ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY: THE IMPACT OF ERASMUS+ MOBILITIES ON FUTURE ROMANIAN LEADERS

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ABSTRACT. This paper investigates the link between participation in Erasmus+ mobilities and a higher level of intercultural sensitivity, a component considered to be highly relevant for contemporary business leaders. It conducts an analysis of existing cultural influences in Romania, through the prism of ethnic minorities, migration and international tourism, in order to emphasize the country's high level of cultural diversity. Furthermore, it explores the Erasmus+ mobility, more precisely, it presents the impact the programme has on integrating young people into the labour market. Subsequently, it clarifies the concept of intercultural sensitivity and outlines the links between intercultural competence and the educational environment. As far as the research methodology is concerned, the data was obtained through primary research: a questionnaire was developed, distributed and analysed. The instrument created by Chen and Starosta (2000), namely the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale, was used to measure the level of intercultural sensitivity of individuals. For this purpose, a comparative analysis of two groups of respondents: mobility participants and non-participants, was conducted, according to several independent variables. The study found that participation in this type of mobility has a positive impact in terms of intercultural skills and leadership abilities. Therefore, the formulated recommendations support the implementation of similar initiatives in the structure of the educational curriculum.

Key words: leadership, Erasmus+, cultural diversity, intercultural sensitivity, ISS

JEL Classification: M10, M14, M19

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Introduction

The recent technological advances make today's society exhibit a process of intense globalization. It can be seen that a diametrically opposed perception of cultural diversity has been reached. What was once considered a burden, and a constant source of conflict, is now seen as an added value that can be brought to society, through cultural interactions (Nicoara, 2005). Also, societies, that are now considered stable and peaceful democracies, have a responsibility to help create an environment in which all individuals have the opportunity to preserve and develop their cultural identity (OSCE, 2012).

The existing cultural mix, present on the Romanian territory, the fluctuations in its consistency, and the conflict situations deriving from these aspects, emphasize the multitude of variables that can intervene in the formation of societal intercultural skills. Therefore, it emphasizes the importance that must be given to the development of cultural skills. Moreover, according to Massey et al. (1993), as most developed countries have moved towards multiculturalism, the developing ones also end up moving in this direction, as is the case of Romania.

Along with the labour market, the education system is also going through an intense process of internationalization. The main focus of the education system should be to prepare young people for the current challenges in society, in terms of the necessary knowledge and skills sets. Therefore, the young generation should be prepared to interact, communicate and then collaborate with people from other cultures. Consequently, at present, the degree of internationalization, especially in the case of higher education, has come to be seen as an indicator of educational quality (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). When one thinks about internationalizing the education system, the Erasmus+ is the most sought program, being considered the most popular. Numerous studies conducted in this regard have shown the major impact that this program

has in the process of internationalizing education, having a major contribution in the participants' preparation for the labour market (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). Thus, the main goal of this program is to enhance the quality of life by increasing employment opportunities by developing intercultural skills, which are highly sought in the current global economy. These objectives can be achieved through opportunities such as: study, practice, projects and volunteering, in various fields, both at home and abroad, in a culturally rich environment (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015).

When we talk about intercultural skills, we are talking about an umbrella concept, which consists of three main components, namely: the cognitive side, the affective side and the behavioural side (Chen and Starosta, 2000). The cognitive part is represented by the state of awareness of the cultural elements (Chen and Starosta, 2000), affectivity is rendered through the concept of intercultural sensitivity manifested by an individual (Chen and Starosta, 1998), and behavioral aspects are described by intercultural efficiency (Chen and Starosta, 1996). Due to misinterpretations of these concepts, many training programs, that aim to develop intercultural communication skills, often have results that are very difficult to quantify or interpret.

At present, most employers show a very high interest in the aspect of intercultural competences, many companies provide training programs in this regard. In the context of a globalized world economy, the ability to interact and adapt to various cultural contexts has become a necessity in the workplace. The high level of competitiveness due to the current world economy causes most companies to broaden their horizons in order to achieve their goals. Thus, a good training of the management generates a substantial competitive advantage. A very important aspect to mention is that global leadership focuses more on trust and building long-term relationships rather than on setting strict goals and directions. Elizabeth Gates argues that, with a better understanding of the global economy and culture, it will be much easier to penetrate a target market (UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute, 2015).

The aim of this study is to investigate the link between participation in Erasmus+ mobility and a higher level of intercultural sensitivity (IS). IS represents a basic component of the set of intercultural skills that have

come to be considered highly necessary for business leaders today. In this sense, a delimitation was made between respondents, namely Erasmus+ mobility participants and non-participants. The instrument created by Chen and Starosta (2000): the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was used to measure the level of intercultural sensitivity. At the same time, it tests certain variables related to international experience that could show a certain influence on the aforementioned link. The variables taken into account are: the number of types of mobility experienced and the period spent in these mobilities. Additionally, a number of demographic variables were taken into account: the frequency with which current interactions with people from other cultures take place, the number of ways in which they take place, gender, age, recent studies, occupation, and income level. Finally, the relationship between the experience of working in a leadership position (past, present or future), and the level of intercultural sensitivity, was studied.

Erasmus+ offers young people the opportunity to live a completely different experience from classical learning styles, enhancing the direct interaction of the individual with other cultural environments, in order to create a behavioural flexibility. In Romania, these types of mobility are starting to gain popularity among young people, universities having a significant contribution in this regard. Given the fact that numerous researches affirm the positive impact of these programmes on the development of the individual, it was considered important to study the influence manifested by these cultural experiences and to analyse the level of cultural sensitivity.

