-to-date knowledge base on established notions of diversity, equity and inclusion and their strategic relevance for further developing inclusive mobility agendas and actions for all student target groups. The framework and content of the Toolkit will be developed in the next phase of the project based on the results and consequences of this phase of research. In order to understand the reasons behind the aforementioned gap and identify the factors that impede and facilitate participation in international student mobility, the Erasmus GAP consortium carried out a **systematic literature review**.

The project consortium, coordinated by **Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines**, includes esteemed members such as **Eötvös Loránd University, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, University of Porto, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv**, and the **European University Foundation (EUF)**.



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## Research method

One category of systematic literature reviews is the descriptive literature review, which includes the **scoping review**. The objective of a scoping review is to extract as much relevant data as possible from the existing literature. This implies that the information collated encompasses not only the results of the studies reviewed, but also the methodology and variables employed (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A further objective of a scoping review is **to provide an overview of the subject area and a comprehensive account of the research and analysis that has been conducted on the issue**.

8

The process of conducting a scoping review comprises six principal stages (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The initial step is to identify the research questions. The literature review was approached from three principal directions, resulting in the formulation of four research questions. These three main directions are the student-level, the institutional-level and national-level factors influencing participation in student mobility. The following four main questions were thus derived:

- RQ1 Which global trends influence Erasmus+ long-term student mobility trends and willingness?
- RQ2 What are the factors determining mobility at the individual level?
- RQ3 What factors supporting or hindering mobility do higher education institutions take into account?
- RQ4 How do higher education institutions reflect on the factors affecting student mobility?

The second phase of the scoping review is the stage during which relevant literature is sought and identified (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Two search strategies were used for this scoping review, (1) searches of bibliographic databases, and (2) backward and forward citation analyses of relevant entries that resulted from (1). In addition to these search strategies, five additional relevant studies were added to the scoping review based on the expertise of the authors with this field of research.

Nine databases were searched for this scoping review: (1) Google Scholar, (2) International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), (3) Web of Science, (4) SAGE Journals, (5) JSTOR, (6) Scopus, (7) Elsevier, (8) Springer, (9) EBSCO, (10) Sociological Abstracts, (11) ERIC.

The following search syntax was used by one review team member to search the two-five databases independently: (((("Erasmus" OR "mobility") AND ("university" OR "higher education institution") AND ("non-mobile") AND ("barrier" OR "obstacle" OR "support" OR "inclusion")))). The search results from each database were exported into Zotero. After removing duplicates, the database search resulted in 1000 studies.

The third main stage of the scoping review is the selection of studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). In the first phase of the selection process titled the **relevance review**, the review team applied the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria at the first search cycle:

- Language of publication is English
- Publication between 01/01/2015 and 31/01/2024



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- Academic articles (assigned to an issue or published online first), book chapters, grey literature, PhD theses
- Fields: Education, Psychology, Social Sciences (Sociology, International Relations, Migration studies), Geography, Humanities

Exclusion criteria at the first cycle:

- Published in a language other than English
- Publication before 01/01/2015

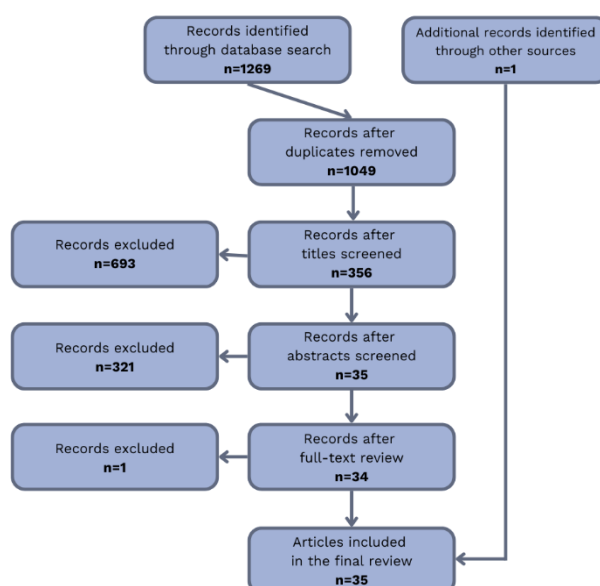
9

In the second phase of reviewing process titled the abstract review, two review team members screen 356 entries independently and blindly based on the following criteria:

- The entry has a clear link to international student mobility.
- The entry has a clear link to hindering or supporting (individual or institutional) factors influencing student mobility.
- The entry has at least a loose link to the university practices influencing/facilitating student mobility.
- The entry has a clear link to the European context.

When there were divergent opinions on inclusion, an additional, third reviewer was involved to reach an agreement. Following this process, 35 studies were found to be relevant for inclusion in the next step of the review. These 35 studies were further assessed for relevance in the information extraction stage (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Scoping review process (own source)**



## Results

### Global, regional, and national trends influencing international student mobility

This chapter focuses on the macro-level trends influencing international student mobility with sections examining global, regional (European) as well as national factors affecting participation in ISM. The first subsection examines global-level trends affecting the number of students taking up international mobility, such as the interlinked phenomena of globalization and internationalisation, global crises like the COVID-pandemic and the economic crisis of 2008, as well as the diversification of mobility forms and types with virtual exchanges and increasingly short-term stays gaining popularity. The second section looks into European level factors, identifying the role of both supranational and intergovernmental European-level policymaking in promoting ISM. It also sheds light to the importance of intra-EU mobility in contributing to wider European political, economic and cultural-societal agendas.

The third subchapter turns to the national level, presenting some key socioeconomic, geographic, political and cultural characteristics of states that result in country-specific variations and trends in terms of the pace and directions of mobility flows. Differing national policy agendas and discourses also affect ISM with structural differences in national higher education sectors and labour markets potentially hindering mobility. Finally, subchapter four takes a look at the convergences and divergences between European and national factors and policies influencing ISM, highlighting the need for identifying whether mobility barriers are country-specific or resemble each other. This section underlines the importance of clearly understanding the reasons behind unequal mobility uptake for effective policymaking, emphasizing that individual and university characteristics do not account for socio-economic gaps on the same level across European countries.

### Global trends influencing international student mobility

#### THE GROWING SCALE OF ISM ON THE GLOBAL AND EUROPEAN LEVELS

Focusing on data from the period of 1999-2019, Shields and Lu (2023) found that the number of international students has been growing on the global level in an accelerating manner. According to Wiers-Jenssen and Støren (2021), the **number of students enrolled** in higher education institutions outside their home country has grown from 2 million in 1999 to more than 5 million in 2017 with Asian and developing countries providing the largest flow of students towards Western countries, and with mobility between Western countries also of substantial volume. **There is a global trend of growth in the number of student embarking on ISM.**

European mobility flows fit into this trend with student mobility growing both to and within Europe, albeit not as fast as the growth in other areas of the world. Degree mobility *to* Europe is the largest form of student mobility in the continent, degree mobility *within* Europe is also considerable, while the number of European students going outside Europe is relatively low (Shields & Lu, 2023). Since the inception of Erasmus in 1987, higher education mobility in the framework of the programme has increased from 3,000 to over 300,000 and promoted to further increase in the future (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020).



## INTERNATIONALISATION AS A TREND IN RESPONSE TO GLOBALIZATION

Increased **global characteristics of societies and economies** require international competencies and motivate strategies to promote student mobility across borders (Åmo & Doornich, 2023). Németh and Csongor (2018) highlight that – regardless of profession – the **contemporary globalised world** makes intercultural competences and cultural sensitivity essential. Mobility is one the core feature of globalization and global society, often framed positively as an opportunity for both individuals and societies (Carrozza et al., 2017). Based on several studies analysed as part of our scoping review, it seems that a **key reason behind the trend of growth presented above is the phenomenon of globalization and the national and institutional response to it in the form of internationalisation of higher education** (Åmo & Doornich, 2023; Bryła, 2015; Carrozza et al., 2017; Németh & Csongor, 2018; Souto-Otero et al., 2023; Skribnjek, 2019).

