

Czech Student's Interest in Studying Abroad and Non-European Mobility

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Abstract: The publication is focused on the evaluation of the interest and experiences of students of the Faculty of Economics and Management of students from the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague (CULS) with international mobility during their studies. The publication evaluates the current development of the number of incoming and outgoing students within the Erasmus+ program and in study programs outside Europe in the years 2008-2019. Based on time series models, the expected development of indicators in the following years were predicted. In the interpretation of the results, factors related to the global epidemiological situation in 2020 and 2021 are taken into account. The solution uses the results of a questionnaire survey carried among outgoing students of the Faculty of Economics and Management. The survey showed that students perceive international mobility as a unique benefit that will make it easier for them to find adequate employment in the labor market in the future. International mobility is highly valued for improving language skills, learning about new cultures and creating foreign social ties.

Keywords: exchange mobilities, study abroad, educational process, Erasmus +, time series analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Exchange mobilities and the opportunities to study abroad have become more and more common part of higher education in the Czech Republic nowadays. The increase of mobility within Europe has led to an increase in the intensity of various forms of student mobility and at the same time of the development of student mobility programs. One of these student mobility programs is Erasmus+. Student mobility is considered as a positive form of migration, which is financially supported by student grants.

International student experience increases young people's labor mobility, knowledge and understanding of other cultures and helps to speed up finding employment after graduation. Learning mobility contributes to the acquisition of experience and competences that are crucial for active participation in society and the labor market. This is the conclusion reached by a recent evaluation of the Erasmus+ program, which talks about the positive impact of mobility on learners in terms of their self-confidence, social integration, independence and gaining a sense of belonging to Europe. Also, University diplomas are recognized within the whole European Union, which helps to increase the labor mobility.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The publication evaluates the current development of the interest of students of the Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague in studying abroad.

The research was based on data from 2008-2019 regarding outgoing and incoming students at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences, and a questionnaire survey. The created database was analyzed using time series methods, and the relationships between the questions from the questionnaire survey were tested using the χ^2 -test of independence. The analyses were evaluated using STATISTICA 14.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Except private schools, the education system in the Czech Republic is free. Education is available to all citizens of the Czech Republic regardless the financial situation and without any discrimination (Průcha, 2006).

3.1. The education system in the European Union

The European Union's program places a high priority on the development of education and training. The access to quality education and training is seen as a driver for the economic growth, social cohesion, research, and innovation, as well as increasing people's prospects for personal development. The European Union is also helping to build a European learning area. The aim is to strengthen learning outcomes and mobility in education, promote common values and facilitate mutual recognition of diplomas across borders. All these supporting programs are included in the Europe 2020 strategy for coordinating Member States' economic policies (Commission, europa.eu, 2020). These include the Erasmus+ program and the European Structural and Investment Funds. In 2018, the European Commission adopted a proposal to promote the automatic mutual recognition of higher education diplomas, upper secondary education certificates and learning outcomes acquired during mobility abroad. Improving the procedures for mutual recognition of qualifications in the EU Member States is the basis for the European Education Area, which should come into force in 2025.

Learning mobility helps to gain experience and competences that are crucial for active participation in society and the labor market. This is the conclusion of a recent evaluation of the Erasmus+ program, which talks about the positive impact of mobility on learners in terms of their self-confidence, social integration, independence and gaining a sense of belonging to Europe (Commission, ec.europa, 2020).

3.2. International study programs

3.2.1. Erasmus and Erasmus +

Exchange mobilities have been supported by the European Commission since 1981. The European Union's Erasmus programs was established in June 1987 to focus on mobility and cooperation in higher education in Europe. The Czech Republic joined the Erasmus program in 1998. Between 2014 and 2020, the European Commission has developed a new program for education abroad called Erasmus plus (Erasmus+), which replaces all existing education programs. (Commission, European Commission, 2020). Currently, Erasmus+ is available to both program and partner countries.

Program countries:

- EU member countries – 28 countries,
- European Economic Area Member States (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein),
- Turkey, Northern Macedonia.

Partner countries:

Armenia, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Georgia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Kosovo, Serbia, Syria, Tunisia, Russia and Ukraine (Dům zahraniční spolupráce, 2020).

3.2.2. Program Erasmus+

Erasmus+ and the European Commission

Erasmus+ is designed to support quality improvement, innovation and internationalization of organizations active in education and training, youth and sport. The Erasmus+ program helps European countries to improve and modernize their education systems and at the same time to train mobility abroad in the field. It is mainly concerned with strengthening the economic factors of employment, competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion. In 2019, the budget for study support has been increased and, as a result, the grants sent to students have increased (Figure 1).

