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**International Student Adaptation:  
The Impact of a Secondary Exchange on Integration in  
the Original Host Country**

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*To my dear parents, who trusted me in this adventure*

*To Mobility Unit who helped me with this research and in life*

*And to myself as a reminder that I can do anything*

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## **Abbreviations**

AFS - American Field Service

AIIESEC - Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales  
(English: International Association of Students in Economics and Business)

CIM - Cultural Identity Model

DMIS - Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

ECTS - European Credit Transfer System

EHEA - European Higher Education Area

EU - European Union

GPA - Grade Point Average

NELM - New Economics of Labour Migration

OECD - Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PAS - Psychological Assistance Service

SEMP - Swiss European Mobility Programme

STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

UK - United Kingdom

UN - United Nations

UNIPD - University of Padua

US - United States

USA - United States of America

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the impact of secondary exchange programs on the socio-cultural adaptation and integration of international students in their original host country (Italy). The research focuses on international students at the University of Padua and compares the experience of those who participated in a secondary exchange program to a third country and later returned to Italy, and of those who initially applied for a secondary exchange but decided to remain in Italy. This study examines whether the temporary absence during the secondary exchange hindered or facilitated re-adaptation and integration upon returning to Italy and explores how the outcomes of those who stayed in Italy differ from those who went abroad. The findings provide insights into the complexity of adaptation processes, highlighting the role of previous intercultural experiences in shaping student integration. Finally, this study provides a new perspective on the experiences of international students that can be useful for the development of university services intended to help these students in navigating mobility and integration challenges.

**Keywords:** international student mobility, secondary exchange, socio-cultural adaptation, re-adaptation, integration challenges, Erasmus+

## **Extended Summary in Italian**

Negli ultimi 75 anni, i tassi di comunicazione globale sono aumentati rapidamente grazie alla globalizzazione, un fenomeno che ha favorito l'interazione e l'integrazione tra persone, aziende e stati in ambiti quali economia, politica, cultura ed educazione. L'istituzione delle Nazioni Unite nel 1945 ha svolto un ruolo significativo in questa dinamica, promuovendo la cooperazione internazionale e incoraggiando il dialogo culturale, in particolare attraverso i programmi di mobilità studentesca. Dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, l'educazione internazionale ha acquisito un ruolo strategico per rafforzare la comprensione reciproca tra i giovani, favorendo lo scambio culturale e preparando le future generazioni a gestire le sfide globali.

Questo studio si concentra sull'esperienza degli studenti internazionali presso l'Università di Padova (UNIPD), esaminando il processo di adattamento socio-culturale e di reintegrazione dopo un periodo di mobilità secondaria, come i programmi Erasmus+. L'obiettivo principale è confrontare due gruppi di studenti internazionali: coloro che hanno partecipato a una mobilità secondaria in un terzo paese e sono successivamente tornati in Italia, e quelli che hanno scelto di restare in Italia continuando il loro processo di integrazione senza interruzioni.

Lo studio ha utilizzato un approccio metodologico misto. È stato somministrato un questionario dettagliato a due gruppi di studenti internazionali selezionati dai database dell'Ufficio Mobilità dell'Università di Padova. I questionari includono domande chiuse per confronti quantitativi e aperte per approfondimenti qualitativi, coprendo temi come le motivazioni per la mobilità, le esperienze interculturali pregresse e i processi di adattamento e riadattamento.

I risultati evidenziano che la mobilità secondaria può influire positivamente o negativamente sul processo di reintegrazione, in base alla capacità degli studenti di gestire le differenze interculturali e di riconnettersi con il contesto italiano. I dati raccolti offrono nuovi spunti per migliorare i servizi universitari, con particolare attenzione alle esigenze degli studenti che affrontano sfide di mobilità e integrazione.

## Introduction

Over the past 75 years, worldwide communication rates have increased rapidly. This phenomenon can be explained by globalisation, characterised by the interaction and integration of people, companies, and states in the realms of economics, politics, culture, religion, and especially education. Alongside advancements in science, technology, and business, the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 significantly contributed to the promotion of internationalisation. Entrusted with the tasks to "maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among nations, achieve international cooperation, and be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations" (United Nations Charter, 1945, Article 1), the UN has remarkably influenced global connectivity.

The creation of the UN also encouraged transformative changes in education, particularly in the realm of international student mobility. The phenomenon of studying abroad emerged and was actively promoted after the 1950s, providing younger generations with opportunities to travel safely, establish valuable connections with peers from other countries, and share knowledge and experiences to address global issues. Additionally, international education provided opportunities for cultural exchange, enabling students to introduce their culture to others while expanding their intercultural outlook and fostering mutual understanding. These efforts aimed to prevent future conflicts by integrating younger generations, especially in the aftermath of World War II, when peaceful cooperation became paramount. Today, overseas education remains a significant force, not only as an integrating factor but also for its role in self-development, language acquisition, networking, and enhancing employability.

Studying abroad encompasses activities undertaken by students as part of their higher education at a university outside their home country. These experiences vary widely. The most common one is when students enrol in foreign universities to pursue full degrees — whether Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD — or complete a preparatory foundation year. Others participate in international exchange programmes facilitated by agreements between home and host universities, often supported by organisations such as Erasmus, AFS Intercultural Programs, or AIESEC. Such exchanges typically last between six and twelve months, though shorter options like international summer schools also exist. While long-term study abroad is generally associated with pursuing a full degree, short-term exchanges are considered temporary sojourns.

Despite the many advantages of international education, students often encounter challenges in adapting to a new cultural context and managing their academic performance in a foreign

environment. The success of an exchange depends heavily on the levels of students' socio-cultural adaptation — the process of acquiring the skills needed to navigate the culture of their host country. Research has shown that while international mobility offers numerous benefits, the outcomes vary significantly based on students' ability to adapt to their surroundings (Cox, 1988).

International student mobility, both long-term and short-term, has been studied extensively, particularly regarding the challenges students face and the adaptation process they undergo in foreign universities. However, less attention has been paid to the stage following adaptation, specifically the re-adaptation process when students return from their mobility programme. This phase, often accompanied by reverse culture shock, remains a topic that has been explored less profoundly in scientific literature.

This paper **aims** to address this gap by comparing the experiences of international students who have relocated to a foreign country for their studies and subsequently undertake a secondary exchange (e.g., an Erasmus+ semester) with those who choose to remain in the country of initial relocation. The focus is on whether and how their experiences of integration and adaptation differ upon returning from a secondary exchange versus continuing their adaptation in one country. The primary **goal** is to explore how additional intercultural experience impacts the overall adaptation process, particularly during re-integration.

The **research questions** guiding this study are as follows:

1. What challenges do international students face when re-adapting to the original host country (Italy) after participating in a secondary exchange to a third country?
2. How do the socio-cultural adaptation and integration experiences of international students who undertook a secondary exchange compare to those who remained in the original host country (Italy) without interruption?
3. Does the additional intercultural experience gained through the secondary exchange facilitate or hinder re-adaptation and integration upon returning to the original host country, compared to students who continued their adaptation process without leaving?

To address these questions, a comparative study was conducted with two groups of international students at the University of Padua (UNIPD) recruited from the dataset of the UNIPD students, who applied for exchange, provided by the Mobility Office at university. The first group consisted of students who undertook a secondary exchange, such as Erasmus+, and returned to Italy, while the

control group included students who applied for an exchange but decided to remain in Italy. Both groups included only international students to align with the study's aims.

Both groups completed a detailed questionnaire designed to collect demographic information, motivations for mobility, prior international experiences, and socio-cultural adaptation processes both before and after the exchange (or while staying in Italy). The questionnaires also addressed many other aspects of students' mobility experience, using a combination of closed-ended questions for quantitative comparison and open-ended questions for qualitative insights. This mixed-method approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the students' integration experiences, highlighting the potential impact of secondary mobility on adaptation and re-adaptation processes.

This thesis is organised into several chapters. Chapter 1 explores international student mobility, with a focus on Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes, and examines the various forms of studying abroad, from long-term degree programmes to short-term exchanges. Chapter 2 reviews socio-cultural adaptation and re-adaptation theories, including models such as the U-curve, W-curve, and reverse culture shock, to establish a theoretical framework for understanding the challenges faced by international students. Chapter 3 outlines the study's methodology, including the research design, participant selection, and data collection process. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, focusing on the challenges faced by students during their re-adaptation or continuous integration process. Chapter 5 discusses the results in the context of existing literature, offering insights into the impact of secondary mobility on socio-cultural integration. Finally, the Conclusion summarises the key findings, acknowledges the study's limitations, and suggests directions for future research on international student mobility and re-adaptation.

# Chapter 1: International Student Mobility and Exchange Programs

## 1.1 Overview of International Student Mobility

International student mobility undoubtedly represents a unique opportunity for many participants in the global higher education market. In recent decades, the world has witnessed exponential growth in educational programmes abroad, international partnerships between institutions, and other opportunities for intercultural dialogue in the realm of education. Among the most popular programmes, there are Erasmus+, as well as double and joint degree courses, which students worldwide undertake with the purpose of moving to another country, obtaining valuable academic experience, and broadening their horizons. Apart from going abroad to pursue a full university degree, many international students decide to engage in additional, or secondary, short-term exchange programmes, adding layers to their academic experience. This chapter, and particularly this section, provides an overview of the main trends, developments, and challenges associated with the internationalisation of higher education.

### *Evolution of international student mobility*

To begin with, it is necessary to understand how international student mobility has developed in the course of history. The article *"Student Mobility and Internationalisation: Trends and Tribulations"* written by Knight (2012) provides insight into how internationalisation, which nowadays has become a core strategic goal of many universities in the world, has influenced the transformations of higher education over the past few decades. The duality of the process of internationalisation, that Knight defines through two interdependent components of **'at home'** and **'abroad'**, consists of the attempts of higher education institutions to blend worldwide trends into their local campus-based activities and to facilitate cross-border student mobility at the same time, thereby reflecting the complexity of contemporary international education.

Having mentioned that the number of international students worldwide increased from approximately 238,000 students in the 1960s to an impressive 3.3 million in 2008 and that the figure is expected to double by 2025, Knight (2012) believes that this growth can be explained by universities' desire to attract biggest global talents and therefore secure the top positions in world university rankings. Another reason is the commercialisation of higher education, marked by the increased focus on competitiveness and market-driven development, that requires universities to prioritise revenue over talent and recruit more students that would help in achieving broader economic goals. Knight, however, critiques this commercial approach arguing that the intrinsic values of education, namely the spread of knowledge, intercultural exchange, as well as diverse educational approaches, may be

overshadowed by the commodification of teaching and learning and standardised, market-oriented practices.

The two components of internationalisation are also further elaborated by Knight. The one that is concerned with the internationalisation 'at home' consists of bringing international features to the campus environment, exploring intercultural dimensions in teaching, and establishing links between the local cultural and ethnic minorities. Various study tours, fieldwork, on-campus assistance programmes contribute to the internationalisation of universities without undertaking physical mobility. Such an approach can create meaningful international experiences for students who lack the financial or other resources needed to undertake a real study abroad programme. Cross-border education, which is the second, 'abroad' component, on the contrary, includes physical student mobility, as well as the mobility of academic programmes and institutions that is realised through joint research projects with the participants from different countries and branch campuses. All in all, it contributes to the academic competitiveness of institutions and allows them to increase their revenue and global attractiveness (Knight, 2012).

One of the important events in the internationalisation of higher education is the transition from the mobility of individuals to the mobility of educational programmes and even universities, that includes twinning programmes, franchise arrangements, branch campuses, joint and double degree courses, and the establishment of education hubs. So called '**twinning programmes**' were represented by the opportunity to spend part of the studies at a partner university abroad that became possible as a result of collaborative effort of educational institutions. Later, these twinning programmes turned into **franchise arrangements**, when institutions began to grant to other institutions an opportunity to offer their full foreign degrees locally so that students could study at home and avoid relocation. **Branch campuses** and **education hubs** were similar initiatives aimed at creating local centres of global education and attracting students by the availability of international education without the necessity to physically go abroad (Ibid).

Knight (2012) provides more details on educational hubs that represent an interesting phenomenon within the emerging trend of the commercialisation of international education. Constituting an effort undertaken on the level of the whole nation to attract students and knowledge to a central location, educational hubs are typical for the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia. These hubs emerge as economic engines that promote innovations and attract more stakeholders that contribute to the change towards a market-driven model of the higher education sector.

Special attention is paid to such collaborative initiatives as **joint and double degree programmes**. The main traits of a joint degree programme are the following: students are engaged in a single integrated course of studies that is offered by a number of universities but only one unified qualification is awarded at the end. Double degree programmes are different in terms of two separate qualifications that they allow students to obtain, one from each university participating in the educational programme. Despite the advantages of such opportunities, there are also a number of challenges, the most significant of which are the legitimacy of awarded qualifications and problems with the recognition of joint degrees. Knight (2012) specifies that some countries do not legally recognise double qualifications, and students, therefore, receive only one diploma from one university and an official certificate from another university. This often results in future problems with employability and enrollment in foreign universities encountered by many students graduating with such qualifications.

All in all, Knight's view of internationalisation of higher education provides substantial understanding of the trends and nature of international student mobility in its complexity and contemporary features. Adding to this knowledge, Choudaha (2017) provides a more detailed explanation of the historical development of those trends within the three specific periods of international student mobility from 1999 to 2020 that is analysed further on.

Rahul Choudaha, in his article "*Three Waves of International Student Mobility (1999–2020)*" (2017), represents the evolution of student mobility by **three waves**, thus providing better understanding of the patterns and challenges that influenced the development in this sphere, namely global demand for highly skilled talents, fluctuations in the world economy, the impact of social and political change, and other events that regard mainly such traditional student destinations like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

The **first wave**, according to the author, started in 1999 and lasted until 2006 and was characterised by a rapid growth in science and technology industries that generated a strong demand for highly skilled professionals in the STEM section, including fields like science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Educational institutions in host countries were motivated to attract more students, while the students were also motivated to succeed academically in the abovementioned fields and fill in the existing gap in the labour market of their host countries. Among those countries, the most popular destinations were the UK, France, Italy, Austria and Switzerland, while countries from where the largest number of students were recruited appeared to be China and India.

Having happened in 2001, the 9/11 terrorist attacks also shaped the context for the wave of 1999-2006. Visa regulations were tightened in the United States, which had a significant impact on student mobility with many applications from foreign students now being sent to such emerging study abroad destinations as France, Italy, and Austria, even though the US and the UK continued to attract students for academic and economic reasons.

With the global economic crisis unfolding in 2008, the **second wave** (2006-2013) was greatly impacted by the financial downturn and the decision of many universities in traditional host countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, that were experiencing severe budget cuts at that time, to focus on attracting mostly self-funded students to be able to use them as a source of income, instead of prioritising talent. Those students were usually enrolling in business and management courses at the undergraduate level, which added to the contrast with previously popular STEM master's degree programmes.

During this wave, scholarships provided by their home government allowed students from Saudi Arabia to undertake international student mobility, while the number of students from China also increased substantially (by approximately 75%) given the rising middle-class aspirations and interest in foreign education. Notably, students from India only increased by 25%, and such countries as Vietnam and Nigeria started to form new providers of international students because of the economic development and the spread of interest towards English-language education in the UK and Australia. As for the language proficiency requirements, this wave also saw the rise of entry opportunities for potential students "with lesser academic rigour and/or lesser English language proficiency" (Choudaha, 2017, p.7) that was again motivated by the desire to gain more money from enrollment fees for international students. Even though additional university services were being created to provide academic and language support to incoming students, they were often insufficient for such a broad range of international applicants.

Various demographic and geopolitical events influenced the **third wave** that spanned from 2013 to 2020. Those events included the slowdown of the Chinese economy, that triggered changes regarding traditional source countries, and such political events as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US president in 2016 and his subsequent anti-immigration policies, which changed the climate in traditional destination countries. New immigration rules and unclear post-graduation opportunities in the US and the UK caused the search for alternative, more welcoming and career promising destinations for international education, as for example, Canada and Australia, or Germany and France in the EU.

A new trend that emerged within the third wave, called “glocal” education by Choudaha (2017), regards the students who want to obtain international education experiences but at a lower cost and geographically closer to their home countries. This phenomenon led to the fact that one in five internationally mobile students to OECD countries came from a country that shares borders with the destination country, thus making it “850,000 regionally mobile international students who are seeking global education while staying close to their home country” (Choudaha, 2017, p. 10).

As a result of the analysis of these three waves of international student mobility, Choudaha recognizes the necessity of higher education institutions to create and tailor their support services to the needs of regionally mobile students as well as students from diverse countries who come to study abroad with the expectations of smooth academic and cultural adaptation to their host countries and further career opportunities, in accordance with the global mobility trends and factors that motivate students to undertake studies abroad despite the rapidly increasing amount of university fees and constantly changing immigration procedures.

The historical overview of student mobility, provided by Choudaha (2017), that consists of three distinct waves and is concerned mostly with the geographical areas of America and Australia, is useful to understand the global scene of destinations, demographics, trends, and policies of international education. As a result of the changes, described by those three waves, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) became another serious player on the global market. The main events that happened in this area and transformed European countries into major destinations for international students and contributed to the development of intra-European mobility, including the Bologna Process, as well as challenges and opportunities associated with this initiative, were described in the article by Ulrich Teichler in 2012.

### *Student mobility in Europe and the Bologna Process*

The **Bologna Process**, which eventually shaped the European Higher Education Area as it is now, is not represented simply by the Bologna Declaration but rather by a long historical period of initiatives and attempts to unify European higher education. Similar to Choudaha’s approach, Teichler (2012) also describes several stages of this process.

The **first stage** began in the 1950s, when the Council of Europe, which was active in the period after the end of World War II, dedicated its efforts towards establishing **mutual understanding** between European nations and bridging cultural differences by means of increased student mobility.

Conventions for recognizing the academic qualifications obtained in other countries were established and expected to facilitate internal student exchange.

The **second stage** unfolded in the 1960s when Europe and other advanced countries in the world were trying to collaborate with the purpose of attracting more individuals and expanding the number of student enrollments in their universities, thus contributing to **economic growth**. It is similar to what was described in the second way (Choudaha, 2017) when international students were seen mostly as a source of revenue. In Europe, though, universities also aimed to provide wider access to higher education for students of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Actual student mobility within Europe was the main focus of the **third stage** that was initiated in the 1980s and is marked mainly by the introduction of the **Erasmus** programme in 1978 by the European Commission. Promoting short-term student mobility in Europe, as well as intercultural exchange and further academic and career perspectives for participating students, the Erasmus programme was seen as a breakthrough initiative and quickly gained success. It became obvious to many European universities that a more convergent approach to the system of higher education is needed to make internal student mobility flourish.

All these efforts finally led to the **fourth stage**, when the **Bologna Declaration** was signed in 1999. As a result, a unified system of study cycles was established and the mechanism of credit recognition was launched, accompanied by the diploma supplements and quality assurance standards. This event changed the way European higher education functioned, making academic qualifications easily comparable and contributing to a more simplified credit transfer that facilitated a common outlook on student mobility across Europe and significantly fostered this process.

In more detail, Teichler (2012), reported two main objectives of the Bologna Process. One of them was to attract more international students to European universities not only from other European countries but also from outside of the European area, and the second one was to increase the participation of local European students in intra-European mobility through short-term exchange programmes. Several initiatives that were introduced in the Bologna Declaration in 1999 contributed to these objectives.

First of all, a **three-cycle system** divided the previously unique study course into three separate stages: Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate. It facilitated the recognition of higher education qualifications obtained by students in their home countries and allowed them to continue their studies

in Europe by transitioning between different academic levels and pursuing those qualifications separately in different universities and even in different countries if desired.

Another initiative introduced by the Bologna Process was a **common credit system (ECTS)** that not only instantly allowed for measuring previous academic achievements so that students from other educational systems could be accepted to European universities but also for the recognition of credits obtained by European students during their temporary academic mobility in other universities. This credit transfer system still lies at the core of the Erasmus student exchange programme.

The academic credentials started to be reported in a **diploma supplement**, a document that extends the diploma and contains information about all the courses that were taken during the period of studies, all the grades obtained and, most importantly, the number of credits achieved at the end of the degree programme. This clear and standardised way to present academic qualifications was established also to help employers and universities access the educational credentials of European graduates. Finally, to ensure high standards of education and increase the attractiveness of European degrees across the European Higher Education Area, **quality assurance** mechanisms were also launched.

Teichler (2012) further reports that all these efforts within the Bologna Process significantly contributed to the increase of inbound mobility to Europe, with the number of international students enrolling in European universities increasing from 827,000 in 1999 to 1.5 million in 2007. Even though the growth in intra-European mobility was not as outstanding as expected, the Erasmus programme remains incredibly important and popular among European universities, as more than 200,000 students annually benefit from it. It might be explained by the fact that pursuing entire degree programmes in European universities represents “**vertical mobility**” for students that come from economically and academically less developed countries and provides them with better career opportunities and potentially changing their lives in a very significant way, while Erasmus temporary exchanges within Europe are considered to be “**horizontal mobility**” and provides mainly intercultural experience, though Erasmus participants often report better employability after their exchange programme.

This focus on employability is being criticised by Teichler, because the original goal of the Bologna Process was to facilitate academic excellence and not to meet the labour market needs. He also notes the challenges in implementing the Bologna reforms that are mainly motivated by the variety of approaches that existed in European higher education institutions, 95% of which had managed to

introduce the three-cycle system by 2010, while there are still universities and educational fields that remain behind in this process and continue with their national systems that often lead to inconsistencies in curriculum and credit recognition and therefore impedes students' participation in academic exchange. A continuous improvement and adaptation of the Bologna system is needed to maintain the success of European higher education in the global academic scene.

As was already mentioned in the article by Teichler (2012), the success of intra-European mobility as well as the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms were not always stable and created many challenges in the realm of internationalisation of higher education. More than ten years later, in their recent article, Brooks, Courtois, Faas, and others (2024) provide a further overview of the contemporary situation and the evolution of challenges that shape student mobility in Europe nowadays.

### ***The contemporary state of international mobility and its new challenges***

The article of Brooks et al. (2024) agrees with the previous literature and states that in 2024 the European Union continues to prioritise the internalisation of higher education and promote student mobility to create a comprehensive and interconnected academic and professional environment. It also distinguishes between **inward** and **outward** mobility, where the former is seen as a means of financial stability thanks to tuition fees paid by international students, as well as a way to make university campuses more diverse and contribute to the development of intercultural skills of local and international students. The latter one, now especially popular in the UK and Ireland, is concerned with the increase of students' employability and the development of their intercultural and entrepreneurial skills.