While the meaning and definition of internationalisation in the context of higher education (HE) is contested (Souto-Otero et al., 2023), **internationalisation of HE** has become a principal trend (Bryła, 2015) and an argument behind almost all European reform in science and higher education (Carrozza et al., 2017). Based on Knight (2008b:6), Souto-Otero and colleagues (2023) **define internationalisation** as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education”, also **highlighting the centrality of border-crossing** that makes mobility a core component. Building on existing literature, they identify the motivations for promoting internationalisation as either **socio-cultural and academic** (extending the academic horizon, building an international profile or status, including international elements to the curricula, and promoting knowledge acquisition and quality enhancement); **economic** (growth, competitiveness, employability and financial incentives); or **political** (enhancing foreign policy, security and safeguarding national and regional identity).

Also drawing from the works of Knight (1997, 2008a), both Németh and Csongor (2018) and Skribnjek (2019) conceptualize the **internationalisation** of higher education as a **proactive response** by national governments, international organizations and higher education institutions **to the challenges catalysed by globalization** (including the flow of technology, economics, people and cultures across borders), highlighting the **dynamic and closely related nature** of these two processes. While student mobility is only one of the elements of internationalisation, Skribnjek (2019) argues that short term exchanges are the focus of many institutions.

## THE EFFECTS OF GLOBAL LEVEL CRISES ON MOBILITY FLOWS

Besides the interlinked trends of globalization and internationalisation, global level crises such as the **economic crisis of 2008** or the **COVID-19 pandemic** are among the macro-level factors affecting student mobility flows and forms (Åmo & Doornich, 2023; Nilsson, 2024; Morley & Cunningham, 2021; Shields & Lu, 2023; Skribnjek, 2019). Large-scale financial crises such as that of 2008 affect the whole world (also made possible by globalization) and have a considerable impact on higher education systems and mobility flows as well (Skribnjek, 2019). *Other types of crises such as the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and their effects were not present in the examined studies.*

According to Nilsson (2024), the pandemic contributes to changing ways of travelling or alternative paths for gaining international experience such as via ICT means. However, he also highlighted that long-term effects on mobility are difficult to predict. Shields and Lu (2023) expected that the pandemic was likely to seriously disrupt the growing trends in ISM and result in a significant drop on the number



of students but noted that prevailing trends may continue following the withdrawal of travel restrictions. In any case, Nilsson argues that COVID-19 **reshapes the concept of studying abroad** and opens new possibilities for virtual exchanges and cross-border learning, potentially contributing to a growing number of traditionally non-mobile students gaining an international experience. He notes that COVID-19 also had an effect on internationalisation strategies with universities pushed to **digitalise education and invest in ICT** platforms and tools, contributing to the emergence of virtual exchanges and blended mobility within Erasmus. Similarly, Morley and Cunningham (2021) note how the adaptation of online learning in the HE sector was accelerated by the travel restrictions due to the pandemic, also identifying collaborative online international learning (COIL) as an alternative way of providing international experience.

#### DIVERSIFICATION OF MOBILITY FORMS FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION

In a post-pandemic world, **virtual learning** became an acceptable alternative with the potential for widening participation. Nilsson (2024) sees these developments as potentially beneficial for non-mobile students by making **higher education more accessible across borders without relying solely on physical mobility**. This highlights another trend influencing student mobility uptake which could be formulated as a diversification of the forms any type of mobility and international learning.

**New forms of exchange** like collaborative online international learning and virtual exchange such as the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges expand the scope and reach of the Erasmus+ programme, providing a more inclusive approach (Shields & Lu, 2023). Another form of diversification can be observed regarding the length of visits: besides the more traditional forms of credit or degree mobility, the number of trips with shorter duration than a single semester (some lasting only 1 or 2 weeks) started to grow internationally, with initiatives from various countries and regions including the UK, US, Australia, Europe and East-Asia (Waters, 2023). Short-term mobility programmes are also increasingly adopted to promote internationalisation (Roy et al., 2022). The idea of **widening participation** is often evoked in terms of these new forms of exchange, hailed as potential solutions for engaging students from less beneficial socio-economic backgrounds (Waters, 2023).

#### Regional (European) trends influencing student mobility

##### EUROPEAN POLICYMAKING AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

Global trends such as increasingly globalized labour markets have an effect on regional factors and policymaking affecting student mobility. In line with the process of globalization, European policy-level interest in making education more international has been increasing with intergovernmental initiatives such as the European Higher Education Area contributing to the growing compatibility of higher education systems in Europe as well as supranational EU-level programmes like the Erasmus scheme increasing participation in student and staff mobility (Launikari et al., 2020). A considerable number of the studies examined displayed **awareness of the European-level factors and policies influencing student mobility, also shedding light to the importance of intra-EU mobility in contributing to wider European political, economic and cultural-societal agendas** (Brooks, 2018; Carrozza et al., 2017; Crăciun et al., 2020; Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2019; Launikari et al., 2020; Netz, 2015; Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020; Skribnjek, 2019; Van Mol, 2017; Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021).

According to Netz (2015), facilitating international student mobility is one of the cornerstones of **EU policy** and a central action line of education ministers of the **European Higher Education Area**. The



policy initiatives are driven by the various (supposed) benefits of ISM such as economic value, good practice exchange, personal development and employability prospects. Intra-European mobility of people as one of the “four freedoms” is considered as an instrument for strengthening EU policy goals (such as European citizenship, competitiveness, employability, intercultural understanding, lifelong learning, etc.), and benefitting not only the participating individual but also local and national communities and economies (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2019). The policy rationales for promoting ISM on the European-level are therefore diverse and driven by **political, cultural and academic motives** (Skribnjek, 2019).

These include **economic considerations** and benefits such as facilitating economic development (Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021) and integration (Brooks, 2018), a single European labour market (Skribnjek, 2019), and enhancing employability (Netz, 2015; Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020) as well as European competitiveness in the global economy (Van Mol, 2017). Intra-EU mobility is also actively promoted by European institutions as an **instrument of “horizontal Europeanization”** (Carrozza et al., 2017) and as a **social-cultural-political investment increasing European integration** (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020; Van Mol, 2017; Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021), contributing to a joint European consciousness (Skribnjek, 2019) and a European political identity (Brooks, 2018).

According to Crăciun et al. (2020), ISM also contributes to the **homogenisation of the different national higher education systems in Europe**. As Skribnjek (2019) notes, the establishment of the EHEA contributes to the progressive convergence of European higher education systems characterised by higher compatibility and comparability and thereby potentially facilitating mobility flows. Brooks (2018) also sees European-level initiatives as contributors to the standardisation of HE across the continent, arguing that the EU is pursuing a **“top-down strategy of convergence” to strengthen the competitiveness of European higher education** through the development of the EHEA, in which student mobility facilitated by the Erasmus programme plays a key role. These perspectives indicate that European-level policy decisions influence national trends of students’ participation in intra-European mobility through a higher convergence between national education systems leading to a higher number of mobile students. Interestingly and somewhat in contrast to this, according to Cairns et al. (2018), the homogenisation of European HE systems might also function as a barrier for some of the students who take up international mobility looking for a challenge.

#### THE ERASMUS(+) PROGRAMME

A central initiative connected to European policy goals is the **Erasmus(+) programme**, which has become the largest international student mobility programme in the world and is widely considered among the most positive results of European integration (Souto-Otero et al., 2023). Erasmus is considered the **“flagship of European cooperation” in higher education** (Crăciun et al., 2020 citing Barblan 2002). Bryła (2015) points out the multi-level effects of the initiative, highlighting that besides the institutional and individual levels, the Erasmus programme **enhances the quality of higher education at the system level** as well. Németh and Csongor (2018) see the programme as a **strategic step towards internationalisation**.

