

Exploring Motives and Challenges in the Erasmus+ Student Mobility Program: A Case Study of Khazar University Students

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Received: 20th June 2024; Accepted: 28th Jan 2025; Published online: 31st January 2025

Abstract

A significant advancement in educational mobility is the emergence of the Erasmus+ program, which has facilitated study experiences abroad for numerous students, including those from Azerbaijan. Among them is Khazar University where there is a noticeable gap in research regarding the motives and challenges encountered by students participating in the Erasmus+ program. Additionally, the challenges faced by these students remain inadequately addressed, largely due to the absence of comprehensive documentation and transparent reporting of participants' experiences. In line with this, this mixed-methods research explores the motives and challenges experienced by Erasmus+ students from Khazar University. The study involved 16 students who participated in the Erasmus+ program between 2017 and 2023. All 16 students participated in a quantitative survey conducted via an online questionnaire. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were held with seven of them to gather qualitative data. Using SPSS for analysis, the findings revealed that the primary motives for participating in the program include the opportunity to study abroad, meet new people, have fun, and gain independence or self-sustainability. Conversely, students perceived the pre-Erasmus period as the most challenging, with paperwork being the most daunting challenge. However, significant hurdles during the Erasmus program include variations in education systems, financial constraints, and culture shock. After the Erasmus period, many students grapple with what can be described as "post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome." The study will illuminate the policy makers and school administrators to address the identified challenges and tailor the students' motives by providing comprehensive Erasmus+ information sessions, so the program should satisfactorily meet the expectations of the participants.

Keywords: Erasmus+ mobility, Erasmus+ challenges, Erasmus+ motives, post-Erasmus+ adjustment syndrome, culture shock

INTRODUCTION

The globalization and internationalization of tertiary education within the European Union have driven the growth of various mobility initiatives, with the Erasmus+ program emerging as a flagship example since its inception in 2014. ERASMUS+, which stands for the *European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students*, builds upon the success of the original Erasmus Program launched in 1987. It consolidates numerous European Commission-run initiatives under one umbrella, supporting school education, higher education, vocational education, and adult education while also funding projects in the sports field. The program aims to foster collaboration across sectors in alignment with the strategic objectives of Europe 2020.

Souto-Otero et al. (2022) highlights that Erasmus+ enhances opportunities for collaboration among higher education institutions and stakeholders, focusing on quality, impact, and accessibility. The program's primary objectives include promoting cross-border mobility for students and staff, enabling higher education institutions to establish and strengthen international cooperation networks, and improving the quality and relevance of higher education through transnational collaboration. Over the years, participation in Erasmus+ has steadily increased globally. For instance, since its inception, more than 4.4 million students have participated in Erasmus programs, with 350,000 students engaging in academic pursuits or internships through the program in 2017 alone.

However, despite its successes in fostering skill development and institutional collaboration, Erasmus+ faces challenges in ensuring inclusive and high-quality mobility experiences. These challenges include financial constraints, grant conditions, disparities in university systems, and limited awareness of the program (Vossensteyn et al., 2010). Addressing these issues requires higher education institutions to understand the motives behind students' decisions to study abroad and the challenges they face. As Krzaklewska (2008) notes, identifying student motives provides valuable insights into their values and expectations, allowing institutions to enhance program satisfaction and align services with participant needs. Moreover, understanding these challenges enables Erasmus+ administrators to devise strategies that promote broader participation and support students more effectively.

Since Azerbaijan joined the Bologna Process, which has triggered significant education reforms, Erasmus+ has become a key component of internationalization efforts in the country Amirova (2019). This is evidenced as in 2019 a total of 325 students and university staff in Azerbaijan were able to learn and teach in Europe as part of Erasmus+ program (EU NeighborEast News, 2021). However, studies have highlighted challenges faced by Azerbaijani students during international exchange programs. According to Alasgarova (2024), these students encountered financial difficulties and language barriers while participating in programs like DAAD in Germany, Mevilana initiative in Turkey and Erasmus+ program around Europe. These challenges

have also impacted students from Khazar University, a private institution that has actively participated in international exchange programs like Erasmus+.

Despite Khazar University's active participation in the Erasmus+ program, research on the motives and challenges faced by its students remains limited. This gap is notable given Khazar University's status as a leading sender of Erasmus+ students in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Erasmus+ Mid-Term Review (2022) highlights that participant challenges are not always openly addressed, often due to insufficient reporting on their experiences. This lack of comprehensive literature and transparency necessitates the need for further investigation into students' motives for joining Erasmus+ and the difficulties they face while studying abroad.

