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Integrating Erasmus+ Mobility into the Design and Evaluation of Professional Development Programs for Academic Staff

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Abstract
This study examines how Erasmus+ academic staff mobility is promoted and supported within higher education institutions, and how it contributes to staff professional development and institutional enhancement. Drawing on qualitative data from 18 Erasmus+ institutional coordinators across Southern European universities, the research explores both implementation practices and developmental outcomes. Findings show that while formal promotion mechanisms exist, their effectiveness depends on personalized communication, cross-departmental coordination, and clear administrative support. Barriers, including workload pressures, limited incentives, and procedural complexity, continue to restrict participation. Erasmus+ mobility supports pedagogical innovation, intercultural competence, and professional identity. It also contributes to internationalizing the curriculum and academic collaboration. However, these benefits are maximized when mobility is embedded in institutional strategy and followed by reflection or knowledge-sharing processes. The study concludes that mobility becomes a lever for institutional change when it is treated not as an isolated opportunity, but as an integrated component of professional learning. This calls for a more strategic and design-based approach to mobility within higher education.

Keywords
Professional Development, University Teachers, Erasmus+ teaching mobility

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1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education (HE) is increasingly viewed as a strategic priority across Europe. Within this agenda, the Erasmus+ programme has become a key policy instrument for promoting transnational collaboration, mobility, and staff development (European Commission, 2022; Knight, 2013). For university teachers, Erasmus+ mobilities offer more than travel, they represent structured opportunities to enhance competencies, deepen intercultural understanding, and build professional networks (ACA, 2023; Teichler, 2007). Staff mobility supports institutional innovation, fosters mutual recognition of qualifications, and contributes to the European Higher Education Area's broader vision (Angouri, 2023; Curaj et al., 2024). Academics who engage in mobility are more likely to adopt inclusive pedagogies, collaborate on curriculum design, and develop reflective teaching practices (Martins et al., 2024). This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how Erasmus+ teaching mobility is used as a professional development tool, examining its benefits, challenges, and strategic impact based on recent literature and data from 18 Southern European institutions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Conceptualising professional development through mobility

Professional development is a lifelong process involving both formal and informal learning that shapes teachers' pedagogical practices, beliefs, and professional identities (Collinson et al., 2009; Korthagen, 2017). It encompasses activities that enhance teaching quality, foster engagement with educational research, and support reflection on professional values and practices. As higher education (HE) becomes increasingly globalised, professional development is now deeply intertwined with transnational and intercultural experiences (Van Vugt & Gallagher, 2025). In this context, international mobility, primarily through programmes like Erasmus+, has emerged as a strategic tool for enriching the professional journeys of academic staff. These mobilities promote integrated learning experiences that combine disciplinary enrichment with the development of transversal competencies, such as intercultural competence, language proficiency, adaptability, digital literacy, and collaboration skills (ACA, 2023).

The value of such experiences lies in immersing participants in diverse institutional cultures, pedagogical systems, and student populations. This fosters reflective practice and comparative insight, prompting them to question taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching, learning, and academic identity (Byram et al., 2002; Preidienė, 2023). Returning teachers often report heightened cultural awareness, increased empathy, and a broader understanding of educational challenges in other contexts (Kastelic et al., 2024). Mobility-based development reinforces the idea of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983), whose growth is driven by iterative cycles of experience and reflection. This aligns with Professional Development 3.0, which emphasises context-sensitive, experiential, and self-directed growth (Korthagen, 2017).

Mobility also fosters informal and non-formal learning. Transformative moments often occur beyond formal settings, through spontaneous peer interactions, classroom observations, or intercultural dilemmas that demand adaptive thinking (Nada & Legutko, 2022; Martins et al., 2024). These 'incidental learnings' can challenge assumptions and catalyse lasting change. Institutional and policy frameworks increasingly position Erasmus+ as both a personal growth opportunity and a lever for modernising higher education (Angouri, 2023; ACA, 2023).

2.2 Motivations and Participation Patterns

The motivations driving university staff to participate in Erasmus+ mobility schemes are diverse and often interrelated. According to the ACA Report (2023), top reasons include curriculum innovation, development of joint academic modules, knowledge exchange, institutional cooperation, and professional growth. Many staff also report increased job satisfaction and academic inspiration. These motivations reflect both personal aspirations and broader institutional goals, particularly when mobility aligns with strategic internationalization agendas (European Commission, 2022). Motivation is shaped by disciplinary cultures, institutional contexts, and external policy dynamics (Knight, 2013). Universities with explicit internationalization strategies and reward systems are more likely to foster positive attitudes toward mobility (Angouri, 2023).

Career stage is also relevant. Early-career academics often seek networking, exposure to diverse academic cultures, and international research opportunities. Erasmus+ can help them build long-term partnerships and enhance their academic profile (Teichler, 2007). In contrast, senior academics may focus on consolidating partnerships, mentoring, or contributing to curriculum internationalization (Kastelic et

al., 2024). For many, Erasmus+ provides a break from routine, offering space for reflection and renewal (Martins et al., 2024).