According to Shields and Lu (2023), the **public nature of Erasmus** and its intention to create “positive externalities” (benefitting not only individual participants but European societies in general) make the initiative different from other forms of mobility. Shields and Lu (2023) believe that it is this level of “publicness” that makes new initiatives aiming to widen participation or reduce the environmental





costs of Erasmus possible (such as the Green Erasmus project or the student-led Erasmus-by-train initiative) and doubt that similar initiatives would succeed in the framework of private mobility. Cairns et al. (2018) argue that the **voluntary nature of Erasmus participation** is a hidden strength of the initiative, leading to highly motivated exchange students who are open to new experiences.

### National characteristics and factors influencing student mobility

There is an ascending European trend in ISM, however, **country-specific trends** differ in terms of pace and the balance between incoming and outgoing mobility. These are due to the **differences in socioeconomic, geographic and cultural characteristics** such as location, distance, country size, climate, leisure activities, language, living costs and subsequent employment opportunities that may facilitate or hinder mobility flows and influence the directions of students (Sin et al., 2017), as well as to **differing policy agendas and national discourses** related to student mobility (Brooks, 2018; Launikari et al., 2020; Waters, 2023).

14

#### COUNTRY-SPECIFIC POLITICAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND GEOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Skribnjek (2019) identifies several theoretical approaches to understanding international mobility flows, highlighting that many studies focus on the determinants of mobility building on the **theory of push and pull factors** adapted from migration theory. These determinants include national educational, political, cultural, economic and academic factors such as educational provisions and opportunities, economic and employability prospects, job opportunities, wage differences, financial support, political stability and immigration frameworks, with economically developed and English-speaking countries pulling students towards them while countries experiencing political conflict, social unrest and economic recession pushing students out of their home countries.

The **interaction of structural** (such as economic competitiveness and funding) **and cultural factors** (such as the degree of openness, cosmopolitan attitudes and language) might lead to certain countries being more internationalized and their citizens more mobile than others (Carrozza et al., 2017). Cairns et al. (2018) highlight that the distance between home and host country and the familiarity with the culture of the latter are also important factors with relatively close destinations (e.g. between Spain and Portugal) providing a layer of comfort. Brečko et al. (2020) found that in the case of short-term mobility stays, the “consumption benefits” such as a good climate or attractive city seem to be more important than programme quality or career perspectives. This means that the **importance of certain country-specific characteristics might differ in line with the length of the mobility period**.

#### COUNTRY-LEVEL POLICY AGENDAS AND DISCOURSES ON STUDENT MOBILITY

**Country-level policy agendas on internationalisation** also have an impact on mobility flows with some states developing strategies for internationalisation of higher education (Launikari et al., 2020). National differences might also exist in terms of the percentage of ISM in the framework of Erasmus. According to the European Commission, Erasmus+ covered around 50% of all ISM uptake in 2017 in Europe. While in Italy, 76% of ISM took place within EU programmes, the amount was a significantly lower 47% percent in the UK (d’Hombres & Schnepf, 2021). National differences in the volume of outgoing mobility flows are also affected by the **actions of National Agencies** which influence the number of available grants. Referring to the case of Spain (the country sending the highest number of students abroad under Erasmus), Varela (2016) noted that the high number of grants generated a



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sense of unlimited access, making students feel that the application is not that competitive and leading to the lowest average Erasmus grant in the EU.

Drawing from policy documents from six European countries, Brooks (2018) identifies how **broader political cultures and national policy environments** affect the conceptualisations of student mobility in Europe. One example is the difference between national discourses in terms of the **importance attributed to intra-European mobility** which draws from the wider geo-political context with some states appearing generally pro-European while others taking a more Eurosceptic stance. Another example is the difference in terms of conceptualising **inward mobility with national migration and labour market policies** expressing different levels of desirability and seeing incoming students through different lenses (e.g. visitors or workers). Another example of the role of national education strategy and related policy discourses is provided by the study of Waters (2023), which describes how the UK government is aiming to frame the Turing Scheme as superior to the Erasmus+ programme in terms of broader focus (global rather than EU) and widening participation (through offering short-term mobility).

### STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

National differences in terms of incoming and outgoing mobility flows are also caused by **country-specific variances in the structure of higher education sectors as well as in labour market flexibility** and differing levels of demand for students with international experience. The study of d'Hombres & Schnepf (2021) compared students' returns from ISM in two countries with very different education systems and labour markets: Italy and the UK. While the clearly stratified and more market-oriented university system in the UK ensures that diplomas signal graduate's skills quite explicitly to employers, the lower flexibility of the Italian labour markets and the more difficult transition from tertiary education to work in Italy leads to ISM being a potential means to signal relevant skills such as language proficiency. Based on their results, these differences lead to higher returns to mobility for Italian students than for UK graduates (6.3 percentage point increase in employment probability in Italy compared to a 2.3 percentage in the UK).

Referring to the Danish Study Progress reforms encouraging faster completion of programmes, Brooks (2018) provides an example of how national reform resulting in **structural changes** can hinder outward mobility. According to Vögtle (2019), a **lack of flexibility and crossnational comparability of curricula** in the case of certain study fields can also hinder possibilities to benefit from a stay abroad. While restrictive physical borders were removed for the signatories of the Schengen Agreement, Samuk et al. (2019) argue that **"organisational borders"** (outlined by the welfare state and the terms of social and economic inclusion) as well as **"conceptual borders"** (being part of a community, tolerance and political inclusion) remained present in the lives of citizens. EU member states have quite diverse perspectives and policies regarding mobility as well as different national frameworks and institutional settings, providing different opportunity structures and thereby shaping the trajectories of young people. These converge with the observations of Geddie (2015) on how local political cultures, policies and existing constitutional and institutional frameworks might disrupt policy flows across borders (Brooks, 2018).

### Convergence and divergence between European and national policies on ISM

According to the literature, there is a **consensus among policymakers** on the benefits of participating in ISM, resulting in strong similarities in the way **national and university level actors take efforts** to





increase student's awareness and encourage mobility uptake (di Pietro, 2022). According to Brooks (2018), this is at least partly stimulated by European-level policy initiatives. Netz (2015) points to the potential of **supranational or intergovernmental initiatives** in the case of overcoming common or similar obstacles between countries hindering participation in mobility (such as age selectivity or discipline-specific challenges). However, he also highlights the importance of recognising **country-specific obstacles** and the extent to which barriers across countries resemble each other, since substantial differences might result in policies that work in some countries while being ineffective or even harmful in others.

The study of Schnepf et al. (2020) contains similar arguments. To alleviate inequalities, **intergovernmental policies** might be aimed at distributing grants and mobility opportunities more equally across institutions or consider whether the merit-based approach for selection is the only right approach. Nevertheless, **country specific policies** for decreasing mobility barriers are also needed since individual and university characteristics do not account for socio-economic gaps on the same level across European countries. Schnepf et al. (2020) highlight that considerable differences exist in terms of the explanatory power of individual- and university-level variables affecting ISM uptake. Furthermore, Brooks (2018) argues that while there is convergence in the way student mobility has a core role in national internationalisation strategies, there are important differences regarding the scale of desired mobility, the characteristics of the ideal mobile subjects, social justice concerns and the prioritisation given to outward mobility, which raises questions about the extent of policy convergence across Europe.

Samuk et al. (2019) emphasize that a single theoretical lens (such as the push-pull factors or brain drain) is not enough for explaining the complexity of inequalities since **macro-, meso- and micro-level factors are all relevant**: besides EU policies aiming to promote wider participation via diverse initiatives, home and host countries and their institutions can define the mobility experience. They highlight the importance of macro- and meso-level factors by recognizing that individuals are embedded within broader structures (such as nation states, institutions and family or peer network).

Aware of the unequal student mobility uptake, European policymakers stress the importance of inclusion, aiming to widen access for students from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. However, examining and clearly **understanding the reasons behind unequal uptake is crucial for policymakers** at all levels, since the success of policy actions for counteracting these background forces depends on clearly understanding where intervention is needed. As Schnepf and Colagrossi (2020) noted, if unequal uptake depends solely on student characteristics, improving support and decreasing costs for disadvantaged students might be an appropriate answer. However, if institutional-level factors also contribute to differing mobility opportunities, they argue for different kinds of actions that foster mobility incentives for those institutions that are attended by less privileged student groups and a more equal distribution of funds between institutes and fields of study.