Literature review

Recent trends indicate that, along with the labour market, the education system is the one that goes through an intense process of internationalization. This aspect is of major importance, given that it is the result of the process of economic and political integration for which the European Union is constantly striving. This process must be strengthened and developed especially in countries with an economy that performs below the European average, including Romania. Moreover, the degree of internationalization, especially in the case of higher education, has come to be seen as an indicator of educational quality (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015).

The Erasmus+ program (2014 - 2020) is a continuation of the Lifelong Learning Program (2007 - 2013), and was developed given the positive results generated by LLP and the impact manifested in the internationalization process. At the same time, it was considered necessary to significantly increase the allocated budget (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). The current concept of the program intends to streamline the participation process, in order to better meet the requirements of the beneficiaries, targeting certain negative aspects discovered at the end of the previous program. Thus, it brings together all seven programs offered by the EU in the field of youth training, namely: Lifelong Learning, Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alpha, Edulink (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). Their unification was achieved in order to eliminate the barriers of a cumbersome bureaucratic process, to diversify the target segments and to create flexibility between the offered programs, which will help to create a much closer link between individuals (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015).

Even if, at European level, cooperation on educational programs is a process that already extends over a period of 30 years, in the case of Romania, due to the late accession to the European Union, this process took place with a significant delay. This aspect currently places the country at the bottom of the ranking in terms of the number of beneficiaries per total number of people, who are enrolled in a form of education (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015).

Although there is an increasing interest into Erasmus+, in terms of mobility there is a great disproportion between the two groups: Romanian students and foreigners who choose Romania as a destination (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). The second category is indicated as being reluctant to look at Romania as a significant source of development opportunities. One of the main impediments being the reported socio-cultural and academic integration problems (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). Currently, there are many initiatives aimed at streamlining the integration of foreign students, such as the European Student Network, an NGO present in most universities in the country, and "buddy" programs organized by faculties. However, the aspects related to the internal organization of the faculties remain a problem. According to the analysis performed, the insufficiency of teaching materials, cultural-linguistic skills and accommodation spaces, represent the main negative aspects for many university centres in Romania.

Regarding the external mobility of teachers, Romania can boast that it was ranked among the top six countries in Europe, at the time of the study (N.A.C.P.F.V.E.T.M, 2015). Contrary to the trend encountered among students, teachers prefer Western Europe as a destination, the economic situation of these areas being correlated with a very high-quality education system. This aspect has a significant contribution to the optimization of teaching and evaluation methods, and the quality of the research activity.

A study carried out by the European Commission on the impact of the Erasmus program on the individual skills, employability and career opportunities of beneficiaries has yielded a number of results relevant to the carried research. Regarding individual skills, more than 90% of the surveyed students showed an improvement in terms of soft skills, such as: knowledge of other cultures, ability to interact and work with people from other cultures, adaptability, language skills and advanced communication (European Commission, 2014). A very high percentage (99%) of universities involved also reported a substantial improvement in students' self-confidence and adaptability, as a result of their time spent abroad.

In order to accurately measure the evolution of the beneficiaries' employability, six factors were considered to be the most relevant. These factors were identified to be: the ability to accept other peoples' culture and customs, openness to new experiences, self-confidence, awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, ability to make decisions, ability to solve problems (European Commission, 2014). In order to ensure the relevance of the study, a significant number of employers also took part, most of them considered the personality traits mentioned above to be highly important. Following the analysis, the students who took part in the program showed much higher scores, in terms of these competencies, than the students who lacked this experience. Moreover, with the completion of the mobility, they showed a significant professional advantage over "non-mobile" students (European Commission, 2014).

This program also seems to play a very important role in enhancing the entrepreneurial environment, through internships (European Commission, 2014). This highlights the importance of the exchange of practices and knowledge, that takes place between the participants in

these internships, especially in the case of countries covered by the economic integration program. According to the research conducted by the European Commission (2014), 77% of Erasmus students who participated in the study held leadership positions in the first ten years after graduation, presenting also an advantage of 44% in obtaining managerial positions, compared to alumni of other initiatives.

Romania is characterized by a high level of diversity, being the home of over twenty ethnic communities. Ethnic minorities have always represented a significant percentage of Romania's population. In 1930, Romanian population was constituted of 73% native Romanian speakers and 71.9% Romanian ethnics (Nicoara, 2005). According to the data provided by the 2011 census, the most recent conducted in Romania, out of a total of 20.1 million inhabitants, minorities represent a percentage of 11%. The share of the main ethnic groups is constituted as follows: 58.86% Hungarians, 29.80% Roma, 2.44% Ukrainians, 1.73% Germans, 1.33% Turks and 5.84% other ethnicities.

Mobility is a complex and dynamic process, which is influenced by a multitude of factors. According to Tomescu-Dumitrescu (2017), these factors can be of two types:

➢ push factors: low standard of living, poverty, lack of job oportunities, ethnic problems, natural disasters, technological accidents, and terrorism;

➢ pull factors: higher standard of living, higher salaries, the possibility to find a better job, and the experience of social networks.

According to the observation made by Tomescu-Dumitrescu (2017), a number of non-economic factors also affect the migration decision and the selection of the destination country. The most relevant examples are provided by: language, cultural and geographical contingency, links to tradition. At present, the problem of international migration is one of the biggest challenges faced by most countries in the world. As Danacica (2010) states, the labor market has become globalized, causing a need to attract foreign labor in the case of highly developed countries. At the same time, undeveloped states have a labour force that exhibits a desire to emigrate to societies that can ensure a better living standard. Thus, society is in a situation where the percentage of migrant population is constantly growing. At the same time, the need to pay a higher degree of

attention to the integration of these people both on the labor market and from a cultural point of view increases.