Institutional encouragement strongly influences participation. Some universities promote mobility through staff development frameworks, improving uptake (Van Vugt & Gallagher, 2025). Yet staff in teaching-intensive roles often face constraints, such as heavy workload, limited substitutes, or inadequate financial support. Administrative complexity and lack of assistance may dampen motivation (ACA, 2023). For some educators, motivation is also rooted in pedagogical curiosity, a desire to engage with other teaching traditions and challenge their own assumptions. In this sense, Erasmus+ becomes both a functional opportunity and an identity-shaping experience (Kastelic et al., 2024).

Emotional and relational motivations also play a role. Mobility fosters a sense of belonging to a European academic community and enhances feelings of recognition and empowerment (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2019). These affective dimensions explain why many staff repeatedly engage in mobility. Participation in Erasmus+ is driven by a complex mix of personal, professional, institutional, and emotional factors, insights essential for designing more inclusive and responsive mobility policies.

2.3 Key Benefits of Erasmus+ Mobility for Teachers

Erasmus+ staff mobility offers a wide range of benefits for participating university teachers. A frequently reported outcome is pedagogical renewal. Exposure to alternative teaching methods, assessment strategies, and curricular frameworks often stimulates innovation upon return (ACA, 2023; Angouri, 2023). Teachers experiment with new forms of student engagement, adopt more inclusive or participatory styles, and integrate international content into their syllabi. Such exposure encourages reflexivity in pedagogical choices, especially when supported by institutional dialogue or peer exchange sessions post-mobility (Martins et al., 2024).

Another core benefit is the development of intercultural competence. Erasmus+ experiences often require participants to navigate culturally diverse environments, fostering awareness of social norms, communication styles, and teaching practices. This nurtures openness, curiosity, and empathy (Kastelic et al., 2024). Teachers report improved ability to manage classroom diversity, increased sensitivity to student perspectives, and more inclusive course design. These outcomes are especially relevant in multicultural settings and support institutional equity goals (Byram et al., 2002).

Language development is also a key benefit. Many participants teach or engage in activities in a non-native language, often English. Immersion strengthens academic language proficiency and builds communicative confidence, particularly among staff initially hesitant to participate due to linguistic insecurity (Helm & Hauck, 2022). Enhanced plurilingual competence improves collaboration with international colleagues and serves as a model of intercultural engagement for students.

Mobility also strengthens professional identity and career development. Teachers often reflect on their roles in the global academic community and report renewed motivation, job satisfaction, and broader perspectives (Martins et al., 2024). In some systems, international mobility is formally recognized in evaluations or promotions (Kőmíves, 2014). Even when not rewarded, many view Erasmus+ as a source of professional prestige and a catalyst for future collaborations. Participation also fosters academic networking and transnational communities of practice, with long-term relationships often cited as one of the most enduring and valued outcomes (Angouri, 2023).

2.4 Institutional and Strategic Dimensions

Erasmus+ staff mobilities serve both individual development goals and broader institutional missions. They support higher education institutions' (HEIs) internationalization strategies, academic diplomacy, and institutional capacity for global engagement (Knight, 2013; Serpa et al., 2020). Participation allows HEIs to position themselves within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), enhancing visibility, credibility, and attractiveness to international partners, students, and staff.

A direct institutional benefit of Erasmus+ mobility is the internationalization of curricula. Mobility enables staff to collaborate with peers abroad and incorporate global perspectives into teaching. These exchanges can lead to co-designed courses, diverse case studies, and the adoption of new methods (Kastelic et al., 2024; ACA, 2023). Institutional gains also emerge through inter-institutional alliances, often resulting in long-term research partnerships, joint degrees, and joint participation in programmes such as Erasmus Mundus or Horizon Europe. These collaborations enhance institutional resilience and adaptability (Angouri, 2023), while contributing to academic standard convergence and recognition of qualifications across Europe.

Erasmus+ can also drive strategic change. Institutions that integrate mobility into professional development plans and academic promotion criteria are more likely to

embed a culture of international engagement (De Wit et al., 2015; European Commission, 2022). However, the transformative potential of mobility depends on strategic alignment. Without integration into policy frameworks and capacity-building initiatives, mobility risks being seen as peripheral (Van Vugt & Gallagher, 2025).

A key challenge is unequal participation. Certain departments or staff may dominate opportunities while others are underrepresented due to limited support, awareness, or incentives. Addressing this requires equitable access, tailored support, and monitoring of participation patterns (ACA, 2023).

Institutions must also enable post-mobility integration. Without structures for debriefing and sharing, the learning gained abroad is often lost. Internal dissemination events and platforms for returnees can help translate individual experiences into institutional knowledge (Martins et al., 2024). In conclusion, Erasmus+ staff mobility holds significant strategic value for HEIs when purposefully aligned with institutional priorities, incentivized, and supported by structures for reflection and policy development. Holistic integration enables mobility to become a sustainable engine for institutional innovation.