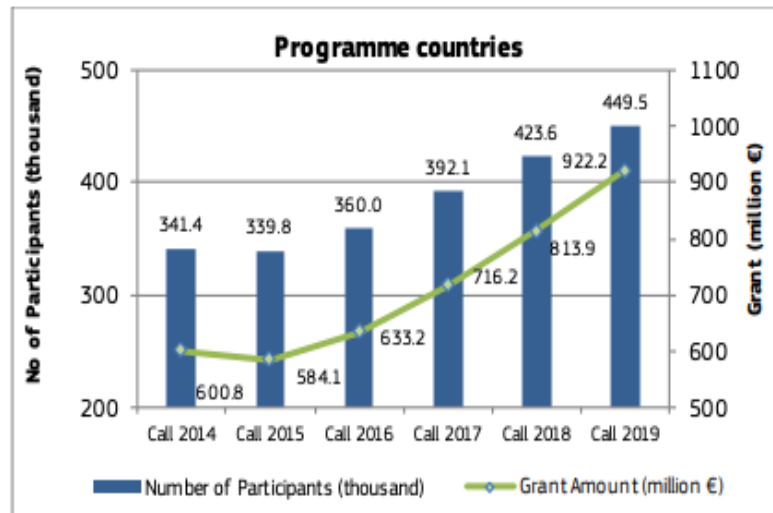


Figure 1- Evolution of the amount of participants (in thousands) and grant amount (mil. EUR).

Source: 2019 Erasmus+ Annual Report of the European Commission

The European Commission has set five themes under the Erasmus+ program (Commission, europa.eu, 2020):

- foreign language teaching and learning,
- cooperation between educational institutions and business,
- labor market issues including careers advice and help for young people,
- unemployment; intercultural/intergenerational and life-long learning,
- learning and international cooperation, international relations and development to cooperate.

Another International programmes of European Union are:

- COMENIUS: International program for primary and secondary schools,
- LEONARDO DA VINCI: provides vocational education and trainings,
- GRUNDTVIG: a program for adults and students of the University of the Third Age,
- JEANMONNET: the program includes events for dedicated academics and students (Basl, Řezáčová, Modrá, Váňová, & Vlč, 2013).

3.3. Erasmus in the Czech Republic

Study mobility

Study mobility is often referred to as seasonal migration. It is a temporary change of residence of undergraduate students at the host university. The grant received by the student participating in the mobility means that the student is paid for his/her move. The specificity is that students are a group for whom the primary purpose of migration is to improve human capital (de Wit, 2002). Student mobility is often associated with internationalisation, which is considered one of the main priorities of the European Union, given its socio-historical context.

Staff/ Employee mobility

Employee mobility is a learning experience for teachers or training for teaching and non-teaching university staff. Staff receive grants for living and travel expenses, which is similar to students scholarship (Gregory, 2011).

Erasmus+ Internship

The Erasmus+ Internship program supports practical internships abroad, which can be used not only by university students but also by recent graduates.

3.4. Non-European mobilities

Non-European mobilities operate on the basis of bilateral agreements between the university and the foreign institution and represent an opportunity for students to experience a different educational system than in Europe. Students have the opportunity to study in Asia, America, Africa or Australia. Students who choose to participate in Erasmus+ receive a grant from the European Union and students who travel outside the EU receive a grant from their home university. In the selection process, preference is given to students with excellent academic results (Gregory, 2011).

Education & Training

Education & Training programs work with developed countries to improve higher education and intercultural understanding. According to the European Commission, with globalisation and increasing competition, Europe's workforce needs continuous training and international benchmarking. Competition with developed countries leads to an improvement in the quality of the system. That is why in 1995 the Commission concluded the first agreements on cooperation in higher education and vocational training with the United States of America and Canada.

3.5. Erasmus Student Network and Buddy program

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is Europe's largest student organization, which was founded in 1989 and has since expanded to 40 countries.

ESN's purpose is to offer assistance to students in the process of academic, social and practical integration during their exchange studies. This is mainly done through activities in local sections, which include cultural and social events where students have the opportunity to meet and get to know more local or international friends. In addition, many sections have introduced mentor systems to help international students, especially in academic and practical integration (ESN, 2020).

Part of ESN is also the Buddy program. This is a voluntary organised group of students from one university who help incoming students on international study programs free of charge. Any student who is interested in Buddy must apply in advance. Members of the Buddy program are then the first people from the university that incoming students meet and are in contact with before the international student arrives in the country.