### Institutional-level factors as barriers and drivers for ISM

The study of international student mobility has often focused on individual factors, but the role of Higher Education Institutions is less understood. (Souto-Otero et al., 2023) highlight that there is a **significant lack of studies on the institutional dimension of international student mobility** compared to the individual dimension.



Roy and colleagues (2022) find that **external factors**, classified as “contextual antecedents”, primarily relate to the institutional and national context, **underscoring the importance of the broader environment in shaping student mobility**. The quantitative research of Schnepf et al. (2022) examine not only individual characteristics but also university features that might influence unequal participation in student mobility. By combining detailed graduate survey and administrative data with information from the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), the study compares four European countries. The results show that socio-economic gaps in mobility remain large even when university characteristics are considered, highlighting the limitations of focusing solely on individual factors, as they have limited explanatory power (Schnepf et al., 2022).

Samuk et al. (2019) highlights that, alongside economic disparities, various forms of inequality – cultural, social, moral, and gender-related – are deeply entrenched within institutional frameworks and national contexts. These inequalities intersect across individual, institutional, and national levels, underscoring the embeddedness of individuals within broader structures. Thus, understanding these levels is crucial to analyzing the inequalities affecting student mobility (Samuk et al., 2019). Although EU policies seek to address these barriers through multiple initiatives, institutions in both home and host countries play a significant role in shaping students' experiences in mobility programmes (Samuk et al., 2019).

In summary, significant gaps in understanding persist because diverse types of inequalities are deeply rooted in institutional backgrounds. Addressing these disparities requires acknowledging the multi-level interactions and the substantial influence of institutional and national contexts on international student mobility, as well as their intersections with the identified individual-level factors (Samuk et al., 2019).

This section examines how the institutional context influences international student mobility, highlighting several factors that can be categorized as academic, strategic, and operational. In alignment with this guiding question, a total of 36 papers were reviewed, resulting in the inclusion of 18 relevant studies in this part of the desk research.

**Table 1. Institutional-level factors studied in the relevant entries (own source)**

Main groups of Institutional-level factors	Factors studied in the literature	Authors
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Institutional network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> <li>Roy et al., 2022</li> <li>Schnepf et al., 2022</li> <li>Waters, 2023</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Di Pietro, 2022</li> <li>Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morley &amp; Cunningham, 2021</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching and evaluation methods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> <li>• Nilsson, 2023</li> <li>• Sin et al., 2017</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curricular issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Di Pietro, 2022</li> <li>• Morley &amp; Cunningham, 2021</li> <li>• Vögtle, 2019</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field of studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> <li>• Németh &amp; Csongor, 2018</li> <li>• Nilsson, 2023</li> <li>• Roy et al., 2022</li> <li>• Schnepf et al., 2022</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Castro-Martín &amp; Cortina, 2015</li> <li>• Launikari et al., 2020</li> <li>• Morley &amp; Cunningham, 2021</li> <li>• Souto-Otero et al., 2023</li> </ul>
<b>Strategic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Di Pietro, 2022</li> <li>• Schnepf et al., 2022</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internationalisation strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Souto-Otero et al., 2023</li> <li>• Van Mol, 2017</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity of the mobility portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> <li>• Morley &amp; Cunningham, 2021</li> <li>• Roy et al., 2022</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vögtle, 2019</li> <li>• Waters, 2023</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> <li>• Lörz et al., 2016</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schnepf et al., 2022</li> <li>• Varela, 2016</li> </ul>
<b>Operative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cairns et al., 2018</li> <li>• Castro-Martín &amp; Cortina, 2015</li> <li>• Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018</li> <li>• Launikari et al., 2020</li> <li>• Nilsson, 2023</li> <li>• Souto-Otero et al., 2023</li> <li>• Vögtle, 2019</li> <li>• Waters, 2023</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lörz et al., 2016</li> <li>• Morley &amp; Cunningham, 2021</li> <li>• Schnepf &amp; Colagrossi, 2020</li> <li>• Schnepf et al., 2022</li> <li>• Vögtle, 2019</li> </ul>

### Academic factors

#### INSTITUTIONAL NETWORK

Institutional networks of higher education institutions are crucial in facilitating participation in various forms of short-term mobility, including credit or traineeship mobility, and summer schools. **Institutional networks appear to be vital for higher education institutions**, as they expand **international collaboration opportunities**, **enhance mobility programmes**, and support the global engagement of both students and faculty (Waters, 2023). Such embeddedness in the international



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environment allows students to engage in study abroad opportunities that align with their academic plans and personal motivations.

**The selection of a study destination** is not solely **driven by** the desire to experience a different **academic or cultural environment** but is also strongly influenced by a student's initial plan to return to their home country (Roy et al., 2022). However, it is not only the student's preferences that shape mobility decisions but also **the opportunities offered by the university itself**. These exchange programmes are often governed by bilateral agreements between institutions, which can significantly limit the choices available to students when selecting their destination (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018). The university's ability to provide **diverse mobility options**, based on its international partnerships, affects the range and flexibility of international student mobility, as highlighted by Schnepf and colleagues (2022).

### ACADEMIC CULTURE

While factors such as **institutional climate and academic culture** of the sending institution are mentioned in literature related to students' decisions to study abroad, their influence has been largely overlooked in research on student mobility (Di Pietro, 2022). **An academic culture that fosters international exchange programmes early in a student's course of study has been shown to be particularly influential**, especially when paired with robust support systems that facilitate student participation in these opportunities (Morley & Cunningham, 2021). This combination of early exposure to international opportunities and adequate institutional support helps create an environment that encourages and sustains student mobility, with the most important actors in establishing this academic culture being **the academics themselves, who can promote mobility opportunities through their courses and set an example by participating in teaching or training mobilities**.

Although evidence on **the importance of the academic culture** of the sending institution as a factor shaping students' mobility plans is limited, it is more frequently noted in the literature that mobile students are often exposed to diverse academic cultures, which can significantly influence their learning experiences and perspectives (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018). This indicates that **the academic environment students encounter abroad has a profound impact on their academic development**, as it exposes them to new teaching methods, scholarly practices, and cultural contexts that differ from those in their home institutions.

### TEACHING AND EVALUATION METHODS

As previously mentioned, teaching and evaluation methods play a crucial role in encouraging student participation in international mobility programmes. However, students who take part in these programmes often face challenges due to differing **teaching approaches and assessment systems**, which can impede their ability to adapt to and fully benefit from the academic environment in the host country (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018). On the contrary, some educators have noted that, in certain cases, students may try to take advantage of what they believe to be easier grading standards abroad, especially in subjects where they struggle to pass at their home universities (Sin et al., 2017). In conclusion, these **contrasting results highlight the need for more transparency and better alignment between the teaching and learning strategies used in various HEIs to facilitate a more seamless transition for mobile students**.



**Non-mobile students commonly express concerns regarding their lack of familiarity with academic conditions and qualifications in other countries**, as well as the structural differences in academic calendars and exam schedules, viewing these as significant obstacles to mobility (Nilsson, 2023). These concerns underscore the complexities of academic culture differences, which not only influence students' decisions to participate in mobility programmes but also shape the academic experiences and perceptions of academic standards for those who embark on a mobility journey.

## CURRICULAR ISSUES

The **integration of international mobility programmes into higher education curricula** plays a crucial role in shaping student participation in ISM opportunities. Early exposure to an internationally oriented academic environment has been shown to significantly increase the likelihood of students engaging in study abroad programmes later in their academic journey (Di Pietro, 2022). This highlights the importance of capturing students' interest early in their courses and subsequently requires ensuring that curriculum planning is aligned with these opportunities.

