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ERASMUS DEVELOPMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS: THE CASE OF KLAIPĖDA CITY

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Abstract

In a world that is becoming more globalized, education is one of the top priorities for nations. Countries have started to invest more money into global education. Numerous short and long-term education and exchange arrangements are created with this aim. One of the most popular of these exchange agreements is the Erasmus+ Exchange Program. Based on this, the study sought to examine the causes, incentives, expectations, and experiences that led students participating in the Erasmus+ Exchange Program in Klaipėda, Lithuania, to participate in Erasmus as well as the benefits of Erasmus to students. The study used a qualitative research methodology, and the semi-structured interviewing approach was utilized to gather data. Comparative analysis and content analysis were used for the gathered data. The analyses conducted revealed that most of the expectations of the Erasmus-participating students were similar. For example, traveling in Europe, socializing, experiencing a different educational system, and language development. Additionally, it has been observed that Erasmus affects students in both positive and negative ways. It has been observed that these effects are within the framework of personal development, education, socialization, language development, and cultural experience. Students who enrol in Erasmus with similar goals and expectations may experience the program in quite diverse ways from one another. It has been noted that most students choose the country for Erasmus, particularly considering economic considerations, and it has been emphasized that in some cases their economic predictions may not come true.

KEY WORDS: Erasmus+ Exchange Program; Erasmus in Klaipėda; Erasmus Experience; Study Abroad; Cultural Exchange.

Introduction

Education directly affects the quality of a country's human resources. Considering the globalization movements, one of the areas of education that countries can invest in is an international education and student exchange. International education and student exchange, i.e., student mobility; foreign language, academic development, basic competencies, communication skills, social skills, cultural awareness, entrepreneurship, etc. helps the development of students in terms of qualifications. At the same time, students can gain the ability to "learn to learn" (Konevas and Duoba, 2007).

In the developing and changing world order, countries want to raise more qualified individuals. In this direction, they support their students to study abroad. In this direction, they support their students at the point of studying abroad for the short or long term (Karadağ, 2022). Nowadays, studying abroad, culture, exchange, etc. there are many programs in the fields. Students are increasingly demanding at the point of participation in these programs. The Erasmus+ Exchange Program is just one of them.

Knowing a foreign language is not enough to communicate and cooperate with people from other countries in the globalizing world. It is necessary to have other intercultural competences that make it possible to live successfully and work effectively. Such as to know more about different cultures, to reduce misunderstandings between people of different nationalities, understanding the opinions and thoughts of

different nations, identifying cultural differences and similarities, to provide effective communication and cooperation with people from different countries (Mauricienė, 2013). In this context, the Erasmus Program appears as an exchange program that can offer multiple competencies together.

In this study, it is aimed to analyse the reasons for participating in Erasmus and choosing Lithuania for Erasmus students coming to Lithuania within the scope of the Erasmus+ Exchange Program, their motivation to participate in Erasmus, their expectations and experiences in the Erasmus process, and the achievements of students from Erasmus and Lithuania. Although Lithuania is developing to the point of welcoming Erasmus students, it is thought that this study will contribute to the field summer due to the fact that there is not much research on Erasmus+ mobility in Lithuania in the literature.

Literature Review

Erasmus+ Exchange Program provides grant support to the participants in the fields of education, training, and sports to support education and youth. The program is conducted by the National Agency under the European Commission (Özel, 2021). Erasmus+, is aimed to ensure that participants educate themselves well and improve employment opportunities

(https://www.ua.gov.tr/programlar/_erasmus-programi/, National Agency of Turkey)

Similarly, students participate in the Erasmus+ Program for assorted reasons such as supporting their

personal development, improving their foreign language levels, benefiting from a different education system, and experiencing foreign cultures. The studies of Aslan and Jacobs (2014) show that in parallel with other studies in the literature, the reasons for students to participate in Erasmus+ exchange programs are to learn a language and live in a different culture. According to the study of Karadağ (2022), many dimensions such as parental income status, parental education level, and the participant student's own personality traits affect the participation of students in Erasmus (Karadağ, 2022).

Higher education students want to develop and educate themselves in the best viable way during their education and to be able to find an easier and better job after graduation. In recent years, the effect of the knowledge and skills gained by the students participating in the Erasmus program on their employment opportunities has also started to be examined (Dinçer, Aslan, and Bayraktar, 2017). Considering the current competitive environment, it is common for students to want to prepare themselves for life after education and to consider or participate in the Erasmus+ Program accordingly. Thus, they will have the chance to be employed more easily as more qualified and equipped individuals (Gözcü, 2021). In this context, it is stated that studying abroad has a positive effect on the future professional careers of students, helping career development, student mobility, employment possibilities of individuals, their chances of working abroad, and increasing their language proficiency. (Schnepf and Colagrossi, 2020; González, Mesanza, and Mariel, 2011). In addition, it is believed that studying abroad helps to develop language learning, intercultural skills, self-confidence, and self-awareness in addition to professional career and education (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013).