2.5 Challenges and Barriers

Despite its many benefits, Erasmus+ staff mobility faces structural, logistical, and cultural barriers that limit participation and reduce its transformative potential. These challenges affect individuals and institutions and require strategic solutions to ensure equitable access to international opportunities. Bureaucracy and administrative burden remain among the most cited deterrents. The application process can be complex and time-consuming, especially for first-time applicants unfamiliar with programme rules or digital platforms. Post-mobility reporting adds to this burden, reinforcing perceptions of excessive bureaucracy (Kastelic et al., 2024; ACA, 2023). Where administrative support is limited or uneven across departments, participation drops significantly.

Language limitations also present psychological and practical obstacles. While English is often the lingua franca of academic mobility, staff lacking confidence in English or the host country's language may feel ill-prepared for teaching or training abroad. This is especially relevant among older faculty or those in non-language fields (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2019). Language insecurity affects both participation and the depth of engagement.

Financial constraints also hinder access. Although Erasmus+ provides grants, they often do not cover total expenses, especially in high-cost destinations. Many participants rely on personal funds, which may not be feasible for younger academics or those from underfunded departments (ACA, 2023). Substitution and teaching coverage are additional logistical hurdles. Faculty frequently struggle to arrange replacements, particularly in small departments, which can discourage mobility and affect managerial willingness to approve applications (Martins et al., 2024). In some cases, institutions lack formal mechanisms or funding to support temporary coverage.

Less visible but significant barriers include limited managerial support, weak strategic alignment, and uneven participation across disciplines. Poor internal communication and a lack of institutional culture valuing mobility can leave staff uninformed or discouraged (Van Vugt & Gallagher, 2025). Certain disciplines, such as sciences and health, face structural constraints linked to lab work or clinical duties. Finally, time and workload pressures often make mobility seem unmanageable. Without integration into professional development strategies, Erasmus+ risks being viewed as an added burden rather than a meaningful opportunity (Angouri, 2023).

2.6 Educational Design and Assessment in Staff Professional Development

The professional development of academic staff increasingly requires a systematic, design-informed approach that frames development as a structured learning process. In this context, international mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ should be embedded within broader institutional frameworks that articulate clear objectives, learning principles, and mechanisms for evaluating outcomes. Educational design and assessment are central to shaping and understanding professional learning, especially when it occurs through mobility.

Effective professional development is rarely ad hoc. It depends on intentional planning, guided by pedagogical theories that inform the structure and impact of learning experiences (Kennedy, 2014; De Rijdt et al., 2013). Educational design aligns institutional goals with activities like mobility, mentoring, or collaborative learning, ensuring they target the development of relevant academic competencies. Erasmus+ mobility, when situated within such a design, becomes more than a logistical opportunity; it functions as a key element of a professional development strategy (Bamber & Anderson, 2012).

Assessment is equally crucial. Institutions must go beyond tracking participation to evaluate actual learning outcomes, both individual and institutional. This calls for a mix of formative and summative approaches, reflective self-reporting, peer feedback, post-mobility interviews, and longitudinal studies of teaching practice (Guskey, 2000; Knight et al., 2006). Without such mechanisms, the transformative potential of mobility is under-examined and under-utilised.

Professional learning is non-linear, relational, and context-dependent (Boud & Hager, 2012). Transformative outcomes, such as shifts in teaching beliefs, adoption of inclusive practices, or emergence of transnational academic identities, often unfold over time and may elude conventional metrics. Thus, assessment frameworks should include qualitative methods, narrative inquiry, and practitioner reflection alongside quantitative indicators. Institutional learning cycles must also be considered. This includes processes for disseminating and applying knowledge gained from mobility within departments, curriculum innovation, and strategic planning. Too often, mobility is treated as a discrete event rather than part of an institutional learning ecosystem (Argyris, 1991). Structured debriefings, dissemination forums, and recognition systems help convert individual experiences into collective benefit.

In sum, embedding Erasmus+ mobility within a design-based, assessment-driven professional development strategy enables institutions to maximize its impact, as a deliberate, accessible context for professional learning aligned with broader goals of teaching excellence, curriculum renewal, and internationalization. However, while existing studies underline the benefits of Erasmus+ staff mobility for individual academics, such as pedagogical renewal, intercultural competence, and enhanced professional identity, few have examined how such mobility is strategically promoted, supported, and embedded within institutional frameworks for professional development. Moreover, the perspectives of those responsible for managing and implementing mobility schemes, such as Erasmus+ officers and International Relations Offices, remain underrepresented in literature. These gaps suggest that Erasmus+ mobilities should be explored not only as individual learning experiences, but also as institutional processes shaped by organizational strategy and support systems. In response, this study formulates the following research questions:

1. How is Erasmus+ academic staff mobility promoted, supported, and implemented within higher education institutions?

2. In what ways does the professional development of academic staff through Erasmus+ mobility contribute to the institutional enhancement of universities?