As far as the European Union is concerned, all Member States are affected to some extent by the intensification of international migration. According to Danacica (2010), the mix of factors that have brought migration to the top of the EU's political agenda consists of:

> ➢ the major political changes that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989;
> ➢ EU enlargement in recent years (10 countries joined the EU on 1 May 2004 and another two on 1 January 2007);
> ➢ liberalization of the labor market;
> ➢ the growing demands for the economic and political integration of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the EU.

According to Udrea (2015), the phenomenon of international migration brings a series of advantages and drawbacks. Table 1 illustrates both negative and positive effects for country of origin as well as country of destination.

Table 1. The effects of migration on the country of origin and destination

	Negative effects	Positive effects
Contry of origin	It affects the stability of the family	Transfer between civilizations, new knowledge
	Skilled labor shortage	Contribution to the development of the country of origin
	Increasing school dropout and delinquency	Contribution to the economy of the country of origin
Country of destination	**Negative effects**	**Positive effects**
	It causes xenophobia and prejudice	Modernization through multiculturalism
	Leads to inter-ethnic conflict	Cheap labor - reduces unemployment

Source: autors' elaboration based on Udrea (2015)

If Romania is viewed from the perspective of a destination country, two phenomena can be discussed, internal migration and immigration. Therefore, according to Massey et al. (1993), as most developed countries have moved towards multiculturalism, the developing ones end up moving in this direction, as is the case of Romania. Contrary to the fact that the country's economy is considered to be still below the European average, Romania manages to meet a number of characteristics favorable to less developed societies. Following a report of Cosciug et al. (2019), it can be mentioned that the cultural variety of Romania is amplified: the share of foreigners reached 380000, increasing four times since the beginning of the decade. The study also reveals that new ethnic groups are beginning to emerge, although the main countries of immigration remain the Republic of Moldova, Turkey, China, Syria and Israel. Immigrants end up settling mainly in the most developed areas of Romania, such as the western cities or the capital, areas also characterized by a high level of cultural diversity. Due to the same study, it was discovered that, regarding the adaptation of immigrants in the socio-cultural environment of Romania, over 50% of them attended or are taking Romanian language courses, which indicates a substantial effort on their part in this direction.

Following the accession to the European Union, international tourism is showing a slight increase. However, the departures of locals are double the number of foreigners arrivals (National Institute of Statistics, 2020), which turns Romania into a country that provides, rather than attracting, international tourists. In order to bring this sector to the level of its potential, we need culturally competent people, willing to use their experience to build an international image that will arouse interest. Thus, given the diversity of resources, the main factor that is missing is leadership. If Romanians travel abroad mainly in order to spend their vacation, according to National Institute of Statistics (2020), more than half of the foreign surveyed visitors have business as their main reason to travel to Romania. As a result, the Romanian business environment has an increasing level of cultural diversity.

Chen and Starosta (2000) are among main researches who focused on analyzing and studying the concept of cultural sensitivity. Starting from the fact that there was a high level of ambiguity around this concept, often being confused with the state of cultural awareness or intercultural

communication skills, the authors felt responsible to clarify these concepts. In their opinion, the three concepts are closely related, but separate in meaning (Chen & Starosta, 2000). At the same time, they consider that the highest level of complexity is presented by the intercultural communication skills, skills that include the two aforementioned concepts.

The two researchers (Chen and Starosta, 2000) further deepened the study of cultural sensitivity, they express the concept as a mindset that helps individuals to observe the differences in behavior when interacting to people. Therefore, it can be stated that this ability facilitates interactions with people from other cultures. Subsequently, they concluded that six elements specific to the affective side of the individual should be present in order to be considered as manifesting a high level of intercultural sensitivity. According to the authors (Chen and Starosta, 2000), these are: self-esteem, self-monitoring, openness, empathy, interaction involvement and the suppression of the act of judging (non-judgment).

For gauging intercultural sensitivity Chen and Starosta (2000) developed a highly regarded measuring tool: the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. This instrument is presented in the form of a questionnaire consisting of 24 questions, marked according to the Likert scale, with values from 1 to 5, as follows: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neither agree nor disagree, 4 - disagree agreement, 5 - completely agree. According to Chen and Starosta, the questions were constructed on the basis of five influencing factors: respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness and interaction enjoyment (Chen and Starosta, 2000). The relevance and validity of the instrument were tested by researchers, each of them obtaining, in turn, very good results, which demonstrates an ability of the instrument to address various groups. Additionally, the authors (Chen and Starosta, 2000) included in the questionnaire four reverse-coded questions, which address these statements in a negative tone, for example: "I do not like being around people from other cultures". Their purpose is to allow participants flexibility in thinking.

Langley and Breese (2005) conducted a study aimed to observe behavioral changes among students who undertook study abroad programs. The results indicated a significant decrease for stereotyping and the tendency to judge other people. Moreover, an increased interesed was observed for both national culture and towards the cultures encountered

through the project. One result that many researchers have reached is that it may be sufficient for the student to show a real desire to study abroad in order to be considered as having a high level of intercultural skills. Williams (2005), as a result of a comparative study between domestic students and international students, indicates that intercultural communication skills can be better predicted by the exposure to a diversity of culture rather than by localization. Penington and Wildermuth (2005) reached some very relevant results regarding the level of intercultural competences among students, being interested in observing the impact of short-term study abroad programs. Similar to the conclusions formulated by Williams (2005), the authors found that there is a correlation between participation in the study abroad program and an increase in the level of cultural awareness. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2006) conducted a pilot study to measure the impact of short-term study abroad programs on the level of intercultural sensitivity. Their study shows uniqueness due to the fact that the study abroad program in question was not one with a theme strictly focused on learning a language. The authors' conclusion was that these short-term experiences can have a positive impact on intercultural sensitivity, with a significant increase in adaptability and tolerance.