4. RESULTS

The exchange mobilities at The Faculty of Economics and Management

The Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague offers its students a large number of foreign mobility opportunities as part of their studies at the faculty. These mobilities can be in the form of semester or annual study stays, practical internships, summer schools and language courses. One of the most used forms of mobility is the Erasmus+ program, in which the mobility participant's foreign study stay is financially supported by funds from the European Union and the Czech Republic. The most prestigious form of international mobility is considered to be studying in the framework of double degree programs. Thanks to this form of study, it is possible to obtain a diploma from the Czech University of Agriculture together with a diploma from a foreign partner university. A student who decides to follow a double degree program completes the first part of his/her studies at the home university and then completes the second part at the foreign partner university. Currently, by obtaining a double degree, it is possible to significantly improve one's position on the Czech and European labor market. The Faculty of Economics and Management offers this program in cooperation with universities in France, the Netherlands and Russia for the Master's degree and in Germany, Italy, Spain, France and Switzerland for the Bachelor's degree. (PEF, 2020).

The figure 2 shows the universities with which the Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague cooperates.

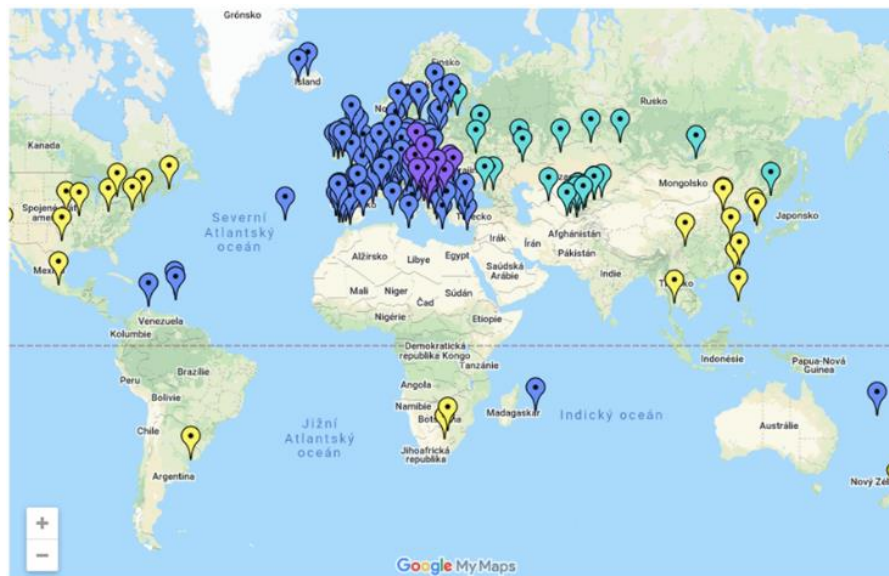


Figure 2 - Partner Universities of The Faculty of Economics and Management of ČZU in Prague

Legend: Erasmus+ (blue colour), CEPUS (purple colour), Erasmus MUNDUS (turquoise colour), non-European mobilities (yellow colour)

Table number I shows the amount contributed by outgoing students by destination country. The countries are divided into two groups according to the cost of living in the country. The contribution for students going on practical placement is higher by EUR 180 per month, mainly due to the impossibility of student discounts.

All the students receive financial support for the mobility. The scholarship is intended to cover only part of the increased living costs during their stay. It is therefore very important for students to consider their own financial resources. The amount of the scholarship is fixed in a flat rate and varies according to the destination country. At the same time, due to the nature of mobility, students are also entitled to an accommodation grant, according to the terms of the valid scholarship regulations. If the conditions are met, students are eligible to apply for support for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or for support for students with special needs (PEF C., Mezinárodní vztahy, 2020).

The Erasmus+ students receive the final amount before departure, while under the bilateral agreement mobilities the students receive the amount in monthly instalments.

4.1. Outgoing students of the Faculty of Economics and Management

The development trends of the interest of students of the Faculty of Economics and Management in studying abroad through the Erasmus+ program in the years 2008-2019 is presented in Chart 1. We can see that the highest interest in the mobility was in 2013 and has been decreasing significantly since then. It is very likely that the decline in interest in Erasmus+ was due to the growth in interest in non-European mobility abroad, which can be seen in Figure 2. Interval predictions for 2020-2022 were calculated based on a quadratic function ($\alpha=0.05$).

