

Roadmap for Learning during an



International Student Lifecycle



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Introduction

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About this roadmap

The Erasmus Careers project builds on the fact that international student mobility enhances employability by fostering key competences that are valued in the labour market. While the Erasmus Impact Studies (2014 and 2019) confirm the positive correlation between mobility and employability, students must reflect on their experiences to maximise the possible career benefits. To support this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a crucial role in guiding students through their learning journey before, during, and after mobility, ensuring that they can identify, articulate, and leverage the skills gained abroad.

This project has been developed by the following organisations: Erasmus Student Network (ESN), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), Expertise in Labour Mobility (ELM), The Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL), Tilburg University (TiU), and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM).

Erasmus Careers aims to achieve several specific objectives: identifying the skills students and trainees acquire during their time abroad; gaining a better understanding of the learning process throughout the International Student Lifecycle; enhancing employers' recognition of the skills gained by students during their mobility; helping students understand and acknowledge the impact of international mobility on their career paths; and ensuring that the competences gained abroad are recognised and integrated into education policies.

This document presents a comprehensive analysis of student learning in mobility, culminating in a roadmap designed to guide HEIs in enhancing their support mechanisms. The extensive research, institutional collaboration, and stakeholder engagement done here is aimed at improving how HEIs facilitate student learning and skill development during international mobility. The framework outlined in this document is based on the International Student Lifecycle (ISL) model, which divides mobility into five key stages: Pre-Arrival, On-Arrival, During Stay, Pre-Departure, and Re-Entry (Perez-Encinas, 2017). Each of these phases presents unique challenges and opportunities, requiring tailored support systems that address students' academic, cultural, and professional needs.

The research and conclusions presented in this document align with the objectives of the Erasmus Careers project. This initiative also contributes to key European Union priorities such

as bolstering the EU's competitiveness, promoting an innovation- and business-friendly environment, and upholding European values within the EU while advancing together. Through this collaborative effort, we aim to provide HEIs with the tools necessary to create a more structured, supportive, and impactful mobility experience for students across Europe and beyond.

From 22nd to 24th November 2023, the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM) hosted a staff training event as part of the Erasmus Careers project, aimed at enhancing university staff capacity to support mobile students' learning through the competence framework and roadmap. The event also sought feedback to ensure the roadmap's relevance for the broader Higher Education sector. The training successfully contributed to refining the roadmap, enhancing institutional capacities, and promoting career readiness through structured support mechanisms for mobile students across Europe.



Literature review



- **Assessing your skills:** Use the tool to identify competences gained through your mobility and how they contribute to your career path.



- **Tracking your growth:** Visualise your progress with dynamic spider charts that highlight your strengths and areas for development.



- **Boosting your competences:** Access tailored resources like videos, blogs, and handbooks designed to help you grow in key areas like adaptability, intercultural communication, and critical thinking.

- **Standing out to recruiters:** Articulate your international experience with confidence, showing employers the unique value you bring.

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Cultural Adaptation during International Student Mobility: The W-Curve model

The W-Curve model, first proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn in 1963, has become an important framework for understanding the emotional and psychological stages experienced by students transitioning to college life. Originally, it was developed to explain culture shock in international settings, the model was then later applied to first-year college students, offering insights into their adjustment process. The W-Curve expands on Lysgaard's 1955 U-curve hypothesis, which described a pattern of initial euphoria, followed by a period of depression and frustration, and finally, adaptation to a new culture.

Gullahorn and Gullahorn's W-Curve model identifies five distinct stages that students typically experience: the Honeymoon phase, Culture Shock, Initial Adjustment, Mental Isolation, and Acceptance and Integration. The Honeymoon phase is characterised by excitement and positive anticipation as students embark on their college journey. This is followed by Culture Shock, where the reality of college life sets in, often accompanied by feelings of isolation and confusion. The Initial Adjustment phase sees students beginning to adapt to their new environment, while Mental Isolation occurs when students feel caught between their college and home lives. Finally, Acceptance and Integration mark the stage where students feel truly connected to their college community.

The W-Curve model is used to understand the experiences of international students, who often face more intense challenges due to additional cultural and linguistic barriers. However, it's important to note that the model has faced criticism for over-generalisation, as not all individuals necessarily experience these stages in the same order or intensity. Despite these limitations, the W-Curve remains a widely recognised and utilised framework in higher education, helping both institutions and students navigate the process of college adjustment.

Acculturation theory offers a valuable framework for examining how international students adapt to new cultural settings. Berry's (1997) model outlines four possible strategies individuals may use in this process: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

Studies have found that those who engage in integration—blending aspects of the host culture with their own—tend to experience lower stress levels and adjust more successfully than individuals who adopt the other three strategies (Berry et al., 2006). Additionally, cultural adaptation can be analyzed through a bi-dimensional perspective, which distinguishes between psychological adjustment—emotional factors like self-esteem and overall wellbeing—and sociocultural adjustment, which involves behavioral skills needed to navigate daily life in a different cultural environment (Ward et al., 2001)

Chambers & Paull (2008) designed a Student lifecycle according to different services that are carried out in HEIs, following eleven phases that match with possible interactions with university staff. They are as follows: Pre-application; Application; Pre-registration; Registration; Induction; Teaching and Learning; Pastoral Care; Employability and Careers Services; Graduation; Alumni; and Post-graduation marketing. This lifecycle is not directly related to International Students, nor does it take into account students' psychological-social needs, however, it does match with support measures that international students need from International Relations Offices.

Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda (2018) and Perez-Encinas et. al. (2017) proposed a new International Student Lifecycle, based on Kelo et al.'s (2010) three-fold cycle, adding a fourth stage. The stages are: Pre-Arrival, Arrival, During Mobility, and — the added one — (Re)integration after mobility. While Kelo et al. (2010) identify the stages as pre-arrival services, services provided on arrival, and services during the period abroad, Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda (2018) argue that a fourth stage is essential to capture the complete mobility experience. This (Re)integration stage addresses two aspects: reintegration into the home country and comprehensive integration into the host university and country for those seeking employment or establishing a life after their study period. Despite its importance, this stage is often neglected in the literature, yet it deserves equal attention due to its relevance in ensuring a successful and impactful mobility experience (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018). This continues to lead to it being the highest level of dissatisfaction reported by students participating in a mobility experience (Erasmus Student Network, 2022).

Lu, Tamayo-Verleene, Søderberg, Puffer, and Meschke (2024) found that while English proficiency, host country language skills, and intercultural competence do not directly influence international student satisfaction, their effects are fully mediated by cultural

adjustment; moreover, social support contributes both directly and indirectly to student satisfaction through its impact on cultural adjustment. The ability to navigate and adapt to the host culture serves as the crucial mechanism by which language skills and intercultural competence enhance the international student experience. Additionally, social support was found to have a dual role: it not only directly improves students' satisfaction but also indirectly contributes by facilitating more effective cultural adjustment. These results underscore the central importance of cultural adaptation as a pathway through which various individual and contextual factors influence international student satisfaction (Lu, Tamayo-Verleene, Søderberg, Puffer, & Meschke, 2024). Cultural adjustment remains an important component of international students' lifecycles.

As models of the international student experience continue to evolve, it becomes essential to assess their relevance and applicability in contemporary higher education. While the W-Curve model and various student lifecycle frameworks have provided valuable insights into the adjustment and support needs of mobile students, the dynamic nature of international education requires ongoing evaluation.

The Impact on Teaching and Learning during the International Student Lifecycle

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, increased attention has been given to the mental health of students enrolled in Higher Education (European Commission, 2022). Li et al. point out that (2024) that there is an increase in institutions offering psychological services to students, adopting various methods to provide psychological counseling to college students, and carrying out targeted prevention and treatment of psychological problems and mental illnesses. However, beyond the additional services offered, it is important to reflect on how a student's time is distributed among study, work and social life, with several research studies addressing that the mental health of students can impact their academic performance and lifestyle (Rohde et al., 2023). In research since executed in Spain, Italy and Portugal in the post-COVID-19 era, large numbers of students reported mental health and well-being; with more anxiety reported by 50%, which led to an increase in academic stress and students report overcommitment levels towards education activities, indicating that not all efforts placed in academic activities were effectively rewarded, with a lower shares of students having confidence in their professional future (Bersia, et al., 2024). International students also reported being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting an increase in feelings of anxiety and social exclusion. (Gabriels et al., 2020), as well as lower satisfaction with social life and interactions with academics and fellow students (Erasmus Student Network, 2022).

The reports of persistent mental health issues beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and how these impact their academic performance and assessment of their future prospects indicate a need to reflect beyond offered support by Higher Education Institutions' services and into the adaptations of teaching and learning methodologies to ensure that correct educational methodologies are applied within the different stages of mobility.

Research has consistently demonstrated that international student mobility fosters a wide range of developmental gains, particularly in academic, cultural, personal, and employability domains (Perez-Encinas et al., 2023). These gains reflect the multifaceted learning that occurs

beyond formal classroom settings, aligning closely with the principles of **non-formal education**. Non-formal learning, often defined as intentional and structured learning that occurs outside traditional curricula, places significant emphasis on the learner's active engagement and experiential context (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; European Commission, 2015). In the context of mobility, students acquire competences such as intercultural awareness, adaptability, communication in diverse settings, and increased self-confidence—competences that are often not explicitly taught but rather developed through immersive experiences (Perez-Encinas et al., 2023).

Trentin (2014) introduces a useful model that highlights how learning takes place at the intersection of different environments—**formal, non-formal, and informal learning**—and the learner's degree of **intentionality**, meaning whether the learning is planned or happens by chance. This perspective is especially relevant in the context of international student mobility, where learning is not limited to classroom settings. While formal learning involves structured academic instruction, non-formal learning might occur in organized workshops, language exchanges, or intercultural training sessions. Informal learning, on the other hand, often happens spontaneously through everyday experiences, such as navigating a new city, interacting with locals, or adapting to unfamiliar social norms. Trentin's model also draws attention to the idea that learning can be both **intentional**, as in pursuing a specific academic or personal goal, and **incidental**, where students acquire new skills or insights without setting out to do so. By recognizing how these different types of learning and intentions overlap, the model encourages a more holistic understanding of the international student experience—one that values not only academic achievement but also personal growth, cultural awareness, and social adaptation.