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore how Erasmus+ teaching mobilities are promoted, managed, and experienced for the professional development of academic staff. The research design was informed by a desire to understand institutional dynamics through the perspectives of Erasmus+ officers and International Relations Offices (IROs), who play a pivotal role in facilitating mobility. Through their strategic and administrative oversight, these actors offer a critical vantage point for analyzing the alignment between Erasmus+ practices and broader professional development frameworks.

3.1. Participants' profile

The focus on expert informants from IROs and Erasmus+ institutional coordinators across Southern European universities aligns with best practices in qualitative inquiry, particularly in cases where contextual depth and professional insight are required (Bogner et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The sampling strategy was intentional and criterion-based, targeting 18 key informants with institutional-level responsibility and expert knowledge of Erasmus+ staff mobility. Purposive sampling is well-established in qualitative research when the aim is to obtain information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). These participants were selected based on their active roles in managing mobility flows at the level of the entire institution, thereby providing a strategic overview of Erasmus+ implementation and institutional dynamics. Accordingly, the figures presented in Table 1 refer to institutional-level mobility data as reported by each informant.

Table 1: Participants from 18 HEIs

	Code	**Country of institution**	**Role in the institution**	**Number of Erasmus+ staff mobility participants per year (approx.)**
1	AL1	Albania	Academic in charge	> 60
2	CR1	Croatia	Erasmus+ Office	> 60

3	CR2	Croatia	Head of IRO	31-60
4	CY1	Cyprus	Head of IRO	10-30
5	CY2	Cyprus	Head of IRO	> 60
6	FR1	France	Head of IRO	31-60
7	GR1	Greece	Erasmus+ Office	10-30
8	GR2	Greece	Academic in charge	< 10
9	GR3	Greece	Erasmus+ Office	10-30
10	IT1	Italy	Academic in charge	Don't know
11	IT2	Italy	Head of IRO	> 60
12	MA1	Malta	Erasmus+ Office	> 60
13	PO1	Portugal	Academic in charge	10-30
14	PO2	Portugal	Academic in charge	10-30
15	SL1	Slovenia	Erasmus+ Office	31-60
16	SL2	Slovenia	Erasmus+ Office	< 10
17	SP1	Spain	Academic in charge	31-60
18	SP2	Spain	Erasmus+ Office	31-60

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through a structured online questionnaire composed of 14 items, all of which were open-ended except for a few background classification items (e.g., institution type, role, country). Structured interviewing with open-ended questions is increasingly used in digital formats due to its capacity to combine thematic focus with the flexibility of qualitative elaboration (Newcomer et al., 2015; Deterding & Waters, 2018). As Wengraf (2001) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) have noted, structured interviews may still enable the collection of complex narratives if questions are framed carefully and designed to elicit reflection.

The questionnaire addressed six key dimensions: promotion and communication strategies, motivational drivers, administrative processes, training and preparation, institutional integration, and perceived impact on teaching and curriculum. This thematic design ensured internal consistency and reflected a conceptual model where mobility is both a policy tool and a developmental opportunity. The online format allowed for flexible participation, accommodating the availability constraints of

university professionals. Moreover, asynchronous written responses have facilitated more reflective and detailed answers in qualitative internet-based research (Spencer et al., 2019).

The analytic approach was inductive and iterative. First, all responses were thematically coded following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. This involved familiarising the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, defining, naming, and producing the report. The coding process was both descriptive and interpretative, balancing semantic content with latent patterns across the responses (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical method because of its flexibility and applicability to a wide range of qualitative research questions. This approach is particularly effective in identifying commonalities and differences across data sets, and in highlighting how participants make sense of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted manually to preserve interpretive sensitivity and was reviewed by both researchers to enhance reliability through analyst triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through successive rounds of coding, broader themes emerged, which were then refined and related to the research questions.

Table 1: Themes, Codes and Frequency

Themes	**Codes**	**Frequency**
Motivations and Benefits	mobility	67
	international	51
	development	24
	collaboration	15
Barriers and Concerns	time	34
	support	26
	language	13
	recognition	12
Institutional Strategy and Support	staff	67
	institution	41
	communication	15
	strategy	20
	office	21

	information	10
	participation	26
Process and Preparation	application	26
	process	19
	training	13
	administrative	17
Impact on Teaching and Learning	teaching	45
	practices	21
	curriculum	13

Moreover, throughout the analysis, memo-writing (Lempert, 2007) and analytic journaling (Watt, 2007) were employed as techniques to capture evolving interpretations, methodological decisions, and emerging connections between themes. This reflexive practice enriched the rigor and coherence of the analytic process (Nowell et al., 2017), and, together with pattern recognition, it ensured qualitative validity, enhancing trustworthiness and analytic generalisation (Gibson, 2017). Finally, the study ensured informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Ethical rigor included secure data storage, transparency, and sensitivity to power dynamics, enhancing credibility and protecting participants' rights.