Chart 2 shows the interest of non-European mobilities at the Faculty of Economics and Management has an increasing tendency. One of the reasons is the possibility to travel to areas that are more distant and more exotic for European students.

The top 5 most favored and requested countries under the program Erasmus+ are France, Spain, Germany, Portugal and Greece (Figure 3).

Table I- Erasmus+ scholarships for students from the CULS

Groups	Target country	Monthly amount of scholarship that students receive	
		Study mobility	Internship
Group 1	Belgium	519 EUR / per month	699 EUR / per month
	Denmark		
	Finland		
	France		
	Ireland		
	Iceland		
	Italy		
	Cyprus		
	Liechtenstein		
	Luxembourg		
	Malta		
	Germany		
	Netherlands		
	Norway		
	Portugal		
	Austria		
	Greece		
Spain			
Sweden			
United Kingdom			
Group 2	Bulgaria	420 EUR / per month	600 EUR / per month
	Estonia		
	Croatia		
	Latvia		
	Lithuania		
	Hungary		
	Poland		
	Romania		
	North Macedonia		
	Slovakia		
	Slovenia		
	Serbia		
	Turkey		

Source: own elaboration based on data from CULS

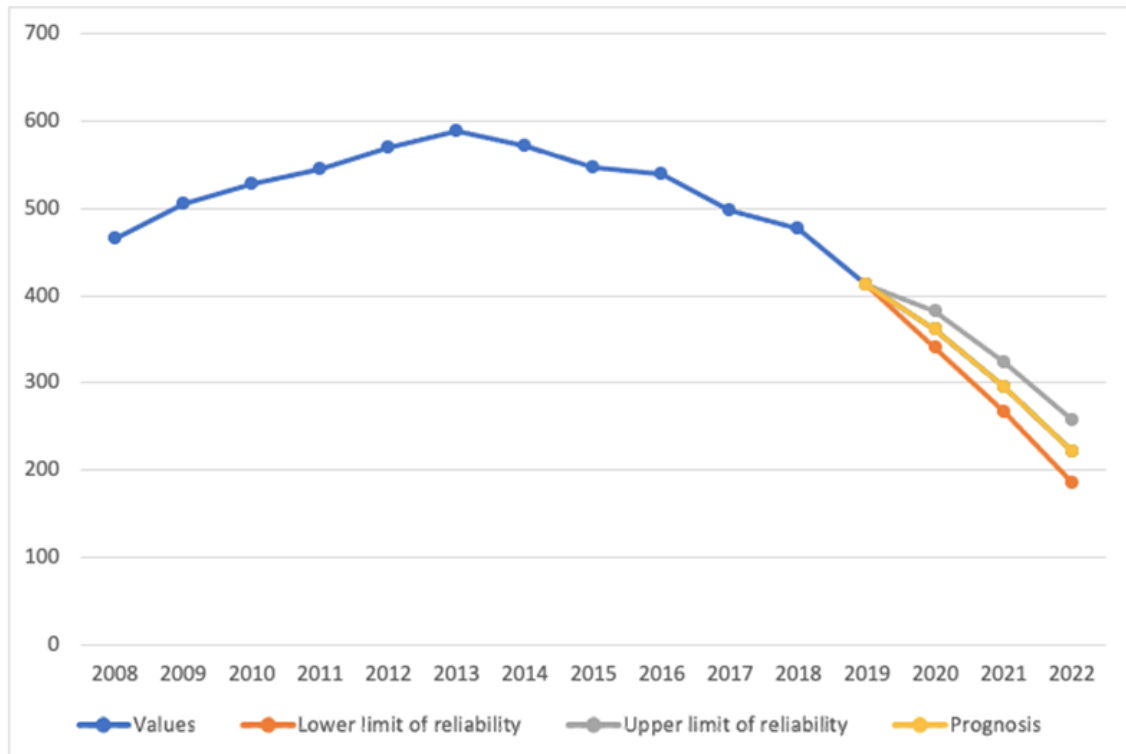


Chart 1 – Student's interest and its prediction ($\alpha=0.05$) to attend Erasmus+ at the Faculty Economics and Management in Prague 2008-2019.

