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Questioning the role of international student mobility as a means to enhance intercultural communication competence: The rise of the Erasmus+ "Bipster"

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Mural art "All the World" by Keith Haring

Photo by Guglielmo Giambartolomei, shared by a research participant

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the potential of Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) to enhance students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) within the broader landscape of European higher education internationalisation, focusing on the experiences of students, organisers, and teachers. Situated within the historical and policy development of internationalisation, BIPs can be understood as part of more "inclusive" initiatives potentially contributing to "internationalisation at home" (IaH). ICC is approached as (i) an interpretation of effective and appropriate communication, (ii) in contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants, where this competence is (iii) situational and contextual, (iv) and is a continuous and dynamic process (v) based on interaction. Drawing on an ethnographically informed, multi-method design, the research combines participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups across four BIPs within a European University Alliance. Findings indicate that teachers and organisers often viewed ICC as a "natural" outcome of participation, linked to international groupwork, engagement with local contexts, and encounters with the cultural "Other". Students, however, related to ICC in varied ways, alternating between essentialist and more interactional perspectives, and reflecting on relational, academic, and experiential aspects of their encounters. Four orientations, framed as Max Weber's ideal types, were identified: the knowledge seeker, the credit seeker, the experience seeker, and the "Bipster". These are not all-encompassing and serve as heuristic tools to interpret varied motivations, expectations, and experiences. The findings suggest that BIPs provide situated learning experiences with the potential to foster students' ICC, yet this potential is shaped and at times constrained by the programmes' short duration, limited pedagogical scaffolding, and assumptions that intercultural learning occurs organically through mere contact. Inspired by Leask's interactive dimensions of the curriculum (2015), the study highlights four interrelated components within BIPs through which elements of ICC learning can be embedded holistically: formal academic, structured social, hidden, and unstructured experiential. It develops concrete recommendations aimed at helping BIP organisers to support their students' lifelong journey in enhancing their intercultural communication competence.

Résumé

Cette thèse propose un examen critique du potentiel des BIP Erasmus+ pour accroître la compétence en communication interculturelle (CCI) des étudiants, dans le contexte plus large de l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur européen. L'étude s'attache plus particulièrement à l'analyse des expériences des étudiants, des organisateurs et des enseignants dans ces programmes. Inscrits dans l'évolution historique et politique de l'internationalisation, les BIPs peuvent être appréhendés comme des initiatives dites « inclusives », susceptibles de coopérer à « l'internationalisation à domicile » (IaD). Plutôt que de postuler que la mobilité engendre automatiquement des apprentissages interculturels, la CCI est ici conceptualisée comme (i) une interprétation d'une communication efficace et appropriée, (ii) dans des contextes où l'interculturalité et les cultures sont pertinentes pour les interlocuteurs, (iii) une compétence situationnelle et contextuelle, (iv) s'inscrivant dans un processus continu et dynamique, (v) fondé sur l'interaction. Mobilisant un design multi-méthodes qui s'appuie sur une approche ethnographique, cette recherche combine observations participantes, entretiens semi-directifs et *focus group*s au sein de quatre BIPs, organisés dans le cadre d'une des Alliances universitaires européennes. Les résultats révèlent que les enseignants et organisateurs perçoivent majoritairement la CCI comme un bénéfice « naturel » de la participation, découlant du travail collectif international, de l'immersion dans des contextes locaux et de la rencontre avec l'« Autre » culturel. Les étudiants, quant à eux, mobilisent des conceptions plus hétérogènes de la CCI, oscillant entre des visions essentialistes et des approches interactionnelles, tout en réfléchissant aux dimensions relationnelles, académiques et expérientielles de leurs rencontres. Quatre orientations conceptualisées comme idéaux-types de Max Weber ont été identifiées : *knowledge seeker, credit seeker, experience seeker* et le « *Bipster »*. Ces types, sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité, constituent des outils heuristiques permettant d'interpréter la diversité des motivations, des attentes et des expériences. Les résultats mettent en avant les différentes situations d'apprentissage contextualisées qu'offrent les BIPs, porteuses d'un potentiel pour stimuler la CCI. Ce potentiel demeure toutefois conditionné, voire limité, par la brièveté des programmes, le modeste encadrement pédagogique et le postulat selon lequel l'apprentissage interculturel émergerait spontanément du simple contact. S'inspirant des dimensions interactives du curriculum formalisées par Leask (2015), cette recherche identifie quatre composantes interdépendantes au sein des BIPs - *formal academic, structured social, hidden et unstructured experiential* - par lesquelles les apprentissages liés à la CCI peuvent être intégrés de manière holistique. Elle fournit des préconisations concrètes pour les organisateurs de BIPs voulant accompagner ainsi le parcours de leurs étudiants dans l'amélioration continue de leurs compétences en communication interculturelle.

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List of abbreviations

ARWU Academic Ranking of World Universities (also known as the Shanghai ranking)

BIP Blended Intensive Programme / **BIPs** Blended Intensive Programmes

CAQDAS Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis

CCGT Critical Constructivist Grounded Theory

DG EAC Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

ECTS European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

ERASMUS European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

EUA European University Alliance / **EUAs** European University Alliances

EUI European Universities Initiative

HE Higher education

IaH Internationalisation at Home

IC Intercultural communication

ICC Intercultural communication competence

IHE Internationalisation of higher education

IoC Internationalisation of the curriculum

OMP Online mobility phase

PMP Physical mobility phase

QS QS World University Ranking

THE Times Higher Education World University Ranking

VE Virtual Exchange

Chapter I - Introduction

Over the past decades, internationalisation has become one of the main missions of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe and elsewhere, intending to prepare students to become "citizens of the world",[1] capable of navigating in our connected and internationally oriented societies (Caruana, 2014; Killick, 2012; Mitchell, 2023). Although a range of drivers shape internationalisation, global, intercultural, and international learning outcomes are often considered central in this process (Deardorff & Arasaratnam, 2017c). This implies the development of "intercultural competence", which is increasingly sought by employers alongside technical or discipline-specific knowledge (Deardorff *et al.*, 2022; Jones, 2013; Lilley *et al.*, 2015; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2016), and recommended among the objectives of international cooperation programmes, such as the Erasmus+ programme.

In the European context, education and training have moved to the centre of the political agenda. The European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017 explicitly identified education as key to building inclusive and cohesive societies and to sustaining European competitiveness.[2] Within this policy landscape, the European Union's strategy for education, youth, sport and culture highlights the role of internationalising education as part of its broader strategic ambitions. Higher education institutions are encouraged to develop "intercultural competence" among their students through internationalisation initiatives, including actions within the Erasmus+ programme and the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The election of pro-European Emmanuel Macron as French president in 2017 was an influential moment for the current emphasis on curriculum internationalisation and internationalisation at home initiatives. Macron's speech at the Sorbonne University in Paris in September 2017 highlighted the unifying role of culture and knowledge within Europe. Macron argued that students ought to speak at least two European languages and proposed that half of all students should spend at least six months in another European country by the age of 25, whether in higher education or vocational training.[3] This speech informed the European Commission's report *Strengthening European Identity through Education*

[1] In this thesis, inverted commas indicate terms whose meaning is contested. They are retained until the concepts are defined later in the text.

[2] See Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01) (accessed on 18/04/2023).

[3] The entire speech can be accessed here: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/english_version_transcript_-_initiative_for_europe_-_speech_by_the_president_of_the_french_republic_cle8de628.pdf (accessed on 24/11/2025).

and Culture, presented at the Gothenburg summit in November 2017, which articulated the goal of a European Education Area based on trust, mutual recognition, cooperation, best practice exchange, mobility and growth (Gunn, 2020).

In this context, it needs to be acknowledged that internationalisation in Europe is strongly shaped by funding and policymaking, which has made academic mobility a central pillar. Academic mobility was largely unstructured before the 1970s, but EU involvement increased substantially in subsequent decades, with the EU emerging as a key actor in promoting mobility and enhancing recognition of studies abroad (de Wit & Merkx, 2022; Papatsiba, 2005). Ambitious mobility targets highlight the priority given to this area. For instance, European ministers agreed that 20 percent of students should undertake study or training abroad, a commitment reaffirmed in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué of 2020. Furthermore, the Council conclusions on the European Universities Initiative set the objective of reaching at least 50 percent mobile students within the European Higher Education Area (The Council of the European Union, 2022a). Within this context, the Erasmus+ programme has been particularly influential and is frequently described as the EU's "flagship" initiative (*e.g.*, de Wit & Deca, 2020; European Commission, n.d.-b; Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; Pépin, 2007), accounting for the majority of mobile students (OECD, 2022).

Academic mobility has therefore become a central focus of research on internationalisation, and the weight given to mobility has sustained the long-standing assumption that education abroad is a key factor in "intercultural competence" development (Jones, 2017; Knight & de Wit, 2018; Marants-Gal & Leask, 2023). Institutions have often measured their internationalisation success through the numbers of incoming and outgoing students and the quantity of bilateral agreements, sometimes as a means to strengthen their reputation and ranking. However, such figures reveal little about the actual educational impact of internationalisation on students or staff. Instead, any meaningful evaluation requires a clearer conceptual understanding of the objectives and implications of internationalisation (*e.g.*, de Wit, 2019, 2020; de Wit *et al.*, 2015; de Wit & Deca, 2020; Hauptman Komotar, 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017, 2019; Teichler, 2023).

At the same time, the concept of "intercultural competence" itself is characterised by ongoing debate and definitional ambiguity. The term is widely used in European institutions' discourse, yet it has been criticised for its polysemy (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Deardorff, 2006); it is sometimes defined as a result, sometimes as a process (*e.g.,* Blair, 2017; Borghetti, 2017; Dervin, 2024b). Within this research,

intercultural competence is understood as a concept shaped by interdisciplinary scholarship and examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives (*e.g.*, Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017b; Martin & Nakayama, 2022). One influential strand in intercultural communication (IC) relies on positivist models where national cultures are predominantly used as explanations for human behaviour. However, there is growing recognition that such conceptualisations can produce reductive understandings of human interaction, prompting a shift towards more fluid conceptualisations in which culture is seen as a meaning-making process, collaboratively co-constructed, drawing upon a multitude of identities (Dervin, 2023; Frame, 2012; Kokkonen *et al.*, 2022; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024). If "intercultural competence" is approached in similarly situational, relational, and context-sensitive terms, the assumption that study abroad functions as a "golden remedy" automatically producing "interculturally competent" students becomes increasingly difficult to sustain (Jones, 2017, p.355).

At the same time, academic mobility remains the backbone of the European higher education internationalisation strategy. However, up to now, the ambitious targets set in the strategy seem to be elusive, with the proportion of European students studying in another country being far below the envisioned numbers (Teichler, 2017). In this context, stagnating mobility numbers, concerns about inclusiveness, pandemic-related travel restrictions, the expansion of digital learning, and ecological considerations have all contributed to renewed attention to internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC), internationalisation at home (IaH), and more flexible forms of mobility (Deardorff *et al.*, 2022). These approaches target students who may not have the opportunity to spend a semester abroad, yet who may still wish to develop "intercultural competence" through contact with international peers or participation in online collaborative learning or short forms of mobility.

Reflecting these field-level realities, the latest Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027) aims to be more accessible, inclusive, digital and environmentally responsible. A key development is the introduction of blended mobility, implemented through Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs). These short programmes combine a physical mobility phase (PMP) with an online mobility phase (OMP).[4] Although blended

[4] Although multiple terms exist for what is here called the "online mobility phase" – including virtual mobility, telecollaboration, online intercultural learning, or virtual exchange (the latter often used as an umbrella term; cf. O'Dowd, 2023) — the Erasmus+ guide refers to it as the "virtual component" or "virtual part" of BIPs. In this thesis, the terms PMP and OMP are used, respectively, for the physical and online phases that define BIPs, primarily for consistency.

mobility is not entirely new, and several initiatives combining online exchange with physical mobility have been carried out within the internationalisation agenda (for instance, see Malichová *et al.*, 2022), BIPs represent an innovative form of short-term mobility newly introduced under the Erasmus+ (2021–2027) programme. Importantly, they provide funding opportunities not only for staff but also for students across all study cycles and disciplines. While several characteristics of BIPs will be discussed in section II.1.3.4, what is essential for the remainder of this thesis is their blended format, their aim to move beyond traditional classroom approaches, and the freedom for organisers and teachers in how to design and structure these programmes. This liberty lies both in the programmes' academic content and approach, but also in their organisational structure. While their objective is to widen access to mobility, BIPs also raise questions about how they are implemented, how they are experienced by organisers, teachers, and students, and their potential to enhance students' "intercultural communication competence".

Research aim

Within this theoretical and policy context, this research aims to critically examine the potential of Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes in enhancing students' "intercultural communication competence" (ICC)[5] within the broader landscape of higher education internationalisation and seeks to identify strategies for good practices. This thesis focuses on BIPs as a specific form of internationalised teaching and learning, situating them within the historical evolution of European internationalisation and exploring their relationship to the enhancement of "intercultural communication competence" among participating students.[6] Examining internationalisation of higher education (IHE) within the European context and intercultural communication more broadly, BIPs form the central object of study, and their practical implementation is examined in order to understand how they may function as a vector for the internationalisation of the curriculum and for enhancing students' ICC. In doing so, the study considers the experiences of students, teachers, and organisers, focusing on how BIPs are perceived to support this.

[5] Within this thesis, I use the term intercultural communication competence (ICC), as it highlights the interactional element that I consider central (this will be further elaborated when setting the theoretical framework). When referring to sources that use the term intercultural competence, I retain their terminology to remain close to the original discourse. I acknowledge that this means that at times there is a terminological inconsistency. However, as outlined by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), "sometimes one term is used to refer to different conceptualisations and sometimes a different term is chosen for the same conceptualisation [which] is confusing and makes discussion of the concept and research into it difficult to handle" (p.51). By highlighting this inconsistency, I aim to remain transparent about the variation in terminology while emphasising the conceptual focus of this thesis.

[6] Although BIPs can also be organised for staff, this study focuses on those organised for students.

Research gap

Although internationalisation in higher education and intercultural communication competence are extensively researched topics, there remains much to explore. A particular motivation for this study lies in the "novelty" of this newly introduced funding activity in the current Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027). When this project began in October 2022, few academic publications had specifically focused on BIPs, making them a relatively new area of inquiry. By the time of writing this introduction in autumn 2025, only a small but seemingly rapidly growing number of publications have appeared *(e.g.,* Clement *et al.,* 2023; Frampton *et al.,* 2023, 2025; Jager, 2025; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; Sletnes *et al.,* 2025).[7] These existing studies have explored organising principles for BIPs (Frampton *et al.*, 2023, 2025), their role within internationalisation strategies (Clement *et al.*, 2023), provided overviews of current typologies (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024), and started to examine students' motivations for participation in BIPs (Sletnes *et al.,* 2025). My own initial work has begun to explore their potential to enhance students' "intercultural communication competence" in the context of European internationalisation strategies (Jager, 2025). Building on this emerging literature, the thesis seeks to provide in-depth qualitative insights into how BIPs may act as a vector for enhancing students' "intercultural communication competence".

Research approach

This thesis is rooted within the discipline of communication sciences, while also engaging with insights from other disciplines such as education and political science. It draws on interpretive and interactional traditions that emphasise how meaning is co-constructed through social interaction. I adopt a constructivist posture, understanding communication as a dynamic process through which participants create shared understanding, negotiate identities, and make sense of their experiences. Within this interpretivist framework, the study examines how students, teachers, and organisers engage with and experience BIPs, with particular attention to interculturality. Culture is understood as fluid and negotiated through interaction. The state of the art will review key concepts and critically examine notions of "internationalisation of the curriculum" and "intercultural communication competence". This conceptual approach is then used to explore empirically four BIPs, which address a range of learning themes, but which do not focus explicitly on language or culture. In this respect, the research situates these programmes within universities' broader efforts to promote internationalisation. Given that European

[7] In this thesis, I primarily worked with publications published in English, and occasionally in French, Dutch or German. There may be additional relevant studies published in other languages or institutional reports that are not captured here. Additionally, by the time of submission, more publications on BIPs have become available.

University Alliances (EUAs) “are considered to represent a testing ground for institution-wide transnational cooperation” (Craciun *et al.*, 2023, p. 12), and that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated interest in blended mobility, BIPs emerged as a new activity within these Alliances. For reasons of access, this research was conducted within the FORTHEM European University Alliance.

The study adopts a multi-method qualitative ethnographic design, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and interactive focus groups. Although BIPs are introduced through a top-down framework in which the Erasmus+ programme defines the funding conditions, their concrete implementation unfolds at the level of organisers, teachers, and students. The research, therefore, examines BIPs as they are designed, delivered, and experienced in practice. It explores how organisers and teachers conceptualise and implement these programmes, how students experience and interpret them, and how “intercultural communication competence” is situated and reflected upon across these different positions. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how ICC is situated and addressed within BIPs, how it is interpreted and experienced by organisers, teachers, and students, and how the design and implementation of these programmes may create opportunities and constraints for fostering students’ ICC.

Researcher positionality

Within the context of this ethnographic research, it is important to acknowledge that my own values, interests, and experiences shape both the focus of this study and the interpretivist approach adopted, as will be discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter. The literature review will outline the different ways in which intercultural communication has been approached and situates the understanding of “intercultural communication competence” adopted in this thesis. Here, however, it is important to note that this understanding has not always been stable or fixed (nor will it probably ever be). Rather, it is the outcome of a continuous process of constructing, questioning, and revising my thinking, shaped by a range of personal and professional experiences. To support the reader in interpreting this research in light of this positioning, I briefly outline relevant aspects of my background below.

I grew up in a small village in the north of the Netherlands and completed most of my primary and secondary education within the same region. From a young age, I have been interested in questions of culture, identity, and the boundaries created between groups. My early assumptions, however, largely reflected what would be described as positivist or essentialist views of culture (*cf.* section II.2. Intercultural

communication competence), which I associated primarily with travelling, encountering difference abroad, and an aspiration to "see the world". This curiosity influenced my decision to pursue a BA in International Business and Management, partly because the programme included a mandatory study abroad semester and an internship abroad.[8] During this period, I studied in Thailand and completed an internship in Germany. In this respect, my educational choices reflect the predominance of personal and experiential motivations for international mobility widely reported in studies on Erasmus and other exchange programmes (*cf.* section II.1.2.3: Individual-level perspective). While this programme provided valuable academic and professional skills, many of the teaching materials reinforced a positivist orientation towards culture. I engaged extensively with authors such as Hofstede and Trompenaars, and much of my early academic writing was framed within these models.

Over time, I became increasingly interested in the interactional dimensions of intercultural encounters, rather than culture as a fixed explanatory framework. This led me to pursue an MA in Intercultural Management at the University of Burgundy Europe. The programme had a significant influence on my current perspective. During this programme, I also participated in an Erasmus-funded exchange semester in Italy, further exposing me to the lived realities of student mobility programmes. Its underlying philosophy, outlined in Frame (2022), challenged essentialist notions of culture and introduced interpretive and constructivist approaches to intercultural communication. As a result, it is difficult to separate my current understanding of culture from the influence these studies had on my thinking. However, this does not mean that I had not questioned dominant national and cultural paradigms earlier in life. Rather, my interest in how social boundaries are constructed, maintained, and challenged developed at a relatively young age. In the introduction to my MA thesis focusing on *Exploring Nationalism in the Netherlands: Banal and Defensive Nationalism in Social Discourse*, I described an early moment of reflexivity regarding the social construction of nation-states:

> *"The world we live in today is arguably constructed by nation-states. From a young age, I could not really comprehend why the world was divided into nations. When I was twelve years old, I heard on the radio about the dangers of malaria and quickly decided that I wanted to help raise money for this charity. With great opportunism, I woke up early to collect plastic bottles in return for money which I would donate for the fight against malaria. However, my enthusiasm was quickly tempered when my neighbours*

[8] Of course, there were also content-related reasons involved in this decision.

told me that it was better to choose a Dutch charity. I could not really comprehend this because what did it matter if I would help people living in the Netherlands or people living abroad? Was it not all for a good cause? Are there not difficulties everywhere in the world? Looking back, I think that this was the first time that I was aware of the consequences of our social construct of nation-states."

This experience represents an early awareness of the consequences of nation-states as social constructs and of how boundaries of belonging are reproduced in everyday discourse. These experiences already reflect a gradual shift away from essentialist understandings of culture. This shift was further reinforced through engagement with scholarship by authors such as Benedict Anderson (2016), Ulrich Beck (2006), and Michael Billig (1995), which conceptualises nations as socially constructed yet socially consequential, particularly in processes of primary socialisation (Frame, 2023). Together, these personal experiences influence my research orientation and underpin the way internationalisation and ICC are approached in this thesis.

Thesis structure and chapter outline

To explore the potential of BIPs as a vector for enhancing students' ICC, **Chapter II** begins with an extensive literature review, focusing on both the internationalisation of higher education and intercultural communication (competence). I start by searching for a working definition of internationalisation, recognising that the concept is interpreted and used in multiple ways to describe a variety of strategies, developments, and challenges. Next, I examine the various rationales driving internationalisation, considering both European Union-level discourse and the motives underpinning educational policies, as well as institutional and individual-level rationales. The discussion then moves to the main manifestations of internationalisation in European higher education that are often highlighted in the literature, namely: (i) the predominant practice of associating IHE with the mobility of students, scholars, and programmes; (ii) the paradigm shift from cooperative rationales to competitive motives; and (iii) the manifestation of reputation and branding, particularly through national and global ranking systems. I argue that IHE may be entering a new phase characterised by an increased focus on "inclusive" internationalisation strategies, exemplified by the growing emphasis on short-term and flexible mobility programmes, including Blended Intensive Programmes, as a response to calls for more inclusive approaches. Finally, the literature review moves on to consider a competency approach towards internationalisation, explaining that internationalisation will be specifically viewed from the perspective that it has the opportunity to enhance "intercultural communication competence" among students. This section outlines the historical context

and foundational principles of the field of intercultural communication, followed by a conceptualisation of ICC from an interpretivist perspective, recognising "culture" as a complex and "fuzzy" construct (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Building on Kokkonen and Natri's (2024) definition, ICC will be understood as (i) an interpretation of effective and appropriate communication, (ii) in contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants, which is (iii) situational and contextual, (iv) is a continuous and dynamic process (v) based on interaction. The review concludes with a discussion of ICC learning situated within HE, emphasising disequilibrium moments, interpersonal interactions, and the ways in which interculturality is negotiated and enacted in practice.

Following the literature review, **Chapter III** presents the methodological framework for this study. I begin by outlining the choice of a multi-method qualitative design, explaining the in-depth study of four BIPs through observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. This approach captures multiple perspectives: students, teachers, and organisers. Next, I explain that an interpretivist and constructivist approach is adopted to explore how participants make sense of their experiences within BIPs, specifically relating to ICC enhancement, and how the study draws on critical constructivist grounded theory (CCGT) as proposed by Levitt (2021). I then discuss each research method in more detail, including the study context, sampling, and design of inquiry. Finally, I describe the analytic procedures, detailing how CCGT principles were applied to structure and analyse the data. The section concludes with a reflection on the methodological implications of these methods.

The findings of this study are presented in **Chapter IV**, bringing together insights from students, teachers, and organisers across the four BIPs. I start by examining organisers' and teachers' accounts, exploring the rationale for designing and implementing BIPs, including the perceived advantages for higher education institutions, the benefits of the BIP framework, and how the programmes were expected to support participants' learning. I then turn to the practical implementation of BIPs, considering both organisational structures and pedagogical approaches, followed by a reflection on the learning spaces and priorities identified. Next, I focus on students' accounts, examining their motivations and concerns for participating in BIPs, followed by experiences of both the physical and online mobility phases, and concluding with a reflection on students' expectations and the implications of their experiences. Finally, I bring together insights from all actors to explore how ICC was understood, enacted, and negotiated within BIPs, highlighting the ways in which the programmes were perceived to enhance students' intercultural communication competence.

Chapter V further discusses the findings, tying them back to the literature on internationalisation and intercultural communication competence. I begin by reflecting on how ICC is conceptualised between theory and practice, in order to consider the potentials and barriers for BIPs to act as a vector for fostering students' intercultural communication competence. I discuss conceptual tensions, moving from country-specific knowledge to knowledge of communicative processes, and the importance of ensuring meaningful engagement through interaction. Next, I reflect on how ICC can be holistically integrated into programme design, examining the different elements included and their implications in practice. Finally, I elaborate on strategies to leverage BIPs as a vector for enhancing ICC, focusing on three aspects: (i) thoughtfully structuring the BIP experience by strategically combining the PMP and OMP, (ii) incorporating ICC explicitly within the learning objectives and overall learning experience, and (iii) the pivotal role of teachers within BIPs.

Finally, in **Chapter VI,** the conclusion presents a synthesis of the study's findings, reflecting on how BIPs can potentially foster students' intercultural communication competence, and proposes recommendations for practice and avenues for further research.

Chapter II - Literature review

II.1. Internationalisation of higher education

In the foreword of the first edition of the *Handbook of International Higher Education*, Josef Mestenhauser (2012) pointed out that back in 1961, an extensive literature review revealed only a limited number of "some 180 pieces of research and publications" that addressed the topic of internationalisation related to the field of education (p.vii). Since then, a growing body of research on the internationalisation of higher education has been established, characterised by considerable variations in methodological approaches and levels of sophistication (Deardorff *et al.*, 2022). In the past, the term internationalisation has mainly been used in political science and governmental relations. However, since the early 80s, it has gained popularity in the (higher) education sector (Knight, 2004). Today, the internationalisation of higher education is not a new phenomenon, but as Egron-Polak and Marinoni (2022) state, "it is one that is both broad and varied" (p.75). Research on IHE has evolved over the last few decades in accordance with the introduction of political policies, practices and strategies (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021). Even though this thesis is aimed to study current practices of IHE, literature must be dedicated to its history, as de Wit and Merkx (2022) remind us that it is fundamental to relate the IHE in today's world to its roots and historical developments as "only in this way is it possible to identify the specific character of the internationalization of higher education as currently encountered" (de Wit & Merkx, 2022, p.23).

De Wit and Deca (2020) state that "universities have always had international dimensions in their research, teaching and service to society, but those dimensions were, in general, more ad hoc, fragmented and implicit, rather than explicit" (p.3). The idea that internationalisation as a question of deliberate strategy is a comparatively recent development closely linked to the late twentieth-century context, in which growing global and regional interconnectedness, alongside the rise of the knowledge economy and the end of the Cold War, encouraged a more strategic orientation towards internationalisation in higher education (de Wit & Deca, 2020; de Wit & Merkx, 2022). IHE is driven by a constantly evolving and dynamic combination of political, economic, socio-cultural and academic rationales, influencing its motives and definitions. For example, Altbach (1998) referred to the university as the one institution that has always been global: "with its roots in medieval Europe, the modern university is at the center of an international

knowledge system that encompasses technology, communications, and culture" (as cited in de Wit & Merkx, 2022, p.23). Kerr (1994) stated that "universities are, by nature of their commitment to advancing universal knowledge, essentially international institutions, but they have been living, increasingly, in a world of nation-states that have designs on them" (as cited in de Wit & Merkx, 2022, p.23). Others call this assumption an "inaccurate myth" as it ignores the fact that universities of the Middle Ages could not be international, considering that nation-states did not yet exist and that universities mostly originated in the 18th and 19th centuries (Neave, 1997 as mentioned in de Wit & Merkx, 2022). Yet, it can be argued that one could speak of a "medieval 'European space', defined by this common religious identity and uniform academic language, program of study, and system of examinations", which bears resemblance to the more recent developments of the European Higher Education Area (*ibid*, p.26).

Certainly, this all comes down to the question of how internationalisation is being defined, which will be extensively discussed in this chapter. It also raises the question of whether internationalisation is primarily about different nations, or representatives of different nations, communicating with each other, or whether internationalisation can instead be understood more as a "state of mind", or something other than merely interaction between different national groups. This chapter will start by considering what is meant by internationalising higher education and the range of activities associated with this process, followed by a discussion of the most commonly cited definitions in the field. This will be followed by delving into the various rationales driving internationalisation, acknowledging that these are multifaceted and change over time in response to contextual changes and the importance given by different stakeholders. These contextual developments are explored further in the third part of this section, which outlines the three main manifestations of internationalisation identified over the past three decades, namely: (i) the predominant practice of associating IHE with the mobility of students, scholars and programmes, (ii) the paradigm shift from cooperative internationalisation rationales to competitive motives, and (iii) the manifestation of reputation and branding exhibited by national and global ranking systems, to which a fourth emerging manifestation may arguably be added (iv) reflecting a shift towards more inclusive internationalisation strategies (de Wit, 2020a, 2020b; de Wi*t et al.*, 2022). Within this final sub-section, BIPs will also be introduced as an activity aligned with this recent trend.

II.1.1. Internationalisation of higher education: A working definition

The definition of internationalisation in the field of higher education has been the subject of much discourse. Internationalisation of higher education has become a broad and varied concept due to its differing rationales, strategies, approaches and constantly changing contexts (*e.g.*, de Wit *et al.*, 2015; Egron-Polak & Marinoni, 2022; Knight & de Wit, 2018). Hence, internationalisation is interpreted and used in various ways to describe a multitude of strategies, developments and challenges. Over the past decades, several definitions have been proposed[9] (*e.g.*, Arum & Van de Water, 1992;[10] de Wit *et al.*, 2015;[11] Knight, 2003, 1994;[12] Van der Wende, 1997[13]), but the term is still used in a myriad of ways, as internationalisation means different things to different people (Knight, 2004, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). Simply put, internationalisation of higher education has traditionally been a term used to discuss the international dimension of HE. Yet, these international dimensions differ greatly among the multiple interpretations at national, regional, institutional, and individual levels (Proctor & Rumbley, 2018a).

Internationalisation of higher education is often described in terms of a range of activities, including:[14]

- International activities like mobility for students, researchers and staff;
- International linkages, partnerships, and projects like new international academic programmes and research initiatives;
- Education provided to other countries through online media;
- Education provided to other countries through arrangements such as branch campuses or franchise programmes;
- Commercial cross-border education;

[9] The following references illustrate a handful of definitions commonly used in the literature.
[10] Arum & Van de Water (1992) define the term international education as "the multiple activities, programs and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange and technical cooperation" (p.202). As this study looks at IHE from a broader perspective than activities that fall within international studies and for reasons of space, this definition will not be reflected further upon.
[11] A more detailed discussion of this definition is provided on page 15.
[12] These definitions will be discussed in more detail on page 14.
[13] Van der Wende (1997) defines internationalisation as "any systematic, sustained effort aimed at making higher education (more) responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalisation of societies, economy and labour markets" (p.19).
[14] This list is based on examples listed in Knight (2004; 2018; 2021) and is intended to give an example of the varied activities used to describe the internationalisation of higher education. Due to the myriad ways IHE is interpreted, this list is incomplete as it is simply impossible to include all.

- The integration of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the curriculum and teaching;
- The international makeup of the student, teacher and scholar population and the development of a multi-ethnic or international culture on campus.

As internationalisation of higher education is used to refer to a variety of activities, it is not surprising that statements like "there is no simple, unique or all-encompassing definition of internationalisation of the university" (Knight & de Wit, 1995 as cited in Knight & de Wit, 2018, p.xix) or "there will likely never be a true universal definition" (Knight, 2004, p.9) can be found in the literature. Nevertheless, this does not mean that no attempts are being made to propose a working definition of internationalisation of higher education. For example, Hunter *et al.* (2022) note that research on the development of the definition of internationalisation reflects a strong trend for diverse and new approaches in emerging labels such as "intelligent internationalisation" (see Rumbley, 2015), "comprehensive internationalisation" (see Hudzik, 2011; Hudzik, 2014), "internationalisation of higher education for society" (IHES) (see Brandenburg *et al.*, 2020), "internationalisation at home" (see Nilsson, 2003; will be discussed further in section II.1.3.4) and "internationalisation of the curriculum" (see Leask, 2015; will be discussed further in section II.1.3.4), which Knight (2021) refers to as examples of the trend to adjust the basic concept of internationalisation with adjectives.

Due to the myriad ways in which internationalisation is interpreted, several researchers warn that internationalisation should not become a "catch-all" phrase for everything and anything related to the international dimension (Knight, 2004; Knight & de Wit, 2018). Moreover, as IHE is a complex and evolving phenomenon, it is also important to avoid oversimplifications, as they may lead to poor decision-making and false conclusions (Egron-Polak & Marinoni, 2022). Some scholars further note that, in the absence of a common approach or shared discourse, internationalisation has become an umbrella term, resulting in its fragmentation and marginalisation in practice (Knutson, 2018). At the same time, the literature argues that the increasing prominence of internationalisation strategies in national, international, regional, and institutional policies demonstrates that it is no longer an *ad hoc* element of the HE landscape, contrary to earlier characterisations (de Wit, 2019, 2020b; Knight & de Wit, 2018).

While the literature largely agrees that there may never be a single universal definition that fits all contexts, the definitions proposed by Jane Knight (2003; 2004) and Hans de Wit and colleagues (2015) seem to prevail in the field of education. As Proctor & Rumbley (2018b) outline in their book *The Future*

Agenda for Internationalization in Higher Education, "… [there is a] relatively small contingent of cutting-edge scholars and analysts who opened the door on the contemporary study of internationalization (particularly from the mid- 1980s and early 1990s onward). That small vanguard of researchers and policymakers lead the early - and crucially - important foundation for the field. By initiating the study of internationalization in higher education over the last two decades, they have had a profound influence and continue to inform internationalization research and analysis in substantive ways" (p.3).[15] Jane Knight is one of these scholars and is described by Hunter *et al.* (2022) as "a key contributor to the definition and meaning of internationalization of higher education" (p.54). Knight argues that due to the myriad ways internationalisation is interpreted, a working definition of internationalisation should be suitable for a broad range of contexts and "generic enough to apply to many different countries, cultures, and education systems" (Knight, 2004, p.11). As early as 1993, Knight defined internationalisation of higher education as "the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution" (Knight 1993 as cited in Hunter *et al.*, 2022, p.54).

In 2003, Knight revised the definition by replacing the specific functional terms of teaching, research, and service with the more generic terms of purpose, functions and delivery. This shift was intended to reflect the growing diversity of higher education providers and delivery modes. Knight's updated definition of internationalisation of higher education as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2003, p.2) has since become a frequently cited and widely accepted working definition in the field (*e.g.*, Brewer & Leask, 2022; de Wit, 2020b; Hunter *et al.*, 2022; Woldegiyorgis *et al.*, 2022). Knight (2003) emphasises that the term process is deliberately used to highlight internationalisation as an ongoing and continuous effort. The concepts international, intercultural, and global are likewise intentionally presented as a triad. In this definition, international refers to relationships between and among nations, cultures or countries; intercultural relates "to the diversity of cultures that exist within countries, communities, and institutions" (p.2); and global conveys the sense of a worldwide scope. To ensure that the international dimension

[15] The work of this small vanguard of researchers and their influence, however, does not come without criticism. Although the definitions proposed by Knight (2003) and de Wit *et al.* (2015) are the most frequently cited in the field (*cf.* infra), they are also criticised for several reasons. For instance, Marginson (2023) argues that the definition proposed by Knight (and which is further built upon by de Wit *et al.*) "is overly normative and insufficiently explanatory, uses a truncated geography, claims a universality that cannot be achieved, and when applied in the practices of Euro-American higher education has regressive effects in the non Euro-American world" (p.3). Please see Marginson (2023) for a critical discussion on the limitations of the leading definition of internationalisation of higher education.

remains central and to signify the process into policies and programmes, the concept of integration was added. Finally, the concepts of purpose, function, and delivery are meant to be used together in which "purpose refers to the overall role and objectives that higher education has for a country or the mission of an institution [,] function refers to the primary elements or tasks that characterize a national postsecondary system or individual institution", and delivery "refers to the offering of education courses and programs either domestically or in other countries" (p.3).

Although Knight's definition has been widely adopted in the literature, de Wit *et al.* (2015) revisited and reformulated it in their study for the European Parliament on the state of internationalisation as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (p.29). De Wit *et al.* (2015) proposed this reformulation for several reasons, one of the most significant being that it reflects "increased awareness that internationalisation has to become more inclusive and less elitist by not focusing predominantly on mobility but more on the curriculum and learning outcomes" (p.29). The authors argue that "the 'abroad' component (mobility) needs to become an integral part of the internationalised curriculum to ensure internationalisation for all, not only the mobile minority" (p.29). Furthermore, "it re-emphasises that internationalisation is not a goal in itself, but a means to enhance quality, and that it should not focus solely on economic rationales" (p.29). Therewith, the updated definition reflects the present trends and concerns in the field of internationalisation. Today, this definition is often referred to as the updated or extended definition of internationalisation in the field of education and is currently seen as the most popular (*e.g.*, Brewer & Leask, 2022; de Wit, 2020b; de Wit *et al.*, 2022; Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2022; Hunter *et al.*, 2022).

Despite its popularity, the updated definition by de Wit *et al.* (2015) has also been criticised. For example, Knight (2018) argues that while it is noble and tempting to include outcomes such as developing international understanding and intercultural competence, or as in the case of the definition by de Wit *et al.* (2015) improving the quality of higher education and making a meaningful contribution to society, no outcomes or rationales should be included in its definition as "a definition needs to be objective enough that it can be used to describe a phenomenon which is in fact, universal, but which has different purposes and outcomes, depending on the actor, stakeholder and context" (p.103). Regardless of the diverging discourse, prominent researchers largely agree that internationalisation should be understood as a

process (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; de Wit *et al.*, 2015; de Wit & Deca, 2020; Deardorff *et al.*, 2022; Hunter *et al.*, 2022; Knight, 2003, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017).

II.1.2. Evolving rationales for internationalising higher education

The plethora of definitions associated with internationalisation in the field of higher education is indicative of, or perhaps a result of, the diverse rationales driving the phenomenon. As with its definition, it is highly unlikely that there will ever be one single universal rationale for the internationalisation of higher education. In this context, rationales are understood as the motivations for integrating an international and/or intercultural dimension into higher education. De Wit *et al.* (2015) remind us that HEIs do not operate in a vacuum; rather, their internationalisation processes are influenced by various actors at the regional, national and supranational levels. In Europe in particular, EU-level policies have an impact on the internationalisation strategies of HEIs. In order to understand internationalisation activities, as well as their support and influence, recognising the most significant – albeit broad – stimuli for internationalising higher education is a prerequisite for this study.

The literature widely accepts that internationalisation is a complex phenomenon, adopting different forms in different contexts (*e.g.*, de Wit & Merkx, 2022; Egron-Polak & Marinoni, 2022; Hunter *et al.*, 2022; Knight, 2021; Proctor & Rumbley, 2018b). Rationales may change, overlap and differ over time in response to rapid contextual changes and may be given different weights by different stakeholders. For example, it could be interpreted that the early universities advocated an academic and cultural rationale for their practices of internationalisation (Jiang, 2008). The period between the two World Wars was more characterised by an increased focus on international cooperation and exchange in higher education (de Wit *et al.*, 2015; de Wit & Deca, 2020), while during the Cold War, political reasons were more dominant, and caused national security and foreign policy to become driving forces for internationalisation (de Wit *et al.*, 2015). The end of the Cold War, the increasing globalisation and regionalisation of economies and

societies, combined with the requirements of the knowledge economy, caused a shift for economic rationales to become more dominant (Jiang, 2008).[16]

It must be kept in mind that the motivations for internationalising higher education vary greatly, could seem contradictory, and yet might overlap. Knight (2004) points out that the rationales for internationalisation may vary from "institution to institution, from government department to government department, from stakeholder to stakeholder, and from country to country" (p.28). Nevertheless, common goals, objectives, and trends can also be observed and the rationales can broadly be categorised (de Wit *et al.*, 2015). Jones and Killick (2007) suggest that the motivations behind (curriculum) internationalisation can be pragmatic, values-based, or a combination of the two. Pragmatically-based rationales centre on preparing graduates for effective performance, emphasising the skills and knowledge necessary to live and work in a globalised world while enhancing international competitiveness and influence. In contrast, values-based rationales prioritise "notions of global citizenship, responsibility, ethics and justice, and are likely to include references to global issues such as poverty reduction, human rights and sustainable futures" (p.111). An alternative typology, which is widely referred to in the literature, qualifies four categories of rationales proposed by Knight (2004), who suggests that traditionally, the various rationales driving internationalisation can be grouped into the following categories: social/cultural, academic, political, and economic (*cf.* Table 1: Rationales for internationalising higher education). These categories might not encompass all of today's emerging rationales for internationalisation, and the categories have become more blurry and intertwined overtime, yet they are still argued to be relevant today (de Wit, 2020b).

Table 1: Rationales for internationalising higher education

Rationales	National and institutional levels combined
Social/cultural	• National cultural identity • Intercultural understanding • Citizenship development • Social and community development

[16] See de Wit and Deca (2020) and de Wit and Merkx (2022) for comprehensive overviews of the history and evolution of IHE. Although this study is situated within the European context, it must be noted that these commonly used timelines of rationales often reflect "Western" events and perspectives. Drawing on cases from China, Israel, and Cuba, Bamberger *et al.* (2019), argue that such framings fail to account for internationalisation in contexts where neoliberalism is not an organising concept or takes a different form.

Political	• Foreign policy • National security • Technical assistance • Peace and mutual understanding • National identity • Regional identity
Economic	• Economic growth and competitiveness • Labour market • Financial incentives
Academic	• International dimension to research and teaching • Extension of academic horizon • Institution building • Profile and status • Enhancement of quality • International academic standards

Source: adapted from Knight (2004), p.23.

These categories provide a useful macro-level view of internationalisation. However, as internationalisation has become more widespread and multifaceted, a closer examination of the differing motives is necessary. As Knight (2021) argues as well "it is critical to distinguish between rationales at different levels of actors/stakeholders, especially individual, institutional, national and regional levels" (p.65). For this study, the decision is to focus on the regional, institutional, and individual levels as this reflects the specific context of BIPs. These programmes operate within European Union frameworks and are shaped by policy initiatives (regional), are shaped by and implemented through the policies and strategies of HEIs (institutional), and involve participants whose motivations and experiences vary (individual). Examining rationales across these three levels allows for a nuanced understanding of how policy, institutional priorities, and personal motivations interact in the context of internationalisation. Consequently, the next section will first provide a closer look at European Union-level discourse and the motives behind its educational policies, followed by an examination of rationales at the higher education institution and individual levels.

II.1.2.1. European Union-level perspective

Taking a closer look at it from a European Union-level perspective, education and training have progressively become more central to the European political agenda (*cf.* introduction). In this context, the

official discourse[17] of the European Union on its strategy for education, youth, sport and culture highlights the important role of internationalising (higher) education in reaching its overall strategic objectives. The mission of the DG EAC[18] "targets to contribute to a **knowledge-based Europe**[19] with the aim to achieve a competitive economy and an inclusive society, while addressing both the green transition and the digital transformation" (European Commission, 2020, p.4). Within this framing, internationalisation is positioned not as an end in itself, but as a means to support several overarching political priorities. The DG EAC states that "promoting our European way of life" and "a Europe fit for the digital age" being their priority matters to support. Other objectives, such as "a stronger Europe in the world" and "an economy that works for people" are also strongly dependent on internationalisation activities carried out among their flagship programmes, in which they outline five main programmes, among which Erasmus+.[20]

A diverse mix of rationales can be found as well in the European Commission's official discourse on education. The green deal, digital transition, and the inclusiveness of education have become hot topics in the discourse on education, with internationalisation being no exception. In its strategic plan for 2020-2024 the DG EAC states that "high quality and inclusive education and training for all is the only way forward if Europe is to remain globally competitive and innovative" (European Commission, 2020, p.7). Internationalisation in the form of EU member states and HEIs joining forces is often described as transnational cooperation/partnerships. According to the Council of the European Union, these cooperations are "key to supporting Union values, identity and democracy, to building the resilience of European society and economy, and to building a sustainable future. Strong, inter-connected higher education institutions are one important instrument for tackling the challenges related to the green and digital transitions and to an ageing population, and other key socio-economic challenges, by sharing knowledge and co-creating innovative solutions. They may also secure Europe's capacity to boost technology-driven competitiveness" (The Council of the European Union, 2022, p.1). Also, these

[17] It must be stated that official European Union discourse is very multifaceted as can be seen from the extensive aims which will be described further in this section. Yet, discussing official discourse from the European Union in terms of Council Communications allows to explore the expressed and implied aims made about IHE by the EU itself. Noteworthy to keep in mind while doing so, is that official discourse might differ from actual underlying imperatives.

[18] DG EAC stands for Directorate General for Education and Culture and is the executive branch of the European Commission that is responsible for policy on education, culture, youth, languages, and sport. https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/education-youth-sport-and-culture_en (accessed on 14/04/2023).

[19] As emphasised in its official text.

[20] The other programmes that they refer to are the European Solidarity Corps, Creative Europe, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.

collaborations are argued to facilitate "universities to be able to thrive and to strengthen a sense of European belonging" (European Commission, 2022b, p.6) and to "contribute to Europe's resilience and recovery" (*ibid*., p.7) to ultimately contribute to "shaping a true European identity" (*ibid*., p.10).[21]

The European Commission, however, also acknowledges that European universities should not only reach out to member states but also to the rest of the world. Reasoning that "universities are instrumental in building Europe's connections with the world and in promoting European values globally" (European Commission, 2022b, p.18). Moreover, the internationalisation of higher education is also outlined to be a strategic geopolitical means and to be an instrument of soft power to support the EU's external policy (European Commission, 2020). This competitive dimension comes back in several official communications in the form of dealing with societal challenges, but also economically in the search for "talents from all over the world". In this context, the rationales for internationalising higher education – by means of transnational collaboration between institutions of different member states of the EU – are wide-ranging. Yet, they can cohesively reason to fall under the umbrella of strengthening "Europe's position in the world and the well-being and prosperity of future generations" (European Commission, 2022b, p.5). This short section was aimed to give a brief overview of the various rationales on the EU-level for promoting the internationalisation of higher education and will be further touched upon in section II.1.3. Manifestations of internationalisation of higher education in Europe.

II.1.2.2. Higher education institutions-level perspective

There is no doubt that internationalisation has become an agenda of growing strategic importance to HEIs (see Wihlborg and Robson, 2018). According to the results of the 5th IAU Global Survey on internationalisation of Higher Education[22] "an overwhelming majority of institutions (more than 90%)

[21] In the literature on student mobility, the relationship between mobility and European belonging is contested. Some studies indicate that participation in EU-funded programmes such as Erasmus+ can strengthen students' sense of European identity and belonging (Ambrosi, 2013; Mitchell, 2015), while others present more critical accounts (Kuhn, 2012). In addition, Radut-Gaghi and Oprea (2016) describe how research from the Arie/Lemel project shows that students rarely discussed European identity in their general conversations, and when they did, it was mostly related to specific contexts, such as travelling, studying abroad, or interacting with peers from other European countries. This raises the question of how prominent the idea of a "true European identity" is in practice.

[22] The IAU Global survey is a study conducted by the International Association of Universities and provides data and analysis on global and regional trends and developments in the field of international Higher Education and related policymaking. By the time of writing, the 5th IAU Global Survey (published in 2019) is their latest survey

have internationalization mentioned in their mission/strategic plan — a clear sign of how internationalization has become widespread at HEIs around the world" (Marinoni, 2019, p.25). The emphasis placed on internationalisation by the European Commission (*cf. supra*), rapid globalisation (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018), revenue generation, and the increased competitiveness among institutions manifested by global ranking systems (*cf.* II.1.3 Manifestations of internationalisation of higher education in Europe) have, among other reasons, been important drivers of the growing attention paid to internationalisation activities in HEIs.

The EAIE Barometer[23] and the IAU Survey are two well-known international surveys in relation to the rationales for internationalisation and implementation strategies for internationalisation in higher education. The IAU considers nine rationales for internationalisation from a HEI perspective that its respondents (mainly HEI rectors and/or key persons responsible for internationalisation strategies) can rank on an ordinal scale from 1 to 3. These rationales (see Figure 1) have been based on the literature and have informed the items in its survey from its first edition in 2003 (Seeber *et al.*, 2016). Nearly similar rationales were provided in the EAIE Barometer, where respondents could select the 3 most important reasons (EAIE Barometer 1st edition).[24]

Figure 1: Rationales for internationalising higher education from a HEI-level perspective considered by the IAU Survey (adapted from Seeber et al., 2016).

Rationales for internationalisation from a HEI perspective

- Increased international awareness of/deeper engagement with global issues by students
- Enhanced internationalization of the curriculum
- Improved quality of teaching and learning
- Strengthened institutional research and knowledge production capacity
- Enhanced prestige/profile for the institution

with the 6th edition expected to be published in 2024. For more information, please see https://www.iau-aiu.net/Global-survey-on-Internationalization (accessed on 05/07/2023).

[23] The EAIE Barometer is a study conducted by the European Association for International Education. "The research focuses on the current state of affairs regarding internationalisation of higher education in Europe as viewed by practitioners directly involved in the internationalisation of their institutions". More information can be found at https://www.eaie.org/our-resources/barometer.html (accessed on 02/02/2023).

[24] In both the EAIE Barometer and the IAU Survey respondents can choose from a set of rationales predetermined by the surveys. According to both tools, these options were based on the literature.

- Opportunity to benchmark/compare institutional performance within the context of international good practice
- Enhanced international cooperation and capacity building
- Increased international networking by faculty and researchers
- Increased/diversified revenue generation

The results of the 5th IAU Global Survey reveal that "enhanced international cooperation and capacity building", "improved quality of teaching and learning", and "increased international awareness of/deeper engagement with global issues by students" are among the most important expected benefits according to its respondents. Similar to the IAU Global Survey Outcomes, the outcomes from the EAIE Barometer suggest that "the most prevalent rationales for internationalisation reflect educational values and institutional missions, whereby internationalisation is an inextricable element of the educational process. By internationalising, institutions throughout the EHEA most often aim to improve the overall quality of higher education, prepare students for the challenges of a globalised world, and raise the institutional profile to attract more students" (Engel *et al.*, 2015, p.94). These outcomes are very similar to the second edition of the EAIE Barometer, in which the most highly ranked goals of internationalisation reflect more values-based approaches, with the top three goals being (i) preparing students for the global world, (ii) improving the quality of education, and (iii) reputation and competitiveness coming third (Rumbley & Sandström, 2019).

II.1.2.3. Individual-level perspective

When discussing students' motivations to participate in internationalisation activities, the literature often focuses on international student mobility, also referred to as credit mobility. Although this study recognises that internationalisation activities extend beyond academic student mobility and can take various forms, the focus here will be on the individual-level rationales for engaging in international exchange. This focus is adopted because (i) it aligns with the dominant body of literature, and mainly because (ii) it provides a necessary foundation for understanding participants' possible rationales for taking part in BIPs. Within the European context, research predominantly examines students' motivations for participation in the Erasmus+ programme for higher education studies (*e.g.*, Aresi *et al.*, 2018; De Winter *et al.*, 2021; Lesjak *et al.*, 2015; Teichler, 2004). This is no surprise, considering that student mobility has long been one of the main manifestations of the internationalisation of higher education, as

will be discussed in more detail in the following section (II.1.3 Manifestations of internationalisation of higher education in Europe).

Students' motivations to study abroad are commonly explained through so-called "push" and "pull" factors. Push factors drive the demand for international education, while pull factors influence the choice of destination (*cf.* Aresi *et al.*, 2018; Sousa *et al.*, 2024). Pull factors include the destination country, the hosting city, and the academic institution (Sousa *et al.*, 2024). Focusing on push factors, research indicates that many push factors are primarily driven by personal and professional growth (*e.g.*, Aresi *et al.*, 2018; Lesjak *et al.*, 2015), while some studies include academic motivations as a separate third category (Sousa *et al.*, 2024). Most of these studies employ quantitative survey methods with pre-set options that students rate (*e.g.*, Aresi *et al.*, 2018; De Winter *et al.*, 2021; Lesjak *et al.*, 2015; Teichler, 2004).[25] For instance, when discussing students' motivations to study abroad, the European Association for International Education (EAIE), refers to the Multidimensional Motivations to Study Abroad Scale (MMSAS) developed by Aresi *et al.* (2018). The MMSAS is a 27-item questionnaire that assesses the importance of nine motivations to study abroad among HE students and is targeted for institutions to understand students' motivations. Aresi *et al.* (2018) used a sample of 1333 students studying abroad for a period of least four months, from this they concluded nine specific motivation factors: (1) Personal growth, (2) Academic, (3) Others' expectations, (4) Foreign language, (5) Cross-cultural, (6) Get away, (7) Career, (8) Independency, (9) Leisure.

Similarly, using a questionnaire distributed among 360 Erasmus students, in which participants rated 14 pre-set motivational items on a five-point scale, Lesjak *et al.* (2015) identified the following student motivations for participation in an Erasmus exchange:

Figure 2: Motivations for students' participation in an Erasmus exchange according to Lesjak et al. (2015)

Motivations for students' participation in an Erasmus exchange according to Lesjak *et al.* (2015)

1. Experience something new
2. Grow personally
3. To learn about different cultures

[25] This, of course, limits students to choosing between predetermined categories of motivations.

4. Meet new people
5. To have a semester away from home
6. Improve foreign language
7. Experience European identity
8. Experience different educational system
9. To improve my academic knowledge
10. Enhance employment opportunities
11. New contacts in field of studies
12. Academic support for my thesis
13. Take advantage of ERASMUS grant
14. It was compulsory

Overall, these studies reveal a tendency that personal factors often outweigh professional or academic motivations when students decide to participate in study abroad programmes. Teichler (2004) already observed two decades ago that "one might be tempted to conclude that many students take the ERASMUS period abroad as an opportunity for leisure and cultural activities rather than for serious study" (p.406), and this idea appears to remain relevant today. For instance, Kosmaczewska and Jameson (2023) show that many students anticipate their Erasmus period primarily as an opportunity for travelling, leisure, and personal experience rather than as one centred on study-related activities. Similarly, Cuzzocrea and Krzaklewska (2023) describe how mobility experiences are often framed around the perceived need to achieve distinction, develop the self, and fully experience youth, while Sousa *et al.* (2024) identify the three main motivations for students to engage in mobility as "for leisure/fun/travel", "to make new friends and create an international social network", and "to learn about a different culture and tradition". Across these studies, personal motivations emerge as the most significant drivers, followed by professional and, to a lesser extent, academic motivations. However, researchers also caution that, despite numerous studies attempting to draw conclusions about students' declared motivations, these motivations remain highly dependent on demographic characteristics, academic discipline, gender, and other personal factors influencing decisions to study abroad (Aresi *et al.*, 2018; De Winter *et al.*, 2021; Kosmaczewska & Jameson, 2023; Lesjak *et al.*, 2015). As with the rationales for internationalising higher education at the European Union or institutional levels, students' motivations are complex and multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single explanation (Kosmaczewska & Jameson, 2023).