The University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School conducts an annual research project aimed at solving leadership problems. In 2015, this research project focused on the issues of skills needed for leaders to be successful in the current economic context. To this end, the university in question surveyed over 300 professionals in various fields: human resources, training and education. The results were published in the report Compete and Connect: Developing Global Competent Leaders (UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute, 2015). According to David Roberts, professor of executive development at Kenan-Flagler, an individual is considered to be globally competent when he or she possesses certain attributes: right functional attitude, knowledge, skills and business expertise, which permits the individual to work effectively in any culture (UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute, 2015). Also, Susan Simmons, director of career management at Michelin North America, emphasizes that the need for these skills should not be

associated only at leadership level, but with all employees, because they all contribute to the success of the company. Elizabeth Gates, executive director of Talent Development at Box, indicates, in the study, that with a better understanding of the global economy and culture, a company's products will be more easily inserted into a target market.

According to the aforementioned study (UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute, 2015), global competencies involve three dimensions:

➢ A positive attitude towards cultural differences, as a result of the presence of self-respect and empathy in the behavior of the individual;

➢ The ability of the individual to speak, understand and think in languages beyond the dominant language in the country of origin;

➢ A deep understanding of world history, geography and a number of other key topics such as health, climate and economy.

The results of the study show that, regardless of the size or objectives of the company, most are aware that culturally fit leaders generate a significant competitive advantage. However, even if they are aware of this requirement, 62% of respondents reported that there is no cultural diversity in senior management positions. When asked to express their opinion on the main qualities that a leader needs in order to be effective in a global business environment, the surveyed experts expressed the ranking illustrated in Figure 1 (UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute, 2015).

The study conducted by UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute (2015) further indicated that more than 71% of respondents stated that the development of cultural sensitivity, especially for leadership positions, is an urgent priority. A worrying result is that only 45% of the leaders, who took part in study, considered the current potential of the company's management as sufficient. Moreover, 52% said their organizations have trouble finding suitable leaders for the required positions.
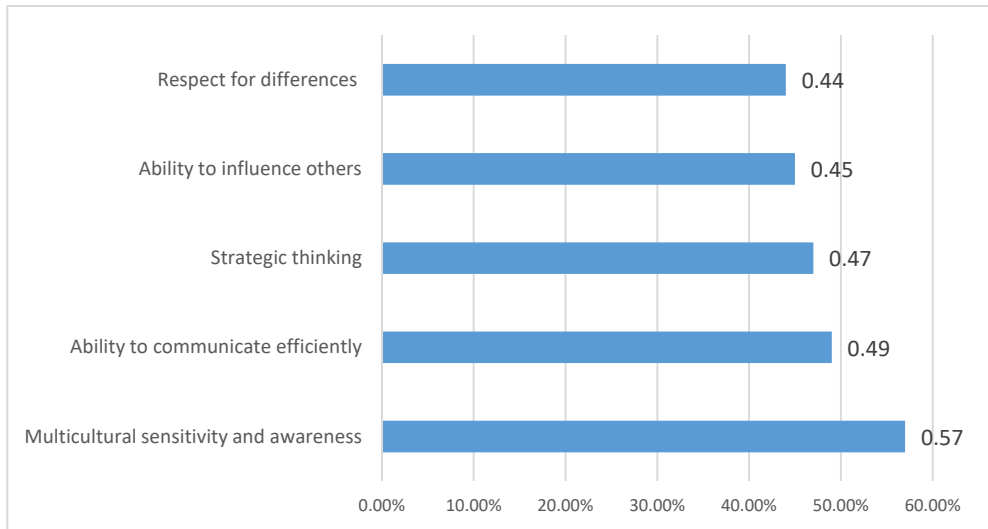
Figure 1: Main qualities required from effective leaders in a global business environment

Source: authors' elaboration based on UNC Executive Development & Human Capital Institute (2015)

Material and Methods

As indicated in the previous sections, the main purpose of this research is to study the impact of Erasmus+ mobility on the level of intercultural sensitivity of individuals. In order to be able to draw relevant conclusions in this regard, a comparative analysis was performed between participants in these mobilities and non-participants. In addition, the aim is to study the link between these intercultural experiences and leadership aspirations. Taking into account both the purpose and objectives presented above, as well as the measuring instrument used, that of Chen and Starosta (2000), the national uniqueness of this study is emphasized.

In order to collect the data necessary to achieve the aforementioned objectives, a questionnaire was constructed and administered. It includes four sections, as follows: Experience, Erasmus+, Intercultural Sensitivity and Information about responders. The first section, called "Experience",

contains a single question: "Did you participate in Erasmus+ type mobility?", and it has two possible answer options: "Yes" or "No". It is intended to separate the two main groups of respondents: Erasmus+ mobility participants and non-participants. Thus, people who did not participate in this type of mobility were redirected to the third section of the questionnaire, the one related to Intercultural Sensitivity. In order to clarify the concept of Erasmus+ mobility, the main forms in which they can take place were also mentioned in brackets: learning abroad, industrial experience abroad, international projects, and voluntary work abroad.

The second section, called "Erasmus+", was intended only for participants in these mobilities, with the aim of collecting additional data related to their individual experience. The information considered to be of interest was: the types of mobilities in which they took part (a multiple choice question), the total duration of the period spent in these mobilities, and the position held in those mobilities (leader or participant). If respondents held a leadership position, they were asked to briefly describe the experience.