The European context, in which the current research is also situated, is represented as a unique one given a number of aspects inherent to this region. Just as creating a unified educational framework and promoting internal European mobility were key objectives of the Bologna process (Teichler, 2012), such programmes as Erasmus+ and the more recent European Universities Initiative continue to facilitate short-term mobility programmes and contribute to the overall goal of creating a shared European identity and developing the European labour market. Furthermore, what distinguishes Europe from other parts of the world is its **colonial legacy** that influences the current mobility of students. For example, universities in the United Kingdom continue to actively recruit students from India, their former colony, which shapes the cultural context for the exchange programmes.

The current situation in the field of higher education in Europe demonstrates that not only the previously existing challenges remained but also several new ones appeared. Brooks et al. identify **six primary challenges**, the description of which is provided further.

As already mentioned by Choudaha (2017), **Brexit** as well as other **political changes in Europe** affected the accessibility of higher education in Europe, with some other countries like Denmark and the Netherlands also tightening their migration policies, according to Brooks et al. (2024). Once perceived as one of the main destination countries in Europe, the UK is now experiencing many uncertainties regarding the established mobility paths that were partially cancelled by Brexit. Although the new “Global Britain” agenda is expected to attract students from beyond the continent, in practice, the already existing relationships with the universities situated in Anglophone Global North and European economically advanced countries are reinforced, thus maintaining the inequalities in mobility opportunities and not creating new routes for overseas applicants. This situation, however, seems to be in line with the policy of the European Higher Education Area and Erasmus+ which consists of encouraging the internal European mobility of students.

International student mobility produces undeniable **public goods** related to the spread of knowledge and interculturality by means of students undertaking physical travel to other countries. However, it seems to overshadow the carbon footprint generated by international flights and go against the sustainability goals promoted by the Erasmus+ programme’s 2021-2027 agenda, which creates a new **environmental challenge** for student mobility. Nowadays, European and other universities around the world have to increase their awareness of the environmental costs of physical mobility and consider greener travel alternatives, while keeping up with the mobility goals. Many online and virtual mobility opportunities have been created in response to this contemporary challenge.

**Socio-economic barriers** continue to be a persistent challenge for those participating in international mobility. Even though study abroad opportunities have recently become more accessible to students from a wider range of social backgrounds, the majority of them remain open mostly to students from more privileged backgrounds. Moreover, the inclusivity that is actively promoted by universities on their websites, mainly regards students from socio-economically disadvantaged countries, while other underrepresented groups of students, such as applicants with disabilities, mature students, or students from ethnic minorities, are still being overlooked. Thus, European universities continue to experience the challenge of stratified participation in student mobility, which brings back the discussion of the 2008 economic recession that forced many universities to choose self-funding international students

over talented students but without financial resources thus limiting their access to higher education, as also reported by Choudaha (2017).

The **financial challenges** are further exacerbated by the **rising costs of living** as well as the **housing crisis** in many European countries. The costs of accommodation, tuition fees, and daily expenses render the study abroad experience less feasible in terms of financial affordability, thus contributing to the overall insecurity and stress that international students often undergo abroad. As an example, Brooks et al. (2024) reported a study in which international doctorate students in Ireland faced higher levels of anxiety related to financial problems, which negatively affected their academic performance and their overall well-being. Within the current cost-of-living crisis, universities as well as other powerful actors in the sphere of higher education have to come up with more efficient ways to assist international students and ensure enough financial support opportunities.

Another challenge that impedes inclusivity and belonging is the experience of **racism and discrimination** that is, unfortunately, still familiar to many international students. According to Brooks et al. (2024), such disparities have an impact on students' academic and social adaptation and integration and need to be addressed comprehensively and proactively by institutions. In practical terms, university staff must be trained on discrimination and racism and support services for students from minority backgrounds have to be developed. Thus, a more inclusive environment will be created for international students and eventually facilitate their mobility experience.

Finally, the article mentions another issue that has emerged in the realm of international student mobility in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic created such unexpected **global health challenges** as extended border closures, health restrictions, lockdowns, and cancelled flights, that negatively influenced the feasibility of student mobility by affecting the logistics and opportunities for travel and offline education. The pandemic demonstrated the unpreparedness of many countries to these challenges and highlighted the need of many universities in Europe and beyond to become more flexible in their response to the discussed problems and ensure resilient safety policies to be able to continue functioning without disruptions, which reflects the idea of adaptability of higher education institutions promoted by the Bologna Process (Teichler, 2012).

Thus, it can be concluded that the main challenge currently faced by international student mobility is maintaining the balance between the cultural and social benefits of mobility experience and emerging environmental considerations. Several authors, cited by Brooks et al. (2024), underline social outcomes and the concept of public good, associated with such intangible benefits as knowledge

dispersal, intercultural dialogue, greater civic engagement, political participation, and overall well-being of society that are undoubtedly valuable but at the same time call for a more profound consideration of environmental sustainability that should not serve as the high cost of all the advantages brought by international student mobility.

The authors also highlight the importance of a multi-layered approach to addressing these challenges given that international student mobility is shaped by micro-level individual motivations, meso-level institutional frameworks, and macro-level policy environments. Therefore, the intersecting problems of political shift, socio-economic inequalities, and environmental sustainability should be solved across regional, national, and institutional levels, thus applying a comprehensive strategy.

Among the proposed solutions there are, for instance, the promotion of alternative travel opportunities like train or bus travel that would contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions, the expansion of financial support initiatives that would facilitate the entrance of students from diverse backgrounds into international mobility scene, and creating more opportunities for underrepresented groups to build a more inclusive academic environment, while also training staff on discrimination and cross-cultural diversity. These strategies are expected to address the current challenges and make educational mobility more accessible, resilient, and flexible.

The current challenges in the field of European student mobility, identified by Brooks et al. (2024), can only be addressed if a nuanced understanding of the various types of mobility that students participate in is provided. This brings the discussion back to Knight's article (2012) that describes the categories of mobility and students' motivations that lie behind it, creating a clearer context for the complex landscape of international student mobility addressed by Brooks et al.

### *Categories of student mobility*

A more structured approach to the classification of mobility that goes beyond full-degree programmes and short-term temporary mobility is proposed by Knight (2012). Her approach consists of identifying the **six separate types of mobility**, where each type is differentiated based on the availability of credits for courses taken outside of the home institution, the entity that awards the qualification, and whether it is recognised by the home, host or other countries where students may want to continue their studies or search for a job.

The first type of mobility experience, identified by Knight (2012) is already well-known **full degree programmes**. This kind of mobility is undertaken by those who decide to move to another country

to enrol and obtain a full degree from a host institution, and such students are usually referred to as international, foreign, or visa students. In the current paper, this kind of mobility will also be often called “long-term”. The degree is awarded by the higher education institution in the host country.

Another kind of student mobility is represented by **short-term study abroad experience** that makes part of a full degree programme pursued in the home university. Short-term mobility may last one semester or one year and be realised as physical mobility to another country where courses are taken at a foreign institution or as attending classes at a branch campus of the home university abroad. Credits obtained during the mobility period are recognized by the home university that eventually awards the degree.

The third type described by Knight (2012) deals with **cross-border collaborative degree programmes** between two or more institutions. Such degree programmes include the already mentioned twinning, franchise, sandwich, joint and double (or multiple) degrees offered either by a home institution, by a foreign university, or in collaboration. Depending on the type of programme that students apply for, different models of degree awarding exist and may include obtaining one degree from a foreign university, one degree from both partner institutions and two or more degrees from all partner universities, etc.

One more kind of mobility is **research or fieldwork** which is also supposed to be a part of the fulfilment of the entire degree programme at home institution, and to be awarded a degree students have to comply with other requirements needed to obtain a degree formulated by the awarding institution. **Internships**, and such practical experiences as **placement** or **community service work**, are another type of mobility that students may be awarded credits for and that will contribute to the overall amount of credits needed to acquire a full degree from the awarding institution.

Finally, the sixth type consists of study tours, summer programmes, cultural or language courses, conferences, workshops, and other activities that might be a part of a degree programme at home university or may be done independently, given that it is not usually credit-based (Knight, 2012).

Furthermore, Knight suggests the concept of ‘**brain circulation**’. While the traditional notions of ‘brain drain’ or ‘brain gain’ are already familiar to the general public and are probably already considered outdated, this new concept better reflects the current complexity of student mobility. ‘Brain circulation’ means that international students may circulate among different countries and

obtain diverse experiences before their return home which is obviously not guaranteed as many students eventually decide to stay in one of those countries and seek employment.

Evidently, international student mobility has a multilayered nature with all the trends and categories that have been developed over the several decades of its evolution in history. Such diversity causes the emergence of multiple challenges that accompany the internationalisation of higher education worldwide. These challenges need to be actively addressed by universities and go hand in hand with the public goods that international students can gain while participating in student mobility.

## **1.2 International education in the context of Italy**

While Knight (2012) and Choudaha (2017) have provided a broader context of international student mobility development and trends in the world, it seems necessary for the scope of the current work to explore the distinctive path that was taken by Italy, a country with a unique status in the European and global higher education market.

The article by Cammelli (1991) focuses on the mobility of foreign students in Italian universities that was shaped by the changes in policies, trends, and institutional procedures after the end of World War II. While Europe was witnessing an increase in international student mobility during this period (Teichler, 2012), the situation in Italy was less stable and consisted of increases and declines that caused the emergence of specific regional challenges.

### ***Historical Overview and Policy Evolution***

In the 1950s and 1960s, international students could easily enrol in Italian universities and encountered almost no obstacles on their way. The mobility to Italy was mainly a one-way flow because students from less developed countries, and especially those from former colonies, were actively searching for educational opportunities in Italy and other European countries given a limited number of universities and disadvantaged economic conditions in their home countries. Moreover, the creation of the Interministerial Committee that was assisting the winners of grants and scholarships and the establishment of foreign student colleges in Naples, Pavia, Siena and Lecce and a European university in Florence can serve as great examples of Italian openness to students from other nations. As a result of open enrollment and the availability of academic support in Italy, a sort of 'brain drain' migration was established.

By the late 1970s, however, the situation changed. Political and economic shifts, the rise in the cost of educational programmes, as well as the increased unemployment among local Italian students

forced Italy to follow the example of some other countries and give priority to domestic students by means of imposing restrictions on the admission of international students. To reduce the influx of foreign students, Italian authorities also began to ask foreign applicants for proof of their financial resources.

### ***International Cooperation of Italian Universities***

Camelli (1991) also mentions that in the early 1950s, Italy actively participated in treaties and international agreements that promoted cultural cooperation and educational exchange. It defined the legal pathways that Italy created to welcome more foreign students, especially from the Mediterranean and European countries. Italy began to recognize foreign qualifications, thus allowing for much easier enrollment procedures at their universities. In the 1980s, the initial cooperative strategies evolved into bilateral agreements between Italian and foreign universities: more than two-thirds of higher education institutions in Italy signed such agreements. It immediately triggered further diversification of the student population, promoted international research collaborations and strengthened the academic reputation of Italy on the global stage.

### ***Trends in Foreign Student Enrollment***

Among the trends, identified by Camelli (1991), there are mostly those that are related to such aspects of student mobility as the origin of students, academic disciplines they choose to study, and enrollment patterns. For example, in the period from 1954 to 1987, international students constituted only 3% of the total number of students in Italian universities. Interestingly, 70% of them were students from Greece, which might be explained by the Greek coup of 1967. Although Greek dominance represents one of the trends that are unique to the Italian higher education sector, many students from North America, Latin America, Asia, and Africa were also welcomed in Italy. In particular, the decolonization of Africa and Asia is considered the main event that facilitated the establishment of multiple agreements between Italy and former colonies.

According to the ISTAT data, provided by the author, the following ten countries were among the top providers of international students for Italian universities: Greece, Iran, West Germany, Jordan, Israel, Switzerland, United States, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Venezuela.

**Table 3. Foreign students enrolled in Italian universities by country of origin (academic year 1987–88)**

1)	Greece	7,963	13)	Great Britain	254
2)	Iran	2,614	14)	Iraq	243
3)	West Germany	1,664	15)	Ethiopia	192
4)	Jordan	1,123	16)	Cyprus	175
5)	Israel	997	17)	East Germany	175
6)	Switzerland	794	18)	Syria	174
7)	United States	696	19)	San Marino	171
8)	Lebanon	686	20)	Somalia	161
9)	Nigeria	596			
10)	Venezuela	358		Partial total	19,661
11)	France	347			
12)	Yugoslavia	278		TOTAL	22,781

*Source: ISTAT provisional data.*

*Pic. 1 Borrowed from Cammelli, A. Foreign students in Italy. High Educ 21, 359–376 (1991). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00132726>*

As for the fields that international students were choosing to apply for in the 1980s, 84% of them were applying for educational degree programmes in such practical and technical disciplines as Medicine, Engineering, Architecture, Mathematics, Physical and Natural Sciences, and Pharmacy.

What is also interesting is the growth of the female population in Italian institutions, which is reported to rise from 16% in 1965 to approximately 30% in 1987, while the overall influx of students from developed countries has fallen from 74% in 1960 to 63% in 1987. Even though women still remained a minority in the university setting at that time, it still reflected, first, the change of social dynamics in their home countries and, second, improved opportunities for inclusive Italian higher education.

Finally, another trend is represented by the graduation rates of foreign students. Thus, in the period between 1954 and 1987, around 20% of international students managed to graduate in a reasonable time, amounting to approximately 35,000 graduates. Again, Greek students are described as the most successful among all the graduating students by the author.

Cammelli (1991) argues that the number of foreign applicants to Italian universities was still low in comparison to other European nations, despite the availability of Italian education and its attempts to establish multiple bilateral agreements. Such limited presence of international students can be explained by the fact that Italy's policies were not always cohesive while its approach was, on the contrary, more reactive than proactive and depended a lot on political and economic challenges. Eventually, the lack of strategic vision led to fluctuating rates of foreign enrollments and limited competitiveness in the market.

While Cammelli (1991) provides the analysis of broader trends and policies that impacted the evolution of higher education in Italy, D'Arca (1994) expands the discussion by focusing on the

mobility experience of non-European students in Italian universities, with special attention to socio-cultural and financial challenges that shape academic and personal well-being. The analysis of this article brings the discussion of the current work further into the topic of adaptation.

Thus, in his report of the study conducted by CE.R.FE (Research and Documentation Centre in Rome), D'Arca views university students from developing countries, who undertake higher education in such cities as Milan, Perugia, Rome, and Bari, not only as students but also as immigrants, which highlights their dual status, and investigates their social, cultural, and financial conditions as well as their influence on the immigration experience. What is also particular about the research in question is that it takes into account the transformation of Italian legislation that used to regulate the immigration of extra-European nationals and created significant obstacles for students from developing countries.

In line with the previously mentioned research, D'Arca (1994) reminds us that international education has been growing in the number of enrollments since 1950 with the United States, France, and Germany (as well as the UK and Australia) being major destination countries for international students. Italy used to receive students mostly from other European nations, from Greece especially, struggling to attract significant flows of applicants from developing countries because of the bureaucratic and structural challenges.

Given the average reported age of non-European students in Italy was 26.6 years, it is obvious that many of them possessed limited financial resources and had to rely on part-time jobs, trying to balance it with studies at university, which was often aggravated by terrible living conditions, in which such necessities as hot water, telephone, or the availability of private rooms were lacking. Such a lifestyle caused many students to extend their studies and complete their degrees much later than it was initially planned.

International students who took part in the study by CE.R.FE indicated that the reasons why they had chosen Italy as the destination country included family ties, positive impressions about education quality, and the availability of scholarships. In more detail, about 20% of respondents considered Italian education as prestigious, while 37% of participants said that they were influenced by their families' and friends' presence in Italy in making the decision to apply to an Italian university. However, despite the availability of already established support networks, many students still faced bureaucratic barriers and complicated administrative procedures at universities.

In terms of cultural differences, extra-European students often demonstrated a distinct cultural identity that was both connected to and different from that of Italian students. It can be explained by

the fact that students from developing countries create a mix of values typical of the Western world and their traditional cultural beliefs brought from their home countries. For example, as the study revealed, many students share the democratic and individualistic values of Italian society but at the same time maintain a strong connection to the values of family and collectivism. As most students expressed the desire to return home after the completion of their studies in Italy, with only a small number of participants planning to stay in Italy or move to another country abroad, such differences in cultural identity seem not to be very problematic.

However, these students go through a so-called “resocialization process” and have to adapt to new social values while also keeping up with education, career, and personal life. Being temporary residents in Italy, many international students try to find meaning in their sojourn in Italy but often face the feeling of isolation, which brings the discussion to the issue of socio-cultural adaptation and integration in host societies.

As demonstrated by the analysis of the two previous articles of Cammelli (1991) and D’Arca (1994), international students who come to Italy from developing countries often encounter cultural and social barriers imposed by the Italian higher education system, which lead to intercultural adjustment problems and other challenges. The study conducted by Cipolletta, Mercurio, and Pezzetta (2022) not only provides an overview of the present-day situation with the experience of international students but also narrows it down to the foreign students’ experience obtained specifically at the University of Padua (UNIPD), where the research of the current thesis work is also conducted.

In more detail, Cipolletta, Mercurio, and Pezzetta (2022) focus on such factors as social network dispersion, dependency, and cultural adjustment and their influence on students’ mental psychological well-being and mental health. The research sample consisted of 139 international students of the University of Padua who were enrolled in either full degree programmes (so-called “long-term foreign students”) or international exchange programmes (Erasmus+) (“short-term foreign students”) at all three levels of education (bachelor, master, or doctorate) between March 2019 and January 2020. Among the students from the sample, 53 individuals were clients of the PAS service (the institutional Psychological Assistance Service, in Italian, called “Centro di Ateneo dei Servizi Clinici Universitari Psicologici) that provides counselling to any students who encounter psychological difficulties during their studies at UNIPD. The aim of the research of Cipolletta, Mercurio, and Pezzetta (2022) was to explore the impact of social support structures as well as cultural backgrounds on the mental health of international students in Padua.

The concept of “dispersion of dependency” is explained by Cipolletta, Mercurio, and Pezzetta (2022) as the “distribution of social resources among international students” and how many various social

resources those students have available to rely on. Thus, a high level of dispersion is characterised by multiple resources that students access, which facilitates their well-being and reduces stress. On the contrary, those students who relied mostly on a single source, like a partner or one close friend, had a low level of dispersion and therefore well-being as well as demonstrated higher levels of stress. These insights led to the conclusion that a well-developed support system is vital for international students, especially taking into account that the majority of students leave their families and friends in their home countries and cannot rely on those support networks to the same extent they used to before their migration. Indeed, the research proved this with the fact that UNIPD students generally relied on friends or partners as support sources and not on their families, which is again explained by the physical distance of the latter and reduced availability of communication with them.

Cultural backgrounds is another factor discussed in the article among those that influence the perceived support and well-being of international students. It was found that students from cultures that demonstrate higher levels of collectivism, for example Asian, African, and South American students, reported to have higher levels of anxiety and lower perceived support. It may be explained by the fact that the Italian cultural context, characterised as more individualistic, creates additional challenges for collectivist students who value collective responsibility, in contrast to those students from more individualistic countries in Europe or North America, for instance. D'Arca's (1994) findings about students from developing countries and their feelings of isolation and integration difficulties are quite similar as many developing countries have collectivist cultures. The lack of social support can indeed trigger the feeling of "otherness" in international students coming to study in Italy from other, especially non-European, countries.

The study also makes a distinction between the long- and short-term students and their respective levels of stress. Students who spend many years in Italy are reported to face more problems in maintaining their support networks in comparison to short-term students who come for a limited period of time. Longer separation from their home-based support networks also negatively affects the well-being of students seeking full degrees. Furthermore, it was found that mostly those students who struggled with limited support networks eventually decided to turn to professional psychological support services, which seems obvious but again reinforces the idea that social support is extremely important for international students.

All in all, Cipolletta, Mercurio, and Pezzetta's (2022) findings highlight the necessity of diverse support networks and services provided by universities that would take into account students' cultural backgrounds and promote mental health and well-being. Such services will help international students

overcome the variety of challenges that they face while studying abroad because those challenges are often specific and place international students into a separate category of migrants.

### **1.3 International Students as a Separate Category of Migrants**

International student mobility may be undoubtedly considered an act of intercultural communication, multiple classifications of which can be distinguished based on **different variables**. One of such variables is the **motives** that people, engaged in cross-cultural contact, may pursue. Motives vary greatly from one person to another, and even contradict each other, as in many cases there are not only ‘official’ reasons that people state explicitly, but also ‘unofficial’ motives for moving (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). For example, a tourist, going abroad to explore a new culture, in reality, may intend to immigrate to the country of his/her trip.

**Motives for migration** may vary and are traditionally divided into two main groups: **pull and push** ones, according to the functionalist theory proposed by Passaris in 1989. This theory consists of the main idea that there are factors, including overpopulation, corresponding lack of economic opportunities, as well as political tensions, that render life in a certain country impossible and enable emigration, pushing people out of their place of origin. At the same time, some factors can pull people into destination countries, such as the attraction of a destination's culture and values, better living conditions, improved quality of life, and potential benefits from the welfare of a host country. The pull factors are the triggers of immigration because they captivate people and provoke their desire to relocate (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Although this theory might explain people’s motivations to move, it has been criticised, stating that people have different perceptions and ambitions, therefore if some circumstances force people to leave, other people may be attracted by these same conditions.

Another theory used to explain migration is called ‘**The new economics of labour migration (NELM)**’ and was introduced in 1978 by the economist Stark. The main proposition here is that migration decisions are often not made by individuals but rather by families and households to provide resources for investment in economic activities, such as small family businesses. It complements the ‘**Human capital theory**’ that articulates migration as an investment that brings additional lifetime benefits and increases the productivity of human capital, such as knowledge and skills. By the way, student migration is also seen as an investment in human capital.

According to De Haas (2021), these traditional migration theories, such as push-pull and the new economics of labour migration, fail to consider the diverse aspirations of individuals as well as the external factors that influence their ability to migrate and are therefore outdated. De Hass proposes

the **aspirations-capabilities framework**, which takes into account both the desire and the capability to migrate. In more detail, aspirations are impacted by economic conditions, individual goals, and cultural norms, whereas capabilities are shaped by legal frameworks, official structures, and one's access to resources.

International students fall into a separate category of migrants within this framework because their aspirations consist of obtaining a degree, exploring career opportunities, acquiring intercultural experiences, and realising upward mobility. Their capabilities may also depend on the availability of scholarships, mobility programmes, and economic resources of their families, as well as global policies for migration which can also affect students' decisions and opportunities to study abroad.

**Length of stay** in a host country is also one of the most prominent factors used to identify groups of migrants. Thus, according to the **time-span variable**, three categories may be singled out: **short-term, medium, and long-term migration** (Bochner, 1982).