II.1.3. Manifestations of internationalisation of higher education in Europe

The field of higher education internationalisation has undergone substantial shifts over the past three decades. These shifts are apparent in the evolving definitions of internationalisation, and the terms used to denote it: comprehensive internationalisation, internationalisation of higher education for society, intelligent internationalisation, internationalisation at home, and internationalisation of the curriculum (*cf. supra*). These qualifiers appear to signal something of the scope of internationalisation and the various rationales for pursuing it. These shifts mirror broader changes in the priorities, practices, and underlying assumptions in higher education policies and practices. In this regard, Hans de Wit (*cf.* 2020a, 2020b; de Wit *et al.*, 2022) identified three main manifestations of internationalisation that have shaped the field over the past three decades, namely: (i) the predominant practice of associating IHE with the mobility of students, scholars and programmes, (ii) the paradigm shift from cooperative internationalisation rationales to competitive motives, and (iii) the manifestation of reputation and branding exhibited by national and global ranking systems.

It could be argued that recently, a fourth form has emerged, reflecting a move towards more inclusive and comprehensive approaches to internationalisation. This trend is exemplified by strategies such as internationalisation at home and the internationalisation of the curriculum, which seek to provide international and intercultural learning opportunities for all students, rather than focusing solely on the mobile minority. In this regard, BIPs represent a concrete example of such practices, combining short-term physical mobility with an online mobility component. By examining these four manifestations in more depth, this section aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how IHE has evolved and how contemporary activities, such as BIPs, are a response to and reflect the latest shift.

II.1.3.1. Mobility of students, scholars, and programmes

International academic mobility of people, programmes, providers, policies, and projects has been a frequent topic in the study and discourse on internationalisation (Knight & de Wit, 2018). Especially since the second half of the 20th century, the internationalisation discourse focused on individual academic student mobility and the topic also gained political attention in Europe since the 1980s (Proctor &

Rumbley, 2018a). Teichler (2017) even states that "student mobility became the most prominent theme in this [internationalisation of higher education] domain in the 1980s and 1990s" (p.183). While academic mobility in the period from 1950 to 1970 in Europe can be characterized as "overwhelmingly voluntarist, unorganized and individual" (Neave, 1992 as cited in de Wit & Merkx, 2022, p.41), scholars suggest that from the 1970s onwards "the EU became the most active political actor in Europe in stimulating student mobility and reinforcing recognition of studies abroad within Europe" (Papatsiba, 2005, p.173). Even so, a recent study by Crăciun (2018), in which computer-assisted content analysis was used to analyse and compare different national higher education internationalisation policies, found that students – especially in terms of international students, their mobility, and numbers – and thereafter, research and institutions are at the core of these national internationalisation strategies.[26]

Improving access to "high-quality" and "inclusive" education and facilitating an easier process for learners and researchers to move across borders in Europe is stated in the latest DG EAC strategic plan (2020-2024) "meant to be the heart and soul of the European project" (European Commission, 2020, p.17). The European Commission has stated its vision for the European Education Area for Europe to be "a continent, where spending time in another Member State – to study, to learn, or to work – has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm. A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity" (European Commission, 2020, p.17-18). To achieve its objectives, the DG EAC rolled out five programmes, with the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, also known as Erasmus, being the best-known for encouraging mobility activities. The Erasmus programme was created in 1987 to allow students to experience student life in a European country other than their home country and was, in its early stages, solely focused on student and staff mobility (European Commission, 2019).

By the European Commission itself and by many others, the Erasmus programme is referred to as the EU's "flagship" programme for education, youth and sport (*e.g.*, de Wit & Deca, 2020; European Commission, n.d.-b; Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; Pépin, 2007). In the DG EAC strategic plan for 2020-2024, it is even noted that the Erasmus programme "has developed into one of the most successful EU programmes, with a well-known brand name that projects a positive image of the Union, well beyond its borders. Within this

[26] The HE policies of Australia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom were selected for analysis in the study (see Crăciun, 2018).

context, the EU added value of the programme is uncontested" (European Commission, 2020, p.21).[27] Although the programme is widely known and described by many as an exchange programme, Hywel Ceri Jones, the first head of the Education and Youth Policy Department of the European Commission, argues that this description is "missing the central point of the programme's importance to the long-term mission of universities which seek to embed a strategy of internationalisation through partnerships in their teaching programmes" (Ceri Jones, p.561). Today, supporting the European Education Area, Digital Education Action Plan, and the European Skills Agenda, the Erasmus+ programme is key in supporting the European strategic cooperation in the field of education and training. Even though the current Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) has a greater breadth than solely mobility, in many of its official publications, long-term mobility is listed as the core of the programme. This is illustrated by the first key action of the programme being the mobility of individuals.

When discussing internationalisation in the European context, it must be noted that since the process of European integration in the 1950s, education has been situated outside the formal competence of the European Union and has been a domain governed by its Member States. However, education has long been viewed as a strategic instrument for advancing European integration, leading to the development of major European-level initiatives such as the Erasmus Programme, the Bologna Process, and, more recently, the European Universities Initiative (Frame et al., 2025; Gänzle & Pinheiro, 2025). As Frame et *al.* (2025) note, "while HE is still formally positioned within an intergovernmental framework, developments in the field have led scholars to increasingly consider it as part of EU policy" (p.5). Within this context, the Erasmus programme and its widely acknowledged "success story" is closely linked to the European policy-making environment. As González and Whalen (2022) argue, "mobility in Europe cannot be understood without being fully aware of the key driver that has led to overall integration at the tertiary level over the past 30 years" (p.435). Hence, to understand today's internationalisation of higher education in Europe – that is characterised by academic mobility – the Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Process need mentioning as they both strongly impacted the mobility outlook in Europe and developed the grounds of the Erasmus programme's achievements and cooperation between member states (González & Whalen, 2022).[28]

[27] In reality, this point can be contested, since focusing on the absolute numbers of Erasmus participants may give a distorted impression, as will be discussed below.

[28] The Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Process both strongly impacted the mobility outlook in Europe and developed the grounds of the Erasmus programme's achievements and cooperation between member states,

The Sorbonne Declaration was signed in 1998 by the ministers responsible for HE in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, with the aim "to create a common frame of reference within the intended European Higher Education Area, where mobility should be promoted both for students and graduates, as well as for the teaching staff" (*Sorbonne Declaration*, n.d.). The Sorbonne Declaration is widely accepted as the foundation for the Bologna Declaration of 1999, which "involves a set of voluntary commitments aiming at (a) strengthening the European cooperation and (b) providing a response to globalization by increasing the attractiveness of European HE systems" (Papatsiba, 2006, p.95). The Bologna Process (BP), launched with its declaration, "refers to multi-national reforms and changes currently undertaken by European states, with varying scope and pace, in order to implement the goal of creating a barrier-free European Higher Education Area (EHEA) characterized by 'compatibility and comparability' between the higher education systems of the signatory states" (Papatsiba, 2006, p.95). According to its official website, the BP is "one of the main voluntary processes at European level, as it is nowadays implemented in 49 States, which define the European Higher Education Area" (*European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process*, n.d.). Although initially being intergovernmental in nature, it became closely related to the EU's work, such as the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and quality assurance (Pépin, 2007). The BP strongly impacted the mobility outlook in Europe and developed the grounds for Erasmus' achievements and cooperation between member states, which is at the heart of the internationalisation of higher education in Europe (González & Whalen, 2022).

During its first year of existence, the Erasmus programme supported 3,244 students going abroad in the 11 countries that were involved at that time (European Commission, 2019). Over the years, the Erasmus programme has expanded greatly in terms of its reach and number of participants. For example, the entire Erasmus+ programme, including all key actions, supported 7.4 million participants by 2014, and this number increased to 11.7 million participants by the end of 2020 (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, the programme's popularity has increased over time with around 90% of European universities being involved in the scheme according to the European Council's numbers in 2017, and a substantial increase can be seen in the number of participating partner countries and countries associated with the programme (European Council, 2017). Focusing on physical mobility, the programme has seen an extensive increase as well, from 3,244 students going abroad in the first year of the programme's existence (*cf. supra*) to 272 497 students going to another European country for their study or training in

however, it must also be acknowledged that various other declarations and agreements have played an important part as well, such as the Lisbon Agreements (see Galvin *et al.*, 2021).

the academic year of 2013-2014 (European Commission, 2015), to 950 000 physical mobility periods that started in 2019 (European Commission, 2021). However, the Covid-19 pandemic showed the volatility of physical exchanges as the pandemic strongly impacted the figures, dropping from 950 000 physical mobility periods started in 2019 to 350 000 in 2020[29] (European Commission, 2021).[30]

As pointed out by Teichler (2017) "both the "success story" of the ERASMUS programme, which notably supports temporary student mobility within Europe, as well as the emphasis placed on student mobility as the single most important aim within the Bologna reform process underscore the key role of student mobility within the internationalisation policies and activities in Europe" (p.183). The ambitious targets set by the European Commission highlight the emphasis placed on student mobility even further. For example, the European Commission had once set the goal that 10% of all students in the European Community should have participated in the Erasmus programme by 1992 (Feyen, 2013), and more recently, the European ministers agreed on the goal to be that by 2020, 20% of the students in HE would have completed a study or training abroad (European Commission, 2022e). The latter target was once again reaffirmed in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué of 19 November 2020:[31] "at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have experienced a study or training period abroad" (p.6). Besides, even more ambitious quotas are not uncommon, for instance, in one of his influential speeches at the Sorbonne University, Paris, in 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron elaborated on his vision for Europe and argued that in Europe, "half of students should have spent at least six months in another European country by the time they are 25, whether they are university students or learning a trade" (Gunn, 2020, p.16). Similarly, in the Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative, the ambitious target of at least 50% mobile students has been reaffirmed (The Council of the European Union, 2022a).

[29] These numbers are calculated using the count of mobility periods started during each calendar year, including key action 1 (learners and staff for all actions) and key action 2 (schools only) of the Erasmus programme (European Commission, 2021)

[30] When speaking about mobility in Europe, Erasmus data regarding student mobility is most frequently presented, as this data is closely monitored and easily accessible. However, there are, of course, also other mobile students that are being funded by other means (such as other scholarships or by ways of own funding). Yet, it is safe to say that the great majority of student mobility in Europe is carried out under the Erasmus umbrella, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that Erasmus+ and other EU programmes account for 69% of credit-mobile graduates in European OECD countries (OECD, 2022). The tremendous growth in international student mobility also reaches further than Europe, with the OECD estimating that worldwide the number of students engaged in tertiary education programmes expanded "from 2 million students in 1998 to 5.3 million in 2017" (OECD, 2019, p.229).

[31] http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf (accessed on 19/04/2023).

However, despite these ambitious goals and the impressive exponential growth in student mobility over the years, it can be said that "to date, the European goal of 20% participation in mobility is still elusive" (Egron-Polak & Marinoni, 2022, p.82). The growth in absolute numbers seems to be enormous; yet, as Teichler (2017) reminds us "absolute figures are misleading" (p.186). It must be taken into account that in many countries HE has shifted from an experience for an elite minority to one that is available for a significant majority of the population. Hence, as pointed out in the first chapter of the *Handbook of International Higher Education* (2022), "the quantitative expansion of student numbers has been a hallmark of higher education since the middle of the 20th century" (Rumbley *et al.*, 2022, p.4). Consequently, while the total number of mobile students has grown considerably, the proportion of European students studying abroad has remained relatively stable and far below the targeted figures (see Teichler, 2017, for a critical overview of the changing role of international student mobility). According to the latest data from Eurostat, approximately 9% of EU students who graduated in 2021 participated in a mobility abroad for at least three months during their studies.[32]

While in the mid-to-late 20th century, the internationalisation discourse on individual international academic student mobility was almost always reported in highly positive terms, today, there is a growing amount of literature expressing a more critical notion. As Proctor & Rumbley (2018a) point out: "in the 21st century, space is being given to increasingly expansive and critical understandings of deeper and more complex trends and issues at play - many with profound economic, social, political, and educational implications" (p.4). While for many years the Erasmus programme has been referred to as a "success story" or "flagship programme" (*cf. supra*), the under-par participation rate leads to questioning the overall effect on the student population. Besides, quantitative indicators say little about the qualitative "outcomes" of student mobility. As a result, there is an increased awareness of the need for more inclusive internationalisation strategies to also reach the majority of non-mobile students, as will be discussed further in section II.1.3.4. Be that as it may, a recent analysis of the data of the research published between 2011 and 2013 that is held in the IDP Database of Research on International Education, shows that research on international education focuses predominantly on English-speaking countries and on only a narrow range of key topics among which international students in higher and postsecondary education, study abroad and international student mobility being the most common topics of this research (Proctor, 2016).

[32] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20231117-1 (accessed on 19/06/2024).

The popularity of focusing on student mobility in research, national policies, and institutional strategies is by no means surprising, as it can be described in quantitative terms. Even though the figures on international student mobility are methodologically also put into question as definitions vary (see Teichler, 2017), international student mobility is often used as a measurement or indicator of the internationalisation level of a higher education institution. Hence, the composition of international students and the number of incoming and outgoing mobility are also used as means to enhance institutional reputation – as these factors are used as parameters in well-known university ranking systems (*cf.* II.1.3.3) – and their given importance is also reflected in the paradigm shift from cooperation to competition, as will be discussed next.

II.1.3.2. Paradigm shift from cooperation to competition

In the 20th century, and in particular the period between the two World Wars, internationalisation in the higher education sector was mainly motivated by international cooperation and policies focusing on stimulating peace and exchange[33] (de Wit *et al.*, 2015). However, as early as 2001, Van der Wende drew attention to the fact that "competition is more and more strongly emerging in the higher education field" (Van der Wende, 2001, p.251). Van der Wende (2001) states that "whereas political, cultural and academic rationales have driven internationalisation over the last decades, now, increasingly economic rationales play a role" (p.250). Today, it is still observed that "traditional values that did drive international activities in higher education in the past, such as exchange and cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, human capital development and solidarity, although still present in the vocabulary of international education, have moved in that process to the sideline in a strive for competition, revenue and reputation/branding" (de Wit and Deca, 2020, p.5). This shift is in the literature often referred to as the paradigm shift from cooperation to competition and is largely agreed on to be one of the main manifestations of the internationalisation of higher education in Europe over the past 30 years (*e.g.,* de Wit, 2019; Sadlak, 2015; Teichler, 2023; Van der Wende, 2001).

In the European context, this paradigm shift might raise eyebrows as "competition is often associated with globalisation and connected to English-speaking countries, whereas cooperation is associated with

[33] Examples of this are the creation of the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 1919 in the United States, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in Germany in 1925, and the British Council in the UK in 1934 (de Wit *et al.*, 2015).

internationalisation and linked to continental Europe" (Luijten-Lub *et al.*, 2005, p.149). In Europe, IHE is driven by the European Union's agenda and its specific higher education programmes and policies such as the European Universities Initiative, the establishment of the European Higher Education Area and the Erasmus programme. This, at first glance, characterises Europe's internationalisation strategy as cooperative. Furthermore, in many of the countries in continental Europe, state funding is provided for education, whilst in particular, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom are known for having a competitive and by some even referred to as a "sometimes even aggressive" approach to IHE (Van der Wende, 2001, p.255). Even though cooperation is still apparent in Europe, one can speak of a paradigm shift that is characterised by the competition for students, scholars, funding, excellence, and access to top global rankings (de Wit, 2019, 2020b; Luijten-Lub *et al.*, 2005). One of the main reasons is that "the threat of competition from the Anglo-Saxon world is felt in Europe" (Van der Wende, 2001, p.256). Rumbley and Sandström (2019) state in their report named "money matters", which is based on the findings of the EAIE Barometer (second edition),[34] that "financial and economic considerations have become increasingly central to the higher education sector, both in general terms and in direct relation to internationalisation" (p.3). In many contexts, public funding for higher education is decreasing or stagnating, combining this with the fact that internationalisation activities can yield significant financial benefits, universities can be tempted to try to generate income from international activities.[35]

Furthermore, as outlined by de Wit & Deca (2020) "national governments increasingly see internationalization of higher education as an important factor in national economic development, trade and reputation" (p.8). This can be seen by several direct measures that certain countries have undertaken such as the re-evaluation of visa processes to ease the mobility of students and scholars, and the increased promotion of transnational education. Similarly, Teichler (2017) draws attention to the fact that "many observers point out a growing nationalistic or even imperialistic undercurrent of internationalisation policies" (p.184). The growing number of national excellence programmes has caused an increased focus on attracting talented students (de Wit & Deca, 2020). Egron-Polak and Marinoni (2022) argue that such "excellence initiatives" on a national but also on a regional level, such as the European Universities project

[34] The EAIE barometer is a study conducted by the European Association for International Education. "The research focuses on the current state of affairs regarding internationalisation of higher education in Europe as viewed by practitioners directly involved in the internationalisation of their institutions". More information can be on https://www.eaie.org/our-resources/barometer.html (accessed on 02/02/2023).

[35] Generating income through raising tuition fees of foreign students does of course not apply to countries in which no tuition fee is charged or between institutions where there is an exchange collaboration free of charge such as under the Erasmus+ programme.

that is being piloted by the European Commission, are "policies that generate competition among institutions of higher education to gain access to funds and often prestige" (p.77). Moreover, the emphasis on attracting talented students and students in fields in which there is declining interest from home students causes increased differentiation in higher education. For instance, under the Erasmus umbrella, national agencies and higher education institutions may set their own criteria for selecting participants eligible for funding under the Erasmus+ programme. Heger (2013) identifies that due to this decentralised structure that is applied by Erasmus, there is a strong likelihood for inequalities for certain groups of students, such as for "those studying a 'non-priority subject' at the 'wrong' university" (p.74). Even though there seems to be a consensus in the literature that the rhetoric regarding competition and economic rationales has gained momentum, it must be noted that it is also challenging to determine how far this impacts the actual internationalisation activities of institutions (Teichler, 2017). Yet one of the visible consequences of this paradigm shift is the increased importance of reputation and branding, which is manifested by national and global rankings and the increased interest in internationalisation measurements.

II.1.3.3. Reputation, branding and ranking systems

Reputation and branding manifested by national and global rankings caught increased attention around the first decade of the 21st century. However, it must be stated that just like the internationalisation of higher education, ranking systems – understood here as vertically sorted lists of HEIs or their subunits or programmes based on quantitative measurements to globally compare reputation, quality and performance (definition adapted from Hauptman Komotar, 2019 and Teichler, 2023) – are not a recent phenomenon from the 21st century but existed already a century before. Yet, due to several factors, among which the paradigm shift from cooperation to competition (*cf. supra*), it became the subject of much discourse. As Teichler (2023) outlines, these studies can be dated back to the 1920s when they first surfaced in the United States and also at a relatively early stage in Japan, and were used as crucial information and guidance for students and prestigious universities to be more demanding in their admission policy. In contrast, ranking studies were rare or non-existent in most European countries where vertical differences[36] between HEIs were considered marginal, as for example in Germany or in the Netherlands. However, due to the substantial increase in student enrolment, there became a need for the

[36] As explained by Teichler (2023), vertical differences are differences in the quality of HEIs and are described in terms as "higher or lower" or "better and worse", while horizontal differences are differences in areas of specialisation and schools of academic thought.

diversification of education. While there was mainly a strive for formal diversification, "*i.e.* manifested through laws or other regulations, of types of programmes or institutions", informal diversification through rankings also started to become more popular (Teichler, 2023, p.3). As a consequence, ranking studies "stirred up" national HE policies, and not long after, global ranking studies presented institutions' global reputations. Thus, combining the need for diversification of HE and the paradigm shift from cooperation to competition caused ranking studies to become one of the main manifestations of IHE in Europe as well (*e.g.*, de Wit, 2019, 2020; de Wit *et al.*, 2015; de Wit & Deca, 2020; Hauptman Komotar, 2019; Teichler, 2023).

One of the first main ranking initiatives, initially published in 2003, was the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai ranking, which affected the development of other ranking systems. The ARWU, together with the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THE), and the QS World University Ranking (QS), are the three most influential and major rankings of "world-class universities" (Hauptman Komotar, 2019; Teichler, 2023; Westerheijden, 2015). Even though these rankings are used by many different stakeholders – *e.g.*, by students, parents, governments, industries, and institutions – they do not come without criticism. Seeking to overcome several weaknesses of the existing rankings, the international European U-Multirank team aimed to develop an alternative ranking that would offer greater transparency and adopt a user-driven approach. The European Union sponsored the launch of this U-Multirank, viewing it as a means to address what was perceived as an underrepresentation of European universities in the major global rankings and to promote a more balanced representation (Westerheijden, 2015).

Focusing on internationalisation, today, the THE, QS, and U-Multirank are the best-known ranking organisations "measuring" or "benchmarking" internationalisation[37] (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). Table 2 shows a summary compiled by Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017) on the parameters that the THE, QS, and U-Multirank use for measuring internationalisation in their rankings.[38] It also must be noted that lately there have been ranking initiatives focusing solely on the international element(s) of universities as well. Examples of this are the THE journal publishing yearly lists of "the most international universities in

[37] ARWU is not mentioned here as ARWU does not emphasise any indicator directly linked to internationalisation but as Delgado-Márquez *et al.* (2011) point out ARWU "rather include them [the international elements] within more generic categories such as academic performance in relation to institution size" (p.280).
[38] Please refer to Hauptman Komotar (2019) for a summary of the methodological designs of ARWU, the THE ranking, QS ranking, and U-Multirank in a comprehensible overview.

the world", which they compute by using the collected metrics for the THE on the "international student score, the international staff score, the international co-authorship score and the international reputation metrics collected for the Times Higher Education World University Rankings",[39] and the QS Stars, which is developed by QS and judges international performance on a set of standards such as inbound and outbound exchange (Hauptman Komotar, 2019).

Table 2: Parameters for ranking internationalisation (reproduced from Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017, p.8)

Parameters	Organisation		
	THE	QS	U-Multirank
Composition: international students	✓	✓	
Composition: international staff	✓	✓	✓
Composition: international diversity		✓	
Incoming & outgoing student mobility		✓	✓
International student support (religious facilities)		✓	
International joint publications	✓	✓	✓

While there is the assumption that rankings increase "healthy competition" and lead to improved quality of education, there is an increasing amount of literature expressing criticism on the rankings and their potential implementations (*e.g.*, de Wit, 2020a; Hauptman Komotar, 2019; Locke, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Teichler, 2023). Although ranking systems differ in their design, these rankings mainly use numerical measurements. As pointed out by Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017) "they [the ranking systems] focus on different countable measures, most notably national composition of students and staff as well as in the numbers engaged in international movement and research" (p.8). These rankings mainly rely on quantitative parameters that are easily available, easily accessible, and indicators that can be easily converted into quantitative outcomes (Teichler, 2023). As argued by Locke (2014) "ranking systems…simplify complex information, decontextualise it so that it can be organised and integrated in particular ways, and eliminate huge amounts of other, qualitative, information that cannot be assimilated

[39] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/most-international-universities-world (accessed on 07/02/2023).

within the system" (p.79). In other words, "they count what is measured rather than measure what counts" (Locke, 2014, p.86).

It could be argued that rankings are valuable for academic quality assurance as they provide numerical information on differences between institutions and can play a role in setting university standards (Delgado-Márquez *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, it could also be argued that the parameters used are crucial indicators for HEIs to lay the foundations for the prerequisites of internationalisation, *i.e.*, having a culturally diverse student and staff population (*cf. infra,* Figure 7 for the stages of internationalisation). Yet, the focus on quantitative indicators can be argued to "represent an extremely narrow approach to defining an international university and do not represent the richness and diversity of activities undertaken by higher education institutions to become more international and intercultural" (Knight, 2018, p.109). Hence, these rankings may negatively influence HEI's internationalisation strategies by focusing on actions that support quantitative measures instead of quality improvement. This could lead to HEIs obtaining higher scores on the parameters that they are being evaluated on but might deflect away from enhancing the quality of education. Therefore, Knight (2018) points out that "one needs to seriously question whether this is part of the internationalization process or part of a university's international marketing and public relations campaign" (p.101). A job advertisement for a "strategic Reputation Manager" by the Australian University of New South Wales in 2012, the Australian La Trobe University searching for a "Manager for Institutional Rankings", or two Saudi-Arabian universities recruiting highly-cited researchers from prestigious universities willing to indicate in their publication their affiliation with those universities in return for a sum of money, which caused these two Saudi-Arabian universities making it from not listed at all into the top 200 to 300 of the ARWU ranking within 2 to 3 years, are all exemplar for what in the literature is sometimes referred to as "the ranking game" – *i.e.*, intentionally working on improving the statics of the measurements used by the major ranking systems to jockey for status and prestige (Kehm & Erkkilä, 2014; Rumbley *et al.*, 2022).

It might seem questionable how much influence these ranking systems have when considering that these major rankings only provide information on about four to six per cent of all universities globally (Kehm & Erkkilä, 2014). One might therefore wonder how rankings became one of the main manifestations of international higher education over the past 30 years – *i.e.*, why there is so much attention on rankings when they provide such limited information, are methodologically criticised, and offer little realistic chance of rising into the top group. Morphew and Swanson have pointed out that "rankings determine

and even codify which kinds of organisational behaviour and practices are legitimate" (Morphew & Swanson, 2011, p. 188 as cited in Kehm & Erkkilä, 2014). Moreover, it is argued that the measurements contribute to "objective" discussions about what constitutes quality in HE (Kehm & Erkkilä, 2014). European HEIs have fared rather poorly in the global rankings, causing the European Commission to take policy efforts to improve its position, which is directly reflected by the BP focus on the mobility of students and staff. Although the ranking institutions have no authority over nation-states nor the European Commission, it is argued that rankings influence the policy discourse and therewith have the power to construct and reframe HE policies and institutions (see Erkkilä, 2014, for more examples of how rankings influence the European Commission's HE agenda). The importance given to rankings is also reflected in the outcomes of the first and second editions of the EAIE barometer. For example, in the first edition of the EAIE barometer (2015), the respondents mentioned that improving the international reputation and the ranking position of the institution was among the most important reasons for internationalisation (Engel *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, in the latest EAIE barometer (2018), practitioners directly involved in the internationalisation of their institutions listed "international rankings-focused activities" among the top 10 internationalisation activities prioritised in strategy (Sandström & Hudson, 2018).

Policy decisions based on ranking evaluations might be biased[40] and not contribute to the quality of internationalisation efforts. When using numerical measurements there is the temptation of viewing internationalisation as an output or an end in itself, however when perceiving IHE as a goal in itself, "then it cannot serve as a means for improving the quality of higher education, research and service to society" as its widely accepted definition implies (de Wit, 2015; Hauptman Komotar, 2019, p.308). Yet, a reaction to these past manifestations of internationalisation of higher education can recently be observed – an increasing number of scholars re-emphasise that IHE should be regarded as a process and not a goal in itself. Hence, it could be argued that IHE is perhaps entering a new phase – a phase that is characterised by an increased focus on the need for inclusive internationalisation strategies.

[40] There are many biases outlined in the literature on the methodological measurements of the ranking systems such as the *lingua franca* bias and the science and engineering bias, but for the sake of relevance, clarity and conciseness, they could not all be mentioned here. For an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of the university ranking discourse, please see Teichler (2023).

II.1.3.4. Calls for more inclusive internationalisation strategies

Following the manifestations mentioned above, combined with Covid-19-related travel restrictions, increasing ecological concerns regarding carbon-intensive modes of transport, growing use of online learning environments and digital communication platforms in universities, as well as more inclusive internationalisation strategies, have all contributed to an increased focus on internationalisation at home, curriculum internationalisation, and more flexible forms of mobility (Deardorff *et al.*, 2022), as will be further explored next.

Internationalisation at home & internationalisation of the curriculum

Internationalisation at Home (IaH) rose to prominence at the turn of the century as a response to the prevailing convention of associating internationalisation solely with the movement of students and staff (Helm & Guth, 2022). Early work on the concept of IaH by Nilsson (2003) – who is also referred to as "the father of internationalization at home" (*e.g.*, Beelen & Jones, 2017, p.4) – presents how IaH was "born" in Malmö in 1998 when Nilsson became the vice president for international affairs at the newly founded university in Malmö, Sweden. In Malmö, Nilsson was faced with the challenge of not having any traditions, structures, or partnerships on which to base its internationalisation strategy. Whereas, in his previous position as the director of the International Relations Office of Lund University, the strategy was based on the mobility of individuals, at the University of Malmö, Nilsson opted for another approach: internationalisation at home (Wächter, 2003). Here, Nilsson (2003) points out that "the concept of IaH is of course not new in an international academic context—it is just a way to embrace all ideas about and measures to be taken to give all students an international dimension during their time at the university" (p.31).

According to Nilsson (2003), "the basic idea [behind IaH] has been to try to let the internationalisation process embrace the whole university: all staff and all students—not only the 10% of the mobile students and a few professors" (p.27). Nilsson sought to share his ideas and stimulate debate within the field, contributing a paper to the EAIE forum in 1999. His proposal to discuss the concept was received with great interest, leading to the creation of a special interest group on IaH, which attracted overwhelming popularity with more than 80 scholars wanting to join the specific network (Crowther *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, a small vanguard of a steering committee was proposed (including Paul Crowther, Michael

Joris, Bengt Nilsson, Matthias Otten, Hanneke Teekens and Bernd Wächter) who put together a substantial publication on the matter, which was distributed as a booklet titled *Internationalisation at Home: A Position Paper* at the 2000 EAIE Annual Conference, serving as a base for further discussion. In this position paper, they defined IaH as "any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility" (Crowther *et al.*, 2000, p.6).

While this was not made explicitly clear in the original proposition paper, Wächter (2003) later explained that the concept of IaH proposed by the committee rested on two pillars: "an understanding of internationalisation that went beyond mobility and a strong emphasis on the teaching and learning in a culturally diverse setting" (p.6). The position paper does, however, include a section on "impacts of cultural diversity at home", in which the authors specify that IaH can adopt a diversity approach:

> *"which highlights the importance of differences as a fundamental issue in modern society and in organisations, culture is not limited to nationality or ethnicity. It includes also other distinctions of social differences such as gender, profession or age. In this notion, cultural diversity refers to social differentiation in a wider sense. When variations in social interaction such as learning and teaching are examined, ethnicity, nationality and language, gender or profession have to be considered as relevant 'cultural variables'" (Crowther et al., 2000, p. 15-16).*

With this, they perhaps started to touch upon viewing interculturality and "intercultural competence" learning as something beyond the essentialist paradigm (this will be elaborated in section II.2. Intercultural communication competence) in which IaH has the opportunity to "make use of the potential input of the rich cultural diversity that surrounds us in our direct living situation" (*ibid*, p.34). Yet, in the position paper, this cultural diversity was mainly presented by ways of making use of the local international community, such as international students or "students who come from families who have migrated from other parts of the world" (p.29).

Taking another approach, Beelen and Jones (2015) argue that IaH can be achieved without the necessity of international students (although their inclusion can be advantageous) and that if we embrace a broad concept of 'culture' (*cf.* the discussion in section II.2. Intercultural communication competence), we also must recognise that every classroom has a diverse range of students which can be the foundation for exploring the international and intercultural aspects of the curriculum, regardless of the presence of

international students. The position paper on IaH has been critiqued for not elaborating on what elements constitute the concept (Wächter, 2003), and the proposed definition has been criticised for focusing on what IaH is not rather than concentrating on what it actually indicates. Besides, it is questioned why the definition does not mention the intercultural dimension as this was one of the key elements from the outset (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Therefore, Beelen and Jones (2015) revised the definition of IaH and updated it to IaH being:

> *"the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (p.69).*

Here, Beelen and Jones (2015) suggest that "a variety of instruments can be used to internationalize teaching and learning: comparative international literature, guest lectures by speakers from local cultural groups or international companies, guest lecturers of international partner universities, international case studies and practice or, increasingly, digital learning and online collaboration… [Furthermore, they outline that] technology-based solutions can ensure equal access to internationalization opportunities for all students. The same is true for engagement with local cultural and international groups, which may also be available to all students, and can be considered a distinctive element of Internationalization at Home" (p. 64).

Internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) is a closely related concept, albeit where IaH excludes mobility across borders, IoC does not exclude activities outside domestic borders. Hence, IaH has been regarded as a subset within the broader framework of curriculum internationalisation (Helm & Guth, 2022). When speaking about curriculum internationalisation, the proposed definition by Leask (2015) is commonly referred to:

> *"Internationalization of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study." (p. 9)*

Leask stresses that this definition supports both the formal curriculum - "the syllabus as well as the orderly, planned schedule of experiences and activities that students must undertake as part of their degree program", and the informal curriculum - "the various support services and additional activities and

options organized by the university that are not assessed and don't form part of the formal curriculum, although they may support learning within it" (Leask, 2015, p.8). Furthermore, Leask (2015) draws attention to the hidden curriculum – "the various unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students—messages we may not even be aware we are sending" such as the textbooks that are selected (*ibid*). Identical to IHE, Leask (2015) argues that it is helpful "to distinguish between the *process*[41] of internationalization of the curriculum and its *product,*[42] an internationalized curriculum" (p.9), defining the latter as one that "will engage students with internationally informed research and cultural and linguistic diversity and purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens" (p.10). According to Leask (*ibid*) "mobility programs are a means by which students might develop desired international and intercultural perspectives" but are not evidence of an internationalised curriculum *per se*. Throughout the book*, Internationalizing the Curriculum,* Leask (2015) stresses the importance of the careful construction of learning environments and making important links that IoC has to teaching delivery, learning processes and assessment practices. Recently, Brewer and Leask (2022) proposed ten priorities for guiding the curriculum internationalisation process as displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Ten priorities for guiding the process of curriculum internationalisation (adapted from Brewer & Leask, 2022)

Ten priorities for guiding the process of curriculum internationalisation*

- *Focus on all students learning outcomes*
- *Approach IoC as a holistic reform process*
- *Pay attention to the co-curriculum*
- *Look beyond the dominant knowledge paradigm*
- *Design for learning*
- *Pedagogy and assessment*
- *Build the intercultural capacity of staff and students*
- *Engage with diversity at home*
- *Engage students as partners*
- *Support faculty and staff*

**The priorities are not ranked in order of importance*

[41] Italicised as in original.
[42] Italicised as in original.

Although numerous practitioners in the field perceive IoC and IaH as distinct and, in a sense, conflicting ideas, Beelen (2023) points out that "they should be considered interwoven concepts that overlap and are essentially the same" (p.105). Both IaH and IoC acknowledge that IHE is no longer an *ad hoc* element in HEIs and push to challenge the assumption that "study abroad offers the golden remedy" (Jones, 2017, p.355). Both concepts seem to be aimed at benefiting a large population of students who might not have the chance to study abroad but can still cultivate their "multilingual and intercultural competence" by engaging with various (incoming) students, by participating in online collaborations with peers from different backgrounds, or by forms of short-term mobility. Within this context, I deliberately do not wish to choose one of the concepts as I see IaH and IoC as overlapping concepts that are born out of the same spirit, namely, making intercultural and international learning accessible to all students. Within this thesis, the terms IoC and IaH will be used interchangeably, with the remark that I understand this in the spirit of embracing the possibility of enhancing students' "intercultural communication competence" beyond solely traditional exchange periods, acknowledging that international and intercultural learning opportunities should be accessible to all students regardless of their background or study cycles.

Within this context, telecollaboration, virtual exchange (VE), virtual mobility and online intercultural exchange are frequently associated with the idea of advancing internationalisation, particularly in relation to IaH and IoC. As de Wit (2016) argues, "online intercultural learning is in this comprehensive context a logical step towards a more inclusive, innovative approach to internationalisation" (p.76). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, prevailing models of internationalisation had already been criticised for their strong focus on mobility, economic drivers and the participation of a relatively small, mobile elite, often at the expense of more inclusive, curriculum-based approaches that aim to foster global and intercultural learning outcomes for all students (*cf. supra*; Helm & Guth, 2022). The pandemic further intensified calls to embed international and intercultural dimensions more systematically into home curricula, and VE soon became, as noted by O'Dowd and Beelen (2021), "one of the hottest topics in international higher education".[43] The European Commission (2022d) identifies virtual exchange as one of the activities associated with IaH and describes it as a means through which students "gain international experience and develop intercultural skills".

[43] Although VE is not anything new and has been carried out in university settings for over 20 years, it was not widely viewed as a tool for internationalising HE (see O'Dowd, 2022).

According to de Wit (2016), VE programmes are particularly relevant to internationalisation because they combine four essential dimensions: they represent a collaborative, international exercise involving teachers and students; they make purposeful use of online technology to foster interaction; they have the potential to lead to active intercultural and international learning outcomes; and they can be deliberately integrated into formal learning processes. There is considerable support in the literature for the potential of online modes of exchanges between people from different "cultures" to contribute to more "inclusive" and curriculum-embedded forms of internationalisation (Hauck et al., 2025; Helm & Guth, 2022; O'Dowd, 2023; O'Dowd & Beelen, 2021; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). At the same time, several researchers note points of caution. As stated by Helm & Guth (2022), "it should not be seen as a panacea, because with the potential benefits also come risks" (p.272). VE is not inherently inclusive (Hauck *et al.*, 2025), and as O'Dowd and Beelen warn, "we need to be careful not to assume that a single VE activity can internationalise an entire curriculum". Alongside these novel virtual forms of promoting internationalisation and mobility, there exists a blended variant (see O'Dowd, 2023; for a discussion on terminology, definitions, and forms of virtual exchange, virtual mobility, and blended mobility), and it is this specific blended activity that is the focus of this thesis.

Blended intensive programmes

As previously outlined, the internationalisation of higher education in Europe is strongly influenced by the European Union's internationalisation strategy and policy (*cf. supra*). Consequently, it is not surprising that the European Union's flagship programme, when it comes to education, tends to reflect the same development towards encouraging internationalisation activities that include wider audiences. The Erasmus programme evidently reflected this when the programme broadened its focus and added a plus to its name when announcing its programme for 2014-2020. While the Erasmus programme was focused on student and staff mobility between universities, the Erasmus+ programme, starting in 2014, became more inclusive by offering "opportunities to study, train or volunteer abroad for vocational students, apprentices, teachers, youth workers and volunteers" to reach wider levels of education (European Commission, 2021, p.5). Even though physical learning mobility "continues to remain the essence and the backbone of the Erasmus+ programme", the programme now reaches wider levels of education (*ibid*, p.5).

According to the European Commission, the Erasmus+ most recent programme, for the period 2021 to 2027, "takes its inclusive dimension to a new horizon by supporting opportunities for personal, socio-educational and professional development of people in Europe and beyond, with the aim of leaving no-

one behind" (European Commission, 2022c, p.4).[44] With a budget of €26.2 billion, complemented with about €2.2 billion from the EU's external instruments, the most recent Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) has nearly doubled its budget compared to its predecessor programme (2014-2020).[45] The new programme aims to increase the number of participants while focusing on accessibility, inclusiveness, and greener and digitally fit societies,[46] with the stated aim of "ultimately equip[ping] young people and participants of all ages with the qualifications and skills needed for their meaningful participation in democratic society, intercultural understanding and successful transition in the labour market" (European Commission, 2022c, p.4). The programme's general objective is stated as follows:

> *"The general objective of the Programme is to support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship. As such, the Programme shall be a key instrument for building a European Education Area, supporting the implementation of the European strategic cooperation in the field of education and training, with its underlying sectoral agendas. In addition, it is key in advancing youth policy cooperation under the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and developing the European dimension in sport" (European Commission, 2022c, p.6).*

This is succeeded by three specific objectives:[47]

- *promote learning mobility of individuals and groups, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of education and training;*

[44] There is an accessible web format of the programme guide (2021-2027) available at https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/erasmus-programme-guide/introduction. The web format of the programme guide is continuously updated, and the European Commission also regularly publishes updated PDF formats. In this study, the published programme guide version 2 (2022), published on 26/01/2022, has been used as a reference.
[45] See Erasmus+ annual report 2020 available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7bda9285-5cc4-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en (accessed on 01/03/2024).
[46] As aligned with the DG EAC Strategic priorities as described in section II.1.2.1. European Union-level perspective.
[47] Objectives directly taken from the Erasmus+ programme guide 2021-2027, guide version 2 (2022), published on 26/01/2022, p.6.

- *promote non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of youth;*
- *promote learning mobility of sport staff, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of sport organisations and sport policies.*

To achieve its objectives, the Erasmus+ programme distinguishes three key actions of implementation:

- Key action 1 (KA1) – mobility of individuals
- Key action 2 (KA2) – cooperation among organisations and institutions
- Key action 3 (KA3) – support to policy development and cooperation.

KA1 is especially important for this thesis as BIPs fall under this action (*cf. infra*). The stated aim of this specific action is "to foster employability, social inclusion, civic engagement, innovation and environmental sustainability in Europe and beyond by enabling students from all study fields and at all study cycles to have the opportunity to study or train abroad as part of their studies" (European Commission, 2022c, p.40). In addition, they outline several specific objectives for the mobility of individuals:[48]

- *expose students to different views, knowledge, teaching and research methods as well as work practices in their study field in the European and international context;*
- *develop their transversal skills such as communication skills, language skills, critical thinking, problem solving, intercultural skills and research skills;*
- *develop their forward looking skills, such as digital and green skills, that will enable them to tackle the challenges of today and tomorrow;*
- *facilitate personal development such as the ability to adapt to new situations and self-confidence.*

[48] Objectives directly taken from the Erasmus+ programme guide 2021-2027, guide version 2 (2022), published on 26/01/2022, p.40.

The objective is also focused on staff, for which it is seen as part of their professional development in order to:[49]

- *share their expertise;*
- *experience new teaching environments;*
- *acquire new innovative pedagogical and curriculum design skills as well as digital skills;*
- *connect with their peers abroad to develop common activities to achieve the programme's objectives;*
- *exchange good practices and enhance cooperation between higher education institutions;*
- *better prepare students for the world of work.*

Moreover, they emphasise that the "objective is to foster the development of transnational and transdisciplinary curricula as well as innovative ways of learning and teaching, including online collaboration, research-based learning and challenge-based approaches with the objective of tackling societal challenges" (*ibid*).

While Erasmus+ still strongly encourages long-term physical mobility, KA1 also recognises the need for more flexible forms of mobility. In the context of becoming more accessible, inclusive, digital, and green, "blended mobility" in the form of "blended intensive programmes" has been introduced as a "novelty" in its most recent programme (European Commission, 2022a). Blended intensive programmes are short-term programmes that combine physical mobility with a virtual component and are, in the Erasmus+ programme guide, defined as:

> *"Short, intensive programmes that use innovative ways of learning and teaching, including the use of online cooperation. The programmes may include challenge based learning where transnational and transdisciplinary teams work together to tackle challenges for example those linked to the United Nations' sustainable development goals or other societal challenges identified by regions, cities or companies. The intensive programme should have added value compared to existing courses or trainings offered by the participating higher education institutions and can be*

[49] Objectives directly taken from the Erasmus+ programme guide 2021-2027, guide version 2 (2022), published on 26/01/2022, p.40.

multiannual. By enabling new and more flexible mobility formats that combine physical mobility with a virtual part, blended intensive programmes aim at reaching all types of students from all backgrounds, study fields and cycles" (European Commission, 2022c, p.47).

Several eligibility criteria have been set by Erasmus+ in order to qualify for mobility projects under KA1 (these criteria can be found in Appendix I - Erasmus+ general eligibility criteria). On top of these, specific eligibility criteria have been set for blended intensive programmes, the most important being that these BIPs must be developed and implemented by at least 3 HEIs coming from at least 3 EU Member States and third countries associated with the programme.[50] The programme must combine collaborative online learning with short-term physical mobility, in which the physical mobility must have a duration of at least 5 days and a maximum of 30 days, while no criteria have been set for the duration of the virtual component. For the BIP to be eligible for funding, at least 15 mobile participants (not including teaching and training staff) must participate[51] and the BIP must award at least 3 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) to students. Please see Appendix II - Erasmus+ specific eligibility criteria for BIPs for a full overview of the criteria.

According to the Erasmus+ programme guide (2021-2027), there is no qualitative assessment nor award criteria for the mobility projects, reasoning that "the quality has been assessed at the ECHE application stage or when selecting a mobility consortium accreditation" (European Commission, 2022c, p.61). Therefore, any application that passes the eligibility check will get funding with the maximum grant amount depending on:

- *The number of mobilities applied for;*

[50] Please see https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/eligible-countries for the list of EU Member States and third countries associated to the Erasmus+ programme (accessed on 03/01/2024).

[51] Whereas in the calls for BIPs in 2021 and 2022 the minimum requirement was to have 15 mobile participants, recently, this criterion has been decreased to 10 mobile participants. In the latest version of the programme at the time of writing (October 2025), the guide states the following:
"To be eligible for organisational support, a blended intensive programme needs to involve a minimum of 10 Erasmus+ mobile learners supported by internal policy funds (not including teaching/training staff involved in the delivery of the programme). These 10 mobile learners must be undertaking their mobility specifically to attend the blended intensive programme through either one of the following Erasmus+ mobility activities: blended short-term student mobility for studies or blended staff mobility for training" (p.59). Source: Erasmus+ programme guide Version 1 12/11/2025 (2026): https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/programme-guide-2026_en.pdf.

- *The past performance of the applicant in terms of number of mobilities, good quality in the implementation of activities and sound financial management, in case the applicant has received a similar grant in previous years;*
- *The number of blended intensive programmes applied for;*
- *The total national budget allocated for the mobility action for mobility projects supported by internal policy funds (ibid).*

Once awarded a grant, Erasmus+ funding is available for the institution(s) organising the BIP for costs directly linked to the organisation of the BIPs[52] and for the mobile participants. The organisational support grant is based on the number of mobile participants, 400 EUR per participant, with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 20 funded participants,[53] allocating together for a funding of 6000 to 8000 EUR of funding per course for the organisers. This organisational support funding can be used for expenses accrued by the participating institutions regarding the coordination of blended intensive programs and encompasses various aspects, including those associated with programme preparation, design, development, implementation, and post-program follow-up. This financial support extends to both in-person and virtual/remote activities, as well as the overall management and coordination efforts, but cannot be used for subsistence and travel costs for participants, nor to pay the teachers/trainers involved in the delivery of the programme.[54] Besides organisational funding, Erasmus+ also offers grants for the participants, which are based on the duration of the physical component of the mobility.[55]

Blended mobility in practice

Blended mobility in the form of combining an online component with physical mobility is not a new concept, and there are multiple examples of blended mobility projects that have been carried out under the internationalisation realm supported by the Erasmus programme. Some of these initiatives resemble the current notion of Blended Intensive Programmes. For instance, Malichová *et al.* (2022) describe the *SmartSoc* project,[56] coordinated by the University of Žilina in Slovakia, which brought together students

[52] Here, the coordinating HEI is responsible for sharing the organisational support grant among the different partners involved in the BIPs who incurred organisational costs.
[53] Recently, the minimum has been adjusted to 10 participants, see footnote 51.
[54] For more information on the organisational support grant for BIPs, see p.73-74 of the Erasmus+ programme guide (2021-2027) version 2 (2022).
[55] 70 EUR per day up to the 14th day of activity, and 50 EUR per day from the 15th to the 30th day of the activity. For more information, see p.68 of the Erasmus+ programme guide (2021-2027) version 2 (2022).
[56] "The main objective of the SmartSoc project was to create and implement an intensive interdisciplinary course in the field of ICT-based entrepreneurship, considering the transnational and intercultural context. This project

from various European universities to work on tasks addressing societal needs and smart ICT solutions through blended mobility and intensive courses supported under Key Action 2 of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2021). The project involved eight ICT-based entrepreneurial cases each year (2020, 2021, 2022), which student teams solved during a blended mobility combining a ten-week virtual component with a two-week physical phase.[57] The concept seems to be very similar to the notion of BIPs. BIPs, however, are an innovative form of short-term mobility that were newly introduced under the Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027), with funding available not only for staff and institutions but also for students across all study cycles and disciplines.[58] Hence, Malichová *et al.* (2022) argue that their project could serve as "a well-developed basis" for future cooperation and that their experience could inform the organisation of BIPs, particularly regarding the need for a more effectively structured virtual component, as coordinating students and teachers proved challenging.

In 2022, the European Commission published a blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility to provide guidance for beneficiaries of KA131 funds (under which BIP is funded)[59] on how to implement and organise "high quality" blended mobility opportunities. They acknowledge it to be a "living document" as new evidence emerges, but it is drafted upon good practices of virtual and distance learning. Furthermore, the document provides more detailed insight than the overall Erasmus+ Programme Guide (2021–2027) into the rationale for introducing BIPs. In here, it is reasoned that "the general objective for the new Erasmus+ programme is to boost learning and training opportunities in Europe and worldwide and to include more people in this experience, blended (short-term) mobilities can be an important first step for students who are hesitant to go abroad" (European Commission, 2022a, p.5). The guide frequently refers to how BIPs are integrated as "novelties" to provide more inclusive mobility forms and argues that BIPs have the potential to encourage IaH. BIPs appear to be introduced to accommodate the different needs, situations and aspirations of the diverse student population reasoning that BIPs create the opportunity to especially reach "people who could not

enforced ICT student teams to deal with economic, societal and environmental challenges defined by strategic documents 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' and 'Horizon Europe' programmes" (Malichová *et al.*, 2022, p.309).

[57] However, due to the pandemic it was impossible for them to carry out the physical mobility.

[58] In the previous Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), physical mobility of a short duration was not possible for students but only for staff and in KA2 strategic partnerships, so BIPs have been introduced as a novelty under KA1 in the most recent programme.

[59] The Blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility KA131 can be found at https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8a4bbab0-540d-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1 (accessed on 03/01/2024).

participate in a mobility programme before, in particular, students from different backgrounds, including those with fewer opportunities… [and BIPS] might also work well for students in highly specialised fields or training for regulated professions" (*ibid*, p.6-7). Hence, they emphasise that blended formats, being flexible in nature, "can boost mobility numbers" (*ibid*, p.7).

In the blended mobility implementation guide, the European Commission also highlights that BIPs can help build students' confidence and can serve as a stepping stone towards longer mobility periods, as students can already participate in a BIP during their first year of studies. They argue that "when students can be encouraged to participate in short blended programmes early in their student career, they will be more likely to participate in full semester programmes later in their studies" (European Commission, 2022, p.6). Moreover, they argue that BIPs also have the potential to encourage IaH, providing the potential for home students to interact with international students and staff.[60] It is stated that "blended intensive programmes should serve to accomplish the institution's internationalisation strategy, addressing the European higher education priorities, such as digitalisation, sustainable development and inclusion, and enhancing the institutions' cross-border activities" (*ibid*, p.11). They introduce BIPs with the idea that it can lead to innovative teaching practices and more flexible learning pathways, as students can work together across different disciplines with the opportunity to learn "new types of competences" potentially leading to micro credentials (*ibid*, p.8).[61] The European Commission concludes outlining the benefits of BIPs by stating that "blended mobility serves the purpose of promoting and implementing quality mobility, while at the same time achieving all the horizontal priorities of Erasmus+ such as inclusion, digitalisation, sustainable development[62] and active civic participation. In short, through the new blended options, the main objective of the Erasmus+ programme, which is the development of the participants' professional and personal skills by learning from abroad, can be more easily accomplished" (*ibid*, p.9).

According to the guide, the physical mobility must "always [be] combined with a virtual component to make sure that the overall experience is long enough to be meaningful in the same way that long-term physical mobility traditionally is" (p.9). The virtual component of the BIP can take place before, during or

[60] Although the "local students" do not receive financial support from Erasmus+, the BIP guide does argue that they should be able to participate.
[61] Although what these "new types of competences" include remains rather vague, it could plausibly be interpreted that "intercultural competence" is among these targeted competences.
[62] This can be seen as contradicting, given the fact that BIPs still include a physical mobility phase and are also presented as an activity that may encourage participation in longer mobility periods.

after the physical mobility and is introduced to complement it by promoting online cooperation and teamwork. In the guide, it is outlined that the virtual component can be used as a way to prepare students for the physical mobility phase, by ways of initiating contacts and supporting social networks to facilitate friendships among the participants. In the same line of thought, it is stated that "the physical mobility component in a blended mobility should be a period that allows for meaningful interaction with other students and group integration in the host institution, in addition to participation in educational courses, and its content should be connected to the virtual component and mutually reinforcing" (*ibid*, p.10). It is often emphasised in the guide that the institutions must recognise both the importance of the virtual and physical components of learning. To give a more profound idea of what BIPs could look like, the European Commission presents two illustrative scenarios, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Two example scenarios for BIPs under Erasmus+

Scenario 1: A Blended Intensive Programme for students*

An Erasmus+ institutional coordinator sends information to academic staff within the institution to advertise blended intensive programmes. A business studies academic is working on how small businesses can lead the way in the implementation of the sustainable development goals and wants to introduce this idea to more students but is not able to create a full new course yet. To develop the idea further, the academic gets in touch with colleagues from three other universities and they decide to organise a blended intensive programme in the form of a summer school which will focus on innovative ways to include the sustainable development goals in the daily operations of small businesses. The institution of the academic includes the blended intensive programme in their Erasmus+ grant application after discussing it with the academic and coordinating with the Erasmus+ offices of the partners. The minimum number of participants in a blended intensive programme is 15 mobile learners but all partners decide to send 10 participants to minimise the risk of not reaching the minimum number of participants. The institution of the academic which will host the programme will also send involve 10 local participants but they do not count towards the 15 minimum as they receive no funding. The programme starts with a seven day physical programme which includes a visit to several local businesses. After the physical component, the students cooperate online to develop their ideas and hand in a final report, which is assessed by the staff. The whole programme awards 3 ECTS credits.

Scenario 2: A blended intensive programme for students in cooperation with outside stakeholders*

An SME or a municipality approaches a university with a topic or a challenge they would like students to work on. The university contacts some of their partner universities and eventually applies for funding to organise a blended intensive programme. The programme is open to students from various disciplines and allows students to improve their problem-solving skills, along with their entrepreneurial and cooperation skills. The teachers also come from different disciplines within the BIP partnership and the programme additionally invites speakers from the enterprise/municipality and other organisations working on the topic of the programme. The intensive programme starts with two weeks of physical mobility where the participants visit the enterprise/municipality to get to know it and have a better understanding of the topic of the programme and the challenge they will be working on. They furthermore get the chance to get to know each other and attend workshops and seminars that will prepare them for their online work. After the two weeks of physical mobility, the virtual component continues every other week for three more months under the guidance of teachers from the BIP partnership where the participants cooperate online across disciplines and countries on solutions, always staying in regular contact with the enterprise/municipality. Finally students submit their final report and present their work to the enterprise/municipality and receive 5 ECTS credits.

*These scenarios are directly taken from the European Commission's (2022) Blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility KA131 (p.15-16).