To fill this void, this study investigates the motives influencing Khazar University students to participate in Erasmus+ and the challenges they face during their mobility experiences. By shedding light on these factors, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutions can enhance program support and promote successful international mobility for their students.

Research Objectives

The study aimed at investigating the motives and challenges faced by Khazar University students participating in the Erasmus+ student mobility program. The following objectives guided the research: to determine students' personal, academic, and professional motives for taking part in Erasmus+ programs. Then, to determine student challenges faced during Erasmus program process. Regarding the second goal, we would want to pinpoint period (pre, during or post Erasmus) did the students face most challenges and to determine the kinds of challenges which students face during each stage of the Erasmus process.

Theoretical Framework

This study on the motives and challenges of the Erasmus+ student mobility program at Khazar University is grounded in migration and mobility theories, with a particular emphasis on the psychological approach. This approach focuses on the motivational aspects of migration, the behavior underlying motivation, decision-making processes, and the consequences of studying abroad (Schwartz et al., 2020). Krzaklewska (2008) further advanced this perspective by emphasizing the importance of examining both the decision-making process in student mobility and the broader effects or challenges of studying abroad, whether on individuals or groups of students.

Building on Krzaklewska's principles, I argue that decision-making is the critical first step in the process of migrating to another country. Individuals are driven by unique motives for studying abroad, making it essential to assess and understand the potential consequences and challenges that accompany this decision. The decision-making process for international students has grown increasingly complex in recent years (Tokas et al., 2023). While economic factors remain significant, non-economic motivations, such as the desire to travel, seek excitement,

explore different cultures (Findlay et al., 2012), or distinguish oneself within one's country of origin (King et al., 2016) also play a crucial role in shaping the decision to pursue higher education overseas (Waters & Brooks, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies on student's motives for Erasmus+ program

Sova (2017, as cited in Krzaklewska, 2008), asserts that students opt to go for the Erasmus+ with motives each driven by distinct aspirations, goals, and expectations. Hovdhaugen and Wiers-Jenssen (2021) mentioned that the motives of students can be categorized in numerous ways, reflecting the diverse reasons behind their decisions. For instance, numerous studies have categorized the motives into four key broad areas: academic, linguistic, cultural, and personal career development. On *academic* reasons, scholars such as Krzaklewska (2008) found that students opt to engage in Erasmus exchange programs to pursue academic goals. Students often express a desire to broaden their academic horizons by delving into subjects that are not available at their home institutions. This aspiration stems from a thirst for knowledge and a drive to explore new intellectual frontiers. By seeking out subjects that are beyond the scope of their home curriculum, students aim to enrich their academic experiences and expand their understanding of diverse fields of study. Likewise, the study by Fombona et al. (2013) mentioned academic as a key motive for the students. The study results indicated that 89% of the participants agreed to have gone for the program after comparing the programme they wanted to study during the Erasmus+ period and those of their university of origin. The power of the programs abroad pushed them to apply for the program.

Based on the literature Krzaklewska (2008), Holicza and Toth (2018), and Dias et al. (2019) emphasized the significance of *linguistic* (language acquisition) as a primary motive for students to pursue international experiences. Aslan and Jacob (2014) delved into the experiences of Erasmus+ mobility students from Ankara University, aiming to unveil the principal motives behind participation in the program, identify best practices, and assess potential variations based on host country contexts. Their study underscored language acquisition as a dominant motive among participants. However, the language acquisition motive has sparked a contentious debate, with some scholars arguing that it serves as a demotivator. For instance, Olmos (2010) argued that the criteria for selecting Erasmus applicants can hinder the mobility of individuals who have limited proficiency in the required language. Additionally, the feasibility of learning a new language is often questioned due to time constraints and the unique challenges it presents compared to other pursuits (Jung, 2020).

Researchers have mentioned *culture* as a very important motive for the Erasmus+ program. Living and studying abroad allows participants to experience daily life, customs, traditions, and social norms firsthand, contributing to a deeper understanding and appreciation of different cultures. In the study by Dias et al. (2019) culture acquisition was among the top five motives for students to go for Erasmus+ program. They argued that engaging in a new culture allows students to build interpersonal connections and relationships with people from diverse backgrounds. These interactions not only enrich students' personal experiences but also promote cross-cultural communication, empathy, and tolerance. In the study by Krzaklewska (2008), the 'wish to learn

different cultures' scored 90% as the most students considered this motive as very important. This might be because the Erasmus+ program celebrates and promotes Europe's rich cultural heritage and diversity. Therefore, participants can explore historical landmarks, museums, festivals, and other cultural attractions, deepening their appreciation for Europe's multifaceted identity and shared history.