Source: own elaboration in the software STATISTICA 14

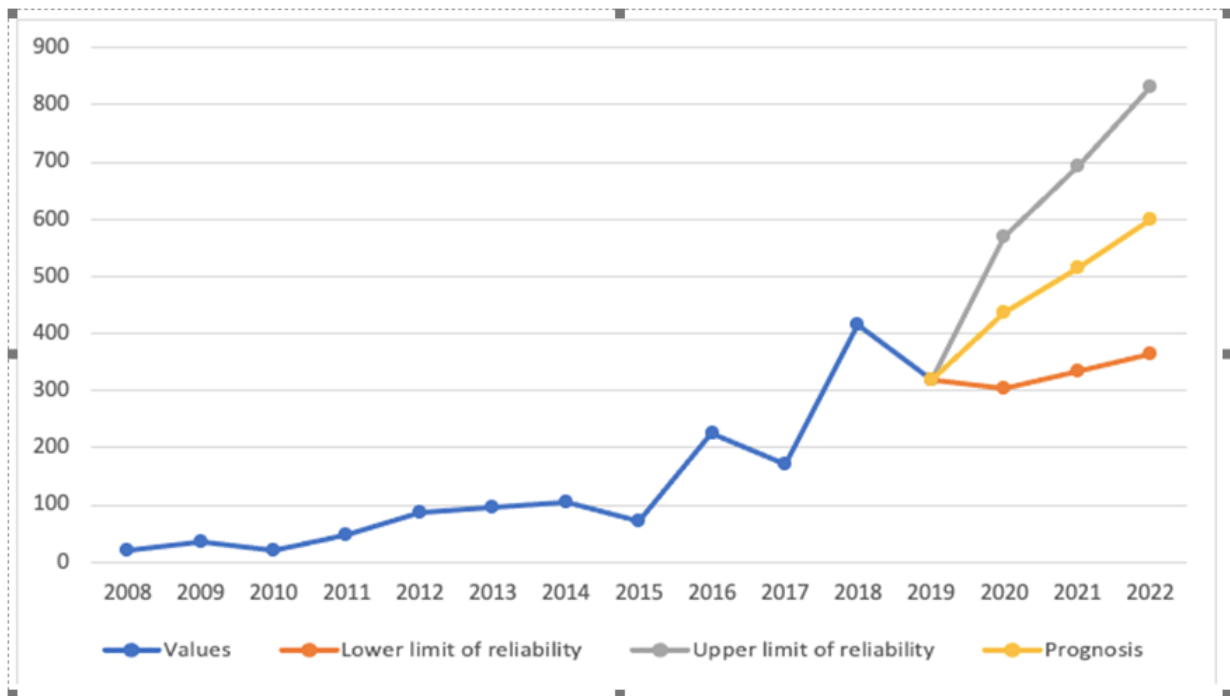


Chart 2- Student's interest and its prediction ($\alpha=0.05$) to attend Non-European mobilities at the Faculty Economics and Management in Prague 2008-2019

Source: own elaboration in the software STATISTICA 14

The top 5 most favored and requested countries under the program Erasmus+ are France, Spain, Germany, Portugal and Greece (Figure 3).

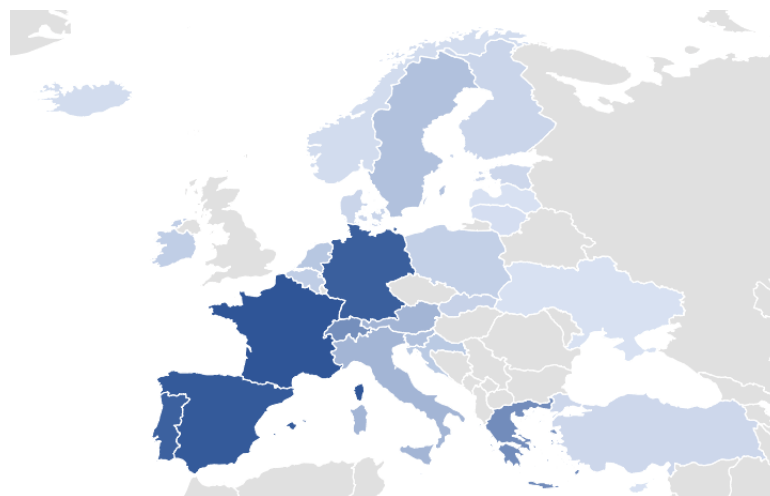


Figure 3- Map of the student’s interest to attend Erasmus+ in 2019

Source: own elaboration based on data from CULTS

Chart 3 shows the 5 most selected universities within the Erasmus+ program by students of the Faculty of Economics and Management. In this case, it is not only about the country, but the students chose the university according to the prestige of the school.

The most popular university out of the non-European mobilities in 2019 was the university Chiang Mai in Thailand. The other most popular preferences of students from the the CULS Faculty of Economics and Management are shown below in chart 4.