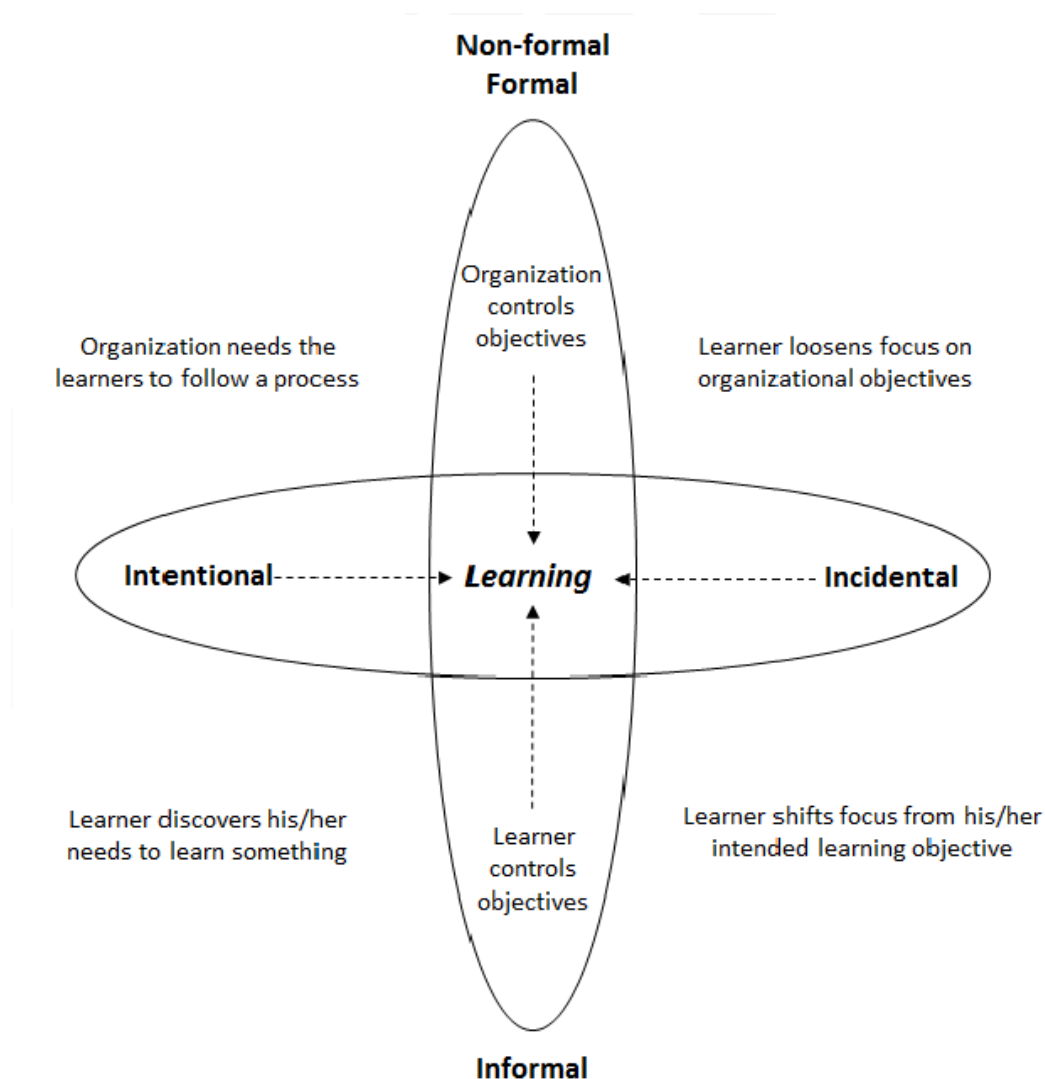


Figure 1 - The learning process as a result of the intersection of formal, non-formal and informal learning on the one hand, and incidental and intentional learning on the other. Trentin, Guglielmo. (2014).

The Erasmus Careers project further emphasizes that these competences, though developed informally or non-formally, have tangible implications for students' future employability and global citizenship, particularly when properly identified, supported, and recognized by institutions.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), developed by David Kolb (1984), provides a powerful lens through which to understand the learning that takes place during international student mobility. According to ELT, learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the

transformation of experience. This theory is particularly relevant to mobility programs, where students are placed in unfamiliar environments that require them to actively engage with new cultural, academic, and social contexts.

Kolb's model is structured around a four-stage cycle of learning:

1. **Concrete Experience (CE)** – students encounter new situations abroad, such as living in a different country, participating in local customs, or engaging in unfamiliar academic systems.
2. **Reflective Observation (RO)** – learners step back from these experiences to reflect on what occurred and how it made them feel or think.
3. **Abstract Conceptualization (AC)** – they then begin to make sense of the experience, forming new ideas, strategies, or modifying previous assumptions.
4. **Active Experimentation (AE)** – finally, learners apply these insights in future interactions or challenges, testing new behaviors and deepening their understanding.

In international mobility, this cycle is continuously activated. For example, a student who struggles with intercultural communication at the beginning of their exchange may reflect on those difficulties, seek to understand cultural differences, and then try new approaches to build relationships more effectively. Over time, this iterative process leads to the development of key transversal competences such as intercultural sensitivity, adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving—competences that are often considered essential for employability and global citizenship (Perez-Encinas et al., 2023).

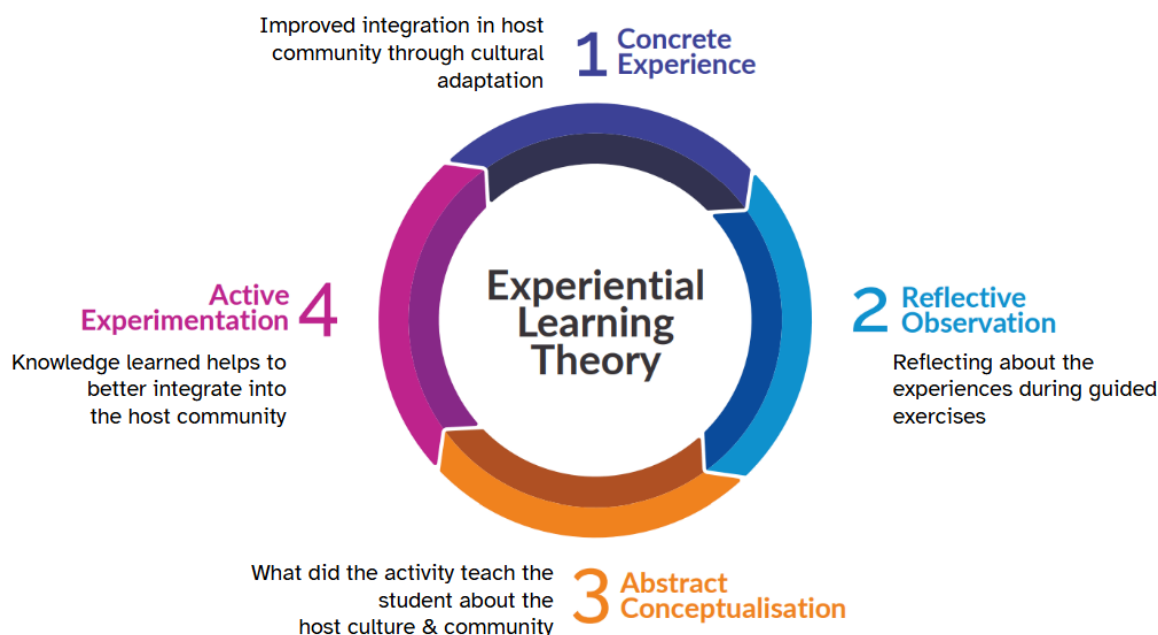


Figure 2 - the Experiential Learning Theory applied to International Student Mobility - Kolb (1984, 2009)

In increasingly diverse and globalized learning environments, recognizing individual differences in how students acquire knowledge has become essential. Adaptive learning frameworks, grounded in constructivist theories of education (Vygotsky, 1978), advocate for personalized instructional strategies that respond dynamically to the learner's pace, preferences, and prior knowledge. This approach is especially relevant in international or large-scale educational settings where students come from varied cultural and educational backgrounds. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) offers a foundational model that highlights four distinct learning styles—Divergers, Assimilators, Convergers, and Accommodators—based on how individuals perceive and process experiences. Learners may prefer to observe and reflect (Observers/Thinkers), engage in abstract reasoning (Theorists), act and experiment (Doers), or explore solutions independently (Explorers). Traditional instruction often privileges reflective or theoretical learning styles, potentially marginalizing those who thrive through action or self-directed exploration (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Honey and Mumford (1986) extended this idea by classifying learners as Activists, Reflectors, Theorists, or Pragmatists, further emphasizing the importance of designing learning journeys that accommodate these varied approaches. Adaptive learning technologies and pedagogies, when

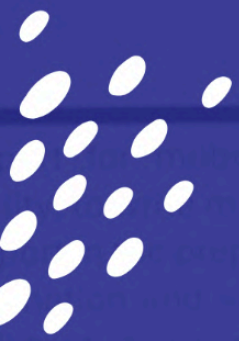
designed with these styles in mind, can create inclusive and effective learning experiences that support broader learner engagement, retention, and outcomes.

Tinto's Model of Student Integration (1975, 1993) emphasizes that students are more likely to persist and succeed when they are integrated both academically and socially within their institution. This is particularly crucial for international students who may face linguistic barriers, cultural isolation, or unfamiliar academic norms. Finally, **Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory** (1985) brings attention to the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—highlighting the importance of empowering international students to take ownership of their learning while feeling supported and included.

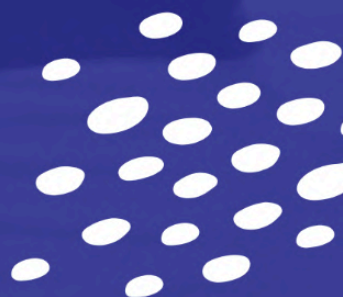
Complementing this, **Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory** (1991) recognizes the deep, often identity-shifting impact of intercultural encounters. When international students are encouraged to reflect critically on their experiences, they often undergo transformative learning that reshapes their worldview, values, and self-perception.