**Short-term** type is represented by **tourists**, who travel abroad for a rather small amount of time, usually not lasting longer than a one-month vacation. Crompton (1979) enumerated nine main **motives** for such a journey, which are all concerned with pleasure and can be divided into two groups: socio-psychological and cultural. Seven motives included in the first group are "escape from a perceived mundane environment, exploration and evaluation of self, relaxation, prestige, regression, enhancement of kinship relationships and facilitation of social interaction" (Crompton, 1979, p. 416). Cultural motives are "novelty and education" (Crompton, 1979, p. 416), implying the discovery of new facts and cultural traditions specific to a host country.

In line with Furnham and Bochner (1989), **tourists are the least susceptible to culture shock**, firstly, because they do not spend enough time in a new culture to face any negative effects since the initial stage is mostly intriguing and exciting. Secondly, tourists tend to observe a new culture more than actively participate in it. Additionally, their tours are often arranged and equipped with a guide, who takes full responsibility and is capable of resolving problems. Finally, being usually surrounded by their host-nationals, tourists receive abundant peer and social support.

Another type of stay is **long-term** and is mostly concerned with migration, which is usually expected to become permanent. There exist various dichotomies characterising migration types, such as "internal versus international, voluntary versus forced, legal versus illegal, and permanent versus temporary" (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 47).

Finally, there is the **medium-term** movement and it is usually represented by business people, diplomats, the armed forces, voluntary workers, missionaries, etc. Even though it is debatable, according to Bochner's (1982) opinion it is also represented by **overseas students**. Among the incentives that students have for going to study abroad are getting a degree, acquisition of academic and professional skills, future career opportunities, high social status, as well as culture learning and personal growth (Bochner, 1973; Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Given that all those groups of people, including overseas students, usually reside in a host country temporarily rather than permanently, their stay at a new place may be defined as a **sojourn** (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), and therefore those people can be identified as sojourners. Although their visits are considered temporal, they may last from six months to over five years, as **the length of a sojourn is not generally specified**. Overall, both the **commitment** to a new cultural environment and the stress of acculturation are not significant. The reasons are similar to those of tourists and comprise a set and specific period abroad, a precise purpose of the sojourn (hence carefully scheduled activities), accommodation provided, sponsorship and career opportunities on return, etc. Even though all these factors reduce stress, some business travellers experience unhappiness and poor adjustment, probably because of their immediate necessity to adapt rapidly and operate effectively, which is not always simple.

What is also relevant to mention here is that sometimes migrants (long-term) may avoid experiencing the negative effects of their move and only enjoy the benefits, while tourists (short-term) might suffer from unhappiness and discomfort, contrary to the image of tourism as something bringing only positive emotions (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Another aspect that distinguishes temporary sojourners from permanent immigrants is their **commitment to and involvement in the local society**. In terms of the involvement of sojourners in a new culture, the dividing line may be established between short- plus medium-term contact and the long-term one. The former group is characterised by a temporary commitment to the host culture or no commitment at all because their sojourn is determined in length and they will eventually return to the country of origin. Consequently, such people are not very interested in building long-lasting relationships with strangers and acquiring local customs. The latter group, on the contrary, intend to become permanent in their new society, hence more frequent contact and motivation to assimilate (Böker, 1981).

**For several reasons, overseas students deserve to be classified in a separate category.** First of all, they have **specific motives** for geographical movements, which include getting a degree, career advancement, prestige and upward mobility, obtaining academic or professional expertise, and finally culture learning and personal development. The last one includes evolving as a personality, gaining insights, and finding themselves (Bochner, 1973). Secondly, **the length of their stay abroad varies greatly**, starting from summer schools lasting three months and ending with full degree programmes often continuing for five years. Also, having graduated from a university, many international students remain in the country for at least one year searching for a job. And if they succeed, their sojourn transfers into permanent immigration.

Thirdly, their involvement in the local community might follow a unique pattern, portrayed in a separate model called the **'Functional friendship model'** (Bochner, McLeod, and Lin, 1977). According to this model, international students during their studies at host universities belong to monocultural, bicultural and multicultural social networks. The first one is called this way because students falling under this category prefer to communicate only with their co-nationals, i.e. students from their native country. The second cohort consists of co-nationals and some host-nationals, for example, other students or university staff. Communication with them is vital because it keeps overseas students more informed, less isolated, and less disoriented, which positively influences their academic performance. Finally, the third group is represented by other international students, who usually can share the struggle of being foreign in another country, which provides empathy underpinned by a shared foreignness, and communication with them may also serve a recreational function.

Another reason why international students represent a special group of sojourners is the **challenges** that they experience abroad.

## **Chapter 2: Theories of Socio-cultural Adaptation and Re-adaptation**

### **2.1 Challenges of Adaptation in Host Countries**

Students go through their own group of difficulties, which are fundamentally different from the ones other types of migrants tend to experience. Previous research concerning this problem is affluent and offers multiple views on the problems international students might face.

Singh (1963) distinguished three categories of difficulties: emotional problems, connected with the feeling of loneliness and homesickness, problems of adjustment, related to social class issues, place of residence, and duration of stay, and finally, academic problems, which are the type of challenges that distinguish students from other sojourners. Wang et al. (2018) similarly identified three main groups of international students' challenges: socio-cultural (social interactions, participation in activities, bureaucracy, transportation, nutrition, language, and environment), academic (courses, internships, homework, exams, teaching and learning in official school settings), and psychological (local values, little knowledge of the local behavioural patterns, and desire to prove stereotypes wrong). These challenges are seen both as opportunities contributing to adjustment and obstacles that impede adaptation.

According to Furnham & Bochner (1982), the difficulties that international students face may be divided into four clusters. The first one is concerned with problems faced by anyone living abroad, such as racial discrimination, difficulties with accommodation, nutrition, financial problems, and language, as well as stress caused by loneliness and separation from a native cultural environment. The other three groups are specific only for overseas students and include academic stress, adolescence problems (becoming independent members of society, finding oneself, forming one's personality) and stress provoked by students' responsibility to show their national or ethnic character in a positive light (Furnham & Bochner, 1982). Additionally, students may encounter special approaches in shops or public transport, when knowledge of the language they have to speak in their new country is assumed to be poor and people are addressing students slowly and clearly, which may be annoying or even offensive (Furnham, 2004).

Moreover, Ward (1967) suggested the existence of a 'foreign-student syndrome'. The behaviour and well-being of students experiencing this condition are characterised by undefined physical complaints, avoidance of interaction and disorganised looks.

Comparing the experiences of students undertaking short-term mobility programmes, not exceeding 6 months, and those students who go abroad for undergraduate or postgraduate studies that might last three to five years, scholars distinguish between the challenges that the former and the latter group go through. Thus, for example, O'Reilly et al. (2015) detected several differences in long-term and short-term students' adjustment. Firstly, unlike short-term students, long-term sojourners managed to establish better relationships with host nationals and obtained higher levels of social support. Secondly, their level of academic satisfaction was higher, which together with the first difference may be explained by the fact that long-term students had more time to adjust to a local environment and did not feel the pressure that once they returned home, their grades would be assessed by a home-university (as in the case with short-term students). Additionally, Conner and Roberts (2015) found out that short-term students did not experience the honeymoon stage upon entering the country. On the contrary, the expectation of culture shock brought confusion as an initial stage, which made authors conclude that in the short-term study abroad programmes culture shock is not necessary to happen at all.

A more recent research (Bukhtiyarova, 2020), comparing the adaptation of short- and long-term international students, revealed that both groups of individuals managed to achieve the functioning stage and demonstrated high levels of adaptation. However, the challenges they faced were different. Thus, long-term students reported going through such difficulties as an adjustment to the university system, language and accent problems, problems connected with students' own process of maturation as personalities, accommodation and financial problems, impaired communication, homesickness and loneliness, transport, shopping for food, and impaired communication with teachers and peers. Short-term students, on the contrary, did not experience problems with communication with university staff and fellow students, difficulties with transport, shopping, and accommodation, as well as homesickness and loneliness. Consistent with the previous findings, such results may be explained by the short-term students' brief residence in the host-country and the corresponding lack of motivation to arrange comfortable conditions for their whole stay abroad, as it is determined in length. The combination of problems connected to the development of one's own social identity and the necessity to demonstrate one's cultural-ethnic identity may provoke the emergence of an inner conflict within young international students. Since they wish to be accepted by host-nationals and are fascinated by a new cultural environment at the beginning of their sojourn, foreign students tend to conform to the peer culture. However, at the same time, they may also want to preserve their unique cultural and personal identity, which might lead to host nationals' inclination to treat foreign counterparts as outsiders. As a result, international students' expectations about social and academic

success in the new culture may be ruined, which eventually contributes to a low level of psychological adaptation (Ishiyama, 1989).

As it was already mentioned, being usually young people during their studies at universities abroad, many overseas students must cope with multiple adolescent problems. These include becoming an independent member of society (especially when they live in another country far away from their families and have to care for themselves completely on their own), finding one's purpose in life (for example, regarding their career goals and aspirations), defining one's personality, and of course trying to build personal relationships with other people, be it romantic bonds, new friendships, or professional networks. Finally, the most important characteristic distinguishing students into a separate group is their academic obligations. Going through all these processes might already be tough but it is also accompanied by academic stress since many students either pay for their education or possess an educational loan, and simply want to succeed in their studies in order to build a decent career in future.

Immigrant youth, which comprises either second-generation migrants, i.e., those who were born to immigrant parents, or first-generation migrants, i.e., those who migrated themselves and who this paper is mainly focused on, was noted to generally have lower academic achievements, higher failure and school drop-out rates than local students. It generates negative consequences in terms of psychological well-being, social life, and economic prosperity for students themselves and their families, but also for sending and receiving countries because it impairs adaptation. Evidently, successful adaptation is beneficial in the long-term perspective since it brings prosperity and increases harmony in social relations in the receiving countries.

Indeed, in a study conducted by Ambrosetti et al. in 2022, it was found that subjective well-being is positively correlated with school performance and is much more significant for immigrant students' achievements than for their local peers. Subjective well-being, which means life satisfaction or, in more detail, how people feel and evaluate their existence, can be employed to analyse the adaptation process of immigrants.

It was also found that immigrant children are more disadvantaged in comparison to their native counterparts for a few reasons. Usually, immigrant families have economic problems that prevent them from providing their children with sufficient material support. Besides, low education levels, limited knowledge of the local language, and lack of time (as it all is often dedicated to performing

tedious low-paid work) within a family are also considered to be factors negatively affecting immigrant-origin children's academic accomplishment.

As for the poor socio-economic background of immigrant families, it was supported by statistics that students coming from such families where parents are non-EU-born are more likely to drop out of schools than children of EU-born parents. This graph demonstrates the drop-out rates of 15 to 24-year-olds in 2020 in different countries, EU total and OECD total. Italy, being the cultural context that the current research is placed into, has the highest drop-out rate among the presented countries: the rate of foreign born who arrived as children is almost 30%, followed by same almost 30% of native-born students with foreign-born parents, and native-born with native-born parents are the lowest in Italy with approximately 18%.

However, there are students who, despite their disadvantaged conditions, still manage to achieve excellent academic results. In literature, such students are often referred to as 'academic resilient students'. What is resilience in this context? This term defines the capability of such unprivileged students to acquire the expertise necessary for proper and meaningful participation in society and a successful presence in the labour market. In a broader sense, resilience might be understood as the ability to adapt to challenges and misfortunes. If a person had some adversity but managed to adjust, he or she may be considered resilient.

Academic resilience may be explained by the following aspects. First of all, even when immigrant parents cannot support their children's education financially or provide cultural and/or linguistic assistance, they still can motivate their offspring and encourage them to study well. Secondly, many students possess a so-called 'migrant optimism' when they report higher educational aspirations and self-efficacy beliefs that lead them to success. Finally, the school environment plays a pivotal role, since it can provide students with high-quality resources, a positive atmosphere including discipline and good relationships with teachers and peers, and abundant extracurricular activities that lead to additional exposure to the host country's language. All these components positively influence academic performance.

All in all, immigrant youth, and international students in particular, not only fall into a separate category because of their length of stay, objectives of the sojourn and the extent of involvement in the local community but also because they face a specific set of challenges. These difficulties, often being different for those undertaking a short educational programme abroad and for those, who migrate to obtain a degree and supposedly become permanent residents after graduation, typically

consist of socio-cultural issues (social life, housing, nutrition, laws, language knowledge, etc.), psychological (stereotypes, local customs and patterns of behaviour), and, most importantly, academic challenges. Obstacles caused by the necessity to be successful in the educational domain at the same time as solving other problems of migrating individuals may lead to low performance and even failure at school or university.

## **2.2 Acculturation Models and Migration Theories**

### ***What is International Students' Adaptation?***

Searle and Ward (1990) argued that, from the theoretical point of view, it was necessary to distinguish between psychological and sociocultural adaptation, since these types are predicted differently and develop in individuals following distinct paths: while the level of psychological adjustment might fluctuate over time, the sociocultural one evolves linearly.

Generally, psychological and sociocultural types of adjustment are intertwined. However, the factors determining them are different. Psychological adaptation, which is mostly concerned with one's emotional well-being and satisfaction with intercultural relationships, is predicted by "the amount of social contact with fellow nationals, satisfaction with social contact with both host and fellow nationals, attitudes towards hosts, life changes and extraversion" (Searle & Ward, 1990, p. 453). Sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to 'fit in' a new cultural environment and is predicted by "cultural distance, amount of social contact with host nationals, previous cross-cultural experience and cross-cultural training, expected difficulty, length of residence in the host country, and attitudes towards host nationals" (p. 453). On the whole, the phenomenon of 'cultural fit' implies that the closer an individual's personality is to the culture of a host country, the easier and better the adjustment would be. On the contrary, the more the cultural distance, the greater the chance of facing problems with adaptation (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Searle & Ward, 1990).

Psychological adjustment in turn affects sociocultural adaptation, predicting it based on such factors as cultural identity, cultural distance, length of residence in the host culture, and quantity of interaction with host nationals (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). It is obvious that a person who is emotionally satisfied with their new cultural environment and successfully interacts with its representatives will have all the potential to integrate and adapt to the host culture entirely.

### *Predictors of Sociocultural Adaptation*

Abundant research in the field is concentrated on the factors that predict the level of cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Thus, Church (1982) in his overview of the previous findings outlined the most common predictors of successful adaptation. Among them, there are listed such background variables as “nationality, status, language proficiency, age, educational level, and previous cross-cultural experience” (Church, 1982, p. 546). Interestingly, nationality is considered to be an important factor, since there are cultural patterns in how students cope with culture shock and refer to the notion of ‘cultural distance’, implying that the greater the difference between a student’s home and host culture, the harder will be the adaptation to achieve. Moreover, the criteria for personal status are subject to change in a new culture, which may also undermine sojourners’ self-esteem and adjustment.

Correspondingly, Berry (1997) discovered that, in a situation where both cultures need to be handled, people act according to different strategies, which are formed depending on two main issues: cultural maintenance and contact and participation. The first one is concerned with the extent to which cultural identity is considered important and desired to be maintained. The second one refers to the extent to which people want to be involved in the other culture or keep identifying with their culture of origin. Thus, people may follow four acculturation strategies: 1) Assimilation, 2) Separation, 3) Integration, and 4) Marginalisation.

The Assimilation strategy defines the behaviour when individuals strive for interaction with the representatives of their host culture while suppressing their initial cultural identity. Separation is an opposite strategy, characterised by holding on to the original culture and denying the other one through the avoidance of communication with its representatives. Alternatively, when an individual shows interest in both cultures and wants to identify with the two of them, he or she is following the Integration strategy. This strategy is considered to be the most positive and successful in terms of its influence on the adaptation. The final strategy, which is Marginalisation, on the contrary, is the least desired since it depicts the rejection to identify with either of the cultures and is often connected to an enforced cultural loss and discrimination.

Previous cross-cultural experience is often assumed to facilitate adjustment. However, there are different opinions on this question. For example, contemplating the issue of foreign students’ culture shock, Furnham (2004) claims that even regular extended trips abroad are not sufficient to prepare students for possible difficulties and reduce the challenges. Indeed, the nature and quality (depth,

intimacy, accuracy, and similarity) of the previous experience abroad might be more helpful than the amount of it (Church, 1982).

Apart from the background variables, several situational characteristics influence the adaptation as well. Generally, it includes such factors as a pleasant arrival to a host country, the availability of informal guidance (e.g., buddy programme), sufficient contact with host nationals, little amount of negative experience, academic success, the length of sojourn, and the participation in orientation programmes (Sewell & Davidsen, 1956; Selltiz et al., 1963).

Contacts with host-nationals are proved to be one of the most influential predictors of successful sociocultural adaptation. Westwood (1990), for instance, found a positive correlation between communication with local individuals and foreign students' academic success, as well as lowered dropout rates among international students. According to the results of the research, those students, who maintained contact with host nationals, remained "more informed, less disoriented, and less isolated" (Westwood, 1990, p. 255) and managed to cope with certain emotional and psychological problems more easily.

Additionally, Church (1982) reports that there exists a third group of variables predicting sojourner's adjustment. These are personality variables, which may interfere with situational factors and define how stressors and situations are perceived. Even though a reliable correlation between individual differences and successful adaptation has not yet been demonstrated, still it was found that a more positive sojourner's experience was related to less authoritarianism, a high level of personal flexibility, modernism, sociability and assertiveness, and more realistic goals and expectations of a sojourn.

In consistency with the previous research, a more recent study (Yu et al., 2019) concluded that the most influential predictors of sociocultural adaptation are contact with local students, intergroup relations without discrimination, social support, and language proficiency.

### ***Stages of Adaptation***

The notion of foreigners' adaptation to the culture of a country where they relocate has been defined differently by many authors since the middle of the 20th century when Oberg (1960) first introduced the term culture shock. Lately, with the expansion of studies in the related field, there were proposed such broader terms as adaptation, adjustment, acculturation, cultural or ethnic assimilation, sojourner

adjustment, etc, which cover more facets of intercultural contact, unlike the notion of culture shock, which refers to the negative feeling of anxiety upon entering an unfamiliar cultural environment.

While we grow up, we subconsciously acquire norms and ways of behaviour accepted in our culture of origin, which further constitute our everyday life, influencing our confidence as well as the feeling of safety and familiarity with the environment around us. These signs and symbols become the cues, which guide our demeanour in the local society. These cues are usually words, body language and habits, which help us to act appropriately when we meet new people, buy something or pay someone, give orders, or simply interpret other people's words. However, when we enter a new culture, many of these cues may be lost, causing frustration and anxiety. Every person reacts to the feeling of culture shock differently: some may feel irritation and avoid contact with local people, and others might want to reunite with co-nationals. Anyway, these symptoms are considered to be a normal process of adaptation and coping with stress (Oberg, 1960).

Generally, Oberg (1960) identified four stages of adaptation: honeymoon, regression/negotiation, recovery/adjustment, and adaptation.

The first stage of a Honeymoon lasts from a few days or weeks to several months. During this time, individuals are fascinated by the new and see only positive features of a new environment. They often compare their own culture with the new one, and the latter seems perfect for them. However, not all travellers experience this stage, as some of them appear to face the next stage of regression first.

The second phase, the Regression (also called the Negotiation), begins after three months into the host culture and is characterised by hostility and aggression towards local people. These feelings occur when a person is no longer amazed by new surroundings but faces a great number of difficulties instead, including language problems, transportation needs, maintenance of one's household, shopping, the necessity to provide children with education if there are any, etc. However, the actual root of such a negative reaction is the fact that people in the host country do not share travellers' great concern over these difficulties. As a result, visitors reject the host culture and tend to unite with the co-nationals. If people manage to overcome this stage, they usually stay for longer; if not, most probably they leave.

The third stage is called Recovery (or adjustment). Having managed to get over the crisis of aversion, a person begins to understand the characteristics of a new culture bit by bit, starts using the language

more confidently, and even jokes about his or her difficulties, which are not over yet, but the person becomes better accustomed to a new reality. There remains only one step on the way to adaptation.

A complete adjustment comes in the last stage when a traveller not only accepts such features of the host culture as food, drinks, traditions, and other things but starts to enjoy them. What is also important about the final stage is that a visitor faces fewer anxiety attacks, though still feels tension in some situations. If a person, who has already adapted to the host culture, leaves the country and returns home, they may miss the people and environment they got used to. This is similar to reverse culture shock, which happens when people have to readjust to their home culture because it appears different from what they recalled while abroad (Furnham, 2004).

Thus, via four typical stages, a person transfers from fascination through rejection through acceptance to adaptation to an unfamiliar cultural environment. However, the environment does not change. It is a visitor's attitude to it that is modified as a result of becoming accustomed to the problems and because of continuous contact with the traits of this environment as well as host-nationals.

However, culture shock may be experienced not only by visitors but also by host-nationals. In this case, shocking feelings are reciprocal and called 'invasion shock'. This type of culture shock occurs when local people become a minority in their environment, surrounded by large numbers of foreign visitors. 'Invaders' express their traditional behaviour, thus overwhelming and sometimes even frightening the host nationals, who experience culture shock without even leaving their country (Furnham, 2004). Moreover, all those people who relocate for work or business, may find themselves suffering from re-professionalisation (re-licensing) and business shock, when they become aware of the fact their qualifications as well as business strategies are not accepted by a host country. In this case, they have to acquire new skills appropriate for the working environment of the host country (Ibid.).

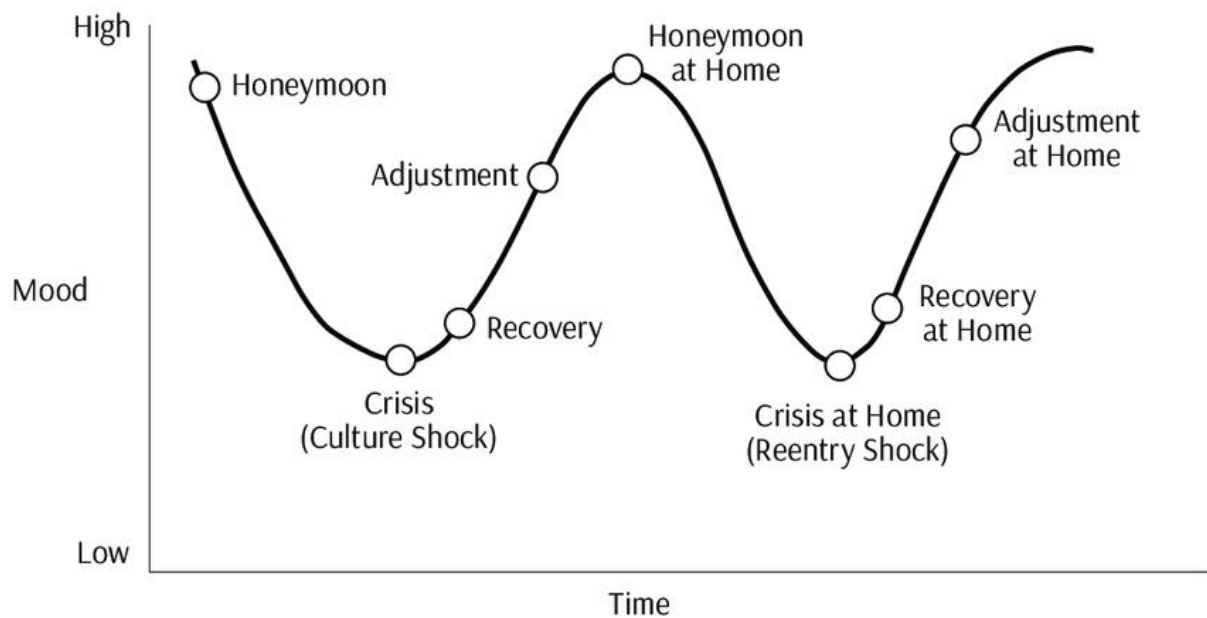
As Westwood (1990) noticed, the idea of presenting adaptation as consisting of several stages progressing from excitement to depression and ending with adjustment has been elaborated by many scholars since the middle of the 20th century. Thus, for example, the U-curve model of the adaptation process was introduced by Sverre Lysgaard already in 1955, being one of the first theories addressing adjustment as a time process together with Kalervo Oberg's culture shock.