Although in the introduction of the guide it is stated that the guide will "provide future and current beneficiaries of KA131 funds within the Erasmus+ programme with guidance and inspiration on how to organise and implement high quality blended mobility opportunities, both for outgoing and incoming Erasmus+ participants" (p.5), limited information is provided on how to actually implement BIPs "successfully" as the guide mainly further provides objectives for its implementation, example scenarios, and examples of existing blended projects within EUAs. Nonetheless, a few bullet points with advice are outlined. For the virtual component, they draw attention to the fact that the institutions should keep the following in mind when organising blended student mobility:

Figure 5: BIP Implementation advice for the virtual component provided by the European Commission

Advice provided in the Blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility KA131 (2022) for the virtual component of blended mobility:[63]

- Clear and comprehensive agreements have to be made between participating institutions about grades, recognition and quality assurance.
- The virtual component may have specific practical challenges that organisers need to be aware of, such as time zone differences, unaligned academic calendars and variance in technological resources.
- Creating an easy and functional online learning environment is crucial to ensure effective cooperation and learning opportunities.
- The online environment can be used to share theoretical insights and promote individual learning that provides a basis for the physical interaction, for example the virtual component can take place before the physical mobility as a preparatory phase where the members of the group get to know each other and materials can be shared.
- Teachers and staff have to be well prepared to host online classrooms and be trained in diverse online pedagogical approaches.
- The virtual component should allow for cooperation between participants from the different participating countries, for example in small groups to allow for meaningful interaction.

And for the physical component, they give the following advice:

Figure 6: BIP implementation advice for the physical mobility component provided by the European Commission

Advice provided in the Blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility KA131 (2022) for the physical component of blended mobility:[64]

- The physical mobility should as much as possible allow for group work, discussion and intellectual exchange instead of only lectures.
- With the theoretical basis of a virtual preparatory component, the physical component can be well-suited to put the acquired theoretical knowledge into practice, for example in laboratory work, field work, visits and interviews.

[63] Directly taken from the Blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility KA131 (2022), pages 12-13.
[64] Directly taken from the Blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility KA131 (2022), p.13.

- Many existing examples of blended mobility show that the physical mobility component is specifically well-suited to connect to the local environment, for field trips and to engage with local businesses, civil society actors etc.
- The programme of the physical component needs to be well-defined and well prepared beforehand, leaving enough time for social interaction and networking.
- For physical mobility as part of a blended mobility project, different practical arrangements have to be put in place compared to regular mobilities, especially concerning housing and access to the host institution's facilities and other student support.

As BIPs have only recently been introduced within the Erasmus+ framework, academic research on these programmes is still emerging. Although the body of literature has grown between 2022 and 2025, BIPs remain a relatively new object of scholarly inquiry. To date, only a limited number of studies have explicitly focused on BIPs (Clement et al., 2023; Frampton et al., 2023, 2025; Jager, 2025; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; Sletnes et al., 2025). These contributions have examined organising principles for BIPs (Frampton *et al.*, 2023, 2025), their role within internationalisation strategies (Clement *et al.*, 2023), and provided overviews of current typologies (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). And, more recently, has begun to explore students' motivations for participating in BIPs (Sletnes *et al.,* 2025).

For example, Frampton *et al.* (2023) describe how they adopted an innovative aesthetic and arts-based approach in a BIP on social work in response to what they identify as the "heterogeneity of international social work curricula, coupled with the linguistic and cultural diversity of students" attending such a programme (p.1). They argue that, in contrast to traditional social work classes, the pronounced heterogeneity among BIP participants requires educators both to introduce students to the field of social work and to remain mindful that an exclusive focus on established professional practices may risk alienating some participants. Hence, Frampton *et al.* (2023) propose adopting a different pedagogical style that draws "inspiration from the arts" (p.5). They describe, for example, the use of a music-based exercise as an icebreaker to encourage openness among participants, and the use of tango as a way of developing communication competence. This approach is grounded in the broader pedagogical orientation articulated in the European Commission's guidance on blended mobility, which emphasises that physical mobility should prioritise group work, discussion, and intellectual exchange rather than only lectures, and that BIPs should focus on facilitating friendships, contacts, and social networking alongside academic learning (*cf.* Figure 6). In this context, Frampton *et al.* (2023) emphasise that "the ability to relate to 'the other' (for instance the culturally, socially, ethnically, and linguistically other) is a key social work

competence", hence they argue that "relationships are not an add-on aspect of the week's learning: instead, they form the week's pedagogic heart" (p.4).

Another study by Clement *et al.* (2023) focuses on how the KU Leuven is bringing online mobility to their "mainstream offering", with particular attention to BIPs, which they categorise as a form of online mobility contributing to the university's home internationalisation objectives under the policy of "Mobility for All". They outline that the "KU Leuven Learning Lab" already uses a design team approach for educational support based on the TPACK model[65] by Mishra and Koehler (2006) (as cited in Clement *et al.*, 2023, p.7), arguing that teachers "do not only need content (what) and pedagogical knowledge (how) to design their learning activities and courses, but also technological knowledge (using what tools) for successful edtech integration", they provide design teams where the three different types (content-specific, pedagogical, and technological) of knowledge are represented. At the same time, they argue that "designing international online learning activities also appeals to international and intercultural literacy", thus reasoning that when supporting and designing online international learning activities such as BIPs, a design team must be composed in a way in which also the international and intercultural knowledge is represented.

The previous section has outlined the context and discourse in which BIPs have been introduced under the Erasmus+ programme, discussed their specific characteristics and requirements, and reviewed emerging literature on these programmes. While the knowledge base on BIPs is growing, there is scope for further research on both implementation practices and learning intentions. As O'Dowd (2023) notes, two principal reasons are commonly given for combining physical mobility and virtual components. First, blended mobility is argued to be a more inclusive form of mobility, potentially reaching a wider audience of students, a rationale that is clearly reflected in the discourse on BIPs and the broader manifestations of internationalisation discussed so far. Second, what O'Dowd (2023) describes as the "best of both worlds" argument, which suggests that students can benefit from direct contact with another culture in person while also having opportunities to develop skills associated with collaboration and online communication (p.19), echoing the European Commission's emphasis on fostering both a "digitally fit society" and "intercultural understanding" (*cf. supra*). However, many of these aspects remain under-

[65] Abbreviation for: Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge.

explored, and examining BIPs within the wider conceptual frameworks of internationalisation and intercultural communication competence may provide further insights.

II.1.4. Internationalisation of higher education: Towards an intercultural communication competence approach

Thus far, the various definitions and rationales that different actors have given for processes of internationalisation, the different forms that internationalisation has taken over the past few decades, and the more inclusive internationalisation strategies that HEIs are encouraged to pursue in their increasing efforts to internationalise have been examined. Up to this point, this study has not adopted any of the definitions discussed earlier. Echoing Knight (*e.g.,* 2004, 2018, 2021), the view is instead taken that a general definition of IHE should be broad enough to suit various contexts, especially considering the various actors that are involved or have stakes in BIPs. However, the degree of subjectivity in the updated definition proposed by de Wit *et al.* (2015) may also be questioned; the inclusion of aims, such as enhancing the quality of education for all students and staff, and making a meaningful contribution to society, arguably introduces ambiguity. This raises the question of whether internationalisation is an ideologically driven policy or a social fact that emerges for a variety of institutionally driven reasons, which may or may not be ideological.

Although various institutions may share a common interpretation or definition of internationalisation, the way they approach its implementation varies significantly due to a variety of reasons. Hence, Knight introduced the notion of "approach", intended to describe and assess the manner in which internationalisation is conceptualised and implemented. She argues that an approach reflects the values, priorities, and actions that are exhibited while working towards the implementation of internationalisation (Knight, 2004, p.18). Knight (1994) outlines that there are predominantly four approaches to internationalisation, notably: *process*, *activity*, *competency*, and *organisational* (Knight,

1994).[66] These approaches are not mutually exclusive, nor are they meant to exclude the possibility of other approaches. In this section, the approach(es) through which internationalisation is viewed in this study will be outlined, drawing on those predominantly identified by Knight (1994). The four preliminary categories appear to be all-encompassing and provide a suitable frame for this study (see Table 3). Each category will be developed separately in the following section.

Table 3: The internationalisation approaches adopted in this study

Approach	Description by Knight (1994)	Application in this study
Process approach	Frames internationalisation as a process which integrates an international dimension or perspective into the major functions of the institution. Terms such as infuse, integrate, permeate, and incorporate are used to characterise the process approach. A wide range of activities, policies and procedures are part of this process.	Internationalisation is seen not as a goal in itself but as a process that may lead to the enhancement of competences among students, such as "intercultural communication competence".
Activity approach	Describes internationalisation in terms of categories or types of activities such as curriculum, scholar/student exchange and technical cooperation.	Blended Intensive Programmes will be the specific internationalisation activity taken as the object of this study. Hence, BIPs will be viewed as an activity that contributes to the internationalisation of higher education.
Competency approach	Looks at internationalisation in terms of developing new skills, attitudes, and knowledge in students, faculty and staff. The focus is clearly on the human	Internationalisation will be specifically viewed from the perspective that it has the potential to enhance "intercultural

[66] More recently, in the book *Higher Education in Turmoil: The Changing World of Internationalization*, Knight also distinguishes between approaches on the national- or sector-level (*i.e.,* programmes, rationales, *ad hoc*, policy, and strategic) and institutional-level (activity, outcomes, rationales, process, ethos, and abroad/cross-border) (Knight, 2008). This study draws on the four approaches identified previously to frame its analytical perspective, as these categories together provide a comprehensive framework for the analysis.

	dimension not on academic activities or organisational issues.	communication competence" among students (and staff).
Organisational approach	Focuses on developing an ethos or culture in the university or college that values and supports intercultural and international perspectives and initiatives.	The study will be situated within the context of the European University Alliance FORTHEM.

Internationalisation of Higher Education: A Process

There appears to be much support for viewing internationalisation as a process, as already hinted by the various proposed definitions (*cf. supra*), but also frequently emphasised by various prominent researchers in the field (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; de Wit et al., 2015; de Wit & Deca, 2020; Deardorff et al., 2022; Hunter et al., 2022; Knight, 2003, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). This means that in this study it is acknowledged that internationalisation is not a goal in itself and is not solely equated with mobility, recruitment and global rankings, but can be used as an instrument with the opportunity to enhance students' competences (Beelen, 2023; Hunter et al., 2022). Viewing internationalisation as an intentional process also means that internationalisation does not happen automatically but requires deliberate actions, such as the implementation of BIPs.

Blended Intensive Programmes as Internationalisation Activities

This study acknowledges that internationalisation does not operate in a vacuum and that BIPs are simply one of the many possible activities that contribute towards internationalisation objectives. As pointed out by Beelen (2023) as well, "a common misconception is that specific components of internationalisation…are confused with the concept as a whole" (p.105). Internationalisation is argued to be "a phenomenon that demands and exerts change, while simultaneously responding and adapting to shifting contextual realities" (Proctor & Rumbley, 2018a, p.4). Today's reality is that mobility continues to be the dominant internationalisation activity (at least in the European context), supported and encouraged by the European Commission. At the same time, there is recognition that traditional mobility has not achieved its targeted participation levels, and that the benefits of internationalisation should be accessible to all students rather than only the small proportion who are mobile. Consequently, BIPs have been introduced as a "novelty", and only limited research has been carried out on the phenomenon that is now strongly encouraged by calls for funding under the current Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027). In

this context, BIPs are understood in this study as a specific activity situated within the broader processes of internationalising HE.

Internationalisation of Higher Education: Enhancing Intercultural Communication Competence

Although there is simply not one single motive for internationalising HE, whether it is from an individual-level, Higher Education Institutional-level or European-Union-level perspective, several scholars suggest that internationalisation activities have the potential to lead to the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge that will prepare students for the "globalised" and "interconnected" world (Killick, 2012; Mitchell, 2023). HEIs are nowadays encouraged by policymakers to focus on developing "intercultural competence" among their students by participating in various internationalisation initiatives, as for example, through actions within the Erasmus+ programme. An example of this is evident in the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027, where the word "intercultural" appears forty times in combination with terms such as understanding, competences, skills, awareness, or learning. However, what this actually entails remains unclear. Viewing internationalisation through an "intercultural communication competence" perspective may appear ambiguous, since intercultural communication competence is itself an ambiguous concept. This is even more apparent when it is understood as a process rather than as an outcome of internationalisation, an idea that will be developed further in the next chapter.

Here, BIPs are being studied as an internationalisation activity which can act as a possible vector to enhance ICC. Although the best-known definitions of internationalisation refer to "integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension", what this actually means is rather obscure. Be that as it may, the definitions that we have discussed so far also show that "the 'intercultural' is encapsulated within the concept of internationalisation" (Dunne, 2011, p.613). There appears to be much support that internationalisation (of the home curriculum) "is an effective option for universities through which they can ensure that all of their students develop the essential intercultural and international knowledge, skills and attitudes required for citizenship and professional practice in an increasingly connected and yet divided and unequal world" (Marants-Gal & Leask, 2023, p.114). Already in the first edition of the *Handbook of International Higher Education* (2012), Deardorff and Jones argue that "intercultural competence development is emerging as a central focus—and outcome—of many internationalization efforts" (p.283). Almost a decade later, in the second edition of the *Handbook of International Higher Education* (2022), their argument is still much the same, though they no longer refer to intercultural competence development as an 'emerging focus', but rather suggest that "intercultural competence

development has become a significant focus of internationalization efforts at many higher education institutions" (Deardorff & Jones, 2022, p.223). Sercu (2023) even states that the meaning of "purpose" in Knight's well-known definition of IHE (2004) refers to "the overall role of education which is [according to Sercu] to promote IC among its students" (p.3). Hence, Sercu (2023) takes a strong stance in looking at "Internationalization at Home (IaH) as a way to develop intercultural competence in university students" (p.1).

When examining IHE from an ICC perspective, it is useful to look at the stages of internationalisation identified by Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017). As can be seen in Figure 7, Spencer-Oatey and Dauber identify four stages of internationalisation, namely, 1) pre-internationalisation where there is a culturally homogeneous campus community,[67] 2) structural internationalisation where there is a culturally diverse student and staff population but there is limited intercultural interaction, integration and personal growth, 3) community internationalisation where there is a culturally diverse community and high levels of intercultural interaction, integration and personal growth, and finally 4) competency internationalisation where there is a population of interculturally competent staff and students.[68] The identified stages seem to be a response to the mere practice of the ranking systems to equate internationalisation with the number of incoming and outgoing students and staff. Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017) argue that "having a diverse population is an important prerequisite for reaping these benefits; however, it does not in itself ensure that integration will be achieved. In other words, the mere existence of a diversified student body does not necessarily lead to interaction nor to the development of 'global skills'. Rather, it is a vital first step in an internationalisation trajectory" (p.9). The final identified stage clearly shows that, from this perspective, internationalisation is viewed from a competency approach where interculturally competent students and staff seems to be the goal.

[67] It could be questionable if there exists such a thing as a culturally homogenous campus when considering culture from a perspective beyond the national paradigm. Although I wish to make this note already here, the different perspectives on culture will be elaborated on in the next section. At this stage, the stages identified by Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017) provide a solid overview of how having a diverse student population alone does not in itself ensure interaction, nor that the development of intercultural competence is met. Moreover, it shows that interculturally competent staff and students are seen as an important element of internationalising HE.

[68] In this sense, interculturally competent staff and students tends to be presented as the final outcome of internationalisation. I would like to raise the question here of whether one can ever be interculturally competent when intercultural communication competence is understood as a relational and interactive process. This will be explored further in the next section.

Figure 7: Developmental stages of internationalisation (reproduced from Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017, p.9)



Internationalisation of Higher Education: Within the Context of the European University Alliance FORTHEM

This study does not adopt an organisational approach as described by Knight (1994) – "developing an ethos or culture in the university or college that values and supports intercultural and international perspectives and initiatives" (p.4) – but the study does take place in an organisational context, namely, the European University Alliance FORTHEM.[69] European University Alliances are transnational networks of higher education institutions established within the framework of the European Universities Initiative, an EU policy initiative launched to strengthen strategic, long-term cooperation between universities across Europe and to contribute to the internationalisation and transformation of European higher education (European Commission, 2024). The EUI can be traced back to President Macron's speech at the Sorbonne University in September 2017 (*cf.* Chapter I - Introduction, p.1; II.1.3.1. Mobility of students, scholars, and programmes, p.30), which has been influential in shaping the current emphasis on more inclusive internationalisation and mobility strategies addressing wider audiences, and which informed the subsequent development of the EUI programme and the establishment of European University Alliances (Gunn, 2020; Maassen et al., 2022). An EUA brings together various stakeholder groups, including students, academics and non-teaching staff, as well as associate partners. Within this context, EUAs are often described as enabling structures that support experimentation with new forms of collaboration,

[69] See https://www.forthem-alliance.eu/ (page accessed on 14/11/2025).

including joint educational formats, mobility schemes, and digitally supported learning activities (Crăciun et al., 2023; Frame & Curyło, 2025). The European Commission has described these EUAs as:[70]

> *"a cornerstone of the European higher education system that profoundly changed the way universities cooperate in Europe. European Universities alliances are seen as a new model of transnational cooperation in higher education with a long-term strategic outlook." (European Commission, 2025, p.25)*

Set up in 2019 and funded by the European Commission, the FORTHEM Alliance currently brings together nine universities across Europe in order to develop in-depth cooperation in all areas of higher education activity. Although BIPs are introduced through a top-down process in which the Erasmus+ programme sets the funding requirements, their implementation depends on bottom-up initiatives in which academic staff play a key role. Setting up a BIP requires a network of institutional partnerships, teachers who know each other and are willing to organise the programme, intrinsic motivation among teachers to develop the BIP, students who choose to participate, and a digital space in which the online component can take place. These conditions are not exclusive to an EUA, but an alliance can facilitate them due to its shared resources and infrastructures, which can make the implementation of BIPs more streamlined (Jager, 2025). Although this study is situated within the organisational context of FORTHEM, the Alliance is not a primary object of investigation. Instead, it has been chosen mainly for practical reasons such as access and available resources, which will be discussed further in the methodology.

[70] For more information on the EUI and EUAs please see https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative (page accessed on 12/12/2025).

II.2. Intercultural communication competence

Following the discussion of internationalisation in higher education, the literature review now turns to intercultural communication competence, which forms the central conceptual framework of this thesis. While ICC is frequently presented as a key outcome of internationalisation initiatives, and used somewhat unquestioningly in programmatic documents, the concept has in fact been conceptualised in multiple ways by diverse theoretical traditions. This section begins by outlining the historical emergence of intercultural communication as a field, before examining different understandings of culture and intercultural communication competence. It reviews influential models of ICC, moving towards the perspective that ICC is situational, relational, and grounded in interaction. Building on this, the section then turns to how ICC can be fostered in higher education settings.

II.2.1. The historical contexts and foundations of intercultural communication

To understand the current state of the field of intercultural communication, it is essential to take a step back and consider how the field has evolved over the years. Providing a brief but concise overview of the history of intercultural communication is crucial as it offers the foundational knowledge and context necessary to navigate and appreciate the complexities of the field. However, before doing so, it is important to recognise that tracing the roots of this field is challenging, if not impossible. Martin *et al.* (2020) highlight the difficulty, noting that: “any attempt to describe our discipline’s global history is now more daunting than ever!” (p.19). Moreover, Baldwin (2017) asserts that “determining the beginnings of the field of intercultural communication research is…problematic” (p.19). This complexity arises from the fact that all academic knowledge is “historically contingent and a contextual production” (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2016, as cited in Martin *et al.*, 2020, p.19). Therefore, the following should be understood as an attempt to provide an overview of common descriptions of the field’s history while incorporating critical perspectives that challenge this linear narrative, offering a richer understanding of its various complexities, which will be built upon later in this chapter.

The literature on “Intercultural competence” can be at least traced back to works published in the 1960s, with some even dating back to the 1930s in the United States (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Therefore, the field of intercultural communication is often referred to as a relatively young field that continues to evolve (Croucher *et al.*, 2015; Fantini, 2020). There appears to be a consensus in the literature that the emergence of the field of intercultural communication is linked to the post-World War II context in the United States (*e.g.*, Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Baldwin, 2017; Croucher *et al.*, 2015; Fantini, 2020; Koester & Lustig, 2015; Martin & Nakayama, 2022). It is commonly argued that in the post-World War II context, the study of intercultural communication arose in the United States primarily from practical needs, such as determining how to identify, select, and train individuals travelling overseas to “effectively” handle intercultural experiences (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Croucher *et al.*, 2015; Fantini, 2020). While service personnel travelling overseas sometimes did receive language training, they often felt ill-equipped to deal with the complex challenges of working abroad (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). Consequently, driven by an initiative from the United States Government under former President Truman, the Foreign Service Institute was launched, which developed a programme with pre-departure courses to assist government and business personnel travelling overseas, which in its early years was directed mainly to people in the Peace Corps and diplomats (Baldwin, 2017; Martin & Nakayama, 2022).

The Foreign Service Institute recruited some prominent anthropologists and linguists to develop these courses. Hence, it is no surprise that early work on the content and methods for developing intercultural awareness is mainly described as rooted in contributions by cultural anthropologists and linguists (see Kulich *et al.*, 2020). However, it also needs to be noted that the team of scholars at the Foreign Service Institute came from diverse academic disciplines. Consequently, one of the important *foci* that they established, which remains relevant today, is that the study of intercultural communication is inherently interdisciplinary (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). Among those prominent people is the well-known anthropologist Edward T. Hall, with classic publications such as The Silent Language (1959) and Beyond Culture (1976), Hall is argued to be an important contributor to early works in intercultural studies, shaping the foundations and formalisation of the field (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Croucher *et al.*, 2015; Lane, 2012). Hall linked culture with communication, providing the impetus for the modern academic study of intercultural communication. As a result, he is often referred to as the “founder” or “grandfather”

of the field (see Kulich *et al.*, 2020).[71] It is worth mentioning that likely due to the need for "international reconstruction", at the early stages, experts defined culture in terms of nationality and concentrated on international contexts. This approach was highly pragmatic, as government and business professionals were less interested in theoretical aspects of culture and communication, and more focused on learning how to adapt and work "effectively" in foreign cultures (relating to national contexts), often linked to national comparisons (Croucher *et al.*, 2015; Kulich *et al.*, 2020; Martin & Nakayama, 2022).

Although the post-World War II context in the United States is often referred to as the time that the field emerged, Kulich *et al.* (2020) emphasise the importance of examining the history of intercultural studies and training in an intercultural manner—meaning "to check, compare, and contrast our un-reflected assumptions about the tradition(s) and complex contexts of scholarship or applications from which we came, on which we build, and for which we move forward" (p.63). Therefore, they encourage intercultural scholars and practitioners to reevaluate the interpretation of the field's emergence. Indeed, the history of intercultural communication is often described from a linear, highly United States-centric perspective, which risks presenting a one-sided picture. Nevertheless, this image of history is also the paradigm on which much research is built today. There have been several calls to include wider perspectives from other parts of the world, and there are several attempts to provide these broader views (for extensive critical reviews on the history of IC, see Baldwin, 2017; Kulich *et al.*, 2020; Martin *et al.*, 2020). For example, Martin *et al.* (2020) provide an overview of the emergence of the field in various parts of the world and outline that in Europe, the field of intercultural communication emerged in response to social and political challenges posed by the large influx of immigrants as well as the establishment of the Erasmus programme. In addition, examining research communities in Germany, France, and the United States, Averbeck-Lietz (2013) shows that communication studies engage with intercultural communication as a research topic in different ways across these contexts. Averbeck-Lietz (2017) also highlights the role of post-war Franco-German relations, particularly the establishment of the *Deutsch-Französische Jugendwerk* [German-French youth council], in fostering intercultural encounters and contributing to the

[71] Although Hall is frequently credited in the literature for inventing the term "intercultural", it must be acknowledged that he did not coin the term as it can be traced back to earlier research. For example, Kulich *et al.* (2020) point out that in 1922, Crider used the term "intercultural practices" in biology, and in 1927, Baker related to "intercultural contacts/relations" among religions, nevertheless, by systematically and scientifically approaching the comparative study of culture, and applying theoretical frameworks, Hall can be attributed to laying the groundwork for the development of a more academic and professional field.

development and popularisation of intercultural thinking and research in France and Germany, independently of the Anglophone academic context.[72]

While acknowledging that intercultural communication is situated differently across research communities, there nevertheless appears to be broad agreement that the post-World War II period was when the field, as it is understood today, was conceptualised. The 1970s into the 1980s were characterised by attempts to conceptualise and develop measurements for intercultural competence, with researchers trying to develop and refine assessment instruments of "intercultural competence" (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). This continued further in the 1980s-1990s and beyond, by a phase which Martin *et al.* (2020) refer to as *the expansion phase* – the period where there has been an explosion of the study of intercultural communication (and applied linguistics) around the globe. At the end of the 1980s, the growing interest in intercultural competence was emphasised when the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* dedicated a special issue on the topic in 1989 (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; *cf.* Kulich *et al.*, 2020 for an extensive overview of the chronological history of cross- and intercultural journals). Since then, a growing body of research across multiple disciplines has emerged on the topic. A significant increase in published papers on interculturality has been observed from the 2000s onwards, with a notable peak in 2015. This peak is likely a result of the promotion of global perspectives in educational curricula and the emphasis placed on the need for HEIs to internationalise (Peng *et al.*, 2020).

Early works on interculturality primarily focused on communication between people from different national contexts, often exemplified by cross-cultural comparisons aimed at training service personnel travelling overseas. Today, however, the field appears to have shifted to a broader understanding of culture, following interpretative and critical paradigms. Despite being a topic of research for over half a century, the intercultural field continues to evolve, with calls to "*interculturalise"*[73] (Dervin, 2022; Dervin & Jacobsson, 2022). The next section will further explore the conceptualisation of intercultural communication competence by examining the variety of ways the concept is defined and applied.

[72] For a more detailed account of how research communities of communication scholars in the United States, France, and Germany engage with intercultural communication as a research topic, see Averbeck-Lietz (2013, 2017).

[73] As Dervin (2022) explains, interculturalising interculturality derives from: "considering the complexities and range of paradigms, definitions and ideologies available around the world about interculturality, one should expand one's take on the notion and turn to a diversity of thoughts to do so" (p.15).

II.2.2. Conceptualising intercultural communication competence

Intercultural communication competence is approached and conceptualised across a range of disciplinary contexts (*e.g.*, Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017b; Martin & Nakayama, 2022). The edited volume *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Approaches, Assessment, and Application* by Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017a) exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of intercultural competence by including twenty-nine case studies from various disciplines and parts of the world. However, despite the extensive research on "intercultural competence" across various disciplines, Arasaratnam's (2014) review of a decade of studies on "intercultural communication competence" (2003-2013) reveals a significant lack of cross-referencing among the 70 articles she examined. Further elaborating on this, Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017b) note: "while intercultural competence research is being done in disciplines such as intercultural communication, medicine, nursing, cross-cultural psychology, and international higher education (to name a few), we are not reading one another's findings with sufficient regularity to build on cumulative knowledge" (p.298). Consequently, this could lead to re-inventing conceptual wheels at the expense of progressing our understanding of interculturality (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

One thing emerging from the literature is that various disciplines use various terms to relate to the concept. More than a decade ago Deardorff and Jones (2012) pointed out that different approaches and disciplines use different terms to refer to the concept, including "intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, global competence, global citizenship, multicultural competence, cultural fluency, communicative competence, cultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, cultural literacy, cross-cultural capability, and so on" (p.284). Recently, Fantini (2020) observed that there are nearly 50 terms in use to refer to the concept of ICC and Dervin (2024a) published a book which showcases 100 terms related to the scientific, educational and political notion of interculturality. More recent terms that have been introduced include "Global Fitness" introduced by Spencer-Oatey *et al.* (2022) as a term that comprises "all the features that enable a person or organisation to succeed in contexts of cultural diversity" (p.10) and "cultural mindedness" which Layne and Teng (2022) define as "a multidimensional concept concerned with how students think about and

engage with interculturality and diversity" (p.1). Many of these terms seem to be conceptually equivalent, with deviations in emphasising certain elements or contexts.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of intercultural communication, a variety of definitions for intercultural communication competence can be found in the literature (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that there is limited consensus on how the concept is measured, assessed or even defined. Some scholars highlight this lack of conceptual clarity as a significant weakness, arguing that it hinders the practical application of intercultural competence and has led to ongoing calls to establish a unified term, concept, and set of components for intercultural competence (*e.g.*, Fantini, 2020) or to adopt "culture-general" approaches to understanding ICC *(e.g.,* Arasaratnam, 2014) as a means for providing clarity and direction. Taking a different perspective, ICC can be regarded as a "sensitising concept". In this view, the issue is not that scholars have failed to reach a single agreed definition. Instead, scholars have highlighted different facets of a complex phenomenon, with each definition reflecting a particular interpretative stance. This diversity of interpretation is common in the social sciences and humanities, where concepts often function as "sensitising"[74] rather than definitive terms, and are therefore rarely defined in the same way. Today, there is growing support for the idea that there is "no one size fits all" in understanding, developing or assessing ICC (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017a). In other words, treating intercultural communication competence as a sensitising concept suggests that considering a range of definitions provides a useful starting point for understanding communication between people from different cultural backgrounds (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1979). Therefore, providing an overview of the various definitions, components and models provides a framework for contextualising the understanding of ICC required for this research (Sabet & Chapman, 2023). The following sections will first examine culture as a "fuzzy" construct, moving away from fixed understandings toward a more fluid and dynamic perspective. This is followed by considering how intercultural competence is often divided into skills, attitudes, and beliefs, before concluding with the working definition of ICC adopted in this study.

[74] A distinction can be made between definitive and sensitising concepts. As Blumer (1954) illustrates "A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks…A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or bench marks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (p.7).

II.2.2.1. Intercultural communication competence: Culture as a "fuzzy" construct

Highlighting the critical role of language proficiency in intercultural competence, Fantini's (2009) definition of intercultural competence as "complex abilities that are required to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p.458),[75] [76] gained considerable traction as evidenced by the multiple references to it by various authors in the edited volume *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Approaches, Assessment and Application* (see Deardorff & Arasaratnam, 2017a). While various scholars indeed emphasise language as an important component in ICC (Byram & Golubeva, 2020; Piller, 2007; 2012), Fantini's definition raises questions about whether such abilities are only relevant when engaging with interlocutors who are "linguistically or culturally different". Framing interculturality in this way risks assuming that there are people who are linguistically and culturally the same as oneself, an assumption that becomes difficult to sustain if culture is understood as relational rather than a fixed code.[77] These definitional choices reflect broader epistemological orientations within the field and recognising this is essential for understanding how ICC is conceptualised.

This is, in essence, a question of what is understood as "culture". As the field of ICC was mainly born out of practical needs to prepare professionals for working abroad in the post-World War II context, culture has frequently been defined in terms of nationality and concentrated on international contexts (*cf. supra*). Early works on interculturality mainly focused on communication between people from different national contexts, exemplified by cross-cultural comparisons. The idea that people's behaviour is strongly influenced by their national culture(s) is represented in comparative models of culture in which countries are ascribed to a scale based on so-called cultural dimensions. For instance, in his well-known book *The Silent Language*, Hall (1959) describes how the concepts of space and time are used differently across various national cultures. Perhaps one of the best-known comparative models of culture is the one proposed by Hofstede (1984), known as *The 6-D model of national culture*. This model includes six "cultural dimensions", namely, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint.

[75] "Effectively" and "appropriately" italicised as in initial text.
[76] In his more recent work, Fantini argues even more forcefully that language proficiency is a core component of ICC, proposing that language and ICC should be integrated into a single academic discipline (see Fantini, 2020).
[77] Will be elaborated on below.

It is accompanied by a country comparison tool that illustrates how different countries score on each dimension.[78] Other well-known comparison models include *The 7 Dimensions of Culture* proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,[79] or more recently, *The Country Mapping Tool* by Meyer.[80]

These national comparative models have been increasingly criticised for their overly simplistic and reductive nature, which risks reinforcing stereotypes and fails to reflect the complexity of culture (*e.g.,* Dervin & Tournebise, 2013; McSweeney, 2013). Moreover, as pointed out by Frame (2012), differences in national cultures can play a role in certain cross-cultural situations, although in most cases they are only one factor among many that shape how people think, act and respond to one another. Hence, "limiting culture to the national level means running the risk of assuming too reductive a view of social behaviour" (Frame, 2012, p.31).[81] These comparative models are often associated with a positivistic understanding of culture, an approach that has been increasingly questioned. Scholars frequently cite Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner as representatives of positivistic approaches, which some refer to as an "old paradigm" (Poutiainen, 2014), in "extinction" or as a "parochial dinosaur" (see Lowe *et al.*, 2012). As Poutiainen (2014) argues "the idea of treating culture as a synonym for nation-state is considered no longer possible, and the time for appreciating universalities in intercultural communication might be over" (p.3). In this context, scholars speak of "theoretical turbulence" (Dervin & Tournebise, 2013; Poutiainen, 2014) in which the specificity of "intercultural competence" models is to try to move beyond the sometimes-stereotyped nature of national culture.

Building on research in the social sciences more broadly, scholars in intercultural communication and cross-cultural management have reached some degree of consensus in identifying several major paradigms that describe different ways of approaching culture. These are often categorised as positivist, interpretivist, postmodern, and critical (see Romani *et al.*, 2018); or functionalist, interpretive and critical (Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021); or, more comprehensively, as positivist/functionalist/ normative/culture-comparative, interpretive/interpretivist/culture-interactional, postmodern/dialogic, and the

[78] See https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/.
[79] See https://www.thtconsulting.com/models/7-dimensions-of-culture/.
[80] See http://erinmeyer.com/tools/culture-map-premium/.
[81] In addition to these conceptual critiques, methodological concerns have been raised. For instance, Hofstede's work has been criticised for its reliance on a single corporate dataset (IBM employees), its use of questionnaires as the sole method of data collection, and its application of cluster analysis, which can produce divergent interpretations depending on the clusters selected (*cf.* McSweeney, 2013; Signorini *et al.*, 2009 for criticism on Hofstede's work).

critical/radical “paradigms” (see Frame, 2025b). Although it is debatable how clearly distinct these paradigms truly are (see Frame, 2025b; Frame & Bousquet, 2024), Frame (2025b) suggests that it may be more appropriate to refer to divergent “perspectives” rather than strictly separate “paradigms”. In this context, it is also useful to consider the notion of “Janusian” discourses of interculturality (see Dervin, 2011; Kokkonen *et al.*, 2022), which refers to an approach that involves juggling “discourses that are liquid (open-endedness, (inter)individualism) and solid (culturalism, differentialism) at the same time” (Dervin, 2011, p.47). Such an approach may possibly lead to “contradictory discourses tainted with pseudo-objectivism and solidification” (*ibid*).

These broader theoretical perspectives on culture are reflected in the ways intercultural competence itself has been conceptualised. Almost two decades ago, Rathje (2007) observed that the debate over the use of the term intercultural competence is marked by two “extreme positions”: one focusing on “inter-national” interaction and the other on “inter-collective” interaction (p.259). Advocates of the “inter-national” perspective on intercultural competence typically define intercultural interaction as occurring between individuals from different national cultures. This approach, considered the “classical” form of studying intercultural competence, attributes cultural misunderstandings to the participants’ countries of origin, thereby viewing international communication “as a form of true interculturality” (Rathje, 2007, p.259). As the “inter-national” approach has received hard criticism because of its oversimplified understanding of culture, Rathje (2007) noticed numerous authors abandoned the view of intercultural competence being characterised by national cultures towards an “inter-collective” model, which describes interactions between individuals who are members of specific social groups.

Whereas Rathje (2007) distinguishes the positions as “inter-national” and “inter-collective”, these two significantly different positions of culture are also commonly characterised as essentialist and non-essentialist (see Holliday, 2000). Where essentialism may be characterised as positivist and where culture is seen as a concrete social phenomenon where national cultures are predominantly used as explanations for human behaviour, non-essentialism can be regarded as following the interpretive paradigm in which “cultures are seen as a dynamic, fluid, and multifaceted processes, collaboratively constructed by participants through their interactions, taking meaning from but also deviating from prefigured macro-level constructs” (Kokkonen *et al.*, 2022, p.1). Some speak of an inter-paradigmatic warfare (Lowe *et al.*, 2012) in which the paradigmatic shift appears to be moving away from essentialist and solid views of culture and interculturality, and instead embraces the idea of interculturality as flexible, fluid,

contradictory, and shaped by political and ideological forces (Kokkonen et al., 2022; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024; Sommier, Bousquet, et al., 2021).

A closely related distinction is made by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) who distinguish between culture-comparative and culture-interactional studies. In their book *Intercultural Interaction: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Intercultural Communication*, they outline that culture-comparative research focuses on cultures, often national cultures, as relatively coherent systems at a macro level, which are then compared in order to identify similarities and (and more often so) differences. Culture-interactional approaches, by contrast, focus on micro-level interactions involving individuals who may be associated with different cultural groups, and examine how communicative behaviour is shaped not only by cultural affiliations but also by contextual factors such as social roles, expectations, and goals (Frame, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). While Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) emphasise that culture-comparative studies provide "valuable baseline data for interpretation purposes", they also caution that "it cannot be assumed that people's behaviour in intercultural encounters will necessarily be the same as in intracultural encounters because people often automatically make adjustments" in response to the interactional context (p.4).

This interactional orientation aligns with Frame's (2014) argument for a more communication-centred approach to intercultural communication. Frame suggests that analysing intercultural encounters requires moving beyond a primary focus on cultural differences and instead examining the sense-making processes through which participants co-construct meaning during interaction. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, this perspective conceptualises intercultural interaction as an emergent, negotiated process shaped by participants' role identities, social identities, and memberships in multiple cultural groups (Frame, 2014). As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) also note, individuals simultaneously belong to many different cultural groups, such as national, regional, professional, organisational, or religious cultures, yet there remains limited understanding of how these multiple affiliations intersect and influence interaction. One of the definitions of culture that aligns with this broader understanding, and which will be utilised in this thesis, is proposed by Helen Spencer-Oatey. This definition describes culture as:

> "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and *[their]* interpretations of the 'meaning' of others' behavior" *(Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.3)*

The understanding in this thesis is that this definition underscores that culture is neither fixed nor uniform, but a complex and evolving set of shared understandings that can guide behaviour and interpretation within social groups. In this thesis, it is also acknowledged that individuals draw on multiple cultures, which can be mobilised in different contexts, as will be further developed in this chapter.

II.2.2.2. Intercultural communication competence: Knowledge, skills, and attitudes

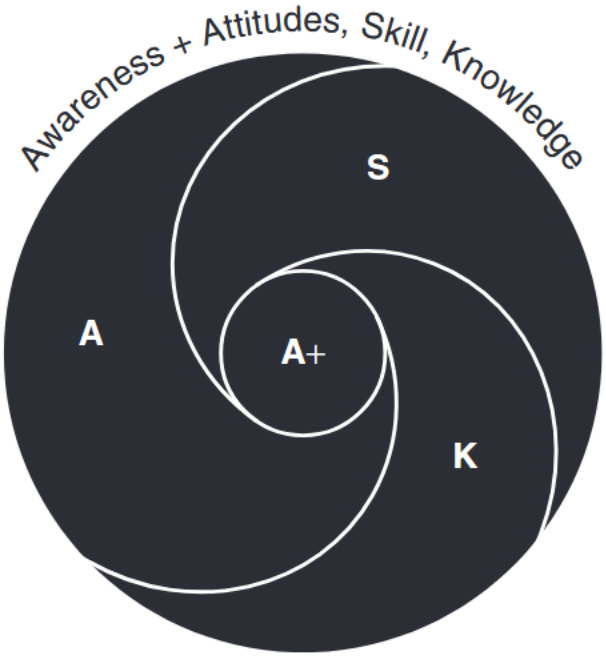
One of the seminal contributions to the literature on intercultural competence is Deardorff's (2006) study, which was the first to document a consensus among intercultural scholars and academic administrators regarding the key elements and assessment methods of intercultural competence, ultimately aiming to establish a widely accepted definition. The study used a questionnaire for institutional administrators of internationalisation strategies in the United States and utilised a Delphi technique to develop consensus among a panel of 23 nationally and internationally known intercultural scholars[82] on the definition and components of intercultural competence. When presented with nine definitions of intercultural competence to administrators, the study found that most administrators preferred a very general definition of "intercultural competence", mainly a definition that works for all students in all situations but that includes certain elements of IC. The most favoured definition among the institutions participating in Deardorff's study is from Byram (1997) and can be summarised as "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p.247). However, interestingly, drawing on the data generated from intercultural scholars through the Delphi study, the highest-rated definition described intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p.247-248).[83]

[82] Although the study is said to include internationally known scholars, all scholars in the study were based in the United States except for two.

[83] This of course begs the question of what is regarded as an intercultural situation. Something that appears not to be defined in the paper. In this study, a situation is regarded as intercultural when interculturality and cultures are regarded as relevant to the interactants (*cf. infra*).

There appears to be much support that knowledge alone, such as culture-specific knowledge often used synonymously with knowledge about nations (Dervin & Tournebise, 2013), is not enough and that ICC also requires skills and certain attitudes as emphasised in the latter definition (Deardorff, 2006). Several scoping reviews have been published to try to bring these together and characterise different models and tools of intercultural competence (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Fantini, 2009; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Lustig & Koester, 2012; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). These tend to underline that models of intercultural competence often draw on similar concepts. In this regard, categorising intercultural competence into knowledge, skills, and attitudes is a central theme in numerous works by intercultural scholars (Dunne, 2011; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Fantini (2009) configured these elements as a pinwheel (*cf.* Figure 8), demonstrating how knowledge, skills, and attitudes contribute to heightened awareness. This awareness is cultivated through introspection and reflection, which in turn reinforces the development of the three components of intercultural competence.

Figure 8: Components of intercultural competence (reproduced from Fantini 1999 as illustrated in Fantini, 2009, p.459)



When analysing the numerous theoretical models of intercultural competence, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) found that over 300 different terms and concepts were used to relate to intercultural competence, many of them very similar yet distinctive in wording (*cf.* Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p.36-43 for the full

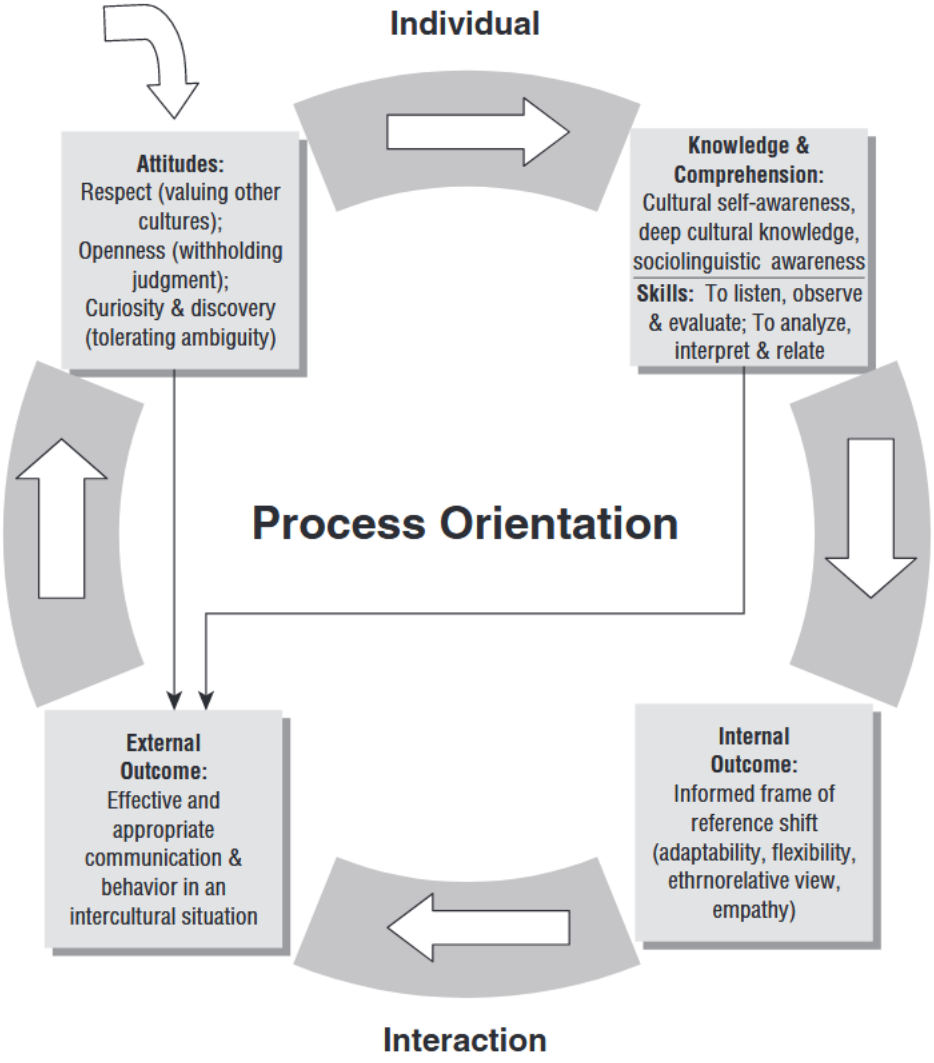
list of terms that they identified). However, as pointed out by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) as well, "it is highly unlikely that there are actually more than 300 theoretically distinct constructs…that need to be modelled explicitly" (p.45). However, it does show that various researchers place different emphasis on the components of what constitutes "intercultural competence". The study by Deardorff (2006) found twenty-two elements that scholars in the field of interculturality reached a consensus on as being crucial elements of intercultural competence. These specific components can be found in **Error! Reference source not found.**

II.2.2.3. Intercultural communication competence: Towards a working definition

Deardorff visualised the results of her study in two models, one of which is a process model (*cf.* Figure 9), which "depicts the complexity of acquiring intercultural competence in outlining more of the movement and process orientation that occurs between the various elements" (p.257). In both of Deardorff's models, the attitudinal element (respect, openness, curiosity & discovery) is the most critical and therefore the starting point of both models. The desired external outcome for both models can be described as "behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations" (p.255). This "outcome" that also reflects the first sentence of the definition proposed by Deardorff (2006) – the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations – is very similar to other widely used definitions, such as the one from Fantini (2009) (*cf. supra*), or the definition proposed by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009).[84] In the definition proposed by Deardorff (2006), the meaning of effective and appropriate is taken from earlier work by Spitzberg "where appropriateness is the avoidance of violating valued rules and effectiveness is the achievement of valued objectives" (Deardorff, 2006, p.256).

[84] For reasons of space and overlap with the other proposed definitions, this definition will not be discussed in further detail.

Figure 9: Process model of intercultural competence (reproduced from Deardorff, 2006, p.256)



A process-oriented perspective on ICC is increasingly gaining recognition and support in the literature (*e.g.*, Deardorff, 2017; Dervin, 2023, 2024; Jones, 2013; Sabet & Chapman, 2023). Such an approach embraces the idea that one picks up ICC throughout one's life, and that it is not a once-and-for-all given competence. Building on Deardorff's model, we can expand this process-oriented view further, advancing toward a more critical approach that involves recognising that interculturality is not only a dynamic process, but also something situational and contextual. This shift is reflected in approaches that focus on the complexity of micro-level communication, where diverse prefigured cultural references are negotiated and co-constructed, and where cultures are "performed" as multiple, constructed and

emergent within interaction (Frame, 2012; Frame & Boutaud, 2011). Viewing intercultural communication as contextualised and situated means drawing attention to "how identity is constructed, mediated, and negotiated within contexts of difference and power" (Darvin & Sun, 2024, p.2). These contexts include politics, economics, history and discourse (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). The definition proposed by Kokkonen and Natri (2024) not only emphasises ICC being a dynamic process, but also closely reflects its situational and contextual dimension, as they define multilingual and intercultural communication (MICC) competence as:

> *"an interpretation of effective and appropriate communication with the use of linguistic and semiotic resources and repertoires in situations and contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants. MICC is situated and contextual and evolving as a continuous and dynamic process based on interaction." (Kokkonen & Natri, 2024, p.28)*

Another key distinction between this definition and those previously discussed is the emphasis on ICC being an interpretation. This leans on Koester and Lustig's (2015) argument that "competent intercultural communication is not something one *does* but rather something that one *is perceived to be*. One's motivations, knowledge, and skills lead to a context-specific impression that desirable outcomes (effectiveness, appropriateness, and perhaps satisfaction) have been achieved" (p.20).[85] More generally, as Laurence J. Peter observes, "competence, like truth, beauty, and contact lenses, is in the eye of the beholder" (as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p.50).

As noted by Dervin (2016) "probably the most important aspect of interculturality is that it can only happen through interactions with another person, which has an influence on how we think, behave, perform, present ourselves, and so on" (p. 72). This leads to Kokkonen and Natri (2024) concluding that "ICC only takes place in interaction" (p.26). By considering culture beyond broad paradigms and emphasising contextuality and situational dynamics, this perspective challenges the distinction between "normal" and "intercultural" interactions (Rathje, 2007). As Dervin (2023) highlights, this raises critical questions: "What is the border between intercultural and non-intercultural when the people we refer to as diverse can encompass such large groups of people? Who decides what is and what is not

[85] "Does" and" perceived to be" italicised as in original.

intercultural?" (p.8). For some, this leads to the idea that "all communication is intercultural"[86] (Dacheux, 1999, p.2). Indeed, as Frame (2025a) points out, "it appears scientifically unsatisfactory to arbitrarily limit "interculturality" to interactions involving people of different nationalities, for example. Scholars of interculturality have indeed at times been forced to admit that such a distinction, commonly used, appears to be one of convention, and that it does not reflect a clear scientific definition related to the concept of culture itself" (p.8). Frame (2025a), therefore, asks: "If we look for a more scientific grounding, how might we differentiate intercultural from interpersonal communication?" (*ibid*). One way of addressing this question is to ground the distinction in the experience and subjective perceptions of those involved in an interaction. For instance, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) adopt the perspective that "an intercultural situation is one in which the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an effect on interaction/communication that is noticeable to at least one of the parties" (p.3). On a somewhat similar note, Rathje (2007) suggests that we must account for the personal interpretations of participants in defining ICC, where individuals perceive the space as cultural. In this sense, "interculturality is always in the eye of the beholder" (Dervin, 2023, p.10). This position is echoed in Kokkonen and Natri's (2024) proposed definition of multilingual and intercultural communication competence, according to which intercultural communication occurs in "contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants" (p.28).

Thus far, an attempt has been made to provide a detailed overview of various perspectives on interculturality by tracing the field's development and examining key definitions and their implications. However, beyond these widely discussed paradigmatic shifts, there are further concerns that the field of intercultural communication increasingly faces. One of the primary critiques is the field's predominance of so-called "Western perspectives" and its reliance on "Euro-American conceptualisations", which has led to increasing calls for the inclusion of a broader range of voices and perspectives (Croucher *et al.*, 2015; Dervin, 2024a; Steyn & Reygan, 2017). Additionally, the use of the word "competence" has been contested. For instance, Murray-García and Tervalon (2017) draw attention to the fact that "in the United States, especially in physician training, 'competence' traditionally implies a static endpoint, a sense of mastery, or an ability to exert control towards a predetermined outcome" (p.19). They argue that this notion of "competence" in interactions with diverse populations is unsettling, particularly for members of marginalised groups whose histories include enslavement, genocide, internment, and economic

[86] Original text in French "*Toute communication directe est interculturelle*".

exploitation. In this sense, competence is often associated with skills, performance, and measurement (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). As a result, some scholars have begun to move away from the term "competence", opting instead for alternatives such as "cultural humility", as proposed by Murray-García and Tervalon (2017), to avoid the pitfalls they see as inherent to the term "competence". However, this shift away from the term competence is largely linked to its association with the post-World War II context and a positivist perspective, where ICC is primarily viewed as a tool for testing, assessing, and training individuals for so-called cultural encounters. These critiques must indeed be taken into account; however, rather than moving away from the terminology altogether, taking a more critical perspective in which ICC is seen as an interpretation of appropriate and effective communication in contexts where interculturality is relevant to the interactants allows competence to be understood more holistically. This holistic approach to competence is argued to be "a working remedy for the existing disputes in IC literature" (Sabet & Chapman, 2023, p.3).

In this thesis, the term "intercultural communication competence" (ICC) will be used to emphasise the importance of interactions in which intercultural competence takes place and is negotiated (Fantini, 2020; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024). Building upon the literature described above, and particularly on Kokkonen and Natri's (2024) definition, ICC will be understood as (i) an interpretation of effective and appropriate communication, (ii) in contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants, where this competence is (iii) situational and contextual, (iv) is a continuous and dynamic process (v) based on interaction. This leads to the question of how ICC can be fostered, as will be discussed next.

II.2.3. Fostering students' intercultural communication competence in higher education

The literature contains numerous models and frameworks that aim to conceptualise, measure, assess, or investigate intercultural competence (*cf.* Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017, for an overview). However, models offering insights into the process of intercultural learning are relatively scarce (Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Vromans *et al.*, 2023). For example, The Council of Europe and the European Commission developed a "T-Kit" for intercultural learning in the

context of youth work and education.[87] When discussing models and theories of intercultural learning, the T-Kit refers to a model of intercultural competence that simply frames a number of identifiable elements that an individual can develop in order to be "equipped" for intercultural encounters, to a model of acculturation, and to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (*cf. infra* for more details on the latter model) (Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja, 2018).

Although some models of intercultural communication do provide insights into how intercultural competence is developed, they have their limitations. Most of the models on intercultural learning generally assume that intercultural learning takes place in stages (*cf.* overviews by Lane, 2012; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). One of the examples of such a model, which is frequently adopted to inform intercultural competence training and evaluation (Peng *et al.*, 2020), is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Bennett (1986). The DMIS comprises six stages, transitioning from ethnocentric stages (denial, defence, and minimisation) to ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration). Each stage reflects a distinct way of perceiving cultural differences, with the model positing that intercultural sensitivity grows as individuals progress through these stages. Other well-known developmental models include Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve hypothesis, which was later expanded to the W-curve model proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), which both assume that individuals move through different stages of "culture shock".[88] Yet, these models have received increased criticism, particularly for their failure to adequately explain the learning processes that drive transitions between stages (Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Taylor, 1994; Vromans *et al.*, 2023). And even more so, developmental models seem to hold less stance when looking at intercultural competence as a lifelong process (*cf. infra*). Instead, the Process Model of Intercultural Competence proposed by Deardorff (2006) presents ICC development as an ongoing process in which attitudes, motivations, and skills facilitate a shift in internal outcomes leading to enhanced affective and appropriate communication (*cf.* Figure 9). However, this model also "does not explicitly elucidate the factors that facilitate the process of intercultural learning" (Vromans *et al.,* 2023, p.2). Hence, Vromans *et al.* (2023) argue that "the intercultural competence literature lacks empirical research on how students learn and the process of intercultural learning" (p.1).

[87] See https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/t-kit-4-intercultural-learning (accessed on 04/09/2024).
[88] For an overview of the literature on the U-curve Adjustment Hypothesis see Black and Mendenhall (1991).