Ingraham and Peterson (2004) attest that *personal growth* encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences and endeavors aimed at enhancing self-confidence, self-reliance, and expanding one's horizons through exposure to diverse cultures, environments, and individuals. It encompasses a multifaceted journey of self-discovery, resilience-building, and transformation, facilitated by interactions with new people and immersion in unfamiliar surroundings. Essentially, professional growth facilitated by Erasmus+ mobility programs centers on activities designed to foster the acquisition of knowledge and competencies that contribute to students' career and academic development (Bracht et al., 2006). Other studies such as Bozoğlu et al. (2016) and Varela et al. (2019) mentions this motives as the major one which is pushing students to go for the program. The argument is that the Erasmus+ program exposes students to a journey of continuous exploration and discovery, fueled by curiosity, courage, and a commitment to lifelong learning.

Di Pietro (2014) examined the relationship between student mobility and the employment potential (*career development*) of graduates. He noted a positive correlation between having an international educational experience and securing employment. This correlation stems from students acquiring qualifications, knowledge, and skills necessary for entering the job market during their study abroad. Souto-Otero et al. (2019) further advocates for the employability motive, suggesting that students frequently perceive mobility experiences abroad as enhancing their prospects of securing employment. They contend that along with acquiring knowledge, skills, and personal growth, students believe that these overseas experiences will bolster their employability and increase their chances of securing a job. However, some researchers have undermined this motive.

Studies have also indicated other motives apart from motives studies. For instance, Lesjak et al. (2015) concluded that students' selection of destination is influenced not only by conventional professional and personal motives identified in previous research but also by the attractiveness of tourism, location, and specific features of the chosen destination. These factors include popularity, cultural richness, artistic and historical significance, available events, safety, and security measures, as well as the vibrancy of nightlife, among others. As per González et al. (2011), a range of motives significantly influences the mobility patterns of Erasmus students. These include country size, living expenses, geographical distance, educational background, university reputation, language spoken in the host country, climate, as well as unique characteristics of the destination country, along with temporal effects. On the Leisure aspect, students heed Rojek's (1989) advice to exercise their rights to take part in Erasmus+ in pursuit of leisure as a means of escaping the routine and regulated work at their home institutions, opting instead for experiences at overseas universities with the hope of acquiring new knowledge. Teichler (2004) observes that two-thirds of surveyed ERASMUS students are driven by leisure and vacation-related desires, while half of the international exchange students heading to the UK view student mobility as an adventurous opportunity.

Erasmus+ mobility challenges

Different studies have grouped the challenges of the Erasmus+ program into five primary categories: financial challenges, issues linked to ERASMUS conditions, challenges associated with the comparability of higher education systems, personal backgrounds, and lack of awareness (Souto-Otero, 2008). Financial challenges revolve around the financial commitment required from Erasmus+ students for studying abroad, often with the expectation of financial benefits from participating in the program. Challenges related to Erasmus conditions entail the administrative and bureaucratic burdens of the program, including selecting educational institutions and determining the duration of study abroad. Compatibility with higher education systems pertains to factors such as program structures' flexibility to accommodate courses completed overseas, alignment of academic calendars, and credit recognition. Personal challenges may also hinder Erasmus+ participation, notably the inability to speak and understand a foreign language. Other personal factors such as having a partner in the home country or caregiving responsibilities may also impede students from joining the program. Finally, awareness of the Erasmus+ program is essential for student participation, necessitating sufficient support from administrators in understanding aspects such as selecting suitable educational institutions, comprehending Erasmus' financial conditions, and navigating application procedures effectively.

It is essential to acknowledge that stress and anxiety are significant challenges faced by students during Erasmus+ mobility experiences. The Erasmus+ mid-term review highlighted stress and anxiety as prominent issues reported by students, with over five percent indicating they experienced a high level of stress and anxiety (2022). Krzaklewska and Skorska (2013) identified cultural shock as a key trigger for stress and anxiety among students during their mobility studies, delineating it into three main dimensions: sociocultural, psychological, and physical. The sociocultural dimension revolves around interpersonal relationships and social functioning, encompassing the adjustment to new social roles and cultural norms regarding interactions and relationships with others in the host country. Challenges in forming friendships were common, particularly in cultures characterized by reserved and shy populations like Scandinavia. In contrast, students may encounter difficulties in cultures with different norms regarding personal space or male-female relationships. Psychological concerns pertain to the emotional well-being of students in the host country and their efforts to develop coping strategies for managing stressors, regulating emotions, and fulfilling relational needs such as closeness, support, and trust. For instance, research indicates that students may feel lonely and insecure due to unfamiliar environments and people. Lastly, the physical dimension encompasses changes in physical well-being due to factors like climate, time differences, or alterations in daily routines, leading to issues such as insomnia, fatigue, and digestive problems. The study highlighted various health issues experienced by students while studying abroad, including stomach ailments, diarrhea (as seen in a student's experience in Turkey), allergies, and respiratory difficulties (Sal İlhan & Külekçi, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a triangulation mixed-method case study approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This design was chosen to validate the results obtained through individual methods (Bergman, 2008). Again, according to Bryman (2012), triangulation mixed-method design implies that the findings from a study employing a method linked to one research strategy are compared or cross-verified with the findings derived from a method associated with another research strategy. On the same, Kell and Vogl (2008) suggest that the triangulation mixed-method can be likened to understanding a phenomenon more fully through complementary findings. In line with this methodology, the current study integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methods to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The approval for the study was granted by the Ethical committee of Khazar University.