There are assorted reasons for students to choose the country or university where they will do Erasmus from an academic, economic, cultural, or political point of view. There is often more than one preference criterion for the preferred university or country. In particular, the professionalism of the institution that will provide education, academic goodwill, flexibility in courses, international awareness of the institution, the number of grants to be given, living and tuition expenses, etc. These are the main criteria for students to choose the country and university where they will do Erasmus (Selickaite and Reklaitiene, 2015). On the other hand, geographical location, weather, culture, the economic and social position of the country, cost of living, education system, language used, perceived image, and recommendations are also among the factors that are effective in choosing the country to study (Lee, 2014).

There are many countries that students can choose from within the scope of Erasmus's mobility. According to Breznik and Skrbinjek's research, the countries that send and receive the most students under Erasmus are Spain, France, Italy, and Germany; the countries with the highest number of students are Sweden, Finland, the UK, and Portugal; the countries that send the most students are Belgium and the Czech Republic (Brenzik and Skrbinjek, 2019).

Erasmus students are one of the indicators of the internationality of institutions. The number of incoming

Erasmus students is considered as an important indicator of the performance of a higher education institution. For this reason, it is important to understand the reasons and motivations of Erasmus students for choosing a country or university, as well as their expectations from that country and university correctly. Lithuania has become increasingly preferred by students within the scope of the Erasmus+ exchange program. In particular, the number of students who prefer Lithuania from countries outside the European Union is higher than the number of students who prefer it from European Union countries. Some of the reasons why incoming students prefer Lithuania are the natural beauties that the country has, and the fact that it has a coast to the Baltic Sea and is considered a safe country. The city of Klaipėda is generally preferred because of its climate or on the recommendations of people who have experienced it before (Štraupaitė, 2020).

Erasmus has some effects on students. These effects are seen as individual effects, academic effects, social effects, and language skills (Özdem, 2013). Studies in the literature show that studying abroad has many benefits such as improving students' language skills, critical thinking skills, intercultural communication skills, and personal development (Erdem Mete, 2017). It has many positive contributions such as the development of foreign language levels, changing perspectives and becoming more open to diverse cultures, and improving communication skills (Adanır and Susam, 2019). In addition, after Erasmus, students can understand diverse cultures more easily and may want to experience cultural changes again. This shows that Erasmus has a transformative effect on the participants. As can be seen, there are different experiences of participants in the Erasmus process. The contribution of the process to people is not always in normal ways. During the Erasmus process, students also gain many benefits from different angles, such as being faced with unusual and unexpected situations (Nada and Legutko, 2022).

In general, Erasmus mobility provides many cultural benefits to students. Students have the opportunity to get to know diverse cultures through Erasmus, to make friends from diverse cultures, to experience the cuisines of different countries, to travel to different countries, to exhibit their own cultures, etc. they can have a lot of cultural awareness (Tetik, 2019). Another benefit is the elimination of prejudices and the strengthening of international solidarity among students due to the continuation of student mobility and intercultural communication (Mutlu, 2020). In this context, the benefits that stand out are personal development and intercultural harmony (Button, Green, Tengnah, Johansson, and Baker, 2004).

Methodology

The sample of the study consists of 25 students who came to Lithuania, Klaipėda from 9 different countries for the Erasmus+ exchange program in the Autumn semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. "Easily Accessible Case Sampling" was used to determine the sample. This research was planned and conducted within the framework of the qualitative research approach. In the process of data collection, a semi-structured interview

form consisting of four main sections and 24 questions in total, prepared by the researchers in accordance with the literature, was used as a data collection tool. The semi-structured interview method was used because it provides a very flexible technique for small-scale research and provides more useful data when the sample size is relatively small and allows thematic analysis of qualitative data (Pathak and Intratat, 2012). The interview form sections are Demographic data, Before Erasmus, During Erasmus, and after Erasmus. The data were collected through interviews. After the data collection, the comparative analysis method was used as the analysis method. Comparative analysis improves our descriptive abilities and is crucial in the concept-formation process since it draws out suggested similarities and differences across cases (Finifter, 1993). The content analysis of the data was made by the researchers and the MAXQDA 2022 program was used to evaluate the analysed data. Content analysis Formally, content analysis is a research technique that uses context to make iterative and reliable inferences from data (Krippendorff, 1989).

Results

Ages: When we examined the ages of the participants, it was seen that 52% of the participants were between the ages of 20-22, 36% were between the ages of 23-25 and 12% were over the age of 25.