The third section was dedicated to measuring the level of intercultural sensitivity, through the instrument developed by Chen and Starosta (2000): the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). The use of this tool was considered relevant given the numerous publications which demonstrate its validity in a multitude of cultural contexts. The ISS is presented in the form of a questionnaire consisting of 24 statements, marked according to the Likert scale, with values from 1 to 5, as follows: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neither agree nor disagree, 4 - agree, 5 - completely agree. Respondents were therefore asked to state to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements made, in order to calculate an individual result. According to the authors (Chen and Starosta, 2000), a higher score signifies a higher individual level of intercultural sensitivity. Along with this requirement, the questionnaire mentioned some further clarifications: there are no correct or wrong answers, and that the respondents should follow the first instinct when reading the statement. The 24 items are grouped according to five influencing factors considered by the authors, namely: Interaction Engagement (involvement in interactions - 7 items), Respect for Cultural Differences (6 items), Interaction Confidence (trust in itself - 5 items), Interaction Enjoyment

(the joy felt in the interactions - 3 items), and Interaction Attentiveness (3 items). Before proceeding to the data analysis, items 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20 and 22 were reverse-coded. This step was absolutely necessary given that, in addition to items formulated in a positive way (e.g. "I like to interact with people from different cultures."), The ISS also has in its structure items that are considered to reflect a negative action (e.g. "I do not like to be around people from other cultures.") This approach aims both to validate individuals' responses through the correlations between positive and negative items, and to create flexibility in thinking, allowing respondents to look at the situation in both.

The last section of the questionnaire includes the following items:

➢ A series of demographic variables: gender, age, graduate education, occupation and income level;

➢ Two questions ("Yes" or "No" type) related to the frequency with which the respondents have contact with people from different cultures and the ways in which these interactions happen (multiple choice type);

➢ Three "Yes" or "No" questions regarding the following situations: I held a leadership position / I hold a leadership position / I plan to hold a leadership position. If they answered yes to any of these questions, respondents are asked to briefly describe the experience.

The questionnaire was disseminated exclusively online, through social media platforms. Given that the study focuses on the analysis of the impact of Erasmus+ mobility, the questionnaire was mostly distributed directly to young people, or in groups in which they are present. In the initial phase, it was opened for answers between 6 and 17 May 2020, and, following a disproportion between the two groups studied, it was distributed for two more days (10 - 11 June 2020) on Facebook groups such as: Erasmus+ Romania, Erasmus+ Opportunities, and Erasmus+ Projects. At the end of the validity period, a total of 170 valid responses were collected through the questionnaire.

The data was analysed using the IBM SPSS program, frequencies and descriptive statistics were used for the individual analysis of each variable addressed in the questionnaire. Subsequently, Alpha Reliability

Analysis was performed to test the validity of each of the five components of the ISS, based on the quality of the responses received in this regard. A series of correlations and T-tests were used to explore the relationship between independent variables (demographics, data on international experience, or leadership) and various components of the ISS (dependent variables). Following a positive result in terms of ISS components, the five composite variables were created as the arithmetic mean of the scores corresponding to each item. Also, a compound variable was created to calculate the individual scores obtained through the ISS, as the arithmetic mean of all item scores.

Results and Discussions

Demographics and additional information about the respondents is summarized in Figure 2. The first question: whether the responders took part in Erasmus+ mobility, revealed that 94 respondents (55.3%) previously participated and 76 (47.7%) did not participate in such projects. Out of the total respondents, 113 (66.5%) are women and 57 (33.5%) are men. Regarding the age categories considered, the situation is as follows: 149 people (87.6%) aged between 18 and 25, 10 people (5.9%) under 18, 8 people (4.7%) aged between 26 and 35 years and only 3 (1.8%) people over 35 years. Regarding the education level achieved undergraduates dominate, counting 101 respondents (59.4%). They are followed by: university graduates (48 or 28.2%), high school graduates (11 or 6.5%), professional school graduates (6 or 3.5%) and postgraduates (4 or 2.4%). Regarding the occupations of the respondents, the sample is structured as follows: 116 students (68.2%), 27 employees (15.9%), 19 high school students (11.2%), 4 entrepreneurs (2.4%) and 4 unemployed people (2.4%). Finally, the structuring according to the participants' income is as follows: 65 people (38.2%) have an income below 1500 lei, 44 people (25.9%) preferred not to answer, 38 people (22.4%) have an income between 1500 and 2500 lei, 13 people (7.6%) have an income between 2500 and 4000 lei, and 10 people (5.9%) earn over 4000 lei.
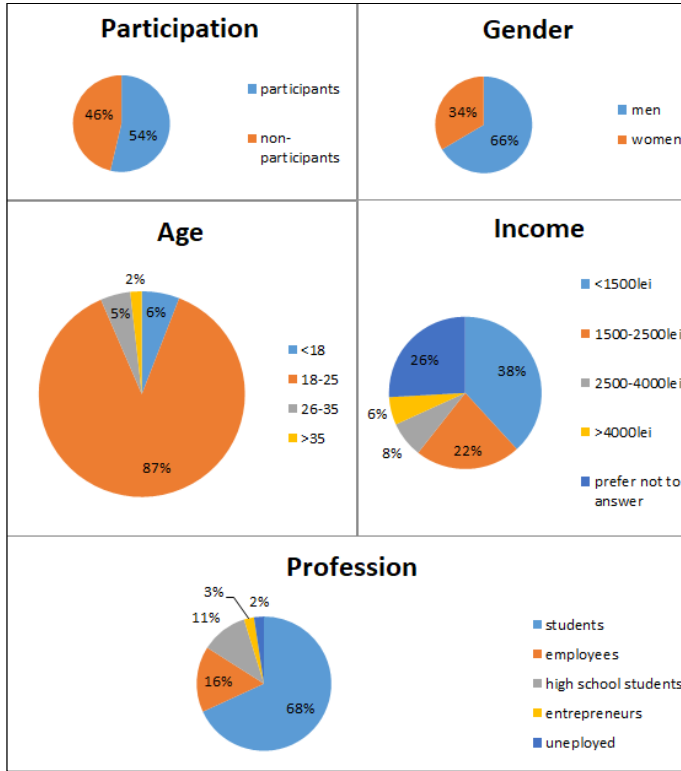
Figure 2: Demographics and information about respondents
Source: authors' own elaboration

After analysing the structure of the studied sample, one can notice a preponderance of young people, and especially students. This is due to both: the channels used to distribute the aforementioned questionnaire, and to the fact that the Erasmus+ program is most popular among students. Regarding the other types of Erasmus+ mobilities, which exclude internships or study abroad (generally specific to students), the existing and known opportunities in Romania are significantly fewer. However, we wanted a diversity related to the typologies of respondents, due to the fact that this type of research has not been previously carried. Therefore, the scores obtained by various groups of individuals were of interest for the carried research.