The participants of the study

The study enlisted participation of 16 students who concluded their Erasmus+ program between 2017 and 2023. Of these participants, 11 are female and 5 are male. Students who had previously participated in the Erasmus+ program were considered suitable for the study, as they could provide accurate and relevant answers to the research questions under investigation. Both participants and Khazar University were purposively sampled because of their involvement in the Erasmus+ program. This is in line with Bryman (2012) who defined purposive sampling as the selection of units based on specific features or characteristics that enable a thorough investigation and deeper understanding of the core themes and research question. While the study does not delve into gender-based analysis, it is worth noting the predominance of female participants, which mirrors a prevalent pattern within the Erasmus+ program at Khazar University. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the participants.

Table 1

The distribution of respondents (students) by gender, academic year, duration, university/country

Background Information	N	%
Gender		
Female	11	68.8
Male	5	31.3
Academic Year		
2017-2018	3	18.8
2018-2019	1	6.3
2019-2020	1	6.3
2020-2021	1	6.3
2021-2022	4	25
2022-2023	6	37.5
Duration		
1 Semester	16	100
University/Country		
Anadolu University/Turkey	2	12.5
Istanbul Aydin University/Turkey	3	18.8
Manisa Celal Bayar/Turkey	1	6.3
Middle East Technical University/Turkey	2	12.5
Polytechnic University of Braganca/Portugal	1	6.3
Polytechnic University of Turin/Italy	2	12.5
Polytechnic University of Valencia/Spain	1	6.3
Sapienza University/Italy	1	6.3
Tuscia University/Italy	1	6.3
UCAM/Spain	1	6.3
University of Cadiz/Spain	1	6.3
Total	16	100

Data collection Tools and procedures

For this study, data collection utilized both an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The online survey was chosen according to Behr et al. (2014) who highlights that using online surveys provides each respondent with a consistent set of probing questions while allowing them ample time to consider their responses without influence or interference from the researcher. Semi structured interviews were deemed appropriate as it gives a chance to give more details and express himself (Sal İlhan & Külekçi, 2022).

This instrument was originally utilized by Onen (2017) in a study examining Erasmus+ experiences in Turkish universities. However, it has been adapted and revised for the current study, with additional questions incorporated to align with the specific research objectives.

Online Survey

The researcher developed an online survey through a google form. Then, the survey link was sent as an e-mail to the participants who were randomly chosen to take part in the study. The survey consists of three sections. Firstly, on demographic, 4 questions about gender, academic year of the Erasmus+ mobility, e.g. 2017-2018; the name of the host country; and the name of the host university were indicated. Secondly, the section had Likert-scale, a multiple choice, and a rank-order scale question. In the Likert-scale question, participants are asked to answer the question: How much did motives influence your decision to go for Erasmus+ program? The scoring scale was from 0 to 4 (No influence at all to big influence). In the multiple choice the students were asked "During which period (pre, during or post Erasmus) did you face most challenges?" Thirdly, the section had three open-ended questions. These questions prompted them to elaborate on the challenges they faced during each phase of the Erasmus program. Additionally, a follow-up question was included: "If you did not encounter any difficulties, please specify."

Semi-structured Interview

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by participants during the Erasmus+ period, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 participants who agreed to participate in the initial emails sent to them. This number of participants was adequate for collecting qualitative data, based on the argument by Guest et al. (2006), who suggested that a sample size of around 6 to 12 participants is typically sufficient to achieve data saturation, where no new themes or information emerge during the interviews. Therefore, a total of 7 interviews were conducted for the study, with each lasting between 25 and 30 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, utilizing an interview guide designed during the proposal stage and approved by the researcher's supervisor and the Erasmus+ coordinator. Participants were initially selected from a pool of respondents who had completed an online survey distributed via email. Only those who accepted the invitation to participate were interviewed. The interview protocol emphasized ethical compliance, including informing participants of their rights, such as the option to decline answering any questions, the right to discontinue participation at any time, and ensuring voluntary involvement. Verbal consent was obtained from participants in addition to prior written consent through email communication. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at Khazar University at times convenient for the participants. The entire data collection process spanned a period of 5 weeks.