Aiming to fill this gap, the study by Vromans *et al.* (2023) proposes a model of intercultural learning. In this model, the knowledge aspect of intercultural communication is an important facet where students, in this case, are presented with so-called "cultural values", with diverse perspectives and experiences, and are stimulated to learn about their classmates' cultures. The next step – in congruence with much of the literature on ICC development (*cf. infra*) – is that a level of dissonance is needed. Dissonance is argued to arise "when the learner's existing knowledge is challenged and found to be incomplete" (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013, p.1566 as cited in Vromans *et al.*, 2023, p.2). The next phase emphasises the importance that students' own intercultural experiences can affirm the knowledge elements, so that students remain motivated to learn. Next, the model leans on Kolb's experiential learning, a theory that argues that learning happens through experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisations, and experimentation. Although this model includes the components of knowledge and motivation, it does not reflect a more critical understanding, depicting the complexity of interculturality and identity formation.

In this context, socialisation offers a useful lens for understanding interculturality as a process that unfolds through social interaction and experience, rather than as movement through predefined stages or the accumulation of "cultural knowledge" (Frame, 2012; Holliday, 2016).[89] As I indicate throughout this section, Frame (2012, 2014, 2023, 2025a) draws attention to the communicative dimension in interculturality and suggests that the process evolves on an interpersonal level; in making this argument, he draws on the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966). Socialisation foregrounds the relational, contextual, and interactional nature of this process, shifting attention from what individuals acquire to how they become differently oriented through experience, interaction, and reflection. Here, the distinction between primary and secondary socialisation made by Frame is particularly useful:

> *"Primary socialisation generally takes place in what might be described as a dominant national context, despite exposure to multiple groups (family, class, regional, ethnic...) within this national context. Since the cultures of these other groups are more-or-less strongly marked by the dominant national culture, which the majority of their members take for granted, most individuals interiorise the 'deeper' traits of national culture (values, basic presuppositions, attitudes, beliefs,...). In this sense primary or 'tabula rasa' socialisation is 'absolute', in that individuals have no preexisting cultural*

[89] This will be further elaborated below when discussing Adrian Holliday's negotiable grammar of culture and Alexander Frame's semiopragmatics model.

> *norms, and the primary socialisation culture(s) are assimilated absolutely, coming to constitute their ethnocentric norm. Secondary socialisation, generally taking place from adolescence onwards, consists in learning new cultural traits comparatively, i.e. by cataloguing their differences with regard to the internalised ethnocentric norms of primary socialisation. Depending on a variety of factors, secondary socialisation generally involves assimilating more superficial levels of culture, then reinterpreting them in the light of one's preexisting ethnocentric norms, values, and basic presuppositions." (Frame, 2012, p.35)*

Within this understanding, it can be explained why enhancing ICC is closely connected to experiences of disequilibrium that disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions and create the potential for reorientation, and how it may be fostered through intercultural interaction and groupwork as sites of socialisation and encounters with the cultural "Other", as well as through processes of decentred positioning in which individuals engage with perspectives that challenge their established frames of reference. This will be further explored next.

Cultural disequilibrium

International mobility has become the dominant activity within the internationalisation of HE (*cf.* section II.1.3. Manifestations of internationalisation of higher education in Europe), with study abroad programmes and student mobility being the most commonly adopted approaches for enhancing ICC among students (Sabet & Chapman, 2023). The assumption that these activities effectively enhance students' ICC likely stems from traditional learning theories, such as Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, and literature on intercultural learning, which emphasise the importance of encountering dilemmas or experiencing disjuncture and disequilibrium as motivators — or even prerequisites — for learning (Killick, 2012; Lilley *et al.*, 2015; Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Taylor, 1994; Vromans *et al.*, 2023).

For instance, Taylor's (1994) model of learning to become culturally competent suggests that cultural disequilibrium acts as a catalyst for change, with its emotional intensity driving individuals to develop intercultural competence. According to Taylor (1994), this state of disequilibrium challenges existing perspectives, compelling learners to adopt new ways of thinking in order to regain so-called balance. In other words, when individuals are thrown off balance, they must adapt by exploring radically new approaches, as their old ways of understanding have been challenged. Anderson's model of the process

of cross-cultural adjustment mentions that overcoming obstacles leads to changes in affective, behavioural and cognitive responses. According to Anderson (1994) "it is experiences of instability or imbalance that provide the necessary impetus spurring organisms to action" (p.302). Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017) highlight that the critical role that disorienting experiences play in stimulating change and personal growth is one of the key takeaways emerging from these learning models. The idea that a moment of disequilibrium or an experience of dissonance is needed in the learning process of ICC seems to have stood the test of time, as more recently, Mitchell and Paras (2018) even refer to cognitive dissonance as the "engine" of intercultural learning.

These moments of disequilibrium are often assumed to occur during periods of physical mobility abroad. Such mobility takes individuals out of their comfort zones, away from familiar social networks, food habits, and language, and into environments where they face new challenges. Taylor (1994) posits that living in another "culture"[90] often triggers a transformative process as individuals are forced to adapt to survive, requiring them to view the world from a different perspective. In the study by Lilley *et al.* (2015) – which aimed to explore students' perspectives of change resulting from a mobility experience – out of the comfort zone experiences were mentioned by students as a fundamental factor for change and helped students to think, reflect and grow. Examples of out of the comfort zone learning provided by Lilley *et al.* (2015) include "being away from family and friends, language difficulties, cultural differences, having to engage with different others, saving yourself in new or different situations, coping, interpersonal conflict, and differences in university structure and support and approaches to learning" (p.233).

Cognitive dissonance arises when there is a conflict between a person's existing beliefs or expectations and new information or behaviour. This conflict causes psychological discomfort, which one must address through various psychological strategies. The way a person resolves this conflict can lead to changes in their attitudes, values, or beliefs (see Mitchell & Paras, 2018). The idea that moments of discomfort are needed for learning seems to be aligned with Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, which suggests that the effectiveness of communication is linked to individuals' abilities to manage their uncertainty and anxiety (see Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). However, arguably, certain moments of discomfort might correspond to very high levels of anxiety, which in turn would tend to cause individuals to focus on simplistic information in the form of stereotypes and be less open to learning. Hence,

[90] Taylor (1994) appears to use the word culture as a synonym for country.

Gudykunst and Nishida (2001) note that "when anxiety and uncertainty are either very high or very low, they do not predict effectiveness of communication" (p.56).

While research on the importance of disequilibrium has mainly been focused on mobility abroad, there appears to be growing support for the idea that such moments of cultural disequilibrium or uncertainty could happen anywhere including the local classroom (Jones, 2013; Killick, 2012; Lilley *et al.*, 2015). As argued by Killick (2012) the home campus might bring similar opportunities to the static majority: "such change might also be stimulated through even short mobilities and brief encounters with another might be explained with reference to notions of "trigger events" (Brookfield, 1987) stimulating significant learning, and "threshold concepts" (Meyer & Land, 2003; Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010) opening up whole new fields of knowledge" (p.374).

Intercultural interaction

There appears to be a consensus around the idea that intercultural interaction is needed to enhance one's ICC as "culture is to be discovered in action" (Hester & Hester, 2012, p.576). Most models of intercultural "learning" emphasise this interactional element. For instance, in the provided example of the process model of intercultural communication competence by Deardorff (2006) (*cf.* Figure 9), the centrality of interaction is evident. One implication highlighted in the study is that: "internationalization strategies need to address the development of the components of intercultural competence in a variety of ways (i.e., course work, study abroad, on-campus interaction with students from different cultural backgrounds, etc.) as well as the actual process for acquiring intercultural competence, including necessary cognitive skills" (p.259). Similarly, Spencer-Oatey and Dauber's (2017) developmental stages of internationalisation (*cf.* Figure 7) underscore that high levels of interaction are necessary for getting to the competency stage of internationalisation.

From a socialisation perspective, intercultural interaction functions as a setting through which students are socialised into ways of communicating and positioning themselves in relation to others (*cf. supra*). This interactive and socialised nature of learning is reflected in broader learning theories, which are also frequently referred to within the literature of international education and intercultural learning, such as

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning.[91] According to Kolb, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1994, p.38 as cited in Healey & Jenkins, 2000, p.185). Similarly, Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, originally developed in research on prejudice, suggests that structured contact between members of different groups can promote understanding and reduce biases. While neither theory originates specifically from the field of intercultural communication education, both highlight how learning and perspective-taking emerge through social interaction, making them relevant in higher education contexts. As Deardorff and Jones (2022) observe, "For many international educators, education abroad presents a key opportunity for developing intercultural competence. Learner-centered interventions in these contexts have therefore become a prevalent feature in the literature […] Such interventions for developing intercultural competence in education abroad may use ethnographic questioning techniques (see, e.g., Bosley, 2010), be guided by experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), or follow transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1994)" (p.231).

This emphasis on interaction underpins much of the rhetoric surrounding student mobility as a key means of enhancing students' ICC. In addition to physical mobility, various modes of virtual exchange have also been highlighted for their potential to enhance students' ICC (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Helm, 2024; Helm & Guth, 2022; O'Dowd, 2021b, 2023; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). As Dooly and Vinagre (2022) note, "A recurring aspect mentioned in publications on VE refers to enhanced intercultural communicative competences as a result of sustained communication with speakers of other languages and cultures" (p.398). However, within this context of contact with the so-called "cultural Other" through student mobility, whether face-to-face or virtual, two important considerations need to be addressed. First, it needs to be acknowledged that constructive engagement with perceived "cultural Others" or "strangers" is not limited to encounters between students of different national backgrounds but can occur in a wide range of situations. As Mendoza et al. (2021) argue, "any member of a university is a potential stranger, who has to negotiate membership, identities, interactions, and (mis-)encounters" (p. 95). This perspective challenges narrow understandings of intercultural interaction as something that only takes place between clearly defined national groups. Second, research across both physical and virtual mobility contexts consistently shows that intercultural contact does not occur automatically, nor does it

[91] As Healey and Jenkins (2000) explain, Kolb's theory "presents a way of structuring and sequencing the curriculum and indicates, in particular, how a session or entire course may be taught to improve student learning. It suggests that learning is cyclical, involving four stages, which, paraphrasing Kolb, may be referred to as experience, reflect, generalize, and test" (p.185)

necessarily result in meaningful intercultural learning. Although interaction is widely positioned as central to the enhancement of ICC, students in diverse learning environments often interact primarily within familiar linguistic or national groupings, resulting in limited engagement across perceived cultural boundaries (De Vita, 2007; Peacock & Harrison, 2009). Where interaction does take place, it frequently remains at a functional level, for example, through short-term or task-focused group work, which does not in itself foster intercultural understanding and may even reinforce existing stereotypes (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Kokkonen *et al.,* 2022; Turner, 2009). Turner (2009) further observes that such interactions can become highly task-focused and competitive, potentially deflecting attention away from relationship building and engagement with difference. Comparable challenges have been reported in virtual exchange contexts, including "failed" or "missed" communication, communication "breakdowns", student frustration, and stereotyping (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Ware, 2005). As noted by O'Dowd and Dooly (2020):

> *"although the intercultural contact takes place in online contexts between learners, it is often in the classroom, in the related activities before and after the online interaction, that intercultural learning takes place. Studies show that learners need the guidance and informed insight of their teachers to create, interpret, and respond to messages, blog posts, and video- recordings during the exchanges. It is in the classroom analysis of this authentic communication that cultural 'rich points' emerge and the skills of intercultural interaction and ethnographic interviewing can be honed" (p.370).*

Hence, while the literature indicates that intercultural interaction can be fostered under particular pedagogical conditions, such as intentionally structured group composition, sustained collaborative tasks, and guided reflection on communication processes, it also consistently highlights the importance of contextual factors. Elements including task interdependence, teacher mediation, clear instructions, and small group dynamics are widely recognised as crucial for achieving the motivational, cognitive, and affective benefits associated with group work (*e.g.,* Kimmel & Volet, 2012). These findings underscore that neither interaction nor mobility can be assumed to automatically enhance students' ICC.

Such observations point to the need to understand intercultural learning not as a direct or guaranteed outcome of interaction or mobility, but rather as a longer-term, situated process. Adopting a process perspective to enhance ICC among students in HE means that "students' learning does not begin when they step on the plane or train to the host country, nor does it end when they step foot again on their home soil" (Murray-García & Tervalon, 2017, p.22). Instead, rather than "the myth" of achieving

intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2017, p.131), ICC development is regarded as a lifelong learning endeavour (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Dervin, 2023). Where some regard this process approach as meaning that one is continually improving their ICC (Sabet & Chapman, 2023), others take a more critical perspective in which enhancing one's ICC is seen as a dynamic process of doing, undoing, and redoing (or thinking, unthinking, and re-thinking) interculturality (see Dervin, 2023). This ultimately leads to the question of whether and how ICC can be "learned".

As stated by Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) "intercultural competence is not something that can be guaranteed, like learning a computer software or learning the lyrics of a new song" (p.15-16). In other words, just because a student experiences study abroad or follows a course on intercultural communication does not mean they come out of it "competent" (*ibid*). Instead, it can even reinforce cultural stereotypes (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Kokkonen *et al.,* 2022). According to Lane (2012) "intercultural learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that support the ability of learners to both understand culture and interact with people from cultures different than their own" (p.2). However, even though intercultural learning can take place, it is not something that can "simply" be learned. Instead, ICC is a learning process in which the learning happens over time, and someone's competence is something that can be enhanced. As argued by Kokkonen and Natri (2024) "even if MICC is seen as an interpretation of appropriate and effective communication in a given situation and context, the different elements of attitudes, knowledge and skills related to MICC can be enhanced through educational experience and they are in use when recognising the most appropriate and effective way to act in a given context, situation and relationship" (p.36). Within this thesis, the terms "enhancing" and "fostering" are deliberately used in relation to ICC instead of terms such as "developing" or "learning". This choice reflects the view that ICC is understood as a dynamic process of doing, undoing, and redoing, rather than as a fixed and stable "trait".

Within this context, it is also important to consider the knowledge dimension of ICC, which has frequently been framed in rather positivist ways. As noted previously, the "knowledge" component is often associated with providing information about other cultures, such as broad patterns or traits, and with outlining expected behaviours or norms. However, there is another line of thought in which knowledge is not only about facts or generalisations, but about understanding the communicative and relational processes that emerge in intercultural situations (*e.g.,* Frame, 2022; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). This suggests that students may benefit from guidance not only on what is

"different" or "other", but also on knowledge of communicative processes, of the uncertainties, anxieties, and potential stereotypes that can arise in intercultural interactions and how these might be navigated. From this perspective, scholars such as Liu and Darling (2024) argue for moving beyond an information-focused approach – for example, teaching culture as a set of facts – towards more process-oriented ways of engaging with intercultural encounters, where learners are invited to reflect on their assumptions and make sense of interactions as they unfold (p. 249). One illustrative example is provided by Frame (2022),[92] who identifies three phases through which learners can be gradually supported in developing a more nuanced understanding of intercultural phenomena: (i) decentring – recognising potential macro-level cultural differences as a source of predictability in interpersonal communication; (ii) fluidifying – attending to the negotiation of culture and identity in specific, contextualised interactions; and (iii) re-categorising – considering representations of social groups as discursive constructs that shape behaviour and understanding, including in relation to power and intergroup dynamics on microlevel interactions.

Shifting the focus to interactional processes

Mezirow (1998), a renowned scholar known for his theory of transformative learning in adult education, argues that "learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future actions" (p.190). In a similar line of thought, Holliday (2016) suggests that intercultural competence is an inherent aspect of human nature, developed from an early age and continuously engaged throughout life when encountering culturally unfamiliar situations. According to Holliday (2016), intercultural competence is not something that needs to be newly acquired but rather recovered from the socialisation processes that shape us from birth *(cf. supra)*. He asserts that "intercultural competence is not something to be learned as a new domain when we encounter the culturally strange, but something to be recovered from our experience of everyday life" (p.12). However, this perspective does not imply that individuals always communicate appropriately or effectively in intercultural contexts, as people can still be refrained from creating resonances with others (referred to as "deCentred threads") due to hindrance by grand narratives (referred to as "deconstructive blocks"). Nonetheless, it emphasises that people have constructed culture on a daily basis throughout their lives – a process that Holliday terms as "small culture

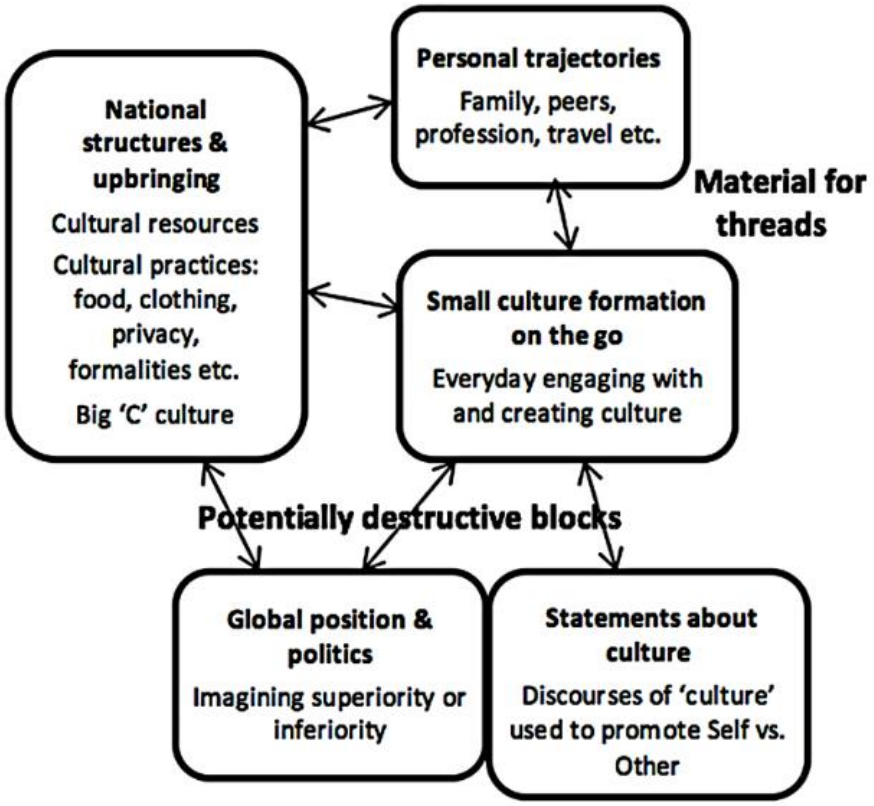
[92] The remark must be made that in his work, Frame illustrates these phases through a two-year MA programme in Intercultural Management, a course dedicated to interculturality, allowing learners to develop a more critical and process-oriented understanding with a considerably longer timeframe than, for instance, the duration of BIPs.

formation on the go" (see Holliday, 2016; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020) – a concept that will be further elaborated on next by looking at Holliday's "negotiable grammar of culture" (Holliday, 2016).

In the book *Making Sense of the Intercultural: Finding DeCentred Threads*, co-authored by Holliday and Amadasi, the authors endeavour a "new" way of talking about interculturality. One of the key elements in this discussion is Holliday's notion of *small culture formation on the go,* which refers to the everyday interactions through which people collectively construct culture. "Small cultures" can be defined as "any social arrangement where two or more people come together to make or negotiate culture and could range from established social groupings such as a department, a social club or a family, to an event such as a meal or a meeting" (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p.9). The notion of "on the go" pulls away from too much focus on the location and "implies the transient and sometimes discordant nature of how people engage: coming, going, accepting, rejecting, remaking, breaking, passing by, upsetting and disturbing; being in conflict with others and the norms of the 'group' or cultural place; accepting, resisting or challenging social conventions through interactional choices" (*ibid.*).

The various interconnected forces that are present in intercultural communication and what someone brings to small culture formation on the go are visualised in Holliday's "negotiable grammar of culture", see Figure 10. The negotiable grammar of culture suggests that even when adopting a non-essentialist perspective on culture, national structures and grand narratives must still be acknowledged as they shape individuals' upbringing through institutions like education and media and influence the cultural resources individuals bring to these small cultural formations. According to Holliday (2016) "these structures influence the particular cultural practices that have been normalized, and also the big 'C' cultural elements in the arts, that form the environments that we grow up in" (p.3). However, rather than assuming that individuals within the same national structures exhibit uniform behaviours, Holliday argues that personal trajectories mediate these narratives, forming the basis of individual responses to everyday interactions (*i.e.*, small culture formation on the go). Nevertheless, potential blocks exist, which can be understood as essentialist references to large cultures that are perceived as separate, mutually exclusive, bounded, and homogeneous entities, leading to "Us" versus "Them" categorisations (or Self versus Other as depicted in the Figure).

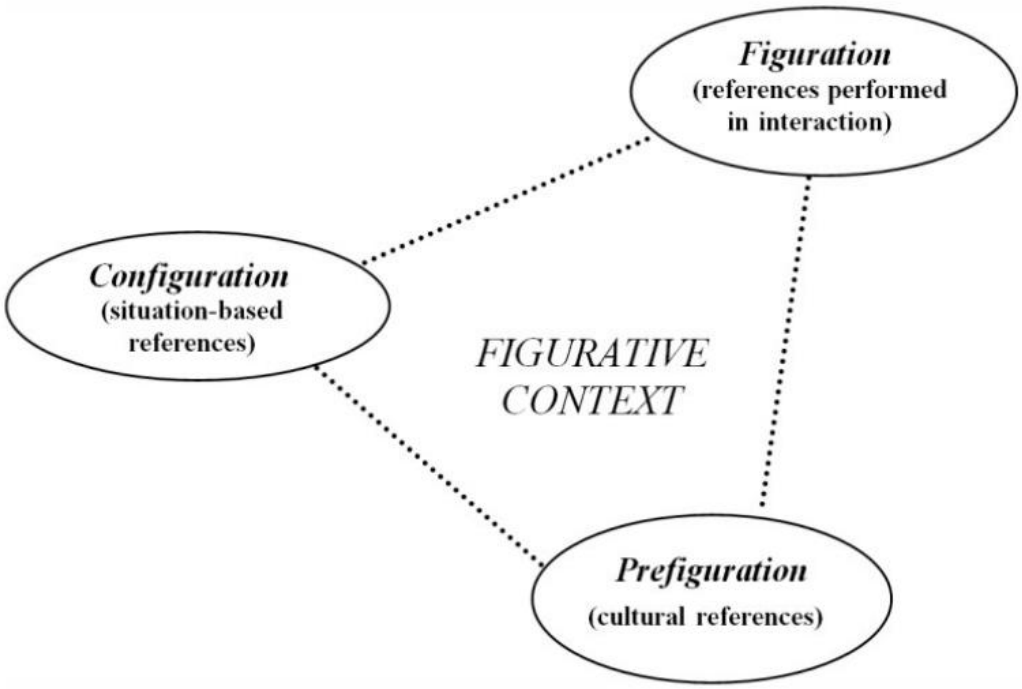
Figure 10: A negotiable grammar of culture (reproduced from Holliday, 2016, p.4)



Threads pull in the opposite direction as blocks and can be explained as "non-essentialist connections in our lives, thoughts and experiences that dissolve large culture boundaries" (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p.12). From this perspective, intercultural competence involves finding cultural threads from one's existing experiences created through small culture formations on the go, moving beyond grand narratives that can form potential blocks (also referred to as Centre narratives, see Holliday & Amadasi, 2020), and within the unfamiliar that one might encounter. Therefore, Holliday and Amadasi (2020) argue that "it is thus by deconstructing existent dominant, Centre narratives that alternative, deCentred narratives can be produced paying close attention to avoiding essentialist blocks" (p.40). It is within this so-called third space—where the "normal" is disrupted—that individuals can become aware of Centre structures and navigate them to create conditions for forming deCentred threads. Hence, students should be educated to recognise and critically reflect on the cultural elements they bring into intercultural encounters, with the goal of identifying threads that connect them with others while avoiding the blocks that hinder meaningful engagement. This approach necessitates a form of critical education that emphasises the importance of focusing on similarities rather than fixating on differences (*e.g.*, Kokkonen *et al.*, 2022).

Building on Holliday's work, one of the angles that is less foregrounded concerns the motivations for individuals to draw on particular cultural references or identity positions in specific interactional contexts and the duality of cultures that are performed. While the negotiable grammar of culture provides a valuable framework for understanding how grand narratives, personal trajectories, and everyday experiences "shape" what individuals bring into intercultural encounters, it offers less detail on how these cultural resources are mobilised, negotiated, and enacted in interaction, or how individuals make sense of themselves and others in interaction. In this regard, Frame's semiopragmatic model (see Figure 11) offers an important complementary perspective (*cf.* Frame, 2008, 2012; Frame & Boutaud, 2011). Drawing on symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), Frame seeks to account for the relationship between socially "prefigured" identities at the macro level and the traits, positions, and meanings enacted by individuals at the micro level of interaction. Whereas Holliday foregrounds the cultural grammar that makes certain interpretations, narratives, and connections available, Frame focuses on the communicative work through which these resources are selected, structured, and performed during interaction (the cultural repertoire).

Figure 11: Semiopragmatics model of intercultural communication (reproduced from Frame, 2012, p.39)



The model distinguishes three levels of interpretative reference used by individuals in interaction, namely, prefigured, configured, and performed references. The first level, that of prefigured references, encompasses the cultural and socially acquired knowledge that individuals bring into interaction through socialisation. This includes language and communicative codes, interactional norms, role expectations, experiential frames, and shared narratives that people bring into the interaction. This level could correspond in Holliday's terms to the influence of grand narratives, Centre discourses, and personal trajectories, which "shape" the cultural resources available to individuals prior to any specific encounter. The second level, that of configured references, takes into account the situated nature of interaction. Here, individuals orient to the immediate circumstances of the encounter, including who is present, the perceived roles and relationships involved, and the expectations associated with the situation. Prefigured cultural knowledge is thus selectively activated, adapted, or downplayed in response to the interactional context. The third level, the figurative level, concerns the interaction itself and the meanings that emerge through participants' actions and discourse. At this level, identities and cultural positions are enacted,

negotiated, resisted, or transformed in real time. Culture is thus not merely referenced but actualised through interaction. Arguably, this level resonates with Holliday's notion of small culture formation on the go, where cultural meanings are negotiated within specific, transient social arrangements rather than simply reproduced from large cultural structures. This performative dimension also aligns with Holliday's emphasis on the emergence of deCentred threads, as participants draw on shared experiences or momentary alignments that cut across essentialist cultural blocks.

While Holliday offers a framework for understanding the cultural resources, narratives, and tensions that individuals bring into encounters, Frame's work provides an understanding of how these resources are prefigured, configured, and performed in interaction. Holliday's work suggests that students already possess intercultural competence in a certain form, grounded in their everyday experiences of small culture formation on the go. However, this competence may remain underdeveloped or constrained by essentialist Centre narratives that function as blocks in intercultural encounters. Fostering ICC therefore requires educational practices that help students become aware of these narratives, reflect on their own personal trajectories, and identify deCentred threads that enable connection across perceived cultural boundaries. Frame's semiopragmatic model complements this view by highlighting the interactional processes through which ICC is enacted. Hence, fostering ICC involves supporting students in recognising how their prefigured cultural knowledge shapes expectations, how interactional contexts configure communicative possibilities, and how identities and meanings are performed and negotiated in interaction. This shifts the focus of intercultural education from predicting cultural behaviour using "culture-comparative" approaches to developing students' interpretive, reflexive, and interactional skills. Within contexts such as BIPs, this understanding foreground the importance of creating learning environments that encourage interaction, reflection, and guided analysis of intercultural encounters. Rather than treating national culture as the primary explanatory framework, fostering ICC entails helping students attend to the dynamic, situational, and relational nature of communication and to enhance the ability to engage with the "cultural Other".

Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined how IHE is framed in policy and research and how it is commonly linked to the enhancement of students' ICC. The literature highlights internationalisation as a complex process that extends beyond mobility and contact across national borders, while also emphasising the influence of European policy and funding frameworks on institutional strategies and practices. Within this context,

recent emphasis on more inclusive forms of internationalisation has been accompanied by the introduction of BIPs, which are explicitly positioned in relation to internationalisation objectives. Within the literature on HE internationalisation, ICC is frequently referred to as a desired outcome of internationalised study experiences. The literature on intercultural communication has led to a more nuanced understanding of culture as "fuzzy", in which ICC is not understood as the acquisition of knowledge about national cultures, nor as a set of decontextualised skills, but as a relational and interactional capacity when engaging with a perceived "cultural Other". From an interpretive perspective, ICC involves the ability to interpret and negotiate meaning in culturally diverse encounters, to reflect on one's own cultural positioning, and to engage with others in ways that remain sensitive to context, power, and emerging social relations. Based on the proposed definition of ICC, the empirical research will examine to what degree BIPs create conditions in which students' ICC may be fostered; how this is understood and experienced by teachers, organisers, and students involved in BIPs; and what the potentials and barriers are for enhancing students' ICC through these programmes.

Chapter III - Methodology

Having developed the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, I now turn to the methodological choices made to explore the potential of BIPs as a vector for enhancing students' ICC. To do this, the research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, situated within an interpretivist and constructivist epistemological framework, to understand how ICC is perceived, negotiated, and enacted within BIPs, and how it is experienced by organisers, teachers, and students. Building on an ethnographically informed orientation, a multi-method design was employed across four BIPs within the FORTHEM Alliance, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and interactive focus groups to engage with multiple actors and perspectives. The chapter first outlines the qualitative and ethnographic research approach and elaborates on the epistemological assumptions that inform the study. I will then describe how the data have been analysed using the analytical framework of critical constructivist grounded theory (Levitt, 2021). Finally, it discusses the ethical implications of these methods and acknowledges the "biases" inherent in the qualitative research tradition.

III.1. Research approach

This research is an exploratory study that adopts a qualitative approach, seeking to understand how ICC is situated and addressed within BIPs, how ICC is understood and experienced by the teachers, organisers and students involved, and how the design and implementation of BIPs might create both potentials and barriers for fostering students' ICC. Rather than aiming for statistical generalisations, the study seeks to describe events, understand particular activities, and provide meaningful interpretations of a phenomenon through sustained engagement with the actors involved. A qualitative approach was therefore adopted, as it "allows [researchers] to examine people's experiences in detail", which was necessary for understanding participants' attitudes towards the themes explored in this study (Hennink *et al.*, 2020, p.10). Moreover, such an approach "allows [researchers] to identify issues from the perspective of [their] study participants and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events or objects" (*ibid*).

Building on this qualitative orientation, the study adopts an ethnographic research approach to explore how ICC is situated, understood, and fostered within BIPs. Ethnography was chosen as a research method

as it allows for in-depth, contextualised exploration of participants' experiences, interactions, and practices within their natural settings (Clark et al., 2021; Jackson, 2016). By combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and interactive focus groups, ethnography enables to capture both what participants do and how they make sense of their actions in real time. This provides a holistic understanding of how and to what extent ICC is integrated within the programmes and reflected upon as a socially negotiated phenomenon. Ethnography allows for immersion in the social setting, enabling the researcher to provide a holistic understanding of a particular sociocultural phenomenon or event, often starting with a general focus rather than predetermined research questions or hypotheses to test (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Jackson, 2016). This is very much the case of this research, in which the initial research proposal was based on the idea to provide a critical look at the concepts of internationalisation and intercultural communication competence applied to BIPs, moving on to the specific questions of how BIPs might act as a vector enhancing students' ICC. By drawing on multiple methods and seeking to understand the experiences of organisers, teachers, and students involved in the BIPs, this approach generates a rich, emic perspective on what is experienced by the various actors involved (*cf. infra* for a discussion on how I employ "triangulation"). These perspectives can then be analysed against the broader discourse surrounding BIPs, IHE, and ICC as outlined in the literature, enabling a critical interpretation of the data considering these different actors and their positions.

These methods allow the study to capture different dimensions of how ICC is situated and experienced within BIPs. Participant observation was chosen to examine how ICC is enacted in practice, for example, in pedagogy, in the programme schedules, in group activities, collaborative tasks, and everyday interactions, providing insight into implicit behaviours and social dynamics that may not be fully articulated by participants themselves. Semi-structured interviews with organisers and teachers complement this by exploring their intentions, interpretations, and decision-making processes, revealing how ICC is considered, planned for, and reflected upon at the level of programme design and implementation. Interactive focus groups with students, in turn, enable the exploration of shared experiences, negotiated meanings, and diverse perspectives, offering insight into how ICC is understood in relation to BIPs from the learners' point of view.

Participant observation, in particular, forms the foundation of this multi-method approach, as it provides the researcher with direct involvement in how BIPs are implemented in practice and the interactions, practices, and social context which set the scene for enhancing one's ICC. Observation captures the often

implicit ways in which interculturality is enacted, which may not be fully accessible through interviews or focus groups alone. By immersing in the setting, the researcher could also contextualise participants' reflections and collective discussions, providing a baseline for interpreting the meanings shared during interviews and focus groups. Observation also allowed for relationship building with participants, enabling deeper reflection on their experiences during subsequent interviews and focus groups. While one-on-one interviews were chosen for teachers and organisers due to the smaller sample size, interactive focus groups were used with students both to accommodate larger numbers and to facilitate collaborative reflection on their experiences. Taken together, these methods allow the study to move between observed practices, individual reflections, and socially constructed understandings, generating a rich, triangulated, and contextually grounded picture of the possibilities of BIPs acting as a vector for enhancing students' ICC.

Epistemological assumptions

Conscious or unconscious ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions influence how research is conducted and interpreted. In this study, an interpretivist and constructivist approach is adopted to explore how participants make sense of their experiences within BIPs, specifically relating to ICC enhancement. It is considered important to understand the subjective experiences that shape social action, what these experiences mean in practice, and how these meanings are interpreted by others. Triangulation is not conceived as a form of "validity-checking" – the idea that using different methods and including multiple actors produces some absolute certainty or "truth" about the phenomenon under study, implying a single reality. Instead, this study draws on the idea of "indefinite triangulation"; this notion draws on ethnomethodology, and questions whether there can be only one single truth about the situation to which various accounts relate (for a more detailed discussion on different forms of triangulation see Hammersley, 2008). In this study, triangulation serves as a means of generating complementary insights through the use of different methods and through engagement with the experiences of multiple actors, namely students, teachers, and organisers. In this regard, it "emphasises the situated nature of all accounts, and offers an important caution against assuming that one source of data is always superior to others", whether at the level of the researcher, students, organisers, or teachers (Hammersley, 2008, p.27).

Reality, therefore, is not conceived as singular, fixed, or objective, but as relational and experiential. Knowledge is understood as constituted through the relationship between individuals and the

phenomena they encounter, and multiple realities are acknowledged as co-existing rather than converging towards law-like generalisations. In line with this epistemological stance, the study does not take a positivist approach to culture, in which cultures are seen as fixed essences that determine behaviour. Instead, a constructivist posture is adopted, seeing cultures as fluid and continually negotiated through interaction. In line with this, the approach to intercultural communication is interpretative: it looks at how participants draw on different cultures and identities to create meaning in specific contexts and situations. This aligns with symbolic interactionism, which sees social interaction as shaped by the meanings individuals attach to actions and relationships (Blumer, 1986). Consistent with this position, the study does not seek to produce universal or predictive explanations of participants' experiences. Instead, it aims to offer an in-depth, contextually situated understanding of meaning-making processes. One of the influences on this interpretivist stance is hermeneutics, which emphasises understanding as situated, historically and socially embedded, and always mediated by interpretation. Participants are therefore not treated as "passive vessels" of an experience, but as active sense-makers whose understandings emerge through interaction and are shaped by the specific conditions in which they participate (Clark et al., 2021). This study also rejects the notion that research can be value-free, particularly in ethnographically informed work that involves sustained engagement with participants and settings. Rather than striving for neutrality, a reflexive approach is adopted, acknowledging that the researcher's identities, experiences, and assumptions inevitably shape the research process (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Clark et al., 2021). Reflexivity is therefore treated as an integral methodological and epistemological practice, enabling ongoing examination of how knowledge is produced. Moreover, it has been aimed to provide full transparency by detailing the data collection methods and by including the interview and focus group transcripts, and the coding overview.

While the overall orientation of the study is interpretivist, it also draws on elements of critical constructivist grounded theory (CCGT) (Levitt, 2021). This allows attention to be given to broader social, historical, and political structures, and to the ways in which power shapes meaning-making. Just as within ethnography, so too within CCGT, reflexivity is central throughout the process: the researcher remains aware of how positionality, prior experiences, and assumptions may influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Personal experiences as an international and exchange student, including participation in programmes such as Erasmus, provide an element of insider perspective. At the same time, the role of a PhD researcher positions the researcher as an outsider. Reflexive engagement with these shifting positions has been essential in ensuring that they are acknowledged rather than taken for

granted, and that participants' varied realities are attended to without being treated as universal. While an initial discussion of positionality has been provided in the Introduction, a further reflection on positionality during and after the data collection will be provided in section V.4. Reflection: Researcher's positionality.

Study context and sampling

The multi-method qualitative approach outlined above was used to study four BIPs implemented within the FORTHEM Alliance between 2023 and 2024. The focus on four BIPs within the FORTHEM Alliance was primarily determined by questions of access. This study commenced at the early stages when BIPs were introduced as a newly funded activity under the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027. Therefore, at the start of this study in 2022, these programmes were just beginning to be set up. As mentioned in II.1.4; p.62, EUAs are considered testing grounds for transnational cooperation, and many EUAs had already begun developing new forms of blended mobility, a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, BIPs represent a relatively new activity, yet one that Alliances were beginning to adopt, as they provided the partnerships and infrastructures necessary to carry them out (*cf.* II.1.4.). As the university to which I am affiliated as a PhD researcher is part of the FORTHEM Alliance, gaining access to its BIPs was relatively straightforward. At the start of this study, the first BIPs within the FORTHEM Alliance were under discussion and in the process of being set up. Staff involved in Alliance activities were contacted by email, informed about the aims of this research, and asked for permission to conduct research whenever a BIP was scheduled. The first four programmes for which access was granted were therefore included in the study. Although these BIPs addressed different disciplinary themes and did not explicitly focus on language or culture, they are situated within wider institutional efforts to promote internationalisation at home, as discussed previously. Details concerning the structure and delivery of each BIP will be provided at the start of Chapter IV - Results.

For each BIP, participant observation was conducted during both the online and onsite phases, followed by semi-structured interviews with organisers and teachers and interactive focus groups with students. Thus, this study captures the perspectives of all actors involved at the implementation level of the BIP: organisers, teachers, and students. Although there was some overlap between teacher and organiser roles, as explained below, this combination of methods provided in-depth insights into both the design and experience of each programme. Given that BIPs allow considerable variation in their structure, methodology, and activities, the four programmes were treated as a type of multiple case study. This

approach allowed for the identification of broader principles of good practice while maintaining the in-depth focus necessary for a qualitative study, rather than aiming for generalisable findings. An overview of the collected data is provided in Table 4. Before discussing each method in greater detail and outlining how it was implemented in practice, several important ethical considerations linked to these chosen methods will be discussed.

Table 4: Overview of data collected

BIPs studied	Participant observation	Number of interviews	Interview participants (I…)	Number of focus groups	Focus group participants (FG…)
BIP A	5 days onsite & 2 x 4h online sessions	2	I1 organiser; I2 main teacher	1	4 (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4)
BIP B	4.5 days onsite & 3 x 1h online sessions	2	I3 organiser; I4 visiting teacher	1	4 (FG5, FG6, FG7, FG8)
BIP C	4.5 days onsite & 2 x 1.5-2h online sessions	1	I5 organiser and teacher	1	4 (FG9, FG10, FG11, FG12)
BIP D	5 days onsite & online one week on/off during collaborative meetings	2	I6 organiser and teacher; I7 visiting teacher	1	3 (FG13, FG14, FG15)

Ethical implications

Considering that this study examined the lived experiences of students, teachers, and organisers during the implementation of BIPs, the data collected were sometimes sensitive. Observations occasionally involved moments of interpersonal tension, groupwork difficulties, or challenges faced by organisers and teachers in navigating the practical realities of delivering the programmes. Similarly, data from focus groups and interviews reflected participants' personal experiences in depth. Given the small scale of each BIP and the limited number of participants, there was a heightened risk that individuals or programmes

could be identifiable. Ensuring confidentiality was therefore essential to protect participants' privacy, prevent unintended consequences within their academic or professional environments, and allow them to speak openly about their experiences. To address these concerns, the entire study was conducted on an anonymous basis. All participants were anonymised, and specific pseudonyms were assigned. Pseudonyms for organisers and teachers are provided in Table 5, where their profiles are further discussed. Focus group participants are identified using "FG" followed by a number, and within the results are also ascribed with the specific BIP they participated in. Because institutional and national affiliations could make participants identifiable, all names, institutional affiliations, nationalities, and other potentially identifying details were removed from fieldnotes, transcripts, and when reporting the findings.[93]

Ensuring that all participation in this study remained voluntary was fundamental. Before each BIP, teachers and organisers informed students that I would be present as a researcher throughout the programme. I also provided a research notice outlining the study's purpose, methods, what participation entailed, and how data would be handled (*cf. Appendix VI - Research notice*). On the first day of each BIP, I briefly introduced myself, clarified my role as an observer, and summarised the focus of the research. Printed copies of the research notice were distributed to all participants. Students were informed that they could opt out either by telling me directly or via a dedicated email address. None chose to opt out, and all reactions were positive. For the BIPs that began with an online phase, I introduced myself at the start of the first online meeting where possible. In BIP C, this took place alongside the introductions by organisers and teachers, while in BIP B, there was no opportunity to do so.

All the teachers and organisers involved were also contacted by email beforehand to request permission for my participation. As outlined previously, participation in both the interviews and the focus groups was entirely voluntary. For the interviews with organisers and teachers, verbal consent was obtained at the start of each interview. For the student focus groups, participants were asked to sign a consent form in advance of the session (*cf.* Appendix V - Focus group consent form). This written consent was considered important because the focus groups took place in a group setting. The signed form clarified that the session involved shared discussion and that the content should not be disclosed outside the group, thereby helping to protect the privacy of all participants. Both the interviewees and focus group

[93] At times when countries or nationalities are being referred to which do not lead to identifying the BIPs the information has remained.

participants were also made aware of audio recording in advance of each meeting, and at the start of each meeting, and they were again informed how the data would be handled. All participants were also made aware that they could withdraw at any time without negative consequences, including up to the submission of the thesis.

III.2. Detailing data collection methods

III.2.1. Participant observation

Participant observation formed a central component of the data collection, providing direct insight into how BIPs were implemented and how ICC was addressed and experienced in practice. Participant observation was the first step in the data collection process in all BIPs studied, followed by the interviews and focus groups. Building on the ethnographic orientation described above, observations allowed immersion in both online and onsite phases of each programme, capturing the social, pedagogical, and collaborative contexts in which students, teachers, and organisers interacted. It captured what was happening "on the ground" and the often implicit ways in which interculturality was enacted from my perspective as a researcher, which may not have been fully accessible through interviews or focus groups alone. Observation also allowed for relationship building with participants, enabling deeper reflection on their experiences during subsequent interviews and focus groups.

As outlined in the ethical considerations above, I adopted an overt strategy, making both the teachers, organisers and students aware of my research role and detailing the study (Clark et al., 2021). This was necessary, as boundaries can become blurred in the field, especially given my flexible, participant-observer stance. Across the different BIPs studied, I occupied multiple, shifting roles: at times a researcher observing, at times a participant observer, occasionally enacting aspects of a teacher, and at other times engaging as a student. These roles were neither fixed nor fully under my control, but were continuously negotiated in response to the interactions, needs, and expectations of students, teachers, and organisers. When requesting access to the BIPs, I adopted a very flexible approach in my initial emails to organisers and teachers, stating that my type of involvement and observational approach would be adaptable according to their preferences. I either arranged a meeting beforehand to introduce myself and discuss the type of observation or clarified my role at the beginning of each BIP. In practice, this meant that in

some BIPs, I took on a slightly more active teacher role, while in others I engaged primarily as an observer. Sometimes this involved interacting in activities to assist teachers or organisers, sometimes joining student activities — such as during students' data collection assignments — and at other times being present without interacting at all. My presence, prior experiences, and professional instincts inevitably shaped both participants' behaviour and my interpretations, highlighting that observation in ethnography is relational and co-constructed. A further reflection on these aspects of positionality and my shifting engagement is provided in section V.4. Reflection: Researcher's positionality.

Prior to this research, I had conducted observations only once for a course in anthropology and ethnography during my master's; however, this was the first time I conducted observations on a larger scale. Having a flexible approach was necessary to gain access and establish relationships with the teachers and organisers involved, yet it also created some uncertainty at the start. To feel more comfortable and prepared, I reviewed different observation strategies, trying to find a method for taking field notes that would allow me to document events richly while remaining engaged in the setting. This led me to consider the principles of thick description (Geertz, 1973), which aim to capture not only participants' behaviours but also the meanings, contexts, and interactions surrounding them (Mills *et al.,* 2010). One critique in the literature on thick description is the absence of practical guidance for implementing it in the field. I encountered this challenge during my preparation until I came across Younas *et al.* (2023), who propose the "MIRACLE" narrative framework, which "serves as a structured process for researchers to plan how to enhance the thick description of qualitative research from the conceptualization of the research project" (p.9-10). The acronym MIRACLE stands for meaningful, interpretative, relational, authentic, contextualised, linked, and emic narratives. Rather than being an afterthought, the framework provides guidance on which narratives to focus on during fieldwork and reporting. Not all dimensions are equally relevant in every study, but the framework helps to identify which aspects should be prioritised in note-taking and reflection. In practice, the framework provided me with a sort of checklist to ensure my notes remained rich, detailed, and attentive to multiple dimensions of experience (Younas et al., 2023). Although the MIRACLE framework offered a degree of stability, I quickly realised that it was not always possible to take notes in real time while being fully immersed in the setting. For example, during field trips to a wastewater treatment plant or a local brewery, or during informal breaks, taking notes continuously would have been disruptive or alienating. Instead, I wrote up many observations afterwards, aiming to reconstruct events as fully as possible. In this way, I tried to document the richness of participants' actions and interactions while remaining engaged in the field. For

BIP A, I produced over 70 pages of observation notes, while for subsequent BIPs the total ranged between 40 and 55 pages, reflecting both a growing confidence in my observational practice and a more selective, focused approach to note-taking.

In contrast to the interview and focus group transcripts, the observation notes are not included in the Appendix of this thesis. During the BIPs, I recorded detailed, thick descriptions of interactions with students and teachers, including informal conversations and practical exchanges. These notes were essential for understanding relational dynamics and the fluid nature of my role in the field, but they contained highly contextual or personal details that could potentially identify participants. For reasons of participant privacy and ethical responsibility, the notes have not been reproduced in the thesis, though they can be made available in anonymised form to the jury members upon request. For a more detailed discussion of how my positionality shaped both data collection and interpretation, see the section on Reflection: Researcher's positionality.

Even though access was initially granted by the organisers and/or teachers involved, during the various BIPs, there were multiple moments when students were not in the dedicated "classroom" where most of the formal teaching took place. Observing students in these settings, therefore, required regaining access to the spaces where they were working. In BIP A, for example, students worked in smaller group rooms adjacent to the main classroom; in BIP C, they could choose to work in the general room or elsewhere, such as a coffee shop or the hotel lobby; and in BIP D, students carried out neighbourhood visits. In these contexts, teachers and organisers were often not present, meaning that observation depended on access to these group settings. In such situations, students acted as "informants" or "gatekeepers" (Clark et al., 2021), guiding access to the locations where their work took place. In BIP A, this was relatively straightforward because the groupwork rooms were next to the main classroom. In BIPs C and D, however, it was less predictable where students would be, and I sometimes felt uncertain about how observation would proceed. In practice, students typically approached me to indicate where they would be working. In BIP C, for example, students had my phone number via a general WhatsApp group. On the fourth day, groupwork could be carried out from anywhere. I went to the general meeting place, but students explicitly messaged me if they were elsewhere, indicating where I could meet them. One student wrote:

> *"hey I can see just one group in the lobby at the hotel but I was just thinking with the others and all of them told me that they are going to stay in the hotel"*

In BIP D, the day started collectively from a central location. In my fieldnotes, I noted down one instance that illustrates how students facilitated access:

> *"When it was time for the groups to start with the data collection, one of the members of the group that I wanted to follow came to me to say that their group was about to leave and asked whether I was ready to join. I had already asked this group yesterday if I could join them today and they all warmly welcomed me. So, in the afternoon I followed the data collection assignment with group number 5. Before starting the data collection, they decided to have a coffee at one of the students' accommodations as it was just around the corner. I felt very welcomed in the group as they also asked if I wanted a coffee and included me in their discussions, giving me a quick catch-up on what they were working on and how the data collection went yesterday."*

These examples illustrate how students facilitated access to informal and dispersed work settings, enabling observation outside the formal classroom setting. Beyond the challenges of accessing dispersed physical spaces, observation during the online mobility phase presented a different set of methodological considerations. As outlined previously, observations were conducted throughout the entire duration of each BIP, covering both the OMP and the PMP. While virtual ethnography is not a new methodological development, it has become increasingly normalised as online interaction is now omnipresent in everyday life (Lenihan & Kelly-Holmes, 2016). In this research, virtual ethnography is not conceptualised as a distinct methodological approach, but rather as a mode of conducting online observations within the broader ethnographic design. The nature of the online sessions shaped the form of observation. These sessions were largely teacher-led and did not include breakout rooms. In most instances, students had their cameras switched off, which made it more challenging to observe interactional dynamics. In BIP B, for example, the online sessions primarily consisted of lectures delivered by the teacher, and in one case, I could only access the session through a recording. In BIPs A and B, collective sessions involved student presentations, during which I observed as a listener. In these online contexts, my role was predominantly that of a non-participant observer. As interaction was often limited or not fully visible, the online observations mainly documented how the online component was structured and implemented. Teachers', organisers', and students' experiences of these online elements were explored in greater depth during the focus groups and interviews.

III.2.2. Semi-structured in-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore how the organisers and teachers understood and experienced the BIPs carried out, which aligns with the purpose of qualitative interviewing (Clark *et al.*, 2021). The aim was to obtain rich descriptions of their experiences, understand how they interpreted the BIPs in relation to internationalisation aims, and gain insight into the extent to which ICC was addressed according to the organisers and teachers in the design and implementation of the programmes. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and/or organisers (*cf. infra* for the reasoning behind the sample decisions). The original intention was to carry out an interview before each BIP to explore motivation, preparation and expectations, followed by one afterwards. However, in practice, this turned out not to be feasible. Many BIPs were only confirmed a few weeks to even a few days before they took place, and the workload for both organisers and teachers was very high. As a result, only post-programme interviews were conducted (besides the various conversations during the observations). While this limited insight into participants' expectations prior to implementation, the post-programme interviews benefited from participants' reflective engagement with their lived experience of the BIPs.

The interviews were also informed by the preceding phase of participant observation. Having observed both the online and onsite components of each BIP, I was familiar with the programme structure, group dynamics, and activities. This prior immersion enabled more focused and contextually grounded questioning during the interviews, as I could refer to specific moments, pedagogical choices, or interactions observed in practice. It also facilitated rapport, as participants were already accustomed to my presence and aware of my research interest. In this sense, the interviews did not function as isolated data collection events but as a continuation of an ongoing engagement with the BIP experience, allowing observed practices to be explored through participants' own interpretations and reflections. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they offer a balance between having structured themes while remaining flexible. As Saunders *et al.* (2012) explain, the interviewer works with a list of themes and key questions, although their use and order can change depending on how the interview develops. Additional questions may also be introduced when topics emerge that are relevant to the research aims. In advance of the interviews, an interview guide was prepared (*cf.* Appendix VII - Appendix VIII -), which served as a base for the interviews. The questions were framed in an open way, which allowed interviewees to draw on their own experiences and respond in a natural, personal manner (Clark *et al.*, 2021).

Although I had prepared an extensive guide in advance, including themes and sample questions to help me feel prepared and to have a backup in case I struggled to verbalise a question, flexibility remained central throughout the interviews. Spontaneous discussion was encouraged, as it often revealed what participants themselves considered important. This meant responding directly to their answers, asking follow-up questions, and occasionally diverging from the interview guide to explore a theme in more depth. According to Clark *et al.* (2021), interviewees may anticipate some questions before they are asked, so the interviewer needs to accommodate changes in the order of the questions. At the same time, it was important to address all themes in the guide across interviews. This ensured that key themes were addressed consistently across cases and enabled analytical comparison across the four BIPs,[94] which is especially relevant in research involving several BIPs. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for multiple case study designs because they maintain some consistency across cases while still allowing space for variation (Clark *et al.*, 2021). In practice, however, this flexibility was sometimes challenging. My interview guides were quite extensive, as I had prepared many possible questions to help me feel ready. Yet already in the first interview, I noticed that, after asking the initial open question, the participant anticipated several of the questions I had planned to address later. In my reflexive notes[95] I wrote:

> *"I do not feel fully satisfied with how the interview went. I had the impression that I was not really in charge of the conversation and that I1 was guiding it through their answers. I followed up as well as I could, but with only a few questions they covered many of the points I had planned to explore. In one sense, this was helpful, because the topics were addressed, but it also meant that I did not have the chance to ask reliability and validity questions or to probe certain issues in more depth. A lot was said at once, and I did not want to interrupt too often, which limited how much I could steer the interview."*

However, reflecting further and debriefing with my supervisors, I recognised that the interviews had yielded rich data and that remaining flexible was essential in order to understand what participants considered important. In the end, my main responsibility was to ensure that all themes were covered, so that the interviews remained aligned with the research objectives. Hennink *et al.* (2020) suggest that if an in-depth semi-structured interview goes well, it feels like a natural conversation for the interviewee. I not

[94] Although it is not the aim to compare the BIPs in any perspective, it was mainly aimed to observe general tendencies.
[95] After each interview, I wrote down personal notes on how I felt the interview went.

only posed questions but also responded to participants' answers and allowed the discussion to develop organically. This approach fostered what Hennink *et al.* (2020) describe as a meaning-making partnership between interviewer and interviewee.

Interviewee selection

Seven semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with teachers and organisers involved in the BIPs. The sample size was primarily determined by the number of individuals occupying central organisational and pedagogical roles within each programme, as well as their availability to participate. Given the relatively small number of organisers and teachers involved in each BIP, identifying key participants was generally straightforward. I used a non-probability sampling approach, combining purposive and convenience strategies. The intention was to interview individuals directly involved in the design, organisation, and delivery of the BIPs, as they were best positioned to provide insight into the research questions. In this sense, sampling was guided by relevance to the phenomenon under investigation rather than representativeness. Many of the interviewees had already been contacted during the process of gaining access to the BIPs for observation and had been informed that I would follow up with an interview, which facilitated participation. This allowed me to use my judgment to identify participants who were information-rich in relation to the BIPs and well-positioned to address my research objectives (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

I aimed to include both organisers' and teachers' perspectives to understand how internationalisation-related objectives were interpreted and the extent to which ICC was integrated into the pedagogical design of the BIPs. In practice, however, the distinction between organisers and teachers was not always clear. In two cases (BIPs C and D), the main organiser also acted as the lead teacher. More generally, several interviewees were simultaneously involved in organisational tasks (such as initiating the idea for the BIP, programme coordination, and partner communication) and pedagogical responsibilities (such as curriculum design and teaching), and only two participants held solely organisational positions. While distinctions between organisers' and teachers' perspectives are analytically useful, the findings should therefore be interpreted with an awareness of this role overlap. In BIPs B and D, visiting teachers had substantial roles and were included in the interviews. In contrast, although several visiting teachers were involved in BIP C, their roles were minor, and they were not included in the sample. For further details on the interviewees' professional roles, how they became involved in the BIP, and their specific responsibilities, please see the interviewee participant Table below.