In the case of the participants who indicated that they enrolled in at least one Erasmus+ mobility, an entire section was dedicated to gathering additional information. This was conducted in order to study the influence of certain independent variables: duration of mobility, types of mobility they participated in, and whether or not they have taken the lead in those mobilities, on intercultural sensitivity. Regarding the duration of these experiences, 40 of the participants (42.6%) spent less than a month, mainly for international projects, exchanges programs, or a short-term practice. A number of 25 respondents (26.6%) had a cumulated period between 3 and 6 months, they are represented mainly by participants to the study and practice mobility. Finally, only 11 participants (11.7%) accumulated an experience of over 9 months, indicating a variety of mobilities in which they took part.

The results for the multiple choice question, regarding the purpose for which the respondents took part in the respective mobility, are presented in Figure 3. It can be seen that participants show a preference for two types of mobility: studying abroad and international projects. As previously mentioned, the higher education system is going through an intense process of internationalization, which has led to countless efforts to enhance studying abroad, such as: increasing the number of scholarships, reducing bureaucracy, and facilitating grade equivalation.
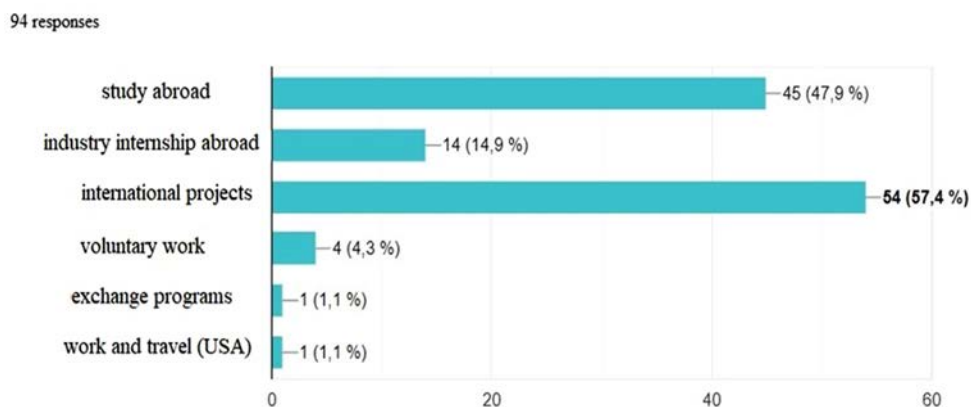

Figure 3: Purpose of mobility
Source: authors' own elaboration

International projects are seen as highly attractive to young people due to the conditions in which they take place: they have a shorter implementation period, address a wide range of current topics, the costs are largely covered by Erasmus+, and they generally manage to meet the needs of the individual, employing non-formal teaching techniques.

The results to the question regarding the leadership position, for the entire sample of respondents (both Erasmus participants and non-participants), are illustrated in Figure 4. As it can be observed, 43 of the non-participants held this position, 19 of them currently hold this position, and, out of a total of 170 respondents, 110 tend to hold such a position in the future. Moreover, a number of 78 Erasmus+ participants (83%) did not hold a leadership position, while the remaining 16 (17%) were allocated such a position.
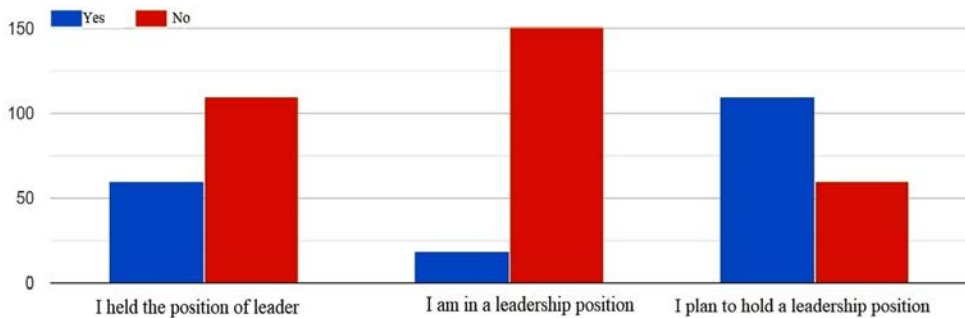

Figure 4: Responses concerning leadership positions
Source: authors' own elaboration

Finally, all participants were asked about the frequency of their interaction with culturally different people: 95 of them (55.9%) answered yes and 75 (44.1%) said no. It can be seen that the results obtained in this respect are very similar to those in the initial question, regarding participation or non-participation in Erasmus+ mobility. Regarding the ways in which these interactions take place, the respondents' options are illustrated in Figure 5.