Erasmus+ incoming students

The „Buddy Program“ for all incoming students at the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, is run by ESN (Erasmus Student Network). The program helps incoming students with adaptation after arrival and during the whole mobility as well. Students from CULS who participate in the buddy program are also organizing cultural and social events for foreign students during whole semester. Chart 5 shows the proportion of students who have applied for the Buddy Program by faculty of the CULS.

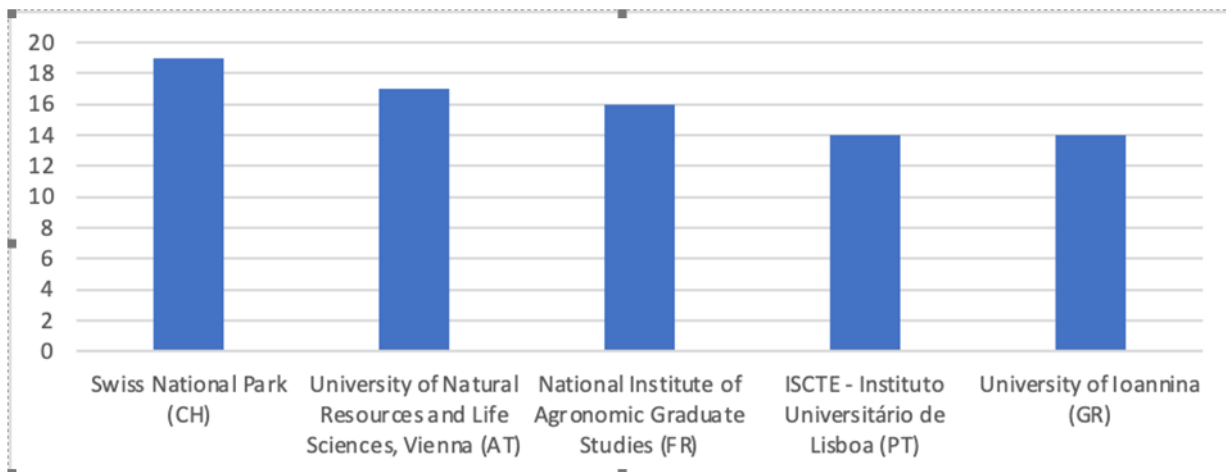


Chart 3- The most popular Erasmus+ universities of the Faculty of Economics and Management in 2019 in terms of the number of outgoing students per year

Source: own elaboration based on data from CULS

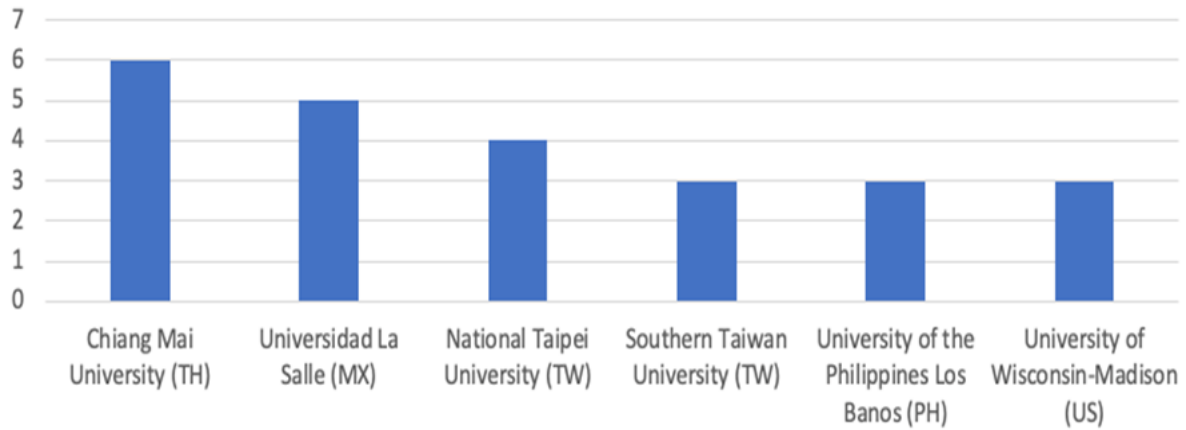


Chart 4- The most popular Non-European universities for students from CULS the faculty of Economics and Management in 2019