4. Findings

This section presents the key findings of the study, based on a thematic analysis of qualitative data provided by institutional Erasmus+ coordinators and International Relations Officers across 18 higher education institutions. Through iterative coding and interpretation, five major themes emerged:

- Motivations and Benefits,
- Barriers and Concerns,
- Institutional Strategy and Support,
- Process and Preparation, and
- Impact on Teaching, Professional Identity, and Strategic Development.

These themes reflect the institutional ecosystem that supports, enables, or constrains Erasmus+ mobility, and illustrate the interplay between individual motivation, organisational practices, and broader strategic priorities. To support clarity and

traceability, the results are presented thematically in subsections 4.1 through 4.5, with each theme discussed in relation to the study's research questions. Select quotations from participants are included to illustrate the data and provide insight into institutional experiences and perspectives.

4.1 Motivations and Benefits

Across institutions, international collaboration emerges as a core motivation for Erasmus+ participation. GR2 described the appeal as a 'desire for international cooperation' and an opportunity for 'establishing new academic partnerships'. Similarly, IT2 highlighted 'opportunities to collaborate with their international colleagues and partners', noting that 'some relationships are long-standing'. At CR1, mobility is seen as a tool for joint academic engagement, where 'exchanging ideas and practices is the main goal for staff' and 'mobility helps them to interact'. GR3 also links mobility to broader collaborative goals, with staff motivated by 'building/strengthening research partnerships, creating collaboration networks'. AL1 echoed this, highlighting the importance of 'building academic networks and developing partnerships'. Together, these accounts present Erasmus+ not just as a professional development tool but as a platform for sustained academic cooperation across borders.

Alongside institutional aims, personal development is frequently cited as a powerful driver for staff mobility. At GR1, Erasmus+ is valued for promoting 'personal development, experience... cooperation at any level with the host institution'. CY1 added that mobility opportunities 'enrich both their personal and professional development', while PO1 emphasized that cultural immersion 'broadens educators' perspectives' and 'contributes to personal satisfaction'. Similarly, SP1 recognized 'personal growth' as a key incentive for participation. CY2 pointed to the chance to 'experience personal and professional growth', and in SL2, junior staff are particularly motivated by 'short term mobilities such as summer school or research training'. Meanwhile, IT1 highlighted the individual benefit of exposure to new environments, with professors motivated by the opportunity to 'open new ideas' through international encounters. Across all cases, Erasmus+ is consistently perceived as contributing not only to teaching or research, but to the holistic development of academic staff.

Moreover, Erasmus+ mobility is also seen as a valuable source of teaching innovation. SP2 noted that staff view it as a chance to 'refresh teaching methods and gain international experience', while also the opportunity to 'exchange innovative

teaching methods' and 'gain insight into best practices across institutions' is mentioned (CY1). According to PO1, participants use mobility to 'enhance their teaching methodologies' and 'incorporate innovative practices into their curricula' and IT1 reported that professors are inspired by these exchanges and keen to 'share their way of teaching', while it is also argued that staff are often driven by 'access to new approaches, technologies, and tools in their field' (GR3).

4.2 Barriers and Concerns

Despite their interest, staff face considerable barriers that can discourage mobility participation. Workload pressures, a lack of support, and bureaucratic complexity are recurrent concerns and reasons for hesitating or opting out of mobility opportunities. The resulting consequence is a diminished engagement with Erasmus+ and missed opportunities for professional exchange.

One of the most frequently cited barriers to Erasmus+ participation is the intensity of teaching and administrative workloads. As SP1 explained, 'the main barriers include heavy teaching and administrative workloads, limited replacement staff, and short mobility windows that conflict with academic calendars'. Similarly, SP2 referred to 'teaching and administrative workload, limited flexibility in academic calendars' as a major constraint. CY1 added that the primary issue is 'the lack of available time, particularly due to academic responsibilities and teaching obligations'. This was echoed by PO2, who noted that 'teaching commitments make it hard for staff to be away', and by CY2, where mobility is often hindered by 'demanding workloads, challenges in finding substitutes'. AL1 described the difficulty for 'teachers [who] often have heavy teaching and administrative loads', while IT1 explained that 'many professors do not have enough time because of lessons and other university tasks'. At SL1, the issue was summarised simply as 'a lack of time', and SL2 linked the barrier to practicalities, noting that 'teaching replacement – staff are responsible for proposing a solution, often by coordinating with colleagues'. Even in GR3, where mobility is generally high, concerns about 'workload/time constraints' persist.