From a broader developmental perspective, **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** (1979) offers a multilayered view of the student experience by situating the learner within nested environmental systems—from immediate interpersonal relationships to broader societal and policy contexts. This theory helps institutions recognize that international student success is influenced not only by the classroom environment but also by institutional structures, visa policies, housing, and local community inclusion. Understanding the needs of international students requires a theoretical lens that acknowledges their complex transitions across academic, social, and cultural dimensions. To fully address the experiences of international students, it is critical to consider their human needs as foundational to academic engagement and personal development.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1954) provides a widely recognized framework for understanding these needs, ranging from basic physiological and safety concerns to higher-order needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. For international students, unmet needs at the lower levels—such as housing, health, or financial stability—can significantly hinder their ability to engage with academic content or form meaningful social connections.



Methodology



This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of the applicability of the W-Curve model within the International Student Lifecycle. The research is primarily descriptive and analytical, aiming to identify patterns, trends, and emotional stages experienced by mobile students during their international experience. This approach allows for the triangulation of findings from different data sources to strengthen the validity of the results.

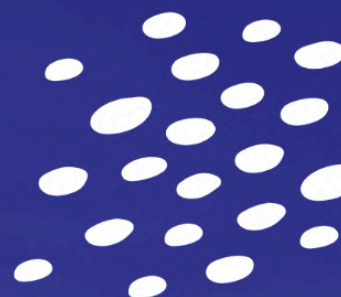
The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the W-Curve model (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), which identifies five emotional and psychological stages experienced during cultural transitions: Honeymoon, Culture Shock, Initial Adjustment, Mental Isolation, and Acceptance and Integration. Additionally, the analysis is guided by the International Student Lifecycle model (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018), which offers a structured framework for understanding institutional support systems throughout the mobility experience. Data was gathered from four main sources: the XV ESNsurvey, the Erasmus Careers Focus Group, the Institutional Survey, and the Bibliometric Analysis (see Annexes I and II). The use of diverse data sources allows for a triangulation of findings, increasing the robustness and validity of the analysis.

Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring participants' anonymity and privacy, particularly concerning qualitative data collection through focus groups. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. As the research focuses on experiences rather than personal or sensitive information, minimal risk was associated with participation.

This methodology has certain limitations. The XV ESNsurvey may contain selection bias, as students with particularly positive or negative experiences may be more likely to respond. Furthermore, the qualitative data may be subject to researcher bias during interpretation. Efforts were made to mitigate these issues by employing triangulation, peer debriefing, and cross-referencing findings from different data sources. Future research should emphasise the first climb of the W-curve, as there is still a need for data on this.



Results



Bibliometric Analysis

International student mobility has become a key aspect of higher education in Europe, offering students opportunities for personal, academic, and professional growth. However, ensuring that students fully benefit from these experiences requires understanding the learning processes they undergo and the institutional support available to them. The desk research conducted by the Erasmus Careers consortium analysed existing literature on the learning development of mobile students and the international student lifecycle, with a particular focus on the role of universities in supporting their learning experiences. This research was used to support the roadmap for learning during an International Student Lifecycle.

The study was structured into two phases:

Bibliometric Analysis: A statistical review of scientific publications related to learning outcomes and institutional services during international student mobility. This analysis helps identify key trends, major contributors, and thematic clusters in the field (See Annex I for the full bibliometric analysis by Perez-Encinas et. al., 2024).

Content Analysis: A deeper examination of selected publications to determine which aspects of learning and student support services are most critical across different phases of the student mobility experience.

This research aimed to provide a strong foundation for designing a structured roadmap that ensures universities can offer the right support to students at every stage of their mobility experience. The findings serve as a guide for both institutions and students, helping them navigate international mobility more effectively and maximise learning outcomes.

Institutional Support and Student Lifecycle

The analysis followed the International Student Lifecycle Model, identifying support services across five phases:

1. **Pre-arrival:** The preparation phase is critical for setting expectations and ensuring students are equipped for their mobility experience. Institutional support at this stage is aimed at providing practical information, pre-departure briefings, and language preparation. Some studies highlight the importance of orientation meetings, access to

student networks, and psychological readiness for cultural adaptation. However, the research indicates that such services are often limited or inconsistent across universities.

2. **On Arrival:** This phase is crucial for ensuring a smooth transition into the new academic and cultural environment. Surprisingly, none of the studies explicitly detail the support services provided upon arrival (Jacobson & Moro, 2009). However, informal learning opportunities, such as peer mentoring and welcome programmes, are often provided by student organisations and host universities.
3. **During Mobility:** Institutional support during the study period primarily comes from the host institution, with services such as academic mentoring, language courses, and cultural integration activities. However, there is a notable lack of engagement from the home institution during this period. The research suggests that maintaining a connection with students while abroad could enhance their sense of belonging and encourage reflection on their learning progress.
4. **Pre-departure:** The transition back home is a critical but often overlooked phase. Few studies mention services provided before departure from the host institution, despite its importance in ensuring a smooth re-integration process. Support at this stage could include guidance on finalising academic requirements, preparing for reverse culture shock, and career-oriented reflections.
5. **Re-entry:** The final phase is crucial for consolidating the learning and skills gained during mobility. More than half of the studies reviewed mention this stage, but there is little evidence of structured institutional support for returning students. Re-entry challenges include difficulties readjusting to home institutions, lack of recognition of newly acquired skills, and the need for career guidance. Universities could play a greater role in helping students leverage their international experience for employability and continued personal development.

Overall, the findings indicate significant gaps in institutional support throughout the international student lifecycle, particularly in the pre-arrival, during-mobility (from the home institution), and re-entry stages. Addressing these gaps through structured support mechanisms will enhance the overall effectiveness of international student mobility.

The increasing relevance of international student mobility in higher education is reflected in the growing number of scientific publications on the topic. However, this field of research remains fragmented, with relatively low levels of collaboration among institutions and scholars. While the focus on competence development and student learning outcomes is well-documented, there are still significant gaps in understanding how institutional services shape student experiences.

The research highlights several key findings, such as the need for structured institutional support. Many students struggle with various phases of mobility due to insufficient guidance and resources. Universities must adopt a more proactive approach in providing structured services that cover all phases of the student lifecycle.

Although the return phase is frequently mentioned in the literature, re-entry remains a major challenge and concrete institutional initiatives to support students after mobility are lacking. This gap limits students' ability to capitalise on their experiences for personal and professional growth.

Home institutions should maintain engagement during mobility because many students feel disconnected from their home universities while abroad, which may hinder their academic continuity and emotional well-being. Strengthening communication and academic support from home institutions can improve student experiences and outcomes.

Mobility for internships remains underexplored in comparison to credit mobility. More studies should examine how international work experiences influence skill acquisition, career pathways, and employability.

International student mobility has a demonstrable positive impact on students' learning and career prospects. However, to maximise these benefits, higher education institutions must adopt a more comprehensive and structured approach to supporting students throughout their mobility journey. Addressing the identified gaps will not only improve the student experience but also enhance the broader impact of mobility programmes on global education and workforce readiness.

Reflections on the International Student Lifecycle

This chapter presents the analysed data for assessing the experiences of international students, therefore establishing the W-Curve model and its manifestation across different stages of the International Student Lifecycle. To provide a comprehensive understanding of student mobility, three distinct data sources were used: the Institutional Survey, focusing on the institutional input; the XV ESNsurvey, and the Erasmus Careers focus groups, focusing on the input from international students. Each of these data sources provided valuable quantitative and qualitative insights into the experiences of mobile students, offering a multidimensional perspective on their academic, social, and personal development throughout their mobility journey.

The Institutional Survey by Perez-Encinas et. al. (2023) was designed to assess the services and support mechanisms provided by higher education institutions for mobile students throughout the various stages of the ISL. By identifying gaps in services and pinpointing effective practices, the Institutional Survey provided a foundation for understanding how institutional support can mitigate challenges faced by students and enhance their mobility experience, particularly about the W-Curve.

The XV ESNsurvey insights were instrumental in identifying common trends in student experiences and provided statistical evidence to support the applicability of the W-Curve model to the broader ISL framework. Specifically, the survey's findings on students' emotional and social experiences during their stay abroad were used to assess the stages of the W-curve.

To complement with qualitative data, the results from the Focus Group made by the Erasmus Career consortium emphasise the challenges students faced, the skills they developed, and their emotional well-being throughout their stay (Perez-Encinas et. al. 2023).

Together, these data sources allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how the stages of the W-Curve manifest in the real-life experiences of internationally mobile students. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of the impact of mobility on student well-being, cultural adaptation, and personal development.

The Institutional Survey (see Annex II for full survey report) was conducted to assess the services and support that higher education institutions provide to mobile students across different stages of the International Student Lifecycle (ISL). The survey targeted university representatives involved in internationalisation, including administrators and faculty members. It was distributed through social media and email campaigns, collecting 397 responses between 29 May and 18 July 2023. After removing incomplete and ineligible responses, 126 valid responses from 87 HEIs across 29 countries were analysed. Most responses came from European countries, with Romania, Spain, and Germany being the most represented. The majority of responses (87.3%) were from public institutions, followed by private (7.94%) and private-government-dependent institutions (4.76%).

The first section of the survey assessed how institutions support the development of 27 competences through mobility using a Likert scale. The results indicate that the most supported competences are language skills, communication skills, open-mindedness, intercultural sensitivity, and cultural awareness. These skills align with the common experiences of mobile students adapting to new cultural and linguistic environments. Conversely, competences such as time management, budget management, and entrepreneurship were found to receive the least support from institutions.