170 responses

within the family	17 (10 %)
in the neighbourhood	4 (2,4 %)
in the circle of friends	77 (45,3 %)
in the area in which you studied	70 (41,2 %)
within the job	39 (22,9 %)
trips	79 (46,5 %)
international projects	85 (50 %)
online	25 (15 %)

Figure 5: Ways of interacting with people from other cultures
Source: authors' own elaboration

International projects occupy the first place in the top of respondents' preferences, which denotes both: an openness to collaborate with people from different cultures, and behavioural flexibility on their part. We refer to behavioural flexibility as the ability to adapt easily, to get out of the comfort zone and then to cope with the many new situations that are imposed by various experiences. Excursions are also considered to be an important source of contact with people from other cultures. Although they generally take place over short periods of time, individuals have contact with most of the cultural elements of the areas / countries visited e.g. culinary specifics, traditional music, different patterns of behaviour, and clothing styles. The key element in this case is the desire to observe and study these particularities. Another notable result is that a significant number of respondents have a circle of friends characterized by cultural diversity. Therefore, it can be seen that today's young generation is much more open-minded in this regard, being raised in an environment defined by connectivity and access to information. A further argument in this regard is that some respondents have indicated the online environment, especially computer games and social platforms, as a method by which they interact with people from other cultures.

Following the descriptive analysis of the variables, we conducted both an analysis of the correlations between the questions and the Reliability Analysis in SPSS to validate the five components of the ISS in the case of this study. The coefficient employed for measuring the internal consistency is Cronbach's Alpha and, it should have a value close to, or over, 0.7 for these components to be considered reliable. In this case, the component with the highest Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is "Interaction

Confidence" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.808), the only two components that have a value below 0.7 (but close to it) are: "Respect for Cultural Differences" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.681) and "Interaction Enjoyment" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.650). A lower coefficient can be interpreted as a need to revise the tool, or to add items that correspond to that component, in order to be able to strengthen the common points in a certain set of questions. The complete results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient specific to each ISS component

Component	Cronbach's Alpha	Items no.
Interaction Confidence	0.808	5
Interaction Engagement	0.796	7
Interaction Attentiveness	0.761	3
Respect for Cultural Differences	0.681	6
Interaction Enjoyment	0.650	3

Source: authors' own elaboration

The comparison of different groups of respondents according to various criteria was performed using the Split Groups function in SPSS. Given that this research aims to study the differences between participants and non-participants in Erasmus+ mobility, a first delimitation of the two categories was made through the mentioned function. Further splits were conducted based on certain demographic variables.

In order to find out which independent variables influence the scores obtained by the respondents, an analysis of Spearman correlations was performed. Regarding the total scores (and the average scores according to each item), very strongly correlations (0.01 level) are registered with: participation in Erasmus+ projects, the number of types of mobility experienced, and the number of ways in which they interacts with people from other cultures, and moderately (0.05 level) with: the total period spent in mobility, the frequency of interaction with people from other cultures, and the gender of the respondents. Notable results in terms of correlations were also obtained in the case of the individual

study of the five components of the ISS. The "Interaction Engagement" component is closely correlated with the participation of mobility and the number of ways in which it interacts with people from other cultures, and moderately correlated with: the number of types of mobility experienced, the period spent in mobility and the gender of respondents. The "Interaction Enjoyment" component is closely correlated with the assumption of the leading position in mobility and moderately correlated with: participation in mobility, the number of ways to interact with people from other cultures, the period and the number of types of mobility experienced. The "Interaction Confidence" component is strongly correlated with: participation, number of types of mobility, total period of mobility, frequency of interactions with people from other cultures, number of ways to interact, and aspiration to hold a leadership position in the future, and vice versa correlated with income level. The "Interaction Attentiveness" component is strongly correlated with the number of ways in which it interacts with people from other cultures and moderately correlated with: the number of types of mobility experienced and the gender of the participants. The "Respect for Cultural Differences" component is strongly correlated with the number of ways in which they interact with people from other cultures and the gender of the participants.

A comparison between the results obtained by participants and non-participants in Erasmus+ mobilities was carried by taking into account both: the total score and the average score for each item, respectively each constructive component of the ISS. As it can be observed in Table 3, the participants of these mobilities register a higher score of intercultural sensitivity, namely 99.1 (4.1290 / 5) out of a possible total of 120. The non-participants are characterized by a slightly lower score, respectively 94.2 (3.9249 / 5) out of 120. An important finding is that participants register better results in terms of total score, but also in terms of all ISS components. On a closer inspection, the ranking of the scores obtained for each of the components is identical for both groups, as follows: "Respect for Cultural Differences" (4.2675 and 4.3351 respectively), "Interaction Enjoyment" (4.0789, 4.2872 respectively), "Interaction Engagement" (3.9361 and 4.1884 respectively), "Interaction Attentiveness" (3.9035 and 4.0745 respectively) and "Interaction Confidence" (3.4184 and 3.7362 respectively).

Table 3: Participation in Erasmus + mobility

Descriptive Statistics

Did you participate in any Erasmus + mobility?		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
No	SCORE	76	54	116	94.20	13.124
	Mean Score	76	2.25	4.83	3.9249	.54684
	Interaction Engagement	76	1.57	5.00	3.9361	.70272
	Interaction Enjoyment	76	2.67	5.00	4.0789	.64606
	Interaction Confidence	76	1.80	5.00	3.4184	.68987
	Respect for Cultural Differences	76	2.83	5.00	4.2675	.56377
	Interaction Attentiveness	76	1.00	5.00	3.9035	.82339
	Valid N (listwise)	76				
Yes	SCORE	94	56	120	99.10	11.005
	Mean Score	94	2.33	5.00	4.1290	.45856
	Interaction Engagement	94	2.00	5.00	4.1884	.54357
	Interaction Enjoyment	94	3.00	5.00	4.2872	.57756
	Interaction Confidence	94	1.60	5.00	3.7362	.72094
	Respect for Cultural Differences	94	2.67	5.00	4.3351	.53184
	Interaction Attentiveness	94	1.00	5.00	4.0745	.77776
	Valid N (listwise)	94				

Source: authors' own elaboration

A number of important findings were discovered when analysing various variables. The most relevant results are presented below:

➢ Variety of mobility experienced: the number of types of mobility experienced is strongly correlated with assuming a leading position and with the number of ways in which participants currently interact with people from different cultures.