In addition to time constraints, many institutions pointed to a broader lack of institutional support in terms of information and structure. At AL1, the issue was described as 'insufficient promotion or guidance about Erasmus+ opportunities', with staff often unaware of 'how to apply, what funding is available, or what the benefits are'. Similarly, FR1 identified a more structural challenge: 'lack of human resources

and funds', while at PO2, support gaps were linked to 'limited information', although the university attempts to mitigate this through 'clear guidelines... support structures... and collaborative networks'. Meanwhile, CR2 addressed language-related challenges by offering training: 'Our Language Centre organizes English language courses for teachers on a regular basis'. Both SP1 and SP2 acknowledged that some institutional support exists but emphasized the need for deeper integration. As SP2 noted, 'broader solutions, like formal workload adjustments and greater visibility of mobility in professional development policies and recognition, are still needed to boost participation', while SP1 called for 'further institutional commitment, such as formal workload adjustments and greater recognition of mobility'. In CR1, the absence of targeted incentives also emerged: 'We unfortunately do not have any means to promote teaching over training'. These examples suggest that without more structured, visible, and proactive support systems, even interested staff may hesitate to engage in Erasmus+ mobility.

Administrative complexity and procedural uncertainty also pose significant challenges for many institutions. IT2 named the problem directly: 'Erasmus+ bureaucracy' and IT1 elaborated that 'there is bureaucracy... some don't know who can take their place in classes during the mobility'. Similarly, PO2 described the '*Administrative Burden*: Preparing documents and contacting host institutions can be complex'. CY2 also listed 'complex administrative procedures' among the key obstacles, while GR1 pointed to difficulties for first-time participants, noting that 'if the curriculum and timetable of the course are quite tight, we contact them with participants with experience and their Departmental coordinator'. These responses indicate that while mobility is valued, the processes surrounding it are often considered cumbersome, especially by less experienced applicants. Streamlining administrative procedures and increasing peer support may be critical steps toward reducing friction and increasing participation.

4.3 Institutional Strategy and Support

Within this study, it seems that universities with stronger institutional strategies for internationalization tend to provide clearer structures and more visible support for Erasmus+ staff mobility. As it was explained, they use a 'multifaceted communication strategy' including 'a regularly updated website, email newsletters, information sessions, and collaboration with departmental coordinators' (SP1). Similarly, SP2

emphasized the role of 'institutional web announcements, faculty-level coordination, and dedicated information sessions', noting that 'personalized support' has been especially effective. CY1 reported that communication 'has evolved to become more streamlined and responsive', particularly through 'personalized emails that include an informative presentation and a set of frequently asked questions'. Additionally, PO1 described a shift toward 'targeted and proactive' outreach using 'email newsletters, internal academic bulletins, and departmental briefings'. This focus on clarity and proximity was echoed by IT1, who stated that communication has become 'more digital and accessible, with tools like chatbots and hybrid events', helping staff access information more easily. GR2 emphasized 'email messages to faculty' and 'announcements at department assembly meetings', while SL2 reported that 'Calls for Erasmus+ mobility' are published on the university and faculty websites, with email notifications sent to academic staff. The abovementioned strategies reflect an intentional move from generic promotion toward personalized, timely, and multichannel outreach.

In addition, the Erasmus+ or IRO plays a central role in institutional efforts to support mobility, such as it was described by SP1, leading to a 'multifaceted communication strategy' that includes success stories, collaboration with departments, and enhanced digital tools. Similarly, GR1 described how their Erasmus Office sends 'e-mail to all academic staff regarding call for application, deadlines, all necessary documents, check list and guidance' (GR1), contributing to wide dissemination and clarity. PO1 referred to the Office for Mobility and International Cooperation as a hub that ensures 'support and direct communication with staff throughout the process'. Likewise, IT1 explained that IRO manages 'emails, departmental delegates, and... regular updates', while also offering 'info sessions with real experiences', which have proven to be especially effective (IT1). According to AL1, staff are more likely to apply when 'directly encouraged or advised by: International Office staff, line managers, or former participants'. GR3 also connects Erasmus+ promotion with broader institutional mechanisms, where Erasmus+ is 'included in performance reviews', supported by 'faculty briefings by Erasmus+ Coordinators'.

4.4 Process and Preparation

Staff experience of the Erasmus+ application process and preparation varies across institutions. Where systems are well-coordinated and communication is clear, staff report smoother access. In contrast, a lack of formal training or the absence of