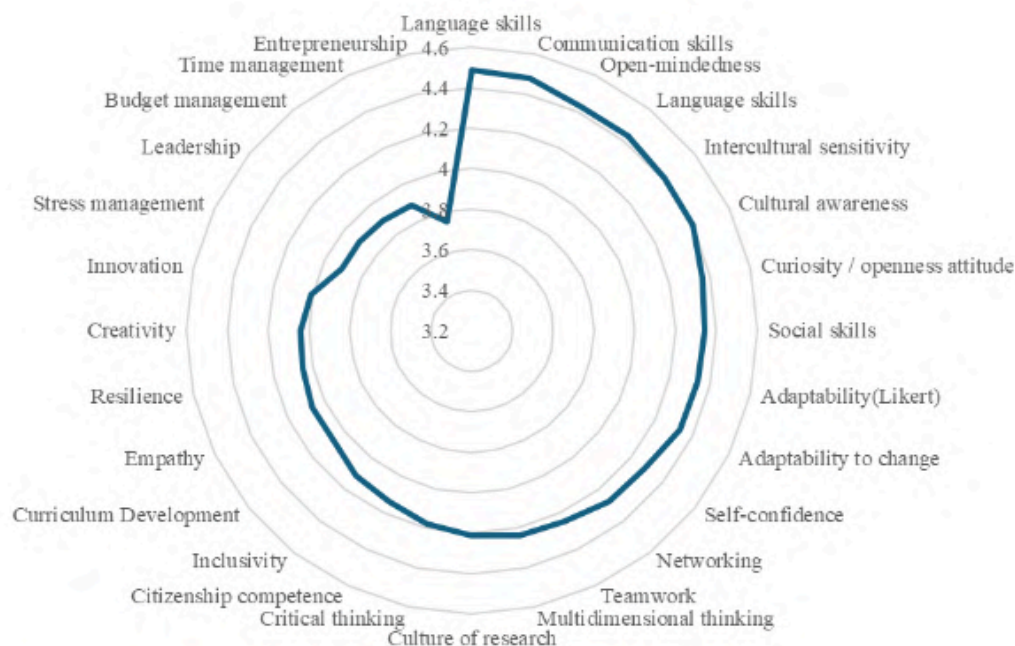


Figure 3: Support of competences through mobility in average (Erasmus Careers project consortium (2024) Institutional Survey Report, Annex II)

When analysing results by institution type, private institutions rated their support for competences higher than public and private-government-dependent institutions. While the top supported competences remained largely the same across institution types, private institutions placed greater emphasis on social skills, whereas public and private-government-dependent institutions prioritised intercultural sensitivity.

The survey examined the services provided to mobile students across five phases of the ISL: Pre-Arrival, On-Arrival, During Stay, Pre-Departure, and Re-Entry. Institutions were asked if they offer several services to incoming or outgoing students, as well as their perception of the satisfaction by students with the quality of the services provided, using again a Likert Scale, ranging from 1 – Very dissatisfied, 2 – Dissatisfied, 3 – Unsure, 4 – Satisfied to 5 – Very Satisfied.

Pre-Arrival: Services are more evenly distributed between incoming and outgoing students. Institutions provide support for accommodation, visa processes, and cultural information, but outgoing students receive more information on mobility opportunities and financial aid. Respondents perceived support in finding accommodation as the most valued service for

incoming students, whereas outgoing students prioritised information on mobility opportunities.

On-Arrival: More services are provided to incoming students than outgoing ones. Incoming students benefit from welcome meetings, transport information, and assistance with local authorities. For outgoing students, faculty communication support and obtaining insurance were rated highly.

During Stay: Most services target students at host institutions. The highest-rated services for incoming students were the library and IT support, while outgoing students valued assistance with faculty communication and linguistic support. However, services related to employment, such as help finding part-time jobs or career counselling, were rated with the lowest satisfaction rate.

Pre-Departure: The services that are offered only to outgoing students expand, in comparison with previous stages. Clear administrative requirements were highly rated by both student groups, but outgoing students placed greater value on internship and career opportunities.

Re-Entry: Services at this stage primarily focus on outgoing students returning to their home institutions. Recognition of ECTS credits and academic information were the most valued services. However, reintegration activities (e.g., "welcome back" events, and reverse culture shock seminars) were rated lower, indicating a gap in structured support for returning students.

Overall, HEIs reported a general satisfaction level of 4.2/5 for both incoming and outgoing students. However, the detailed responses suggest that incoming students receive more immediate support, while outgoing students have better access to career-related services towards the later stages of their mobility experience.

The survey explored institutional support for underrepresented groups and equal access for international students. Results indicate that HEIs provide targeted guidance primarily to students with disabilities and those from low-income backgrounds. However, support for other groups, including those facing social or educational barriers, was reported to be less comprehensive.

In terms of equity between international and local students, respondents reported high levels of access to academic facilities, social opportunities, and faculty interaction for international students. However, institutions showed slightly less commitment to addressing insensitive or discriminatory remarks toward international students.

Regarding teaching methods, most respondents agreed that mobility experiences enhance critical thinking and employ innovative digital learning approaches. However, engagement with local communities and the development of green skills were rated lower.

The survey assessed institutional communication with mobile students across different ISL stages. The findings indicate that communication is strongest at the beginning (Pre-Arrival and On-Arrival) but declines in later stages. Email and institutional websites are the most widely used methods, with in-person meetings playing a key role during On-Arrival. Social media, online meetings, and mentoring programmes are more relevant during the During Stay phase. Instant messaging services (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) are rarely used.

The digitalisation of services is strongest in the During Stay, On-Arrival, and Pre-Departure phases, likely due to the logistical needs of students abroad. Private institutions tend to offer more digital services compared to public institutions. Institutions that indicated room for further digitalisation suggested improvements in areas such as accommodation management, admissions, nomination processes, and training agreements.

The survey results provide valuable insights into the role of HEIs in supporting mobile students throughout their international experiences. **Key findings of the survey include (Erasmus Careers project consortium, 2024, Institutional Survey Report, Annex II):**

The most supported competences during mobility are related to **communication and cultural adaptation**, while entrepreneurship and financial management receive less attention.

Institutional support varies across ISL stages, with **Pre-Arrival** and **On-Arrival** receiving the most attention, while Re-Entry remains underdeveloped.

Institutions report **strong equity** in access for international students, but support for underrepresented groups remains uneven.

Digitalisation efforts are increasing, but there is room for further development in mobility-related services.

Career-related services, including career counselling and employment information, are among the least prioritised areas, suggesting a **gap in helping students transition from mobility to the job market**.

Institutions could **enhance structured reflection opportunities** for returning students to better integrate their learning and competence development.

Overall, the survey results reinforce the need for a structured roadmap that ensures comprehensive institutional support across all phases of the International Student Lifecycle. The insights gathered highlight the **importance of balancing academic, personal, and professional development services to maximise mobility outcomes**. Moving forward, aligning institutional strategies with student experiences will be essential to closing gaps in service provision, particularly in career guidance and re-entry support. The Erasmus Careers project used these findings to shape a roadmap that enhances student mobility experiences, ensuring stronger connections between HEIs, students, and the evolving demands of the labour market.

Students' reflections on the International Student Lifecycle

In the context of international student mobility, the applicability of the W-Curve model, as mentioned before, remains an open question. As Higher Education Institutions strive to enhance their support mechanisms for mobile students, understanding how students navigate the emotional and psychological aspects of their mobility journey is essential. However, as mobility experiences become more complex and intertwined with broader competences related to employability, social integration, and personal growth, it is crucial to reassess the validity of the W-Curve model in explaining these processes.

This chapter seeks to examine the presence and relevance of the W-Curve model within the International Student Lifecycle by analysing data from the XV ESNsurvey and the focus groups of the Erasmus Careers Competence frameworks in international student mobility report. By examining qualitative and quantitative insights directly from international students, the study aims to determine whether the emotional and psychological stages outlined by the W-Curve are still applicable to the experiences of mobile students today.

The XV ESNsurvey, published in 2024, is a large-scale research project conducted by the Erasmus Student Network aimed at exploring the experiences, challenges, and outcomes of internationally mobile students. With responses from over 20,000 participants across various European countries, it provided valuable insights into academic performance, cultural adaptation, social integration, and personal development during mobility. As one of the most comprehensive datasets on international student mobility in Europe, the XV ESNsurvey serves as a critical resource for assessing the applicability of the W-Curve model within the broader framework of the International Student Lifecycle.

To complement the analysis of the students' views, eight focus groups were organised across four countries—Belgium, Spain, Greece and the Netherlands—to gather qualitative insights from students and trainees regarding their mobility, which fed into the Competence framework in international student mobility of the Erasmus Careers project (Perez-Encinas, et. al. 2023). Participants, who had been abroad for 2 to 6 months, were asked about their experiences before, during, and after mobility. The findings from these focus groups, which involved 35 students and trainees, highlight how initial excitement and growth abroad often

give way to challenges and isolation —mirroring the dips in the W-curve. These qualitative insights contribute to understanding the broader impact of mobility on student well-being and development.

Data from the XV ESNsurvey

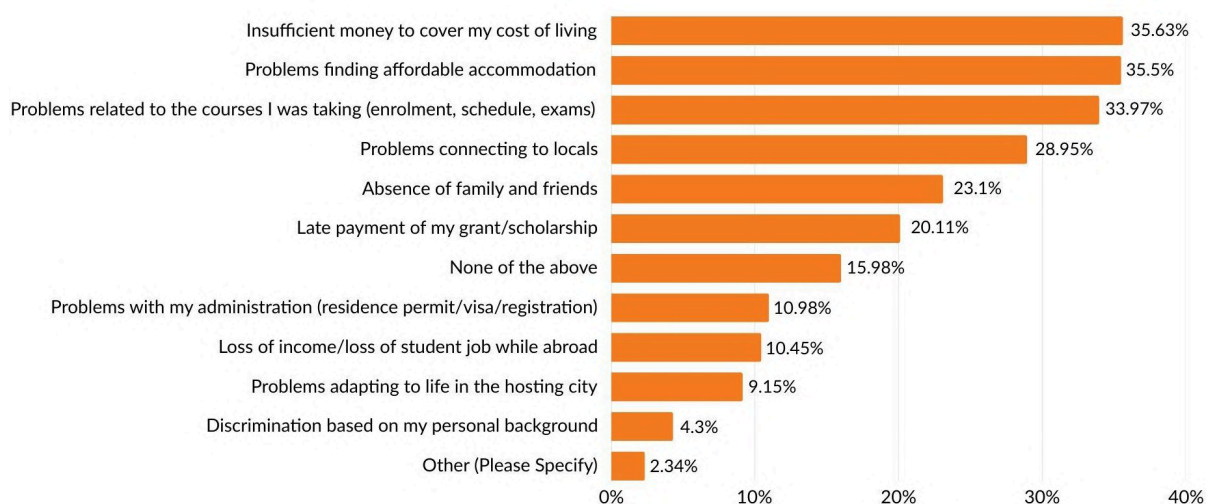


Figure 4: Issues encountered during the stay abroad by exchange students, XV ESNsurvey.