Table 5: Overview of interviewees

Pseudonym	Role in the BIP	Professional role	Got involved in the BIP
(I1, organiser, BIP A)	Organiser	Senior university staff member responsible for internationalisation activities and, within this role, involved in FORTHEM.	As part of their institutional role, tasked to explore how BIPs could be used within the FORTHEM framework.
(I2, main teacher, BIP A)	Main teacher during the BIP	University teacher in entrepreneurship-related subjects at the organising university.	Invited by superiors to teach at the summer school.[96]
(I3, organiser, BIP B)	Organiser	University staff member in international relations and, within this role, involved in FORTHEM.	Together with a colleague from the home institution, wanted to organise an activity within the context of FORTHEM. Having organised a similar exchange programme the previous year and noting that BIP funding was available, they decided to run it again in the form of a BIP.
(I4, visiting teacher, BIP B)	Visiting teacher	Senior faculty member in business/economics.	Joined after the call disseminated within the FORTHEM network, seeing the BIP as valuable for their department's new courses aligned with the topic.
(I5, organiser and teacher, BIP C)	Organiser and teacher	Associate Professor in economics.	Organised the BIP as a continuation of a partnership with another university from the previous year.
(I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D)	Organiser and teacher	Professor of demography and active within one of the FORTHEM labs.	Proposed the BIP within the context of their associated FORTHEM lab, responding to the call for BIPs and coordinating with colleagues.
(I7, visiting teacher, BIP D)	Visiting teacher	Research group leader and active within one of the FORTHEM labs.	Invited to participate by I6 through collaboration within the FORTHEM lab.

[96] The wording summer school is used here intentionally, as I2 was unaware that the summer school was carried out as a BIP.

Interviews in practice

All interviews lasted between 40 and 85 minutes, resulting in 8 to 18 pages of transcripts each (*cf.* Appendix IX - Interview transcripts). The timing mainly depended on the interviewee's availability (some had to leave within 45 minutes) and on whether the themes were covered. Interviews were conducted a few days to a few weeks after each BIP, which meant that a relationship had already been established with each interviewee through prior contact during the programmes. All participants were aware of the general topic of the research, either because those with organisational roles had permitted me to conduct the study and/or because the research notice had been shared at the start of the BIP and reinforced through multiple conversations during the programmes.

Two versions of the interview guide were prepared and are included in the Appendix (Appendix VII - Interview guide for teachers; Appendix VIII - Interview guide for organisers/teachers). Each guide was structured around thematic blocks to ensure coverage of all research objectives while remaining flexible for natural conversation. The blocks included introduction, role clarification, organisational process, reflections on the BIP experience, exploration of internationalisation and understanding of ICC, and potential advice for future BIPs. Within these blocks, prompts were provided to encourage responses and for me to fall back on, but the order and depth of questions could vary depending on the flow of the interview. The guides slightly differed depending on participants' roles. The teachers' guide emphasised pedagogical aspects, including teaching approaches, learning goals, adaptation to diverse student groups, and reflections on the blended format of the programme. The organisers' guide focused more on the rationale, planning, and implementation of the BIP, including organisational experiences, programme design decisions, and embedding internationalisation objectives. For participants with dual roles, I5 and I6 in this case, a combined guide was used to cover both sets of themes. This ensured that interviews captured the specific responsibilities of each participant while maintaining a level of consistency across the study.

This theme-based structure allowed for following a pathway through the conversation while remaining responsive to participants' emergent reflections. For example, the theme on exploration of internationalisation stance and understanding of ICC was placed towards the end of the interview, unless the participant raised it earlier, in which case it was explored immediately. Later blocks, including advice for future BIPs and closure with an open-ended question, provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on potential improvements and to raise any additional points they considered important. Optional

prompts within each block encouraged depth and richness in the responses, complementing data collected through participant observation.

Each interview began with a short introduction in which I asked permission to record, emphasised anonymity, explained the aim of the interview, and clarified how the data would be used. Following the introduction, the conversation transitioned to clarifying the interviewee's role and their process of becoming involved in the BIP, followed by an open question about their experience. This often marked the point where the conversation began to flow naturally. Other themes were then addressed in an order guided by participants' responses and my follow-up questions. This approach ensured that all thematic blocks were covered while the conversation remained flexible, participant-centred, and reflective of the actual experiences and priorities of the interviewees. Although the research was explained in broad terms, *i.e.*, focusing on internationalisation activities, BIPs explicitly, and how they serve as a method to enhance students' ICC, the interviews initially avoided using the terms "intercultural competence" or "intercultural communication competence" unless the interviewee introduced them. This was done to prevent these terms from shaping or constraining participants' responses. Near the end of the interviews, these terms were introduced to gauge the interviewees' understanding and how they related to this. As outlined by Hennink *et al.* (2020) "a qualitative researcher needs to be open-minded, curious and empathetic, flexible and able to listen to people telling their own story" (p. 10). That is something that was my main note for myself during the interviews – relating things that have been said to new questions: listen, remain flexible, and explore. I practised this beforehand through two mock interviews and felt more comfortable adopting this posture after the first interview.

III.2.3. Activity-oriented focus groups

In order to complement the data collected during the participant observation and to better understand the students' experiences of the BIPs, four synchronous online activity-oriented focus groups were conducted. Clark *et al.* (2021) draw attention to the fact that social science researchers conducting focus groups typically engage in qualitative research methodologies in which researchers are "explicitly concerned with revealing how the group participants view the social world in relation to their own life experiences" (p.453). Focus groups are a form of group discussions or group interviews, though they differ

in important ways.[97] They bring together several participants and a facilitator to explore a clearly defined topic, relying on group interaction, which allows the researcher to gain insights that would be less accessible through individual interviews or more conventional group interviews (Clark *et al.*, 2021).

Although originally mainly used in marketing-related research, focus groups are now widely embraced as a data collection method to explore a range of topics. In the context of this thesis, they have been employed to explore students' experiences of BIPs and their perceived contribution to the enhancement of their ICC (Hua, 2016). An increasing number of studies show that focus groups could be "successfully" used as a method to gauge student experiences of learning, which could be used for creating or evaluating pedagogy.[98] Moreover, in a specific study on the use of focus groups in higher education research, it is argued that "focus group discussions offer the potential to engage with students as partners and surface a more authentic voice" (Bourne & Winstone, 2020, p.1). Breen (2006) argues that "pedagogic research[ers] might decide to use focus groups when they need to know about student experiences of a particular teaching and/or assessment method; when they need to generate ideas among a group of staff for the purposes of curriculum development; or when they need to find out how a new policy will be received by staff and/or students in order to devise appropriate means of implementation" (p.464). In this particular case, the focus groups were aimed at understanding the students' experiences of a newly implemented internationalisation activity and how they related to their experiences in terms of fostering their ICC.

According to Cyr (2016), focus groups can generate data on at least three potential units of analysis, namely, the individual, the group, and the interaction level. The former, the individual level, centres

[97] Although, to a certain extent, focus groups resemble group interviews, the literature indicates that focus groups and group interviews are two distinctive data collection methods satisfying different purposes (*e.g.*, Bourne & Winstone, 2020; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Colucci, 2007). For example, Colucci (2007) argues that too frequently focus groups resemble individual interviews done in a group setting but that this does not do justice to the group dynamic that focus groups provide. Clark *et al.* (2021) point out that whereas one of the aims of a group interview is to prompt responses from a wider group of people, "focus groups are specifically designed to produce interaction between participants" (p.453). In contrast to group interviews, focus groups have the potential to uncover group dynamics and enable the researcher to explore "the way in which individuals discuss a certain issue as a member of a group, rather than simply as individuals" (Clark *et al.*, 2021, p.453).

[98] To give a few examples, Armellini *et al.* (2021) used focus groups to understand students' perceptions of their learning experiences in the context of an institution-wide shift to Active Blended Learning. Langegård *et al.* (2021) used focus groups to explore students' experiences of the pedagogical transition of a nursing course that changed from on campus delivery to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a study by Winlow *et al.* (2013) provides insights on how focus groups can be used in pedagogic research to provide insights into the effectiveness of course delivery, learning and teaching issues, and adequacy of support networks in HE.

around findings on the information gathered from individual participants, enabling the researcher to simultaneously and quickly explore various perspectives to validate or enhance existing evidence. The group unit of analysis could explore the extent to which agreement and disagreements exist, intending to affirm or expand upon other evidence. The interactional level takes into account the interaction (the back-and-forth) among participants and allows for the discovery of nuances and complexities. The level of analysis could involve a combination of units, but each unit of analysis serves different research purposes (Cyr, 2016). Somewhat similarly, Clark *et al.* (2021) argue that the main reasons for researchers to use focus groups fall under the following three main categories: to explore how people construct meaning through social interactions; to make use of a group dynamic to obtain more interesting, nuanced and realistic data; or to give research participants more freedom than in a conventional, one-to-one interview. Although the first category closely fits with my interpretative approach (*cf. supra*), the main objective of the focus group was not to find out how the students constructed meaning through interaction. Instead, the focus group was principally chosen as a method to allow a more flexible approach where students are empowered through a range of activities to reflect upon the BIP while making use of the group dynamic. Due to the flexibility that focus groups offer, it is seen as a technique through which the researcher is "more likely to get access to what people see as important or interesting" (*ibid*, p.458).

Activity-oriented focus groups are focus groups "where participants are actually asked to "do" something… [including] questions that engage participants… [to] provide a different way of eliciting answers and promoting discussion" (Colucci, 2007, p.1424). The kind of activities that could be used in focus groups can take up different forms, such as free listings, ranking, pile sorting, choosing among alternatives, label generation, picture sorting, roleplay, storytelling and projective techniques in which multiple activities could potentially be combined in a single exercise.[99] However, taking into account Collucci's argumentation "[the] exercises are meant to be the input for further discussion, and they accomplish their role best if the moderator goes further than the fulfilment of the task and invites participants to describe their answers more in depth, provide more detail, apply them to a real situation, and express agreement or disagreement with other participants' answers" (*ibid*, p.1430). In this regard, incorporating interactive activities into focus groups has several advantages. For example, activity-oriented focus groups offer participants alternative ways of responding. In simple discussion formats, participants are often expected to provide an immediate verbal answer, whereas activities give them time

[99] See Collucci (2007) for further description of potential focus group activities.

to reflect and organise their thoughts before entering into a group discussion. Activities can also prompt participants to express ideas in different ways, encouraging creativity and allowing them to sketch out or articulate their thinking more freely. In addition, the interactive elements can stimulate further dialogue among participants and offer a concrete point of reference for discussing particular topics. Finally, activity-oriented focus groups may simply be more enjoyable, engaging, and potentially emancipatory for participants (Bourne & Winstone, 2020).

Synchronous online interactive focus groups

A total of four synchronous online interactive focus groups were all conducted using *Microsoft Teams*. Although in-person focus groups have for a long time been the norm, online focus groups are gaining increasing popularity and methodological support (Richard *et al.*, 2021).[100] In this study, the choice to hold them online was straightforward, as it would have been nearly impossible to organise in-person sessions for logistical and financial reasons. The focus groups were designed to capture students' experiences of the entire BIP, including both the physical and online components, which meant that they had to take place at the end of each programme. Because the online component followed the physical mobility period in two cases, and because the students were geographically dispersed, an online format was the only feasible option for bringing them together.

When conducting synchronous online focus groups, selecting an appropriate platform is of significance (Menary *et al.*, 2021). In this case, *Microsoft Teams* was chosen as the hosting platform because it met several key criteria:[101]

- It allowed meetings to be audio and video recorded;[102]
- I was familiar with the platform, enabling smooth facilitation and the ability to provide basic technological support if needed;
- Screensharing could be used to guide participants through interactive exercises;
- Participants could join directly from their web browser without needing to create an account or download software;
- It included a chat function, allowing participants to contribute at any time;

[100] Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic forced many researchers to change their initially designed in-person focus groups to fit into online focus group formats, which seemed to have accelerated the debate in favour of the online facilitation of the method (*e.g.*, Howlett, 2022; Langegård *et al.*, 2021; Menary *et al.*, 2021).
[101] These criteria are based on the "online focus group checklist" created by Menary *et al.* (2021) and adjusted to the specific needs of this study.
[102] Although video footage exists, the analysis focused solely on the audio.

- The platform is widely known, increasing the likelihood that participants would already have experience using it;
- It is stable and complies with standard security requirements;
- I had free access to host sessions of at least two hours.

In addition, my university supports *Microsoft Teams*, which gives me a professional account that allows me to host an unlimited number of sessions without time restrictions, unlike what I might have faced using other platforms. For managing some of the interactive components during the focus group (*cf. infra*), I also used *Flinga,*[103] an online collaborative tool that allows participants to post, share, and organise ideas in real time on a shared digital whiteboard.

Although online focus groups are gaining increasing methodological support, online methods are frequently positioned as the "secondary option" compared to the widely regarded "gold standard" of face-to-face communication (*cf.* Howlett, 2022). Furthermore, it could be argued that online methods could cause "anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions, and troubles […] due to perceived difficulties around managing the interactions and generating meaningful conversations" (Abidin & De Seta, 2020, as mentioned in Howlett, 2022, p.390). Moreover, Clark *et al.* (2021) note that "the evidence tends to show that face-to-face focus groups produce higher-quality data compared to online ones" (p.470). However, they also acknowledge that recent technological developments and increasing familiarity with online tools make online focus groups an increasingly viable alternative. Recently, Menary *et al.* (2021)[104] concluded that both face-to-face and online focus groups deliver indistinguishable results as far as the depth of the discussion and the themes raised. Given the geographical dispersion of participants across different countries, conducting face-to-face focus groups was not feasible. Online focus groups were therefore selected as the most appropriate methodological approach, allowing all participants to take part while maintaining opportunities for interaction and collective discussion. This format did not appear to limit the quality or depth of the data generated. Designing interactive activities for an online setting required reflection and creativity, as well as time to identify a suitable platform (Flinga) to support these activities, but the technology proved effective. One advantage of online focus groups that I personally observed is that participants can choose the location from which they join. During the focus groups, students often joined from home, and their level of

[103] https://flinga.fi

[104] Their results are based on synchronous activity-oriented focus group sessions that were intended to be in-person, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced to carry out some of their focus groups online.

engagement appeared to be very high. This flexibility may have enabled participants to join from environments where they felt safe and comfortable, such as their homes, which might have created an atmosphere more conducive to speaking openly than, for instance, a public setting (Howlett, 2022; Richard *et al.*, 2021). Before the focus groups, students were explicitly asked to join from a quiet place to minimise disturbance and background noise. The reasoning behind this was to support the flow of conversation and to ensure a clearer recording, which would ease the process of transcription.

Participant selection

The size of each focus group required careful reflection, as the literature points to limitations associated with both very large and very small groups. There appears to be broad agreement that a focus group should have a minimum of four participants, with typical group sizes ranging between six and ten (*e.g.*, Clark *et al.* 2021). Smaller groups are often recommended when participants are likely to have much to say on the topic, particularly when personal accounts and experiences are involved, as is the case with this study, where all participants were experts in their BIP experience. Moreover, it is argued that synchronous online focus groups work best with smaller numbers than in-person groups (Menary *et al.*, 2021). Especially, since the focus groups were interactive (*cf. infra*), it was important not to have too many participants to ensure smooth facilitation and explore experiences in depth. Therefore, the ideal focus group size was set to be between four and six students. On the other hand, before starting recruitment, the literature had already highlighted that last-minute cancellations and participants not joining the call can be a challenge in online settings (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Menary *et al.*, 2021). This was therefore anticipated and mitigated by aiming for at least five students who agreed to take part. In practice, two students were unable to participate due to personal reasons, although both offered to reschedule or take part in a one-to-one interview. For practical reasons, I thanked them for their willingness but declined these alternatives. In the end, each focus group included three to four participants.

The focus group participants were selected through convenience and purposive sampling techniques. As participation in this study was voluntary, students were informed at the beginning of each BIP that focus groups would take place at the end of each BIP and that they could indicate their interest at any time. At the end of each onsite part of the programme, I passed a paper around so that students who would be interested in participating could write down their name and email address, which allowed me to contact them to follow up after the BIP. Purposive sampling was additionally used to ensure diversity across groups, and during the first BIP, two students who appeared to have experienced considerable group

difficulties were specifically invited to participate. These sampling techniques align with CCGT (*cf. infra*), where the aim is to recruit participants who can shed light on variations in experiences and practices related to the phenomenon of interest (Levitt, 2021).

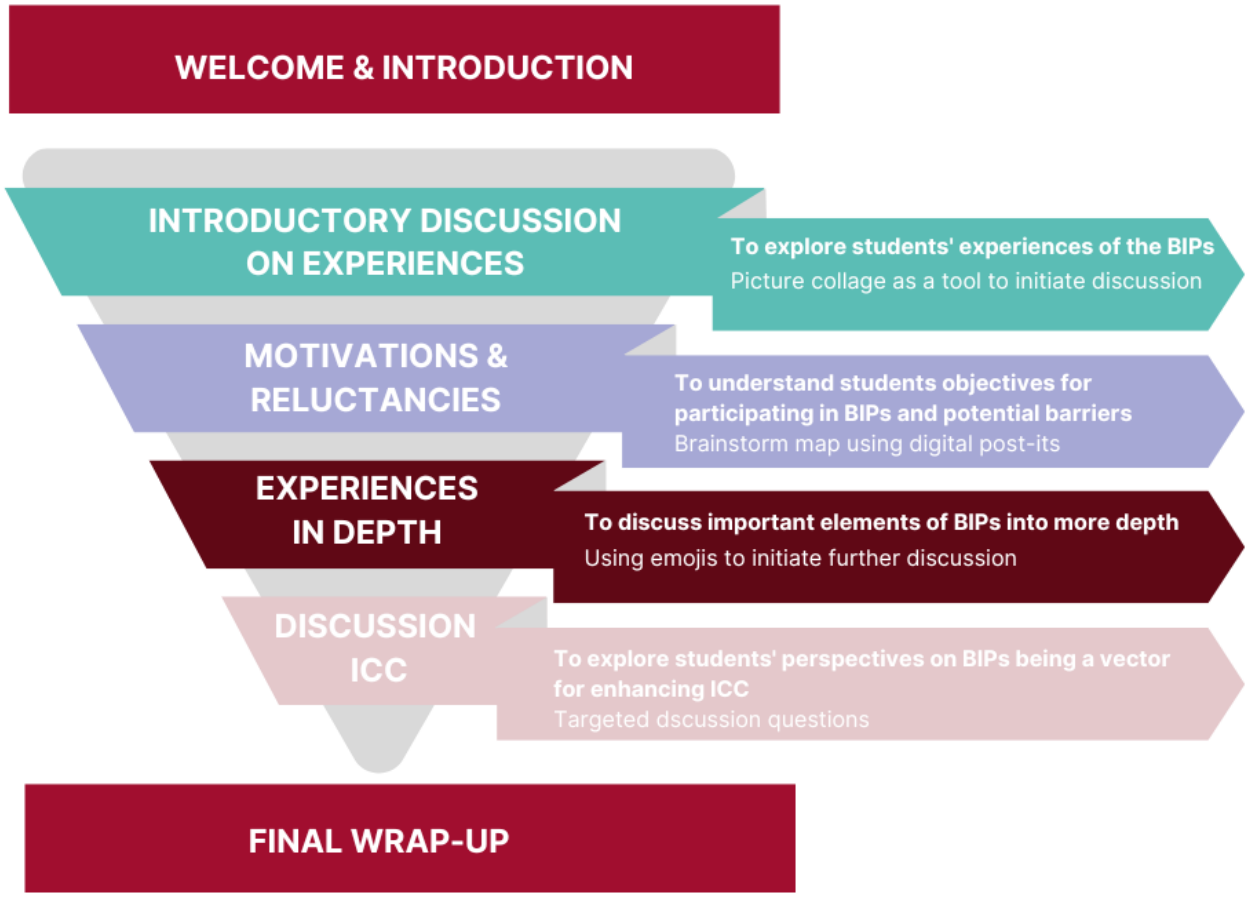
Focus group design

The focus group was designed to offer students a structured but flexible space in which they could reflect on their experience of the BIP. The intention was to create a setting where students could work through a series of activities that supported reflection, comparison, and discussion without placing pressure on individuals to speak in an unstructured group conversation. By using activities, students were able to contribute at their own pace and raise points they considered meaningful. This approach also made it possible to observe what students themselves highlighted as important, rather than directing them towards predetermined themes. Although the focus of the analysis was not primarily on how students constructed meaning through interaction during the focus group, the group context inevitably influenced how they articulated and developed their ideas. When one student shared an observation, others often responded, clarified, or expanded on it, which resulted in richer and more detailed accounts of the BIP experience. This interaction supported students in refining or reconsidering their initial reflections, something that would have been less likely in a one-to-one interview. This aspect of interaction aligns with theoretical positions such as symbolic interactionism, which holds that understandings of social phenomena emerge through discussion and engagement with others rather than in isolation. Focus groups, therefore, provide opportunities to observe some of the processes through which individuals make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it (Clark *et al.*, 2021). While I did not analyse the interactional processes in depth, the design of the focus group acknowledged that students' reflections emerge partly through responding to one another.

Focus groups can take upon different designs including "funnelling" and "pyramid" techniques "where 'funnelling' involves an initial focus on general issues, moving towards more personal matters or specific issues, with sensitive questions at the end…while the 'pyramid' technique begins with easy to answer questions at the start, deeper questions in the middle and generalized questions at the end" (Winlow *et al.*, 2013, p.13). Like the funnelling technique, Breen (2006) argues that a focus group should begin with general experiences and progress to the specific key questions. When designing the session plan for the focus groups, it was important for me to design it in a way that a) participants could share and explore their experiences of the BIP with each other, b) allowed for exploring issues of shared importance, c)

allowed for idea generation to develop an understanding of how BIPs could be improved in the future,[105] and d) allowed me to explore students' stance on BIPs as a way to enhance ICC. Taking this into account, the focus group was structured around specific activities linked to particular themes that were aimed to be explored; these activities acted as stimuli for discussion and were organised according to the funnelling technique, as shown in Figure 12. The session began with a broad and relatively easy topic, gradually building towards a discussion focusing on students' perspectives of BIPs as a potential vector to enhance their ICC.

Figure 12: Applied funnelling technique during the focus groups



The focus groups were carefully designed in accordance with the overall research objectives. From the outset, the intention was to develop a well-structured focus group guide that could be repeated across

[105] These three points are in line with Breen's guidance on when to choose focus groups (see Breen, 2006).

the different BIPs to ensure comparability in the data gathered (*cf. Appendix X* - Focus group guide). Although the session plan was structured in advance, the activities themselves were unstructured in the sense that the facilitation remained flexible. Only the task and main discussion topics were specified, which allowed participants to guide the discussion in the direction they considered important. In the following, each round will be discussed in more detail to explain the reasoning underpinning the focus group guide. For more specific details of each round, such as their planned time (which remained flexible), potential questions that were drafted in advance, and more details on the activities, please consult Appendix X -

Round 1 – Welcome and introduction

The general introduction was divided into two rounds: (1) the introduction of the research project and the focus group, and (2) student re-introductions. This structure was intentional, as the focus group literature frequently recommends ensuring from the outset that all participants understand the objectives of the research, the purpose of their participation, ethical considerations, and the practical arrangements of the focus group, including the session agenda and ground rules[106] (*e.g.*, Breen, 2006; Clark *et al.*, 2021). Although the students had already signed a consent form containing information on data processing and anonymity, it was important to briefly remind them of these aspects, to check whether they had any questions, and to emphasise that they could refrain from answering any question at any point in order to help create a safe environment for sharing. The reintroductions additionally provided an opportunity for students to reconnect informally, as they had previously met during the BIP, and served as a transition into Round 2.

Round 2 – Introductory discussion on experiences: Picture collage

The literature widely suggests beginning focus groups with an activity designed to put participants at ease (*e.g.*, Breen, 2006; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Winlow *et al.*, 2013). Although the students were already somewhat familiar with one another by the time of the focus group, it was important to me to start with a brief icebreaker activity to help them reconnect and recall their shared experience (as the focus group took place several weeks after their final meeting) and to foster an atmosphere of trust before moving into the main activities. For this purpose, the students were asked in advance to send an image representing their BIP experience, from which I created a picture collage by combining all submissions of the specific focus

[106] There were no strict "rules", the participants were mainly assured that all opinions were valued.

group participants. During the focus group, the picture collage was shown to the participants, allowing them to view the images selected by all group members, which served as a stimulus for an initial discussion of their experiences. This already provided insight into the topic, as the students explained their reasons for choosing particular images and began to reflect on how these images represented their overall experience. These picture collages can be found in section IV.2.2.

Round 3 – Motivations and reluctancies/hesitations mapping

To ease students further into the topic and to encourage reflection on the BIP, an activity exploring students' motivations and reluctancies for participating in the programme was planned. The aim was to identify students' objectives and motivations, as well as any potential barriers to participation.[107] The literature suggests that transitions between positive and negative aspects in focus groups should be handled carefully, as poorly managed transitions may result in discussions focusing primarily on negative elements without adequate attention to positive features (Winlow et al., 2013). Accordingly, I began by asking about students' motivations, as this was more likely to elicit positive reflections before moving on to potential challenges, thereby helping to maintain a balanced perspective.

In the first stage of the activity, students were asked to brainstorm individually and record their motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining on digital sticky notes on a blank canvas supported by the Flinga platform. This approach gave participants time to reflect privately before entering the group discussion and ensured that everyone could contribute individually. Bourne and Winstone (2020) point out that "providing activities where participants can record their responses on sticky notes privately may help to pull out honest answers which some participants may not feel comfortable sharing in a large group" (p.8). Although the topic was not particularly sensitive, the intention was to create a safe environment and to prepare students for subsequent activities. Only in Focus Group B did the activity progress to a second stage, in which students collectively ranked their motivations according to perceived importance. This was intended to stimulate group discussion and allow for deeper exploration of responses, as ranking activities can help to "delve into the 'why' behind an opinion and provide an opportunity for them to question each other to gain a deeper understanding of why an individual is thinking in a certain way" (Bourne and Winstone, 2020, p. 8). However, ranking the motivations that had also been noted by others proved challenging for students, and this stage was therefore omitted from the

[107] As the focus groups were carried out after the BIP, this means it produced a reflection of the students on their initial motivations and concerns.

subsequent focus groups. In all focus groups, students were invited to explain what they had written and to discuss their responses with one another. Following the motivation mapping, the same procedure was applied to a reluctance and/or hesitation map. The collected responses to the Flinga whiteboard of the motivations, as well as hesitations, can be found in Appendix XII.1. and Appendix XII.2. respectively.

Round 4 – Reflecting further upon experiences: Emojis

This round was included because several themes emerging from the observations required specific further exploration. These included the content of the course, the programme and schedule, the online component, the social aspects of the programme, and groupwork activities. The latter two themes were not addressed in every focus group, specifically during this exercise, as students had sometimes already touched upon them earlier during the discussion. To stimulate discussion and make the activity more interactive, emojis were used. It is acknowledged that emojis can be interpreted differently by different participants and may carry varied meanings. However, in this context, the emojis served as prompts to initiate discussion, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on each one to ensure that their intended meaning was captured. The overview of emojis can be found in Appendix XII.3.

Round 5 – Discussion on ICC: discussion round

This round was a key part of the focus groups and was specifically designed to explore how students understood ICC and how they reflected on it in relation to the BIP. It was the only point in the session where the term ICC was explicitly introduced and discussed, allowing observation of whether the concept would emerge naturally in students' reflections at earlier stages. During this discussion round, I asked questions that I considered important but had not yet been addressed, or where further exploration was needed. The discussion focused on what students had learned from the programme, their views on the benefits of having students from different universities and disciplines participate, and their understanding of ICC, including how they perceived BIPs as a vector enhancing this and whether this had been on their mind when joining the programme. The conversation also explored how the diversity of the group influenced their experience and the impact of coming together in person rather than solely participating online. This approach allowed students to reflect openly on ICC and its relevance to their BIP experience while providing the flexibility to delve deeper into emerging themes.

Round 6 – Final wrap-up

The final round served as the wrap-up stage, during which students were invited to share any final remarks and to contribute anything else they considered important that had not been addressed in the earlier rounds. Participants were also thanked once again for their time and contributions.

Before the first focus group, a projective exercise had also been planned, in which students would collaboratively create a guide for a friend considering attending a BIP, as well as for the teachers and organisers involved in the programme. However, this exercise was not carried out due to time constraints. Students had been informed in advance that the focus group would last a maximum of two hours, so it was not possible to include all planned activities. The exercise was therefore removed to allow sufficient time for the remaining activities. The focus groups lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, resulting in approximately twenty pages of transcripts each. Both the focus group transcripts and the data collected from the exercises are available in Appendix XI - Appendix XII - , respectively.

As the facilitator of the focus groups, my role was to guide the conversation while avoiding being overly intrusive, creating an environment in which participants felt comfortable openly expressing their beliefs, experiences, and perspectives (Clark et al., 2021). In this capacity, my challenge was to balance structure and flexibility: while the activities and discussion topics were planned, I allowed participants the freedom to shape the discussion in directions they considered important. This approach aligns with the principle that focus groups can give participants more control over the conversation than individual interviews, enabling them to highlight issues they perceive as significant (Clark *et al.,* 2021). During the sessions, I observed how participants often prompted, probed, and challenged each other in ways that would have been limited in a one-on-one interview. For instance, in BIP A, when students discussed whether people from different disciplinary backgrounds should be able to apply, participants engaged with one another to debate and reflect on their differences of opinion. Such interactions not only enriched the discussion but also allowed me to gain insights into why participants held particular views and how these views could evolve through dialogue with peers (Cyr, 2016). Hearing one another's perspectives encouraged participants to develop, qualify, or modify their own initial reflections and sometimes to articulate agreements or disagreements they might not have considered independently (Clark *et al.*, 2021), as is occasionally illustrated in the results (*e.g.,* IV.2.1.1. Students' motivations). In practice, my facilitation involved guiding students through the structured activities, clarifying instructions where necessary, and

encouraging them to elaborate on their ideas, while consciously attempting not to influence or steer the discussion.

III.3. Approach to data analysis: Critical constructivist grounded theory

The recorded interviews and focus groups were all manually transcribed (*cf.* Appendix IX - Interview transcripts and Appendix XI - Focus group transcripts), without the use of AI-assisted tools. Although this was time consuming, it allowed me to become deeply familiar with the data and ensured secure handling of the material. The data were transcribed verbatim to keep the transcripts as close as possible to the original, preserving the full dimensions of the interviews and focus groups. Slang, repetitions, and other features of spoken language were retained to maintain the character of the spoken interaction and the integrity of the text. Subsequently, ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software, was used to support the coding process and to structure and organise the data in order to identify patterns and relationships. As Friese (2019) explains, "the main goal of categorization is to tag things to define or organize them. In the process of categorization, we compare data segments and look for similarities. All similar elements can be grouped under the same name. By naming something, we conceptualize and frame it at the same time" (p.69). To understand the functions and workings of ATLAS.ti, I participated in a training course and based my understanding on the detailed description and step-by-step guide described in the book *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti* (Friese, 2019). I did not use any automated functions such as "Auto Coding" or "In Vivo Coding", but rather employed ATLAS.ti as a supporting tool to conduct and organise the qualitative analysis manually. Using CAQDAS made the coding process more systematic, transparent, and traceable, allowing me to document, adjust, and merge codes while maintaining reflexivity throughout the analytic process. Here, I refer to codes as keywords or sentences linked to quotations, and coding describes the act of creating those codes. Codes can also be seen as tags or labels, as they segment the data into analytically meaningful units organised by topic.

Initially, I considered following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) because the study does not fully follow a grounded theory approach, as I came in with research questions and ideas from observations and the literature review. However, I adopted Heidi Levitt's Critical Constructivist Grounded Theory (CCGT), as it enables systematic comparison and hierarchical category development while remaining compatible

with prior theoretical sensitivity. In particular, CCGT fits within a critical-constructivist epistemological framework, acknowledging that the analysis is both informed by existing literature and shaped by participants' perspectives while remaining reflexive on the researcher's position. Levitt (2021) explains that, despite differences between grounded theory approaches, they share core features such as constant comparison, the development of hierarchies, theoretical sampling, saturation, and memoing. Using this approach allowed me to generate interpretations of experiences and practices, or understandings of phenomena, that are firmly rooted in the data, while also considering the research aims, the literature review, and experiences from conducting participant observation.

In practice, I applied a systematic coding process to identify patterns and themes following the steps outlined by Levitt (2021). This involved reading the transcripts to create initial units, labelling these units, constantly comparing codes, developing hierarchies of categories, and eventually identifying core categories. During the initial coding, each transcript was read relatively quickly in an exploratory manner, during which descriptive notes were made, and provisional codes were assigned. As the analysis progressed, these codes were compared, refined, and merged, and groups of codes were organised into folders reflecting emerging categories and hierarchies. This iterative process embodies the main principles of CCGT: constant comparison, hierarchical category development, and memoing. Coding started with the interview data, as they were transcribed first, followed by the focus group data, and then these two datasets were compared for similarities and differences. To facilitate organisation, I used colour coding: purple for teachers and organisers, pink for students, and green for overlapping codes to maintain an overview of the different actors and developing categories.

Initially, the data were unitised according to broad thematic segments informed by the interview and focus group guides and the research questions. For interviews, this included units such as background information about interviewees, advantages of organising BIPs, benefits for students, organisers and teachers, and perspectives on ICC, etc. For the focus groups, the units included students' motivations, concerns and hesitations, descriptions of learning, groupwork, and views on ICC. Within these broad units, data were further divided into smaller units and subcodes to provide interpretation and meaning. The units were then compared and merged to form higher-level categories, also emerging from the data itself, such as organisational challenges, groupwork, duration and intensity, or involvement of home students. Eventually, overarching categories and core categories were developed to structure the findings. The coding was not mutually exclusive, which meant that the same data segment could be assigned to more

than one code if it reflected different analytical dimensions. For example, the statement: *"I would have liked to have two weeks as well because it takes me a lot of time to get used to like people and new things, and I started talking to people like in just like at the last day. I was like, why do I bond with you on the last day of everything? I am usually like that, so it would have been nice to have two weeks as well."* (FG14, BIP D), could be coded both under "duration and intensity: preferences for extended programme duration" and under "Interpersonal relations and social engagement: group bonding & team dynamics", addressing both aspects simultaneously. The coding overview, including all codes, can be found in Appendix XIII - Coding overview. It includes not only frequently mentioned items but also less frequently occurring yet analytically significant contributions.[108] In line with CCGT, the analysis does not focus solely on commonalities. Participants interpret ICC in different ways, and the analysis reflects not only shared patterns but also contradictions and complexities, acknowledging multiple social realities. Constant comparison, both between data sets and between data and concepts, was central to the process, strengthening theoretical sensitivity and analytical coherence across the different case studies and levels of data. I continued coding and comparing data until no substantially new codes emerged.

The analysis combined top-down and bottom-up logic. The initial units were informed by the research questions, the literature review, and the interview guides (top-down), while subcategories and subcodes emerged inductively from participants' accounts (bottom-up). For example, the category concerning rationales for designing and implementing BIPs reflects themes intended to be explored, whereas the specific subcategories developed inductively from participants' accounts. Observation notes were not analysed using the same formal coding procedure. This was because their purpose was to provide a holistic and contextualised understanding of the BIPs rather than to generate independent themes. The volume of data — over 200 pages of observation notes, nearly 100 pages of interview transcripts, and more than 100 pages of focus group transcripts — made applying formal coding impractical within the time frame of this study. Instead, the notes complemented and contextualised the coded interview and focus group data, offering insights into programme implementation, the learning environment, and participant interactions, and enabling the cross-checking of emerging themes for a richer and more nuanced interpretation.

[108] As it is not meant to provide any quantitative comparison the frequency of the codes are not included in the provided coding overview.

III.4. Methodological considerations

Qualitative research is sometimes criticised for lacking the transparency and objective focus often associated with quantitative methods (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, it is acknowledged that replicating this research is challenging, if not impossible. However, the value of in-depth qualitative research using observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups lies in the flexibility these methods offer for exploring complex phenomena and generating rich, detailed insights. Attempting to ensure that qualitative research can be replicated would not be realistic or feasible, and could risk undermining the very strength of this approach (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, by providing a detailed account of the research methods, explaining the rationale for choosing them, including transcripts, and a reflection on the researcher's positionality, I aimed to ensure transparency in the research process.

Aligned with the epistemological approach taken in this study, this research did not aim to capture an objective reality as reality is understood as contextual, co-constructed, and interpretive, rather than universal or standardised. However, this does not imply that validity and reliability have not been considered in the research process. To improve validity and to be ethically responsible, respondent validation was used in the form of sending the interviewees the transcripts afterwards, giving them the option to read through them and request changes if necessary.[109] Since I had already exchanged informally with many of the interviewees and focus group participants during the participant observation phase, it was important to critically examine the challenges of reliability and validity in the focus groups and interviews and not take things for granted due to my interpretations during the observations. Consistency was addressed by occasionally asking the same questions in slightly different ways, asking participants to provide examples, and summarising responses to check whether I interpreted them correctly.[110] All of the interviews and focus groups were conducted in English. This is not my first language, nor was it the first language of most of the participants. As a consequence, it is possible that linguistic constraints influenced the nuance, depth, spontaneity, or understanding of some responses.

[109] The focus group participants were not sent the transcripts afterwards, as it involved multiple people and would have been more difficult to arrange. However, at the start of each focus group and in the consent form it was explicitly mentioned that participants could withdraw from the study until publication.

[110] Before each focus group and interview, I reminded myself of a set of follow-up prompts to support the clarity and accuracy of the data. These questions helped me to check meaning, avoid assumptions, and encourage participants to expand on their responses. Examples included: What do you mean by that? Could you please elaborate a little? You have just said XXX, could you tell me a little more about it? Do I understand correctly that XXX? Do you mean that XXX? Is it fair to say that you XXX?

As with any research method, I am aware that the methods used in this research are no exception in terms of having some inherent limitations. Therefore, clearly explaining why this method has been chosen and its limitations is key. According to Norris (1997) "attempts to apply the concepts of validity associated with quantitative research to the design and practice of qualitative research have yet to show their operational relevance to case study, ethnography or naturalistic inquiry. Part of the problem concerns a failure to recognize that the nature of naturalistic inquiry is markedly different from experimental design. This does not mean that concepts of validity are inapplicable or nonsensical, but it does mean that we have to re-appraise their meaning and use" (p.172). In line with this, qualitative research focuses on explaining one's assumptions and potential sources of bias rather than strictly applying quantitative notions of validity and reliability.

Two key biases inherent to these methods are the observer bias and interviewee bias. Observer bias refers to the way my own assumptions and interpretative frameworks shape how I perceive and make sense of events (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Interviewee bias concerns the extent to which participants' responses may be influenced by my presence, tone, or non-verbal behaviour. Both forms of bias are especially relevant given that my understanding of interculturality influenced what I attended to and how I interpreted practices within the BIPs. These dynamics of self-presentation and interaction can be further understood through Erving Goffman's work on social interaction. Goffman's notion of "face", which may be defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman 1967 as cited in O'Driscoll, 2022, p.85). Since face emerges in interaction and is tied to social approval, it is important to consider that participants may have tailored their responses to present themselves positively. For example, during the interviews and focus groups, participants were aware that I was observing the BIPs and had a general idea of my research interests. This awareness may have encouraged them to provide answers they perceived as desirable or relevant, illustrating the influence of the social desirability bias.[111]

A possible example of this, which also illustrates the desirability bias, can be found in the interview with I2, the lead teacher of BIP A. During the BIP, there were various chats between the other visiting staff

[111] The social desirability bias "refers to evidence that some respondents' answers to questions are related to their perception of the social desirability of those answers. They are more likely to give an answer that they perceive to be socially desirable, which means that socially desirable forms of beaviours or attitudes tend to be over-reported and undesirable forms under-reported" (Clark *et al.*, 2021, p.207).

member, I2, and me regarding the challenges students faced when working in groups (*cf.* section IV.2.2. for a discussion on student group work). In these chats, the visiting staff member and I2 often concluded that the students were too different from one another. However, at the end of the BIP, I1, the organiser, explained that the students had actually been selected to represent this diversity, given the nature of BIPs. When starting the interview, I opened with a very general question: "to start, could you maybe clarify a bit more about your role and how you came into the summer school as well?" I2 immediately replied by referring to their experience teaching students from diverse backgrounds and stressed that it had been a great experience. They also noted that they had not been aware of the extent of the diversity in advance and that it would have been nice if someone had mentioned it. This quick shift to highlighting the positive aspects of teaching a diverse group, while downplaying the difficulties they had previously discussed, points to a form of desirability bias. At the start of the interview, I2 seemed to adjust their response to align more closely with what they perceived as the "right" or "expected" answer, especially given my research focus. However, moving on in the interview, I2 expressed that the selection should have been different, and moved away from the positive experience they mentioned at the start. Persson (2022) reminds us that "Goffman's sociology is based on the idea that individuals not only know that a different course of action is possible, but that they actually act differently than they say they do and talk about their interaction in ways that do not always correspond to what they are doing. This special, potentially socially illusory symbolic interaction is more than anything else Goffman's province in sociology" (p.122). Hence, what participants say and what they actually do may not always align, a consideration central to interpreting qualitative data.

In addition to these considerations, interviewee bias also needs attention, especially because it is closely connected to interviewer bias. Although interviewees may appear open and willing to participate, they may still feel cautious about the unstructured nature of the conversations or the sensitivity of certain themes. This was particularly relevant in this study, given the personal and sometimes delicate nature of the topics addressed. An interviewee might have wished to influence my interpretation, or they might have provided only a partial picture of their views (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). To support the relationship, I informed the interviewees and focus group participants beforehand that they did not have to discuss any topic they did not feel comfortable with. The interviewees were also given the option to remove parts from the transcripts afterwards if they wished. This flexible approach appeared to help the interviewees feel more comfortable, as none of them refused to discuss any of my questions. Nevertheless, it has to be considered that there remains a possibility that an interviewee either provided only a partial picture or

shaped their answers to maintain face. Furthermore, it is important to consider what Goffman calls the "individual information preserve", meaning "the set of facts about an individual that he or she can choose not to reveal to others" (Persson, 2022, p.122-123). Finally, the observer effect also needs to be acknowledged. My presence as a researcher may have influenced participants' behaviour and interactions (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Although measures were taken to minimise this influence, it cannot be fully eliminated. This will be addressed in greater depth in the section reflecting on my positionality as a researcher, where I further consider how my presence and research focus may have shaped both the data collection process and its interpretation. In sum, I acknowledge that the methods adopted come with several limitations and potential biases. Nevertheless, they were well-suited to collect the types of data necessary to shed light on the research questions. Through careful documentation, reflexivity, and transparency in the research process, I aim to provide a trustworthy account of how the data were collected and interpreted. The next chapter discusses the findings that resulted from this process. In reporting these findings, I include many verbatim excerpts in order to remain close to the perspectives and wording of the participants. Quotations are reproduced without correction or editorial markers so that participants' voices are preserved as expressed.

Chapter IV - Results

After having set out the theoretical framework and the context in which BIPs have emerged, and having detailed the methods used to examine their role in enhancing students' intercultural communication competence, this chapter presents the findings that emerged from the data. I first provide an overview of the four BIPs included in this study to provide further context. While the Erasmus+ programme sets certain academic and organisational requirements (*cf.* II.1.3.4., p.44), it leaves considerable freedom for organisers regarding programme content, structure, and duration. For example, the length of the physical mobility phase can range from five to thirty days, and the online component can be scheduled flexibly in terms of timing and format. Consequently, BIPs can differ substantially in their design, academic focus, and modes of student engagement. The following Figures summarise the key features of each BIP studied, providing context for the empirical findings that follow. It must be kept in mind that the purpose is not to compare the programmes, but mainly to provide insight into how the BIPs were implemented, offering context for interpreting the results presented in this thesis.

Figure 13: BIP A at a glance

BIP A

The BIP related to the topic of entrepreneurship and crowdfunding combined elements from the host university's bachelor's programmes in Marketing as well as in Management and Business Administration. It began with a five-day onsite mobility phase, followed by two online sessions of four hours each, held over the subsequent two months. The expected output included a written group report and a group presentation; upon meeting the participation requirements and successfully completing the assigned tasks, students were awarded 7.5 ECTS credits.

The BIP was organised within the framework of the FORTHEM Alliance and welcomed incoming students from six of the other FORTHEM partner universities. It was open to all FORTHEM students, regardless of their discipline or level of study. The idea for the programme was initiated by I1, who also assumed the organisational lead. I1 was supported by the local FORTHEM team and by the head of the department in which the BIP took place. The academic content was developed by I2, who was solely responsible for the teaching activities, with occasional support from departmental colleagues, either through short lecture segments or as jury members during the students' final presentations. In addition to I1 and I2, one visiting staff member from a partner institution also took part.

The physical mobility phase consisted of five days of teacher-led lecture-based sessions delivered by I2. Dedicated time was also set aside for students to work in groups on their final assignments. The daily schedule typically ran from 9:15 AM to 6:00 PM and included a shared lunch. The formal programme focused exclusively on academic content, but each day (except the final day) concluded with an evening social activity led by I1. These included a barbecue, a city tour, a boat tour, and a dinner consisting of local specialities.

In the first of the two online sessions, student groups presented the preliminary version of their assignment, while the final session was dedicated to the graded final presentations. In both sessions, I2 was joined by colleagues who provided feedback, and the visiting staff member also attended.

Figure 14: BIP B at a glance

BIP B

The BIP related to the circular economy consisted of three one-hour online lectures followed by 4.5 days of onsite mobility. The programme awarded three ECTS for participation and did not include formal assignments, apart from a final group presentation on a question related to the week's topic.

The BIP was hosted by one of the smaller campuses of the university,[112] about 110 kilometres from the main campus. It was open to all FORTHEM students, regardless of discipline or level. It was primarily organised by the head of the international office at the host campus (I3), supported by a dedicated teacher and the FORTHEM office at the main campus. Three FORTHEM partner institutions participated, one partner withdrew due to funding issues, and was replaced at short notice.

The online component included three one-hour topic-specific sessions and a one-hour briefing on practical arrangements. These were held within two weeks to four days before the PMP. Lectures were delivered by professors from two partner universities and one from the institution that had withdrawn from the BIP. As they were scheduled rather last-minute, all sessions were recorded to allow students to rewatch them. During the online lectures, the sessions were delivered as non-interactive, teacher-led presentations based on slides, with no additional support from the organisers present.

The PMP of the BIP consisted of 4.5 days of onsite lectures, workshops, company visits, and social activities. Typically, the programme started around 8:15 AM and ended at 6:00 PM and included an independent lunch break. A few non-discipline-specific activities were integrated into the schedule, including two city tours and a farewell evening on the fourth day, offering opportunities for informal interaction and socialising. These activities were organised and led by the head of the international office at the host campus, who accompanied the group. The content was delivered by a workshop facilitator invited for one morning, visiting lecturers who gave two lectures, and two lecturers from the host university, each responsible for specific sessions. The company visits included guided tours of businesses working on circular economy. Group work was embedded

[112] According to a statistical report published by the host university of BIP B, for the academic year 2023–2024, the university had a total student population of 33,343, of which 1,412 were based at the campus where BIP B was held. The report was accessed on 29/04/2025, however, to preserve the anonymity of the host institution, the link to the report is not shared.

in several parts of the programme: during one workshop, students completed a team assignment; in another lecture, they were asked to brainstorm together; and on the final morning, they were divided into groups to deliver a final presentation as part of the closing challenge.

Accommodation included stays with host families for about half of the participants, while others arranged their own.

Figure 15: BIP C at a glance

BIP C

The BIP related to business skills and entrepreneurship was situated within the field of Business Administration. The programme began with two online sessions, followed by a 4.5-day onsite mobility period. Upon meeting participation requirements and completing set assignments, students were awarded three ECTS credits. Prior to the PMP, students completed a pre-arrival task: a presentation on Christmas markets in the country of their home institution, to be delivered during the first morning of the onsite week.

The BIP was hosted by one of the FORTHEM universities and continued a pre-existing partnership established outside the FORTHEM framework. Two original partners withdrew, and the host university continued with the remaining partners, inviting an additional FORTHEM partner. The programme was coordinated by the international and FORTHEM offices, with I5 taking both organisational and academic lead. The BIP was open to bachelor's students in Business Administration, predominantly selected from equivalent classes at partner universities.

The OMP included two sessions of 1.5–2 hours each, scheduled two to four weeks before the onsite component. Both were hosted by I5 with participation from visiting lecturers. The first session provided practical information about travel, the BIP, and the pre-arrival task, as well as the first lecture delivered by a visiting professor. The second session featured student group presentations about their home universities and countries, followed by final practical instructions.

The PMP consisted of 4.5 days of in-person activities. The formal programme typically ran from 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM and included collective coffee and lunch breaks. Each evening featured a social activity, such as a city tour followed by dinner, a national cuisine evening, and a pizza night. The first day began with student presentations of their pre-assignment, followed by discipline-specific lectures in the afternoon. Teams were also formed on the first day, after which the final assignment was introduced.

The daily structure combined lectures in the mornings — focusing on specific areas within the BIP's discipline — delivered by a mix of visiting and host university professors. Two guest lectures were also delivered by local business owners. In the afternoons, students worked independently in their teams on their final assignments without supervision. On the third day, students participated in a field trip to a local site where they completed group challenges, followed by a company visit. The final morning was dedicated to the group presentations of their final assignments, and the programme concluded with a feedback and closing session.

Figure 16: BIP D at a glance

BIP D

The fourth studied BIP related to migration studies and consisted of a five-day PMP, followed approximately seven weeks later by a five-day OMP. The BIP awarded three ECTS[113] for participation and required passing a final assignment involving a presentation and a research report, which was done in small groups on a theme related to the week's topic. A final grade was awarded for this work.

The initiative to set up this BIP came from I6, a motivated teacher at the host university, and was supported by several FORTHEM Lab colleagues and the local international office. Hence, the BIP was organised within the context of a FORTHEM Lab and included one external partner due to a personal connection. It was open to all FORTHEM students, regardless of discipline or level of study. Student recruitment was coordinated via local FORTHEM offices and colleagues from the Lab were asked to actively select and nominate students. Meeting the minimum required number of outgoing participants proved challenging; only two weeks prior to the start of the physical mobility phase was this number reached. Subsequently, less than two weeks before the

[113] Beforehand, there was no information written on the possible ECTS that one could receive upon participation.

programme began, applicants received an email with instructions for completing their registration and general information on participating as exchange students. In total, nine outgoing students took part.

The onsite programme ran from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM and included organised collective lunches as well as social activities in the evenings. The programme was divided into two stages, in which the first two days were dedicated to content-specific learning modules in the morning, followed by groupwork in the afternoon. The following three days featured a combination of activities tied to the local area and community, including lectures, workshops, and onsite explorations, during which students were required to conduct neighbourhood walks and collect data for their group research projects (in groups of 4 to 6). In addition to the academic programme, three evening activities were organised: a visit to an art exhibition on the first evening, a pre-dinner social gathering on the second, and a social dinner on the fourth.

The OMP also consisted of five full days of sessions, running from 9:30 AM to 6:30 PM.[114] Each day began with a plenary session led by either I6 or I7, in which students received guidance on analysing their collected data, preparing their presentations and reports, or asking questions. After these sessions, students worked independently in their respective groups. The BIP concluded with a final online meeting during which the student groups presented their final work.

Having set the stage for the studied BIPs, this chapter moves on to three main sections detailing teachers' and organisers' accounts; students' accounts; and ICC for teachers, organisers and students. This section first examines organisers' and teachers' rationales for implementing BIPs, as well as how the programmes are put into practice in terms of organisational structures and pedagogical approaches. These perspectives are presented first because their decisions and approaches shape how BIPs are designed and implemented, which in turn influence students' experiences. It is followed by students' accounts, which focus on their motivations and concerns for participating, their engagement with both the physical and online mobility phases, and their overall reflections on the programme.[115] Drawing on both sets of accounts, the chapter then addresses ICC for organisers, teachers and students, reflecting on how BIPs

[114] Although this was stated in the official programme, in reality, students had to organise themselves within their own groups after the plenary meetings – something which, as became evident from the focus group data, was done only to a limited extent.

[115] The PMP and OMP phases are described in detail only for students, as the interviews with organisers and teachers focused on broader programme design and implementation rather than on these specific phases.

are perceived to create opportunities to enhance students' ICC and how these experiences are understood by the participants. Presenting the perspectives in this order allows the analysis to first establish the structural and pedagogical context provided by organisers and teachers before examining how students navigate and experience these conditions.

IV.1. A focus on organisers' and teachers' accounts of BIPs

This first section will introduce organisers' and teachers' accounts of BIPs, focusing on why these programmes have been implemented and how they are conceptualised and designed in practice. Drawing on interview data, observations, and programme schedules, it outlines the rationales that shape organisers' and teachers' engagement with BIPs and situates these within broader institutional and pedagogical contexts. The section will also foreground the analytical focus on programme implementation, organisational structures and pedagogical approaches, providing a basis for reflecting on the learning spaces and priorities that emerge across the studied BIPs.

IV.1.1. Rationale for designing and implementing BIPs

This section examines the underlying rationales for the design and implementation of BIPs from the perspective of the organisers and teachers involved in the studied programmes. Drawing on interview data and observations, it explores why BIPs are taken up as a mobility format, how they are positioned within broader internationalisation strategies, and what is perceived to distinguish them from other forms of international mobility and cooperation. Rather than assuming a single or coherent motivation, the analysis highlights that BIPs are shaped by a combination of strategic, financial, pedagogical, and personal considerations. These rationales operate at different levels, including institutional ambitions for internationalisation, the enabling role of EUAs, and expectations regarding the benefits of the BIP framework for both institutions and students. The section is structured around three interrelated modes of inquiry: the perceived advantages for HEIs in organising BIPs, the advantages attributed to the BIP

framework itself, and the specific benefits that organisers and teachers outline for students participating in these programmes.