The Data Analysis

The data obtained from the online survey was analyzed using SPSS 30.0.0 after being downloaded from the Google Form platform. Quantitative analysis of the first and second sections of the survey, which comprised Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and rank order questions, was conducted in terms of frequencies and percentages. Conversely, the third section was qualitatively analyzed. Subsequently, the analysis of the semi-structured interviews commenced. Initially, the audio-

recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher, employing the verbatim transcription technique. The transcribed data was then coded, categorized, and analyzed to identify emerging themes, illustrating the challenges experienced by the students.

RESULTS

Students' motives for participating in Erasmus+ program

The study employed Vossensteyn et al. (2010) conceptualization of motives, illustrating how each one influences students' decisions to pursue a program. Table 2 shows the influence of each motive. The listed motives were a chance to study abroad, independence/self-sustainability, benefits for future employment in my home country, opportunity to learn/improve foreign language, quality of a host university, opportunity to develop soft skills (adaptability, demonstrating initiative), benefits for my future employment abroad, a chance to experience new learning and teaching practices, a chance to meet new people and to have fun.

Table 2

The influence of various motives on student decisions for Erasmus+ program

	No influence at all	Little influence	Some influence	Moderate influence	Big influence	Total
Chance to study abroad	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100% (16)	100% (16)
Independence/self-sustainability	0.00%	6.3% (1)	25.0% (4)	25.0% (4)	43.8% (7)	100% (16)
Future employment in my country	0.00%	0.00%	31.3% (5)	56.3% (9)	12.5% (2)	100% (16)
Learn/improve foreign language	6.3% (1)	6.3% (1)	25% (4)	31.3% (5)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
Quality of host University	0.00%	0.00%	12.5% (2)	56.3% (9)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
Developing soft skills (adaptability)	0.00%	0.00%	43.8% (7)	18.8% (3)	37.5% (6)	100% (16)
Employment opportunities abroad	0.00%	6.3% (1)	18.8% (3)	43.8% (7)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
Experience new learning practices	0.00%	0.00%	31.3% (5)	37.5% (6)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
A chance to meet new people	0.00%	0.00%	6.3% (1)	37.5% (6)	56.3% (9)	100% (16)
To have fun	6.3% (1)	0.00%	18.8% (3)	18.8% (3)	56.3% (9)	100% (16)

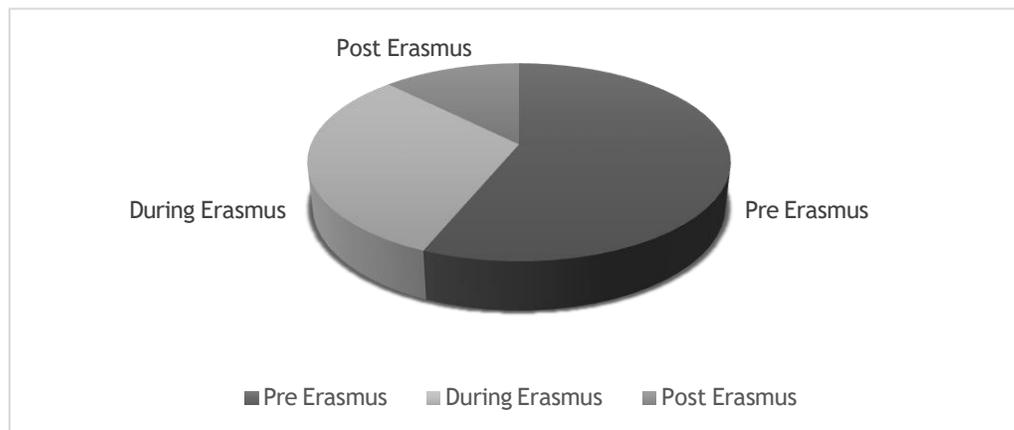
From the analysis, it was clearly observed that the chance to study abroad is the most influential factor (100%) driving students to participate in the Erasmus+ program, followed by meeting new people (56.3%), and the desire to have fun (56.3%). The third ranked motive was gaining independence and adaptability (43.8%). Developing soft skills, particularly adaptability, ranked fourth. Motives such as the quality of the host university, employment opportunities abroad, and the opportunity to learn or improve a foreign language were tied for fifth position. Lastly, future employment prospects in their home country ranked the least in prompting students to go for the program.