Gender: When the gender of the participants is examined, it is seen that 88% of the participants are male and 12% are female.

Country: When we examined where the participants were from, it was seen that 14 of them were Turkish, 4 were Spanish, 1 was French, 1 was German, 1 was Afghan, 1 was Egyptian, 1 was Gambian, 1 was Croatian and 1 was Italian.

Departments; When the departments of the participants are examined; Business Administration (n=4), Management Information Systems (n=3), Political Science and Public Administration (n=2), Technology (n=2), Economy (n=2), Tourism (n=2), Tourism Guidance (n=1), Maritime Management (n=1), Marine Sciences (n=1), Finance (n=1), Electrical and Electronics Engineering (n=1), Information Systems (n=1), Physiotherapy (n=1), Energy Management (n=1), Classical Philology (n=1), and Marine Transportation Management (n=1).

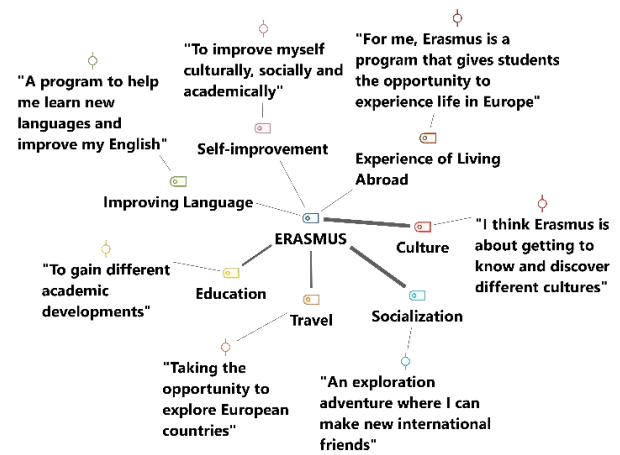


Fig. 1. Definition of Erasmus in terms of students

The participants were asked what Erasmus means to them and it was observed that the participants mentioned the dimension of culture and socialization more often. After the Code-Sub code-sections model analysis, it is seen that the participants mentioned the cultural dimension 15 times, the socialization dimension 15 times, the travel dimension 10 times, the education dimension 9 times, the language development dimension 5 times, the personal development dimension 3 times and experience of living abroad dimension 3 times. When we examine the dimensions, Erasmus for the participants is “experiencing new cultures” in terms of culture, “meeting with people from different cultures and making friends” in terms of socialization, “having a chance to discover Europe” in terms of travel, “experiencing the education system and academic structure of Europe” in terms of education, “learning new languages and improving English skills” in terms of language development, “contributing to their academic, social and cultural personal development” in terms of personal development, and “experiencing life in Europe” in terms of life experience abroad.

If a new definition of Erasmus is required considering the pertinent responses to this question, “Erasmus is an experience of living abroad that provides the opportunity to discover new cultures while traveling in Europe, to meet people from different cultures and languages, and to improve oneself in terms of language development, education and personal development.”

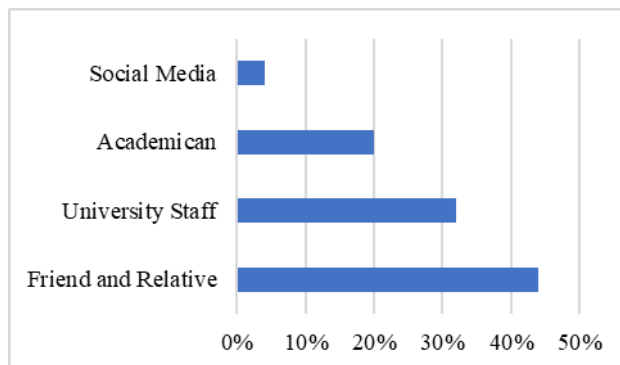


Fig. 2. Resources for students to learn about Erasmus

Participants were asked where they learned about the Erasmus exchange program and document-based frequency analysis was applied to the answers received. Accordingly, 44% of the participants stated that they learned Erasmus from friends and relatives, while 32% stated that they learned it from university staff, 20% said that they learned it from academics and only 4% stated that they learned Erasmus through social media.