As a result of Lysgaard's (1955) research conducted among 200 Norwegian students who received Fulbright grants to study in the USA, it was found that those who stayed in America for a period of

less than six months, as well as those who stayed for more than eighteen months, seemed to be better adapted to a new cultural and academic environment than those who left the country between these thresholds of six and eighteen months of residence. Consequently, three main stages of the adaptation process were identified: the introductory stage, crisis, and adjustment. In brief, the first stage was characterised by one's impression of being abroad, learning new routines and ease of making new acquaintances, which were usually random, shallow and not intimate enough at this stage. The second stage came when students felt the need to integrate into a friendship group. However, because of their busy schedule of studies, they do not manage to be involved with friends in a relaxed atmosphere, which provokes dissatisfaction and loneliness. The problem of language proficiency also emerges sharply at this stage, since the initial content of being simply understood by native speakers is substituted by the awareness of its insufficiency and the demand for more profound language knowledge needed for more intimate conversations. By the time the final stage arrived, students usually had already managed to overcome the problems of the middle stage and managed to get involved in friendship group(s), which made them feel satisfied and engaged in the local community. Thus, the process of adaptation follows a U-shaped curve.

Subsequently, it was suggested that culture shock does not end when students arrive at the final stage and feel adapted to their new cultural environment. On the contrary, it continues to influence travellers' well-being even after their sojourn, when they return home. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) applied the U-curve of adjustment in their study of returning US scholars and found out that they experienced a similar though reverse culture shock, defined as the process of re-adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation to an individual's home culture after spending some time in a different culture (Gaw, 2000). Therefore, they suggested the W-curve hypothesis, which is concerned with sojourners' expectation to return to the same native environment being the same individuals as they were before the sojourn. However, it is not possible since the experience obtained through the adaptation process may significantly change the individual. Moreover, having discovered a new culture, a sojourner will never perceive their home culture as it was before. It is especially evident among international students, who undertake exposure to a new culture at a rather young age and go through the transformation of identities and personal values at the same time. Of course, upon their return home, they may already have absolutely different personalities and would see their domestic environment differently. In general, returnees may experience such difficulties as the dissonance of their new values and the values of their families and friends who stayed in the home country, withdrawal from interaction with them, rejection from the part of their co-nationals and being labelled as 'brainwashed', feeling of loneliness, etc.

All in all, the U-curve of adjustment, being complemented by another curve of readjustment, looks the following:



*Pic. 2 Borrowed from Mlynarczuk-Sokołowska, Anna. (2018). Education of Foreign Children in Poland. Methodical Contexts. Kultura i Edukacja. 7. 10.15804/kie.2017.04.12*

A similar process of adaptation was described by Ishiyama (1989). In the beginning, foreign students tend to deny their original ethnicity and identify more with a new culture. However, as was noticed by other scholars, visitors start to reject the host environment, become ethnocentric and search bonds with their native culture. Eventually, a bicultural identity is formed since they start to appreciate and perceive both cultures more objectively.

Bennett's **Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)** (2017) expands the traditional acculturation theory proposed by Berry (1997) and suggests that intercultural competence is a developmental process and can be presented as a continuum consisting of six stages, divided into two broad stages. The first phase is ethnocentric, in which individuals view their cultures as central, and comprises Denial, Defense, and Minimization. The second phase is ethnorelative and individuals start to appreciate cultural diversity. It consists of Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration stages.

In particular, Denial is characterised by an individual's unwillingness or inability to recognise cultural differences. In the Defense stage, people start to acknowledge the differences but perceive them as threats, which often evolves into stereotypes. Minimisation marks the transition stage where differences are overlooked or interpreted as universal, and similarities are given more importance. Acceptance initiates recognition and respect for cultural differences, while in the Adaptation stage

individuals are already capable of modifying their behaviours so that they can effectively communicate with other cultures. Finally, Integration occurs when multiple cultural identities are united in one individual who has a sense of belonging to diverse cultural communities. International student mobility may facilitate the progression from the ethnocentric towards the ethnorelative stages.

Additionally, a three-stage scaffolding model was introduced by Adisa et. al (2019), which portrays student's transition towards cross-cultural adaptation and consists of three main parts: the stormy stage, the acclimatisation stage, the functioning stage.

The first one is called 'stormy' because during this period international students may be overwhelmed by the intensity of their new academic and social life and the difference from the way of living a student is accustomed to. Even though many sojourners struggle at this stage, others can easily accept this new climate and enjoy it. The second stage of acclimatisation is intended to help struggling students understand and get used to this new cultural environment and learn a new way of life. The problem is that not all international students manage to overcome the first stage and come to the second one. In this case, they usually withdraw from the university or repeat the semester. However, those students who successfully acclimatise to their new culture, can move onto the next stage, called the functioning stage, where they function as their local peers, feel mentally stable and integrated into the new system.

Achieving the functional stage is considered equal to a complete adaptation. But how long does it take to reach it? According to Adisa et al. (2019), international students have unequal potential towards achieving the functional stage. It depends on such factors as their culture of origin (and its distance from a host culture in particular) and the level of studies (foundation course, undergraduate or postgraduate). Thus, Asian students undertaking foundation courses managed to start functioning normally in British culture only after ten weeks of their arrival, while their co-nationals at under- and postgraduate levels adapted after eight weeks. African students of undergraduate and postgraduate levels made it to the functioning stage after six weeks. Finally, undergraduate students from Europe started functioning after eight weeks while postgraduates did it after six weeks. All in all, the above-mentioned research advised that students should aim at reaching the final stage within eight weeks of studies and that spending more than six weeks in the stormy stage may have a negative impact both on students' academic performance and adaptation process.

	<b>Stage 1</b>	<b>Stage 2</b>	<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Stage 4</b>
<b>U-curve</b>	Introductory stage	Crisis	Adjustment	
<b>Culture shock</b>	Honeymoon	Regression/ negotiation	Recovery/ adjustment	Adaptation
<b>W-curve</b>	Return home	Crisis	Recovery	Reintegration
<b>Ishiyama (1989)</b>	Identification with the host-culture	Rejection, ethnocentrism	Bicultural identity formation	
<b>Three-stage scaffolding model</b>	Stormy		Acclimatization	Functioning

*Table 1. Stages of Adaptation based on Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), Ishiyama (1989), and Adisa et. al (2019)*

Taking everything into account, it becomes evident that, even though the adaptation process may take a different amount of time for every individual moving abroad, it usually follows the same pattern. Initially, a person is amazed by a new cultural environment, feels satisfied, notices only positive features and wants to identify with the host culture. However, sometime later, the ‘honeymoon’ feelings are substituted with the awareness of the local imperfections and the sufferings that a person may go through because of some challenges he/she encounters during the second stage of adjustment. Furthermore, foreigners become gradually accustomed to the local environment, accept both the positive and the negative, learn how to overcome difficulties and become more and more confident and happy. Finally, the person begins to enjoy the host culture in full, is capable of leading a normal life typical of the local society, and feels accepted by it and integrated. If a person returns home, most probably the process will repeat, but in relation to the native culture.

### **2.3 Re-adaptation and Reverse Culture Shock After Temporary Absence**

As already mentioned, the adaptation process does not end when an individual achieves the stage when he or she has already overcome adjustment challenges, feels satisfied with their life and accepted by the local community, and can successfully function in their new cultural environment. If a person returns home, as for example international students return to their countries of origin after having graduated with a degree or completed an exchange programme, the process might flow into the next stage of re-adaptation to home culture, when the phenomenon of reverse culture shock may appear. It can also be accompanied by a number of challenges and have an impact on psychological, social and academic aspects of life. The following part of this literature review will focus on the arguments provided in the four selected articles and attempt to formulate the triggers of re-adaptation challenges, the significance of cultural identity strength in this process, as well as possible strategies to facilitate re-entry.

Gaw (2000) conducted a study on 66 American undergraduate college students returning home from abroad and found that they were going through the process of re-entry and re-adapting to their home culture that for many now felt foreign. This process is reported to be similar to the initial culture shock, defined by Adler (1975) as a set of emotional reactions to the loss of familiar cultural features, mirroring it and being also accompanied by feelings of helplessness, irritability, isolation, depression, and anxiety. In the case of international students, this experience is also intensified by academic problems and difficulties in the process of reconnecting with peers, which also contributes to the overall sense of alienation and not fully belonging to their home culture anymore.

The article written by Gaw (2000) highlights the necessity of launching special support services that would help returning students in the process of re-integration by providing counselling and overall psychological support. It is interesting, however, to mention that students, who reported higher levels of reverse culture shock in Gaw's study, demonstrated less willingness to turn to support services, which can probably be explained by the stigma or the absence of a reliable service provider.

Sussman (2002) continued the investigation of the topic of reverse culture shock and in her study called "Testing the cultural identity model of the cultural transition cycle: Sojourners return home" decided to explore the connection between the strength of home culture identity and repatriation distress experienced by sojourners upon their return to the country of origin, which in this specific study was American teachers returning from Japan.

Having mentioned the previously found positive correlation between the successful adaptation to host culture and the stressful experience of returning home, in her study Sussman (2002) applied the

Cultural Identity Model (CIM) that proposes that cultural identity is not a stable aspect but rather a dynamic one, able to shift based on the experiences obtained abroad and that basically four post-adaptation identity types can be formed: affirmative, subtractive, additive, and global, each associated with different repatriation outcomes.

In more detail, individuals with the affirmative type of identity remain strongly connected to their home cultures and usually experience a minimal level of stress upon re-entry. Sussman (2002) calls them “grateful repatriates” but mentions, however, that they usually show low adaptation to their host cultures. Subtractive and additive identifiers, on the contrary, demonstrate high adaptation to a new cultural context and consequently have more difficulties when returning home but the reasons for this are different between the two types of identifiers. Thus, subtractive individuals have mostly negative repatriation experience because they feel less positive about their home country and psychologically distance themselves from their compatriots. Additive individuals do not really lose their original cultural identity but rather embrace too many aspects of their new cultural contexts, like values, norms, and ways of thinking. Even though they see it as identity gain, their return home might be stressful. Finally, global identifiers usually possess a sense of belonging to a global community because of their multiple intercultural experiences and demonstrate moderate re-adaptation difficulties.

All in all, the results of this study on American teachers prove that students undergoing significant changes of identity, for example, those of subtractive and additive types, may experience a more stressful re-adaptation process and real reverse culture shock. Moreover, the study adds to the discussion by showing that there are not only psychological, as described by Gaw (2000), but also cultural aspects of the experience of reverse culture shock.

Twenty years later, Swallow and Tomalin further contributed the research on re-adaptation and focused on studying how culture shock affects students’ well-being and what they experience while going through reverse culture shock in their article “Culture shock and student engagement” (2022). First of all, they highlight that we should notice similarities between different cultures rather than differences and that a new constructive paradigm should be considered. They cite Bennet (2020) who suggests recognising the importance of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding, and awareness of what brings us together, as well as the idea that one culture is not better than another. Such an approach can help international students in overcoming the challenges they face abroad.

Swallow and Tomalin identify the following key issues. The first is the feeling of isolation and loneliness triggered by the physical distance of the place where students stay (like for example

students' residences situated on the outskirts of the town where they come to study), which makes the participation in students' gatherings, clubs and unions very difficult if not impossible. The second issue is living with a family. Even though it seems like a very beneficial opportunity to learn the language and the culture of a host country, students often just get a room to stay and meals to eat but not the expected social contact and intercultural experience, which can also lead to isolation.

The third issue identified in the research of Swallow and Tomalin (2022) is the feeling of exclusion from one's classroom, which happens either as a result of not socialising with fellow students or because they do not fully understand the professors. Both situations might emerge because international students do not always possess high levels of local language competence and may not understand humour and unfamiliar accents. This issue may often lead to another one which is the situation when students only communicate and make friends with the representatives of their own nationality. Obviously, it creates a comfort zone for them, where they can speak their native language and not apply any effort to socialise with other, often completely unknown, cultures.

Given the academic context, many international students also experience burnout, which is another key problem mentioned in the article. Some students tend to work really hard and instead of success, they might face late submission or non-submission of their assignments, lower grades, or even withdrawal from studies. As one of the participants of the study conducted by El-Asri, Karfa and Farhane (2024) reported that "it's important not to choose only easy classes during the exchange year, as this can make readjustment more challenging," and recommended opting for "a balanced approach with a mix of challenging and manageable subjects can facilitate a smoother return, reducing the need for paying additional tutoring to overcome academic challenges." As can be seen from these words, return home and academic readjustment can also be challenging.

Therefore, the final issue described by Swallow and Tomalin (2022) is exactly culture shock and reverse culture shock. According to the authors, the most relevant model to analyse culture shock, apart from the abovementioned U-curve and W-curve, is the one suggested by Bennet (2021) that is called The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and describes the development from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

Furthermore, Swallow and Tomalin (2022) state that re-entry home from a study abroad programme can be even more challenging than the initial culture shock when students only get accustomed to their new cultures. It happens because, after their sojourn, many international students are no longer previous individuals. Their new experiences, knowledge, and challenges that they overcame while

trying to adapt abroad changed them and they do not know how to fit into the once familiar environment.

Reverse culture shock may be divided into four stages. The first stage is leave-taking and departure when individuals leave their host cultures and return home. Here starts the second stage, which is the honeymoon because it feels like having a vacation at home. The third stage is the actual reverse culture shock when difficulties emerge. At this point, students may feel marginalised, depressed, and unmotivated, and the need for re-entry counselling, workshops, or group discussions becomes evident. Any opportunity for students to share their experiences and reflect on their time abroad can help in reconnecting with others and moving smoothly to the final stage, which is re-adjustment. At this stage, individuals gradually re-integrate into their home environment, return to their previous routines, and feel like they achieved a balance between their previous and their new selves (Ibid).

El-Asri, Karfa and Farhane (2024) agree with Swallow and Tomalin (2022) that reverse culture shock can be even more challenging than traditional culture shock because students feel isolated in their native, home culture and can undergo bipolar experiences when they feel torn between conflict and peace, reality and idealisation, freedom and restriction, comfort and discomfort. The process of re-adaptation can be even harder for young students because they are perceived to easily detach from their home culture, change identity that is only being formed, and are in general more flexible in adapting to foreign environments. Moreover, re-entry can be an especially negative experience for students from developing countries, since they are prone to idealising their exchange in a more developed country.

Among the various feelings that students coming back home from their host countries may have are “alienation, loneliness, feeling of loss, isolation, unhappiness, loss of identity, depression and sometimes, illnesses which are the result of extreme levels of change” (Uehara, 1986 cited in El-Asri, Karfa and Farhane, 2024). Key factors that contribute to those feelings are unhealthy comparisons between host and home cultures, reverse homesickness, challenges in reconnecting with friends and family, boredom, inability to apply new knowledge and skills, and trouble in understanding the home culture.

That is why the importance of social support networks was once again emphasised and explained with the idea that while communicating with their close community, connecting with family, friends, and mentors, and sharing the experiences with them, returning students can process these experiences more easily and reach a profound understanding of what they gained abroad. Universities are thus encouraged to conduct post-exchange support programmes where returning students can share their

feelings, establish and re-establish connections with other fellow students, and receive professional emotional support that would help in overcoming reverse culture shock.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Participants**

Current research was conducted with the assistance of the Projects & Mobility office of the University of Padua, and its Mobility Unit in particular. The division of the Unit that takes care of outgoing student mobility provided access to the data on UNIPD students who took part in mobility in 2021, 2022, and 2023. These three years were selected because all the students who undertook mobility before 2021 most probably have already graduated from university and do not have access to their university email addresses, while students who take part in exchange programmes in 2024 might not have yet completed their sojourn, as only the returned students were selected to study the experience of re-adaptation.

Among the various exchange programmes that students of the University of Padua can apply for, the following were selected: Erasmus+ as the most popular one, Erasmus+ KA171 which is represented by international mobility beyond Europe, and SEMP mobility which stands for Swiss European Mobility Programme that technically functions under Erasmus+ programme but provides opportunities for students from Switzerland and those foreign students who come to study in Switzerland.

Thousands of students enrolled at the University of Padua take part in exchange programmes every year (around 1500 individuals per year) but only international students were sorted out from the overall database. On the whole, 941 international students were selected as a sample in line with the scope of the current research that focuses only on international students. They were divided into two groups: the first group consisted of students who undertook mobility, successfully finished it and returned to Italy, and the second group, which is considered the control group for this research, was composed of students who applied for an exchange programme but decided to cancel it and stay in Italy.

#### ***Students Who Undertook Mobility and Returned to Italy***

The first group of students who finished their sojourn abroad and returned to Italy consists of 556 international UNIPD students in total. It is necessary to mention that this part describes the demographic information of international students who were contacted and invited to take part in the current study. The information about the actual respondents to the survey will be provided later in the part specifically dedicated to them.

Over the three selected years, there was a stable increase in numbers with 159 students who went abroad in 2021, 172 students in 2022, and 225 participants in 2023. This might be explained by the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic started to fade and more universities in Europe and beyond started to open up and receive more students, apart from the fact that the number of applications from foreign citizens to the University of Padua itself increased every year. As for the gender of participants, female students outnumbered male participants, with 332 individuals and 224 individuals respectively in total. In particular, there were 85 female students and 74 male students in 2021, 111 females and 61 males in 2022, and 136 female participants as well as 89 male participants in 2023, which demonstrates stable growth in numbers among the female participant who remained in majority over the three years, and fluctuations in the number of male participants.

	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2021</b>	85	74	159
<b>2022</b>	111	61	172
<b>2023</b>	136	89	225

*Table 2. The numbers of international students at the University of Padua who undertook international mobility (by year and gender)*

The average age of the participants of the first group is 27.9 years old, with the youngest participant being 20 years old and the oldest being 44. The highest number of participants in this part of the sample was 26 years old (90 of them) at the moment of applying for their mobility programme. The age distribution is the following: 213 students were between 28 and 30 years old, 184 students between 24 and 27 years old, 60 participants reported to be between 31 and 34, 47 students were between 20 and 23, 38 participants were between 35 and 37, 10 people of 38-41 range, and 4 individuals in 42-44.

<b>Age group</b>	<b>20-23</b>	<b>24-27</b>	<b>28-30</b>	<b>31-34</b>	<b>35-37</b>	<b>38-41</b>	<b>42-44</b>
<b>Number of students</b>	47	184	213	60	38	10	4

*Table 3. Distribution of the numbers of international students at the University of Padua who undertook mobility (by age groups)*

The foreign origin of students was identified based on their citizenship reported in their mobility applications. They also were asked to select their nationality, which stands for the country they were born in, but for the current research, it was divided to take citizenship into account as the main factor in determining students' international status. It can be explained by the fact that some students who were born in another country might actually have Italian citizenship which means that they either have Italian parents (as Italian citizenship is passed by descent based on the principle of the right of blood (*jus sanguinis*) or they are were born from foreign parents but raised in Italy.

Of course, there are other ways of obtaining Italian citizenship, for example, through marriage, but for this research, it was assumed that in any case, students with Italian citizenship must be excluded from the sample, first of all, because they are not considered international at the moment of application for enrollment at the University of Padua and secondly, because they might have been already integrated into Italian culture, even if they were born and raised abroad but by Italian parents who most probably passed the Italian culture to their children. At the same time, students born in Italy, i.e. those who selected Italy as nationality in their application for mobility, but from parents who are not Italian citizens, might not have Italian citizenship as well but grew up in Italy and are integrated into Italian culture, even though at home they might follow the traditions of their parents. All in all, it is evident that the situations might differ greatly and it might create limitations for the current research.

Moving forward to the analysis of the sample in terms of citizenship (Table 4), it is important to mention that the highest number of international students who undertook secondary mobility is from Iran with 157 individuals. The ranking continues with India, Turkey, Romania, Pakistan, Albania, Russia, Brazil, Kazakhstan, and Egypt. The number of students for each of them is reported in the table below. The chart with full statistics on citizenship can be found in the appendices. Two interesting facts to note: 1) the gap between the most frequent citizenship and the second place is 125 individuals more for Iranian students, and 2) all the countries in this list are developing countries, students of which, according to El-Asri, Karfa and Farhane (2024) might be idealising their study abroad experience in developed countries and it might create additional challenges for adaptation and re-adaptation. D'Arca (1994) also noted that such students often face bureaucratic and structural obstacles in European countries and might feel more isolated because their often collectivist values clash with the western individualistic world.

<b>Country of citizenship</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
Iran	157
India	32
Turkey	31
Romania	26
Pakistan	25
Albania	25
Russia	20
Brazil	20
Kazakhstan	12
Egypt	10

*Table 4. Top-10 citizenships of international students at the University of Padua who undertook mobility*

Even though the majority of students (433 individuals to be precise) were in their second year of studies at the moment of application for exchange, it does not necessarily mean that it was their second year in Italy. Here, the level of studies should also be considered because the second year of studies may refer to both the second year of the bachelor's degree and that of the master's degree programme. As for the level, indeed, 433 participants of the sample are enrolled in the master's degree course at the University of Padua, while only 77 students study at the bachelor's level. Additionally, there are 46 students of so-called single cycle degree programmes of Law (4 students) and Medicine (42 students) sciences that last 5 and 6 years respectively.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Number of student</b>
Bachelor	77
Master	433
Single-cycle degree in Law	4
Single-cycle degree in Medicine	42

*Table 5. The numbers of international students at the University of Padua who undertook mobility (by degree level)*

To provide a more detailed report on the educational fields that UNIPD students undertaking mobility are from, an analysis of their departments was conducted. Overall, the highest number of students, precisely 76, comes from the Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies. The

following four departments are also included in this top-5 ranking: the Department of Economics and Management, the Department of Medicine, the Department of Information Engineering, and the Department of Agronomy, Food, Natural Resources, Animals and Environment.