When students were questioned about the issues they encountered during their stay, reflecting on the during mobility and pre-departure stage, they signalled that the most common issues persisting are insufficient money to cover the cost of living (35%), finding affordable housing (35%), problems related to courses (33%) and problems connecting to locals (28%). The most pressing issues presented here are all issues related to the beginning of students' experiences, **which are usually encountered right after arrival**. The absence of family and friends (23%) is an issue that could be signalled throughout their experience, but most likely, towards the **middle-end of their mobility period**.

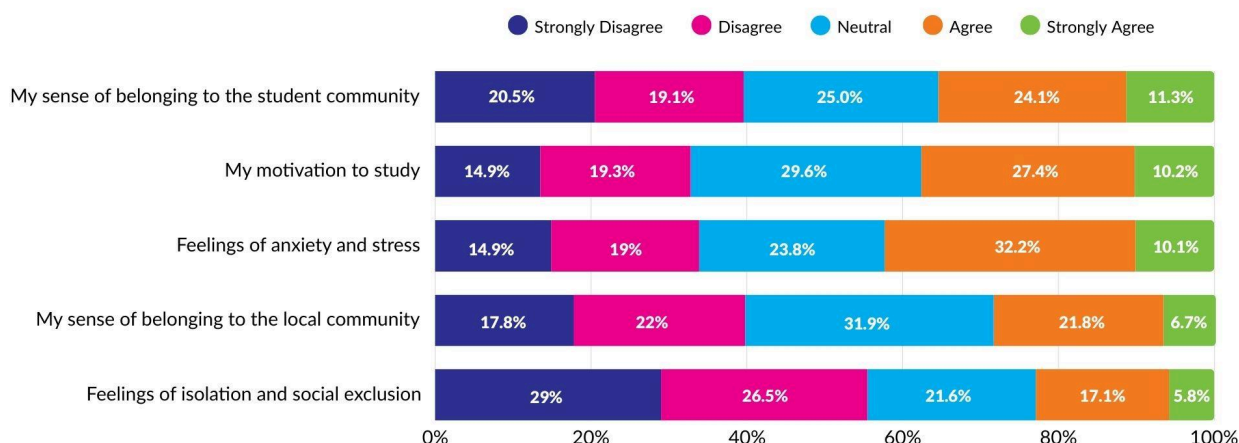


Figure 5: Impact of the issues experienced while abroad, XV ESNsurvey.

The impact of the issues international students encounter was questioned, and the biggest impact was a higher feeling of anxiety and stress, with 42.3% of students agreeing with it. The feeling of isolation and social exclusion was the least reported impact, with 56.5% disagreeing with it. The issues encountered are also highly reflected in students' sense of belonging in the student community and **their motivation to study, which can be reflected towards the end of their mobility experience, close to exam phases.**

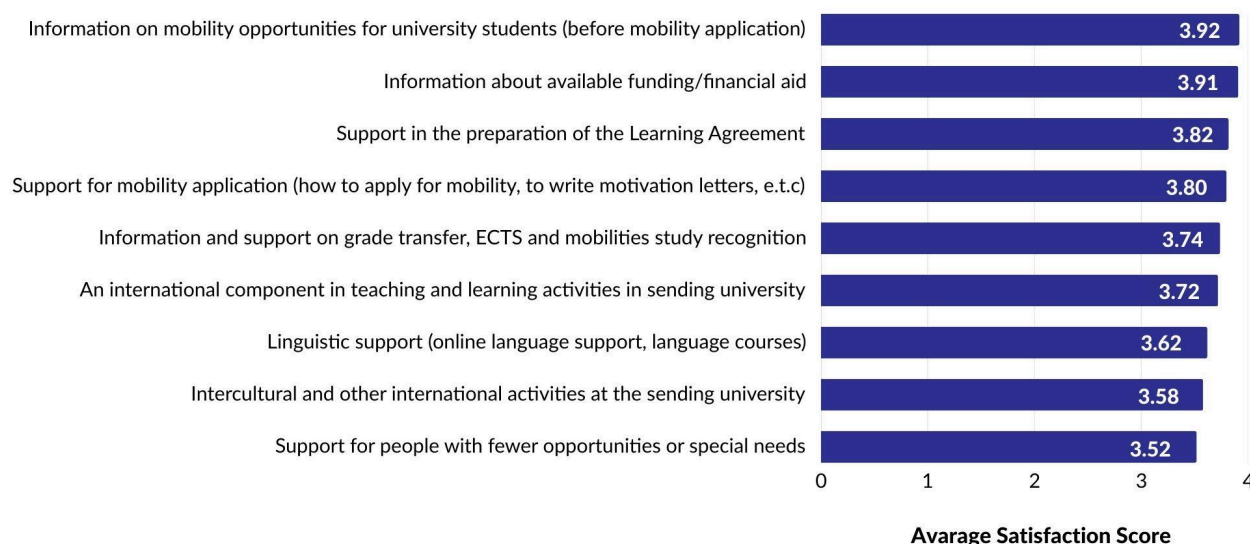


Figure 6: Average satisfaction with the support provided by Sending Institutions before Arrival on a 5-point Likert scale, XV ESNsurvey.

When international students were asked about their satisfaction with support from the sending institution (their home institution), the higher rated support measures are information on mobility experiences, funding and support with the learning agreement. However, the lowest rated support are for people with fewer opportunities, international activities and linguistic support. The data from the XV ESNsurvey validates the data gathered from the before-mentioned Institutional data on HEI's support measures.

High satisfaction with pre-mobility services suggests that adequate preparation and guidance from home institutions contribute to a positive emotional state as students embark on their mobility experience. The well-structured support systems provided before departure likely enhance students' initial sense of well-being and readiness, reinforcing the initial high of the W-Curve upon arrival abroad.

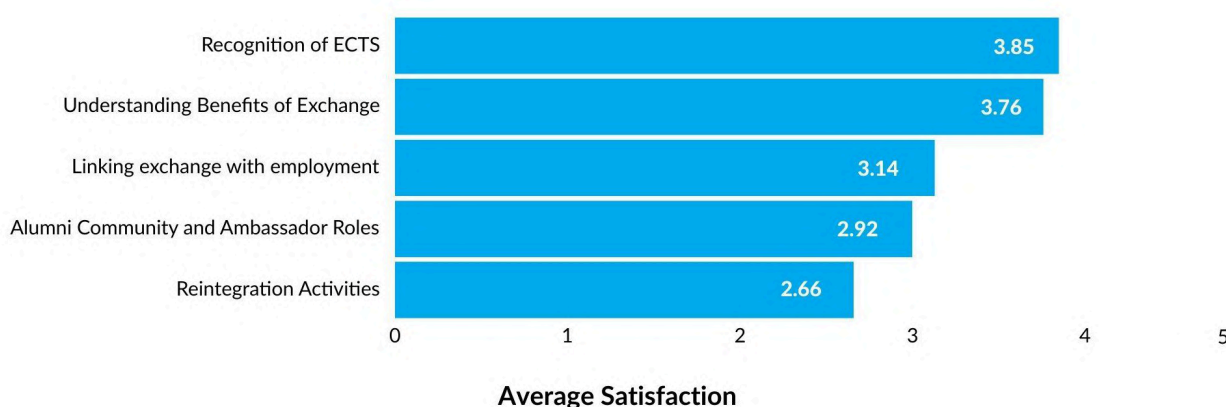


Figure 7: Satisfaction with the services provided by the sending institution (after mobility) on a 5-point Likert scale, XV ESNsurvey.

Moreover, the satisfaction of students with their sending institution after mobility on the aspect of reintegration activities (2.66) and linking exchange with employment (3.14) is quite low, this aggravates and showcases the need for support measures for students when they return home. **According to the W-Curve model, this stage often corresponds to a stage where students may struggle with reverse culture shock and a lack of recognition for their newly acquired competences.**

The inadequate reintegration support provided by sending institutions suggests that students are not properly guided through the reflection and integration of their learning experiences upon returning home. This lack of structured support not only impacts their emotional

well-being but also diminishes their ability to effectively translate their international experiences into valuable skills for employability.

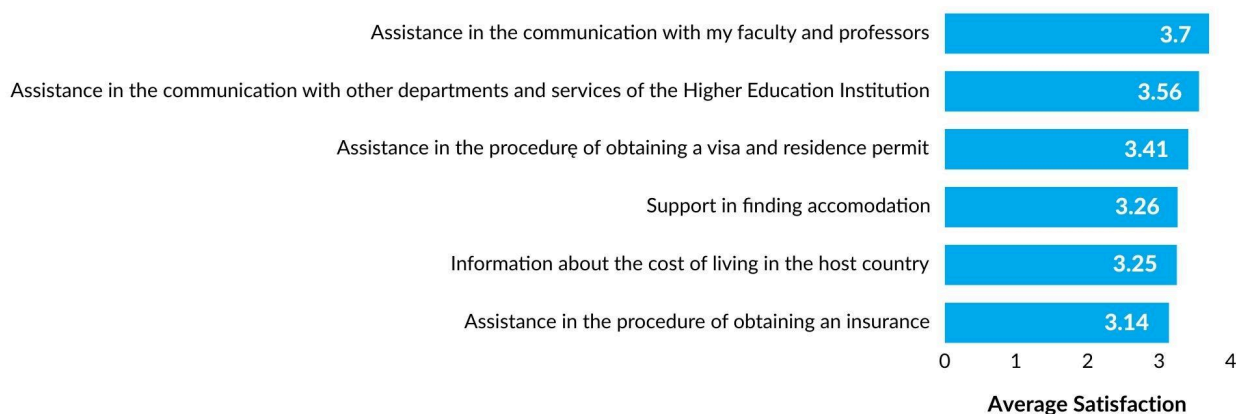


Figure 8: Average satisfaction with the support provided by Host Institutions before Arrival on a 5-point Likert scale, XV ESNsurvey.