Source: own elaboration based on data from CULS

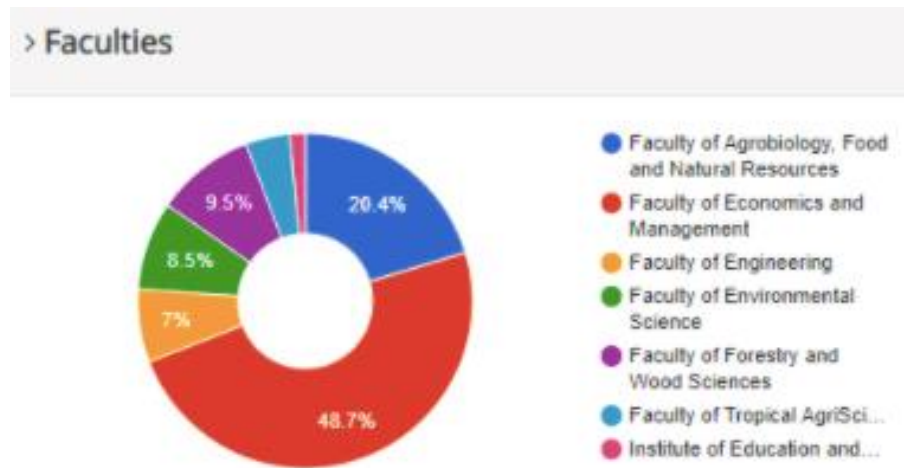
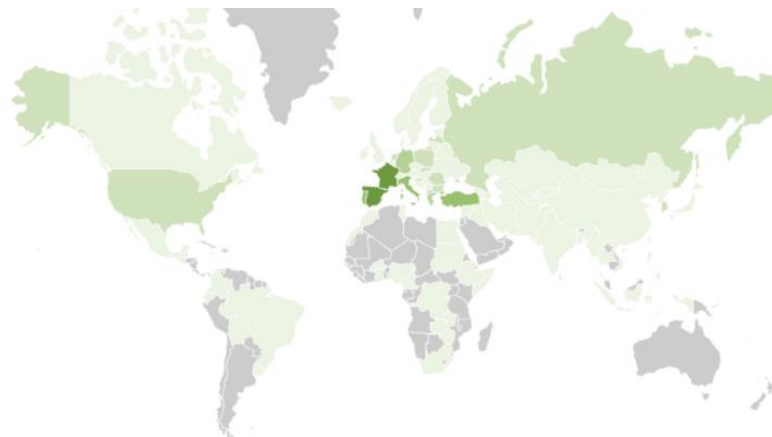


Chart 5- Buddy program for foreign students within the CULS in 2019

Source: ESN CULS

In 2020 and 2021, there was a significant drop of student interest due to the pandemic situation of COVID-19. Figure 4 shows the countries from which students came to the CULS as part of student mobility (data from 2019). The countries that are more strongly colored show a higher number of students arriving and therefore we can say that most students arrive from the countries of France, Spain, Italy and Turkey under the Erasmus+ program. For non-European mobility, the countries are the USA, South Korea and Russia.



Despite the partial epidemiological calming under COVID-19 in 2022, many students are concerned about the possibility of certain global sites being closed again. Experiences with online learning, closure of universities, cultural and social venues do not bring the expected benefits of study abroad.

4.2. Analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey

Respondent’s profile

The questionnaire survey was conducted in early 2022 and focused on students of the Faculty of Economics and Management who participated in study abroad, both in the Erasmus+ program and the Extra-European Mobility program. The sample size was 104 students. Respondents had most often studied in Portugal, Germany, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan and France. The countries South Korea and Taiwan fall under bilateral agreements and the rest under Erasmus+. Students preferred mobility under Erasmus+ or Extra-European Mobility, with almost three quarters choosing Erasmus+.

Mobility selection criteria

Chart 6 shows which criteria were most important for students while choosing their mobility abroad. For 83% of the respondents, learning about a foreign culture and meeting new people was important for their choice of mobility location, for 56% of the respondents it was the location of the mobility and for 49% it was an opportunity to improve their language skills.