administrative guidance can be discouraging. The Erasmus+ application process across institutions typically begins with an open call, followed by internal evaluation and coordination. At SP1, the process involves 'submitting an online form, departmental approval, and coordination through the International Relations Office', though staff face challenges such as 'tight deadlines, administrative complexity, and limited awareness of opportunities' (SP1). Similarly, SP2 noted that applications begin with an online call, after which staff must submit a mobility agreement and obtain departmental approval. However, 'complex paperwork' and 'varying levels of support across faculties' can complicate participation (SP2). At MA1, the process is 'widely promoted', with applications 'rated by two independent assessors' and ranked before being transferred to the Erasmus+ office for implementation. Meanwhile, GR1 described a detailed multistep procedure, where staff submit documents by email, receive preliminary results via the Erasmus Committee, and later sign a grant agreement after completing pre-mobility paperwork. GR3 also applies a highly structured process involving a 30-day online application, pre-grading by the Erasmus+ Office, and formal evaluation by a committee, followed by a public appeals period. In some cases, such as CR2 and SL1, the call is open year-round, though CR1 noted this can lead to late applications that 'make the process very stressful'. Institutions like CY2 and PO2 mentioned ongoing challenges, including 'short timelines', 'complex administrative procedures', and the need for 'clearer guidance' and 'streamlined documentation'. To address these issues, several universities propose improvements such as earlier communication, digital checklists, and briefings. As IT1 suggested, the process could benefit from 'more simple steps, such as a checklist, and one short meeting to explain everything at the beginning'. Preparation for Erasmus+ mobility among academic staff remains uneven across institutions, with most support focusing on administrative or logistical guidance rather than pedagogical or intercultural training. As it was noted, 'most support focuses on administrative guidance rather than pedagogical or intercultural training', though there is recognition that additional resources like 'pre-departure workshops on teaching in international contexts' and 'intercultural communication sessions' would be beneficial (SP2). Similarly, PO1 described current support as 'basic guidance… including administrative and logistical information', while proposing improvements such as 'pre-departure intercultural training, pedagogical workshops… and peer mentoring'. Some institutions, like MA1, already offer more structured support, noting that 'logistical support is always offered and meetings are held well before the mobility dates… A pre-

departure meeting is then held a couple of weeks before the start of the mobility' (MA1). In CY1, the Mobility Office provides 'detailed guidance on the required documentation… [and] assistance with grant agreements, mobility plans', tailoring this to the participant's objectives and destination. CY2 also offers 'pre-departure guidance addressing administrative, cultural, and logistical aspects', even though formal pedagogical training is not offered. By contrast, institutions like CR1, GR3, and IT2 report that they do not offer any preparation or specific training. Yet, the need for greater readiness is evident; IT1 recommended 'short training about intercultural topics', guidance on 'how to teach in another university', and a practical 'guide with tips for travel, documents, and teaching methods', while SP1 sees potential in 'pre-departure workshops focused on pedagogical adaptation, intercultural communication, and logistical planning', and suggests that peer mentoring and exposure to host institution practices could 'strengthen the overall impact'.

4.5 Impact on Strategy, Teaching and Learning within the organisation

The impact of Erasmus+ mobility on teaching practices and professional identity is evident, especially among staff who engage repeatedly. Respondents describe transformative experiences that lead to more innovative teaching methods, broader perspectives on curriculum design, and a more global academic identity. This impact is strongest when mobility experiences are recognized institutionally and shared through peer learning. As SP1 observed, Erasmus+ mobility 'contribute[s] to a stronger professional identity, as staff feel more connected to a global academic community' and gain 'greater confidence, broader academic networks, and increased motivation to innovate in their teaching' (SP1). Similarly, CY2 highlighted that 'repeat participants often report strengthened professional identity, increased confidence, and a deeper commitment to internationalization'. For GR1, the impact manifests in multiple ways, participants 'become more transformative', improve their methods, and gain a 'broad career perspective' while engaging in 'pedagogical and scientific innovations'. MA1 noted the 'sharing of good practices' and the rise of 'multicultural awareness, personal confidence, networking and collaboration'. At PO1, mobility experiences are said to 'inspire teaching staff to rethink their role as educators', fostering 'greater adaptability' and reinforcing 'a mindset of continuous professional growth'. CY1 also emphasized that Erasmus+ 'strengthens the professional identity of participants', a sentiment echoed by AL1, who mentioned that mobility 'encourages self-reflection and professional

adaptability' and leads to 'greater involvement in shaping internationalization strategies'. CR2 articulated a particularly comprehensive view, stating that 'mobility supports both personal and professional growth' and that repeat participants 'tend to develop a stronger sense of belonging to the European Higher Education Area and contribute more actively to institutional strategy'. Although some institutions such as GR3 and FR1 expressed limited awareness of this impact, others like SL1 reported clear outcomes such as 'improved professional identity and confidence', and IT2 linked it directly to co-teaching and sustained collaboration.

Across institutions, Erasmus+ mobility is also consistently associated with the revitalization and innovation of teaching practices. SP2 observed that staff often return with 'new methods, perspectives, and tools', resulting in 'refreshed teaching practices'. This sentiment is echoed by SP1, where mobility 'often leads to refreshed teaching practices, including new pedagogical approaches and the integration of international perspectives into the curriculum' (SP1). At CY1, Erasmus+ 'encourages the adoption of innovative teaching practices' and brings international elements into the classroom. Similarly, PO2 highlighted that staff 'learn new ways of teaching and apply them in their classes', while PO1 emphasized the development of 'new perspectives on course design, assessment strategies, and collaborative learning'. In MA1, mobility was said to inspire the 'adoption of new teaching methods' and the 'sharing of good practices', while AL1 underlined that staff are exposed to 'different teaching styles and educational technologies' and 'often revise or enrich course content'. GR1 referred to the overall effect as making staff 'more transformative', while CR2 pointed to the 'enhancement of teaching practices' through exposure to diverse pedagogical systems. Some institutions, like SL2, acknowledged that while Erasmus+ 'enriches teaching practices and perspectives', the degree to which these are incorporated 'depends on the staff'. Even where outcomes are less uniform, as IT1 suggested that 'every case is different', there is still a belief that Erasmus+ helps in 'seeing other ways of teaching'. Altogether, these reflections indicate that Erasmus+ plays a meaningful role in sparking pedagogical renewal and broadening educators' approaches, even if implementation varies across individuals and contexts.