<b>Name of the UNIPD Department</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies	76
Department of Economics and Management	65
Department of Medicine	49
Department of Information Engineering	44
Department of Agronomy, Food, Natural Resources, Animals and Environment	36

*Table 6. The numbers of international students at the University of Padua (by the name of their departments)*

The top degree programmes are Medicine and Surgery (6 years single cycle degree at the Department of Medicine), Human Rights and Multi-level Governance (Master's degree at the Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies), Business Administration (Master's degree at the Department of Economics and Management), Entrepreneurship and Innovation (Master's degree at the Department of Economics and Management), and Food and Health (Master's degree at the Department of Land, Environment, Agriculture and Forestry of the School of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine). Notably, all these degree programmes are held in English, which demonstrates that international students at the University of Padua who decide to take part in the secondary exchange programme, study in the English language and might have less contact with Italian students and therefore be less integrated into Italian society and culture since one of the most significant predictors of sociocultural adaptation in the host country is the contact with local students (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Yu et al., 2019).

It is also curious to see the list of the most popular destination countries among the UNIPD international students. There are 27 countries in total, most of them (22 countries) belong to the European Union, and 5 of the countries are extra-European nations. Among the first group, students choose such destinations as Romania, Slovakia, France, Portugal, Poland, Spain, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Ireland, Estonia, Bulgaria, and Malta. The second group is formed from such countries as Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Australia. The most popular destination is

Germany, where 116 students went in 2021-2023, while the least popular destination countries are Slovakia, Malta and Australia with 1 international student for each country.

<b>Destination country</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
Germany	116
Spain	72
France	45
The Netherlands	36
Belgium	29

*Table 7. Top-5 most popular destination countries among the international students of the University of Padua who undertook mobility*

Finally, the average duration of the sojourn in a destination country is 5.5 months. The minimum number of months is 2, while the maximum duration is 12 months. The majority of students (196 individuals) spent 4 months abroad. As for distribution, 202 students spent 5-6 months in destination countries, 196 stayed abroad for 3-5 months, 76 individuals for 8-9 months, 38 students for 2-3 months, 10 people for 11-12 months, 9 people for 6-8 months, and finally 5 people stayed for 12 months and possibly several added days.

<b>Months abroad</b>	<b>2-3</b>	<b>3-5</b>	<b>5-6</b>	<b>6-8</b>	<b>8-9</b>	<b>9-11</b>	<b>11-12</b>	<b>12-13</b>
<b>Number of students</b>	38	196	202	9	76	20	10	5

*Table 8. Distribution of the numbers of international students at the University of Padua who undertook mobility (by months spent in destination countries)*

We can see that the vast majority of students in the sample spent enough time abroad to overcome culture shock and adapt well to their host cultures (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960; Adisa et al., 2019). As a curious fact, international students of the University of Padua spent 3061 months in mobility in total, which makes it more than 255 years.

### ***Students Who Applied for Mobility but Stayed in Italy***

This group of students is considered to be the control group because these individuals demonstrated interest in going abroad for an exchange programme but eventually withdrew and stayed in Italy. While their fellow students were abroad and adapting to other cultural environments, the students of the control group spent this period in Italy and faced the Italian cultural, academic, bureaucratic and other contexts every day. It is hypothesised that their decision to stay contributed to the process of adaptation and integration into Italian society and culture that began after the moment when they decided to cancel their mobility and stay in Padua, in comparison to those who left and did not fully face the whole adaptation process.

This second group is smaller in numbers, as students who apply for mobility mostly complete their exchange, and count for 385 individuals. Again, three years were taken into account and the upward increase in numbers can be witnessed here as well.

In terms of gender distribution, there were again more females than males among the participants, 240 students and 145 students respectively, in all three years. The number of students divided by gender in every year selected for the sample is presented in the following table, where a stable increase is seen for both female and male participants, unlike the first group:

	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2021</b>	37	24	61
<b>2022</b>	83	48	131
<b>2023</b>	120	73	193

*Table 9. The numbers of international students at the University of Padua who cancelled mobility (by year and gender)*

The average age of the students in the control group is 27.7, where the youngest person is 20 and the oldest student is 49. The greatest number of students was 27 years old (55 of them) and slightly less (53 of them) were 26 years old. The rest of the distribution is the following: 199 students were 25-28 at the moment when they completed the application for mobility, 69 students were 20-24 years old and 69 students were between 29 and 32 years of age, followed by 35 students of 33-37 years old, 7 individuals of 38-41 years old, 4 persons in the range of 42-45, and finally 2 students in between 45 and 49 years of age.

Age group	20-24	25-28	29-32	33-37	38-41	42-45	46-49
Number of students	69	199	69	35	7	4	2

Table 10. Distribution of the numbers of international students at the University of Padua who cancelled mobility (by age groups)

Analysing citizenship, it is important to mention that students from Iran were the most numerous, with 108 individuals in particular. The following countries in the ranking are India, Russia, Turkey, Pakistan, Romania, Brazil, Ukraine, Egypt, and Albania. The gap between the first (Iran) and the second place (India) is again substantial and consists of 76 individuals. And again, all the countries may be considered developing, which may signal the possibility of idealisation of studies in Italy and the difficulties caused by cultural differences (collectivist vs. individualistic cultures) and systemic barriers (D'Arca, 1994; El-Asri, Karfa and Farhane, 2024).

Country of citizenship	Number of students
Iran	108
India	32
Russia	24
Turkey	19
Pakistan	15
Romania	14
Brazil	14
Ukraine	13
Egypt	11
Albania	9

Table 11. Top-10 citizenships of international students at the University of Padua who cancelled mobility

In this group, the majority were also in the second year of their studies, while the most numerous level of studies was a master's degree. In more detail, 316 students were enrolled in master's degree programmes, 58 in bachelor's degree programmes, 10 in the 6-year single cycle degree programme of Medicine, and 1 student in the 5-year single cycle degree of Law.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Number of student</b>
Bachelor	58
Master	316
Single-cycle degree in Law	1
Single-cycle degree in Medicine	10

*Table 12. The numbers of international students at the University of Padua who cancelled mobility (by degree level)*

The UNIPD departments where international students attend degree courses should also be analysed here. Thus, the Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies was the most popular in this part of the sample as well, with 57 students, while the rest of the top-5 ranking was the following: the Department of Information Engineering, the Department of Economics and Management, the Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies, and the Department of Land, Environment, Agriculture and Forestry.

<b>Name of the UNIPD Department</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies	57
Department of Information Engineering	43
Department of Economics and Management	41
Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies	26
Department of Land, Environment, Agriculture and Forestry	22

*Table 13. The numbers of international students at the University of Padua (by name of their departments)*

The top degree programmes, similarly, were the following: ICT for Internet and Multimedia (Master's degree at the Department of Information Engineering), European and Global Studies (Master's degree at the Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies), Human Rights and Multi-level Governance (Master's degree at the Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies), Food and Health (Master's degree at the Department of Land, Environment, Agriculture and Forestry of the School of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine), and Business Administration (Master's degree at the Department of Economics and Management). Again, all these degree courses are held in the English language.

Finally, the most popular destination countries where international students constituting the control group wanted to go but cancelled their mobility are the following: Germany, France, Spain, Norway, and Belgium.

<b>Destination country</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
Germany	76
France	45
Spain	38
Norway	22
Belgium	21

*Table 14. Top-5 most popular destination countries among the international students of the University of Padua who cancelled mobility*

The rest of the countries include the same list that the first group of students had but adding Cyprus, Iceland, Latvia, and Lithuania were added as destination countries in Europe, and Serbia and China as destination countries outside of the European Union (where Australia is excluded as no student in this group applied to go there), making it 32 countries in total. The most popular country was Germany, while the lowest numbers of students applied for exchange in Malta, Slovakia, China, Latvia, Iceland, and Cyprus, where only 1 student in each country was registered.

### **3.2 Questionnaire**

Each group received a questionnaire developed specifically for them: one for those UNIPD students who undertook a secondary exchange and returned to Padua and another one for international UNIPD students who applied for an exchange programme but stayed in Italy (the control group). This section in the paper will describe the content of both questionnaires, compare the questions and explain the significance of them for the current study.

#### ***Part 1. Motivation to undertake mobility***

Even though both questionnaires contained a section dedicated to demographic information, it was placed at the end of the survey so that participants would not get bored in the beginning and there were more chances that they complete the questionnaire. The first part of both surveys, therefore, is asking about students' motivations to undertake mobility. The first question is "What were your main reasons for applying to the University of Padua and moving to Italy?" and is aimed at exploring the motives of the participants to enrol at the University of Padua and move to Italy, which represents

their primary mobility act. Among the offered answers there are such options as academic and professional growth (including obtaining a degree abroad, internships, networking, and future employment in Italy), personal development (e.g., personal growth, increasing social status, forming new relationships), cultural and long-term aspirations (including learning a new culture and language, potential long-term migration). Participants of both questionnaires were able to select multiple options and were also given an opportunity to provide their own answers to this question.

The second question of the first part is “What are your major plans after graduation from the University of Padua?”. To investigate if international students have any plans for their future and if those plans are connected with Italy or other countries outside of their home country is also relevant to the issue of their motivation to study abroad, which might subsequently influence the level of their adaptation and integration in Italian society. All the options were already defined and only one major option could be selected: “stay in Italy for employment”, “stay in Italy for other purposes (continue education, marriage, etc.)”, “return to home country”, “move to another country”, and “not yet decided”.

The third question is formulated slightly differently for two groups of students: “Why did you decide to participate in the exchange programme?” for those who actually undertook the mobility, and “Why did you decide to apply for the exchange programme?” for those who applied but cancelled their participation. This question is intended to provide insight into students’ motivations, similar to that of the first question but in relation to their so-called secondary act of mobility. It was possible to choose multiple options among the following already offered ones: academic and professional growth (including academic opportunities, internships, networking), personal development (including personal growth, increasing social status, forming new relationships), cultural and long-term aspirations (including learning a new culture and language, potential long-term migration), and to add one’s own answer.

The questionnaire targeted at students who withdrew from the mobility programme also contains the question “What was your main reason for cancelling the exchange program?” in which the participants could also select one of the most important options: financial reasons, academic reasons, personal reasons; or add their own one. Even though the Mobility Unit of the University of Padua conducts its own questionnaire among the students who cancel their mobility programme and also gathers information about the reasons for this decision, it was not used in the current research but was decided to rather ask the respondents about their obstacles once again.

## ***Part 2. Italian language***

The next part of both surveys is dedicated to Italian language competence. Since language represents a substantial part of culture and students in possession of linguistic competence in the local language of their study-abroad country were proven to achieve better levels of socio-cultural adaptation as well as academic performance (Church, 1982; Yu et al., 2019; Ambrosetti et al., 2022), it was crucial to investigate the relationships that the participants of the current study have with the Italian language and how it might affect the levels of their integration.

Thus, the first question in the Italian language part of both questionnaires is “What was your level of Italian before moving to Italy?” and is aimed at uncovering the initial level of language proficiency before the primary mobility act happened. The second question is similar to the first one and is also asked in both surveys: “What was your level of Italian before applying for the exchange?”. The answers to the second question allow us understand firstly if there was any improvement in language proficiency between the beginning of international students’ stay in Padua and the moment they applied for secondary mobility as well as to notice the condition of their language skills before the subsequent absence from Italy (in case of the outgoing group) and subsequent stay in Italy (in case of the control group). The answers to both questions were offered in the range from zero knowledge to fluent with all the intermediate levels of language knowledge (beginner, intermediate, advanced) to be selected.

The next question in this part is formulated differently for the two groups of students. In particular, those who went to an exchange programme were asked to answer the following question: “Has your Italian language proficiency improved or declined during your exchange?” with the three options of “improved”, “declined” and “stayed the same” to select from. For the control group, the question was asked as “Has your Italian language proficiency improved or declined during the time you stayed in Italy?” with the same three options to choose one: “improved”, “declined” and “stayed the same”. This question will provide valuable information on the impact of either absence or stay in Italy on the linguistic proficiency of the participants.

Finally, the fourth question was identical for both surveys: “How often do you use Italian in your daily life (socially, academically)?” with the possibility to choose one of the options among “never”, “rarely”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, and “always”. The curiosity here is to trace the correlation between the frequency of Italian language usage and its level and, again, whether participants’ leave for secondary exchange or their decision to stay in Padua somehow affected the language knowledge and use.

### ***Part 3. Academic performance***

As was previously mentioned, O'Reilly et al. (2015) found that long-term students who had more time to adjust to another educational and cultural environment were more satisfied with their academic performance than those who went abroad for a shorter period. Additionally, Ambrosetti et al. (2022) stated that immigrant students in general proved to be more academically resilient. Therefore, it seems important to investigate if and how taking part in a secondary exchange program or, on the contrary, cancelling it influenced the academic success of the international students at the University of Padua. In line with O'Reilly et al. (2015), those UNIPD students who undertook mobility might be considered "short-term" students in relation to the time they spent in Padua before leaving for a secondary exchange, while students who decided to stay and spent the time, that they could potentially spend abroad, in Italy may be considered "long-term" as they seem to have more time available for adapting to the Italian educational system. Accordingly, the following questions were asked in the first questionnaire: "Has your academic performance in Padua improved or declined after your exchange?" (the options are "improved", "declined", or "stayed the same") and "Did you feel more or less motivated to engage academically in Padua after returning from your secondary exchange?" (the options to choose are "more motivated", "less motivated", and "no change"). Similar questions but worded differently were asked in the second questionnaire: "How would you describe your academic performance in Padua after you decided to stay in Italy?" (options to select: "improved", "declined", or "stayed the same") and "Did staying in Padua help you focus better on your studies?", where the answer could be simply "yes" or "no".

### ***Part 4. Accommodation***

Problems associated with the search for and stay in rented accommodation were mentioned among the challenges that render the adaptation process of international students more complicated in several previous research papers (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Brooks et al., 2024). Indeed, the housing crisis in Europe and in Padua in particular is flourishing making it extremely difficult for international students to find affordable accommodation. That is why participants from the first group were asked "Did you maintain your accommodation in Padua during the exchange?" (answers limited to simply "yes" or "no") and similarly "Did you maintain the same accommodation throughout your stay in Italy?" (answers also limited to "yes" or "no") for the second (control) group.

The second question in this part was formulated differently for each survey depending on the situation. Thus, students who went on exchange and did not maintain their accommodation in Padua were asked how easy or difficult was it to find new accommodation upon their return to Padua and

provided several options to choose from: very easy, easy, difficult, very difficult. The second group which consists of students who decided to stay in Italy were rather asked if the idea of losing accommodation had any impact on their decision to cancel the exchange, with “yes” and “no” as optional answers. Given that the situation with housing availability is very problematic in Padua, it is expected that the prospects of not being able to find another place to stay indeed affected students’ decision to stay in Italy rather than undertake a secondary exchange programme.

Parts 5 and 6 of both questionnaires are considered to be the most crucial as they contain questions that explore the socio-cultural adaptation and integration of international students in Italy and re-adaptation challenges (in the first survey) and adaptation (in the second survey) challenges respectively and have the biggest number of questions.

### ***Part 5. Socio-cultural adaptation and integration***

Given that contact with local students was identified among the predictors of successful socio-cultural adaptation of international students (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Yu et al., 2019), the current research is also aimed at verifying the connection between the amount of contact with Italian students and foreign students’ integration. The relevant question “What nationality are most of your friends in Padua?” was asked in both questionnaires and the following possible answers were provided: “mostly Italian”, “mostly from my home country”, “mostly from the same continent/macro area as mine”, “very mixed origins”.

To find out whether the absence from Italy or uninterrupted stay influenced the networks that international UNIPD students established in Padua before the moment of their application for mobility, they were asked two questions: “Have your friendships and social connections in Padua changed while you were on exchange?” (optional answers included “yes, they improved”, “yes, they weakened”, “no significant change”) in the first questionnaire and “Have your friendships and social connections in Padua changed while you stayed there?” (optional answers were the same) in the second questionnaire.

The third question in this part was optional for both questionnaires because it was open and allowed the respondents to write their own opinions on the reasons why their social connections have changed (or stayed the same) after returning from their secondary exchange/after deciding to stay in Italy as if it was asked in an interview.

The following three questions ask about self-reported feelings on the sense of belonging, adaptation and integration in Italy. In particular, the questionnaire sent to students who undertook mobility and returned to Padua contained the question formulated as “How did your exchange impact your sense of belonging in Italy?” which invited them to select one of the options available: “strengthened it”, “weakened it”, “no change”, while students who never went on secondary exchange and stayed in Italy were asked “How has your sense of belonging in Italy changed since deciding to stay?” with the same answer pull available. The results will be compared and discussed in the following chapters of this paper.

It was also decided to control the level of adaptation as a self-reported variable and not using any special test. Consequently, the students were asked either “Do you feel more or less adapted to life in Italy now, after returning from the exchange, than you were before?” or “Do you feel more or less adapted to life in Italy now, after you permanently stayed there?” to compare the answers (more adapted/less adapted/no change) and see if taking part in a secondary exchange influences the adaptation process in the country where students come to study from abroad and if yes, to what extent.

Finally, the participants of both groups were invited to answer the question “Do you feel your exchange experience helped or held back your integration in Italy upon your return?” or “Do you feel your decision to cancel the mobility and stay in Italy helped or held back your integration there?” to check if the decision to leave Italy for several months or, on the contrary, to stay helped, held back, or had no influence on international students' integration in Italian society and culture, according to their self-reflection.

### ***Part 6. Re-adaptation challenges***

In the case of students who undertook mobility, the questions in this part are aimed at learning more about the re-entry experience of these students and reverse culture shock. First of all, in the question “What challenges, if any, did you face when adapting back to Italy after your exchange?” they were asked to select multiple answers describing challenges that students returning from exchange usually face, such as social (e.g., re-establishing friendships, interacting with locals, finding accommodation), academic (e.g., university expectations, study methods), cultural (e.g., norms, behaviour, language), or other (additionally asked to specify), or select “I did not face any challenges” if applicable (Swallow & Tomalin, 2022), El-Asri, Karfa & Farhane, 2024).

The following questions “Can you describe any significant cultural shocks or challenges you faced after returning from the exchange?” and “How did your participation in the exchange programme

impact your emotional connection to Italy?” again provided an opportunity for respondents to leave their own answers reporting the specific challenges and emotional connection to Italy. Such an approach allows us to discover more challenges and add to the existing research, if possible.

Students, who cancelled their mobility programme and decided to stay in Italy were asked to report their adaptation challenges since they were not able to experience the reverse culture shock but might have continued to experience the initial culture shock that emerged during their immigration to Italy. The first question revolved to them was “What challenges, if any, have you faced while adapting to Italy?” where they could choose multiple responses: social (e.g., re-establishing friendships, interacting with locals, finding accommodation), academic (e.g., university expectations, study methods), cultural (e.g., norms, behaviour, language), or other (additionally asked to specify), or choose “I did not face any challenges” if applicable.

The final questions included “Do you feel that staying in Italy without going on an exchange has helped you integrate better into Italian culture?” where the expected response was either yes or no, and “Do you feel you missed out on experiences by not going on the exchange? If yes, which experiences?” which is an open question where students could share their thoughts.

### ***Part 7. Demographic information***

The final parts of both questionnaires were identical and dedicated to the demographic information about the respondents. It included questions about age, gender, country of origin, and the degree level of the course they are enrolled in at the University of Padua, which could be selected between bachelor’s and master’s degrees since all other levels were excluded already at the moment of sample selection, and for how long they have been studying in Italy before applying for mobility. Another set of questions in this part concerns any previous experience of living abroad before moving to Italy, internal migration in their country of origin and the significance of this move in terms of distance or cultural change (e.g., moving from a rural to urban area, or between different regions). These last three questions will be useful when analysing if the respondents already had any previous experience of culture shock and how it might have influenced their current migration experience in Italy and their secondary mobility in the case of the participants from the first group.

All in all, the questionnaires were distributed with the help of the Mobility Unit of the University of Padua who created an email list based on the sample and shared the two links to Google Forms surveys to two separate groups of students: those who completed their mobility and those who cancelled it. Given that there are students who had completed their mobility in 2021 and since then

have already graduated from the University of Padua, their university email boxes are no longer active and that is why some emails with the questionnaire did not reach the addressee. Despite the fact that 556 students received the questionnaire for international UNIPD students who undertook secondary exchange and 385 students received the survey for international UNIPD students who cancelled the mobility programme and stayed in Italy from the official email address of the Mobility Office, which is erasmus@unipd.it, where they receive all the important information concerning their mobility from, the percentage of actual respondents was very low. All the details will be provided in the next part dedicated to the results of the survey.

## Chapter 4: Results

The participation rate in the first group is only 7%, as only 39 students out of 556 who were contacted actually took part in the research. The rate in the control group is even lower, around 4%, as we received only 15 responses out of 385 students. The results obtained in both questionnaires will be reported in this part and compared wherever possible. In contrast to the structure of the surveys, the part on demography will be analysed first so that the overall image of the participants of the current research is created in the beginning.

### *Demographic information*

Among the respondents who undertook mobility and returned to Italy, 44% are between 27 and 30 years old, with another 33% between 23 and 26 years old, which is in line with the data provided about the whole population contacted for participation. The majority of the respondents who applied for mobility but remained in Italy, which is 60%, are between 23 and 26 years old. They are slightly younger than the majority of respondents in the first group, which also corresponds to the overall statistics on the international UNIPD students who received the questionnaire for the control group, but the share of the respondents who are older than 31 is bigger than in the first group (26,7% versus 15,4%).

1. What is your age?  
39 responses

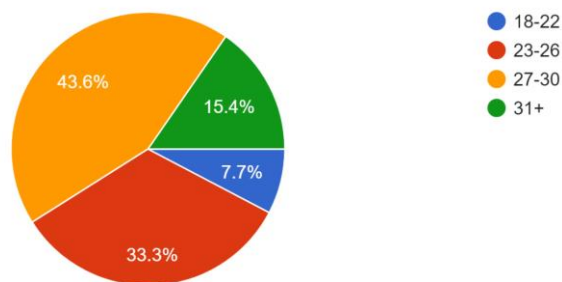


Figure 1. The distribution of the participants of the first group (students who undertook mobility) by age

1. What is your age?

15 responses

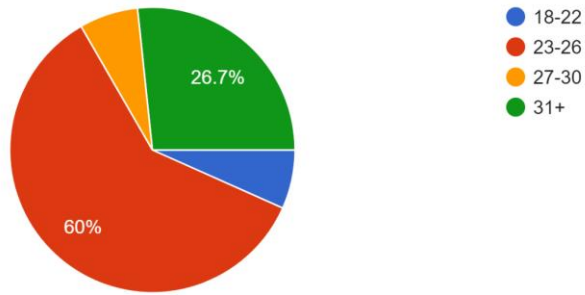


Figure 2. The distribution of the participants of the control group (students who cancelled mobility) by age

The prevalence of female respondents was not a surprise given that the overall majority of the international UNIPD students who undertook mobility are females. Nevertheless, the shares are different because there are more female participants in the second group (80%) than in the first group (59%).