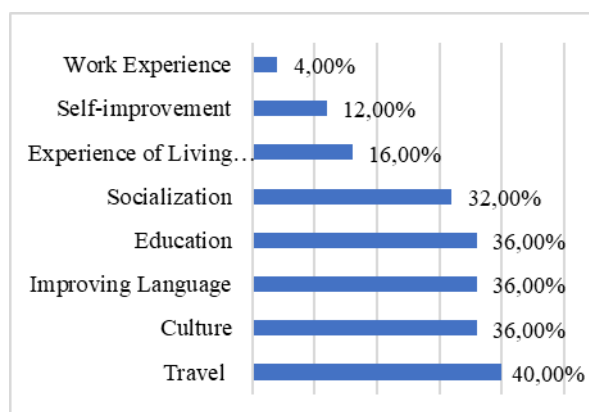
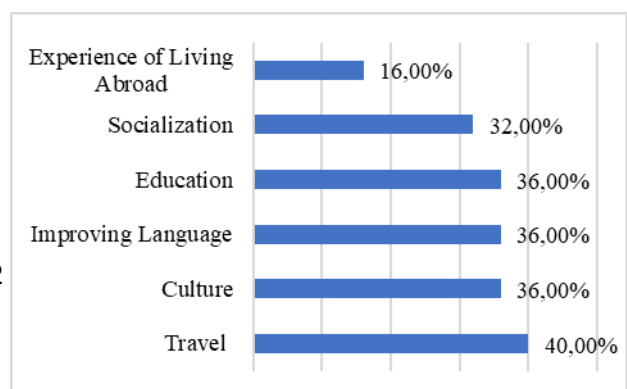


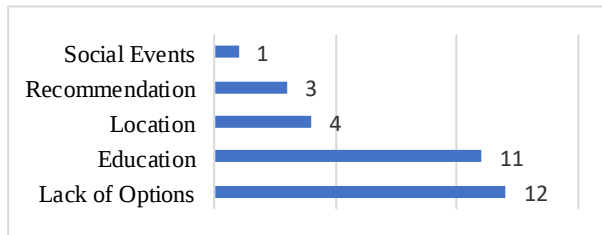
Fig. 3. Reasons for students to choose their first preferred countries

The participants were asked in which order they preferred Lithuania for the Erasmus program and a document-based frequency analysis was applied according to the answers received. After the analysis, it was observed that 52% of the participants preferred Lithuania as the first choice, 32% preferred Lithuania as the second choice, 8% preferred Lithuania as the third choice and the remaining 8% preferred Lithuania as the fourth choice. When we examine the first preferred countries of the participants, it is seen that there are a total of six countries. These countries are Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Spain, Finland, and Croatia. In this context, it is seen that 13 participants included Lithuania as their first choice, while 7 participants chose Poland as their first choice, 2 participants Hungary, 1 participant Spain, 1 Participant Finland, and 1 participant Croatia as their first choice. When the reasons why the participants preferred the relevant countries in the first choice were examined, it was observed that the Economy, Education, Socialization, Culture, Language Improvement, Lack of Options, Advice, and the Nature of the Country were the effective elements.

When the main reasons why the countries preferred under the Erasmus program are in the first place are examined, it is seen that 35.1% of the participants mentioned the Economy, 21.6% Education, 13.5% Socialization, 10.8% Culture, 8.1% Language Development, 5.4% Lack of Options, 2.7% Advice and 2.7% Nature at least once. When the contents of the related reasons are examined, it is observed that the fact that it is an economically more liveable and cheaper country increases the priority of the country to be selected from the point of view of Erasmus. In addition, the education system, universities, and academicians of the relevant country are among the factors that bring a country to the forefront during the choice. When we examine preferences in terms of socialization and culture, the fact that a country has an interesting culture and provides opportunities to explore this culture is observed as one of the essential elements that help to bring the relevant country to the forefront during the choice. Further, if a country can provide different opportunities for language improvement, this country is also at the forefront of preference. Again, it is observed that the recommendation and the natural structure of the country also affect the preference of the relevant country in the first place. Only 5.4% of the respondents stated that they chose the relevant country because they did not have any different options.

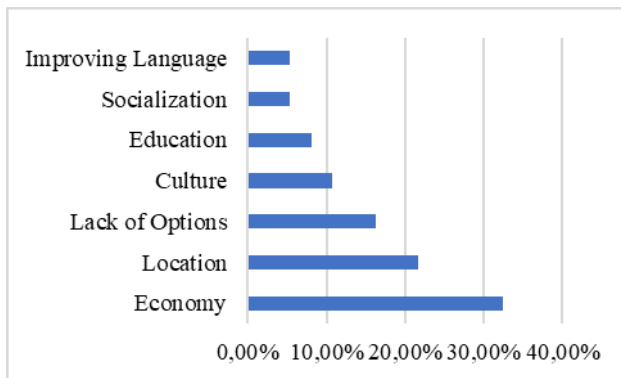
Fig. 4. Expectations of students before coming to Erasmus





When the expectations of the participants before participating in the Erasmus program are examined, 34% of the participants have an expectation of socializing, 20.8% have an expectation of traveling, 17% expect quality education, and 13.2% learn about new cultures. It is seen that 13.2% of them expect to improve their English language level and learn new languages, and finally 1.9% of them expect to contribute to their personal development.