Erasmus+ mobility is widely acknowledged as a strategic tool for internationalization across institutions, though the formal integration and recognition level vary. SP1 reported that it is 'integrated into the university's internationalization strategy as a key tool for staff development and global engagement'. Similarly, SP2

confirmed that it is 'embedded in the broader internationalization strategy, aiming to enhance teaching quality and global engagement'. Institutions like CY1 also link mobility to their efforts to 'enhance academic quality, foster global partnerships, and support professional development'. CR2 echoed this, stating that Erasmus+ contributes to 'global partnerships, the exchange of best practices, and the continuous improvement of teaching, research, and administrative processes'. PO2 positioned mobility as part of broader alliances, such as the EU GREEN Alliance, supporting strategic collaboration. At MA1, the program is tied to an internationalization and a globalisation strategy, reflecting the centrality of mobility to institutional development. IT2 further noted that mobility is 'part of our University Strategic Plan 2023–2027', with recognition tied to career progression in most departments. While Erasmus+ mobility contributes to individual growth, its potential for broader organizational learning is recognized but not always fully realized. Several institutions rely on informal mechanisms, such as 'peer exchanges and departmental meetings' (SP1), or 'peer discussions' (SP2), to share mobility outcomes. At PO1, institutional learning is recognized as valuable but underdeveloped, prompting the suggestion for 'structured post-mobility debriefings, peer presentations, or integration of outcomes into staff development activities'. CY1 provides a more embedded approach, sharing learning through 'departmental meetings, workshops, and contributions to strategic planning'. Similarly, CY2 described how 'insights and best practices from mobility experiences are regularly shared via workshops, reports, and internal networks'. PO2 encouraged participants to 'share new practices gained abroad', while AL1 mentioned that returning staff may 'complete reflective reports or participate in debrief meetings with the international office'. GR1 added a visibility element, with mobility experiences presented in the "Participants Stories" section of the university's website.

5. Conclusions

This study explored how Erasmus+ staff mobility is promoted and supported within higher education institutions, and how it contributes to the professional development of academic staff and institutional capacity building. Based on thematic analysis of responses from Erasmus+ institutional coordinators in 18 Southern European universities, two key research questions were addressed.

Answer to RQ1: How is Erasmus+ mobility promoted, supported, and implemented?

The study found that Erasmus+ mobility is generally promoted through formal mechanisms, including institutional websites, email campaigns, faculty briefings, and support from International Relations Offices (IROs). However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms varies considerably. The most impactful strategies combined multichannel communication with personalised support, proactive outreach, and strong collaboration between central offices and academic departments. Administrative clarity and training opportunities further facilitated participation. Nonetheless, challenges such as workload constraints, insufficient incentives, and procedural complexity continue to limit engagement in many institutions.

Answer to RQ2: How does Erasmus+ mobility contribute to institutional enhancement?

Erasmus+ staff mobility contributes to institutional development primarily by enhancing teaching practices, strengthening intercultural competence, and reinforcing academic staff's professional identity. Participants frequently reported renewed motivation, exposure to innovative pedagogies, and broader academic networks. At the institutional level, Erasmus+ supported internationalization strategies, curriculum development, and the emergence of transnational collaborations. However, the degree to which institutions capitalized on these outcomes depended heavily on whether they embedded mobility within strategic frameworks, recognized staff contributions, and created channels for post-mobility reflection and knowledge sharing.

The most important finding of this study is that the developmental potential of Erasmus+ mobility, both at the individual and institutional level, is closely tied to how well it is integrated into broader professional development and internationalization strategies. When institutions approach mobility as a learning process rather than a logistical transaction, its impact is significantly amplified. This aligns with prior research (e.g., Angouri, 2023; Martins et al., 2024), which emphasizes that strategic framing, reflective practice, and structural support are essential for converting mobility into meaningful and sustainable institutional learning. In this sense, the study contributes to both theory and practice by offering an empirically grounded understanding of how Erasmus+ mobility can evolve from an isolated professional experience into a lever for organizational change. Future research could investigate how

these dynamics unfold across various national or disciplinary contexts, and how institutions can design mobility pathways that more effectively support pedagogical transformation and long-term collaboration.

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