IV.1.1.1. Perceived advantages for HEIs in organising BIPs

This section will describe the perceived advantages for HEIs in organising BIPs, based on the perspectives of the organisers and teachers in this study. It will reflect on three main points which emerged from the data: (i) offering (home) students an "international flavour", (ii) the perception of BIPs as a funding opportunity to support internationalisation activities and promote internationalisation at home, and (iii) the role of European University Alliances, which are seen both as providing a framework for organising BIPs and in which BIPs enact as a means for institutions to demonstrate their activity within the partnership.

Providing (home) students an "international flavour"

One of the things that became very apparent from the observations during the BIPs, the various chats, and the formal interviews was that all of the teachers and organisers involved in the BIPs (except for I2) were in some way specifically engaged in internationalisation activities at their home institution. This ranged from organisers having a role as international advisor (I1) or international relations officer (I3), to organisers and teachers being actively involved in the FORTHEM Alliance (I1, I5, I6, I7), to being engaged in internationally oriented teaching activities (I4, I5, I6, I7).[116] Moreover, all the interviewed teachers were also teaching courses in English at their home institutions and perceived this as something they did intentionally to provide students with an "international dimension", as demonstrated in the following excerpt by I4:

> *"[I]n some groups I do have some, you know, sometimes it is international students. Sometimes it is just like local [students of the nationality of the home university], but I'm still trying, you know, teach the courses in English. So, this means it is basically it is still about the economics, right? But English is like an additional kind of bonus […] this is where I see this quite a lot, that these, you know, international dimensions and*

[116] Such as setting up or teaching a COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) or having participated in previous BIPs or VEs.

diversity and all the other things are very, very useful. So, and this is what I'm trying to promote here in my course this as well." (I4, visiting teacher, BIP B)

Interestingly, apart from I1 and I3, whose official roles are clearly tied to the internationalisation of higher education, the other organisers and teachers involved appeared to participate mainly due to an intrinsic motivation to engage in internationalisation activities. A clear example of this can be seen in the interview with I7. When asked about their professional role,[117] I7 described themselves as a research group leader and teacher, without explicitly referring to their involvement in the BIP, other than noting that the lecture they delivered in the programme aligned with their research. However, when asked more specifically about their role in the BIP and how they became involved, I7 remarked: "*That is one part which I'm not being paid for, and so I didn't mention it".*[118] This response suggests that I7 distinguishes between their perceived formal professional responsibilities and their involvement in the BIP.[119] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss staff engagement within BIPs in depth. However, various studies have noted that staff engagement presents a challenge in the internationalisation process (van den Hende *et al.*, 2022; Whitsed *et al.*, 2022). Similar observations were identified in this study; I1, I3, I5, I6 and I7 indicated that it was difficult to locate colleagues willing to take part in the initiatives, and it was also suggested that there was limited institutional recognition for involvement in internationalisation activities in general. Likewise, literature on virtual exchange highlights that teacher engagement in such efforts involves significant time commitments and additional workload, leading to frequent calls for greater institutional support and the provision of incentives (O'Dowd, 2021a).

Given the fact that most of the organisers and teachers are somehow involved in internationalisation activities at their home institutions, it is not surprising that it became apparent from the data that this

[117] The exact question that was posed here by the researcher was: "So, just to start, could you maybe please explain me a little bit more about your current professional role and what you are doing?"
[118] "That is one part" is interpreted to be relating to I7's role within a FORTHEM lab and within the BIP.
[119] For example, Winkler's (2013) autoethnographic account of identity construction during various workday events points to the manifold tasks that constitute academic work, not all of which are necessarily expressed in contractual terms. We might ask whether involvement in internationalisation, for instance, may be considered an inherent or expected aspect of one's role within the higher education landscape. Whether such engagement is primarily driven by institutional norms or intrinsic motivation remains unclear; the data suggest that at least I7 was motivated by a strong belief in the benefits of internationalisation for students.

group reasoned that providing (home)[120] students with an "international flavour" as one of the main advantages of (organising) a BIP, as explained by I5 as well:

> *"I think my interest in BIP, it is related to these programmes[121] because we really want to give our students who make the effort to study in English […] to give them the opportunity to have the international experience, the international flavour. So, that means that we try to offer them internationalisation at home, one part of the experience, and also the opportunity to experience different Erasmus programmes. […] That is why the BIPs are really a good opportunity for them, to recruit them and give this international experience." (I5, organiser and teacher, BIP C)*

Interestingly, although there were no ("local") home students[122] involved in BIPs A and B (*cf.* IV.3.1., p.229, for further comments on this), here, the organisers in particular perceived the organisation of a BIP as an opportunity to offer their home students an international experience and to contribute to the internationalisation at home process within their institution, as illustrated in the following statement by I1:

> *"[W]hen the BIP idea first came out […] I was thinking very much more like okay and this is an opportunity for our students to have an international classroom and some of them will get to go abroad." (I1, organiser, BIP A)*

Moreover, the discourse by I3 on the explicit question regarding their motivation for organising a BIP extends beyond the broader institutional rationale for internationalisation and reveals a more localised and personal drive to create impact at the level of the home campus. In this regard, I3 appears to be

[120] In this section, "home" is placed in brackets to acknowledge that BIPs are generally seen as providing students with an international experience. However, the reference to home students is also necessary here, as it highlights the idea of an institution organising a BIP specifically for "their" own students, emphasising the benefits for the local student body.

[121] These programmes here refer to the two English track programmes at the home institution in which I5 is involved.

[122] In this context, "home students" refers to students enrolled at the host institution, as opposed to incoming mobility students from partner universities. In the case of BIP A, the annotation "local" home students is used at certain points in the presentation of the results. This distinction is necessary because I1 explicitly notes that, although no students of the nationality associated with the country in which the host institution is located were involved, some international students who were enrolled at the host institution as part of longer-term international mobility did participate in the BIP.

challenging the assumption that internationalisation activities are bound to the main campus and instead can take place on a smaller campus located in a more rural area:

> *"[F]or me, I think it is very important to make some different offer for the students, international student, [students of the nationality of the home university], and to show to the [students of the nationality of the home university] at [one of the campuses of the home university] it is possible to make international in [one of the campuses of the home university] […] and even for the other professors. But I think we are at a local university, we have local habits. So, I want to show to the other that we are not in the main campus, but it is still possible to be very active." (I3, organiser, BIP B)*

This perception of viewing BIPs as a means to providing (home) students an "international flavour" aligns with the European Commission's discourse, which highlights that BIPs "should serve to accomplish the institution's internationalisation strategy" (*cf.* section II.1.3.4; where BIPs have been introduced in the literature review). However, while the idea that BIPs could provide (home) students with an international environment appeared to be one of their main advantages, it also became apparent that the BIP format itself was not necessarily a pedagogical choice on the part of the organisers.

BIPs as a funding opportunity for internationalisation projects

One noticeable aspect during the observations was that BIPs A and D were communicated as summer schools. This was evident not only in their promotional materials aimed at attracting students but also in the communication throughout the programmes, such as the welcome letter (BIP A) and the programme schedules (BIPs A and D). Moreover, organisers and teachers consistently referred to the programme as a summer school, a pattern that also emerged frequently in the interviews with I1, I2, 16 and I7. For instance, I2 appeared unaware that the programme was a BIP and what this entails, as can be seen from the following excerpt:

Figure 17: Extended interview excerpt - awareness of BIP characteristics

"**RJ:**[123] **And, so, we refer to it as a summer school but this summer school has been organised as a blended intensive programme, were you aware of that?**
I2: Once more, if you can come again, I didn't get that.
RJ: Yes, so I mean it's called the summer school in entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, but it

[123] RJ is the interviewer.

has been organised as a blended intensive programme.
I2: Yeah.
RJ: Are you aware of this or are you familiar with the term?
I2: Yes, I mean I have, I had blended programmes and other stuff, but I mean, I don't know if you mean something specific in here. Maybe you can explain further?
RJ: Yes, so, under Erasmus they have introduced these blended intensive programmes as a type of funding for which then the university or institutions can organise these kind of programmes, get funding for it, and the students are being sent on these programmes and it's like different from a normal exchange in the sense of that…
I2: Yes, yes.
RJ: It is a short-term mobility, including an online element.
I2: Yes, yeah. So, I mean that is and I think this course had all these elements that you mentioned in it, it is just that the intensive part you know this is part of the name, but I don't feel that the students are aware that it is intense."

The excerpt highlights a fundamental challenge: participants may not be fully aware of the specific nature of the programme they are engaging in, and the distinctive characteristics of BIPs under Erasmus+ are not necessarily well understood.[124] Another participant echoed this uncertainty:

> *"Well, I had a summer school two years ago, but I'm not sure it was a BIP. It could have been a BIP…It was a FORTHEM summer school, but was it a BIP? Maybe it was a BIP, I don't know." (I7, Visiting Teacher, BIP D)*

The challenge of unclear programme categorisation appears to extend beyond BIPs. For instance, one of the visiting teachers reflected on the broader challenge of distinguishing between different mobility formats:

> *"One day I was invited to the meeting here at the university [...] to share my experience exactly on this Blended Intensive Programme [...] I was sitting there and just thinking about like where is the, where are these concepts coming from? [...] Because they are the kind of, you know, there are different names to them, and they are all of them are kind of similar, with this like, you know, kind of differences [...] Maybe even confusing,*

[124] In this regard, I2 was also unaware in advance of the BIP that there would be students participating from different disciplines and study cycles and was only made aware of that on the second day of the PMP when I made a comment about students' backgrounds.

you know, you have so many different programmes [...] I was just sitting there and like, wow, how is that different? And to which do I apply?" (I4, Visiting Teacher, BIP B)

Notably, from the interviews with the organisers of the studied BIPs (I1, I3, I5, and I6), it became apparent that the BIP format and its organisation[125] were primarily chosen because of financial considerations. For instance, in the case of BIP B, the BIP was partially a continuation of another mobility activity that was organised on the local campus the previous year, and this somewhat similar event was now to be organised as a BIP to receive funding:

"So last year […] we got this idea about the circular economy in [region of the home university]. And, so, we thought maybe we can try for the first time, like, to do this project, this short-term mobility under Erasmus+. So, we did that last year, it was success, and so […] [name of a colleague working at the local FORTHEM office] told us that it was possible to organise, that the same topic or another topic was possible under a BIP. And we were very interested because last year we had [the home university] had to finance everything, and so as you can imagine, as [the home university] doesn't want to finance everything […] and so for this year, it was very interesting for them. So, a very good opportunity to apply for the BIP, and so we almost organised the same, the topic was the same, the week was a little bit different."[126] (I3, organiser, BIP B)

Using somewhat similar reasoning, I1 explained the choice of the BIP format by noting that there had long been an institutional aspiration to organise some form of summer school within the context of one of FORTHEM's Erasmus+ projects. In this regard, BIPs were chosen because this format allowed incoming students to receive a stipend as well:

"Well, we had the money here already through Erasmus+, so it was a little bit like we knew we were trying to think creatively about how could we get the scholarships for the students as well […] that was also a primary reason was to be able to allow more students to come with a stipend by doing it, by doing it as a BIP." (I1, organiser, BIP A)

[125] "its organisation" here refers to the number of participants, as the number of incoming students impacts the amount of funding an organising university receives. In the interview with I5, it was also revealed that for BIP C, they specifically targeted a higher number of incoming students to secure a larger amount of funding.
[126] This excerpt was followed by inquiring "how was the week a little bit different" in which it was answered that the difference referred to the number of visiting teachers and the companies that were visited.

Already touching upon the idea that one of the reasons for organising an international summer school activity as a BIP due to funding reasons, near the end of the interview, I1 addressed this more explicitly by stating:

> *"I would like to push toward using the BIPs more in the way that they are intended instead of more like we can get away with this to get some extra money to fund it, to put it, that is putting it very bluntly and very honestly." (I1, organiser, BIP A)*

Although these straightforward examples raise the question of whether BIPs are specifically chosen for their "unique" nature or rather used as a means to fund (existing) international mobility projects, it is important to keep in mind that the reasons for choosing a particular mobility activity are often ambiguous and shaped by multiple factors. This also relates to the fact that internationalisation activities in general are implemented for a variety of reasons, as was extensively discussed in the literature review chapter.

EUA providing the framework for BIPs

As some of the discussion and excerpts above already touch upon, the scheme of an EUA, FORTHEM in this case, appears to have provided the studied BIPs with the structural context to facilitate their organisation.[127] This is exemplified, for instance, by the following response from I6 when asked how the BIP came about:

> *"Okay, I am one of the representatives, the one that participates for [the home university] to the FORTHEM [name of the specific lab]. Since I am involved in this lab, I think that it would be good to organise something within the context of this lab. So, I, when I saw the call for the Blended Intensive Programme, I proposed to the other colleagues of my lab to organise it all together. […] So, this was the starting point of the story." (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP C)*

[127] It must be noted that BIPs A, B, and D were organised within the framework of the FORTHEM Alliance. Hence, it is logical that this is also reflected in the context in which these BIPs took place. At the same time, the role of FORTHEM also emerged as a distinct theme in the interviews, allowing it a context in which the organisation of a BIP was encouraged, and partner universities were found. Although BIP C was not specifically organised within the FORTHEM context and was instead a continuation of an earlier partnership, the institution that hosted this BIP (a member of the FORTHEM Alliance) made the deliberate decision to replace two of the original partner institutions with a new partner from within the FORTHEM network. While this would be an interesting development to explore further, it falls outside the scope of the current research.

Although BIPs are introduced top-down through Erasmus+ funding requirements, their implementation relies on bottom-up initiatives driven by (academic) staff. Organising a BIP requires institutional partnerships, committed teachers, motivated students, and suitable digital spaces. The context of an EUA can facilitate these conditions by providing shared resources and infrastructure, making BIP implementation more streamlined (see Jager, 2025). The data collected in this study clearly indicates that the context of EUAs encouraged the organisation of these BIPs. Whether it involves staff working in the international office or teachers with the idea of setting up a mobility activity, they indicated that the FORTHEM framework provided the necessary context and structure to organise BIPs, including the identification of partner universities. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from I1:

> *"They have had kind of an idea about a summer school for a long time at the business school. So, they kind have always were internationally oriented and they kind of always have wanted to do something like this. And in terms of entrepreneurship and they thought, oh well FORTHEM would be a good opportunity, and then this kind of gave a framework and then this was very much of a 'let's do it!"' (I1, organiser, BIP A)*

To sum up the expressed advantages for HEIs in organising BIPs, these programmes appear to contribute to an institution's ambition to carry out internationalisation activities. In this context, FORTHEM provided a framework that not only facilitated the organisation of BIPs but also actively encouraged institutional participation, fostering a sense of engagement within the alliance. The BIP format provided the financial facilitation of organising such a mobility activity, which the organisers and teachers reflected to be a format that was able to provide (home) students with an international flavour, including those who perhaps would otherwise not have had the opportunity to engage with such activities, as will be further developed in the next discussion on the perceived benefits of the BIP format.

IV.1.1.2. Perceived advantages of the BIP framework

The data reveal that the organisers and teachers identified several advantages of the BIP framework, particularly in comparison to semester-long exchanges and regular courses offered at home universities. These advantages included seeing BIPs as a more inclusive and appealing mobility format, with the potential to lead to further internationalisation activities and engagement, as well as the fact that the format allows for teaching beyond traditional classroom approaches. These advantages will be further explored and exemplified in this section.

A more inclusive and appealing mobility format

As discussed in the literature review (section II.1.4.), BIPs have been introduced as a "novelty" in the latest Erasmus+ programme to reach a wider range of students due to their flexible nature. The idea of the BIP format being more inclusive, accessible, and appealing for students is also reflected in the interviews with the organisers and teachers of the studied BIPs. In this regard, the BIP framework is reflected upon as a format that, due to its short-term nature, is very suitable for students who would normally not have had the opportunity or willingness to go abroad for a longer period, such as the traditional Erasmus semester. For instance, both I4 and I5 reflect upon how, in their national education systems, it is very challenging for students to participate in an Erasmus semester due to financial constraints and work obligations. In this context, they relate how BIPs can be a potential solution so that their students can still participate in internationalisation activities:

> *"For example, the semester Erasmus, the specifics in [country of the home university] is that […] students are paying for their education, and […] they try to find a job and this is how they kind of finance their studies, and whenever they have a job, this is basically a game over for a semester stay abroad. […] So, that is why I think that at least in case of [country of the home university] these Blended Intensive Programmes and basically being away for one week of course is much, much more realistic […] And for us, I think this is actually very, very attractive I think as an opportunity to be in involved in the internationalisation processes." (I4, visiting teacher, BIP B)*

I1, I6 and I7 do not refer specifically to their national education system but to various other factors, such as low numbers of students going on a semester abroad, a semester abroad not fitting into students' regular courses, students' personal commitments, financial constraints, or students being hesitant to commit to a semester abroad. Related to this, it is referred to various times that BIPs do have the opportunity to reach those students as well, as illustrated in the comment by I6 on their objective for organising a BIP:

> *"[W]e have many students here in [the home university] that never go abroad with Erasmus and…for example […] because of financial constraints, because they want to conclude their studies as fast as they can, or because they are afraid to go abroad, or they have no money to go abroad, or anything else. […] So, I think the gift to students in the case of [the home university], to student, to give these opportunities, something*

that can in a sense change their career and also give them the opportunity to meet other students from FORTHEM university" (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D)

Although the official discourse from the European Commission states that short-term mobility activities such as BIPs are not meant to replace or be seen as an alternative to long-term physical mobility (which remains a strongly encouraged pillar of the Erasmus+ programme), the discourse of the interviewees illustrates BIPs as a kind of trade-off against the traditional Erasmus semester, clearly reflected in I7's statement that *"a BIP is a good chance of at least doing a little bit of something"*. All interviewees repeatedly emphasised that BIPs provide students with an international experience they would otherwise not have access to. This reflects the status of BIPs as a more inclusive and appealing mobility format.

BIPs as a "flower bed" for students' future engagement in internationalisation activities

The official discourse around the latest Erasmus+ programme states the objective "to boost learning and training opportunities" in which blended mobility is promoted as potentially "an important first step for students who are hesitant to go abroad", likely leading students "to participate in full semester programmes later in their studies" (European Commission, 2022a, p.5-7, *cf.* section II.1.4., p.50). Although one might question whether this aligns with other goals, such as promoting sustainability and enabling participation among students who are unable to go abroad for a semester due to the structure of their study programmes,[128] Interviewees I1, I4, I5, I6, and I7 all highlighted that BIPs can stimulate further engagement in internationalisation activities. The idea that BIPs have the potential to spark curiosity and encourage students to explore additional international opportunities was consistently reflected across the interviews. As I4 expressed: *"it*[129] *kind of creates an interest for the students maybe to spend some more time, you know, if they did find it interesting, you know, and curiosity was created"*.

In most cases, interviewees did not explicitly refer to BIPs as leading to future participation in an Erasmus semester. Rather, they framed BIPs as an alternative for students who are unable to go abroad for a full semester (*cf. supra*). Nevertheless, as I6 phrased it, BIPs "*[are] the starting point for other international opportunities"*, whatever form these may take. In this regard, I6 and I7 relate to how BIPs can serve to promote students' further engagement within the FORTHEM Alliance. Participation in a BIP was seen as a chance for students to connect with peers from partner universities and become part of a wider network:

[128] Although interesting to delve further into, this is outside the scope of this thesis.
[129] 'It" refers here to BIPs.

"*they are in a network in FORTHEM Alliance, in which they can have a lot of opportunities, and they can catch them"* (I6). In BIP D, I6 and I7, have been recruiting students during the BIP to initiate a student-driven project.[130] In this context, I7 stressed that BIPs should not be regarded as encapsulated activities, but rather as flower beds from which spin-off effects can grow, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *"We have asked a couple of students, the they are kind of like really, really, really, really brilliant ones that we had, we asked them if they would like to continue this kind of topic and work in a student-driven project for our FORTHEM lab […] And so, the BIP is actually the kind of like flower bed or whatever, where this has started growing […] And that is something which is a spin-off effect for our lab from the BIP, which is super. […] And so, this is exactly what I think BIPs should be, something which is not kind of a complete capsule, but something which disseminates also into future activities." (I7, visiting teacher, BIP D)*

Beyond their role as flower beds for students' future engagement in internationalisation activities, BIPs were also described as catalysts for further institutional developments in this area. These developments include strengthening partnerships with other institutions (BIP C), providing a framework for future BIPs (also BIP C), or, as I1 noted, serving as a pilot initiative: *"kind of a first try, let's keep our fingers crossed that this BIP works well because then it could be a pattern, then it could be something that other people do"*. Similarly, visiting teacher I4 mentioned that after participating in a BIP, they are now considering organising a BIP at their home institution.

Going beyond traditional classroom approaches

In the Erasmus+ programme, BIPs have specifically been presented as "novelties", characterised by the use of "innovative ways of learning and teaching". In the official discourse, this "innovative" dimension appears to be linked to the blended format, the encouragement of challenge-based learning, possibly connected to the UN SDGs, and their transnational and transdisciplinary nature. Moreover, in the *blended mobility implementation guide* by European Commission (2022a), it is emphasised that BIPs "can be well-suited to put the acquired theoretical knowledge into practice, for example in laboratory work, field work, visits and interviews" and that "the physical mobility component is specifically well-suited to connect to

[130] See https://www.forthem-alliance.eu/media/events/detailed-view/call-for-student-driven-labs-projects-in-2024-2025 for more information about FORTHEM student-driven projects. It is out of the scope of this research to further explore this theme, but the idea of projects following from the BIP is important in this case. Accessed on 10/04/2025.

the local environment, for field trips and to engage with local businesses, civil society actors, etc" (*cf.* section II.1.3.4. for a discussion on the discourse on BIPs). The idea that BIPs are an activity that goes beyond traditional classroom approaches is also echoed in the interviews, where this is seen as one of the framework's advantages (*cf.* IV.1.2.2. Pedagogical activities and approaches for more information on the pedagogical activities in the BIPs). For instance, commenting on the BIP experience, I4 stated:

> *"I really liked how it was designed, so it was like a lot of, you know, kind of days was more workshops, then days was the company visits. […] [the] students they were engaged. […] So, I, I think that all in all this experience was really, really good, and very successful […] at least to my understanding of how it should go." (I4, visiting teacher, BIP B)*

Similarly, I7 commented on how BIPs provide students with a different view of academia through the informal, outside-the-classroom activities, which also allowed for a shift in the typical teacher-student dynamic:

> *"I think students really enjoy as well because they have the feeling they look into different world of academia by getting closer to their professors. When you just have classroom interaction, which has a very set sort of rules they have, where interaction is pretty predictable in a way […] and by having these groups mixed from different nationalities with a common project, and then being also in the position of being easily talking to the teachers and the professor, that is a very good arrangement because it has the hierarchical sort of lowering" (I7, visiting teacher, BIP D)*

At the end of the interview, when asked for advice for future organisers, I7 re-emphasised the importance of activities beyond the classroom:

> *"Have activities which are not only in the classroom. Yeah, but I think that is matter of the course, but I think this must not be underestimated and it is not all about having dinner together or something, but really do something together, testing field work, that is something which is really, really good, to have actual activities outside of the classroom, which are not eating together." (I7, visiting teacher, BIP D)*

Although the distinctiveness of BIPs among other mobility programmes also must be questioned (*cf. supra*; IV.1.1.2., p.141), several interviewees nevertheless stressed the importance of linking BIP activities

to the local context. In their accounts, this connection to the local setting was seen as a way of making learning more participatory and experiential, while also allowing academic content and social activities to be meaningfully intertwined. All interviewees, except I2, reflected on the idea that BIPs do not mirror a traditional classroom experience. Instead, they extend beyond it by incorporating a range of activities, such as company visits, engagements linked to the local context, and opportunities for social interaction. As noted by I5, BIPs also create a space for combining educational methods, referring both to the variety of activities within the programme and to the interdisciplinary nature of BIP C.[131] Furthermore, it became evident across the interviews that the organisers and teachers viewed there to be many advantages for students to participate in BIPs, as will be explored next.

IV.1.1.3. Perceived benefits of BIPs for students

The largest coding category that emerged from the interviews related to the organisational challenges faced by teachers and organisers in setting up and delivering the BIP. Interestingly, although this was not a specific focus of the interviews, it nonetheless became a recurring theme across all conversations. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine this theme in detail; however, it is important to note that despite the many organisational hurdles encountered, all organisers and teachers expressed a strong belief in the benefits that BIPs offer students. In particular, I3 and I6, who both critically reflected on the organisational aspects of the BIP, both emphasised that the effort is worthwhile given the value it provides for students:

> *"[S]ince the procedure is so confused and not well organised, and the call is structured in this way, all this part was a nightmare, whereas the experience with the students was excellent. […] So, I don't know if I will repeat it or I will suggest it to others because of this part. […] Otherwise, I would say you have to do it once a year for your student because it is an excellent, excellent experience […] it had really an added value from many, from many points of view, from many points of view." (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D)*

The many positive benefits mentioned are, of course, also linked to the fact that the teachers and organisers were intrinsically motivated to be involved in the BIP (*cf. supra*), and may additionally reflect

[131] Interestingly, none of the teachers and organisers commented on the online aspect of BIPs except when specifically inquired about. This will be further developed at a later stage in the results, but important to raise here as well.

efforts to rationalise and legitimise their involvement in retrospect. In the interviews, this was often expressed in terms of the BIP being a valuable opportunity for students, which offered added value from academic, personal and professional perspectives. At times, however, these perceived benefits remained somewhat vague and were not always articulated in concrete terms. Nonetheless, several specific lines of thought did emerge regarding the advantages of participating in BIPs, particularly the opportunities they provide for international exposure, for giving students an international experience through interaction in groupwork, and the personal and professional learning benefits that arise from this.

International (groupwork) experience

One of the main advantages mentioned by the teachers and organisers is the idea that BIPs provide students with an exposure to an international experience. This exposure relates to providing students the opportunity to travel abroad and engage with the host country. For instance, I1 described how the social programme was designed *"to give the students […] a taste of the best of [country of the home university] during the summer"*. Similarly, I3 noted that living with a host family was particularly valuable in offering students an insight into the "host culture". The way this international experience connects more broadly to national cultural exposure is reflected in I4's remarks:

> *"So, this means that we really saw like, you know, several things, like one is just the academic part and the knowledge they gained, but also just you know that networking and the cultural part, you know, being in [country of the host university] as well and seeing that part of culture." (I4, visiting teacher, BIP B)*

Beyond the physical experience of going abroad, the international aspect was most often associated with the opportunity for students to engage in international groupwork. This was the most frequently mentioned benefit and was raised in each interview. It also highlights the consistent use of diverse teaching methods across the BIPs, with groupwork emerging as a common feature in all programmes. As I5 observed:

> *"I think the experience to work in an international team was the best outcome for them because we can provide this type of knowledge, and during the classrooms, during the semester in our own universities, but learning how to work in an international team this is the main benefit." (I5, organiser and teacher, BIP C)*

A few moments later, I5 reinforced this view, stating that "international" and "teamwork" are two keywords for BIPs. Here, "international" not only refers to group composition, but also to students learning to navigate different national academic expectations:

> *"[T]eamwork it is important but could be really challenging to work in an international team and the BIPs are the I think the perfect opportunity because they have to learn how to deal with different cultures, different people, and also different rules in different universities. As an example, for their first online assignment, we asked them to use the templates and all the visual and the requirements from their own universities and it was different quite different because we saw that the requirements in each university regarding […] how to put the information [later on they had to use] all our rules and they had to fit in this. So, it is international and teamwork I think these are the keywords for the BIPs. "*

The idea that these groupwork experiences also contribute to the development of interpersonal skills will be discussed next.

Personal and professional development

Throughout the interviews, BIPs are reflected upon in terms that extend beyond the traditional classroom learning experiences (*cf.* infra; IV.1.2. BIPs in practice: Implementation of BIPs as well). On a similar train of thought, it is stated that BIPs enable students to learn beyond academic-specific objectives. For instance, both I1, I5, and I7 state how BIPs are more focused on soft skills compared to traditional courses:

> *"I think a BIP is more focused on soft skills comparing to regular classes and also this part is really important part of their…let's say general learning during university years. It is not enough to have the knowledge, but also to learn how to put it in the…and to value all the knowledge that you have." (I5, organiser and teacher, BIP C)*

Moreover, I1 reflected how the OMP of the BIP extended the learning (*cf.* infra; IV.1.2. for further discussion on this) and highlighted that students developed several soft skills. I1 felt that this was something that could be used to further advertise and implement future BIPs:

> *"I just spoke to [the Vice Dean] about it and he was really, really happy with the, with the digital component of it, and he said that he saw that the students really learned a lot of soft skills after the fact in that kind of time, and listening to him talk about it, I*

thought okay, now you can advertise for this, and this is why, this is the real added value of the BIP. " (I1, organiser, BIP A)

Clearly, the question must be raised here about what these "soft skills" actually refer to, as soft skills are a rather broad overarching term for various skills. However, there were several mentions in the interview data of how groupwork and international interaction can lead to students gaining different perspectives:

"I think that the added value of this kind of programme is to give to students the opportunity to meet people from other countries and also to stay, to compare perspective, point of view, and so on". (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D)

The development of interpersonal relationships also emerged as a key benefit and will be further discussed in the next section in relation to the rationale behind the chosen structures of the BIPs. At this stage, it is important to point out that the results indicate that, according to the organisers and teachers, the BIP experience – particularly the groupwork – exposed students to different perspectives and allowed them to build an international network. This was often linked to their professional development. For instance, I4 highlighted that it is almost inevitable that students will work in internationally oriented companies, and that the BIP experience offers valuable preparation for such contexts. Similarly, I6 reflected that the experiences gained through BIPs *"can change their future steps in the long term"*.

IV.1.2. BIPs in practice: Implementation of BIPs

Moving on from the rationales, this section will provide a closer look at the actual implementation of BIPs. While the Erasmus+ programme guide sets out some general requirements, organisers have much liberty in shaping both the content and the organisational structure of BIPs. This section examines how the BIPs in this study were structured and the (pedagogical) activities they included. The purpose is not to compare the programmes, but to show how they were implemented, highlighting both their diversity and the similarities in approaches, and to set the context for how students experienced the BIPs and the extent to which and how opportunities for ICC enhancement were represented. First, the organisational structure of the BIPs is considered, including the duration and sequencing of the physical and online mobility phases, as these emerged as important for both the intensive nature of the programmes and the development of interpersonal relationships among students. This is followed by a discussion of the pedagogical activities and approaches adopted in each programme, showing how organisers and teachers translated the BIPs

into concrete learning experiences. However, before turning to this, the characteristics of the four studied programmes as outlined in Figures Figure 13Figure 14, Figure 15Figure 16 (pages 132-135) are summarised in the Table below.

Table 6: Overview of the implementation characteristics of the studied BIPs

	BIP A	BIP B	BIP C	BIP D
Topic of study	Entrepreneurship & Crowdfunding	Circular economy	Business & Entrepreneurship	Migration studies
Organisational framework	EUA FORTHEM, the first-time the host university organises a BIP	EUA FORTHEM, the first-time the host university organises a BIP	Continuation of existing collaboration now widened to EUA FORTHEM	EUA FORTHEM and an additional partner, the first time BIP is organised in this partnership context
Targeted participants	Students from all disciplines and study cycles within FORTHEM	Students from all disciplines and study cycles within FORTHEM	BA students in Business Administration from the partner institutions	Students from all disciplines and study cycles within FORTHEM
Organisational structure	PMP followed by OMP	OMP followed by PMP	OMP followed by PMP	PMP followed by OMP
Duration PMP	5 days	4.5 days	4.5 days	5 days
Duration OMP	2 x 4-hour sessions and students were expected to collaborate online in a time frame of 2 months to prepare their final assignments	3 x 1-hour sessions	2 x 1.5/2-hour sessions	One week of virtual exchange
Awarded ECTS credits upon completion	7.5	3	3	3
Evaluation method	Attendance, final group presentation and written group report, both relating to the BIP's topic.	Attendance	Attendance, group presentation conducted at the start of the BIP in groups of the same home institution, a final group presentation in mixed international groups, and a written group report.	Attendance, final group presentation and written group report both relating to the BIP's topic.

BIP delivery onsite - formal curriculum	Teacher-led lecture style[132] delivered by I1, followed by independent groupwork time.	Combination of teacher-led lecture style onsite lectures delivered by one host, two visiting, and three guest lecturers, and interactive workshops, and two company visits.	Teacher-led lecture style delivered by a mix of visiting and host university professors. Two guest lectures were also delivered by local business owners. In the afternoons, students worked independently in their teams on their final assignments without supervision, and one visit to a local business.	Two days of teacher-led lecture style delivered by various host and visiting lecturers, followed by independent groupwork time, and three days of activities tied to the local area and community, including lectures, workshops, and onsite explorations, during which students were required to conduct neighbourhood walks and collect data for their group research projects.
BIP delivery online - formal curriculum	2 x 4-hour sessions on Zoom in which students presented their groupwork.	3 x 1-hour sessions on Microsoft Teams delivered by teachers from the partner institution on topic-specific content and a one-hour briefing on practical arrangements.	2 x 1.5/2-hour sessions on Zoom. Session 1: providing logistical, travel and practical information, online lecture delivered by one of the visiting professors. Session 2: dedicated to student group presentations about their home universities and countries, followed by final practical instructions related to the mobility.	Five full days of online work through Microsoft Teams, including each day a plenary session led by either I6 or I7, in which students received guidance on their groupwork, followed by students working independently in their respective groups, and concluded with a final online meeting during which the student groups presented their final work.
BIP delivery (onsite) - informal curriculum activities	Shared lunches and each evening featured a social activity such as a barbecue, city tour, boat tour, and a local specialities dinner.	Two city tours during the daily programme; one farewell party evening activity.	Shared lunches; field trip during the daily programme; each evening featured a social activity, such as a city tour followed by dinner, a national	Shared lunches; activities integrated in the daily programme included much room for socialising during the explorations of local sites; three

[132] Teacher-led lecture style is here used to refer to a teacher-centred mode of instruction in which most of the time is devoted to educator explanations, typically supported by slides, to convey mostly content-specific knowledge.

			cuisine evening, and a pizza night.	evening activities: a visit to an art exhibition, a pre-dinner social gathering, and a social dinner.
Groupwork elements	Groupwork was integrated from the first day, with the groups being re-mixed on the second day. After this, students continued collaborating throughout the PMP and OMP to complete their final group assignments.	On a few occasions, brief groupwork elements were included in the workshops, during which students were asked to complete tasks in various groups.	During the OMP, the students worked in groups from their home university. During the PMP, groups were determined on the first day, specifically mixing students from the participating universities, after which the students continued to work together throughout the week to complete their final group assignments.	Groups were formed on the first day, deliberately mixing students from the participating universities, after which they continued to work together during the PMP and OMP to complete their final group assignments.
Accommodation arrangements	Students' responsibility with optional provided recommendations.	Host families & students' own arrangements.	Host students in a single hotel that was collectively arranged.	Students' responsibility.

IV.1.2.1. Organisational structure of BIPs

In the following section, the organisational structure, in terms of both the duration and the placement of the PMP and OMP, will be discussed, as this emerged as a theme highlighting the intensive nature of the programmes and the importance organisers placed on providing space for students to develop relationships.

Duration of the physical and online mobility phases

The BIPs in this study all adopted a similar approach to the duration of the PMP, but there were some slight variations in the duration and timing of the OMP. While the Erasmus+ guidelines do not prescribe a specific duration for the online component, the example scenarios provided (*cf.* Figure 4: Two example scenarios for BIPs under Erasmus+) suggest that it may extend over a longer period; for instance, scenario two proposes three months of online cooperation. Nevertheless, all of the BIPs studied featured a shorter online component compared to the physical mobility component.[133] Despite this shared characteristic, there were minor differences in the frequency and duration of online meetings across the programmes, as illustrated in Table 6. With regard to the physical mobility phase, despite the freedom to schedule the PMP anywhere within a range of five to thirty days, all of the BIPs in this study opted for the minimum duration required to qualify as a BIP, with mobility phases lasting five or even four and a half days. This seems to be in line with the results of the study by O'Dowd & Werner (2024), in which 90% of the 196 BIP coordinators indicated that their BIP lasted the minimum requirement of five to seven days. During the data collection in this study, the organisers and teachers were not specifically asked for their reasoning for the length of the physical mobility phase. However, time,[134] funding,[135] and perhaps limited awareness of

[133] Although BIP D also had one week of virtual exchange, in practice, the students did not always meet (*cf.* IV.2.2.2. Students' experiences of the OMP, for a further discussion on this).

[134] Time in the sense that both students and teachers need to have sufficient availability in their schedules to participate in the PMP is an important consideration. Teachers may have other responsibilities that prevent them from being committed for more than five days, while for students, it could create complications in relation to their home programme schedules and requirements (on top of that, their private responsibilities). From interviews with organisers and teachers, it has already become clear that finding a suitable time to schedule the BIPs was challenging due to differing academic calendars and overlapping commitments for students. In addition, a longer programme duration could present further logistical challenges.

[135] Organisational support for BIPs is provided as a lump sum of 400 EUR per funded mobility participant, with a minimum of ten and a maximum of twenty (meaning a total of roughly €4,000 to €8,000 for the BIP). Since this amount is tied only to the number of eligible learners, the total organisational funding does not change according to the length of the BIP. Hence, organising a longer BIP may place additional pressure on the available resources. https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/higher-education-mobility-projects

the possibility of organising longer BIPs,[136] are likely factors underlying this decision. Although the BIPs had the same duration for the physical mobility phase, the awarded ECTS differed: BIPs B, C, and D each recognised 3 ECTS, while students in BIP A could receive 7.5 ECTS.

Programming the OMP and PMP: The consideration of developing interpersonal relations

Focusing on the programming of the organisational structure, both BIPs B and C started with an online phase followed by the physical mobility phase, while it was vice versa for both BIPs A and D. Interestingly, when discussing the motivations for planning the online phases as they had, a common underlying reason emerged: the development of interpersonal relationships.

Online mobility phase followed by physical mobility phase

The choice of BIPs B and C to start with an online phase was justified by the aim of (i) preparing the students for the intensive week onsite and (ii) establishing the theoretical framework. As I5 explains:

> *"We wanted to have let's say the kick-off part and the meeting was really important and I think that it is easier for them to have an idea about their future partners. […] Also, I think we wanted to have […] the students prepared for the intensive week. So, we really used the intensive week for work because […] they needed only two more lectures and theoretical framework in the first and second day because the intensive week is quite challenging when we are talking about the volume of work for students and that is why we try to provide them the information before and also to make them think about it and read and do some research on their own. So, when they started to work in teams, they already knew something about the topic, that is why we decided on this." (I5, Organiser and Teacher, BIP C)*

Indeed, the aim of using the online phase to prepare the students for the PMP with a "kick-off part" was also evident during the observations of BIP C. A significant portion of the online sessions was dedicated to introducing the BIP, explaining the rationale for its organisation, and noting that the programme stemmed

[136] From conversations with teachers and organisers, it became clear that not all the possibilities and requirements of BIPs were fully understood. For many organisers it felt like "navigating the waters" and represented a new type of initiative to coordinate. Several expressed interest in having a template or guide on how to organise BIPs, or in seeing concrete examples of how they had been implemented elsewhere. In BIPs B, C, and D, organisers even mentioned that they were not aware that it was possible to extend the PMP beyond five days. This points to a potential institutional disconnection between the call and its implementation: while the call is picked up by motivated individuals, they may not be fully aware of all the available options.

from a previous partnership between the institutions. Students were also provided with information about the host city and logistical travel details. Additionally, the sessions were used to confirm arrival times and address any questions regarding the mobility week. This preparation not only familiarised students with their future partners, easing the atmosphere during the onsite phase, but also delivered much of the theoretical knowledge required for the course, leaving more time for groupwork during the mobility phase. This theoretical preparation was also addressed in BIP B when I4 reflected on their online lecture:

> *"[My] online lecture was linked to the workshops that we had there. So, this means that we are kind of gaining a little bit more time in terms of preparing the students for these onsite workshops. So, this means that you know, when we are on site, we are having probably just more interesting activities and not so much just the informative lectures." (I4, Visiting Teacher, BIP B)*

In this regard, the aim of using the online sessions before the PMP in order to prepare students logistically, socially, and theoretically, seems to have been strategically chosen to leave the students more time to work together onsite and to be able to have more time for other activities such as company visits, interactive workshops, and activities tied to the local context.

Physical mobility phase followed by online mobility phase

Interestingly, BIPs A and D applied the reverse logic. The rationale behind the choice to place the OMP after the PMP appeared to be twofold: (i) as an academic extension of the physical mobility phase, and (ii) to first establish relationships among students to facilitate more "effective" online collaboration. For instance, in the following excerpt, I1 explains that without the online component, awarding 7.5 ECTS would not have been possible:

> *"This 7.5 ECTS credits thing would never have been possible with just the physical component, but by stretching it to basically last 2.5/3 months then we could put more content into the programme and stretch it to be a 7.5 credit course, so that it could be, go in as an elective in the students' regular study programmes." (I1, International Advisor, BIP A)*

The excerpt above does not explicitly address the reasoning behind organising the online component after the physical mobility phase. However, it does illustrate how integrating the online and physical mobility phases can be seen as an academic extension of one another, making the programme eligible for the

required ECTS. Along the same lines of thought, I7 expressed several times during the interview how having the online element following the PMP maintains the students' academic focus:

> *"As I said before, the really big thing is to not see the one week abroad as a sort of interesting academic holiday trip but to really focus on the material and get back into the material which you worked on in the summer school part of it, and go back to the topic, go back to the peers you have been working with together, to make it kind of a lasting sort of experience, because otherwise you go back to your home and forget about everything, maybe, but this way you are forced to stay on." (I7, Visiting Teacher, BIP D)*

When proposing the option that the online phase could also be scheduled before the physical mobility phase, I7 appears to be strongly opposed to having the online phase beforehand:

> *"After, after is better, after is much better because all the interpersonal stuff, which you only have when you are meeting up together in a place, you have lunch together, and so on. All the coffee breaks, all the coffee break dynamics, yeah, they play into how this group is established. So, I would strictly forbid, yeah, by law from Brussels, to have online events before the actual meeting." (I7, Visiting Teacher, BIP D)*

When inquiring about I7's stance on this, I7 points out that although online meetings are "efficient", they are full of "misunderstandings", and that therefore, "it is better to have a personal background already". The organiser and teacher in charge of BIP D answered regarding the structure in a similar line of thought:

> *"I wanted the equation, the group is built before and in presence, and then to work together when they, when they, students are friends in a sense. So, I think that otherwise, I think that the online session would be not so effective, because if we do teaching online with students that you have never meet and that don't know each other, you have this kind of PV session, like that you are passive and stay there to listen, or to I don't know…to cook or wash your clothes or things like this. […] The in-present experience and then online, I think that the situation is better. You know each other, you have a common duty, you are like engaged in the project, and so even online, you can work effectively." (I6, Organiser and Teacher, BIP D)*

Online mobility phase – physical mobility phase – online mobility phase

None of the studied BIPs included two online phases, both in advance and bookending the physical mobility phase. This is in line with the results of the study by O'Dowd & Werner (2024) in which 89% of the 196 BIP coordinators indicated that their BIP either had an online phase followed by a physical mobility phase or vice versa. Interestingly, I5 did mention considering including a second online phase in the form of a follow-up meeting in which the evaluation of the students' assignments and feedback on the onsite week could be discussed:

> *"The evaluation process let's say the follow-up meeting, we decided to have the follow-up in our last day of the intensive week, maybe it is a good idea to have a follow-up on online version of the follow-up at the end after the intensive week. I don't know, could be a good idea for next year." (I5, Organiser and Teacher, BIP C)*

It should also be noted that organising a BIP already imposes a substantial workload on the teachers – something that was also frequently mentioned in the interviews – and they must meet certain minimal requirements to secure funding. In the case of the OMP, these requirements are rather lenient, with no minimum or maximum duration. Additional hours devoted to online sessions or follow-up work are not always compensated, which may reduce the practical incentive to implement a second online phase. Moreover, limited time, resources, and scheduling complexities may be further reasons that constrain the introduction of two online phases.

In sum, an emerging pattern can be found in the data when looking at the reasoning behind the structure of the BIPs. Whereas in BIPs B and C, the structure appeared to have been chosen reasoning to leave more time for in-person interaction and groupwork during the physical mobility phases as well as providing a familiarity to the PMP that was to come, in BIPs A and D, it was to have the relations established beforehand in order for the students to work more "effectively" online. The common denominator across these rationales is the emphasis on enabling students to develop interpersonal relationships, either by allocating more time for face-to-face collaboration or by using the physical mobility phase to lay the foundation for subsequent online cooperation. However, despite this pronounced focus, limited attention appeared to be paid during the BIPs to actively facilitating the development of these relationships or guiding students in their collaborative groupwork, whether in person or online, as will be discussed at a later stage.

IV.1.2.2. Pedagogical activities and approaches

The BIP criteria stated in the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) allow much flexibility regarding the content, pedagogies, and delivery form of BIPs (*cf.* European Commission, 2022c; Frampton *et al.*, 2025). However, despite this flexibility, the way BIPs are introduced and described in the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), the European Commission's blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility, the accompanying example scenarios, and the various online informational and promotional materials, collectively set certain expectations for their implementation. For example, both the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) and the European Commission's blended mobility implementation guide for Erasmus+ higher education mobility state that BIPs should adopt "innovative ways of learning and teaching".[137] Additionally, across various policy and promotional discourses, BIPs are portrayed as potentially involving challenge-based learning in transnational and transdisciplinary teams, addressing issues linked to the UN's SDGs or other societal challenges. The blended mobility implementation guide explicitly frames BIPs as opportunities for students to engage in "group work, discussion and intellectual exchange instead of only lectures" (p.13). While the blended mobility implementation guide notes that the OMP should provide a theoretical foundation or be regarded as a preparatory phase for the PMP, the PMP is identified as being suited for putting this knowledge into practice.[138] The PMP is also described as an opportunity to connect with the local environment through field trips and engagement with local businesses, civil society actors, and other stakeholders. As such, this discourse frames BIPs as pedagogical opportunities that go beyond traditional classroom teaching approaches, aiming to offer students group-based, experiential activities that are often locally embedded and intended to add value to existing programmes.[139] Nevertheless, although no strict rules are imposed on the content, pedagogy, or delivery of BIPs, the requirement to award a minimum of three ECTS credits creates an implicit expectation of academic and discipline-specific content.

In practice, the studied BIPs adopted diverse pedagogical approaches and activities (*cf.* Figure 13; 14; 15; 16; BIPs A, B, C, and D at a glance). In the case of BIP A, there was a clear distinction between the social and scientific parts of the programme. The daily schedule primarily consisted of teacher-led content-

[137] They do, however, not describe what innovative ways of learning and teaching entail.
[138] For instance, laboratory work, field work, visits, and interviews.
[139] The following statement in the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) clearly illustrates this point: "The intensive programme should have added value compared to existing courses or trainings offered by the participating higher education institutions and can be multiannual" (European Commission, 2022c, p.47).

specific sessions, mainly delivered by I2. Each afternoon, one to two hours were set aside following the lectures so that students could work independently in groups on assignments related to the BIP's central theme. On the other hand, the informal programme, which took place exclusively in the evenings, comprised cultural visits and social activities and was led by the international coordinator, I1.[140] Although the UN SDGs were not explicitly addressed during the BIP, it was stated on the host university's website that the programme was "motivated by several UN Sustainable Development Goals".

BIP B featured a rich blend of approaches, with various teachers, professors, industry professionals, and workshop facilitators, each responsible for different elements of the programme. Some contributors adopted a more teacher-led content-specific approach, while others delivered interactive workshops in which students were assigned small group tasks. The programme also included two field trips to local companies whose activities were related to the BIP's central theme. During these visits, students received insights into practical applications from industry professionals. Compared to the other BIPs in this study, the informal curriculum was relatively limited and consisted primarily of a farewell party on the fourth day. Although no explicit reference was made to the UN SDG, the BIP's topic being "circular economy" inherently addresses several of them.[141]

BIP C also incorporated a variety of pedagogical activities, including teacher-led lectures delivered by a combination of visiting and host university professors, two guest lectures by local business owners, and a visit to a local company. In the afternoons, students worked independently in groups on their final assignments. Similar to BIP D, BIP C placed a strong emphasis on independent groupwork, with substantial time allocated for this purpose. The formal curriculum also included a one-day cultural sightseeing trip during which students were given group assignments designed to encourage social interaction while exploring local landmarks. Although students were not explicitly asked to address a societal issue, their final assignments, which included both an oral presentation and a written report, were directly linked to the local context. Specifically, they involved conducting market research related to setting up a stand at the local Christmas market. The informal curriculum was particularly rich, with evening activities scheduled each day. These included a city tour followed by dinner, a national cuisine evening, and a pizza night.

[140] The lead teacher, I2, reflected upon this as taking time away from students scientific learning commitments.
[141] For instance, the following goals are particularly relevant: goal 6 (clean water and sanitation), goal 7 (affordable and clean energy), goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities), goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), goal 13 (climate action), and goal 14 (life below water).

The first two days of BIP D followed a pedagogical structure somewhat similar to that of BIP C, consisting of teacher-led lectures delivered by a range of host and visiting lecturers, followed by time allocated for students to work independently in their respective groups on their assignments. However, what set BIP D apart was that the remaining three days of the programme were closely tied to the local context. These days featured activities directly related to the local area and community, including lectures and workshops led by local organisations, as well as onsite explorations. During these sessions, students conducted neighbourhood walks and gathered data for their group research projects. These projects were thematically linked to regional societal issues, specifically addressing urban inequalities. In this sense, the pedagogical approach of BIP D closely aligns with the way BIPs are envisioned in official documentation. Interestingly, when the lead organiser and lecturer, I6, was asked about the programme design, they noted that the idea of anchoring the BIP in the local context was not initially planned. Rather, it was brought to their attention by a colleague:

> *"I asked to other colleagues who participate in other BIPs about the organisation because at the beginning my idea was to do like a summer school, very scientific, but then I discovered that this kind of experience should be more participative and related to the territory. So, I decided to do this kind of a tour of the city related to the content of the people. And the social experience was really strongly related with the scientific programme because we organised two days of more frontal lectures and then three days of touring the city, that are, it is better, experimental look to the city, into the equality, and so on […]" (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP C)*

The remark that the social part was also related to the scientific part was mentioned several times throughout the interview with I6. In the case of BIP A, there was a clear distinction between the formal curriculum, which students had to attend as part of completing the course and which was highly teacher-led, lecture-based, and included some elements of group work, and the informal curriculum, which could be voluntarily joined and consisted of an evening programme including socialising and cultural activities. In contrast, in BIPs C, D, and to some extent BIP B, the additional activities such as socialising and cultural explorations were included in the daily programme, making them to some extent part of the formal curriculum.

Although the official documents do set some expectations for the PMP, there is less guidance regarding the OMP. In the case of the studied BIPs, the pedagogical approaches to the OMP were broadly similar,

typically involving Zoom or Teams as platforms to organise online meetings. In BIPs B and C, the online component, prior to the PMP, closely resembled a teacher-led lecture format, with limited interaction apart from opportunities for students to ask logistical questions about their travel arrangements. In BIPs A and D, however, time was allocated between the collaborative session for students to work independently in their groups on their final assignments, which were later presented in a final online collaborative session. Notably, BIP D also included daily check-ins between the groups and the two main lecturers involved.

In sum, the studied BIPs applied various pedagogical activities during the PMP and somewhat different approaches during the OMP, highlighting the flexibility and openness to interpretation in the pedagogical design of BIPs. At the same time, there also seems to be a shared idea that BIPs should include activities beyond traditional classroom teaching. The extent to which these activities are integrated, as well as their form and timing, differs widely. This also raises the question of how learning objectives are defined and whether activities beyond traditional classroom approaches are part of the intended learning trajectory.

Learning objectives: Academic focus of BIPs

The learning objectives for the studied BIPs were not widely accessible as they were not formulated in any of the programmes' promotional materials to recruit students, published documentation, or specific learning platforms, except in the case of BIP A.[142] In this case, the information and enrolment webpage listed several learning outcomes, the focus of the course contents, and outlined how the course is motivated by several UN SDGs[143] (*cf.* Appendix IV - for the specific learning outcomes of BIP A). Not surprisingly, these learning outcomes are closely tied to students acquiring discipline-specific knowledge. What is remarkable, however, is the absence of any learning outcomes related to soft skills or intercultural communication competence. When I2 explained the learning outcomes related to the BIP's topic, it became clear that integrating any objectives beyond this scope was not considered their responsibility as the academic lead, as the following excerpt illustrates:

[142] I have not inquired about the BIP application form or receiving written learning objectives, however, it was inquired about in the interviews with the leading teachers I2, I5, and I6.

[143] Specifically goals 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), 1 (no poverty), 5 (gender equality).

"No, I was not asked, but I thought that was something, I mean, because you tell me to teach entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, then that is what I'm going to handle as an academic responsible, right?" (I2, main teacher, BIP A)

This excerpt will be discussed in more detail in section IV.3. ICC for teachers, organisers and students. However, it is important to note here that there was a strong emphasis on discipline-specific learning outcomes. These outcomes reflected a combination of learning objectives from the university's general marketing as well as management and business administration courses, worth seven and a half ECTS credits, and were not specifically tailored for the BIP. Similarly, in the interviews with the organisers and teachers of BIPs C and D, it became apparent that the learning objectives were closely aligned with the programme's academic focus. For instance, when asked about the learning outcomes of the BIP, I5 responded as follows:

"[F]or this year the plan was to provide students some tools to evaluate the opportunity of opening a business, this was the main topic. […] and we asked students to evaluate the opportunity to enter the [city of the home university] […] Christmas market with a business idea. […] the idea was to cover the different parts of opening a business […] so it was about the opportunity evaluation, marketing, and financial, and also the soft skills related to communicate related to your business idea, and English communication of course." (I5, organiser and teacher, BIP C)

In the excerpt, I5 also noted that the objectives included students developing soft skills, which they explained had been a lacking focus when the BIP was previously organised. When asked what these soft skills referred to, it became clear that they primarily involved presenting and pitching a business idea in front of an audience in English (also one of the final assignments for the students). In a somewhat similar vein, I6 remarked that, while the students gained considerable knowledge in terms of scientific content, the short duration of the BIP meant that the programme did not focus exclusively on "hard skills". As a result, the expectations for the students' scientific assignments were somewhat lower; instead, greater emphasis was placed on the learning process itself rather than on the final reports produced:

"Obviously it is a two week programme in which they have too many things to do and what I always say to them is that the important is not the…to have like the research paper that you can publish in the top journal but to have an experience of research […] But they face a lot of problems, problems of relations in the groups, problem of building

an idea, and translate the idea in the reality […] So, I think that they learn a lot in the process. That was my duty more than the perfect output. They learn a lot, both in the soft skills and hard skills." (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D)

IV.1.3. Reflection: Learning spaces and priorities within BIPs

In the official discourse by the European Commission, BIPs have been (among other things) introduced as a means to encourage IaH and to support institutions' broader internationalisation strategies. Teachers and organisers recognised this intention in this study, albeit to varying and sometimes questionable extents. As outlined in the literature review, I see IaH and IoC as overlapping concepts born out of the same spirit, namely, making intercultural and international learning accessible to all students. My understanding of these concepts has not changed throughout the research process, and I continue to agree with Beelen (2023) that "they should be considered interwoven concepts that overlap and are essentially the same" (p.105). However, in this context, Leask's (2015) notion that it is useful to think about the curriculum in terms of its formal, informal, and hidden elements provides an important lens to look at the programmes of the BIPs. This typology was found to be indirectly reflected in both the discourse and practices of the organisers and teachers. However, rather than referring explicitly to these curricular dimensions, participants often described their programmes as comprising a *scientific* and a *social* component. In retrospect, this was already something I had noted on the first day of observations, writing in my notes: "it felt like the social programme and the content were separate". Similar remarks appeared repeatedly in my subsequent observation notes. However, it was only during the analysis of the focus group and interview data that I recognised this as a recurring theme in participants' discourse as well.