2. What is your gender?

39 responses

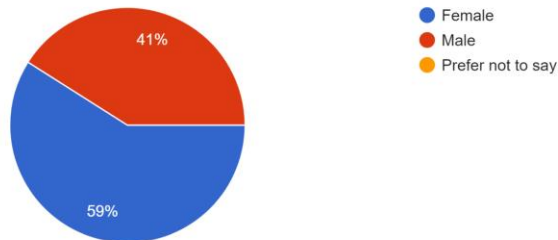


Figure 3. Gender of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

2. What is your gender?

15 responses

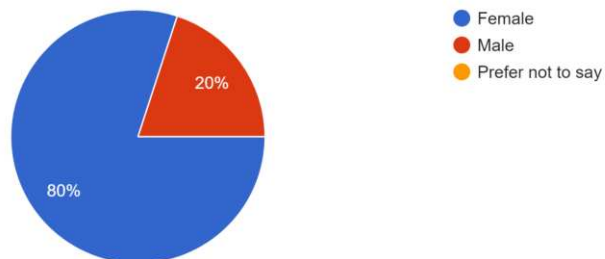
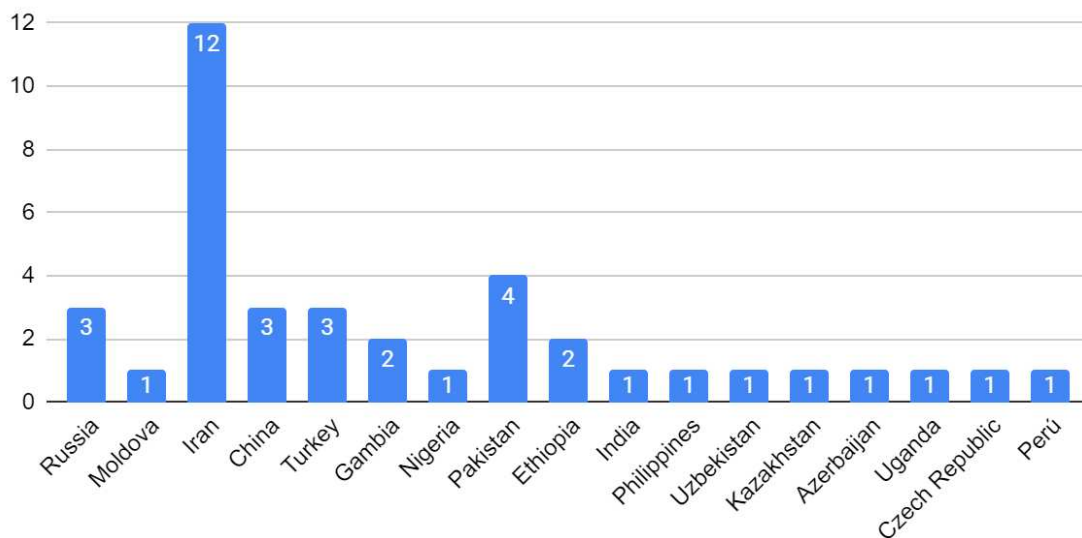


Figure 4. Gender of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

The question “What country are you originally from?” was formulated in such a way that students could leave their own answers based on their interpretation. Thus, they could have reported their country of citizenship, their nationality, the country they were born and raised in, or even the country where their parents are originally from. For example, one respondent of the control group wrote that she was born in the United Arab Emirates but her country of origin is India, and the latter was considered as the final answer in the current research. Such an approach allows us to get a response that reflects the cultural identity of each student, as the country they mentioned is most probably the culture they identify with the most.

The participants of the first group were from 17 different countries, with Iran being the most frequently mentioned one as 12 respondents out of 39 are from this country, which makes it around 30% of the respondents. Pakistan, Russia, China, Turkey, Gambia and Ethiopia were also represented by several respondents. All other countries were mentioned by only one participant each, as seen in the chart:



3. What country are you originally from?

Figure 5. Countries of origin of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

The participants from the control group were from 7 different countries and one participant preferred to give no response, the reason of which is unknown. Russia and Iran were in the lead with 4 participants from each of the countries, while Turkey was in second place with 2 respondents from there. All the rest were represented by one participant each:

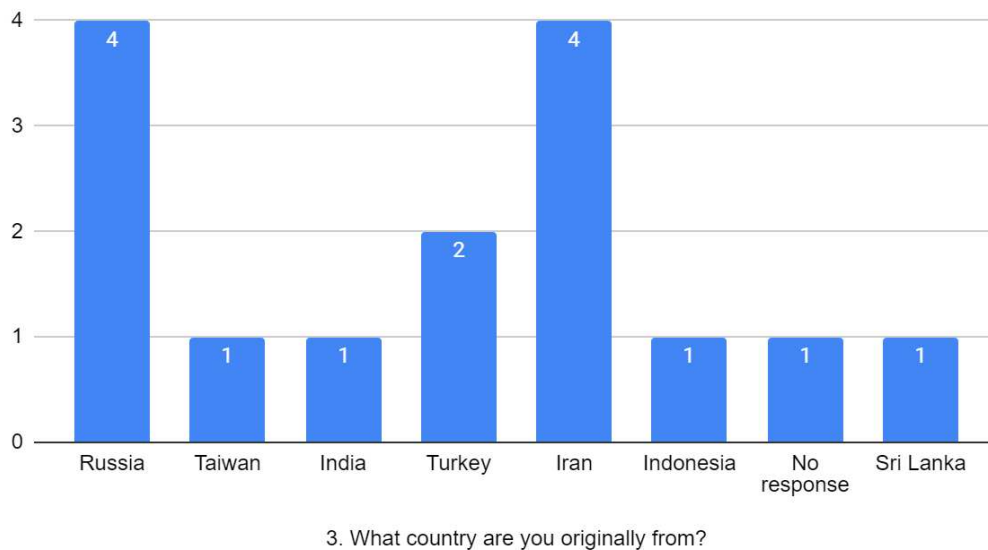


Figure 6. Countries of origin of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

As was previously discussed in the section on Methodology, almost all the participants are from developing or even economically disadvantaged countries, as well as mostly collectivist cultures, which first of all might have a certain influence on their levels of socio-cultural adaptation in Italy and, secondly, might be considered one of the reasons why they decided to take part in the survey because collectivist cultures value the sense of belonging to the group and take this responsibility seriously, that is why when they received an email from the university office's address, they might have probably considered it important for the university they belong to and decided to help.

In both groups, the vast majority of the respondents are enrolled in master's degree courses, which also corresponds to the general statistics reported in the Methodology part.

4. What is your current degree program at the University of Padua?  
39 responses

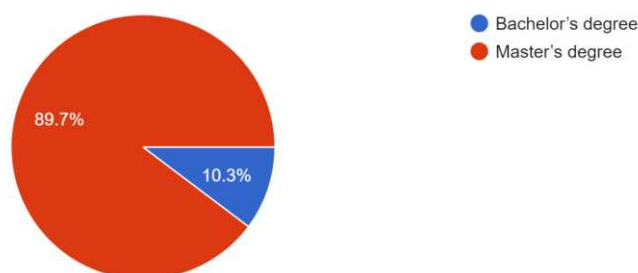


Figure 7. The degree levels of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

#### 4. What is your current degree program at the University of Padua?

15 responses

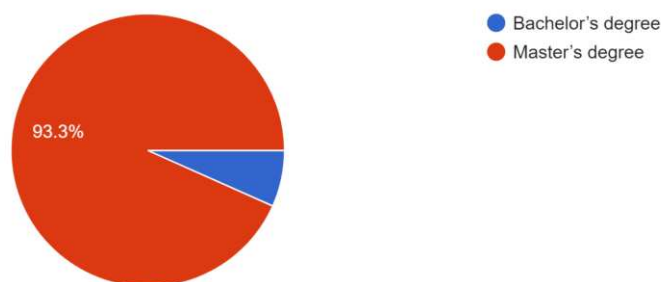


Figure 8. The degree levels of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

Moving on to the previous international experience of the respondents, it is necessary to first compare the amount of time that they had spent in Italy before the moment when they applied for a mobility programme. The overall majority of respondents in the first group (77%) spent 1-2 years, and only 5% of the participants lived in Italy for less than one year. The rest (18%) reported to have stayed in Italy for more than two years. The share of those who spent less than 12 months among the respondents of the second group is much bigger and makes up 33%, and there were also more respondents who stayed for more than 2 years, almost 27% in particular, while the remaining and still the largest part of the respondent reported to had lived in Italy for 1-2 years before applying for exchange.

#### 5. How long have you been studying in Italy (prior to your exchange programme)?

39 responses

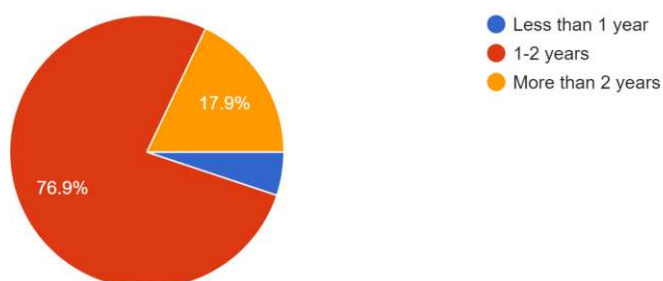


Figure 9. The amount of time the participants spent in Italy before undertaking mobility

5. How long have you been studying in Italy (prior to applying for an exchange)?  
15 responses

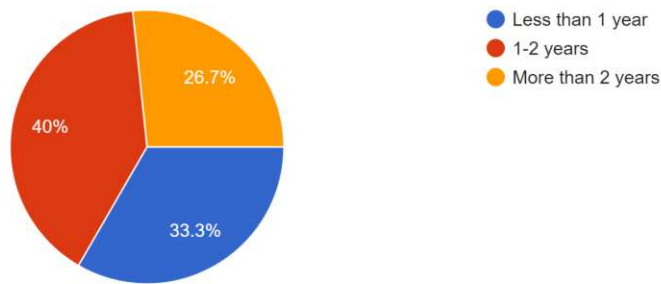


Figure 10. The amount of time the participants spent in Italy before applying for mobility (that was subsequently cancelled)

Notably, there were more respondents who had previous experience of living abroad before moving to Italy in the control group (approximately 47%) than in the first group (around 26%) where students also undertook a secondary exchange programme apart from moving to Italy for a degree. But in general, the majority of both groups did not have any prior experience of cross-border migration.

6. Did you have any previous experience of living abroad (not in your home country, for more than three months) before moving to Italy?  
39 responses

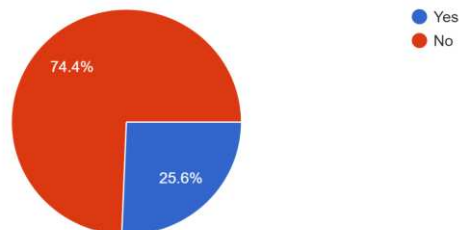


Figure 11. Previous experience of living abroad of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

6. Did you have any previous experience of living abroad (not in your home country, for more than three months) before moving to Italy?  
15 responses

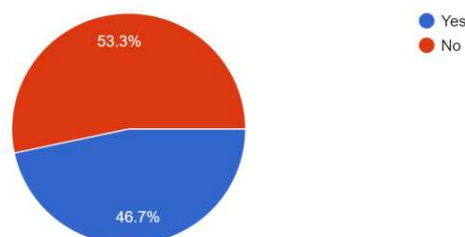


Figure 12. Previous experience of living abroad of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

However, more than half of the participants in both groups reported to have previous experience of the internal movement in their countries of origin:

7. Have you moved internally within your home country (to another town or city) before moving to Italy, for at least three months?  
39 responses

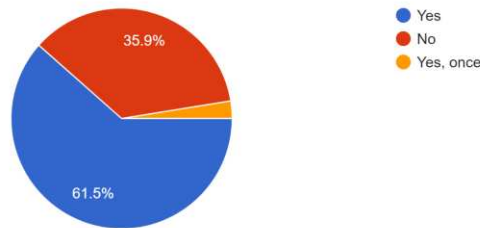


Figure 13. Previous experience of internal movements of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

7. Have you moved internally within your home country (to another town or city) before moving to Italy, for at least three months?  
15 responses

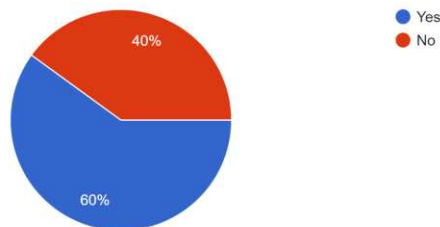


Figure 14. Previous experience of internal movements of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

In both cases, this internal migration was mostly significant or very significant, for example moving, to a different city within the same region or moving to another region as well as from a rural area to an urban area:

8. If yes, how significant was this move in terms of distance or cultural change (e.g., moving from a rural to urban area, or between different regions)?  
29 responses



Figure 15. The significance of the internal movements that the participants (who undertook mobility) experienced before moving to Italy

8. If yes, how significant was this move in terms of distance or cultural change (e.g., moving from a rural to urban area, or between different regions)?

10 responses

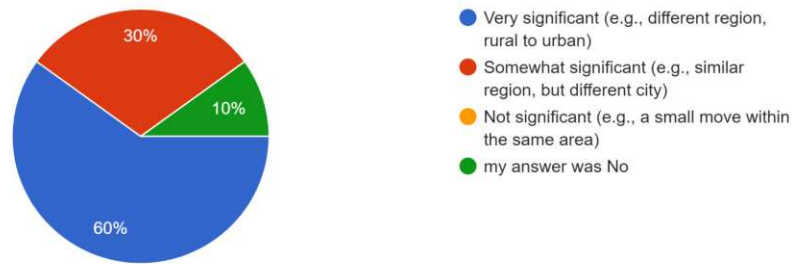


Figure 16. The significance of the internal movements that the participants (who cancelled mobility) experienced before moving to Italy

### ***Motivation to undertake mobility***

Moving on to the analysis of students' motives to first move to Italy and then also undertake a secondary exchange programme, the analysis of the reasons for migrating to Italy and enrolling at the University of Padua should be provided in the first place. Given that multiple options could have been selected in the first question, it appeared that in both groups the majority of students saw academic and professional growth as the main reason to move to Padua, scoring 87% in the first group and 80% in the second group. Specifically, some respondents of the first group also left their own responses, which included such phrases as *"the University of Padua is potential in the field that I studied"* (the respondent who had also finished high school in Italy), and *"reputable Bachelor's programme Psychological Science"*. Many students also chose personal development (43% and 26%) and cultural and long-term aspirations (41% and 46%) as the reasons to come to Padua. It is curious how the number of respondents who chose long-term aspirations that include potential long-term migration is higher among those who eventually cancelled their mobility and stayed in Padua than among those who went on a secondary exchange programme as if this were a sign that these students were already initially determined to integrate more deeply into Italian society and culture.

One respondent in particular wrote *"As the University of Padua is one of the leading global universities so i wanted to be part of its large, growing community, contribute to the betterment of the planet and help those in need, all while enhancing the reputation of my university"* that seems to be an all-encompassing statement. Another student responded simply *"Scholarship"* which corresponds to the study conducted by D'Arca (1994) in which the availability of scholarships provided by Italian universities was also mentioned as one of the main reasons why international students choose this country for higher education.

Indeed, the share of respondents who selected the answers “Stay in Italy for employment” and “Stay in Italy for other purposes (continue education, marriage, etc.)” to the question “What are your major plans after graduation from the University of Padua?” was bigger among the respondents of the control group (40% in sum) than among the respondents of the first group (slightly more than 33% in total). The most popular answer in the first group was “Move to another country” which is actually the same in percentage in the second group as well (33,3% in each questionnaire). Moreover, in the first group, the share of students who would prefer to return to their home country is bigger than in the second group (15,4% versus 4,7%), which may mean that students who not only moved to Italy but also undertook another movement for a short-term exchange are in general more flexible with migration and that students who cancelled the exchange and preferred to rather spend this time in Italy might be another signal of their long-term plans regarding the movement to Italy. Around 20% of participants in both groups, however, had not yet decided what to do after their graduation from the University of Padua:

2. What are your major plans after graduation from the University of Padua?  
39 responses



Figure 17. The plans that the participants who undertook mobility have after graduation from the University of Padua

2. What are your plans after graduation from the University of Padua?  
15 responses



Figure 18. The plans that the participants who cancelled mobility have after graduation from the University of Padua

The results for the question “Why did you decide to participate in/apply for the exchange programme?” are similar to those for the question about the reasons for applying to the University of Padua and moving to Italy. Again, academic and professional growth was in the leading position in the two questionnaires: around 80% of the respondents selected this option in the first group and slightly more than 70% of participants in the second group). The students who undertook mobility also selected personal development (64%) and cultural and long-term aspirations (41%) as the reasons to go on exchange. One student also left his/her own answer stating that *“The quality of higher education in the UK is much better than in Italy. There is much better support available for international students in the UK. I was also very attracted to their multicultural society. Universities in the UK are very well-organised. There are a lot of opportunities for international [students] to explore and they are also felt welcomed unlike in Italy. The quality of life in the UK is much better.”* This answer demonstrates dissatisfaction with various aspects of life and education in Italy, which can be interpreted as a trait of a low level of integration in Italy and most probably high adaptation to the British culture and lifestyle.

Indeed, in the open question “How did your participation in the exchange programme impact your emotional connection to Italy?” that was asked in the section regarding re-adaptation challenges upon return to Italy, this student gave a very straightforward answer: *“I do not feel connected to Italy on any level.”* However, it might also be a sign that this student left Italy in the Regression stage (Oberg, 1960) when he/she experienced hostility and aggression towards Italy, or in the period between 6 and 18 months of stay in Padua that is the period when students may be in a crisis as the adaptation was proved to be more successful in those students who left the country where they migrated to either before the 6-months threshold or after the 18-months threshold (Lysgaard’s, 1955), since they student reported to had stayed in Italy for some time between 1 and 2 years. Finally, the reverse culture shock might also be another explanation for such a response.

In the second questionnaire, the options “Personal development” and “Cultural and long-term aspirations” were chosen an equal number of times, making the share of 33.3% each.

### ***Italian language***

As for Italian language proficiency, the majority of the respondents in both groups reported having either zero knowledge (around 72% in the first group and approximately 47% in the second group) or the Beginner level (around 23% in the first group and around 40% in the second group) of Italian before moving to Italy. Interestingly, no one was fluent in Italian, though the share of international students who could speak Italian at Intermediate and Advanced levels before enrollment at the University of Padua is bigger in the second group (13,4% in sum) than among the respondents of the

first group (5,2% in total). It can be explained as a consequence of those students' desire to migrate to Italy and their preparation for this important step or as a motive for both their movement to Italy and the decision not to go on further exchange, as being able to speak Italian they can be better prepared and subsequently adjusted to their new life in Italy.

1. What was your level of Italian before moving to Italy?  
39 responses

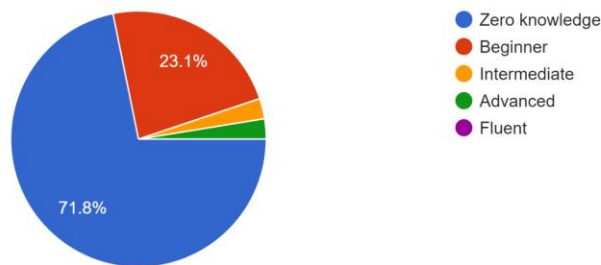


Figure 19. Italian language proficiency of the participants (who undertook mobility) before moving to Italy

1. What was your level of Italian before moving to Italy?  
15 responses

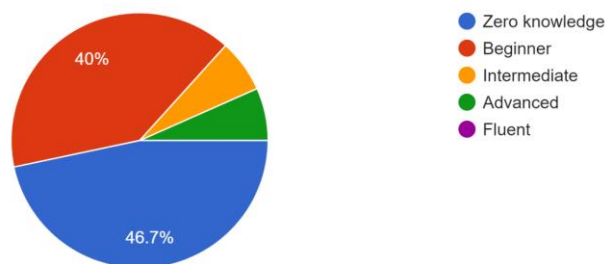


Figure 20. Italian language proficiency of the participants (who cancelled mobility) before moving to Italy

Similar results were demonstrated by both groups in relation to the question “What was your level of Italian before applying for the exchange?” with 64% of the respondents in the first group and 60% of the participants in the second group having the Beginner level of Italian, which demonstrates that their knowledge of the language improved over the time they spent in Italy. It is additionally proved by the fact that the number of individuals at the Intermediate level also increased but most importantly there were already some respondents who reported fluency (1 person in each group):

2. What was your level of Italian before applying for the exchange?

39 responses

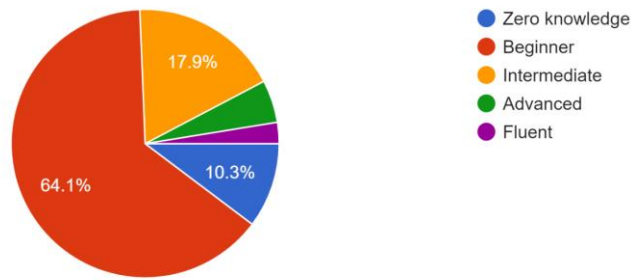


Figure 21. Italian language proficiency of the participants (who undertook mobility) before applying for exchange

2. What was your level of Italian before applying for the exchange?

15 responses

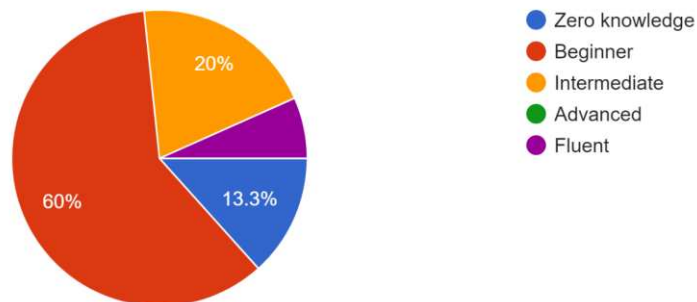


Figure 22. Italian language proficiency of the participants (who cancelled mobility) before applying for exchange

What is interesting is that no respondent among those who cancelled the exchange programme and stayed in Italy reported that their level of Italian language proficiency declined during this period. On the contrary, the majority of them accounting for 73% improved their level. Among the students who went on exchange, only one-third managed to improve their Italian language skills while they were absent in Italy. Almost half of the respondents in this group remained at the same level (46%) but some students believe that their knowledge of Italian deteriorated while they were on exchange.