The most challenging period in the Erasmus process

A sub-question was included for respondents regarding the Erasmus+ process, focusing on the phases before, during, and after the program. Participants were asked to indicate during which period, whether pre, during, or post-Erasmus, they encountered the most challenges. Responses to this inquiry were collected through a multiple-choice question in the questionnaire. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Distribution of respondents and their most challenging Erasmus+ period



The findings indicate that the period preceding the Erasmus program is perceived as the most challenging phase. As depicted in Figure 1, most respondents, comprising 9 out of 16 (56%), acknowledged that the period before Erasmus posed the most difficulty. Additionally, 5 out of 16 respondents (31%) identified the during-Erasmus phase as challenging, while 2 out of 16 respondents (13%) mentioned the post-Erasmus phase as the least challenging.

The challenges encountered by the students during Erasmus+ program

As indicated by the data, students encounter various challenges throughout their study, with the Pre-Erasmus phase emerging as the more arduous one. Hence, it was imperative to investigate the specific challenges students face in each phase of the program.

Table 3

Results on the challenges in pre-Erasmus period

	F	%
Paperwork	6	38
Selection of equivalent courses and preparing Learning Agreement	4	25
Visa Application process	4	25
Finding Accommodation	2	13
Total	16	100

Table three highlights the challenges faced during the pre-Erasmus period. The most common issue was paperwork (38%), followed by course selection and Learning Agreement preparation and the visa application process (both 25%). Finding accommodation was the least reported challenge (13%).

During this phase, paperwork emerged as the predominant challenge. Students found it notably stressful and challenging to prepare, gather, and submit the required documents for their applications.

Respondent 1 (Female): "The application period was too short, and it was too difficult to assemble all the necessary documents".

Respondent 2 (Male): "It was really difficult for me to prepare the necessary documents."

The next two challenges were Visa Obtaining Process and selection of equivalent courses and preparing Learning Agreement.

Respondent 6 (Female): "After logging to the university course catalogue, I was unable to understand and make the links with my courses I already studied in my university."

Respondent 2 (Male): "The visa procedure proved to be extremely challenging for me. Being my first time applying for a visa, everything seemed overly complex."

Overall, it can be argued that during the pre-Erasmus+ phase, students encountered challenges related to document processing and navigating various administrative tasks. Furthermore, students struggled with unfamiliar procedures for credential evaluation and insufficient support from host institutions, which often resulted in prolonged timelines and missed opportunities

The challenges during the Erasmus+ phase

As depicted in Table 4, the most prevalent challenge during the Erasmus+ program was the variations among education systems, particularly in approaches to lesson delivery. Students noted differences in grading systems at the host university compared to Khazar University.

Table 4

Results on the challenges during Erasmus period

	F	%
Variations among education systems	7	44
Learning Agreement Language and communications	4	25
Financial difficulties	3	19
Culture Shock	2	13
Total	16	100

Table four reveals that the main challenges during the Erasmus period were variations in education systems (44%), followed by language and communication issues (25%) and financial difficulties (19%). Culture shock was the least reported challenge (13%).

Respondent 2 (Male): "I struggled because the educational system and the way the lessons were delivered was not the same as what I was used to in my home country. I found it challenging to read the articles that were provided each week because I was not used to doing so."

Another challenge in this phase was language and communication. Students who were not proficient in the native language of the host country faced significant hurdles, especially in situations where a student was not fluent in English.

Respondent 1 (Female): "Language was a challenge for me as I had no knowledge of the native language of the country whatsoever (Italian). This made me difficult to make friends with other people".

Financial difficulties also emerged as a significant challenge during this stage. Some participants reported that the allowance provided by the Erasmus+ program was insufficient to cover their expenses. As a result, some had to seek additional financial support from their families back in their home countries.

Respondent 4 (Female): At the beginning I didn't know that it takes time to receive the grant due to many banking process. This made me get my grant very late. I had to call my family to send me money. I would struggle financially if my family was unable to assist.

Lastly, cultural shock posed a significant challenge for some students as they encountered unfamiliar experiences and practices that differed greatly from those in their home countries.

Respondent 2 (Male): “The lifestyle of students in the University dormitory was shocking to me as girls and boys would visit each other without restrictions which is totally different to my dormitory in my home country. This is in Italy is very normal unlike here”.

The challenges in the post-Erasmus+ phase

While a minority of respondents (13%) found it less challenging, many other students still faced difficulties during this period. The most prevalent challenge is what is being called “post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome”. Some students express challenges in adapting and readjusting to their old class and colleagues and country life following their study abroad experience.

Respondent 4 (Female): “After returning, I struggled with adaptation during the initial three months, but eventually, I was able to move forward with my life. The biggest challenge I faced was adapting to an old environment.