**A well-structured curriculum that incorporates preparation, implementation, and debriefing phases around international experiences can significantly improve student learning outcomes** (Morley & Cunningham, 2021). This approach not only prepares students for the academic challenges they might face abroad but also enhances their ability to reflect on and apply what they have learned upon returning to their home institutions. A key strategy for encouraging mobility is the **integration of "mobility windows"** within the curriculum, which are predefined periods that allow students to participate in international programmes without disrupting their overall academic progress. Vögtle (2019) stresses the importance of embedding such windows to streamline the process for students and make mobility a more accessible option.

Nevertheless, introducing **mandatory mobility phases**, particularly in fields like teacher training, requires careful consideration. Vögtle (2019) points out that while mandatory mobility can promote international engagement, it may inadvertently create barriers for certain student groups, especially first-generation students in academic programmes, like teacher training, who may face additional challenges in accessing such opportunities. Thus, it is crucial to strike a balance between providing sufficient opportunities for mobility and ensuring equitable access for all students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

In conclusion, the integration of international mobility into higher education curricula requires a thoughtful approach that includes early exposure to global academic environments, careful curriculum planning, and the provision of mobility windows.

## FIELD OF STUDIES

While initiatives like Erasmus actively **promote international mobility across all levels and disciplines**, the relatively low participation rates among students in certain study fields, such as medicine, underline the need to better incorporate ISM opportunities and global perspectives into specialized curricula (Németh & Csongor, 2018). In some fields, such as teacher training, additional efforts may be necessary to redesign the curriculum to increase flexibility and cross-national comparability, allowing students to participate in ISM without hindering their academic journey (Vögtle, 2019).

Factors such as the specific discipline and the academic level impact students' decisions to study abroad (Roy et al., 2022). The **relationship between a student's field of study and their likelihood of**



**participating in mobility programmes is complex and context-dependent**, varying by country and discipline (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018).

The empirical research of Schnepf and colleagues (2022) indicates that social segregation within universities and fields of study plays a crucial role in explaining unequal participation rates in Erasmus programmes. Specifically, **students enrolled in disciplines and institutions with higher concentrations of disadvantaged students are less likely to engage in mobility**, even when controlling for individual characteristics. This suggests that the field of study itself, alongside other institutional factors, affects students' mobility uptake (Schnepf et al., 2022).

### ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Effective **academic preparation** is crucial for enhancing participation in international student mobility programmes. **Cultural adaptation and the phenomenon of culture shock** can significantly impact students who are unprepared for the unfamiliar norms and beliefs they encounter abroad. These experiences often lead students to reassess their own cultural identities, highlighting the necessity of realistic expectations and effective preparation (Morley & Cunningham, 2021). A lack of adequate preparation among students is often cited as a significant challenge to successful mobility experiences (Castro-Martín & Cortina, 2015). There exists considerable potential for development in this area through the implementation of preparatory programmes that equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for their international placements (Souto-Otero et al., 2023).

**Mobility guidance**, as a means of academic preparation, plays an essential role in preparing students for their international experiences. This guidance **encompasses information and support** aimed at helping individuals develop their skills and awareness of potential challenges while abroad, as well as providing students with opportunities for debriefing and self-reflection is critical for processing their learning experiences in different cultural contexts (Launikari et al., 2020; Morley & Cunningham, 2021). The guidance therefore should begin **before departure** and continue **throughout the mobility period**, enabling students to take greater responsibility for their learning while abroad. **Post-mobility reflection and evaluation of experiences** are integral to maximizing the benefits of international study, allowing students to integrate their learning into their academic and professional lives (Launikari et al., 2020). Overall, comprehensive academic preparation is vital for enhancing the effectiveness and accessibility of international student mobility programmes.

### Strategic factors

#### INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

**Institutional characteristics** play a crucial role in shaping participation in international student mobility, **such as a university's location or its unique institutional history**, while the reputation or prestige of a university also affects the probability of students engaging in ISM, according to the empirical research of Di Pietro (2022). **These factors can influence the resources available for mobility programmes, the support structures in place for students**, and the overall institutional culture regarding international engagement. For instance, universities located in urban centres may have better connections with international institutions and resources, while those with a strong reputation may attract more funding and partnerships that facilitate mobility.





**The socio-economic composition of universities significantly influences ISM participation.** Disadvantaged students are often concentrated in institutions with limited mobility opportunities, creating a gap in access to international experiences. For instance, there is a striking variation in mobility uptake between universities within the same country. In Germany, student participation in international mobility ranges from as low as 5% to as high as 60%, while in the UK, it varies from 0% to 30% depending on the institution (Schnepf et al., 2022). This disparity highlights the importance of institutional policies and the ability of universities to secure mobility grants, both of which are critical in determining students' access to international programmes. Consequently, disadvantaged students face barriers not only due to their socio-economic backgrounds but also because they attend universities that promote or facilitate international mobility to a lesser extent.

Overall, **the relationship between institutional characteristics and ISM participation underscores the need for targeted institutional agendas**, policies, and strategies focused on internationalisation. These should not only enhance mobility opportunities but also ensure equitable access for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### INTERNATIONALISATION STRATEGIES

**International student mobility** is increasingly recognized as **a pivotal component of higher education institutions' internationalisation strategies**, encompassing various aspects such as the internationalisation of curricula and the recognition of student mobility. Among these strategies, mobility opportunities occupy a prominent position, with **mobility often cited as the most frequent internationalisation activity of HEIs** (Souto-Otero et al., 2023).

When surveying HE leadership about their institutions' objectives for international student mobility, **four types of motivations emerged: academic, economic, social, and profiling**. Notably, academic-related considerations were reported as the most significant by HE leadership, emphasizing that international mobility enables institutions to cultivate competencies in their students that might not be otherwise attainable (Souto-Otero et al., 2023). Social motivations related to diversity were reported as comparatively low, despite the widely acknowledged link between diversity and internationalisation (Castro et al. 2016, cited by Souto-Otero et al., 2023). Interestingly, the goal of increasing the diversity of the student population is frequently prioritized by HEIs in Western and Northern countries. However, cross-country analyses reveal heterogeneous effects, indicating stronger impacts for Southern and Eastern European countries (d'Hombres & Schnepf 2021, cited by Souto-Otero et al., 2023). This suggests that while the focus on diversity may be one of the objectives of international student mobility flows, its significance and implementation can vary widely based on geographical and institutional context (Souto-Otero et al., 2023). Furthermore, many HEIs emphasize the role of ISM in enhancing graduates' employability, highlighting the competitive advantage associated with international experiences (Van Mol, 2017).

### MOBILITY PORTFOLIO

Limited choices across all mobility types frequently pose obstacles to participation (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018). **The diversity of the mobility portfolio is therefore essential in fostering inclusive international experiences for students**, as it encompasses a range of study abroad programmes tailored to different needs and circumstances. Incorporating various lengths and locations for international student mobility, particularly in specialized programmes (such as nursing), **can broaden inclusivity** (Morley & Cunningham, 2021).





**Short-term mobility programmes**, in particular, offer several advantages, making them appealing options for many students (Roy et al., 2022). They are perceived as less ‘risky’ than longer stays, require less time away from home and other responsibilities, and are generally more cost-effective. Additionally, they demand fewer personal contacts and less social and cultural capital, making them more accessible (Waters, 2023). Consequently, providing more short-term mobility opportunities **can effectively expand access to international experiences** (Vögtle, 2019).

## REGULATIONS

Organizational regulations play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of international student mobility (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018). Even though **mobility windows** play a key role in terms of **academic quality assurance of ISM**, they also need to be addressed from a regulatory point of view. Addressing concerns about the potential extension of study duration due to mobility can be managed by incorporating designated mobility windows within academic curricula, which can help alleviate student fears and demonstrate the benefits of international experiences (Lörz et al., 2016).