➢ Total period of mobility: strong correlation was found between the time spent in mobility and the frequency with which interactions between participants and culturally different people take place.

➢ Frequency of interactions with people from other cultures: non-participants in mobility who do not interact often with people obtained an average score of 91.44, and those who interact frequently with them obtained an average score of 97.79. Regarding the participants, a higher frequency of these interactions is strongly correlated with a longer period spent in mobility and correlated both with the number of types of mobility experienced and with the assumption of the leading position within them.

➢ The number of ways in which these interactions are performed: in the case of non-participants, a multitude of environments through which they interact at the moment with people from different cultures is strongly correlated with the aspiration for a leadership position in the future and correlated with the total score and the Interaction Confidence component. Regarding the participants, numerous strong correlations were obtained: the number of types of mobility experienced, assuming the leading position in mobility, and the components Respect for Cultural Differences and Interaction Attentiveness.

➢ Holding a leadership position in the past: non-participants who have not been leaders so far have obtained an average score of 93.47, while those who have assumed this responsibility have obtained an average score of 95.68. The participants who were not leaders so far obtained an average score of 98.42, compared to 100.23.

➢ Holding a leading position at the moment: non-participants who currently hold such a position are characterized by an average score of 96.09, while those who do not benefit from this experience obtained an average score of 93.88. Regarding the participants, the trend is the same, respectively the leaders obtaining a higher score (104.88), than non-leaders (98.56).

➢ Aspiring for a leading position in the future: non-participants who do not aspire to such a career obtained an average score of 91.63, and those who do, a score of 95.61. The difference between the two groups in the case of participants exists, but is insignificant: 98.58, respectively 99.38.

➢ Gender: male non-participants are characterized by an average score of 93.14, while females obtained an average score of 95.15. In the case of participants, males obtained an average score of 96.62, and females, an average score of 99.81. With the exception of the Interaction Confidence Component, all other components show higher scores for women than for men in both groups.

➢ Age: only significant correlation with the frequency with which interactions with people from other cultures take place.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate the link between participation in Erasmus+ mobilities and a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. In this sense, delimitation was made between respondents, namely Erasmus+ mobility participants and non-participants. It further aimed to investigate certain variables related to the international experience that could show a certain influence on the aforementioned link. The variables taken into account are: the number of types of mobility experienced and the period spent in these mobilities, the frequency with which current interactions with people from other cultures take place, the number of ways in which they take place, gender, age, recent studies, occupation and income level. Last but not least, the relationship between the reporting of individuals to a leadership position in the past (and in projects), present or future, and the level of intercultural sensitivity was studied.

Following the comparison between the results obtained by the non-participants, with those obtained by the participants, it was found that the latter show a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. Moreover, this trend is also valid for all five components of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS): "Respect for Cultural Differences", "Interaction Confidence", "Interaction Engagement", "Interaction Attentiveness" and "Interaction Enjoyment"; participants in Erasmus+ mobility are found to register higher scores than non-participants. These results could be due to the fact that individuals who opt for such an experience already show a higher level of awareness of cultural differences. The desire to participate in Erasmus+ mobility can emerge as an aspiration to encounter and to explore new cultures.

The results of the study support a strong link between the level of intercultural sensitivity and assuming a leadership position. The scores obtained by former Erasmus+ participants outperform those obtained by non-participants in these variables. Moreover, even if we talk about the case of respondents who have held a leadership position in the past, or the case of those who currently hold or tend to do so, the scores obtained by leaders are substantially higher in both groups. In the case of non-participants who were leaders in the past and those who are

current leaders, a higher level of intercultural sensitivity could mean that they have worked, or are working, in an environment characterized by multiculturalism. This implies a previous requirement on the company's behalf: to have invested in training in order to develop these individual skills. On the other hand, it is possible that such skills were acquired before the currently held position and constituted a significant advantage for professional advancement. Regarding the current leaders, it was noted that those who participated in Erasmus + mobilities obtained the highest score of all the analysed groups.

A comparative analysis of two groups, according to the gender of the respondents, was performed: women were found to register a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. This can be attributed to the fact that, in general, women are educated in such a way as to be much more attentive and empathetic compared to men. Consequently, they are characterized by a much higher level of awareness, a competence that also applies to interactions with people from other cultures, thus leading to a high level of intercultural sensitivity. The same trend is maintained in the case of ISS components, with the exception of Interaction Confidence, being self-evident that, due to universally valid perceptions, men are the ones who excel in this regard.

Another notable result concerns the category of non-participants aspiring to a leadership position. This choice was found to be closely correlated with a high frequency with which current interactions, with people from other cultures, take place, and with a high score on the Interaction Confidence component. Consequently, aspiring leaders seem to realize the importance of culturally diversity within the workplace, and already perceive themselves as culturally flexible.

As a recommendation, following the carried research, the education system should place more emphasis on training young people to gain more intercultural flexibility: both in terms of the necessary knowledge and skills sets. Therefore, students should be enabled to interact, communicate and then collaborate with people from other cultures, given the globalization that characterizes the current socio-economic context. A first step could be the introduction into the curriculum of an intercultural education subject, as early as possible in the educational cycle. Hence, students would have the opportunity: to learn about various cul-

tural elements, to acknowledge the differences in customs and thinking, and to gain intercultural skills. Subsequently, they will show a much higher level of respect and empathy in future interactions with people from other cultures, and their appetite for knowledge in this direction will be aroused. This method is already being applied in many countries and is reported to give everyone an equal chance in the process of developing intercultural skills, not just to those who choose to take part in international projects or mobilities.

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