The second theme found prevalent was motivation and engagement. After the exhilarating and novel experience of studying abroad, students often struggle to reintegrate into their university studies, impacting their academic performance.

Table 5

Results on the challenges post-Erasmus period

	F	%
Post-Erasmus+ adjustment syndrome	11	69
Motivation and engagement	5	31
Total	16	100

Table five shows the challenges faced post-Erasmus. The most common issue was Post-Erasmus+ adjustment syndrome (69%), followed by motivation and engagement difficulties (31%).

DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was finding out the student motives influencing them to go for Erasmus+ program. Based on the literature on Erasmus+ motives, the result of this study is in line with those of previous studies. The study revealed that various factors exerted differing influences on students' decisions to join the Erasmus+ program. On the same, Teichler (2004) noted that many students lack a single predominant motive, often fluctuating between different choices. As this study found a chance to study abroad as main motive influencing students for the program, prior research by several scholars (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021; Krzaklewska, 2008; Souto-Otero et al., 2019; Vossensteyn et al., 2010) confirms the same. This may be argued that studying abroad offers students the chance to immerse themselves in different academic environments, gain exposure to diverse teaching methods, and access unique learning opportunities not available in their home institutions. Regarding the desire to meet new people, studies by Krzaklewska (2008) and Varela et al. (2019) also found it as a significant motive. This reflects the notion that Erasmus students perceive "academic learning" as encompassing the entire experience, including social interactions. On the same, these studies highlight the importance of this motive by explaining that meeting new people allows students to build international networks, establish friendships, and develop interpersonal skills in multicultural settings. Overall, this motive not only enriches students' social experiences but also broadens their perspectives and fosters intercultural understanding. When it comes to having fun as a motive, studies by Semiz and Salman (2017) and Krzaklewska (2008) have similarly identified this motive as influential in students' decision to take part in the Erasmus program. This is attributed to an assumption that participating in Erasmus provides students with opportunities to immerse themselves in new cultures, forge lifelong friendships, and partake in exciting experiences beyond the confines of traditional classroom settings. This aspect of enjoyment contributes to a holistic and rewarding exchange experience, boosting overall satisfaction among students, and fostering personal growth and development. The last motive among the four is gaining independence or self/sustainability. The students reported that their time abroad enabled them to autonomously make decisions, including budgeting, overcoming challenges, and navigating their surroundings without relying on their parents.

However, this study has uncovered contrasting results compared to previous findings by Holicza and Tóth (2018), Kayaoglu (2016), and Varela et al. (2019) which highlighted learning or improving a foreign language as a top motive for participating in Erasmus, the current study found that while this motive was listed, it did not significantly influence students' decisions. This may be attributed to concerns expressed by participants in studies like Jung (2020) and Olmos (2010) regarding the feasibility of mastering a foreign language during the Erasmus experience, as well as challenges related to language acquisition and selection processes for Erasmus applicants. In a similar vein, the findings of the current study contradict those of Findly et al. (2012), who discovered that students often choose to participate in the program to advance their career pathways, particularly on an international scale. However, the present research identified a low percentage of students who perceived this as their primary motive.

The second objective about Erasmus+ challenges, the study findings revealed that participants encountered various challenges before, during, and after their Erasmus experience. A significant majority identified the "pre-Erasmus process" as the most demanding phase, aligning with Önen's (2017) study which similarly highlighted this period as particularly challenging. In this phase, In the pre-Erasmus+ program phase, students identified paperwork as their most

pressing challenge. The other challenge in this phase involved selecting equivalent courses and preparing learning agreements. Diaz (2017) echoed this issue, emphasizing the complexity of constructing a study plan for abroad study, requiring approval through the Learning Agreement. Obtaining visas emerged as a third significant challenge for students, with many expressing frustrations over inadequate university support and delays in visa processing. This finding is corroborated by Kavilanzi's (2018) study on pre-departure challenges faced by Erasmus students in India, which identified the visa process as rigorous and intense. Finally, finding accommodation was mentioned with relatively less influence compared to other challenges. Nevertheless, Nielsen (2020) emphasized accommodations as a significant concern, pointing out that due to time and financial constraints, some students commence their Erasmus journey without a clear understanding of their housing arrangements.