## SELECTION CRITERIA

**Merit-based selection of students** into ISM programmes often reinforces inequalities. In many cases, **students selected based primarily on academic ability tend to be those from more privileged backgrounds**, further perpetuating disparities in access to international experiences. Intergovernmental policies could help by distributing mobility grants more equitably across all universities, regardless of student demographics. Additionally, reconsidering the criteria for selecting students for ISM programmes – moving beyond academic ability alone – could help address some of the inequities in participation (Schnepf et al., 2022).

Research utilizing data from the academic records of a sample of 400 graduates, 68 of whom participated in Erasmus mobility, demonstrates that participation in the Erasmus program **diminishes the relationship between prior academic performance and final GPA**, effectively acting as a form of grade insurance. This creates **an incentive for lower-performing students to engage in the programme** while simultaneously discouraging higher-performing students from doing so, resulting in a form of ‘adverse self-selection’ into the program. This phenomenon is particularly evident **in the Spanish context**, where **the wide availability of Erasmus opportunities mitigates the impact of merit-based university selection procedures and enhances the influence of applicant self-selection** (Varela, 2016).

## Operative factors

### SUPPORT SERVICES

Support services play a crucial role in facilitating international student mobility, particularly in **the areas of administrative and organizational support**. A lack of support or access to information can be a significant barrier for students considering studying abroad (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018). Many HEIs attempt to address this by offering information sessions to help guide students through the decision-making process (Waters, 2023). Despite these efforts, **students often report facing challenges in finding the necessary information and navigating administrative requirements**, which can be a major obstacle (Nilsson, 2023). Additionally, specialized support is needed for students with unique family



circumstances, such as accommodation and childcare facilities, to better meet their needs during mobility (Vögtle, 2019).

**Mobility guidance and preparation** are equally essential components that can either support or impede participation in ISM. Mobility guidance – beyond the previously mentioned academic preparations – **provides vital information and advice to help students** enhance their skills and gain international experience. This includes preparing them for potential challenges, not only regarding their academic trajectory but also concerning the administrative and operational issues that may arise during mobility, as well as helping them develop coping strategies (Launikari et al., 2020). However, **the lack of preparation is often cited as a significant challenge**, highlighting the need for further development in this area (Castro-Martín & Cortina, 2015; Souto-Otero et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the literature suggests that while host institutions must provide a basic safety net for international students, they should also allow for a substantial degree of autonomy. This autonomy requires students to solve problems independently, a role that is often filled by parents in their home countries (Cairns et al., 2018a).

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial incentives play a crucial role in influencing participation in international student mobility (ISM), particularly through the **distribution of financial resources and the policies that shape access to mobility programmes**. Disadvantaged students often face dual obstacles: their socio-economic background and the institutional environment they are part of. **Universities with fewer mobility grants or less emphasis on promoting international opportunities typically leave these students at a further disadvantage, reinforcing disparities in ISM participation**. For instance, institutional success in securing mobility grants is a significant factor, with students at well-funded institutions more likely to study abroad than those at less resourceful universities. This underscores the importance of institutional policies in shaping access to international opportunities (Schnepf, 2022).

**Equitable distribution of financial resources** across universities is crucial for addressing these disparities. **Allocating funds** for international mobility based on the number of students enrolled, rather than on historical success in sending students abroad, could provide better opportunities. Incentives for universities with low Erasmus participation could also encourage greater ISM uptake, particularly for students at institutions serving disadvantaged populations. **Redistribution of funds** in this manner could ensure that ISM opportunities are more accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic background or the institutional resources of their university (Schnepf et al., 2022). **Enhancing financial support and reducing the costs of studying abroad, especially for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are key steps toward creating more equitable mobility opportunities** (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020).

**Financial barriers** are therefore a key issue, as many students perceive **a lack of funding opportunities** for temporary mobility. This could be mitigated through more targeted support schemes that address specific groups, such as first-generation students, student parents, and older students, who may face additional challenges. **Tailored support for these students could bridge the gap in access to ISM**, ensuring that a more diverse student population benefits from international experiences. Additionally, **specific travel bursaries and targeted information campaigns could help** students navigate financial constraints and increase their participation in ISM (Lörz et al., 2016; Morley & Cunningham, 2021; Vögtle, 2019).



## Individual-level factors as barriers and drivers for ISM

The majority of the entries (18) included in the scoping review mentioned the role of individual-level factors in participation in short-term mobility. However, only less than half of the studies (10) focused exclusively on the drivers and barriers to ISM and the differences between mobile and non-mobile students. This result has reinforced the consequences of the systematic literature review conducted by Roy et al., 2022. According to authors, whose search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in the English language between 1977 and 2021, there are a significant number of studies that focused on the antecedents of international short-term mobility, they found only five studies that compared mobile and non-mobile students by the relevant influencing factors. However, over the last decades, researchers have actively examined the role of individual-level factors in participation in ISM. In conclusion, while **the topic of the individual (student)-level factors contributing or hindering to participation in ISM is well-researched and described in the literature** (Netz, 2015; Netz and Finger, 2016), there is still a need to better understand the differences between mobile and non-mobile students and the complex role of individual, institutional level, and the national context.

The role of individual-level factors in ISM can be investigated by applying various research designs. Most of the entries included in the scoping review are empirical studies that applied various methodologies and data collection tools. Although **quantitative methods** are the most commonly used scientific methods, some pieces of mixed method and qualitative method research can be found among the studies as well. Among the entries that included empirical data, most studies use **a questionnaire and secondary (integrated) database** as data collection tools. The studies that do not collect their data report their findings from multiple **large-scale European surveys**, for instance, Erasmus+ impact studies and Eurostudent. Furthermore, international, and national statistical databases (national graduate databases, integrated, ETER e.g.) have been also widely used for research purposes over the last decades. Based on large-scale international surveys, **comparative studies** become important resources to explain the differences between mobile and non-mobile students and show the country-specific obstacles and the factors that could deter students from ISM differently (Netz, 2015; Schnepf et al., 2022). In addition, a small number of studies covered in our review have used **control group-based research methods**. These studies examine the differences in various variables between control and test groups, such as mobile (control) and non-mobile (test) students (Lörz et al., 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2021). From this review, we identified the **panel study** as a used method in relation to exploring the reasons for the mobility gap. Nevertheless, this method is also widely used not only to explore the barriers and drivers of the mobility gap but to measure the impact of ISM also. According to Roy et al., 2022, there is still room for improvement related to panel studies that would support a better understanding of the antecedents of ISM.

In terms of the research population, there are two main target groups: (1) active **university students** who are currently studying at universities with no intention of or planning to study abroad, or who have already participated in a mobility period, moreover (2) **graduates** who have completed their studies, therefore, the barriers and drivers of ISM can be retrospectively examined. In terms of limitations, the body of entries presents various results regarding the explanatory power of individual-level factors and the differences between countries and variables. Therefore, the results of the scoping literature review should be treated with caution in terms of generalization to all national and university contexts.



To better understand the mobility gap, **three main implications can be drawn from the entries**. First, some studies have drawn attention to **the difference between objective and subjectively perceived obstacles** (Netz, 2015; Lörtz et al., 2016.; Vögtle, 2019). This distinction is often mentioned in relation to financial resources, cultural capital, and the role of social networks. According to Netz (2015), objective obstacles are externally identifiable student attributes like having children, and subjectively perceived obstacles refer to the extent to which students perceive certain aspects, like having children, as barriers to studying abroad. In essence, objective obstacles are tangible factors, whereas subjectively perceived obstacles involve how students interpret and view those factors in relation to their study abroad plans. Secondly, **decision-making** has been described as a **complex, multi-stage process** in which path students encounter a sequence of obstacles. Throughout the planning or formation of the intention to study abroad and realization steps, the combined effect of various factors leads to participation in ISM. Thirdly, in recent decades, the lack of relevant studies on the role of institutional settings has highlighted the importance of the need to examine not only individual but also **university characteristics** as possible causes of unequal mobility uptake (Van Mol, 2017; Schnepf et al., 2020; Schnepf et al., 2022). Recently, Schnepf et al., 2022. – which based on four countries' comparative analysis – noted that except for the UK, not even half of the gap in mobility uptake is accounted for by individual variables in the countries (Germany, Hungary, and Italy) included in the studies (Schnepf et al., 2022). The authors explain that the low explanatory power of individual-level factors (gender, age, etc.) derives partly from the importance of the students' university context.