Regarding students' satisfaction with their host institution before arrival, they rate lower supports that involve needs outside of the institution, such as in obtaining insurance (3.14), cost of living (3.25) and accommodation (3.26). **These are support needs that can become a problem right after arriving, supporting the W-model in the initial decrease of students' well-being.**

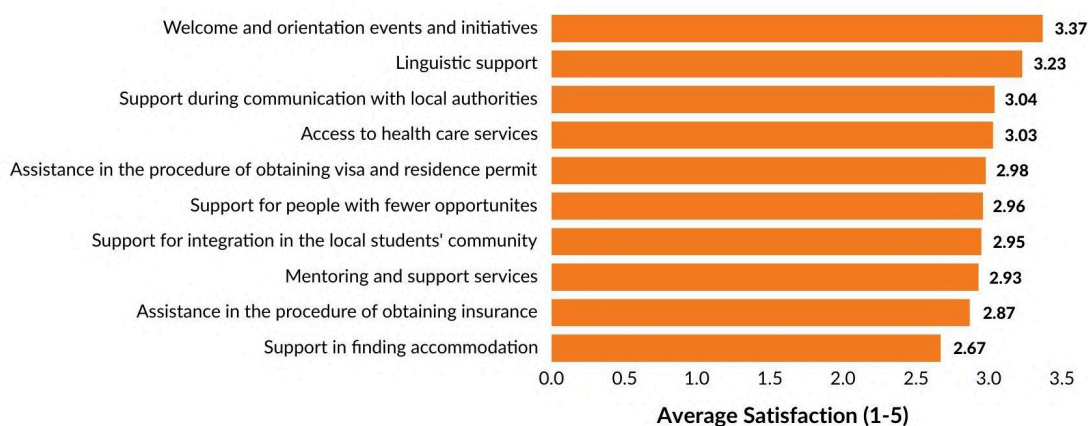


Figure 9: Average satisfaction with the services and support provided by the Host Institution during mobility on a 5-point Likert scale, XV ESNsurvey.

During their mobility, students rate the support by their host institution regarding welcome initiatives, linguistic support and communication with local authorities very high, which are all needed at the very beginning of their mobility experience. However, other support services, such as in finding accommodation, insurance procedures, mentoring services and integration with the local community are rated lowest. **These services are crucial throughout the entire mobility experience, not just at the start.**

The discrepancy between well-rated initial support and poorly rated ongoing support further reinforces the W-Curve model's pattern, where the initial enthusiasm and excitement are followed by a decline in satisfaction as students face practical and social challenges without adequate institutional support. This decline highlights the importance of providing continuous and comprehensive support throughout the entire mobility journey.

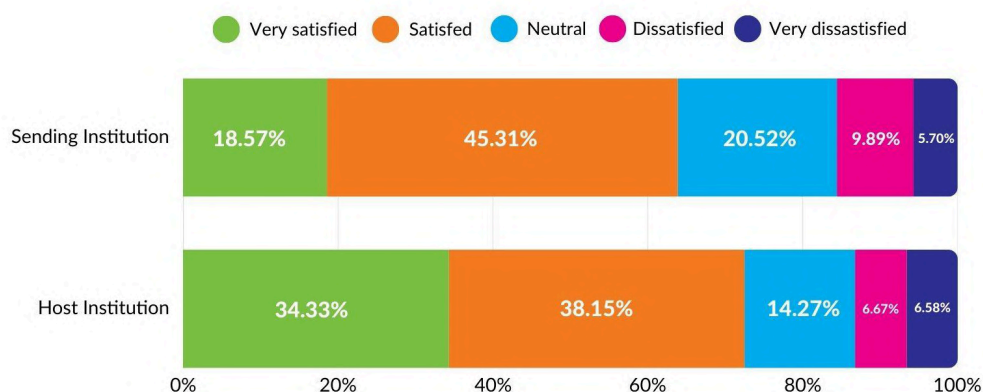


Figure 10: Percentages of the overall satisfaction with the services provided by the Sending and Hosting Institutions, XV ESNsurvey.

On average, students are more satisfied with the services provided by the host institutions, with 72.48% being satisfied or very satisfied, compared to 63.88% being satisfied or very satisfied with their sending institution. This could mean that students are more satisfied with support services during their mobility, which further validates the model's depiction of a challenging re-entry phase where students often feel neglected or unsupported after mobility.

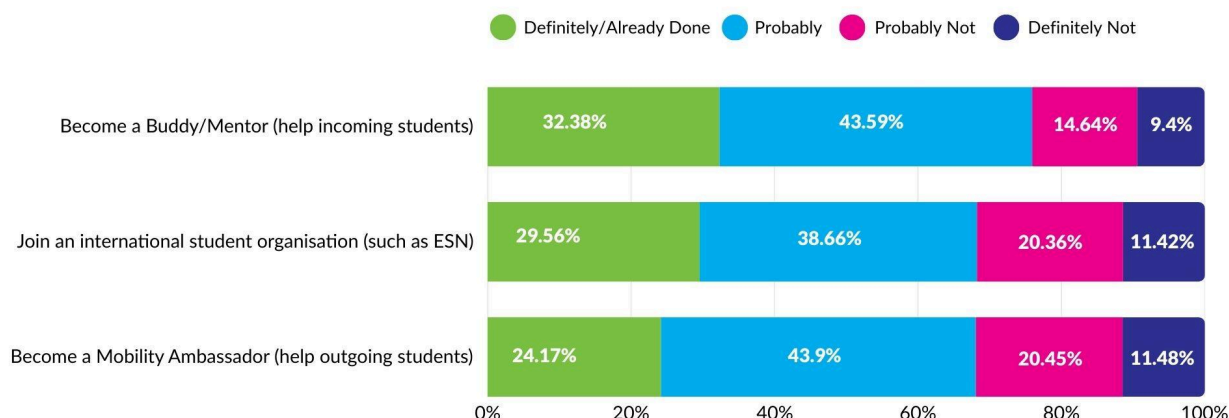


Figure 11: Engagement with international students engagement after mobility, XV ESNsurvey.

Students were asked about their engagement with internationalisation activities through student engagement after mobility, ranging from 25% to 33% having or wanting to engage with CSOs after their mobility. This activity can significantly reduce students' cultural shock by providing them with opportunities to apply their newly acquired skills, connect with like-minded individuals, and build social networks that facilitate their reintegration process. Participation in CSOs offers students a structured way to reflect on their experiences abroad, translating their learning outcomes into practical, community-oriented initiatives.

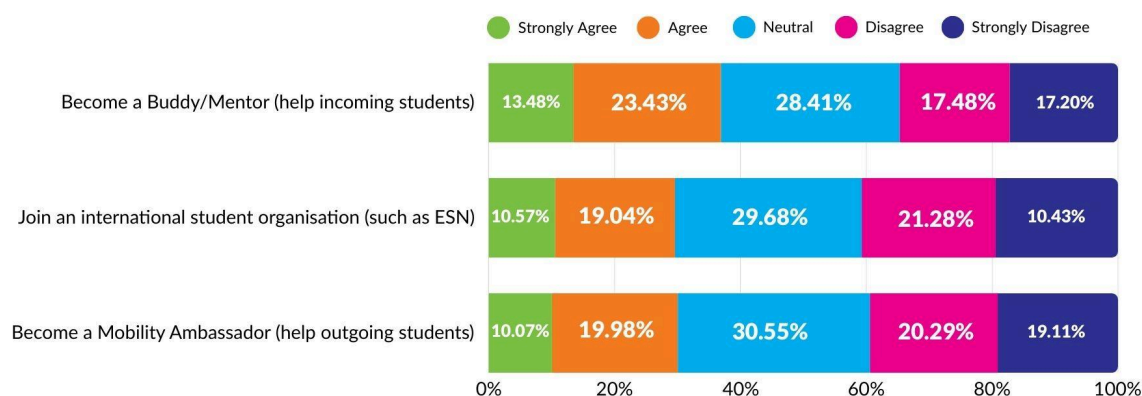


Figure 12: Encouragement from the sending institution to participate in civil society organisations after mobility, XV ESNsurvey.

Moreover, students were asked how they perceived the encouragement from their sending institutions to participate in CSOs after mobility. **The results showed that HEIs are not highly encouraging, possibly impacting the final decline in students' well-being when they return**

home. Students who did not continue their involvement in CSOs were more likely to report challenges in reintegrating into their home environment and a decreased sense of purpose. This evidence suggests that the lack of institutional encouragement to participate in CSOs could correlate with a post-mobility decline in well-being.

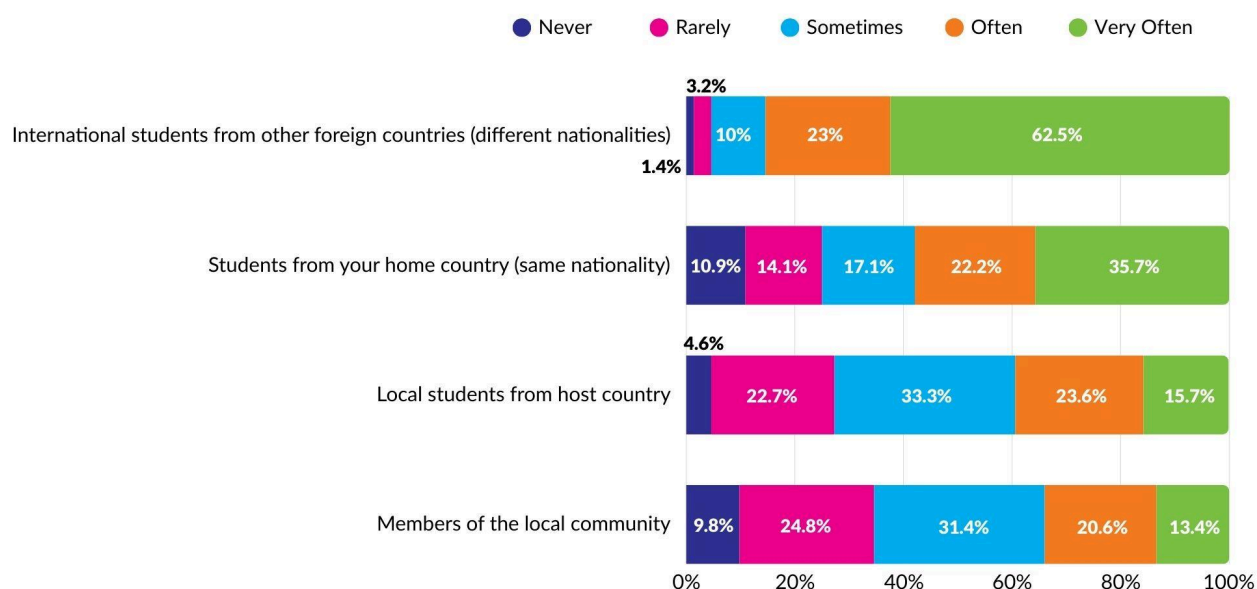


Figure 13: Exchange students' distribution of the frequency of interaction with different groups, XV ESNsurvey.