When asked whether the Erasmus process they went through met their expectations, 60% of the participants said that Erasmus met my expectations, while 40% said that it did not meet their Erasmus expectations. When the



answers of the participants, who stated that their expectations were met were examined, it was seen that the expectations of language development, travel, socialization, and access to quality education were met, and when we examined the answers of the participants who said that they did not meet my expectations, the problem was mostly the behavioural attitudes of the Lithuanian people towards foreign students.

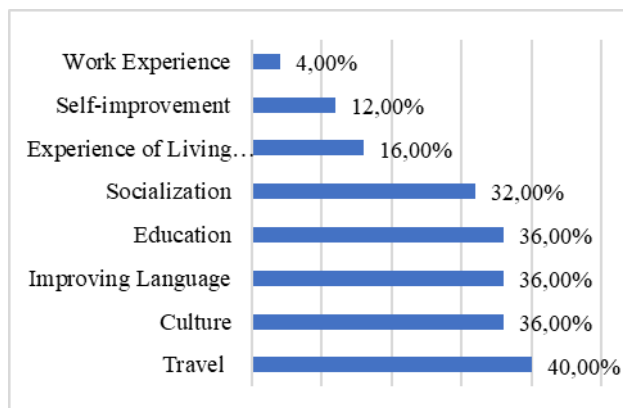


Fig. 5. Reasons for students to participate in Erasmus

When asked why students participate in Erasmus, it was determined that 40% of the participants mentioned the travel dimension, 36% of the participants mentioned the cultural dimension, 36% of them mentioned the language development dimension, 36% of them mentioned the education dimension, 32% of them mentioned socialization dimension, 16% of them mentioned the life experience in abroad dimension, 12% of them mentioned the personal development dimension and 4% of them mentioned the gaining work experience at least once. In general, when the students' reasons to participate in Erasmus+ Exchange Program were examined, it was seen that some of the reasons were to travel easily within Europe, getting to know and experiencing new cultures, learning new languages, and improve their current English level, to study at universities that provide quality education, taking courses from qualified academicians, meeting new people and making friends from different cultures, to leave their comfort zone and gaining new experiences in the new environment, to contribute their personal development and gain new work experiences.

Fig. 6. Reasons for students to choose the universities they have chosen for Erasmus

When students were asked why they chose the university where they are currently doing Erasmus+ Exchange Program, it was determined that 12 participants preferred it because they did not have the option to choose any other university except the relevant university, 11 participants choose it because they thought the university's education is in a good quality, 4 participants choose it because they thought the location of the university close to important areas, 3 participants preferred it because of the recommendations they received from people, and one of them preferred it because of the social activities offered by the university are sufficient.

Fig. 7. Reasons why students choose Lithuania for Erasmus

When examined why the participants preferred Lithuania for Erasmus, it was seen that 32.4% of participants preferred Lithuania due to economic reasons, 21.6% of them choose it because of the location of Lithuania, and 16.2% of them preferred it because of their limited options. 10.8% of them were interested in Lithuanian culture because 8.1% of them wanted to take quality education, 5.4% of them chose it because of socialization opportunities and activities and 5.4% of them preferred it to improve language skills. When the participant's reasons for choosing Lithuania are examined, the most mentioned reason by the participants is economic reasons. It is seen that the most important reasons for the participants to choose Lithuania are that they think that Lithuania is a cheap country to live in and that the amount of grant given is sufficient for their general living expenses in Lithuania. Regarding the location of Lithuania, which is another reason, the participants mentioned that Lithuania is located in the Baltic Region and is close to other northern countries. Regarding the lack of options, there was not any other country that the participants could choose for Erasmus+

caused the students to choose Lithuania. When the cultural reason was examined, it was determined that the cultural values of Lithuania were seen as interesting by the participants, and therefore they preferred Lithuania. In terms of education reason, it was seen that the participants thought that the education system of Lithuania was successful, so they wanted to study in Lithuania. In addition, it was seen that a group of participants thought that it would be easier to socialize in Lithuania and they preferred Lithuania due to the diversity of social activities. Another reason the participants preferred Lithuania for Erasmus+ was that they thought that Lithuania would provide a good opportunity for improving language skills.

Living Experience Abroad: According to the answers of the participants, it was seen that 52% of the participants had previous living experience in different countries, while 48% of them had no experience of living in a different country. In addition, when the participants were asked about their opinions about living abroad after their Erasmus experience, 68% of the participants stated that they want to live abroad and 32% of them stated that they do not want to live abroad. Only 11% of students who want to live abroad stated that they want to live in Lithuania.