This distinction is observable in all of the BIPs in this study, but particularly visible in BIP A, which was the only BIP in which the daily programme of the PMP consisted of five full days of lecture-based teaching and structured groupwork (scientific programme), and the social programme involved optional evening activities such as cultural visits and social gatherings. Moreover, there appeared to be a clear divide between the scientific programme that was led by I2 and at times supported by departmental colleagues, and the social programme, which was led by the international office under the lead of I1. This divide not only appears to be in terms of organisation but also in participation, where I2 and their departmental

colleagues perceived their primary responsibility as limited to the formal or scientific elements of the course and restricting participation to this part and not joining most of the social activities, which were regarded as supplementary and largely coordinated by the international office. Moreover, various concerns were raised by I2 that the social activities were taking away students' focus from the course, as normally they would expect students to work or do reading after the course, for which they now did not have the time because there were still activities in the evening.

Even when activities outside the classroom were integrated into the daily programme, as in BIP D, a distinction still appeared in the discourse. The following excerpt by I6 is illustrative of this:

> *"[T]he social experience was really strongly related with the scientific programme because we organised two days of more frontal lectures and then three days of touring the city." (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D)*

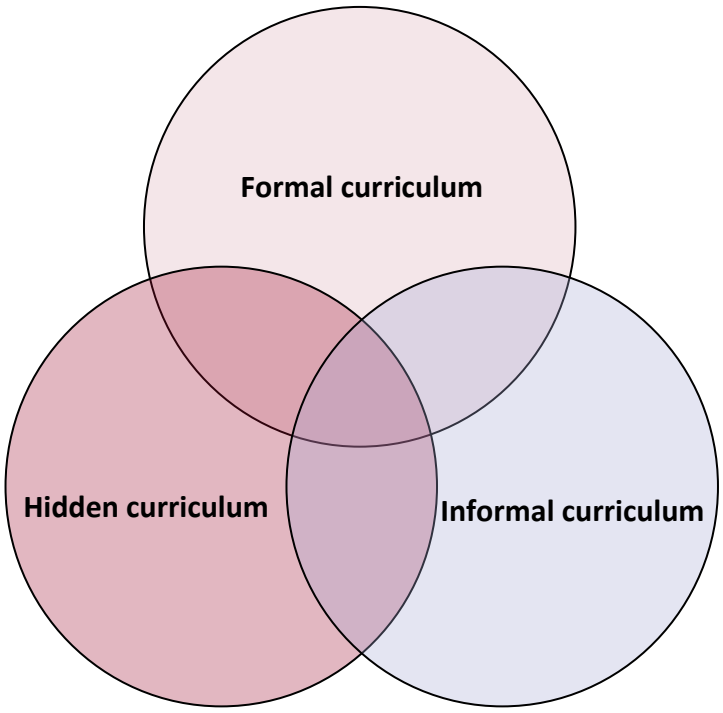
Although the city tours required students to collect data for their research projects and offered insights into local organisations addressing inequalities (the main theme of the course), they were still described as part of the social experience. So, while I6 clearly emphasised the connection between the academic and social dimensions, there still appeared to be a subtle divide. Activities that took place outside the classroom, even when directly linked to the subject matter, were not fully perceived as part of the scientific learning process. These discourses clearly illustrate the separation of BIPs into two elements: the *scientific* and the *social*. It is important to problematise this tendency to separate the scientific and social dimensions of learning within BIPs. When these elements are already understood as distinct in theory, such separation is likely to be reproduced in practice. However, Leask (2015) does not distinguish between the importance of learning that takes place in the different parts of the learning environment. Instead, Leask (2015) argues:

> *"The formal, informal, and hidden elements of the curriculum are connected and interactive, rather than discrete—experienced by students as a dynamic interplay of teaching and learning processes, content, and activities in and out of the classroom. (…) They simultaneously define students' present learning and develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to create future opportunities for them and others within an increasingly connected and globalized society. Together they make up the total student experience. The point in the center, where all three elements work*

together, is a potentially dynamic and powerful space offering rich opportunities for learning for all students" (p.9).

This synergy is visualised in the following figure:

Figure 18: Three interactive elements of the curriculum (reproduced from Leask, 2015, p.9)



Similarly, within BIPs, I would argue that both the scientific and the social elements shape the experience and learning of the students, as will be further illustrated in the next section. Although learning beyond traditional classroom settings, innovative teaching practices, and opportunities for relationship-building were frequently emphasised by the teachers and organisers, in practice, these aspects tended to be treated as secondary in the BIPs observed in this study. This division can be problematic, as it positions social learning as less valuable than content learning. Furthermore, it frames the development of soft skills as an additional bonus[144] rather than an integral component of the educational experience. The separation between the scientific and social components of the programme may also help to explain how ICC development is perceived within BIPs. It raises further questions regarding where learning takes place and what role there is for developing ICC within these programmes.

[144] As literally said by I1 during the interview: "all of these soft skills came as a real bonus, yes".

IV.2. A focus on students' accounts of BIPs

Having outlined how the BIPs were implemented in practice, I will now describe how they were experienced, focusing on the students' accounts, as they were the ones engaging directly with this implementation. To stay close to the students' lived experiences, this part will draw extensively on excerpts from the focus groups and the students' output from the interactive focus group exercises. Observations have also been used to sketch a narrative of situations as they were experienced. The section will first discuss students' self-declared motivations and concerns for participating in the BIPs. It will then turn to their experiences, structured according to the PMP and the OMP, before discussing these in the light of students' overall experiences. Finally, a reflection will be provided on the different participant profiles that emerge from the data.

IV.2.1. Students' motivations and concerns for participating in BIPs

Moving from the organisers' and teachers' rationales for implementing BIPs, this section examines both the students' self-declared motivations for joining the programme and any hesitations or concerns they encountered. First, students' motivations will be explored, highlighting the relative importance of cultural curiosity and travel aspirations, social and personal development, and, to a lesser extent, professional or content-specific interests. This is followed by a discussion of students' hesitations and concerns, focusing on practical and organisational challenges as well as social integration and group belonging. By examining both students' motivations and the hesitations they highlighted, this section offers insight into aspects of the programme that may require greater attention, as well as a deeper understanding of the diverse rationales underlying participation and how these may have shaped expectations and experiences.

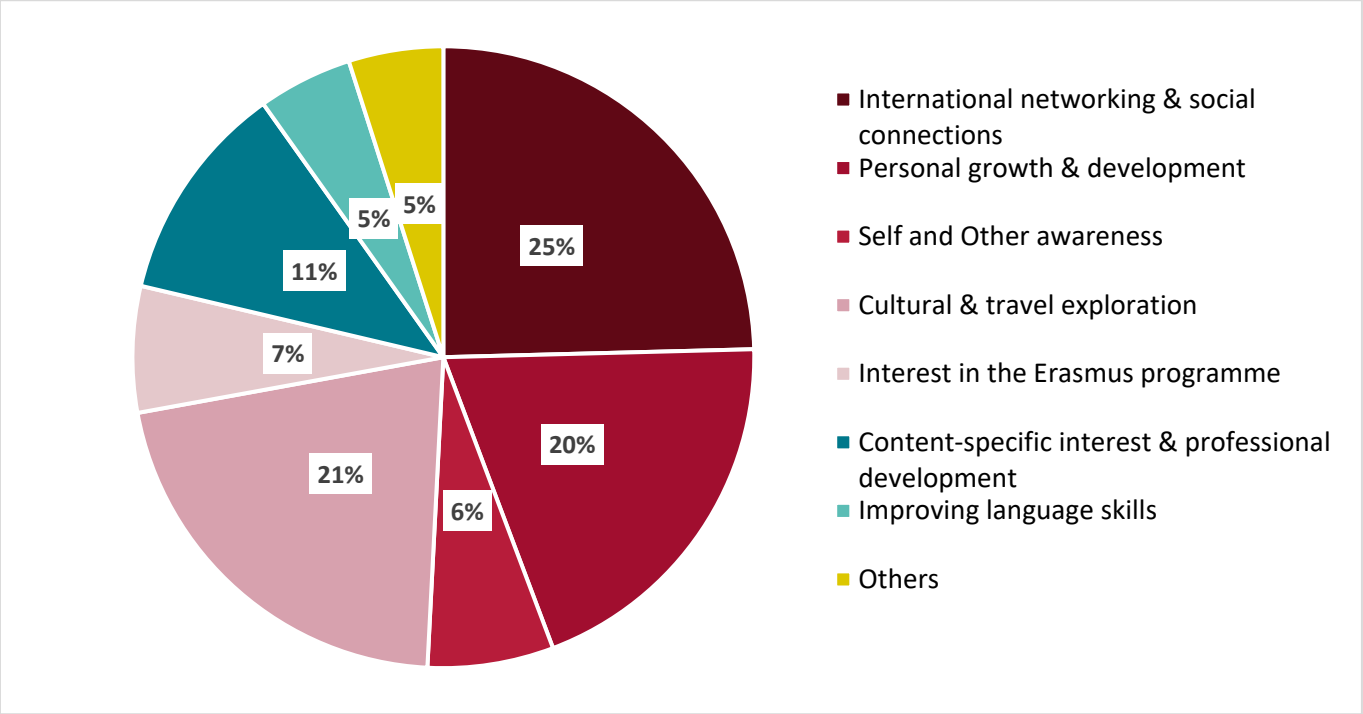
IV.2.1.1. Students' motivations

One of the activities during the interactive focus group specifically focused on exploring students' motivations and objectives for joining their respective BIPs (*cf.* III.2.3. Activity-oriented focus groups). Although students talked about their motivations to participate in the BIP at various points during focus group discussions, this section specifically looks at responses generated during the round 3 exercise, where

students entered their motivations on a Flinga Whiteboard, and at the discussion that followed, as this directly reflects students' discourse on their motivations. It is important to examine these motivations and objectives to understand students' expectations about BIPs and to assess how these align with the actual programme.

The responses were categorised into eight themes, as shown in Figure 19. These themes also correspond to the coding categories created in ATLAS.ti under the heading *students' motivations for joining the programme*, and reflect both the answers on the whiteboard and the subsequent discussion, during which students were invited to comment on their entries. Before delving into this section, it is important to note that students often expressed multiple motivations for joining the programme. While this study is qualitatively designed to provide rich insights into students' experiences rather than quantitative generalisations, it is nevertheless useful to present an overview of the relative frequency with which certain motivations were mentioned. As illustrated in the pie chart, and based solely on the Flinga Whiteboard responses from all four focus groups, students referred more frequently to motivations related to the social aspect, interpersonal connections, and personal development and growth, represented by the red and pink colour theme, than to content-specific interest or professional development, represented by the blue colour theme.

Figure 19: Illustration of the frequency of students' self-declared motivations for participating in the BIP by category



For reasons of clarity and conciseness, seven themes[145] have been reorganised into three overarching groups under corresponding subheadings in this section to describe students' motivations. First, motivations related to cultural curiosity, travel aspirations, and interest in the Erasmus programme are presented, encompassing the themes of (i) cultural and travel exploration and (ii) interest in the Erasmus programme, represented by the pink colour theme in the pie chart. This is followed by a section on personal growth and development through social interactions, which includes the themes of (iii) personal growth and development, (iv) self and other awareness, and (v) international networking and social connections, illustrated by the red colour theme in the pie chart. Finally, the section concludes by focusing on the themes of (vi) content-specific interest and professional development and (vii) improving language skills, represented by the blue colour theme in the pie chart, before turning to students expressed hesitations and concerns.

[145] The eighth theme categorised as "others" will not be discussed because they were not clearly defined and did not relate directly to the scope of this analysis.

Cultural curiosity, travel aspirations, and interest in the Erasmus programme

All of the students except for FG1 and FG2[146] expressed that one of their main reasons for participating was related to exploring a "new culture"[147] and having an opportunity to travel to another country. This was particularly evident in the case of BIP A, which was hosted in a country known for its high cost of living. FG3 and FG4 expressed that this BIP was "*the opportunity to travel in such an expensive country"* (FG3), or as FG4 stated*: "I wanted to be in [country of the host university of BIP A] for the summer"*. Here, the decision to apply for the BIP was also specifically related to visiting a particular country, a motivation that FG5, FG6, FG7, FG8 and FG15 shared. For instance, FG8 explained that it had long been an aspiration to visit the country of the host university of BIP B:

> *"[F]ind out more about [country of the host university of BIP B] because for the whole life I wanted to go there, and before my 18th birthday I went there, and I was so, so grateful to be and to have fun" (FG8, BIP B)*

Moreover, general expressions such as "visiting a new country", "visiting new places", or "find out more about [country of the host university]", in which exploring local foods was also mentioned, came up repeatedly. Interestingly, even students FG9, FG10 and FG14, who were home students to the host universities of their respective BIPs, also referred to motivations related to "cultural" exploration and curiosity. For example, FG14 explained:

> *"[I]t was curiosity because I am not from [city of the host university of BIP D], but I don't really like I am near [city of the host university of BIP D] but I don't really know it, and I think it is better if you know your country before going out and the adventurers and such." (FG14, BIP D)*

Several students (FG3, FG9, FG10, FG11, FG12, FG15) also specifically mentioned that they were motivated to sign up for the BIP due to a particular interest in participating in an Erasmus activity. For some (FG3, FG11, FG12), there was a desire to experience what an exchange programme is like before completing their studies. As FG12 expressed: "*I wanted to experience how the exchange programme does because*

[146] This is not surprising given the fact that both FG1 and FG2 were on an Erasmus+ semester exchange at the host university of BIP A. Consequently, they did not specifically mention cultural or travel exploration as one of their motivations, as they were under the impression that the BIP was a "normal course" like any of the other electives they could choose from as exchange students.

[147] Here, students appear to associate the idea of exploring a "new culture" primarily with what can be described as high culture, or Culture with a capital C, such as visiting a new country or seeing local sites. This will be discussed further in IV.3.2. ICC for students.

that was my last year that last semester". Meanwhile, FG9 and FG15 noted during the focus group discussions that they had not had the chance to participate in a traditional Erasmus semester. As the quote below illustrates, FG15 had planned to take part in an exchange semester, but due to time constraints, they were unable to follow through. In the event, BIP D offered an opportunity to engage in an Erasmus experience:

> *"I always wanted to participate in an Erasmus project. I was supposed to go in one this year for like six months, but when I heard about it was also last minute. And so, I couldn't attend. And so, when this opportunity came to my, to my teacher, I said, yeah, of course I want to go." (FG15, BIP D)*

Besides the examples illustrated above, these motivations also relate to the desire to take part in learning experiences that allow students to gain different perspectives and to develop a curiosity about how things are done at other universities. These points are closely connected to the themes of personal growth and development, and international networking and social connections, which will be discussed next.

Personal growth and development through social interactions

Besides nearly all of the students mentioning motivations related to travel experiences (*cf. supra*), the other majority of the comments related to students being motivated to participate because of the aspiration to improve their social skills, connect with others, and for their personal growth and development. For example, comments like "new experience", "new knowledge", "learning new things" and "personal growth" were noted numerous times. For instance, the following comment by FG12 touches upon several of these elements:

> *"[W]hat motivates me to join this short mobility is, of course, personal growth because I don't want to stop in what I have like what I am learning right now from the school or in one country, because I would like to, you know, like to know more, to learn more." (FG12, BIP C)*

This personal development[148] is also related to students wanting to "push their limits" – which can be interpreted as getting out of one's comfort zone *(cf.* discussion on out of comfort zone learning, *Lilley et*

[148] Interestingly, only in the responses from the focus group participants of BIP B, personal development was also explicitly related to the fact that one of their motivations to participate in the BIP was related to self and other awareness under the term "self-improvement". However, although this was visible in their written responses, it

al., 2015, in section II.2.3, p.83) – and improve their social skills. Especially, FG13 and FG14 were specifically mentioning how they signed up for the BIP as a way to "push their limits" and "to get out of their shell":

> *"My motivations were pushing my limits and curiosity. Pushing my limits, I relate to what [FG13] said about being shy and like trying to get out of my shell because I don't, I have a really hard time talking to people I have never met, I am a bit awkward. So, it was like you have to do this because you have to get out of your shell." (FG14, BIP D)*

Although not specifically mentioning social skills as a current "weakness", almost all of the other students (FG1, FG3, FG5, FG6, FG7, FG8, FG9, FG10, FG11, FG12, and FG15) also referred to the idea of meeting new people, in which new people related to "foreigners", "people from different backgrounds", "people from different countries" or "parts of the world". In this regard, it is also important to note that this was not always something initially mentioned by all participants when giving their responses on the whiteboard (yet a big part of the written responses also related to this). However, it emerged as a point of consensus during the discussion that followed the exercise. For instance, although FG3 did not explicitly note this themselves on the Flinga whiteboard, they reacted more strongly after FG2's comment "I also wanted to connect with more students across the EU" was read aloud, pointing out that this social aspect is the main advantage of participating in a BIP:

> *"I would just absolutely share this experience, since this is basically the purpose of FORTHEM mobility. It is also one of the main advantages that you gain from this experience. So, yeah, now I am just worried I forgot it in my notes, but yeah, I agree 100%." (FG3, BIP A)*

The idea of being motivated due to the possibility of meeting new people even extended beyond the idea of "meeting" or "connecting" with others by FG5, FG6, FG8, FG10, as they referred to their motivation to participate in BIPs as an opportunity to "creating bonds", "friendships" or even "lifelong friendships".

In the context of gaining social skills and connecting with "the Other", FG1, FG2, FG6 and FG7 also pointed to the BIP format as attractive due to offering teamwork and collaborative exercises. The idea that during the BIPs the students would specifically work in teams and collaborate was seen as something that explicitly "pushed" the students to socialise and to make new contacts, as FG7 reasoned that one of the

was not much reflected upon during the discussion on their motivations. Here, similar to the other focus groups, the discussion was more geared towards improving social skills and gaining interpersonal relations, in which collaboration and groupwork also played a role.

motivations to sign-up was to participate in teamwork: *"And for teamwork because if you work in team, you meet also new people, you make contacts and I also keep in time keep in touch with some people that I met in the BIP"*. The motivation to meet new people was not solely socially driven but also linked to the desire to expand one's network in ways that could support future career prospects. The notion that participating in a BIP could serve as an asset in one's professional development is a theme that will be explored next.

Professional development and content-specific interest

Several students (FG5, FG10, FG11, FG12) highlighted that participating in the BIP would support their professional development, both through the skills they acquired[149] and because participation in an international experience could enhance their resume and give them an advantage in their career search. For instance, while FG12 explains why they wrote "this will help me with my future career" on the motivation's whiteboard, FG12 reasoned:

> *"[I]f I join Erasmus programme, I feel like this will help me in my job hunting here in [FG12's country of the home university] or whatever in Europe […] because this will […] I think that I will have a solid background working with international people if I if I will join, you know, this intensive programme. […] employers are looking for, for, international students or students who are also engaged with international activity. So, that is why […] I was interested that time." (FG12, BIP C)*

While most of the students related to the fact how the international experience was seen as beneficial for their future career due to the thought that an international experience increases attractiveness for future employers and because of the ability to show working in an international context (*cf. supra*), there was the unique case of FG5 for whom the idea of improving one's resume by taking part in a BIP was the primary reason for participation. This was related to the fact that FG5 works for a research institute where one of their tasks is to carry out research relating to circular economy, hence, participating in a BIP about this and gaining insights into the circular economy within another country was seen as very beneficial, as FG5 explains:

[149] Within these skills only three of the students (FG7, FG9 and FG10) expressed that among other things they also were motived to participate in the BIP with the idea to develop their English language skills.

> *"I feel horrible now **[laughing],** but I have to admit that I think it was the CV record for me, the most important thing. I wouldn't even say that it was for me personally, but maybe more for the place where I work." (FG5, BIP B)*

Although FG5 was relatively unique in that their motivation for participating in the BIP was specifically related to the topic and improving one's resume, several other participants (FG4, FG8, FG10, FG11, FG13) also reasoned that learning (more) about the specific topic of the BIP they participated in was among other reasons for participating in the BIP, as the comment by FG4 illustrates:

> *"I was interested in crowdfunding as a source of income for your venture, also I wanted to experience summer in [country of the host university of BIP A]. So I was motivated to sign up for the event." (FG4, BIP A)*

It is important to note that only FG4, FG5, and FG13 identified their interest in the topic as one of their primary reasons for participating in the BIP. However, in all cases, no single motivation was mentioned in isolation; rather, students often described a combination of factors. The following excerpt from FG13 illustrates this multifaceted motivation:

> *"I had like many reasons, but my first thought was the theme was really interesting and it goes with my study programme. […] And then there was a thing what I really liked that it is funded because if I am honest then if, if, if it wasn't like funded I won't go. […] And then there was like this thing I like to meet new people and as well from other countries to see different perspectives. And I was writing that get out of my shell […] And to see like other type of people, how they communicate, how they, how they see the world. […] And that is as well to put myself outside of my usually routine." (FG13, BIP D)*

Although the focus group participants expressed a variety of reasons for participating in the studied BIPs, the focus group data clearly suggest that cultural and social immersion were more central in their decision to participate than participating for the academic experience. The following excerpt from FG3 captures this strongly:

> *"[T]o be 100% honest, that if you come for a FORTHEM experience, then the programme does not matter that much because also what you want is to discover a new culture and discover a new country. It is such an opportunity to travel in such expensive*

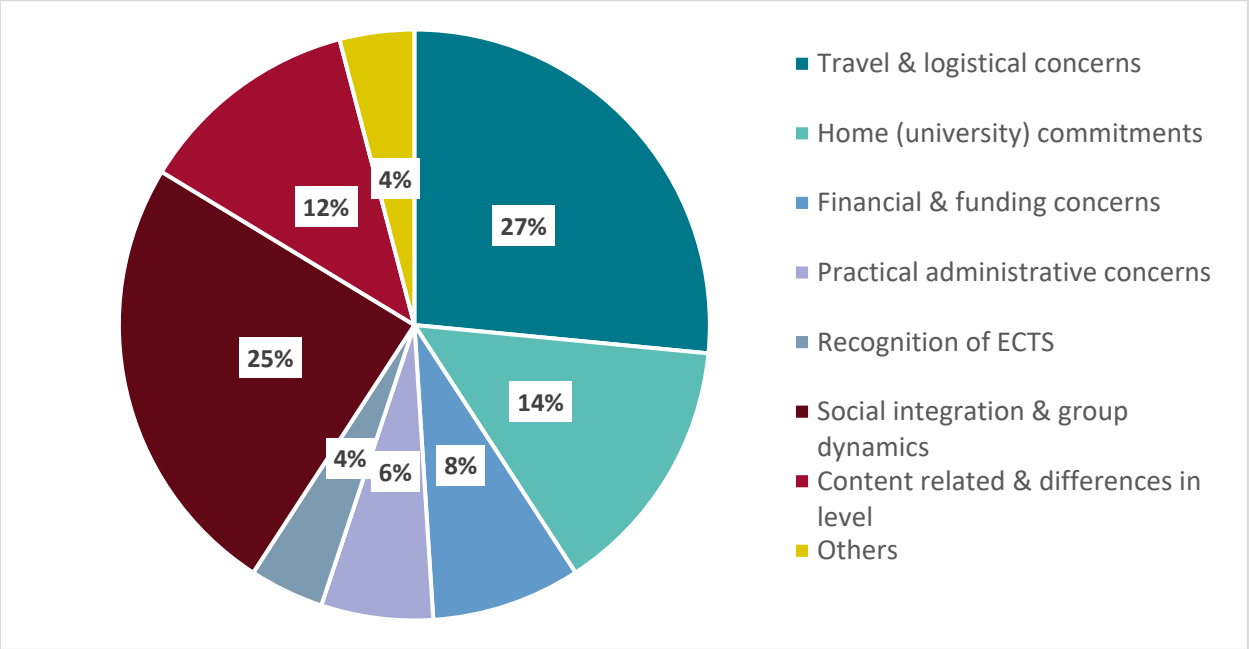
countries […] where we would not be able to go as students, and that was my main motivation at the beginning." (FG3, BIP A)

FG3's reflection illustrates a key pattern emerging from the data: for many students, the primary declared motivation for participating in a BIP was the opportunity to explore a new culture and build social connections rather than engage with the academic content.

IV.2.1.2. Students' hesitations and concerns

In contrast to, or perhaps alongside, the students' motivations for joining the BIPs, this section explores the hesitations and concerns they expressed about taking part in the programme. As in the previous section on motivations, the focus is on the responses from the third round of the focus group activity (*cf.* III.2.3. Activity-oriented focus groups), during which students shared their hesitations and concerns on a Flinga Whiteboard, followed by a discussion. It is important to consider these concerns, as they may indicate potential barriers to participation in BIPs or, as the examples discussed below suggest, areas that may benefit from greater attention during the programmes themselves. The responses were categorised into eight themes, as shown in Figure 20. These themes correspond to the coding categories created in ATLAS.ti under the heading *students' hesitations and concerns* and capture both the initial whiteboard entries and the subsequent discussion, during which students were invited to comment on or expand their responses. As with motivations, students rarely expressed a single concern; rather, most reported multiple concerns. The pie chart provides an overview of the relative frequency with which certain concerns were mentioned, including only the frequency by category of the Flinga Whiteboard responses.

Figure 20: Illustration of the frequency of students' self-declared hesitations and concerns for participating in the BIP by category



For reasons of clarity and conciseness, and due to some overlap between individual themes, the seven categories[150] have been reorganised into two overarching groups under corresponding subheadings in this section. First, practical and organisational concerns are discussed, represented by the blue colour theme in the pie chart, encompassing the themes of (i) travel and logistical concerns, (ii) financial and funding concerns, (iii) practical administrative concerns, as well as references to (iv) home (university) commitments and (v) recognition of ECTS. This is followed by a section focusing on social integration and group belonging, represented by the red colour theme in the pie chart, which addresses concerns related to (vi) social integration and group dynamics, alongside (vii) content-related concerns and perceived differences in academic level.

Practical related concerns

The focus group participants pointed out various concerns relating to practicalities, from basic practical matters such as "where will I wash my clothes" and "how to wake up at 7" to concerns relating to scheduling, funding and travel practicalities. For instance, several students (FG3, FG5, FG6, FG7, FG8, FG13,

[150] Similar as to the discussion on motivations, the eighth theme categorised as "others" will not be discussed because they were not clearly defined and did not relate directly to the scope of this analysis.

and FG15) expressed concerns about travelling to the host university of their respective BIPs. These concerns are primarily related to logistical challenges, particularly regarding how to reach the location. FG8, for example, referred to their experience travelling to the BIP destination:[151]

> *"[H]ow to get to [city of the host university of BIP B]? It was such a disaster for me because this is such a small city and I was on the road for more than 30 hours and I was really tired after going by bus and all the trains. I was really worried that I won't be on time or something will happen. Someone will rob me or, you know, this is some overthinking and that is it." (FG8, BIP B)*

As already addressed in the excerpt above as well, concerns about travelling also extended to questions of personal safety and the prospect of travelling alone. For many of the students[152] it was their first time undertaking a trip on their own, which, for some, became a source of hesitation when considering whether to join the programme. For instance, FG15 reflects how this was their first experience of travelling alone:

> *"[I]t was my first time travelling alone, and I had to like take two airplanes to from [FG15's country of the home university] to [region of the host university of BIP D]. And also, not knowing anyone because from [country of the host university] I don't know anyone, from my university it was also kind of the last day that I knew someone was going, but I didn't know who. So, I was kind of like, hmm okay." (FG15, BIP D)*

Concerns about financing the trip and the timing of receiving the Erasmus grant were, in some cases (FG3, FG5, FG12, FG14), closely linked to concerns about travel and logistics. Students were required to pay upfront for their travel arrangements, which especially in the case of BIP D, posed an additional challenge as the notification that the programme would take place was given at relatively short notice. As a result, some students had to make last-minute travel bookings, leading to higher costs and added uncertainty about whether they would be reimbursed. As FG13 explains:

> *"I was running around the departments to get everything signed and I thought, okay, if I don't get all the signatures, I won't go […] and the same with the funding because like*

[151] Although several students expressed hesitations and concerns regarding travel, particularly in the case of BIP B, which was situated in a smaller city without direct transport to and from the airport and limited public transit, all of the focus group participants here (FG5, FG6, FG7, and FG8) indicated that this was a significant concern for them.
[152] There is no exact number here, but this point is also supported not only by the focus group data but also from the various chats with other BIP participants during the physical observation period.

I wasn't sure I will, if I didn't get all the signatures if I will have the funding, if I could like, do I need to like book tickets, plane tickets or accommodation."

The above excerpt also addresses concerns relating to practical administrative challenges, a concern that was also shared by FG5 and FG15. These concerns related to the paperwork students were required to upload in their mobility portal to receive approval to participate, but also to receive funding for their BIP participation. Although students had already decided to apply, this became a source of uncertainty during the preparation process, with some expressing concerns about whether they would ultimately be able to take part in the programme.

Another concern raised exclusively by the focus group participants of BIP C was the issue of overlapping commitments during the BIP. All of the focus group participants were in their final year of studies and expressed concerns about managing other university or work-related responsibilities alongside their participation in the programme. However, this theme was also raised by other students in the context of groupwork — an aspect that will be further elaborated upon in the next section. Similarly, during the concerns and hesitations whiteboard activity and the subsequent discussion, participants from BIP C raised the issue of ECTS recognition. For FG3, this was a concern before the start of the programme, whereas FG1, FG2, and FG4 identified it as a concern that emerged during the BIP. These themes also link to challenges experienced in groupwork, as will be further discussed in section IV.2.2.

Social integration and group belonging

Interestingly, although making new social connections and building friendships with people from different backgrounds was raised as one of the most frequently noted motivations for participating shared by all the focus group participants (*cf. supra*), social integration and group dynamics were also frequently listed by the students as one of their concerns before joining the BIP (FG5, FG7, FG8, FG10, FG12, FG13 and FG14). It even became the largest coding group under the category of *students' concerns and hesitations for joining the programme.*[153] Statements written on the Flinga whiteboard like "not knowing anyone", "social integration" and questions as "will I stand out?" or "will I get along with others?" were not mentioned in isolation. FG10 even referred to this as "the fear of the inevitable", explaining that during last year's BIP, they had difficulties integrating into the group. They mentioned several times during the

[153] When not only considering the Flinga whiteboard responses but also the following discussion.

focus group that, although they struggled to connect with people last year, they had learned from that experience and enjoyed the BIP more this year. Yet the "fear of the inevitable" stayed:

> *"To me is the fear of the inevitable, because last year was a good experience, but we had up and downs, and the social integration was harder, and I was a little bit scared about that this year as well. I was just like, okay, maybe it is gonna be just like last year, but it is fine […] You need to speak with the people, you need to connect with them. So, I think the experience from this year, it was a really nice experience and I am looking forward for the next year as well, but also, I have a fear for the inevitable." (FG10, BIP C)*

This "fear" relating to whether one would be able to integrate and build social connections within the group appeared to be shared by many. Another excerpt that captures the various underlying concerns is illustrated in the following explanation about the response to the Flinga whiteboard by FG5, who explains they were hoping to have at least one safe person to be able to become friends with:

> *"[A]nother point is will I stand out in a way […] because I always need…I added like safe person here, I need at least one person which is like I can call them like my friend, my safe person for the week. So otherwise, I just cannot participate as myself just because I am very, I don't know, not like lonely, but something like that. And then also how to get heard?" (FG5, BIP B)*

Students expressed concerns about integrating into the group, both in terms of whether others would include them and whether they themselves would enjoy the experience and get along with the other group members. This may also be linked to the fact that none of the focus group participants spoke English as their mother tongue. For instance, FG5 explained how language skills and being concerned about being misunderstood also plays a role: *"I think I am smarter in [FG5's country of the home university]. Yeah, I, I think I am. Yeah, I know more"* (FG5).

Moreover, FG5, FG8, FG10 and FG14 also expressed concerns relating to their experience and knowledge about the topic and worried about "not doing a good job":

> *"[F]or me like my main concern was not doing a good job because I was afraid of not being up to the task of going around and do whatever because I have never done anything like that before and I thought that everyone was like expert of. Then I realised*

that no one knew what they were doing, so it was almost no one, so it was comforting." (FG14, BIP D)

This concern was also linked to the different educational levels of the participants, with some students fearing that their fellow BIP colleagues "know more things". Issues of social integration, forming interpersonal connections, and "getting along with others" were raised not only on the Flinga Whiteboard but also during the broader discussion. When one participant shared such concerns, others in the focus group expressed recognition and support, suggesting a shared experience. For example, when FG12 spoke about finding it difficult to "mingle" and worried about their social integration, FG10 gave a thumbs-up. When I asked about this gesture, FG10 explained that it represented what they referred to as "the fear of the inevitable".

IV.2.2. Student experiences of BIPs

After having outlined the students' self-declared motivations and hesitations for participating in the BIPs, this section presents their experiences, focusing on both the PMP and the OMP. Drawing on focus group discussions, observation notes, and exercises such as the emojis activity, it explores how students engaged with the different programme components, the challenges they encountered, and the learning outcomes they reported. The section first describes the PMP and OMP separately, as these were experienced very differently by the students, before bringing the two phases together to provide a holistic view of their overall experience.

IV.2.2.1. Students' experiences of the PMP

Before the focus group, students were asked to submit an image or picture that represented their BIP experience, which they were then invited to elaborate on in the early stages of the discussion. This aimed to encourage students to reflect on their experiences in advance, to ease them into the focus group setting and to stimulate discussion. Beyond these initial objectives, the images also offered valuable insights for analysis, revealing how students retrospectively chose to represent and make sense of their experiences.[154] All of these images relate to the PMP of the programmes and several common themes emerged across these images: (i) many of the pictures featured the students themselves alongside (some

[154] It is not intended to conduct any visual data analysis. Rather, the images are included to illustrate students' experiences, to provide contextual background, and to further support the argumentation.

of) their fellow BIP participants, highlighting the interpersonal and social aspects of the BIPs; (ii) these photos were often taken during social activities such as the farewell party, a collective lunch, or dinner; (iii) some pictures were taken during cultural outings, where (historical) local sites were visited or they emphasised the international dimension of the BIP experience; (iv) finally, certain images referred to the groupwork element of the BIP, which captured the moment their groups received a prize for the best project, showed the final presentation pitch, or referenced a more "frustrating" groupwork experience.



The themes reflected in the images chosen by the focus group participants were not limited to the specific task and accompanying discussion. Instead, experiential learning in the local context, interpersonal relationship building, and social engagement, particularly through social activities and even more so through groupwork, emerged as recurring threads throughout the focus groups. Therefore, the next section will explore these themes in depth.

Course content: Appreciation of experiential learning in local contexts

Overall, the focus group participants expressed satisfaction with the content of the BIPs.[155] In the case of BIPs B and D, students reported that their satisfaction even exceeded expectations. Students' perspectives on course content were specifically explored during round four of the focus groups (cf. III.2.3, p.122), where participants were invited to reflect by selecting an emoji that best represented their experience. A review of the emojis provided (*cf.* Table 7) indicates that students viewed the content very positively.[156] In particular, students from BIPs B and D emphasised their appreciation for the integration of learning activities linked to the local context. For example, FG6 explained that the content exceeded expectations largely due to the two visits to local companies:[157]



"I was really surprised, honestly, I didn't think that we will learn so many new things, especially from the visit, personally, I believe I have learned so much from the wastewater treatment plant in there, so the was [a local plastic recycling company] visit too, and there was so much information even from the little game that we played the climate risk thing that we did."(FG6, BIP A)

In a similar vein, FG13 expressed how enjoyable the programme was due to the programme consisting of three days of onsite neighbourhood explorations. They selected a "heart eyes" emoji to convey their appreciation:



"I have the hearts in my eyes. I put it because I really like […] the process when you go to the neighbourhoods and you talk with the people and you go to the stakeholders, and I was really, really happy about doing that. Because when I sign all the papers, I didn't know what, what we will do, and I was really happy that we, like, wasn't all five

[155] Except for FG1, who expressed a more critical view of the course content. FG1 felt that although the content was generally good, the theoretical component was limited and delivered too quickly to be fully absorbed. They also felt that the tasks did not require applying the theory in a meaningful way and that, in their view, the workload did not justify the 7.5 ECTS awarded. Additionally, FG8 mentioned not having enjoyed one of the guest lectures, although their overall reflection on the programme remained positive, which they indicated by selecting two different emojis.

[156] As mentioned in the methodology, caution is needed when interpreting the emojis, as they can carry multiple meanings. In the following section, the emojis will be placed before each excerpt in which a student explains their reasoning for selecting a particular emoji, in order to provide additional context for their reflections.

[157] Following the previous footnote about cautioning the interpretation of emojis, the emoji chosen in this example illustrates this point. As without having provided the context, this emoji could arguably be either positively or negatively interpreted.

days staying in, the like, and listening lectures. I was really happy and that we will go outside and talk." (FG13, BIP C)

Table 7: Students' emoji reactions to the course content

Content of the course			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			

While students from BIPs B and D explicitly referred to experiential learning situations tied to the local context when asked about the course content, participants from other BIPs also highlighted their appreciation for experiential learning tied to the local context at other moments during the focus group. This included activities such as exploring the local sites or listening to the experiences of local business owners. FG12, for instance, noted the value of hearing a local entrepreneur's story and learning from the diversity of teaching approaches among lecturers from different institutions:

"[I]t was really inspiring to know about real life stories. For example, I will, I remember about the story of the [local business in the city of the host university] […] I believe that was really inspiring. […] And also, I want to say, even we have like learned about

entrepreneurship and of course the business skills during the programme, we met different lecturers from different countries, of course they have different ways of teaching. So, for me that was really a good experience to enhance my knowledge." (FG11, BIP C)

While FG11 focused on the diversity of teaching perspectives, this idea of gaining multiple perspectives also emerged in student interactions. FG5 reflected that hearing how peers from other countries approach similar challenges was one of the most valuable aspects of the BIP experience:

"[F]rom my experience, I think the biggest benefit was to hear others and to be heard because we all have these same problems regarding like linear economy, but let's say Italy, Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, France, we are on the same planet. It is just we are on different pages, but we still need to, to solve these same problems. So, to hear other experiences and and to hear other like policies which are applied on different countries, it was very beneficial." (FG5, BIP B)

Drawing these insights together, the focus group participants reported being pleasantly surprised by the content of the programmes, particularly because the learning activities extended beyond traditional classroom approaches. These included locally grounded elements such as company visits, neighbourhood explorations, country-specific perspectives on the course content, and visits to cultural sites.

Interpersonal relations & social engagement

Besides expressing appreciation for learning linked to the local context, students also frequently expressed valuing activities that gave them time to socialise and build interpersonal relationships. As during the formal programme, most of the BIPs were exclusively focused on specific academic content, the students referred to the development of interpersonal relations happening during the activities outside of the formal curriculum. These activities varied depending on the BIP but often included city tours, group meals or pre-dinner activities. For instance, one of the students reflected upon the farewell party that was organised on the fourth day of the PMP of BIP B, noting that it had finally provided an opportunity to get to know their fellow BIP colleagues outside of the classroom, stating: *"I hadn't talked with the students from [one of the partner universities] till tonight"*. Moreover, in the image representing the students' experiences, most of the images also referred to images taken during one of those activities. Students referred to these social activities with positive references. For instance, several students explicitly mentioned during the focus group that this had been their favourite part of the BIP: *"I think it was the*

social part was one of the best parts of this project." (FG7, BIP B). Students often identified these social activities as key spaces for building relationships, whether within their project teams or among the wider participant group. As one participant recalled:

> *"[T]he field trip we had […] our team, we really enjoyed it a lot and this part was our favourite. You know, like it is so good, and then, like we we build relationship." (FG12, BIP C)*

The social dimension of the BIPs appeared to be a significant part of the overall experience, with students often describing these moments as central to the value they attributed to the overall programme experience. FG6, for instance, not only highlights the uniqueness of the opportunity to meet peers from various backgrounds but also points out that such interactions are unlikely to happen when just travelling alone to another country. According to FG6, the BIP specifically facilitated the environment for establishing friendships:

> *"[…] I really believe that as a student it is such an opportunity, such a great opportunity which you just have to take in a way. As…you don't…even if you go and visit a country by yourself, you won't have the other colleagues with you, you won't have 30 new people to meet, you won't have all those possible friendships which you can, which you can take advantage of in a way. (FG6, BIP B)*

This comment reinforces the idea that the BIPs are not merely academic exchanges, but also social spaces that facilitate "cross-cultural" friendship networks, which students viewed as both personally enriching and essential to their overall learning experience. The students frequently refer to having "bonded" together, having created "friendships", and the BIPs having created a "family vibe" as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *"[F]or me what I did in [city of the host university of BIP D] was something that I did in my degree every day. So, instead of the study itself, I decided to focus on the culture and on the on the people, and I have to say that I created a strong connection with almost everyone. […] and we all felt good with each other, and we helped each other, and so yeah, I think we created like this family kind of vibe." (FG15, BIP D)*

At a later moment, the same student provides a more emotional account of how quickly these social bonds were formed and how meaningful they became, emphasising the strong cohesion of the group by the end of the week:

> *"I think I, we bonded really quickly and when we started the groups, on Wednesday my group was already so strong and cohesive that when we got on Friday it was like sad, I mean we tried so hard not to cry, I mean, I cried when some people left. Because I was like, "noooo, I have to see you again!"" (FG15, BIP D)*

In the above excerpt, FG15 mentioned that they had to cry when it was time to say goodbye to their fellow BIP classmates. This was not a standalone case and was observed especially in BIP D, where several students had tears after the final organised element. While some students commented on the intensity of the programme and the short nature as a way in which relationships were quicker formed, others expressed a desire for more space and time for such connections to develop. As FG10 remarks:

> *"I noticed this kind of programmes can be a little bit sometimes too much because we have a lot of things to do for the project and this is why, as I said earlier, maybe we need more time, maybe two more days to do the field trip, to get to know each other. Maybe for the future they will think about that because otherwise it can be a little bit full for us and a lot of things to do." (FG10, BIP C)*

This comment reflects a common tension between the academic intensity of the programme and the students' desire for meaningful interpersonal engagement. It suggests that while social bonding is valued, it may be inadvertently constrained by the dense academic schedule, prompting a need for more deliberately structured social moments within the design of BIPs.[158]

Especially in BIP B, where there was only once an activity organised outside of the daily formal curriculum and where around half of the students were staying with host families, it was observed that, compared to the other BIPs in this study, the students had fewer opportunities to meet together. This was also highlighted by students participating in the focus group, who recommended that future BIPs should include more organised social activities, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

[158] This will be further elaborated at a later stage.

> *"I think it could […be] better […] to have more afternoon activities that were organised because when the main activities are finished, people don't know what to do and maybe if they organise it with I don't know, like a bowling night, or I don't know, something that you can do in that place, will be much fun also for us." (FG7, BIP B)*

Although the students expressed a wish to meet up after the daily programme, the lack of organised activities, combined with the logistical challenges of staying with host families[159] meant they were unable to organise this themselves. As several students explained, those staying with host families were brought to the programme each morning and picked up again when it ended, limiting their ability to gather informally:

> *"Maybe the host family must be in the same town because one of the biggest problems to have, I don't know, afternoon activities was when we want to organise something, the majority told us they are in…near like I don't know 10 kilometres or something and you don't have connections and it would, it would be very difficult for them to, to, stay with us or to organise something. (FG7, BIP B)*

The request for more structured activities to support the development of interpersonal relations was not limited to adding extra non-curricular activities. It was also expressed in terms of having more time to get to know each other during the formal curriculum. The limited time available for this during the formal curriculum was also noted during the observation. In all of the BIPs observed, this became apparent from the start, as none included dedicated time for students to get to know each other, not even for simple introductions such as stating their names. Instead, the BIPs began directly with formal activities related to the scientific content of the programmes. This was also pointed out by the students; for instance, FG11 stated: *"we were mainly focusing on our tasks from the beginning"*. While the students acknowledged that teachers needed to adhere to the scientific programme and course content, there was an almost unanimous consensus that some time should be allocated for getting to know their fellow classmates:

> *"I mean, as [FG9] said and I said earlier about the getting to know each other better, even in the time when we have to do the task and everything, maybe we can add some more, I don't know things to just like games to know each other or to make it more fun.*

[159] Most of the host families were located in the countryside, where a car was the only possible mode of transport to move around.

I mean, I know it is about university, I know it is about studying and everything, but we also had to make connection to make friends." (FG10, BIP C)

Especially, the recommendation that in future programmes it would be important to at least start with some introductions was shared by many of the focus group participants. For instance, FG5 refers to the fact that, especially when not knowing anybody else, it would be very helpful to have at least some sort of socialising or introductory activity:

> *"[A]s I came alone and I didn't knew any people, I would prefer to have like a small introduction or something. And also, the aspect that not everyone came on the first day, and on different times. So, I would start the whole week with some introduction to each other or something like that." (FG5, BIP B).*

FG5 continued by reasoning that having some introductions is not only important for building interpersonal relations but also to get an understanding of each other's level on the topic by knowing what their specific study areas are in order to understand "*how deep you can go"*. Others related more to the interpersonal aspect, emphasising that it would be good to get to know each other first. Some suggested that this could be done simply by having an introduction round, while others proposed starting with a shared activity, such as a field trip.

Although working in fixed groups throughout the BIP (BIPs A and D) facilitated intense collaboration with a small group of students — which, for some, led to a strong bond with their teammates — it also resulted in a less pleasant experience for others who felt "unlucky" in their group composition (*cf. infra*). While groupwork enabled bonding within the assigned groups, it simultaneously restricted broader social interaction among other classmates. This was discussed in the focus group of BIP D, where all three participants reflected on this limitation. As FG14 explained:

> *"Maybe the fact that I don't know if it is the way this project was built, but maybe more communication with the groups like different groups, because at the end of the day, like the groups we hang out basically with the people from our groups and we didn't have a chance to meet like other people from other groups. So, at social dinner and stuff, yeah, but I noticed that it was kind of like the groups that hang out together, so the people from the same groups."*

Upon this, FG15 continued:

FG15: Yeah, I have, I have the same opinion. I would just really like to know besides like the lunches and at the social dinner, we were really separated from each other and that didn't... For example, with [FG14] and [FG13], I didn't talk that much with them in the, during the week. So, yeah, it would be, it would be nicer to be able to talk with everyone except on the social dinner, or like the lunches, yeah.

Groupwork

Besides the common denominator across all BIPs, though realised to different extents and in varying forms, of including activities tied to the local context, each programme also featured a collaborative element, with students working in groups on tasks that formed part of the final evaluation.[160] As a majority of the focus group participants indicated to be motivated to participate in a BIP especially due to the possibility to improve their social skills, connect with others, and for their personal growth and development which some directly linking BIPs "pushing" this due the groupwork elements (*cf. supra;* IV.2.1. Students' motivations and concerns for participating in BIPs), it is not a surprise that the students often discussed their experiences in terms of their groupwork. Especially in BIPs A, C, and D, students worked extensively in their assigned groups throughout the BIP. However, it is worth noting that students had varied experiences and reflected on them with different levels of satisfaction.

As illustrated above, several focus group participants (FG2, FG3, FG4, FG9, FG10, FG11, FG12) already addressed at an early stage in the focus group the groupwork element of the BIP due to the image they had chosen representing their experience. For most of the students, except for FG2, this image of their group represented a positive memory of the group they worked with during the BIP. For instance, FG9 explains the following about having chosen a picture with their group members to memorise their BIP experience:

"I chose this picture because I really enjoyed the working with my team. I really enjoyed the, the talking to them, and that is why I wanted to emphasise this picture […] and

[160] This occurred to a lesser extent in BIP B, where students were only asked to complete small group exercises in certain workshops, with the groups being mixed each time. In contrast, the other BIPs included a groupwork component in pre-assigned groups that remained consistent throughout the programme, and their collaborative work contributed to the final assessment.

that is why I really enjoyed participating in this one, in this year's programme." (FG9, BIP C)

On top of their role in developing interpersonal relationships, focus group participants also highlighted positive aspects of the groupwork, because it exposed them to different perspectives on the topic, thanks to the interdisciplinary composition of the groups.

While positive experiences of groupwork were noted in the observations and appear in the focus group data, students in the focus groups engaged more extensively with negative aspects of groupwork (especially in BIPs A and C). Although not all students in the focus group reported having an unpleasant groupwork experience during the BIPs, they all acknowledged and recognised the difficulties faced by those who did. For example, FG3, FG9 and FG10, who had participated in a previous BIP, all empathised with other focus group participants who had a negative experience, explaining that they had undergone a similar situation during another BIP. After FG2 described their unpleasant experience, FG3 went on to outline how they had encountered a comparable situation the previous year:

"So, joining [FG2] on [their] experience, telling that I had a previous experience at the Blended Programme in Finland in May this year, and it was absolutely a nightmare for me too. Like, maybe the worst experience in terms of group work that I had, and I was a bit scared of that in [country of the host university]." (FG3, BIP A)

Similar to FG3, also FG9 and FG10 outlined that they were *"afraid that it was gonna be the same"* experience during this BIP. Interestingly, when students had unpleasant groupwork experiences, they appeared to describe being in a group that does not cooperate well as a "matter of chance" or a matter of "bad luck". Or looking from another perspective, as FG1 puts it, being in a well-functioning team is a coincidence: "*I think most of the time it is by coincidence that that the groups understand each other well"*. While for some the diversity in the group(s) led to broadening one's perspective, others ascribed the diversity in the groups as a factor causing challenges within the group. When discussing group challenges, students mainly ascribed these to happen due to (i) the group composition in which the interdisciplinarity of the members played a role, (ii) the different levels of engagement and motivation, in which there is also a link with (iii) the factor of ECTS and academic recognition.

Before turning to this, two examples of groupwork challenges that occurred during the BIPs will be outlined.[161] These have been sketched to provide a narrative of particular difficulties that arose, though they should be regarded as anecdotal. As noted earlier, not all students encountered such challenges. Nevertheless, focus group participants recognised themselves in these situations, and similar issues were raised repeatedly in discussions. The two detailed cases presented here serve as illustrative examples rather than isolated incidents, as comparable challenges were observed in multiple groups or reported by students in all BIPs except for BIP B.[162]

Figure 21: Groupwork challenge example I

Groupwork challenges example I – Disagreements, raised voices, and communication withdrawal

On the fourth day of the PMP of BIP C, which was fully dedicated to groupwork, tensions that had previously been observable on a surface level escalated into overt conflict. The following example focuses on one group that had been closely observed throughout the programme, as it was the only group to consistently arrive early and make use of the designated groupwork space from the morning onwards. Notably, both FG11 and FG12, who later participated in the focus group, commented on the incident described below.

Upon entering the groupwork space shortly after a few students had arrived, a heated exchange was already underway. The conflict appeared to centre on one student from partner university II, who had proceeded with implementing their own ideas without consulting the rest of the group. Students began accusing each other in raised and seemingly frustrated voices of "not listening". Amidst this exchange, the student from partner university II exclaimed: "stop, stop, stop because it is not leading anywhere". In response, one student from partner university I stood up, moved to the opposite side of the room, sat on a couch with their back turned to the group, and began using their phone. This student remained physically and communicatively withdrawn from the group for approximately four hours until the assignment deadline.

[161] It is outside the scope of this research to describe every incident in depth. In BIP D, the main groupwork challenges stemmed from students' reliance on the host university students, largely because data had to be collected from the local population and the language barrier limited participation. This issue was specific to the pedagogical design of BIP D, and a detailed analysis lies beyond the scope of this thesis.
[162] BIP B involved only minor groupwork, and students did not have to collaborate on an assignment to obtain a grade.

While the other student, from partner university I, remained at the groupwork table, their interactions did not appear to be particularly collaborative. They adopted a directive tone, using expressions such as “no, you shouldn’t do this” and “you must do this”. In response, one other student from partner university II voiced frustration through remarks including “you don’t have to wind me up every time”, “Keep on blabbering”, and “yeah, you just continue your work”. This led to a further brief disagreement between the two students. Although the conflict did not escalate further, the other student from partner university I continued working in silence for the subsequent two hours.

Students from the host university, who were also part of this group, had already expressed their discomfort earlier that morning. In a brief exchange with one of their fellow host students, they had been advised to remain quiet and not involve themselves in any arguments. Upon entering the room together and seeing their groupmates engaged in a heated discussion, one of the host students whispered “oh gosh” and both chose not to join the group table. Instead, they seated themselves on the couches at the back of the room and waited for the situation to de-escalate. As the conflict remained unresolved after an hour, one of the host students approached the groupwork table to ask whether they could help. However, their attempt received little acknowledgement. The student then returned to me and inquired about how best to approach the group. Ultimately, both host university students remained in the space but were largely disengaged, spending the time on their phones.

Figure 22: Groupwork challenge example II

Groupwork challenges example II – Escalated conflict, fragile communication, and student drop out

On the second day of the PMP of BIP A, one of the groups displayed heightened tensions during groupwork. Two students engaged in a heated discussion: one repeatedly attempted to explain their idea, while the other disagreed and eventually took the chalk forcefully out of the other’s hand to draw an alternative version. Three other group members remained largely silent, occasionally nodding or offering brief verbal agreement.

The disagreement was partly framed as a language issue by one of the students. The student who had taken the chalk commented that others "clearly seem not to understand what we are saying". Another student tried to mediate by re-explaining more slowly. A quieter student admitted reluctance to contribute, citing limited English confidence and being abroad for the first time. A peer offered translation support, and the student expressed discomfort with the raised voices, saying "I don't like when they scream".

Further tension arose when one student remarked that some group members' English was "too poor", adding "no offense". This caused visible discomfort to some of the other students. Meanwhile, the student who had taken the chalk argued that the conflict was not about language, but about differing perceptions of what a "farm" should look like.

As the discussion became increasingly tense, with raised voices and one student starting to cry, I asked the group to draw a simple object, a piece of bread, to reflect on differences in perspective. This prompted recognition of diverse viewpoints: one student linked it to the idea of a "cultural lens",[163] while another suggested that group members needed to show more kindness to each other. The student who had previously voiced disagreement connected this reflection back to the task, noting that differing ideas about a farm illustrated the same point.