The ESNsurvey data shows that a significant pull factor for students in choosing a mobility destination is the possibility of engaging with the local community (rated third in importance). This suggests that students enter their mobility experience with high expectations of community involvement and integration, which could contribute to the initial positive experiences they have abroad.

However, the reality of engagement with local communities is much lower than anticipated. Only 34% of respondents reported engaging 'often' or 'very often' with local community members, compared to much higher engagement with international students (86%) and home-country students (57.9%). **This discrepancy indicates that while students arrive abroad with high expectations for local integration, they may experience challenges or a lack of opportunities to engage with the host community, potentially leading to frustration or a sense of disconnection which corresponds to the decline in the W-curve.**

Figure 14: Relative frequency of skills improved during the exchange, XV ESNsurvey.

Regarding the skills developed by international students while abroad, the top 10 self-assessed skills that exchange students improved during their stay are the following: language skills (86.22%), communication skills (75.86%), open-mindedness (74.76%), social skills (69.37%), adaptability to change (67.46%), cultural awareness (65.1%), intercultural sensitivity (62.24%), adaptability (58.63%), curiosity/openness (52.09%) and critical thinking (50.01%).

As students progress through their mobility, they often experience a rise in personal and professional growth, which is reflected in the significant improvement in key skills such as adaptability to change (67.46%), adaptability (58.63%) and curiosity/openness (52.09%). These skills not only facilitate integration into the host community but also boost students' confidence and sense of self-efficacy.

These developments contribute to an overall increase in well-being during mobility, reinforcing the idea that while the initial phase may be marked by uncertainty, students often experience a significant positive shift as they settle into their host country and grow both personally and professionally.

Data from focus groups

The following results have been extracted from the Erasmus Careers Focus Group report of the Competence framework in the international student mobility report (Perez-Encinas et. al., 2023). The report was focused on students' perceptions of the impact of international mobility on their professional careers, however, it also addresses the support and struggles of their mobility lifecycle.

The focus group showed what are the motivations behind students' mobility experiences—such as learning a new culture, gaining autonomy, improving language skills, and enhancing employability— and these motivations reflect the initial "high" of the W-curve. Some students mentioned they decided to go abroad because the Erasmus mobility offered them an opportunity to travel that they did not have before. **These personal and professional goals**

create a sense of anticipation and enthusiasm before departure, which typically leads to a positive initial phase abroad.

Despite the positive expectations, many students face difficulties in integrating into local communities during their mobility period, as reflected in the issues they experienced in socializing and feeling fully integrated from the ESNsurvey. Among the participants of the focus group, there were also specific cases of students who had **problems socializing at the beginning of their mobility. This is a clear indication of the "dip" phase of the W-curve, where students may struggle with cultural adjustment, language barriers, or social isolation, leading to a decline in their emotional well-being.**

However, there is a mention that students value having gained independence and autonomy and having stepped out of their comfort zone. **During mobility, students may be less concerned about being judged because after the mobility period, they will leave the host country and will not meet most people again, therefore making them feel free and improving their well-being after the initial dip.**

After mobility, students' experiences show a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment. Some students became more appreciative of their home culture, while others expressed dissatisfaction with their home university's support during the mobility period, feeling abandoned after returning. **These mixed emotions are indicative of the second dip that can occur when students return home and face a lack of integration or support, contributing to the final decline in their well-being.**

The reflections on the mobility experience highlight that many students, particularly Erasmus interns, did not feel fully prepared for the return home and struggled to maintain the same level of engagement and satisfaction once back.

Conclusions

This study set out to evaluate whether existing models of cultural adaptation and international student lifecycle effectively capture the learning needs and lived experiences of mobile students.

The findings demonstrate that existing models, particularly the **W-Curve model** and the **International Student Lifecycle (ISL)**, continue to offer relevant conceptual foundations for understanding international students' emotional, cultural, and academic transitions. However, their effectiveness is moderated by how well institutional support mechanisms align with these phases. The W-Curve's stages were reflected in both quantitative (XV ESNsurvey) and qualitative (focus groups) data, validating the model's relevance in capturing emotional fluctuations during mobility. Nevertheless, some students' experiences diverge from the linearity implied by the model, reinforcing the need for flexible, adaptive frameworks.

The ISL model, particularly in its expanded form including the (Re)integration phase (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018), provides a more comprehensive lens to structure institutional support across all stages of mobility. Yet, data shows critical service gaps—especially in **re-entry support**, **mid-mobility engagement by home institutions**, and **ongoing community integration**—which undermine students' ability to reflect on and apply the competences they gain abroad.

The findings from institutional surveys, student focus groups, and the XV ESNsurvey reveal strong alignment between students' lived experiences and the educational theories discussed throughout this review. For instance, **Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory** is implicitly validated by students' descriptions of learning through immersive, real-life challenges abroad. Students reported developing competences such as autonomy, intercultural communication, adaptability, and problem-solving—hallmarks of experiential learning gained through active engagement and reflection during mobility.

Similarly, **Self-Determination Theory** is echoed in student narratives around gaining independence and agency while abroad. Many reported that their motivation and satisfaction were tied to how much autonomy they had in navigating academic systems, language barriers, and cultural differences. The focus group findings further emphasized that feelings of freedom,

especially from social judgment, allowed for greater self-expression and confidence, reinforcing the importance of fostering autonomy and relatedness.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is also clearly relevant: challenges during pre-arrival and early mobility stages often stemmed from difficulties meeting basic needs such as housing, emotional support, and belonging. Students who felt disconnected or unsupported—especially during the re-entry phase—reported declines in wellbeing and engagement, suggesting that unmet foundational needs can compromise educational outcomes.

From the **institutional side**, staff responses reflected an awareness of these stages and needs, though support was found to be inconsistent, particularly in the re-entry and mid-mobility phases. The **W-Curve model** was validated across both student and institutional perspectives, with emotional highs and lows consistently mirroring the model's trajectory.

Overall, the research illustrates that **theories of learning and adaptation are not only theoretically sound but also empirically grounded in student realities**. For these frameworks to remain effective, however, they must be **translated into practical, adaptive, and inclusive strategies** that respond to the full spectrum of students' cognitive, emotional, and social needs. This includes designing reflective learning opportunities, ensuring consistent support throughout all phases of mobility, and integrating competences gained abroad into institutional recognition and employability pathways.

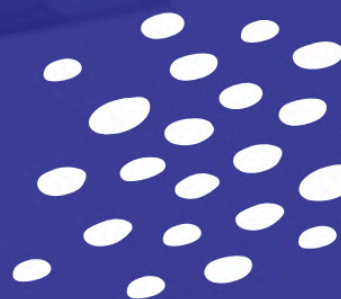
As international student mobility continues to evolve, the challenge for higher education institutions lies in moving beyond static models and toward **dynamic, learner-centered ecosystems** that empower all students to thrive—academically, personally, and professionally—through the mobility experience.

This highlights the need for **adaptive, inclusive, and psychologically responsive educational practices** that align with the diverse learning journeys of mobile students.



The International Student Lifecycle

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Our research indicates that the w-curve with the 5 different identified stages, is currently still relevant. Consisting of five key stages—Pre-Arrival, On-Arrival, During Stay, Pre-Departure, and Re-Entry— (Gulahorn, 1963 ; Perez-Encinas et al., 2018) the ISL model ensures that institutions can offer targeted and effective support to mobile students at every phase of their journey. While mobility provides students with transformative academic, personal, and professional development opportunities, the effectiveness of these experiences depends on the availability and quality of institutional support services.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT LIFECYCLE

Cultural Adjustment curve during International student mobility

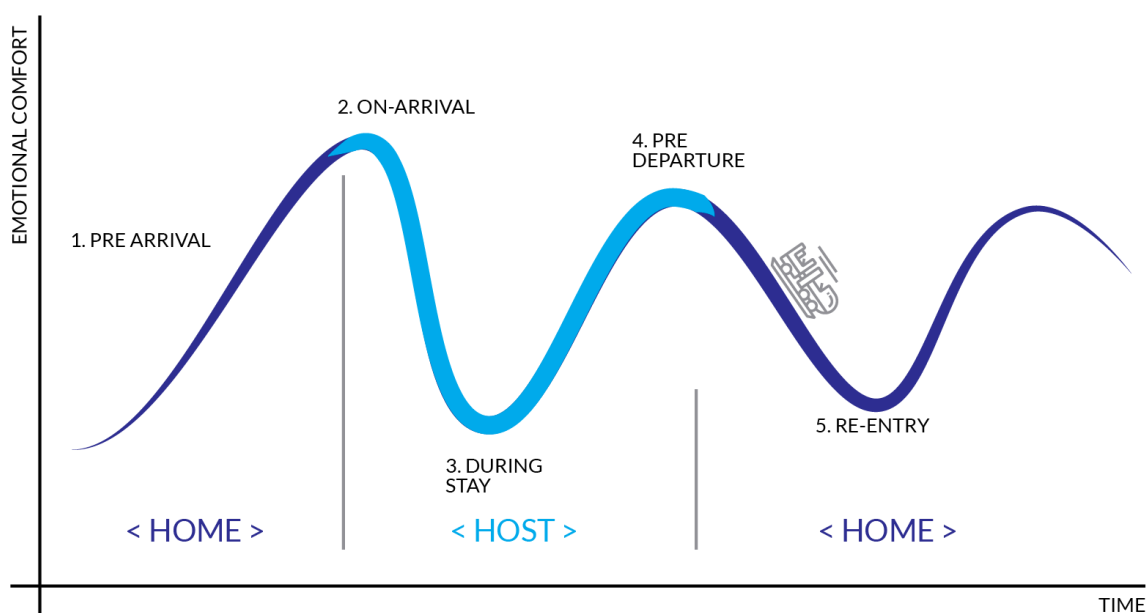


Figure 15 - The International Student Lifecycle adjusted from Gulahorn & Gulahorn (1963) and Perez-Encinas et al. (2018).