Contribution of Erasmus to Self-Improvement: At the point of whether Erasmus+ contributes to personal development, 88% of the participants stated that participating in Erasmus+ contributes to personal development, and 12% of them stated that participating in Erasmus+ does not contribute to personal development. When the answers of the participants who thought that Erasmus+ contributes to personal development are examined, it has been seen that leaving their comfort zones, and living abroad with foreign cultures are factors that contribute to self-development.

The Contribution of Erasmus to Education: When asked whether Erasmus+ has any contribution in terms of education, 68% of the participants stated that Erasmus+ contributed to education, and 32% of them stated that Erasmus+ did not contribute to education. When the answers of the participants who said that Erasmus+ contributed in terms of education were examined, the education system of the universities in Lithuania, methods of applying lectures by academics, variety of course content, and the absence of any language barriers in universities identified as the main reasons.

Culture Shock: When the participants were asked whether they had experienced any culture shock within their Erasmus+ experience, 56% of the participants stated that they experienced culture shock, while 44% of them stated that they did not experience any culture shock. When the answers of the participants who experienced culture shock were examined, it was seen that the participants experienced culture shock in terms of food, economy, and behavior of Lithuanian people. Among these three reasons, the most emphasized point was the behavior of the Lithuanian people. It was expressed by the participants that Lithuanian people are closed-minded, cold, introverted, and intolerant towards foreigners. At

the same time, some of the participants stated that they encountered rude behavior from the local people. This situation was described as a culture shock by the participants as it was a situation, they were not unusual in the country they came from.

The Amount of The Grant and Its Sufficiency: The participants were asked whether they received any grant from the university they came from, it was seen 56% of the participants received grants between 1700-2000 Euros, 20% of them received grants below 1700 Euros, 20% of them did not receive any grant, and 4% of the participants received grant more than 2000 Euros. Afterwards, the participants were asked whether the grant they received was sufficient for the Erasmus process in Lithuania. Accordingly, it was seen that 8 of the 20 grant recipients said that the amount of the grant they received was sufficient, while 12 people said that the amount of the grant they received was not sufficient for this process. There are some common basic reasons such as the fact that Lithuania is a more expensive country than expected, increasing costs of meeting basic needs in Lithuania, socializing areas are limited in Lithuania and the cost of the available areas is high expressed by those who find the grant amount insufficient. When the answers of the participants who thought that the amount of grant, they received was sufficient were examined, it was stated that the amount of the grant would be sufficient for basic living expenses while it was seen that they stated that the grant would not be sufficient for additional elements such as socialization, entertainment, and travel.

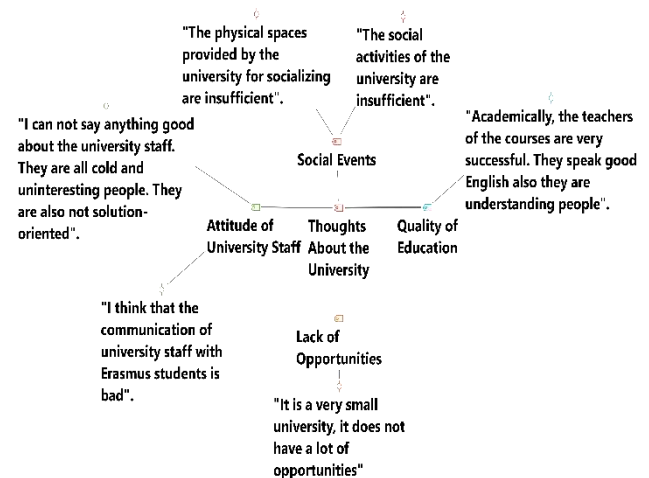


Fig. 8. Students' thoughts about the university where they did Erasmus

The participants' opinions about the university where they are participating in the Erasmus program were solicited. When the responses were evaluated, it was discovered that 91.7% of the participants spoke of the quality of education, 50% spoke of the conduct and attitudes of the university staff, 25% spoke of the lack of opportunities at the institution, and 12.5% spoke of social events. When the replies of the participants were examined, it became clear that those who spoke about the quality of education mostly focused on the calibre of the university's academics and the suitability of the course materials it provided. Additionally, it was noted that participants had unfavourable opinions regarding the conduct and attitudes of university employees,

particularly regarding communication issues. In addition, it is seen that the participants have negative evaluations of the physical facilities and social activities of the universities as they are insufficient. The participants were asked whether they thought about choosing the universities they were doing Erasmus at again. While 28% of participants said they may choose the same university again, 72% said they would not choose the same university again.

When the participant's reasons for considering the same university were explored, it was discovered that they typically believed that the education the university provided was of a high caliber and that the physical facilities were adequate for instruction. When we examine the reasons of the participants who do not intend to choose the same university again, it was observed that the participants generally wanted to have a different experience in a different place and stated that they would not prefer the same university again for reasons such as the negative attitudes and behaviours of the staff of the university and the lack of opportunities of the university and the city.