3. Has your Italian language proficiency improved or declined during your exchange?

39 responses

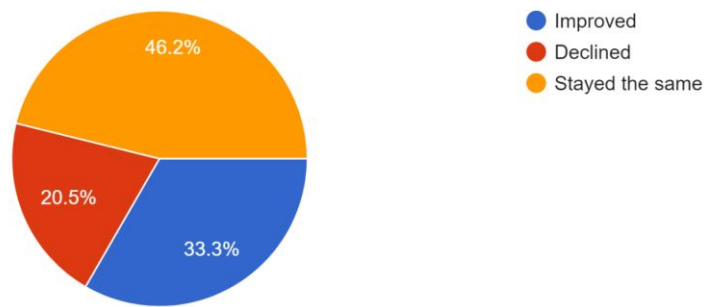


Figure 23. Changes in Italian language proficiency of the participants (who undertook mobility) during exchange

3. Has your Italian language proficiency improved or declined during the time you stayed in Italy?

15 responses

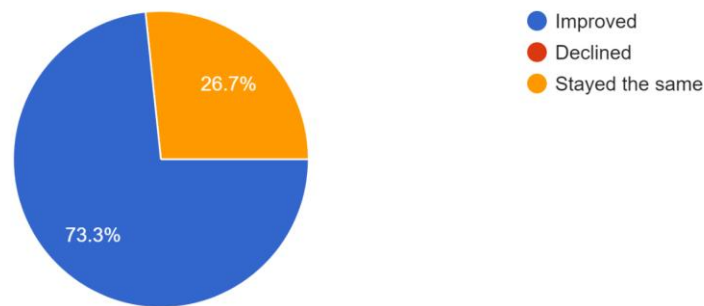


Figure 24. Changes in Italian language proficiency of the participants (who cancelled mobility) during the time spent in Italy

As for the usage of the Italian language in everyday life, the results are quite controversial. Even though the respondents of the first group reported a decline in language proficiency, they seem to use it more than students of the second group who stayed in Italy and improved their language proficiency, and the share of those who never uses the language is even bigger than among the participants from the first group:

4. How often do you use Italian in your daily life (socially, academically)?

39 responses

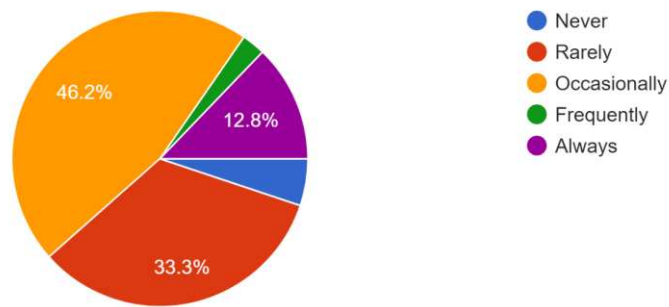


Figure 25. The frequency of Italian language use in the daily life of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

4. How often do you use Italian in your daily life (socially, academically)?

15 responses

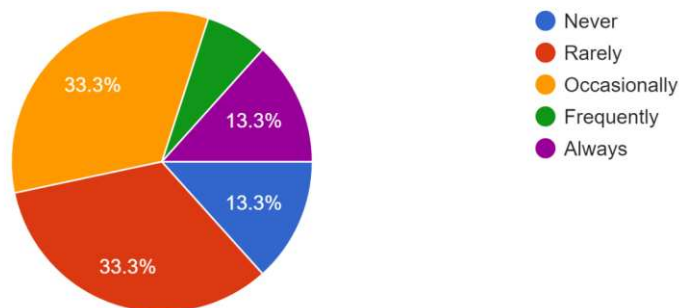


Figure 26. The frequency of Italian language use in the daily life of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

### ***Academic performance***

Taking into account the study conducted by O'Reilly et al. (2015) and subsequently by Ambrosetti et al. (2022), it was expected that leaving Padua for an exchange programme would negatively impact international students' academic performance and motivation to study upon their return to Italy. That was assumed also based on the challenges that the Bologna process introduced to some universities that struggle to adapt their systems to the unified European credit recognition initiative Teichler (2012), which might create problems for students returning from exchange as their GPA might be negatively affected by the recognition scale of their home university.

However, contrary to the expectations, 82% of students who undertook secondary exchange reported that their academic performance at the University of Padua improved, while slightly more than 15% of the respondents believed that their academic performance stayed at the same level, and only 1 person (2,6%) considered it to decline. Students from the second group, who stayed in Italy for the whole time, mostly improved (53%) or remained at the same level of academic success (40%), and again only 1 person reported the decline:

1. Has your academic performance in Padua improved or declined after your exchange?

39 responses

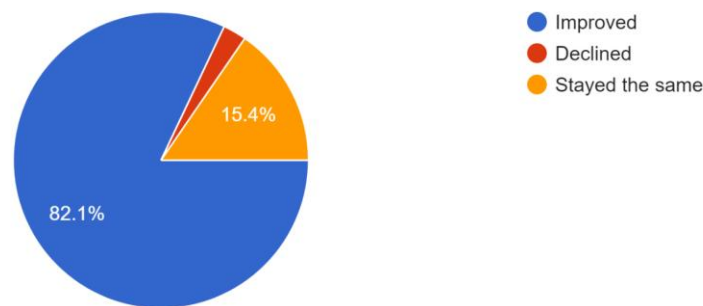


Figure 27. The change in academic performance of the participants (who undertook mobility) after they returned to Italy

1. How would you describe your academic performance in Padua after you decided to stay in Italy?

15 responses

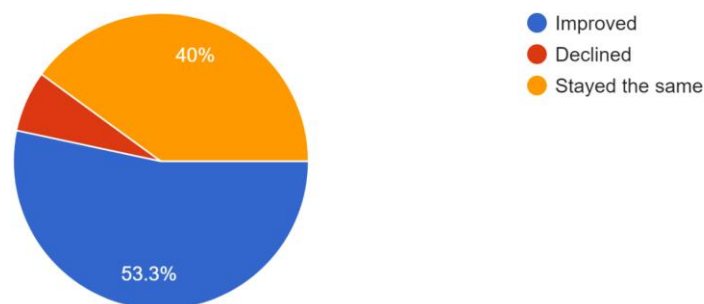


Figure 28. The change in academic performance of the participants (who cancelled mobility) after they decided to stay in Italy

Moreover, only 20% of the participants in the first group said that they became less motivated academically after their return to Padua, while more than half of the total number of students who took part in the first survey reported that they became even more motivated, and a quarter remained at the same level.

2. Did you feel more or less motivated to engage academically in Padua after returning from your secondary exchange?  
39 responses

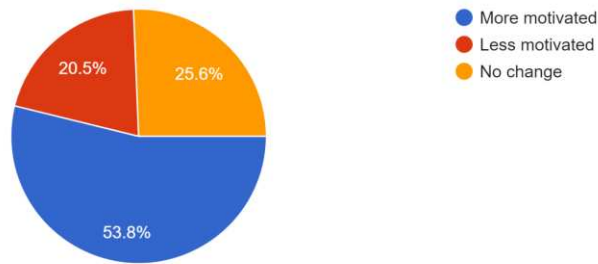


Figure 29. The change in academic motivation of the participants (who undertook mobility) after they returned to Italy

As for the second group, more than half of the respondents believed that staying in Padua actually helped them to focus on their studies:

2. Did staying in Padua help you focus better on your studies?  
15 responses

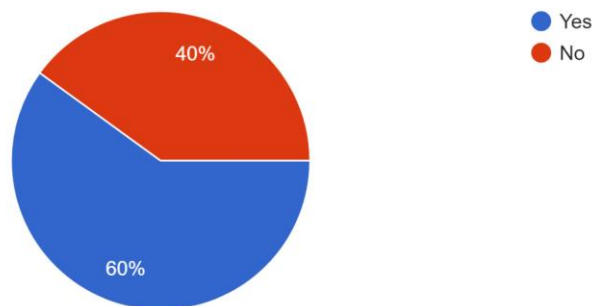


Figure 30. The change in academic motivation of the participants (who cancelled mobility) after they decided to stay in Italy

### ***Accommodation***

As it usually happens, 60% of students who left Padua and went on an exchange programme had to finish their accommodation contracts and leave the places where they stayed before mobility. When they returned to Italy, it was difficult (41,4%) or very difficult (48,3%) for the majority of them to find new accommodation:

1. Did you maintain your accommodation in Padua during the exchange?

39 responses

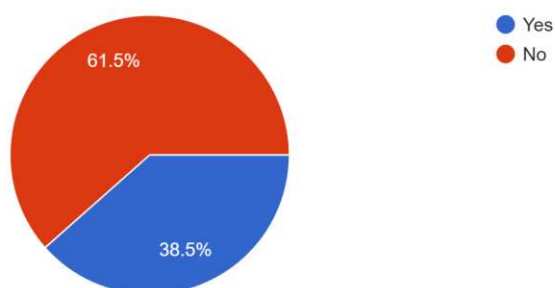


Figure 31. The participants who undertook mobility and managed to maintain their accommodation in Italy or not

2. If no, how easy or difficult was it to find new accommodation upon your return to Padua?

29 responses

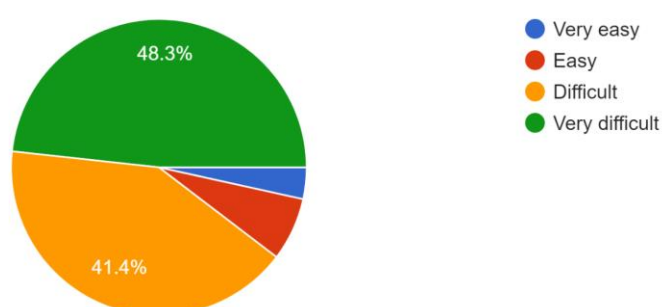


Figure 32. The difficulty of finding new accommodation among the participants who undertook mobility and did not maintain their accommodation

Students, who decided to stay in Padua mostly maintained their accommodation, even though the share of people who did not is also big (40%). What is important is that the idea of not being able to find accommodation upon return from the exchange, as it is indeed very difficult based on the responses of the first group, influenced the decision to cancel the mobility of almost 90% of the respondents from the second group:

1. Did you maintain the same accommodation throughout your stay in Italy?

15 responses

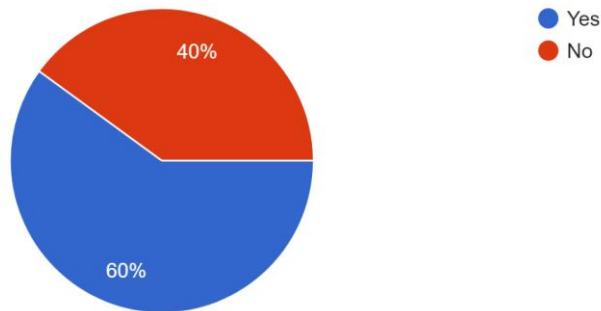


Figure 33. The participants who cancelled mobility and managed to maintain their accommodation in Italy or not

2. Did the idea of losing accommodation impact your decision to cancel the exchange?

15 responses

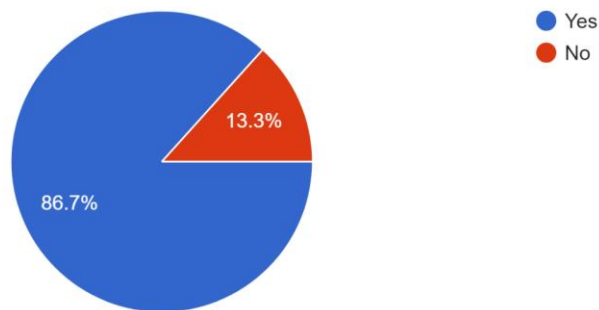


Figure 34. The influence of the idea to lose accommodation on the decision of the participants who cancelled mobility to do so

### ***Socio-cultural adaptation and integration***

It was found that the respondents of both groups made diverse friendship networks over their time in Padua that consisted mostly of people from their home countries or the same continent and macro area. Significant parts of participants in both surveys reported having friends of very mixed origins (33% and 26%), while not so many international students had mostly local Italian students as friends in Padua (approximately 13% in each group). According to the Functional friendship model suggested by Bochner, McLeod, and Lin (1977), such a diversity of friends consisting of monocultural, bicultural and multicultural social networks may be beneficial for international students as they

manage to maintain their original cultural values and traditions of their home country, receive support from the local students and staff at university, thus feeling less isolated and more integrated, and be able to share the struggles of being an international student with other foreign students who may undergo the same difficulties.

1. What nationality are most of your friends in Padua?  
39 responses

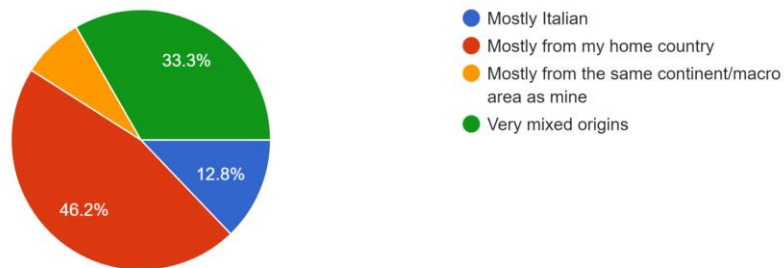


Figure 35. The nationality of the friends of the participants who undertook mobility that they made in Padua

1. What nationality are most of your friends in Padua?  
15 responses

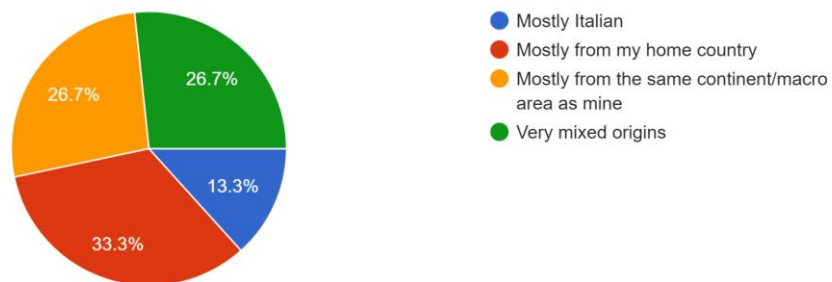


Figure 36. The nationality of the friends of the participants who cancelled mobility that they made in Padua

A more or less equal number of students of the first group improved, weakened, or maintained their friendships and social connections without any change while they were away from Padua:

2. Have your friendships and social connections in Padua changed while you were on exchange?

39 responses

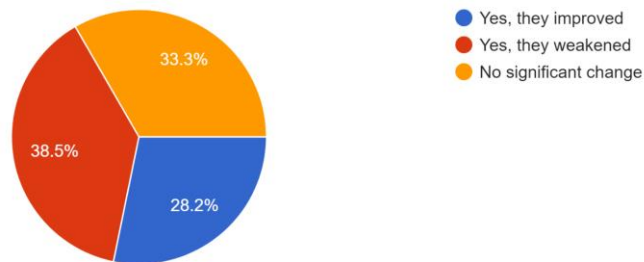


Figure 37. The change in the friendships of the participants of the first group as a result of undertaking mobility

Some of the respondents also gave possible reasons for the changes in their friendships and social connections. For example, those who managed to improve their relationships with friends reported the following ideas:

“I think it improved because during my exchange, I developed more socialising skills and I applied it more when I came back”

“During my exchange, I became more outgoing, engaged in new activities with my friends and became more open. When I returned to Padova, I decided to do intentionally do better with my relationships and friendships.”

“After the exchange, I significantly improved my understanding of other cultures and gained confidence in interacting with more diverse groups which helped me in making new friends. During the exchange, the host university treated me exceptionally well, especially my supervisor and the entire research group who warmly welcomed me, fostering a strong sense of belonging!”

“Exposure and being more comfortable and willing to connect”.

Those who felt like their social connections mostly weakened, mentioned “lack of every day/every week interaction”, “lack of proximity”, “lost connections” as the reasons and some wrote:

“Because many of my friends are now busy on something else so we no longer have the time to get together and share memories together”

“True friends are proved when facing difficulties ... so we will lose those who were not true friends ...”

“I have felt some distance from my friends”.

Other responses also included the following messages:

“Not sure, some stayed the same. In uzbek, we say "the care is in the eyes", meaning the more you see certain people, the more you care.”

“I mostly kept in contact with my close friends from Padova during my exchange and I think my bond with them grew stronger but obviously I missed my chance of meeting new people in Padova during my second year which equalize things for me. I would say having stronger connection with my friends is a greater plus but since Padova is a student city most of them moved out once they are graduated and I felt a bit lonely when I first moved back.”

Among the respondents of the second group of students who stayed in Italy, the overall majority had either improved or managed to keep their social ties at the same level:

2. Have your friendships and social connections in Padua changed while you stayed there?

15 responses

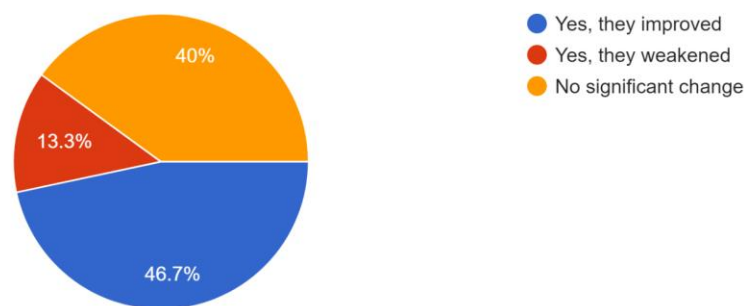


Figure 38. The change in the friendships of the participants of the second group as a result of their stay in Italy

They also had a chance to leave some comments on why it happened like this. In particular, those who improved their friendships wrote:

“I think my social connections improved because I could spend more time with my friends here in Padua and meet more often, especially for such events as their birthdays and other holidays, which brought us closer together”

“I found a life partner from Italy”

“I knew more people.”

“I can meet some people from other countries through online platform”

At the same time, those who think that their connections weakened or stayed the same, explained it in their comments:

“Went through a massive existential crisis.”

“I have had the same close group of friends as I had when I first came to Italy.”

“I believe my heavy course load and my lack of knowledge in Italian were obstacles before me to improve social connections.”

and some mentioned “personal problems” as the primary cause.

A curiosity consists of the fact that some students mentioned the cultural differences between them and Italian people that served as a reason why they did not manage to improve their friendships:

“Italians don't want to talk English and they always want a friend talks in Italian. If your Italian is not good, in general it is hard to make a friend in Italy.”

“It is difficult for me to communicate with Italian students and I think that I missed more advanced communication”

“Mostly from Italians I receive the feelings that they are not willing to communicate with foreigners.”

Contrary to what was expected, neither the participation in the exchange programme, nor the decision to stay and spend these several months in Italy do not seem to have influenced international students' sense of belonging in Italy, as the results in both groups are very similar:

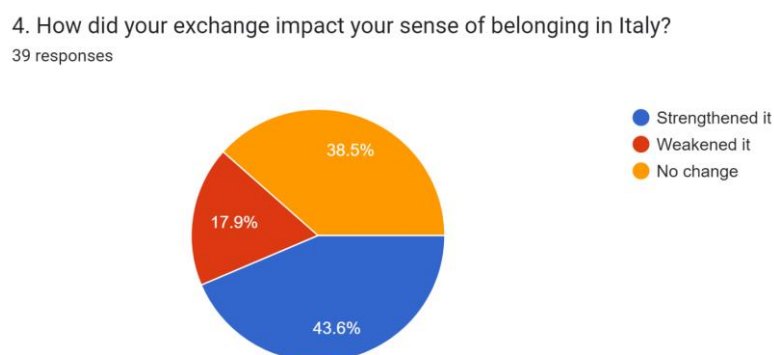


Figure 39. The change in the sense of belonging in Italy of the participants who undertook mobility and returned to Italy

4. How has your sense of belonging in Italy changed since deciding to stay?

15 responses

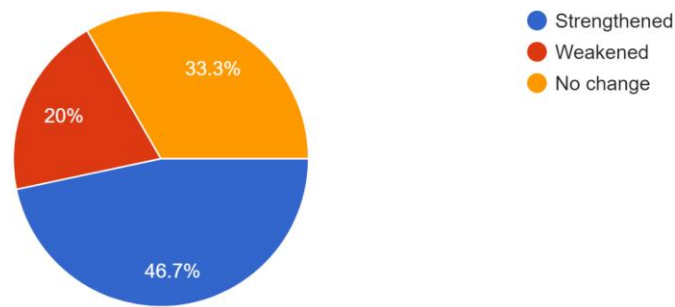


Figure 40. The change in the sense of belonging in Italy of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy

The difference can be, though, seen in the students' responses to the question on whether they feel more or less adapted to life in Italy after returning from the exchange or after having permanently stayed here:

5. Do you feel more or less adapted to life in Italy now, after returning from the exchange, than you were before?

39 responses

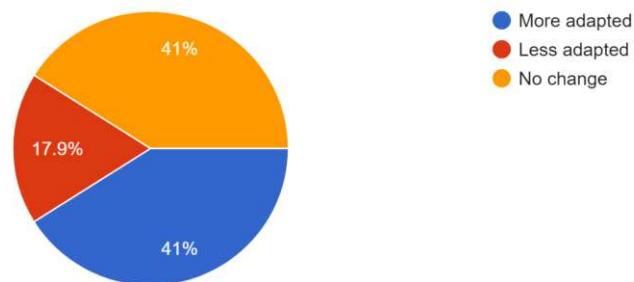


Figure 41. The degree to which students who undertook mobility and returned to Italy feel adapted to life in Italy

5. Do you feel more or less adapted to life in Italy now, after you permanently stayed there?

15 responses

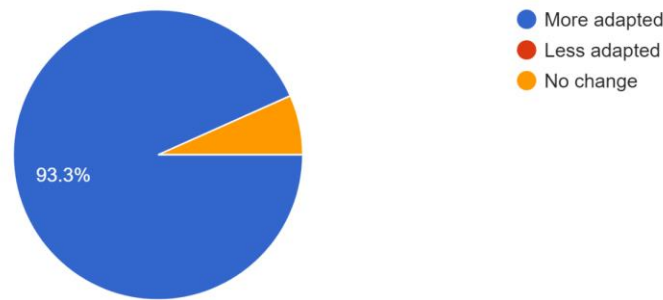


Figure 42. The degree to which students who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy feel adapted to life in Italy

Even though the participants of the first group feel mostly more adapted (41% of them) or did not undergo any particular change in their sense of adaptation (another 41% of the participants), there is still a number of students, almost 18%, who reported to actually feel less adapted, which of course can be explained by their temporary absence from Italy. No student felt less adapted after their uninterrupted stay in Italy but almost all of them (93%) believe to be even more adapted, which also corresponds to the previous findings.