The most challenging aspect during the Erasmus period often revolves around differences in education systems between the home and host universities. These discrepancies encompass variations in teaching methods, course requirements, and grading systems, which pose significant challenges for many students. Marinescu et al. (2022) found that adapting to these differences in working styles and teaching methods presented difficulties for numerous students. Secondly, language barriers present a formidable challenge for students, particularly those who are not proficient in the native language spoken in the host country. This finding aligns with numerous previous studies, including those by (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Önen, 2017; Sal İlhan & Külekçi, 2022) which identified language and communication as significant hurdles for students during their Erasmus experience. The other challenge is financial difficulties whereby students commonly face despite receiving a monthly grant. This grant often proves inadequate to cover all expenses, prompting students to carefully manage their finances. Studies by researchers (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Nada et al., 2023; Souto-Otero et al., 2019) underscore the prevalence of financial challenges among Erasmus students. Lastly culture shock is paused another challenge to students. Nur and Suhria (2021) acknowledge that it's a common issue encountered by international students when they go abroad. The unfamiliarity of the local environment and interactions often trigger feelings of discomfort, frustration, and confusion (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

After completing the Erasmus+ program, many students experience a period of readjustment to their home institution, termed as post-Erasmus+ adjustment syndrome Sal-Ilhan and Kulekci. (2022) and Önen (2017) corroborate these findings. Furthermore, motivation and engagement pose challenges as students struggle to reacclimate to the academic and social environment of their home university. Having experienced the freedom and flexibility of the Erasmus program, transitioning back becomes a challenge.

In general, the research highlights administrative inefficiencies during the pre-Erasmus+ phase as a major challenge. This necessitates the need for universities to streamline document processing, improve support for visa applications, and offer clearer guidance for students preparing for international study. While during the Erasmus+ program, challenges such as differences in education systems, language barriers, financial difficulties, and culture shock suggest that host institutions must enhance orientation programs, offer additional language support, and provide financial planning resources. Finally, in the post Erasmus+ phase, the difficulty students face in readjusting to their home institutions indicates a need for reintegration programs to help them transfer their newly acquired skills and perspectives into their local academic and social environments.

Limitations of the study

This study's scope is limited to a sample of 16 students from Khazar University who completed their Erasmus period abroad. The small sample size presents a significant limitation, particularly when interpreting the findings in the context of statistical reliability and generalizability. As a result, this study's instrument should be validated before generalizing the findings to a larger population. Again, Due to the small sample size, it is also not possible to extrapolate or generalize the findings to encompass all Azerbaijani students who have participated in the Erasmus program from other universities. The study's focus on Khazar University was driven by ease of access to respondents, and while this decision provided a practical advantage in terms of data collection, it limits the scope of the research to a single institution.

Additionally, the study predominantly includes female participants, which may introduce gender bias in the results. The experiences and challenges faced by female students could dominate the findings, potentially overshadowing the unique experiences of male students. It is important to acknowledge that the motives and challenges encountered by male students might differ significantly, and their perspectives may not be adequately represented in this sample. Therefore, future studies could benefit from ensuring a more balanced gender distribution and a larger, more diverse sample to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the Erasmus experience.

In terms of the qualitative data, the findings from interviews and open-ended responses provide valuable insights that complement the quantitative results. While the sample size may limit the broader applicability of the findings, the qualitative data serves to enrich the overall understanding of the challenges and motivations experienced by the participants. These qualitative insights offer a deeper exploration of the contextual factors that influence the Erasmus experience, which quantitative data alone may not fully capture.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study was to analyze the key motives driving students to participate in the Erasmus program, as well as the challenges they face before, during, and after the program. The study focused specifically on students from Khazar University who have completed their Erasmus period and returned home. The four primary motives identified were the opportunity to study abroad, the chance to meet new people, seeking enjoyment, and aspiring for independence or self-sustainability, ranked in that order. Furthermore, the study revealed that the most challenging periods for many students occur before Erasmus, followed by during the program abroad. During the pre-Erasmus phase, students encountered stressors such as paperwork, selecting equivalent courses, preparing learning agreements, navigating the visa process, and finding accommodation. Throughout the Erasmus period, students faced challenges including discrepancies in education systems, financial constraints, and culture shock. Lastly, upon completing their study period, students struggled with post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome, as well as issues related to motivation and engagement upon returning to their home universities.

Therefore, to enhance the Erasmus+ program's impact and alleviate challenges, future efforts should focus on providing students with comprehensive pre-departure support, including workshops on navigating bureaucratic processes, understanding course equivalency, and preparing for cultural differences. Additionally, increasing financial allowances or introducing flexible financial aid options could help mitigate the monetary constraints students face. Partner universities should consider establishing mentorships or buddy programs to assist incoming students in adapting to new educational systems and cultures. Lastly, creating structured reintegration programs for returning students could help them adjust more smoothly and maintain their academic motivation and engagement. These efforts will ensure a more fulfilling and less challenging experience for future Erasmus+ participants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author extends gratitude to all the teachers at Khazar University and the Erasmus+ students for their enthusiastic participation in this study.

FUNDING

This study was conducted without receiving any funding or grants from public offices, organizations, or profit organizations.

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