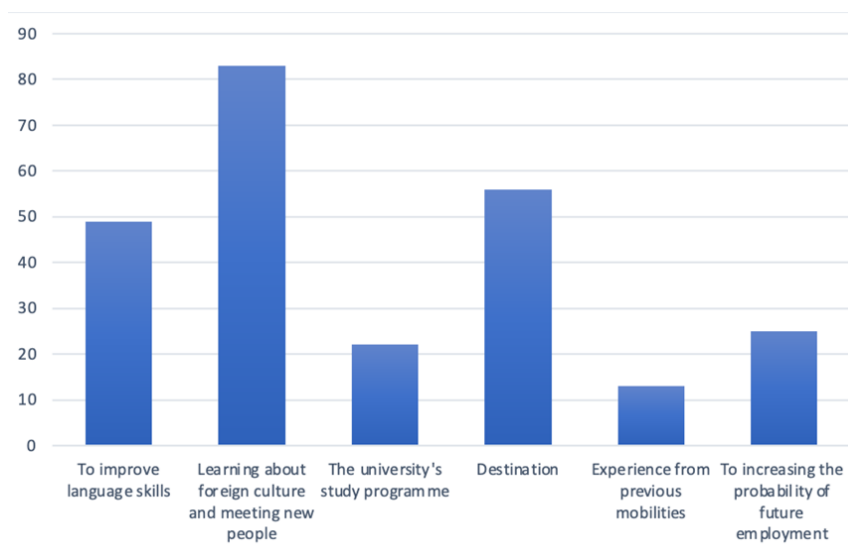


Chart 6- Respondent’s criteria for international mobility (%)

Source: questionnaire survey

Dependency analysis of qualitative variables

The dependency analysis between the questions in the survey were performed using the χ^2 test. Hypotheses were tested at 5% significance level. Five null hypotheses were formulated for the aim of the study:

H01: The relationship between the study program and the mobility chosen by the respondent does not exist.

H02: The gender of the respondent does not affect the choice of the mobility.

H03: Mobility does not affect the quality of studies.

H04: Gender does not affect interest in participating in one of the mobilities again.

H05: Absolved mobility does not affect your interest in studying abroad again.

The results of the testing of statistical hypotheses are shown in Table 2.

Null hypothesis	Test criterion	Dependency $\alpha=0,05$	C
H01	12.8956	Yes	0.3395
H02	0.3871	No	-
H03	38.8783	Yes	0.6235
H04	2.3944	No	-
H05	6.3705	Yes	0.2471

Table 2- Results of statistical hypotheses tests

Source: questionnaire survey

The χ^2 test of independence found that the study program (Bachelor's, Master's) has an influence on the choice of international student mobility (C=0.395). Girls and boys choose destinations according to similar criteria. The quality of the level of study abroad is related to the choice of university (C=0.6235). Gender does not influence the interest to participate in one of the mobilities again, but previous study abroad experience triggers repeated interest in studying abroad (C=0.2471).

5. CONCLUSION

Based on time series analyses, it was found that the number of students interested in completing Erasmus+ student mobility is decreasing. However, in the framework of bilateral agreements (Extra-European Mobility), student interest is on an increasing trend. Current students are more interested in mobility where they get to go to less usual areas from a European perspective, such as the countries in the Extra-European Mobility. In addition to the attractiveness of the countries under bilateral agreements, a common reason for choosing to study in these countries is the reduced administrative burden of the extensive documents a student has to submit before departure. As the Erasmus+ scholarships for outgoing students are funded by the European Union, a considerable amount of documentation is required. Conversely, for students who choose to go under bilateral agreements, the scholarship is provided by the student's home university, making it easier for both the university and the students. Another reason for the reduced interest of students in Erasmus+ is the growing interest in seasonal work abroad and summer language stays outside Europe. A significant contribution to that is made by the Czech-US Agency for Work & Travel in the USA and Canada.

The Buddy Program is important for students in the context of learning mobility. In the case of European countries, the program is largely provided by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), which helps students to adapt to their new country before and during their mobility. The ESN is also involved in promoting mobility abroad. For non-European mobility, universities usually provide their own Buddy system.

Based on the results of a survey carried out among students of the Faculty of Economics and Management at CULS in Prague, the most attractive universities for Erasmus+ are in France, Portugal, Spain and Germany. In the framework of bilateral agreements, these are Thailand, Mexico, Taiwan, the Philippines and the USA. An important criterion for selecting a particular university is the level of education provided.

Despite the partial epidemiological relief under COVID-19 in 2022, many students are still concerned about the possibility of certain global sites being closed again. Experiences of online learning, university closures, and restrictions on cultural and social venues are negatively impacting current student interest in international mobility.

Several criteria play a role in the mobility abroad and in the choice of the country and university where a student decides to study. In addition to the actual desire to study the chosen study program abroad, these include efforts to improve language skills, to learn about a foreign culture and new people, and to become independent. Learning about the culture of the country will help students in both their personal and professional lives. By studying abroad, students can open the door to interesting job opportunities in both the domestic and international job market.

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