Roy et al., 2022 conducted a systematic literature review on the personal and contextual antecedents of short-term international mobility programmes. In their study, they identified the following personal antecedents: the student's family socioeconomic status, the student's family's education, previous mobility experience, personality traits, personal motivation, and goals, moreover, other personal antecedents. For defining the groups of relevant factors, our review also built on the five groups of 'causes' of unequal mobility uptake in the US context explained by Simon and Ainsworth (2012) and cited by Waters, 2023. The groups of causes are as follows: financial; habitus; social networks; cultural capital; and institutional factors.

In this review, the dominant individual-level factors are categorised into the following five themes. The **demographic and socio-economic factors** (1) are well developed in the studies and have been actively researched for a long time. The exploration of **cost-related factors, financial barriers** (2) as a cause that also explains the mobility gap and is not entirely independent of socio-economic factors, is also a widely discussed topic. The role of **social networks** (e.g. family, friendship and other communities), **cultural and mobility capital** (e.g. language skills, previous mobility experiences) are also key themes in the contributions (3-4). **Psychological factors** (e.g. motivation, personality traits, personal and skills development, multicultural effectiveness) also influence students' planning and realisation of study abroad (5). Related to this factor, benefit considerations are widely used term that discusses the positive impact of ISM on personality development.

**Table 2. Individual-level factors studied in the relevant entries**

Main groups of Individual-level factors	Factors studied in the literature	Authors
Demographic and socio-economic factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents' educational attainment</li> </ul>	Netz, 2015



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' labor market position</li> <li>• Students' gender</li> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Educational background (performance-related factors), and</li> <li>• Urban-rural aspect</li> </ul>	Lörz et al., 2016 Van Mol, 2017 Sin et al., 2017 Samuk et al., 2019. Brecko et al., 2020 Netz et al., 2020 Zimmerman et al., 2021 Roy et al., 2022 Schnepf et al., 2022 DiPietro, 2022
<b>Cost-related factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indirect costs</li> <li>• Direct costs</li> <li>• Additional financial burden</li> <li>• Time loss</li> </ul>	Netz, 2015 Lörz et al., 2016 Launikari et al., 2020 Samuk et al., 2019
<b>Social networks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family – having minor child(ren), strong relationship with parents</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	Netz, 2015 Lörz et al., 2016 Launikari et al., 2020
<b>Cultural and mobility capital</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign language skills</li> <li>• Previous mobility experiences – mobility capital</li> <li>• Other cultural resources</li> </ul>	Netz, 2015 Lörz et al., 2016 Zimmerman et al., 2021 Roy et al., 2022 Waters, 2023
<b>Psychological factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation (personal development, learning new cultures e.g.),</li> </ul>	Beerens et al., 2016 Lörz et al., 2016 Zimmermann et al., 2021



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multicultural effectiveness</li> <li>• Personality traits and</li> <li>• Skills and competencies,</li> </ul>	Roy et al., 2022
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### Demographic and socio-economic factors

Traditionally, studies exploring the barriers and drivers of ISM have looked at the role of demographics and the socio-economic status of students. In the mid-2010s, landmark studies were published that focused on the possible reasons and drivers for the low rate of ISM (Netz, 2015; Lörz et al., 2016). A number of studies have found that **demographic and socio-economic factors play a significant role in the realisation of study abroad**; students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to participate in ISM than better-off students (Lörz et al., 2016). Zimmermann et al. (2021) discuss the literature that has explored the differences between mobile and non-mobile students in the light of demographic characteristics. Among the demographic characteristics – based on relevant studies published between 2011 and 2017 – Zimmermann et al. (2021) referred to age, gender, educational background, cultural background and previous international mobility experience. In line with the relevant studies, the scoping literature review discusses **parents' educational attainment, students' gender, age, educational background and urban-rural aspect** as demographic and socio-economic factors.

Some entries discussed in this review do not give a clear the definition of the socio-economic status. The entries that specify the socio-economic background apply to the parent's educational attainment and/or parents' labor market position. According to Schnepf et al. (2022), **advantaged students are defined as those having at least one parent with a tertiary degree, and disadvantaged students are those whose parents did not complete higher education studies**. Cited by Roy et al., 2022, Wiers-Jenssen (2011) found parental education of the mobile student group was higher than the non-mobile group among Norwegian students. Brecko et al. (2020) also confirm that the majority of students studying abroad come from privileged backgrounds which is defined by parents' educational and professional background. They explain that students whose parent was a manager, professional, or technician, and at least one parent with a higher education qualification, moreover their parents' income status was at or above the average income in their country are most likely to study abroad. According to Roy et al. (2022), **a large number of studies have found a positive correlation between the student's socio-economic status and mobility participation**. Schnepf et al. (2022) found that in all four countries studied (Hungary, UK, Italy and Germany) **the differences in mobility participation between advantaged and disadvantaged students are large**. Lörz et al. (2016) applied the term "*students from underprivileged families*", and they underlined that in Germany these students less often intend to study abroad. However, Cairns (2015) discussed that "*familial affluence as an explanation of mobility may be inadequate, as a functioning mobility habitus needs more than a financial resource; a position of relative comfort can even inhibit movement*".

In terms of demographics, other factors also play a key role in participation in ISM (e.g. age, gender, area of residence, educational background). With regard to **gender**, the results presented are unclear. Netz (2015) notes that the role of gender in the planning and realisation of study abroad remains





ambiguous and requires further research. Furthermore, some studies suggest that gender does not directly influence the likelihood of participating in ISM. Nevertheless, in many EU countries, the proportion of students studying abroad is slightly higher for women than for men. Netz et al. (2020) found that in Western countries the increase in the number of female students studying abroad is higher than that of their male counterparts. With regard to **age**, Netz (2015) - discussing the results of a comparative study of four countries (Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland) - confirmed that increasing age is negatively associated with the likelihood of planning and realising a period of study abroad. However, Sin et al. (2017) mentioned that the lack of maturity derived from students' young age could also increase the fear of participation in mobility. In terms of the **urban-rural aspect**, Samuk et al. (2019) noted that urban youth have a more positive orientation towards mobility and might be less deeply attached to local communities.

DiPietro (2022) discussed that in Italy having completed an upper secondary academic school (liceo) increases the probability of participating in study abroad programmes. Studying foreign languages is also associated with a higher likelihood of participating in study abroad programmes. Similarly, Lötzt et al. (2016) started to explore the role of performance-related factors. Besides these factors, they examined the school grade, the probability of success, and skills in foreign languages. In terms of these factors, the authors found that *"students with a better final school grade, those who assess their chances of successfully completing higher education more positively, and those with better skills in foreign languages have a higher probability of intending to study abroad. The performance-related differences between students from academic and non-academic families can explain a substantial part of the discrepancy in the intention to study abroad"* (Lötzt et al., 2016).

Zimmermann et al. (2021) highlighted the role of the **combined effect of various factors** and concluded that students who are younger, female, without a migration background, and whose parents have attained higher educational degrees were more likely to engage in ISM. Netz et al., 2015 highlighted that the student groups (such as older students with a non-academic background as well as familial and work-related obligations) that face **multiple disadvantages encounter various obstacles** to studying abroad.