Students could also express their feelings on whether their exchange experience helped or held back their integration in Italy upon their return, and the results are the following:

6. Do you feel your exchange experience helped or held back your integration in Italy upon your return?

39 responses

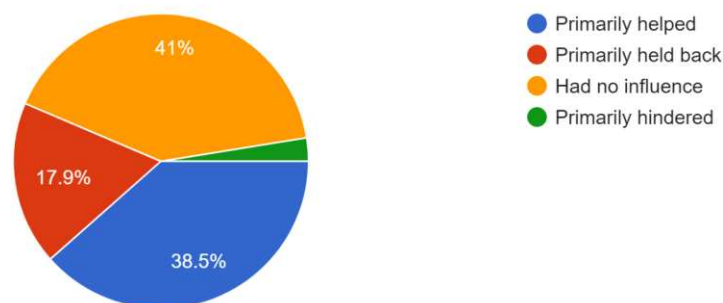


Figure 43. The degree to which students who undertook mobility believe it influenced their integration in Italy

The second group's opinion on whether their decision to cancel the mobility and stay in Italy helped or held back their integration was less diverse:

6. Do you feel your decision to cancel the mobility and stay in Italy helped or held back your integration there?

15 responses

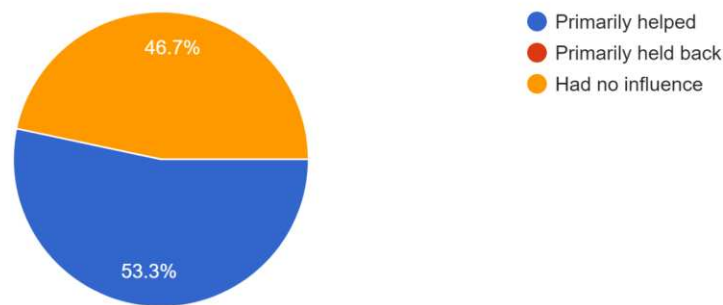


Figure 44. The degree to which students who cancelled mobility and decided to stay in Italy believe it influenced their integration in Italy

### ***Re-adaptation challenges of students who returned from mobility***

Challenges related to social life, re-establishing friendships, interacting with local Italian citizens, and finding new accommodation were the most frequently faced and selected by almost 60% of students. The second popular difficulty was associated with such cultural challenges as returning to Italian norms, behaviours and language after the sojourn in another foreign country, and was chosen by 28% of the respondents. Academic challenges were faced by 25% of the participants and included difficulties with adapting back to the study methods they used while studying at the University of Padua (as they might obviously differ from the methods that are employed in other universities) and complying with university expectations. A quarter of the respondents did not face any re-entry challenges and a couple of students left also their own responses: *“My exchange helped me realise that the approach to studying in Italy is very much traditional compared to in the UK”* and *“I face so many financial challenges which some of them were because of exchange, since the average costs in my Belgium were higher than Italy, I spend most of my budget there”* that adds more valuable information to our findings.

When asked to describe the significant cultural shocks or challenges they faced after returning from the exchange, students of the first group wrote:

“Amount of bureaucracy that was waiting for me”

“Italian bureaucracy. I went to Finland where everything was running very smooth and I forgot how slow and difficult the things (Residence permit, responding mails etc.) are in Italy.”

“How Italy is a little disorganised compared to the location I went to (Svizzera)”

“Interacting with locals can be pretty hard as they don't usually speak other languages apart from Italian”

“You need to learn Italian to have a job”

“I realised how affordable food items and other personal care products were in Italy, compared to the country where I did my exchange. Before then, I used to think that Italy was a really expensive country to live in.”

“When I came back I find it difficult to have access to accommodation so I was moving from one friends house to another for almost a month which was really difficult for me and also many things have changed so I have to adapt back to life in Italy after been away for 6 months or so.”

“Transportation expenses”

and a couple of particularly outstanding messages:

“Living in Italy is a cultural shock in itself.”

“Nothing shocking, just I felt how much I had missed Italy and how much I feel close to this culture in comparison to Belgium”

From those comments the following re-adaptation challenges can be identified: Italian bureaucracy and system, the need to learn the Italian language, accommodation and financial issues, and problems with transportation.

The participants of the first group were also asked how, in their opinion, their emotional connection to Italy was impacted by their participation in the exchange. These were their answers that described a positive change:

“No major impact. Made me understand that culturally I am very connected to Italy now, but way of living in Italy (bureaucracy, job market) is far from what I would like to deal with in future”

“I love it here so I was excited to come and enjoy Italy as much as I can”

“It made me fell in love with the city more”

“Leaving Italy and experiencing another culture for a few months made me realise how much Italy had to offer in terms of its culture and lifestyle. When I came back, I embraced the Italian culture more”

“Relatively improved my connection to Italy since I had to mention to colleagues during my exchange that I was studying in Italy”

“I like Italy more for its numerous attractions”

“It had a significant impact on me as I was representing the University of Padua, our Italian university. I considered myself as an ambassador for both my university and Italy as while frequently mentioning my home university and home supervisor or home location. This constant reference to "home" fostered a strong emotional connection to University of Padua, and the Italy as a whole, making me feel even more attached to both!”

“Made me understand that culturally I am very connected to Italy, but also it is very difficult to deal with bureaucracy here. the latter drains out the emotional and cultural connection”

“I am originally from a mediterranean country and going to a Scandinavian country showed me how much I like the environment in Italy and how close it is to home. I feel emotionally more connected to Italy.”

“I missed Italy so much”

“I genuinely wouldn't mind if I had to settle in Italy long-term. Leaving my home country wasn't easy but Italy and especially Padova, gave me a new home, a sense of belonging, and some incredible people with whom spending time was a treat. Even if I do not stay in Italy long-term (although I hope I do), Italy will always be very close to my heart.”

“Increased my love for Italy but also made me realize how expensive Italy is in comparison”

“I still love Italy and nothing can break this emotional feeling, since I will not forget the kind behavior of Italian people and friendly cities.”

There were also some comments that can be interpreted as a neutral impact of secondary mobility on the sense of emotional connection of international UNIPD students:

“I think, I liked certain things in Italy such as drinking coffee and aperitivos but in the general, I miss my exchange period since the rent was cheap, no problems with residence permit documents, people in general were nice”

“My emotional feeling to Italy did not significantly changed. I felt being far from my second home while I was away for my Erasmus program. However, there are some points I have noticed during being in this program. If I want to compare, as an international student, at Unipd the environment is more international. But making friends is not easy specifically with Italian students. But in the host country I could find a lot of friends and I could learn a lot about their country and culture. We discussed

many different aspects of life and culture with my friends there. Another point is that, interacting with professors was easier.”

“Made me understand that culturally I am very connected to Italy, but also it is very difficult to deal with bureaucracy here. the latter drains out the emotional and cultural connection”

“It led me to know how different European countries are, the different cultures and the weather conditions, so when I came back it was a bit different on how I used to see Italy prior to going to my Erasmus. I can say my perspective changed”

Finally, there was only one response that can be seen as a negative impact:

“I do not feel connected to Italy on any level.”

All in all, it can be concluded from these testimonials that a short-term absence from Italy conditioned by participation in a secondary exchange programme does not imply any significant negative impact on international students’ feeling of adaptation, integration and emotional connection to Italy, which is their ‘home’ country in relation to the ‘host’ country where they undertook their mobility in and their ‘host’ country in relation to their country of origin where they moved to Italy from. Moreover, the comments that students shared in the questionnaire demonstrate that for many of them, there was either no change in emotional connection or it even became stronger.

### ***Adaptation challenges of students who stayed in Italy***

Given that this group of students applied for mobility but eventually withdrew and decided to stay in Italy, they could not experience reverse culture shock upon re-entry to Italy, but they continued to live in Italy and therefore their adaptation and integration process was not interrupted and they could experience further adaptation challenges.

According to the responses, the most frequent adaptation challenge was connected to social life (including establishing friendships, interacting with locals and finding accommodation) and was experienced by more than 70% of students. More than half (53%) also reported struggling with cultural challenges (adjusting to cultural norms, behaviours, and local language) and academic challenges (with meeting the university expectations and getting accustomed to the study methods) were encountered by 40% of the respondents. Two participants reported facing no challenges and another two respondents especially noted bureaucratic problems they had to overcome.

Another crucial finding is that 60% of the respondents in the second group believe that their stay in Italy, uninterrupted by the participation in another mobility programme, did not have any positive impact on their process of integration into Italian culture and society:

2. Do you feel that staying in Italy without going on an exchange has helped you integrate better into Italian culture?  
15 responses

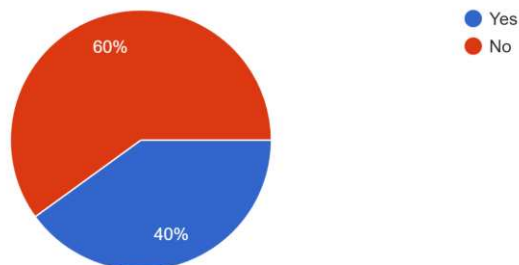


Figure 45. The opinion of the participants who cancelled mobility and stayed in Italy on whether it helped integration into Italian culture

Finally, students in this group were asked if they feel like they missed out on experiences by not going on the exchange and these were their responses:

“Yes, I was really looking forward to going for my exchange to the Netherlands. But along with academic reasons like the fact that I still had a lot of exams and my internship still left and so if I went on the exchange program I would graduate really late. another reason was I could not find an accommodation in Netherlands. I tried a lot but did not find anything. I was excited about being in a different country and especially because the main language spoken there is English which makes life way easier than what it is here and it would be a change and a chance to experience a new place.”

“Yes, I think I missed some new experiences. I also have lost some job opportunities abroad, which are difficult to find otherwise.”

“Yes, different culture, different courses out of suggested in my program”

“Different culture, network, friendship, different experience”

“I feel like I could have visited another country and get acquainted with its culture as well as local people and maybe find new friends. I could also have had another international experience for my CV. Since I wanted to go on exchange in an English-speaking country, I could have improved my English because I feel like in Italy my proficiency has weakened. But at the same time, I am satisfied that I stayed in Italy because feel now more integrated here and I have done many other things useful for my future career and life in Europe in general”

“Yes, the experience of living in a new country with different laws, culture, nationality, and new connections, and saving money money, but staying in Italy was also good for me, I got to know more about the culture, laws, and people, and I could live more easily.”

“Some. It was my 3rd time applying to Erasmus. The first two was during my bachelor's also held in Italy. The first time I went to my place of Erasmus but had a negative experience. Turned back in 10 days. The other two times I applied, won the place I would like to go but never had enough desire to go. The last time was also because of my relationship here in Padua. I feel to have lost some experiences regarding Erasmus life and travel, but I am still happy with my life here”.

It can be concluded from these experiences that even though many students appreciate their life in Italy and the opportunities they got while staying here (such as learning more about culture, people, and Italian laws, as well as finding love), still the majority of them believe that their decision to stay in Italy did not help to integrate better and that they have missed on such experiences as getting acquainted with another culture, establishing a new network of friends and colleagues, exploring new courses and different study methods, improving other foreign languages, discovering new job opportunities and enriching their resumes.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

The current research explored the influence of secondary exchange on international students' adaptation and integration upon re-entry to Italy, their original host country where they are enrolled in a degree programme at the University of Padua. The study focused on two groups of international students: those who undertook short-term mobility in a third country and those who cancelled their mobility and decided to remain in Italy. This method was employed with the aim of comparing the experiences of the two groups, which resulted in several valuable insights into the challenges and re-adaptation process.

Answering the first research question, the study emphasises that students returning from secondary exchange indeed faced several re-adaptation challenges which included re-establishing friendships they made in Padua before leaving for mobility, finding new accommodation, and returning to Italian cultural norms and academic traditions. Among the particular challenges that are mostly conditioned by the Italian context in which the study is situated, there are Italian bureaucracy and system, the need to learn the Italian language, accommodation and financial issues, and problems with transportation.

Regarding the second question, no particular difference in students' sense of belonging in Italy was found between those who undertook mobility and were absent from Italy for several months and those who decided to stay rather than go on exchange. Moreover, many students changed their attitude towards Italy. They felt a special connection to this country exactly because they left Italy, saw another country and culture, and returned to their original host country. As for the adaptation, students who cancelled the mobility and stayed in Italy, were better adjusted to the Italian environment than those who went on exchange, even though the latter also demonstrated either positive change or no change in their adaptation level.

For the third question, there were also no major divergences between the two groups since both those who went on exchange and those who stayed in Italy believe that their experience had no influence on their re-adaptation (or simply adaptation) and integration or even facilitated those processes. While secondary exchange introduced several re-entry challenges, it also provided opportunities for intercultural education and raised awareness.

## **Conclusion and Limitations**

There are several limitations of the current study. First of all, the research is concerned only with the international students of the University of Padua, which may limit the generalisability of findings. Moreover, the response rate appeared to be low in relation to the number of students who were invited to take part in the research. Secondly, the study relied on self-reported answers, which can bias the results. Finally, the research is cross-sectional in nature which limits the opportunity to investigate how adaptation and re-adaptation processes could evolve over time. A longitudinal study might have allowed a more comprehensive understanding of how secondary exchange may affect the integration process.

This research highlighted the diverse nature of experiences that international students can go through, specifically focusing on participation in secondary mobility and its influence on re-adaptation to the original host country. The comparison between the two groups of students, those who undertook mobility and those who remained in Italy, provided insights into the dual nature of these experiences. Creating significant challenges in social, cultural, and academic spheres, they also provide multiple perspectives for international students to develop intercultural communication skills, resilience to changes, and further migration opportunities.

These findings can be useful for the development of university support programmes, such as re-adaptation workshops or buddy service initiatives. A more comprehensive and longitudinal study is needed, though, to explore the dynamics of socio-cultural adaptation and integration processes in diverse cultural and academic contexts and gain a more profound understanding of students' needs to be utilised in the development of university support services.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire 1: For International Students Who Undertook a Secondary Exchange and Returned to Padua

#### Part 1. Motivation to undertake mobility

1. What were your main reasons for applying to the University of Padua and moving to Italy?
  - a. Academic and professional growth (e.g., obtaining a degree abroad, internships, networking, future employment in Italy)
  - b. Personal development (e.g., personal growth, increasing social status, forming new relationships)
  - c. Cultural and Long-term Aspirations (e.g., learning a new culture and language, potential long-term migration)
  - d. Other (please, specify)
2. What are your plans after graduation from the University of Padua?
  - a. Stay in Italy for employment
  - b. Stay in Italy for other purposes (continue education, marriage, etc.)
  - c. Return to home country
  - d. Move to another country
  - e. Not yet decided
3. Why did you decide to participate in the exchange programme?
  - a. Academic and professional growth (e.g., academic opportunities, internships, networking)
  - b. Personal development (e.g., personal growth, increasing social status, forming new relationships)
  - c. Cultural and Long-term Aspirations (e.g., learning a new culture and language, potential long-term migration)
  - d. Other (please, specify)

#### Part 2. Italian language

1. What was your level of Italian before moving to Italy?
  - a. Zero knowledge
  - b. Beginner

- c. Intermediate
- d. Advanced
- e. Fluent

2. What was your level of Italian before applying for the exchange?

- a. Zero knowledge
- b. Beginner
- c. Intermediate
- d. Advanced
- e. Fluent

3. Has your Italian language proficiency improved or declined during your exchange?

- a. Improved
- b. Declined
- c. Stayed the same

4. How often do you use Italian in your daily life (socially, academically)?

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Occasionally
- d. Frequently
- e. Always

### **Part 3. Academic performance**

1. Has your academic performance in Padua improved or declined after your exchange?

- a. Improved
- b. Declined
- c. Stayed the same

2. Did you feel more or less motivated to engage academically in Italy after returning from your secondary exchange?

- a. More motivated
- b. Less motivated
- c. No change

### **Part 4. Accommodation**

1. Did you maintain your accommodation in Padua during the secondary exchange?

- a. Yes

- b. No
2. If no, how easy or difficult was it to find new accommodation upon your return to Padua?
- a. Very easy
  - b. Easy
  - c. Difficult
  - d. Very difficult

### **Part 5. Socio-cultural adaptation and integration**

1. What nationality are most of your friends in Padua?
- a. Mostly Italian
  - b. Mostly from my home country
  - c. Mostly from the same continent/macro area as mine
  - d. Very mixed origins
2. Have your friendships and social connections in Padua changed while you were on exchange?
- a. Yes, they improved
  - b. Yes, they weakened
  - c. No significant change
3. Why do you think your social connections have changed (or stayed the same) after returning from your secondary exchange? (Open response)
4. How did your exchange impact your sense of belonging in Italy?
- a. Strengthened it
  - b. Weakened it
  - c. No change
5. Do you feel more or less adapted to life in Italy now, after returning from the exchange, than you were before?
- a. More adapted
  - b. Less adapted
  - c. No change
6. Do you feel your exchange experience helped or held back your integration in Italy upon your return?
- a. Primarily helped
  - b. Primarily held back

- c. Had no influence

### **Part 6. Re-adaptation challenges**

1. What challenges, if any, did you face when adapting back to Italy after your exchange? (multiple)
  - a. Social (e.g., re-establishing friendships, interacting with locals, finding accommodation)
  - b. Academic (e.g., university expectations, study methods)
  - c. Cultural (e.g., norms, behaviour, language)
  - d. Other (please specify)
  - e. I did not face any challenges
2. Can you describe any significant cultural shocks or challenges you faced after returning from the exchange? (Open response)
3. How did your participation in the exchange programme impact your emotional connection to Italy? (Open response)

### **Part 7. Demographic information**

1. What is your age?
  - a. 18-22
  - b. 23-26
  - c. 27-30
  - d. 31+
2. What is your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to say
3. What country are you originally from? (Open response/drop-down)
4. What is your current degree program at the University of Padua?
  - a. Bachelor's degree
  - b. Master's degree
5. How long have you been studying in Italy (prior to your exchange programme)?
  - a. Less than 1 year
  - b. 1-2 years

- c. More than 2 years
- 6. Did you have any previous experience of living abroad (not in your home country, for more than three months) before moving to Italy?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 7. Have you moved internally within your home country (to another town or city) before moving to Italy, for at least three months?
  - a. Yes,
  - b. No
- 8. If yes, how significant was this move in terms of distance or cultural change (e.g., moving from a rural to urban area, or between different regions)?
  - a. Very significant (e.g., different region, rural to urban)
  - b. Somewhat significant (e.g., similar region, but different city)
  - c. Not significant (e.g., a small move within the same area)
  - d. Other (please specify)

**Questionnaire 2: For International Students Who Applied for an Exchange but Stayed in Italy (Control Group)**

**Part 1. Motivation to undertake mobility**

1. What were your main reasons for applying to the University of Padua and moving to Italy?
  - a. Academic and professional growth (e.g., obtaining a degree abroad, internships, networking, future employment in Italy)
  - b. Personal development (e.g., personal growth, increasing social status, forming new relationships)
  - c. Cultural and Long-term Aspirations (e.g., learning a new culture and language, potential long-term migration)
  - d. Other (please, specify)
2. What are your plans after graduation from the University of Padua?
  - a. Stay in Italy for employment
  - b. Stay in Italy for other purposes (continue education, marriage, etc.)
  - c. Return to home country
  - d. Move to another country

e. Not yet decided

3. Why did you decide to apply for the exchange programme?

- a. Academic and professional growth (e.g., academic opportunities, internships, networking)
- b. Personal development (e.g., personal growth, increasing social status, forming new relationships)
- c. Cultural and Long-term Aspirations (e.g., learning a new culture and language, potential long-term migration)
- d. Other (please, specify)

4. What was your main reason for cancelling the exchange program?

- a. Financial reasons
- b. Academic reasons
- c. Personal reasons
- d. Other (please, specify)

## **Part 2. Italian language**

1. What was your level of Italian before moving to Italy?

- a. Zero knowledge
- b. Beginner
- c. Intermediate
- d. Advanced
- e. Fluent

2. What was your level of Italian before applying for the exchange?

- a. Zero knowledge
- b. Beginner
- c. Intermediate
- d. Advanced
- e. Fluent

3. Has your Italian language proficiency improved or declined during the time you stayed in Italy?

- a. Improved
- b. Declined
- c. Stayed the same

4. How often do you use Italian in your daily life (socially, academically)?

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Occasionally
- d. Frequently
- e. Always

### **Part 3. Academic performance**

1. How would you describe your academic performance in Padua after you decided to stay in Italy?
  - a. Improved
  - b. Declined
  - c. Stayed the same
2. Did staying in Padua help you focus better on your studies?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

### **Part 4. Accommodation (differences)**

1. Did you maintain the same accommodation throughout your stay in Italy?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Did the idea of losing accommodation impact your decision to cancel the exchange?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

### **Part 5. Socio-cultural adaptation and integration**

1. What nationality are most of your friends in Padua?
  - a. Mostly Italian
  - b. Mostly from my home country
  - c. Mostly from the same continent/macro area as mine
  - d. Very mixed origins
2. Have your friendships and social connections in Padua changed while you stayed there?
  - a. Yes, they improved

- b. Yes, they weakened
  - c. No significant change
3. Why do you think your social connections have changed (or stayed the same) after deciding to stay in Italy? (Open response)
  4. How has your sense of belonging in Italy changed since deciding to stay?
    - a. Strengthened
    - b. Weakened
    - c. No change
  5. Do you feel more or less adapted to life in Italy now, after you permanently stayed there?
    - a. More adapted
    - b. Less adapted
    - c. No change
  6. Do you feel your decision to cancel the mobility and stay in Italy helped or held back your integration there?
    - a. Primarily helped
    - b. Primarily held back
    - c. Had no influence

### **Part 6. Adaptation challenges**

1. What challenges, if any, have you faced while adapting to Italy?
  - a. Social (e.g., re-establishing friendships, interacting with locals, finding accommodation)
  - b. Academic (e.g., university expectations, study methods)
  - c. Cultural (e.g., norms, behaviour, language)
  - d. Other (please specify)
  - e. I did not face any challenges
2. Do you feel that staying in Italy without going on an exchange has helped you integrate better into Italian culture?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Do you feel you missed out on experiences by not going on the exchange? If yes, which experiences? (Open response)

## Part 7. Demographic information

1. What is your age?
  - a. 18-22
  - b. 23-26
  - c. 27-30
  - d. 31+
2. What is your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to say
3. What country are you originally from? (Open response/drop-down)
4. What is your current degree program at the University of Padua?
  - a. Bachelor's degree
  - b. Master's degree
5. How long have you been studying in Italy (prior to applying for an exchange)?
  - a. Less than 1 year
  - b. 1-2 years
  - c. More than 2 years
6. Did you have any previous experience of living abroad (not in your home country, for more than three months) before moving to Italy?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. Have you moved internally within your home country (to another town or city) before moving to Italy, for at least three months?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
8. If yes, how significant was this move in terms of distance or cultural change (e.g., moving from a rural to urban area, or between different regions)?
  - a. Very significant (e.g., different region, rural to urban)
  - b. Somewhat significant (e.g., similar region, but different city)
  - c. Not significant (e.g., a small move within the same area)
  - d. Other (please specify)