Authored by Adriana Perez-Encinas from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, this lifecycle is designed as a practical guide for higher education institutions to build comprehensive learning pathways for mobile students. By outlining key services at each stage, the roadmap aims to address students' needs, bridge existing gaps in institutional support, enhance the student experience, and strengthen the employability outcomes of international mobility..

**On-Arrival:**

It is the stage in which the student has just arrived at the host institution and is adapting to the new environment.

Laying the Foundation: Pre-Arrival Preparedness

Understanding Student Needs

During the pre-arrival stage, students are often faced with uncertainty regarding logistics, academic expectations, cultural norms, and emotional readiness. Their needs are rooted in a desire for psychological security and autonomy, as outlined by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Determination Theory. This includes clarity about housing, visa status, financial obligations, and institutional processes, as well as emotional preparation for cultural transition. Students also require support to develop cultural awareness and confidence to begin their mobility journey.

Support Mechanisms

To address pre-arrival needs, institutions should implement structured support such as virtual orientation modules, logistical checklists, and early communication with staff and peer mentors. These mechanisms provide clarity on visa processes, course registration, housing, and health insurance. In addition, cultural briefings and language preparation resources offer emotional reassurance. Early peer contact through mentoring programs can reduce anxiety and create a sense of community before departure.

Educational Methodologies

The pre-arrival phase benefits from constructivist, learner-centered methodologies. Blended learning modules—delivered asynchronously—can help students internalize essential knowledge and build confidence. Scaffolded digital content such as videos, quizzes, and reflective prompts gradually prepare students for cultural differences and academic expectations. Instructional design should prioritize accessibility, interactivity, and flexibility to accommodate diverse learning preferences and time zones.

Illustrative Example

An international student completes a pre-arrival orientation course online, which includes interactive cultural quizzes and recorded testimonials from former students. They also receive regular email updates and are paired with a student mentor for casual conversations before departure.

**Pre-Arrival:**

It is the initial stage of the International Student Lifecycle (ISL), the phase in which the student has not yet arrived at the host institution and is preparing the mobility.

Navigating the New: First Steps Upon Arrival

Understanding Student Needs

Upon arrival in the host country, students experience significant emotional fluctuation, as described by the W-Curve model. While the initial 'honeymoon phase' is marked by excitement, it is typically followed by culture shock and confusion. During this period, students need support to foster a sense of belonging, social connection, and safety. Psychological needs such as emotional reassurance, interpersonal support, and structured orientation are critical to ease the transition. The sense of relatedness and inclusion becomes especially important to mitigate early stress.

Support Mechanisms

Effective arrival support includes comprehensive orientation programs that introduce academic expectations, cultural values, and campus life. Institutions should offer welcome sessions, buddy systems, and social mixers to help students build initial connections. Early access to counseling, health services, and intercultural workshops can address the emotional demands of transition. Personalized advising and multilingual support can bridge academic gaps and reduce stress. These mechanisms play a critical role in shaping students' first impressions and overall adjustment.

Educational Methodologies

Educational practices during arrival should focus on experiential and participatory learning. Simulation exercises, group orientation tasks, and reflective discussions engage students actively and encourage immediate application of cultural knowledge. Kolb's learning cycle—especially the stages of concrete experience and reflective observation—can structure initial learning encounters. Intercultural games and self-assessment tools can also aid students in identifying their cultural orientation and personal learning goals.

Illustrative Example

A student arrives on campus and participates in a welcome week filled with intercultural games, buddy lunches, and academic orientation sessions. They also attend a session on coping with culture shock and join a city tour organized by student volunteers.

**During Stay**

It is the stage during which the student is enrolled in studies at the host institution.

Deepening Engagement: The Mobility Experience

Understanding Student Needs

Throughout the mobility period, students' needs evolve from basic adjustment toward deeper academic, social, and personal development. Their focus shifts to engaging with new academic systems, building intercultural relationships, and sustaining motivation. According to Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, learners need continuous opportunities to experience, reflect, conceptualize, and test new ideas. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory also highlights the importance of critical reflection to help students internalize and grow from their experiences.

Support Mechanisms

During the mobility period, institutions must maintain regular and consistent support. This includes academic mentoring, language assistance, and platforms for intercultural dialogue. Reflective workshops and mid-semester check-ins help students process their experiences and sustain engagement. Creating peer-led learning spaces or digital portfolios encourages students to track and recognize their growth. Such continued investment ensures students feel supported, academically stimulated, and socially connected throughout their time abroad.

Educational Methodologies

Educational methodologies during mobility should emphasize deep reflection, applied learning, and adaptive instruction. Project-based learning, collaborative group work, and critical incident analysis are effective formats. Kolb's four-phase cycle can be applied in academic and non-academic contexts to help students conceptualize their growth. Formative feedback and competency-based assessment allow students to make connections between their intercultural experiences and academic goals.

Illustrative Example

Midway through their exchange semester, a student reflects on challenges in a group project with local peers. They discuss this during a reflection workshop and update their learning portfolio with entries on teamwork, conflict resolution, and adapting communication styles.

**Pre-Departure**

It is the stage in which the student is preparing to leave the host institution and to return to the home institution.

Closure and Reflection: Preparing for Return

Understanding Student Needs

As students prepare to return home, they often experience mixed emotions: a sense of accomplishment coupled with anxiety about reintegration and leaving new social networks behind. At this stage, their needs center on closure, validation of learning, and opportunities to make sense of their growth. Maslow's esteem needs and Mezirow's theory of identity transformation both highlight the importance of this reflective space. Students must be supported in recognizing and articulating the competences they have developed during mobility.

Support Mechanisms

Support in the pre-departure phase should include structured opportunities for reflection, such as group debriefs, exit interviews, or narrative evaluations. Institutions should help students make meaning of their experience by offering certificate programs, transcript supplements, or competence recognition frameworks. Social support through farewell events, mentor acknowledgements, and collaborative storytelling sessions enables students to leave with a sense of completion. When supported to reflect, students are more likely to recognize the value of their growth and transition confidently into their next stage.

Educational Methodologies

In this phase, methodologies that foster critical reflection and identity exploration are essential. Transformative learning techniques—such as structured journaling, storytelling, and visual thinking—encourage students to evaluate how their worldview has changed. Dialogue-based workshops and alumni storytelling can support sense-making. Pedagogical approaches should be inclusive and personalized, allowing students to articulate individual meaning rather than general conclusions.

Illustrative Example

As their semester ends, students join a farewell event where they present digital stories about their exchange experience. They also participate in a reflection circle and receive a competence certificate detailing soft skills gained during mobility.

**Re-Entry:**

It is the stage in which the student has returned to the home institution after leaving the host institution and is readjusting.

Rebuilding at Home: Reintegration and Future Planning

Understanding Student Needs

The (Re)integration stage—either reintegrating into the home country or transitioning into a post-mobility life abroad—is frequently accompanied by disorientation, identity shift, and uncertainty about next steps. Students need emotional and practical support to navigate reverse culture shock, validate their learning, and apply it in meaningful ways. Theories such as Mezirow's and Berry's Acculturation Model point to the need for continuity and identity reconstruction. Without institutional guidance, students may struggle to leverage their mobility experience in future careers or academic pursuits.

Support Mechanisms

In the (Re)integration phase, institutional support is often minimal yet deeply needed. Students benefit from re-entry workshops, mobility CV sessions, and intercultural debriefing circles. Connecting returnees with alumni networks or career advisors enables them to link their experiences with future pathways. Institutions should also provide psychological support to address feelings of alienation or reverse culture shock. Formal recognition of competences gained abroad can help students reclaim their learning and reintegrate their international identity into personal and professional life.

Educational Methodologies

Methodologies for the reintegration stage should support narrative reconstruction and career readiness. Tools such as mobility portfolios, digital storytelling, and peer-led reflection groups help students link their international experiences to future goals. Career planning modules embedded with experiential learning elements prepare students to articulate soft skills and global competences in job applications. Educators should foster spaces that normalize post-return challenges while guiding students in transforming their experiences into forward-looking strategies.

Illustrative Example

Upon returning home, a student attends a re-entry workshop, updates their LinkedIn profile with a new 'mobility CV,' and connects with former exchange students to co-lead an info session for outgoing peers.

Key Considerations for Supporting International Students:

Cultural Sensitivity: Educators must be culturally sensitive and aware of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of international students.

Language Support: Providing language support is essential for international students to fully participate in the learning environment.

Inclusive Classroom Practices: Creating a classroom environment where all students feel respected and valued is crucial.

Mentorship and Support Programs: Pairing international students with mentors or peer advisors can help them navigate the challenges of studying abroad.

Collaboration with International Student Organisations: Universities should work closely with their international student organisation to provide comprehensive support services.

By understanding the international student lifecycle and applying these educational theories, educators can create learning environments that are inclusive, supportive, and empowering for all students, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds.



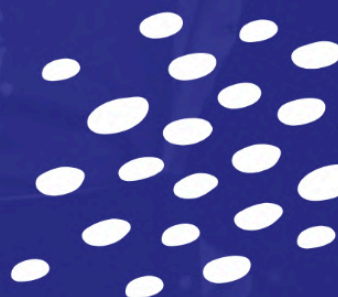
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- Mattia Belloni
- Konstantina Ky
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Annexes

- ANNEX I - Perez-Encinas A. et. al. (2024), [Bibliometric analysis of publications related to "Learning and services"](#), Erasmus Careers project, Work Package 3.
- Annex II - Erasmus Careers project consortium (2024), [Institutional Survey Report](#), Elaborated by UAM,

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