### Cost-related factors

Exploring financial barriers is also a key theme in the relevant entries. According to Eurostudent 2018, the top three reasons for not participating in a mobility period were **additional financial burden** (62% of respondents), separation from family and friends (47%) and loss of paid employment (35%) (Eurostudent, 2018 cited by Launikari et al., 2020). The data show that the financial burden, the lack of financial resources, is considered the most important barrier to participation in ISM. Regarding financial costs, studies distinguish between direct and indirect costs. **Direct costs** include housing, travel, subsistence and tuition fees (Samuk et al., 2019). It is also important to note that in some countries, students who work during their studies may also face direct costs. The most commonly discussed **indirect costs** are delayed study progress and postponed (full) entry into the labour market. According to Lörz et al. (2016), students who are concerned about financial burdens and time loss are less likely to intend to study abroad. Moreover, students facing high social costs are also less likely to plan to study abroad.

Netz (2015) – in a complex comparative study – examined three main variables alongside other factors: **expected additional financial burden, expected delay in study progress and higher self-**



**earned income.** The results showed that low-income students are more likely to plan to study abroad in all countries, while high-income students are not deterred from studying abroad until their income reaches a certain level. Concerns about delaying progress have a negative impact on study abroad plans in all countries except Switzerland. Concerns about the actual financial investment in studying abroad only affect plans in Germany and Switzerland. Low-income students are more likely to plan to study abroad in all countries, while high-income students tend to be deterred from studying abroad only when their income reaches a certain level. Concerns about delaying progress have a negative impact on study abroad plans in all countries except Switzerland. However, concerns about the actual financial investment in studying abroad only affect plans in Germany and Switzerland. The study suggests further research on funding opportunities for international study mobility in different countries to better understand students' financial considerations (Netz, 2015).

### Social networks

The role of **social networks** is also important in planning and decision making. **Separation from family** is often identified as a social cost of ISM (Netz, 2015; Lörz et al., 2016). As mentioned above, almost half of European students experienced the difficulty of separation from family and friends (Eurostudent, 2018 cited by Launikari et al., 2020). As it is not easy for many students to move away from social relationships, these factors are often defined as social costs of ISM. **Strong ties with close family members** contribute to the need to stay at home due to interdependence. Netz (2015) confirms that both **being responsible for minor children and living with parents** are negatively associated with having studied abroad in all countries surveyed.

### Cultural and mobility capital

According to Waters (2023), **cultural capital** refers to various cultural resources (including artefacts such as books and technology, and 'know-how', and is strongly linked to social capital) that make it more likely that a student will be able to study abroad. **Adequate, sufficient language skills** are a form of cultural capital that is essential in the planning and decision-making stages of ISM, and without proficiency in the national language of the host country, students may feel more vulnerable. The significant relationship between sufficient language skills and willingness to participate in ISM was demonstrated in early research (Roy et al., 2022). Over the last decades, this issue has been a recurring question in several large-scale European surveys (e.g. Eurostudent).

According to Roy et al. (2022), a student's **interest in languages or knowledge of a second language** has been identified in some academic work as a precursor to undertaking mobility. Kim, Goldstein & Randi (2006) - cited by Roy et al., 2022 - identified variables in their longitudinal study that predicted participation in mobility programmes, such as interest in a foreign language. Cited by Roy et al., 2022, Ballatore & Ferede (2013) found significant relationships between Erasmus participation and previous language study abroad - more Erasmus students had previously taken at least one language course abroad.

In terms of regional or country-specific patterns, according to Netz (2015), the disposition to study abroad (foreign language skills perceived as insufficient) was negatively associated with plans to study abroad in all countries (Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands) except Austria. Furthermore, **previous international mobility** experiences have repeatedly been shown to increase the potential to move abroad (Zimmerman et al., 2021). Roy et al. (2022) found in their systematic literature review,





that travel or mobility undertaken before university, previous international travel experience, and prior mobility experience of siblings and peers at university act as antecedents encouraging to undertake short-term mobility.

### Psychological factors

Among the **psychological factors**, the entries focused on personality characteristics such as motivation, personality traits, and related skills and competencies. Among **motivational factors**, the studies show the importance of external factors as well, for instance, academic learning, other skills development, employability enhancement, and personal development. Key motivations are considered gaining intercultural skills and personal development and increasing competitiveness in the labour market (Beerkens et al., 2016). Doyle and al. (2010) cited by Roy et al. (2022) found that learning about other cultures, being outside of one's comfort zone, personal growth, and building international networks are antecedents to short-term mobility participation. Studies from Erasmus data over a decade have consistently revealed the role of individual motivation in seeking new experiences as an antecedent to mobility participation. Students who plan to study abroad have **personality characteristics**, like a high motivation or self-efficacy, that also make them more likely to get a student job. Nevertheless, Roy et al. (2022) urgently more studies to research the motivation among students at a time when they are to make such a decision.

Zimmermann et al. (2021) presented their findings on the differences in **multicultural effectiveness** between mobile and non-mobile students. Multicultural effectiveness is an umbrella concept, under which the study focused on three aspects: multicultural self-efficacy, metacognitive intercultural competence, and intergroup anxiety. The research examined three main groups of students: control students with no mobility plans, present sojourners who engaged in ISM, and future sojourners who had concrete mobility plans. Their main results revealed that students with immediate (present sojourners) and delayed (future sojourners) plans to study abroad have higher levels of multicultural self-efficacy and metacognitive intercultural competence, and lower levels of intergroup anxiety compared to control students (students with no mobility plan). Importantly, there were no significant differences in these variables between present and future sojourners, suggesting that these effects are not due to short-term anticipation before departure but rather reflect stable individual differences between students who plan to study abroad and those who do not (Zimmermann et al., 2021).



## Conclusions

Inclusion is a key priority of the Erasmus+ programme for 2021–2027, yet only 8% of higher education learners participating in mobility are categorized as having fewer opportunities, raising questions about equitable representation. The **Erasmus GAP project addresses this disparity by providing data, tools, and strategies** to help higher education institutions (HEIs) identify and overcome barriers to mobility for underrepresented groups. By conducting a systematic literature review and analyzing large-scale data, the **project seeks to support HEIs and policymakers in fostering inclusive international student mobility (ISM)** and contributing to broader debates on inclusion, cohesion, and Erasmus+ funding.

33

The literature review highlights multiple factors influencing ISM participation across macro-, meso- and micro-levels. **Macro-level factors** include global trends like globalization and internationalization of higher education, while crises like the pandemic have spurred alternatives such as virtual exchanges. At the **institutional level**, factors such as resources, international partnerships, and strategic internationalisation efforts significantly influence mobility opportunities. Mobility-friendly curricula, inclusive selection criteria, and strong support systems – including financial aid and academic preparation – are essential for fostering accessibility. Academic culture also plays a role, with institutions that embed mobility as an integral part of the student trajectory. However, institutional factors may also impose constraints that hinder the participation in ISM. At the **individual level**, socio-economic background, cultural or mobility capital, psychological traits, and financial barriers significantly impact student participation. By addressing these barriers and enhancing support structures, the Erasmus GAP project aims to make ISM more accessible and effective in preparing students for globalized academic and professional landscapes.

In conclusion, understanding the **gap between mobile and non-mobile students** is a **highly complex issue** that extends beyond individual-level factors. While these factors are important, **institutional-level dynamics as well as global, regional and national trends** are equally **crucial** in shaping students' participation in international mobility. To fully grasp and address this gap, more research is needed to **explore how institutions perceive and respond to these disparities**, as well as to **identify best practices** that can help reduce barriers and promote more equitable access to international student mobility. The next phase of the research specifically addresses this issue.

The barriers to student mobility are **multifaceted and context-related**, arising not only from the characteristics of the student population but also from the operational structures of higher education institutions themselves. These barriers manifest as **gaps in accessibility and inclusivity** when institutional responses fail to adequately address individual-level factors such as socio-economic status, cultural capital, and psychological readiness. By failing to recognize or adapt to these dimensions, **universities inadvertently widen the mobility gap, limiting opportunities for students from underrepresented backgrounds** to participate in study abroad programmes. The findings underscore **the critical need for a systemic and inclusive approach** in the design and implementation of mobility initiatives, one that bridges institutional frameworks with the diverse needs of students.



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