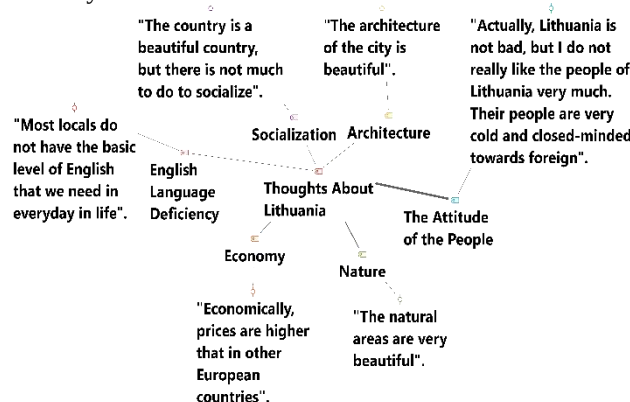


Fig. 9. Students' thoughts about Lithuania

When we asked the participants about their thoughts about Lithuania, it was observed that 85.7% of the participants mentioned the behaviour and attitudes of local people, 33.3% the nature of the country, 33.3% the economy, 14.3% the lack of English language, 9.5% the socialization and 4.8% the architecture of the country at least one time. When we looked at what the participants thought about Lithuania, we found that they had positive opinions of the country's nature and architecture but negative opinions of its economy, socialization, English language proficiency, and the attitudes and behaviour of the locals. Some participants stated that they thought that their living costs would be more affordable before coming to Lithuania, but when they came to Lithuania, their living costs were high, and inflation was higher than they expected.

When the answers to the questions about choosing Lithuania again were examined, 72% of the participants stated that they would like to choose Lithuania again, while 28% stated that they would not choose Lithuania again for Erasmus. The participants who are thinking of choosing Lithuania again mostly stated that they would prefer Lithuania to study at the same universities again because they are satisfied with the quality of the education they received. Other participants stated that

they would not prefer Lithuania again, especially due to the negativity in the attitudes and behaviours of the local people and the fact that they want to have different experiences in different countries.

Conclusions

With globalization, it is seen that countries are trying to improve their activities in the field of education. Thus, they will be able to develop their countries with more qualified graduates. However, this target is a process that will take time and therefore it will not be sufficient for a country to organize educational activities only within itself, to produce more qualified graduates, and to improve the conditions of the country. From this point of view thanks to the international agreements made regarding education, students are encouraged to take short or long-term education outside their own country. It allows students to experience the educational standards and life opportunities of different countries, interact with diverse cultures of students and further develop themselves in many aspects, such as language, vision, and personal development. Since it is believed that students who have acquired these skills and requirements will become qualified employees after graduation, many agreements are being made between countries and universities today in order to contribute to the development of their countries. The Erasmus+ Exchange Program is one of these agreements. Erasmus is extremely popular among student exchange programs because of the grant support provided to students by the European Commission and the advantages that students from both countries within the European Union and countries outside the European Union can benefit decently from the education system of different countries of Europe.

With the Erasmus+ program, it is possible to study in many countries of Europe today. Due to the differences in living standards, the potential expenses of the students were considered on a country basis, and accordingly, they were grouped among the countries included in the Erasmus program. First and second group countries are: Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Southern Cyprus, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Greece; third group countries are: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Turkey. Students who will go to the first and second group countries with educational mobility receive a monthly grant of 600 euros, and students who will go to the third group countries with educational mobility receive a monthly grant of 450 euros. Students who go to the first and second group countries with internship mobility are provided with 750 euro grant support, and students who go to the third group countries with internship mobility are provided with 600 euro grant support.

According to the research conducted, most students who are considering participating in the Erasmus program choose a country based on economic concerns. Participants try to estimate their expenses by considering

the cost of living in the countries they will go to. It has been observed that participants use their economic forecasts as the first criterion when choosing the countries, they will go to. Lithuania, where students come for the Erasmus+ exchange program, can take the first place in the preferences of some students for this reason, as well as for various other reasons. However, this prediction and foresight may not always give accurate results. Students' economic forecasts before coming to Lithuania for Erasmus and their experiences and thoughts after coming to Lithuania differ in this respect is observed that a large majority of respondents think that Lithuania is more expensive than expected and that the inflation rate is higher than in other European Union countries. This experience seems to have taken Lithuania out of the first place in their preferences for students who want to have a second Erasmus experience. Some of the Erasmus students emphasized that the grant amount was sufficient for basic living expenses, but the grant was insufficient for socializing and traveling. Considering that Erasmus is not only an educational program but also a cultural exchange program that can add vision to students, it is recommended to improve the grants given. It is thought that students can become graduates and qualified employees of the future only when education and experience are together, and this proposal is thought to be important for the development of relevant experience.

In addition to the economic reasons, exchange students are also affected by the quality of education, the language of the education provided, the language commonly used in the country, the location of the country, the climate of the country, the nature of the country, the culture of the country, etc. It has been observed that they prefer Lithuania for Erasmus for many varied reasons. According to the data obtained from the interviews, it was observed that the students had a particularly strong motivation to socialize and travel before coming to Erasmus. Accordingly, it has been observed that students who are considering participating in Erasmus want to dare to go out of their comfort zone, want to push their own limits, be open to diverse cultures and new experiences, or at least have the desire to improve themselves at these points.

It has been observed that students' expectations before coming to Lithuania for Erasmus and their experiences after coming to Lithuania differ in some cases. It is seen that the Erasmus process in Lithuania does not contribute as much as some students expect, especially students who are considering improving their English language level. Some students also emphasize Lithuania's limited options for socializing. When we examine the main reason for the differences between the expectations and experiences of the students participating in the Erasmus+ exchange program, the most frequently mentioned factors are the fact that the local people in Lithuania are closed to foreign cultures, most of the local people do not know English, those who know do not speak a foreign language and their negative attitude towards foreigners and behaviours were found to be common causes. Although it was stated that there were some negative experiences by the participants, it is also seen that most of the Erasmus students have positive common ideas about the preservation of the nature and architectural structure of

Lithuania. This situation is likely to cause students to intend to visit Lithuania again in the future. While it was seen that many of the participants wanted to experience living abroad again after the Erasmus experience, it was seen that only a few people could choose Lithuania again.

When the main reasons shaping the participants' university preferences for Erasmus are examined, reasons such as the quality of academicians and education, and the adequacy of the physical facilities of the institution are mostly encountered. It is seen that some of the students who evaluated the education process they received stated that they would prefer the same university. These reasons are basically that the language of education is English, the academicians they take courses from, and the quality of education meets their expectations. It was observed that most of the participants stated that they would not prefer the universities they did Erasmus in Lithuania again because they wanted to have new and different experiences at a different university. Also, similar participants had some expectations about the physical, academic, and other facilities of the university before coming to Lithuania. However, they state that they will not choose the same university again on the grounds that they think that their expectations are not met. This shows that, contrary to the opinion of Štraupaitė (2020), it is not correct to associate a significant part of an institution's performance with the number of Erasmus students who prefer it. It is seen that it would be more accurate to evaluate the performance of the institution in line with the opinions of the students who are in the Erasmus process and have completed the process.

It is seen that Erasmus has a significant impact on students in many areas such as language, education, cultural exchange, personal development, and life experience. It was stated by students that studying in Lithuania generally improves their English foreign language level. One of Erasmus' benefits for students is the chance to learn new languages and the opportunity to strengthen their language skills. Among the other benefits of Erasmus for students are opportunities to experience a different educational system for students from outside of Europe and study abroad for students from within Europe. In keeping with the chances offered to students by Erasmus, students can benefit from simpler career opportunities in the future by gaining a more varied education, increasing the number and proficiency of foreign languages, and fostering their personal growth.

The majority of students who have participated in Erasmus believe that it has had a substantial impact on their personal growth. Living with foreign cultures and understanding them, accepting cultural differences, and avoiding prejudices, developing crisis management skills, living in a different country, having an international experience that they can use multiple languages, making foreign friends, experiencing different food cultures, and getting out of the routine and comfort zone can also be defined as growing, maturing, and learning. From this vantage point, it becomes clear that in addition to enrolling in a course at a foreign university, living with people from distinct cultures also significantly contributes to an individual's personal growth. As mentioned in previous studies on Erasmus (Jacobone and

Moro, 2015; Tekin and Gencer, 2013; Cuzzocrea and Krzaklewska, 2022), personal development manifests itself as a positive output of Erasmus. From this point of view, it can be thought that personal development is a part of education.

Most of the students reported experiencing culture shock when questioned about their Erasmus experience in Lithuania. The primary causes of the culture shock mentioned are the food culture and the negative traits seen in the attitudes and behaviors of the Indigenous people. It is believed that one factor that will prevent students from picking Lithuania again in the future is the locals' lack of receptivity to other cultures. At this point, to ensure more positive cultural interactions in the future, it is proposed that Lithuanian universities, academics, and other interested parties provide more incentives for Lithuanian students to go to various countries for Erasmus. In addition, it is suggested to give motivation to students at the point of recognition and understanding of diverse cultures. Promoting students' international travel for academic objectives need to be seen as an advantage rather than a loss. Thus, the foundations for a society with more diverse viewpoints in the future can be established.

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