Later, as the groupwork session ended and the door needed to be locked for lunch, one student from the group, who had been slow to pack up, approached the visiting staff member and me to ask where they could smoke. They explained that the programme was stressful and the group frustrating, and that they really needed to smoke. The visiting staff member directed them to the smoking area. This student had also skipped lunch the previous day, and when I asked if they would join us today, they said they needed some time alone.

At a later point, another student in this group became visibly overwhelmed and left the groupwork space to go to the bathroom, where they were found crying. After speaking with the visiting staff

[163] Something which I1 talked about during the "Crash Course: [country of the host university of BIP A] Culture", as will be further elaborated on at a later stage.

member, the student explained that they were struggling with the group situation and decided to return to the hotel to rest for the day. This student rejoined the group on the following day.

Meanwhile, two of the students from this group asked I2 to switch groups or work on their own, but this request was denied. FG2 also repeatedly went to I2 for advice on how to handle groupwork challenges and differences in English level but were repeatedly told that they must manage the teamwork themselves, with the instruction: "You as a group deal with it yourself, you are all adults."

During the subsequent online phase, the pre-existing group challenges intensified, with two students having dropped out, and overall group progress remaining limited. Interestingly, the group members who dropped out were the members who remained rather silent during the heated group discussions.

During the focus group, FG2 reflected on their experience, referring to an image representing their week, stating the following:

> *"I had the picture with someone punching through the laptop* ***[everyone laughing]*** *because that is basically when I think back of it, that is how I feel about that week. For me, it was a very frustrating week, and if I look back at my semester abroad, it was honestly my worst week here. And all the, also like the other things that come with it afterwards, with the doing the project and stuff like that." (FG2, BIP A)*



Groupwork frictions: Navigating diversity and tensions in interdisciplinary and international groups[164]

In BIP D, the focus group students highlighted the interdisciplinary composition of their groups as a clear asset, observing that the mix of academic backgrounds enhanced both the collaborative process and the outcome of the final assignment. Rather than viewing disciplinary differences as a barrier, they described how these differences allowed everyone to contribute in distinct and complementary ways, thereby enriching both the learning experience and the quality of the group's output. The students recognised that having peers from diverse fields enabled a more effective division of tasks, as each person could draw on their specific knowledge. For instance, FG14 explained how this dynamic played out in practice, noting:

> *"For example, there are people that were studying statistics. So, I think for some of them it was easier to construct the graphs or for others it was easier to put together the interviews and to build questions. Me, I was with two urban planners, so they knew, definitely knew a lot more about specially the inequalities than I did. But I study like method, methodological research, so I knew about like a bit more about interviews and stuff. So, it was easier for them to work on certain aspects than it was easier for me to work on. It was collaboration at the end of the day." (FG14, BIP D)*

By contrast, and especially in BIP A, the focus group participants reflected on the interdisciplinarity from a different perspective, noting that the students' fields of study and background knowledge were too incompatible. FG1, FG2, FG3, and FG4 all referred to this as a factor contributing to group conflict. For

[164] This section is particularly relevant in connection to the discussion of students' discourse on approaches to interculturality and understanding of ICC, which is explored further in section IV.3.2. ICC for students.

example, FG1 remarked that some students' study disciplines were too far misaligned from the BIP's content and wondered why the organiser had purposively selected those students:

> *"I think as a second factor, […] that some people were not from the field, like for example [FG3], you said it is still like related or it is like useful, you wouldn't do something like biological or biology. But I think there was someone from history studies and that that was the moment I was surprised […] because I was like, why did [I1, organiser, BIP A] choose someone from history studies for a financial crowdfunding lecture? Especially when, I mean, we all knew that it is a groupwork and that it is a group exam or group grade." (FG1, BIP A)*

Later in the discussion, the "issue" of aligning students' disciplinary backgrounds more closely with the BIP topic was raised again in a firmer manner, advising against such student composition in future BIPs:

> *"I think some planning maybe should be done like as [FG1] said, like maybe four people with the same background, like same disciplines or faculty they can, like a different culture, but the same discipline they could come in and do an intensive course." (FG4, BIP A)*

The excerpt above refers not only to the differences in academic disciplines but also to the varying levels of students' prior knowledge of the topic (which will be elaborated on below). Moreover, in the groupwork challenges example II outlined above, the students explicitly stated during one of their discussions that they "really don't like each other", which led one student to suggest that groups should instead be formed based on personality tests.[165] Interestingly, however, in the focus group discussion in BIP A, the experience of working in international groups was generally described in positive terms. Participants appreciated the diversity of perspectives that, in their view, arose from national cultural differences, and these differences were not framed as a source of conflict. As FG4 emphasised, students may come from "a different culture",[166] but ideally, they should share a common disciplinary foundation.

By contrast, in the focus group of BIP C, where the majority of students came from the same discipline as the BIP topic, and most of the incoming students belonged to the same class at their respective universities, the international nature of the group was seen as the main source of friction. For instance,

[165] Something that was also talked about by I2 and the visiting staff member.
[166] Culture here appears to be associated with nationality.

both FG9 and FG10, who had participated in the BIP organised in the same context the previous year, reflected on their unpleasant groupwork experience, noting that students within the assigned groups tended to remain with their fellow nationals. This resulted in the formation of "groups within the group" and hindered collaboration:

> *"[W]e as a team struggled last year. Not because we had something against the other, or we argued or anything. Everybody was chill, but, I mean, we were from three countries, Romania, Germany, and Finland, and it seemed like we were from three different teams. I mean everybody, everybody had some ideas, but we couldn't put them together and form something." (FG9, BIP C)*

Not only did these students refer to national differences as a source of friction, but all focus group participants from BIP C also invoked them to explain the behaviour of certain group members. This was clearly illustrated in the aftermath of the situation described in the first groupwork challenge scenario. At the end of the afternoon, shortly before the students were due to present their pitches, I encountered FG12 by coincidence in the bathroom. When I asked how things were going, they replied that the situation had gone "way better" after the lunch break because they had taken time to reflect on cultural differences. It was in this context that they commented: "Germans are really direct". They then asked what I thought the Hofstede dimensions might indicate about differences between nationality X and nationality Y. Later, during the focus group, the topic of cultural dimensions resurfaced when FG11 and FG12 emphasised the need for BIPs to include information about cross-cultural perceptions to support mutual understanding in groupwork:

> *"I think it is also imperative if [...] the coordinators will also prepare something like [...] a discussion about cross-cultural [...]. It is really critical because [...] it will create like a massive [...] issue if we don't understand where are they coming from. Because they are like, for example, you are from [nationality X], and from the [nationality Y], you are from [nationality Z] [...] and then we don't understand each other [...] sometimes I feel like [...] he or she got offended, but it is normal for the other side [...]. So, something like that, but at least just like cross-cultural one, one very quick and that it's easy to understand." (FG12, BIP A)*

Taken together, these examples illustrate that both disciplinary and national diversity shaped students' experiences of groupwork in complex ways. Interdisciplinary differences were valued by some participants

for enabling a variety of perspectives, supporting task distribution, and enriching the final output. However, others found these differences challenging, particularly when they seemed misaligned with the course content or assessment requirements. Similarly, national diversity was generally regarded as a strength, yet in some cases it was seen as contributing to misunderstandings or communication barriers. The combination of interdisciplinary and international group composition, along with students being at different stages of their academic studies, was frequently mentioned by focus group participants as a source of tension within the groups. These issues are closely linked to another recurring source of friction: varying levels of student commitment.

Motivation, commitment and the stakes of participation

Another factor repeatedly mentioned by the students as a source of tension within their groups was the perceived variation in levels of commitment and motivation among participants. This factor emerged across all BIPs and was frequently mentioned during focus group discussions, often in relation to groupwork challenges and unequal levels of participation. For instance, when reflecting on their groupwork experience, FG14 used an emoji representing tiredness to express their frustration with the three-day neighbourhood explorations for fieldwork, which were hindered by some group members being distracted from the task:



"I chose this one because it was [...] a bit like tiring, I am talking about my group, was a bit tiring. When we go around collect people because like some people from our group would go and explore more, and like no, we have to go this way and all. There was a language barrier as well, so it was a bit hard to keep them like concentrate on what we were trying to do [...] at that moment I felt like so frustrated. (FG14, BIP D)

Here, FG14 refers to the challenge that, for data collection, students needed to interact with "local residents", which in many cases required the use of the "local language". However, none of the incoming students were fluent speakers of this language, creating a dependency on the home students to initiate and carry out the data collection (*e.g.,* conducting interviews or surveys). As there were approximately three full days dedicated to collecting the data, already during the observation phase, it was observed that some incoming students became disengaged over time. For instance, they chose to get ice cream or drinks while their group members from the host university continued with the fieldwork. This language dependency in conducting groupwork appeared unique to BIP D. However, issues relating to commitment and engagement were reported across other BIPs as well. This was even more evident during the OMP of

BIPs A and D, where groupwork continued after the PMP. In some cases, students failed to participate in the online phase altogether, placing an additional burden on those who remained active.

Clearly, students joined BIPs with varying motivations and expectations. Nonetheless, the data suggests that the majority were primarily motivated by the cultural and social aspects of the programme, rather than the academic components (*cf.* IV.2.1.1. Students' motivations), which could have possibly caused different levels of commitment to the assigned academic tasks. Another factor influencing engagement was how the students were assessed and how the awarded ECTS credits were recognised by their home institutions. While each BIP awarded a minimum of three ECTS credits, their integration into students' degree programmes differed: for some, credits counted directly toward required coursework, while for others, they were considered additional credits, either recorded as a bonus on their transcript or acknowledged through a certificate. As a result, students had differing stakes in completing the course successfully. In each BIP, there were varying degrees of pressure to obtain the ECTS credits, however, the difference was particularly notable in BIP A, where 7.5 ECTS credits were awarded, thus raising the academic stakes for some participants. In the focus group discussion, both FG1 and FG2 noted that, for them, the BIP formed part of their compulsory coursework. This led to a stronger sense of pressure to meet academic requirements, as FG2 explained:

> *"Yeah, I know that two people they didn't get any credits at all for what they were doing, and the other two got like, I don't know, maybe two or three credits at max. And for me, it is a 7.5 credit course and which I needed because to get my 30 credits to pass this semester. So, for me there was a lot more pressure on it than for two or three credits." (FG2, BIP A)*

The different ways in which ECTS are recognised appeared to influence students' commitment to the groupwork tasks. Already at an early stage of the focus group discussions, during the motivations and concerns mapping activity, several students raised concerns about how their work would be acknowledged by their home institutions (*cf.* IV.2.1.2. Students' hesitations and concerns). For instance, FG4 expressed that, in the absence of a grade, there was little incentive to put in significant effort:

> *"[L]ike in my home university, once I applied, they stated, like the FORTHEM courses, it is not always the credits they say it is. [...] Like we don't, the grades are not reflected, we just get the credits. And I was like there is like no point of like getting the grade like*

I had put in so much effort for just getting credits, so that was a concern for me. (FG4, BIP A)

Moreover, students pointed out that assessment methods could create additional friction within the group. In BIPs A, C, and D,[167] the final grade was based solely on the groupwork carried out. Several students reported that they perceived this as "not fair for the grade" and expressed a wish for an individual component to be included. In BIP C, dissatisfaction was particularly evident, as some students received grades that did not reflect their individual contributions, while others benefitted despite limited involvement. Teachers also recognised these discrepancies, noting that unequal workloads and prior knowledge could affect outcomes, and in some cases, the grading had implications for scholarship eligibility. I5 reflected that these issues had a significant impact on home students and later planned to meet privately with them to clarify the rationale behind the grades and offer an opportunity to their students to improve their marks.[168]

IV.2.2.2. Students' experiences of the OMP

Moving from the students' experiences of the PMP, this section will discuss their experiences of the OMP. The students participating in the focus groups expressed less than satisfactory experiences with the OMP component of the BIPs. One of the specific elements during the focus groups was to ask students specifically about their experiences of the OMP in the emoji exercise. A first glance at the overview of the emojis the students entered in the chat regarding their experience of the online part (*cf.* Table 8), indicates little satisfaction for this component.[169][170]

[167] In BIP B, ECTS credits were awarded based on attendance and no assessment was involved.

[168] It is outside of the scope of this thesis to discuss the assessment methods in further depth. However, it is important to note that I5 reflected that some high-achieving home students, who were also specialised in the disciplinary topic, received unexpectedly low grades despite significant contributions, while others with minimal involvement and from other disciplines received higher grades. One visiting student appeared visibly disappointed, having undertaken the exchange as an additional academic opportunity, only to find that it negatively affected their grade average. I5 admitted feeling uneasy about how the grading had been handled by their colleagues and, although they remained silent during the teacher meeting to preserve harmony, planned to meet privately with the affected home students to explain the rationale and offer opportunities to improve their marks.

[169] As previously mentioned, caution is needed when interpreting emojis, as they can carry multiple meanings. In the following section, emojis will be placed before each excerpt in which a student explains their reasoning for selecting a particular emoji to provide further context.

[170] The emojis chosen by FG9, FG10, FG11 (BIP C), and FG15 (BIP D) might initially appear to reflect a more positive experience. However, when elaborating on their emojis, a less satisfactory experience could be reported. For instance, FG15 described their emoji as representing a "50/50" experience – positively associated with seeing other BIP participants again but also indicating a dislike for online classes, stating they "hated it". In the case of BIP C, students described the online phase as "okay" but not worthy of a "happier face", ultimately agreeing that it would be preferable to exclude the online component altogether.

Table 8: Students' emoji reactions to the OMP

Online part			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			

The seemingly dissatisfying experiences of the online phase seem to have several reasons such as (i) the desire for more online interaction, (ii) encountered technical challenges and perceived lack of organisational structure, (iii) disruption due to overlapping commitments, (iv) low engagement and limited collaboration in the online groupwork, and (v) a perceived lack of guidance, resulting in a preference for an extension of the physical mobility phase over having an online component.

Student perspectives on online activities

Interestingly, from the focus groups it became apparent that the students of BIPs B and C, which started with an online phase that included instructional and practical activities, expressed a wish for more interactive and group-related activities. On the other hand, some of the focus group participants of BIPs A and D, in which the online phase followed from the physical mobility and consisted of evaluative and

collaborative activities, pointed out a preference for having instructional activities online but not groupwork.

In BIP B, the online phase consisted of three one-hour online sessions. These sessions were given by lecturers from three different FORTHEM partner universities, among which one was given by the two visiting teachers who were present during the PMP as well. All three of these lectures were teacher-led lectures where the teachers were giving a one-hour informative lecture in the form of a presentation supported by a PowerPoint. During the first online session, as an observer, I was a bit confused as there were different links to the session circulating (this will be discussed further below), hence I arrived a few minutes late to the session, where the teacher had already started the lecture, which felt like quite an abrupt start into the BIP:

> *"I'm wondering if there has been done any general introduction or welcome to the BIP. Although in this meeting I arrived late due to the link, I don't have the feeling that this has been done as the BIP organisers aren't in this meeting and when the teacher went over the slides, it was mainly about fishery." (observation notes, OMP session I, BIP B)*

The students in the focus group also pointed out that the online sessions were "confusing", "boring" and that there was no time for introductions, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> *"I was a little bit confused on the online courses because it was a little bit boring because we don't interrupt. And I it was, I expected that to meet each other in online, maybe just some things about us and after we meet in person it will be more easier." (FG7, BIP B)*

FG7 continues to comment on the online sessions, stating how "boring" it was due to the lack of interaction between both the students themselves and the teachers and students:

> *"Because I feel like I just meet the people in the physics in physic way, not online, that was like we were just saw a, I don't know, a TV show or something, with two, three professors." (FG7, BIP B)*

The desire for more online interaction was shared by all students in the focus group of BIP B. Several times, suggestions were made on how to make the online sessions more interactive. For instance, FG8 interrupts to say: "*I am sorry for interrupting, or I just want to add, for example, you did, they can could just ask us*

about how it is going in our countries or just some small talk, let's say, or some jokes. But there was none of it."

Although there was, to a certain extent, more interaction during the online component in BIP C in the form of allowing students to ask questions about the lecture content or the physical mobility phase and including a section where students had to give a presentation introducing their university and country, the students still noted that they did not give their full focus. They suggested having more interaction during the online sessions, as expressed by FG10: *"Also, the online session to be more interactive. I mean, for us to talk more, the students. I know that we have to listen to the courses as well, but we can put that inside, alright."*

FG10 also participated in the previous BIP that was organised within this framework and reflected on one specific element during the online sessions that could make it more interactive:

> *"I just remember something from last year that was really interesting. So, we had once online session and the teacher moved all the students in separate rooms, let's say, and we get to speak with each other to know each other, to talk more, and that was nice, that was really fun, and I think it is a good idea to introduce the online sessions to get to know each other and to talk to us and the teachers as well." (FG10, BIP C)*

When I confirmed this statement by asking the students "So, to use smaller breakout rooms to make the online session a bit interactive?" All of the focus group members nodded in agreement. The focus group participants of BIPs B and C did not explicitly mention collaborative work in the terms of groupwork, but expressed a wish for more interactive exercises and elements to get to know each other during the online phase.

Technical challenges and perceived lack of organisational structure

One of the prominent themes that emerged from both the observations of the online phase and the focus group discussions was the prevalence of technical challenges during the OMP, coupled with a perceived lack of organisation (except for BIP C). These technical challenges included confusion about the meeting links for and access to the online sessions (BIPs B and D), connection issues (particularly in BIP A), and sound issues (notably in BIP B). These technical issues seemed to be further complicated by a lack of organisational clarity.

In the case of BIP B, each online session was led by a different guest lecturer from one of the FORTHEM partner universities. However, as no representative from the host university was present during these online sessions, this sometimes resulted in seemingly unprepared situations. For instance, during the first online session, the link distributed by I3 was not the one used by the guest lecturer. As a result, five other students and I waited for over ten minutes to receive the correct link. Additionally, there was confusion about the timing of the third session as midway through the session, one of the organisers of the host university started another meeting in the Teams channel, stating in the chat: *"I am waiting for [I4, visiting teacher BIP B]".* To which a student responded, "*Dear [name of one of the organisers of the host university of BIP B], the lecture was on 10:30 [specific time zone], so it is already over"*. During this session, the guest lecturer (I4) asked whether the session was supposed to last an hour, suggesting some uncertainty regarding how well informed I4 was about the session's expectations.

Furthermore, two out of the three online sessions of BIP B experienced technical difficulties. During the first session, the guest lecturer struggled to share their screen to display slides. In the second session, the guest lecturer incorporated multiple videos into their presentation, but there was no sound, making it difficult to follow. Initially, I assumed this issue was due to watching a recorded version, but when I inquired, students confirmed it had occurred during the live session as well. FG7 remarked: *"Well, I think we asked each other about this and we all have the conclusion that we didn't hear nothing, all of us."*, prompting laughter from the focus group participants. When this was followed up, inquiring whether anyone had reported the issue, the students laughed again, acknowledging that no one had informed the lecturer. The students clearly perceived that the guest lecturers faced challenges during the online sessions and often reflected on this experience with laughter and humour. For instance, FG8 explained their choice of emoji by saying:

> *"As for me, I put it in the more Jesus with his mouth shut, let's say because I haven't, when participating in it, it wasn't really interesting and the lecturer had a really bad English. And there was nothing really like important, because she, for example, she was talking about, for example lecturer from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], she has so many struggles, for example, to talk about the topics and I found it fun, but I can't tell anyone about that. You know, I can't, really. How to say that? I don't want anyone to get offended. Let's say that. That is why I choose that emoji". (FG8, BIP B)*



Following this, the focus group participants laughed and made approving gestures. A few moments later, FG5 reflected on one of the sessions, describing it as “iconic”:

> *The one in which I was with the [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], professor, it was, that was iconic, if I may call it like that, because she, after each sentence, she said something like, “is it clear? Yes it is”. “Do you understand? Yes, you understand”. And like she didn't waited for the response. But just like “is it clear? Yes, it is. Let's move along”.” (FG5, BIP B)*



As these online sessions in BIP B were scheduled only a few days in advance, the sessions were recorded for the students who could not participate. In contrast, in BIP C, the sessions were scheduled weeks in advance. On the other hand, in both BIP A and D, which had the OMP following the PMP, it was observed that the online component seemed to have been less structured. For instance, during a brief chat over a coffee with I7 during the second day of the PMP of BIP D, it became apparent that the programme of the online component was yet to be decided:

> *“I stand next to [I6, organiser and teacher, BIP D] to drink my coffee, and we start talking about the online part. When I asked what it will be about, I6 explained that it is not yet determined. On the last day, the students are expected to give a final presentation, and furthermore, I6 has just blocked that week for themselves to be available for the students. The students will be working in groups and I6 will meet with the groups now and then. I6 asks me how it is usually going with other BIPs and I answered that it depends on how the online sessions are being used. I6 replied that they asked but didn’t really get guidance on what to do, so that they will see.” (observation notes, second day of the physical mobility phase, BIP D)*

In the end, the programme for the online phase was announced one week in advance. However, there was considerable uncertainty among students regarding the online meeting location, as some did not have access to the Teams channel where the information was shared. Observation notes from the first online session indicate that attendance was low, with only 12 students participating. This was likely since not all students had access to the Teams channel where the meeting was hosted. The lack of clarity regarding the links to the meeting continued throughout the week of the PMP. While meetings sometimes took place directly within the Teams channel, at other times, an external link was provided. This led on several occasions to the circulation of multiple links, resulting in students joining different meetings. Additionally,

one of the students from the host university of BIP D was frequently relied upon to share the link in the students' WhatsApp group chat minutes before the meeting.

Moreover, it appeared that the teachers were also not quite sure of how to direct the sessions. For instance, I7 was in charge of facilitating the online session as I6 had other obligations. However, I7 appeared to not be fully prepared as they phrased to have "not much information", did not have an overview of the different groups, and expressed that the meetings in the mornings were mainly a "lock-in proof" that the students are present and ready to work together on the day to come:

> *"I7 asks if anyone has any questions for them or about what they need to do, jokingly adding that they aren't sure if they could answer them since they don't have much information. Nobody replies. I7 then states that this was the morning check-in and reminds everyone that there is another general meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning. I7 emphasises that today's meeting was to ensure everyone is present and that they should work together on the data today. I7 says these meetings are to "have a lock-in proof that everyone is here". I7 asks if I have anything to add, and I respond that I have nothing more to add. I7 wishes everyone good luck, and the meeting ends." (observation notes, first day of the online phase, BIP D)*

Interestingly, although observations suggested that the online phase of BIP D lacked organisational structure, students in the focus groups did not specifically comment on this aspect. While they expressed less than satisfactory experiences, comparing them to the COVID-19 pandemic (FG14 and FG15), their concerns were primarily related to the expectations and experiences of online groupwork, which will be discussed in more detail at a later stage. In contrast, no specific observation notes indicated disorganisation in the online phase of BIP A. However, focus group participants described the online component as "quite unorganised".[171] One reason for this perception was the technical challenges

[171] That there are no reports of organisational challenges in the observation notes could be attributed to the design of the online component of BIP A, which consisted of students working independently in their teams without any check-ins, as was the case in BIP D. Consequently, I was only able to observe the two online sessions in which the groups presented their work. Moreover, I was already made aware of the design of the online programme well in advance due to the preliminary conversations with the international office before gaining access to become a researcher on this BIP.

encountered during the online sessions, which led to delays in starting. FG2 illustrated this when elaborating on their choice of emoji:



> *"Hmm, well, the online thing they were quite unorganised. Especially the first one, started like, I don't know, 10/20 minutes later because there were some connection problems and quite often I couldn't really understand people when they were talking because of the internet connections and stuff like that. At the second, like the last one, the internet quit at [host university of BIP A]. So, I also had that problem, but also like the lecturers as well. And after that I had it again. So, at the end I just couldn't get back in anymore, and so that was wasn't really a nice way of them ending it." (FG2, BIP A)*

Additionally, focus group participants from BIP A indicated that it was unclear to them that the programme would include an online component. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *"But I was also wondering…I think or what I heard that no one was aware of these online dates, that it just when the week began, I was like, yeah, we have online meetings after that? And I think a lot of people were like, oh, I didn't know that I have to have time in October. And I think that was also a problem for some people that they just thought it is one week and I don't need to plan more time. Yeah, I think that was also a problem maybe." (FG1, BIP A)*

This lack of clarity had several implications for students' schedules and groupwork commitments (*cf. infra)*. Furthermore, the absence of teacher guidance in terms of "following up" with students during the online sessions reinforced the perception that, as FG3 summarised, *"the remote part […] was not that planned and structured."*

Disruption due to overlapping commitments

Students' ongoing personal commitments, and particularly ongoing commitments at their home institution, were frequently mentioned as a factor interfering with their commitment to online participation during the BIPs. This was a recurring concern across all BIPs, regardless of their specific structure.[172] For instance, FG5 expresses having felt guilty for having only attended the first online session:

[172] Overlapping commitments were not only a factor during the OMP but were also mentioned and observed during the PMP. For example, in BIP B, some students were distracted by following online lectures during class time, which at times disrupted the teaching. In the PMP, such overlaps were less disruptive, since students only missed an hour

"I felt guilty because I had lectures at the same time. So, I attended only the first one." Similarly, FG11 reflects on their choice of a seemingly smiling emoji by saying that it is not the happiest face due to conflicts in their schedule:



> *"I remember the first online class was okay but the second one we were having online we were having our own class which was overlapping. So, I think it was kind of little bit of a distraction for us because we were not giving our 100% for both tasks that we were doing because we had this class going on, we couldn't skip that, because we already when we are we we are we are going to have our classes in BIP in [country of the host university], we will like, we will have to be absent already for like a couple of classes from the same course. So, I think it was kind of a little bit stressful one. So, but I was okay, that is why I put this emoji. It is not the happier face, but it is, it is okay." (FG11, BIP C)*

Whereas missing or not fully participating in the online lectures had individual consequences, such as students missing out on certain information, it also affected collaborative work, particularly when students were required to present within their groups. For example, during the country presentations that the students were required to give during one of the online sessions of BIP C. The following excerpt from FG12 illustrates this, explaining their choice of emoji by highlighting how low attendance and a scheduling conflict made it difficult to deliver and engage with the presentations:



> *"I will just put expressionless. Well, well, online it is good that they have organised for, you know, for the preparation of the pre-task, but it seems that based on our experience, like I think the last online session that there are a lot of missing students who weren't there, that we have to present the country, our university, and then we thought that everyone were present, but unfortunately…And also, the thing was like me and [FG11] was at, was, was, having class that time during that online. So, it is kind of a bit difficult for us, the professor was, well, well talking, and then we were also listening the, the presentation." (FG12, BIP C)*

In BIP C, the students had to prepare these country-specific presentations collectively with their other BIP colleagues at their respective home universities alongside the guidance of their teacher(s), who were also

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or two or caught up in the evenings. In the OMP, they were perceived as more problematic, as students sometimes had to miss an entire session or could not contribute to groupwork.

involved as visiting teachers in the BIP. Hence, other commitments mainly affected attendance and participation in the online sessions themselves. In BIPs A and D, where the online phase followed the physical mobility phase, overlapping commitments of students appeared to have brought additional difficulties and impacted the engagement of students in their groupwork tasks, resulting in limited group collaboration, a challenge that will be further explored next.

Low engagement and limited collaboration in online groupwork

Although in BIP D the dates of the online sessions were communicated already during the promotion of the BIP, the students of the focus group mentioned that some of their group members had other commitments, resulting in limited online collaboration. For instance, FG13 expresses that besides the online part being "sleepy", they also had a dissatisfactory experience due to limited group collaboration:



> *"I put this emoji because for me the online part was sleepy, first of all. Second of all, we didn't have really good, like coming together in online part, because in my group there was guys who needed to do some other things, so we didn't have like this really nice working together, what I would like. But yeah…because everybody was kind of busy and we had some calls, but it wasn't like, I don't know, I didn't think it was kind of productive". (FG13, BIP D)*

Even though the programme stated that the students were expected to meet each day of the online week autonomously to work on their group work tasks from 10:30 to 18:30 after the group session was conducted, the students expressed that they were limitedly meeting together:

> *"In in my case, not everyone could attend at the same time […] for example, to see how much time we have and if we needed to cut some information or to add, we did the simulation together, but it was like in the Thursday night/afternoon, I guess. So, it was the only time we were that everyone was together on Teams doing stuff, but other than that, it was like three to four people were online on Teams, but we used to, we worked a lot separately. […] So, we kinda divided it what we had to do." (FG15, BIP D)*

The tendency to divide groupwork and work autonomously appeared to be common among all three focus group students, who represented three out of the five working groups. This was partly due to overlapping commitments but also to instances of friction within the groups. For example, FG14 remarked that most of the work was taken on by just two or three students:

"For me, in my group there were two guys that had to work every like day in the afternoon, so they weren't there, not really. They worked separately. And it was basically just two of us or three of us on a call working together, but our group was not very cohesive as in working together, but we did it." (FG14, BIP D)

Although in BIP A, the time period during which students were expected to work together was less dense, as it was distributed over a period of two months, students in this BIP also reported facing challenges in their groups and limited collaboration:





"I used these smileys for the group work, because my group, I know we tend, as students we tend to do it like last minute. There was, my group did nothing the whole time. Like nothing, nothing! And then just one day before the presentation was, so how can we do that? How can we do that? And I texted them, I don't know three times "can you please add your stuff" and they didn't even understand. […] So, it was just like a mess. And one girl also started her Erasmus and was complaining that she doesn't have time because she is in Spain now and she doesn't have time to do things because she needs to live a life there. And I was like, yeah, but I am in [country of the host university], so there is no difference between us. Yeah. So, that is, that was just, yeah, maybe I have another expectation for myself, but it was just for me, it was horrible that they didn't at least didn't do anything and didn't communicate." (FG1, BIP A)

After asking whether the students actually met together in their groups to prepare for the presentations, they all admitted to having limitedly collaborated within their groups. FG1 explained that their group only came together the evening before the final presentation. Similarly, FG2 explained that their group tried to schedule meetings at the beginning, but that in the end, two of their group members decided to quit the course:

"Yes, so, first in the beginning, when we were still five people, we tried to do meetings, but usually then everyone said, yeah, we can, and then eventually one or two people would show up online, and so that was always like very annoying. And after a moment, we were only three usually, and we didn't really meet up, it was more via WhatsApp like, hey, I did this can you please look at it and leave some comments or stuff like. That is how we eventually did it, so, yeah." (FG2, BIP A)

Both FG1 and FG2 were in groups that had already reported group challenges during PMP, however, both FG3 and FG4, who were in the same group that seemed to work cohesively together during the physical week, and also won a prize for their project, expressed having had debates in their group during the online phase, stating that it was more difficult to manage.

Although FG3 and FG4 encountered some challenges with groupwork, they recognised that FG1 and FG2 were particularly "unlucky" with their groups. FG1, for instance, expressed feeling unsupported by I2, the principal teacher of BIP A: *"I didn't also didn't really felt helped by for example [I2, main teacher, BIP A] in that case, which even makes it then worse that there is basically no one you can go to, like hey it is shit and but help me, but no".* FG3 sympathised with FG1, expressing surprise at the possibility of students quitting and highlighting the lack of guidance from the teacher. In this instance, FG3 referred to the online phase as the most challenging part of the BIP:

> *"I was very surprised by I2's reaction. Because eventually, what was the most complicated was the part at home, when we all came back home, we had our own life to manage, the studies, and stuff, not the same schedules, and not the same languages, so sometimes there were also language barriers, but I was really surprised to see that some members could quit. And two, but other, and some other groups also quitted in between, because this is a European programme and we were funded by the EU to do this and it was in the contract that we had to come until the end. So, I was very surprised by this to be honest and very disappointed for you. Also, just imagining how much work it had to be for you, since just we were five and it was already a lot, I can tell. So yeah, I was, yeah, it was very weird." (FG3, BIP A)*

Taken together, across the different BIPs when discussing the OMP, students frequently referred to limited interaction, organisational uncertainties, and difficulties in coordinating groupwork alongside ongoing commitments at their home institutions. While the specific format and timing of the OMP varied, similar patterns emerged in how students described their engagement with online activities and collaboration. In this sense, the online phase was often experienced as less satisfactory than the physical mobility phase.

IV.2.2.3. Students' overall experience

Having discussed students' reflections on both the PMP and the OMP, this section will bring these experiences together by first considering what students felt they learned during the BIP, before summarising their strong preference for the PMP over the OMP.

Students' learning

As previously mentioned, the students expressed overall satisfaction with the course content of the BIPs, particularly in relation to learning activities that were embedded in the local context. However, placing students' overall experiences in the context of their self-reported learning outcomes reveals a notable tension as to the extent to which students believed they had acquired subject-specific knowledge and relating to the primary value of the BIP in terms of developing soft skills. Especially when focusing more narrowly on subject-specific knowledge, student responses revealed a more mixed perspective on their learning journey. In this regard, students from unrelated academic backgrounds often felt they had gained new disciplinary insights. For instance, one participant in BIP D explained:

> *"I learned a lot more about demography and more technical stuff because I have never studied any of that." (FG14, BIP D)*

In BIP B, which focused on a theme closely linked to one of the UN SDGs, students often reported an increased awareness, particularly those with little or no prior knowledge of the topic. However, this learning was typically not framed as academically relevant, but rather as something that influenced their personal lives. For instance, FG6, FG7, and FG8 described changes in their daily habits or mentioned efforts to share what they had learned with family members.

> *"[B]efore coming on this BIP to [country of the host university], I have never come, come up with such circular economy [...] and it raised my awareness and now I am also sorting the plastic, you know, like all the rubbish that I have." (FG8, BIP B)*

Whereas these provided examples relate to students who do not have a study background related to the topic, also in BIP C – which brought together mainly students from directly related study programmes – students reported content-specific learning. This was largely attributed to the inclusion of elements and teaching methods not typically encountered in their home curricula, such as delivering a pitch or gaining real-life experience. However, looking at students in BIPs A and D with more relevant disciplinary experience, it became noticeable that they were more reserved and critically questioned the degree to

which they had acquired new subject-specific knowledge. In this case, FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4, FG5, FG13, and FG15 were critical of the theoretical depth and the content delivery. Remarks questioning the academic value of the programme were common across these groups, as illustrated by FG13's comment stating that: *"from like [an] academic standpoint, I didn't learn anything"*.

This criticism was particularly evident in BIP A, where students frequently discussed the quality of the content in relation to the number of ECTS credits awarded and what they perceived as generous grading. The following comment by FG1 clearly captures the tension between the limited theoretical depth and the number of ECTS credits granted:

> *"[T]o be honest, I didn't learn that much in this course. I learned a lot practical, which is also great, a great thing, but like, just from a theoretical view, I think this course what was not that good [...] And I think in [country of their home university] we wouldn't get 7.5 credits for that. It was not that much work, especially not theoretical work." (FG1, BIP A)*

The students did not frame this issue as specific to BIPs, but rather as something they associated more broadly with Erasmus mobility experiences. For instance, FG3 noted this to be *"typical from these Erasmus classes [as they] are less demanding than the other courses that you can get in your home university"*. This, however, was seen as problematic for FG1 and FG2, who were in a group that experienced many group challenges (*cf.* Figure 22: Groupwork challenge example II). They expressed the feeling that group members whose performance they judged to be weak might have returned with the impression that they had done excellent work. On the other hand, FG3 acknowledged that it might be hard to work with students who have a different level and that it might have been too difficult for those students, but that during the experience for them *"the mutual learning [...] was [...] the most important"*. This highlighted FG3's general stance, represented in their discourse that BIPs are not so much about subject-specific learning but more about discovering new cultures and learning from the diversity dynamics.

This idea was echoed by the majority of students, who primarily reflected on their learning as the development of personal or "own" skills, which can broadly be categorised as soft skills and intercultural learning. These included communication skills, confidence, adaptability, and the ability to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Much of this learning was reported to arise from social interaction

and cross-cultural collaboration. For instance, the following excerpt illustrates how FG7 linked their learning mainly to self-improvement:

> *"I think [this experience] will help me also to improve myself and to also help me to be a little more confident, to be more, maybe friendly or to be more adaptable because I think it is one of the best things to do to be a people person." (FG7, BIP B)*

In several cases, this personal development was explicitly linked to learning how to communicate in culturally diverse contexts. When asked about their learning, these contexts were often described in terms of learning how to communicate with "the Other", where "the Other" was typically framed as someone of a different nationality. The excerpt below, for example, captures a participant's reflection on their own communication style, which they associated with their national background, and their realisation that it is necessary to adapt their way of speaking when interacting with someone from a different cultural background:

> *"[W]hat I learned is, how to say, like more soft skills, how to communicate with the other type of people. Like as well, for me it opened more, more my thinking how I communicate, how I tell things. Because usually, I am just comparing to my home country, we are really direct, what we mean that we are saying like, and here I know that people are not so direct. So, I need to learn to talk little bit differently. And as well what I really liked that people were really warm and welcoming, and like, for like, my not like from academic thing but it's more like how you behave with other people." (FG13, BIP D)*

Other students outlined that they learned that people are different and being able to shift reference towards understanding "the Other". The following excerpt from FG12 illustrates this, although reflecting somewhat Janusian thinking:[173]

> *"I have learned that in this short mobility that people, it is not always the same as what you think you know, like working with different people will not have the same minds mindset like you. So, you have to always understand and put yourself into their shoes. So yeah, so that is what I have learned. So whenever like let's say I, I, will work in*

[173] This will be further developed in IV.3.2. ICC for students.

another country, first, learn the culture, learn their culture, how they work, how they work, they speak and everything. It will really a big help." (FG12, BIP C)

It needs to be noted that when students were specifically asked what they had learned during the BIP, their responses were often rather vague, typically beginning with general statements such as having "learned a lot of new things". These were often followed by brief reflections on whether or not they had acquired subject-specific knowledge and then turned towards highlighting the development of what was generally referred to as personal or soft skills. These skills were frequently linked to interactions with people from different nationalities or to having gained country-specific insights through field explorations or the overall experience. However, a holistic analysis of the interview data suggests that students primarily emphasised learning related to gaining different perspectives and learning to be adaptable, largely as a result of interaction and collaborative work. Although some of them encountered challenges in their groupwork, most felt able to work through these difficulties and learn from them. This learning is captured in the following excerpt:

"It was really like an achievement for me personally, like since like our team, like every person like we, everyone had a different perspectives, like, we like, everyone towards the team like everyone added their own like advantage, like pros and cons, like and we were able to, like at the end of the day we were able to find a solution. So, and like I was so like happy to be a part of this team and our communications and like that. So, it was more like a debate I would say, it is more like not a communication, but yeah, I really had a great time working with this team, I couldn't ask more for. So, this was my like, it was really a great experience for me." (FG4, BIP A)

Preference for physical mobility over online learning

The numerous technical challenges encountered throughout the online phase of the BIPs, the perceived lack of organisational structure and guidance, overlapping schedules, low engagement and limited collaboration in groupwork, and online sessions frequently described as "boring" are the most prevalent reasons for the students expressing dissatisfactory experiences of the online phase. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the focus group participants of the various BIPs strongly expressed a preference for the PMP over the OMP. For instance, when asking about the structure of the BIP, whether to have the online phase before or following the PMP, the focus group participants of BIP C unanimously agree with the idea of having no online phase at all. The following excerpt of FG10's response illustrates this:

"I mean to have it before is okay, but to have it after it is okay as well because if you are having them after, you already know each other, you already maybe knew some people, you are more more focused to listen to them, being just like, okay, yeah, that is my friend, let's listen to them. So, I think to do the online classes after would be a good choice, but also to not do them as well it is a good choice as well. I mean to be everything to be face to face. [Participants laughing] To yeah, face to face and to extend the the days. Not to have online classes, just to extend the days maybe." (FG10, BIP C)

Upon this, all of the focus group participants started laughing and approved this idea. In the final focus group question, where the participants were asked whether they have any advice for future organisers, the participants again addressed extending the duration of the physical mobility phase and to remove the online phase: *"as I said earlier, the, the extension of the programme in general, maybe add some. Personally, I wouldn't have the online classes at all, but it is only my opinion." (FG9, BIP C)*

Similarly, the focus group participants of BIP D expressed a preference for extending the PMP. They recognised that the online component can be practical and has potential uses, but felt it is less suitable for collaborative work, as the following exchange among the participants illustrates:

Figure 23: Extended focus group excerpt - extending the PMP

FG14: For me, I, I would have liked it more if you were in present as well, but obviously it's not possible, you know. But I think online is just, it adds distance, it's just harder. It's more practical, I, I recognise that, but I didn't, I don't really enjoy this kind of work.

FG15: Yeah, I feel the same way as [FG14]. I, I get it in the, in a week we can't do everything, we can't have lectures, we can't connect and gather the all of the hours is also the information, and also do the presentation in one week, of course. But yeah, the online part was just I think it was just to do the presentation. Was this so we could do that step? But yeah, also would prefer if it was everything in in present. So, yeah.

RJ: And you, [FG13], do you have any thoughts on it?

FG13: Yeah, I think the same. I was thinking more like, like all the lectures could be like online, but the work what we need to do, it would be better if we are altogether. Yeah.

The value of the physical mobility phase is also frequently emphasised by the organisers and teachers. For example, when discussing a COIL that I5 organised, I5 expressed their wish to organise it as a BIP next year in order to include a physical mobility phase. Moreover, in the following excerpt, I6 explicitly describes how they give more importance to the physical mobility phase:

> *"I think that the physical experience is more important than the online part…but there I think, since the money are like always not so much, I think that this can be a good part, but the real added value of the experience is the experience in present, not the online one. So, stay together, having really international group, this is something that is different from what they normally do. Students I mean. Whereas the online session, yes can work, but it is not something that completely changes your perspective." (I6, organiser and teacher, BIP C)*

It is, however, not only due to a less satisfactory experience of the OMP that students expressed a preference for the PMP. Many students also referred to having had a really "great" experience during the PMP, with FG8 even describing it as an experience they will remember for their whole life. For instance, for many students, the BIP marked their first time abroad, and in several cases, their first experience travelling alone. This was described as an important moment in itself, with students highlighting the sense of independence gained through navigating travel logistics and being away from their parents. Others mentioned experiences such as flying for the first time or expressing great enthusiasm during a bus ride when seeing mountains for the first time. Across the BIPs, some students extended their stay to visit the capital city, indicating a desire to make the most of the opportunity to travel and explore beyond the organised programme.

Another finding that emerged during the observations and informal conversations was that for some students, participation in a BIP was not a one-off event. Instead, what could be described as the phenomenon of the "Bipster" (*cf. infra* for a description of the "Bipster") became visible. After the first occasion on which I participated as an observer, I repeatedly encountered students in later BIPs who had already taken part in an earlier one. This pattern was also evident in the focus groups, where several participants (FG3, FG4, FG6, FG7, FG8, FG9, FG10) mentioned that they had attended at least two BIPs,[174] and/or stated that they were planning to join another in the near future (FG6, FG7, FG8, FG10, FG13, FG14, FG15). When asked why they had chosen to participate again, one student explained:

[174] By the time the focus group took place.

> *As for me, my coordinator just told me that you have an opportunity to go there and it is a nice programme, so why don't you? And I thought, okay, let's go, it is [city of one of the FORTHEM universities]! And it's just a time, a nice time to be there. And why not? A new experience, new people, new topics. Yeah, just, or just to change the environment, why not? (FG8, BIP B)*

This also underlines that participation to BIPs was not always primarily linked to subject-specific interest, but rather to motivations that align with other categories identified in the data, such as the value of cultural and travel exploration, describing BIPs as a chance to experience a different environment and to spend time in another European city, and the idea of international networking and social connections, emphasising the opportunity to meet new people.

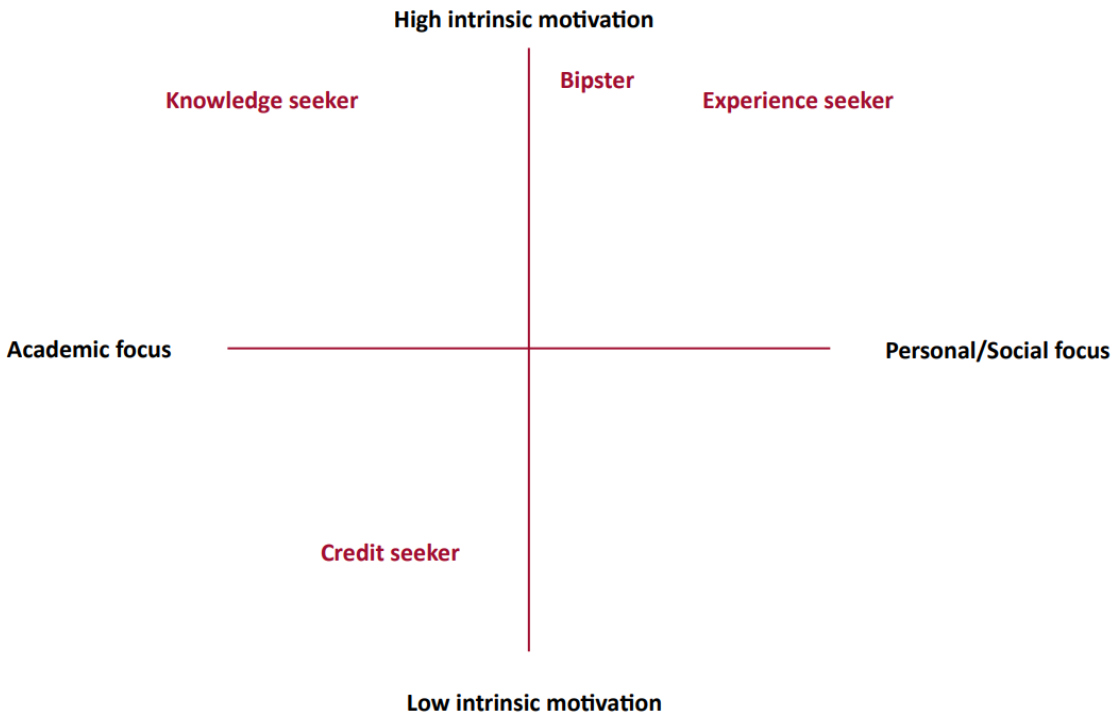
IV.2.3. Reflection: Typifying students' expectations of and implications in BIPs

Although there is substantial literature on students' motivations for participating in semester-long mobility exchanges or full-degree programmes abroad, research focusing specifically on motivations for participating in Erasmus+ BIPs is still scarce, with only a small number of recent studies beginning to address this gap (*e.g.,* Sletnes *et al.,* 2025). In their study of nursing students participating in a specialised BIP on mass casualty incidents, Sletnes *et al.* (2025) identify both subject-specific interest and the opportunity for international encounters as central motivational factors. In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that participants' motivations were less strongly linked to subject-specific learning, although such motivations were not entirely absent. Lesjak *et al.* (2015) argue that, as Erasmus students typically engage in shorter mobility periods than full international degree-seeking students, their motivation tends to be less oriented towards professional and academic reasons and more grounded in personal growth. In this context, it is unsurprising that the focus group participants indicated being primarily motivated by the "cultural" and social dimensions rather than by the academic experience, given the short-term character of BIPs. At the same time, this stands in tension with the aims of BIPs, which are designed to provide opportunities for students to explore subject areas beyond their regular study programmes and to promote interdisciplinarity. Hence, BIPs offer a unique opportunity for students to gain insight into disciplines not necessarily close to their own. Nevertheless, the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge in another discipline did not feature prominently in students' motivational responses. Instead, some

students explicitly commented that the topic “did not matter much”, suggesting that their participation was guided more by the intercultural and experiential aspects of the programme than by its academic content. This tendency is further illustrated by the “Bipsters” who chose to attend programmes on a variety of topics, ranging from entrepreneurship to circular economy to spatial planning. However, it must also be recognised that, since BIPs are open to students from a variety of disciplines and study cycles, motivations and engagement vary widely.

Building on this diversity of self-declared motivations and experiences, it is possible to identify different orientations towards participation in BIPs, reflecting the ways students approach academic, social, and intercultural aspects of the programme. These orientations, in turn, can help contextualise students’ engagement in relation to the conceptualisations of ICC, which will be discussed in the next section. It is by no means my intention to place BIP participants into fixed categories. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate the diversity of orientations, expectations, and ways of engaging within BIPs. The four orientations outlined below should therefore be understood in the sense of Max Weber’s ideal types. These are not ideals in a normative sense, nor are they meant to exist in pure form in empirical reality. Instead, they function as analytical tools that support interpretation, comparison, and explanation. They allow for reflection on the variety of participants involved in BIPs and on how programme design and pedagogical approaches might respond to this diversity, particularly in relation to enhancing students’ ICC. To make these different orientations towards participation more visible, Figure 24 brings together two analytical dimensions. The horizontal axis represents the primary focus of engagement, ranging from a predominantly academic orientation to a primarily personal and social orientation. The vertical axis represents the degree and nature of motivation, ranging from lower or predominantly extrinsic motivation to high intrinsic motivation. Crossing these two axes allows for the identification of four ideal-typical orientations towards participation in BIPs. These ideal types do not describe individual students in a fixed or exhaustive manner; rather, they serve as heuristic tools that highlight contrasting ways of approaching BIPs and provide a structured lens through which participants’ motivations, expectations, and experiences can be interpreted.

Figure 24: Typology of participation profiles in BIPs



Bipster

The Bipster can be described as characterised by high intrinsic motivation and a strong focus on personal and social engagement, while still engaging academically to varying degrees. This can include, but is not limited to, students who participate in multiple BIPs and whose involvement develops over time. Initial participation may be cautious and may be more academically motivated, but repeated participation often leads to greater confidence, proactive involvement, and the development of social and intercultural networks. Bipsters frequently take the initiative in informal activities, maintain connections beyond the classroom, and contribute actively to group dynamics. Importantly, this pattern illustrates how BIPs can act as "flower beds" for future international engagement, supporting the European Commission's view that "when students can be encouraged to participate in short blended programmes early in their student career, they will be more likely to participate in full semester programmes later in their studies" (European Commission, 2022, p.6). The defining feature of this pattern is that engagement in early programmes fosters sustained participation and ongoing involvement in international learning opportunities with high intrinsic motivation.

Credit seeker

The credit seeker can be described as primarily extrinsically motivated, participating mainly to obtain ECTS credits or fulfil degree requirements, rather than having specifically chosen the BIP for personal growth or social engagement. This can include, but is not limited to, students from the home university or Erasmus/other exchange students taking the course in English at the host university as a convenient way to earn credits. Engagement with the academic content varies: it may be sufficient to meet requirements, or more active in order to achieve a good grade for their transcript. Social engagement also varies: some may participate minimally beyond formal programme obligations, while others may interact with peers and use the BIP as an opportunity for personal growth. The defining feature of this pattern is that extrinsic motivation shapes participation, while academic and social engagement can occur to differing degrees.

Knowledge seeker

The knowledge seeker can be described as highly intrinsically motivated, with a strong focus on academic learning. This can include, but is not limited to, students with a deep interest in the disciplinary or interdisciplinary topic of the BIP, seeking to understand how it is approached in different countries or explore topics beyond their main field of study. Engagement typically involves active participation in classroom discussions, collaborative tasks, and independent exploration to maximise learning opportunities. While social interaction may occur, it is secondary to academic engagement. The defining feature of this pattern is a primary orientation toward knowledge acquisition, with social or personal development playing a complementary role.

Experience seeker

The experience seeker can be described as primarily motivated by opportunities to explore the host country, local sights, and the broader experiences offered by the BIP, rather than by its academic content. This can include, but is not limited to, students who actively engage in excursions, sightseeing, and informal social interactions within the programme, and students in the later years of their studies who wish to participate in an exchange-like experience before graduating. Engagement with academic content is variable and often secondary, while participation in activities related to the programme's location and experiences is central to their participation. The defining feature of this pattern is a focus on gaining memorable experiences and personal enjoyment, with academic learning being a secondary or incidental outcome.

Obviously, these are “ideal types” and other types of participants could possibly be identified. For instance, one could imagine a typology of participants motivated primarily by external factors, such as pressure from peers or societal expectations, who engage in BIPs not for academic or social reasons but out of a sense of obligation, for example, as part of a mandatory course. However, this type was not observed in this study. The typologies discussed here are grounded in the data and were inspired, in part, by a particular student, which led to the idea of the Bipster. This typology is illustrated through one student whom I first encountered during BIP A. At that time, the student did not stand out within the group, and we did not have any extended conversations. In a brief exchange, the student mentioned feeling unsure about their English and explained that it was their first time abroad. They also appeared to stay close to peers of the same nationality. When I encountered the same student during two subsequent BIPs, their role within the group had noticeably shifted. They became more socially active, taking the initiative to organise informal activities by sending messages in group chats and inviting peers to join. The student became central to social bonding, setting up a group WhatsApp chat, encouraging fellow participants to attend social activities, and often being among the last to leave organised events. In later conversations, the student also shared that they had visited participants from earlier BIPs, particularly when attending BIPs hosted in the locations of previous BIP colleagues. This case suggests that repeated participation gave the student confidence and enabled them to create further opportunities for group interaction, as well as to sustain relationships formed in earlier programmes. The role of the experienced “Bipster” can be seen in FG6, FG7, FG8, FG9, FG10, and potentially others to follow.

IV.3. ICC for teachers, organisers and students

Having discussed the rationales for implementing and participating in BIPs, how they function in practice, and the students’ experiences, I now turn to how ICC was reflected and understood by all actors in this study. This section both uses the responses when ICC was explicitly inquired about during the interviews and focus groups and builds upon an interpretation of the data as a whole, even when the participants do not explicitly label a topic as “intercultural”.

IV.3.1. ICC for teachers and organisers

It is important to note that in the interviews, I did not initially inquire about ICC, nor did participants explicitly explore how they defined or understood the concept until later in the conversation. Terms such as "intercultural competence" or "culture" were avoided unless introduced by the interviewees themselves (*cf.* III.2.2., p.111 for an explanation of this approach). This decision was essential to avoid shaping participants' responses or influencing their choice of wording. Interestingly, although none of the interviewees used the term ICC explicitly, they did refer to intercultural learning, international experience/opportunities, learning in diverse settings, and learning about other culture(s). These aspects commonly associated with ICC were thus not framed as such. Many of the organisers and teachers suggested that, in addition to discipline-specific knowledge and skills, students also developed a range of soft skills — including what could be understood as ICC. This section first discusses how intercultural learning was framed through the international and local contextualisation of the BIPs. It then focuses on the role of international interaction and groupwork in supporting students' intercultural learning. Finally, it examines how ICC was largely positioned as a natural outcome of participation in a BIP, rather than as an explicit learning objective.

IV.3.1.1. Framing intercultural learning through international and local contextualisation

A common feature in the studied BIPs was the repeated emphasis by teachers and/or organisers (and students too) on the international dimension of the BIP. This was frequently made explicit in verbal statements referring to the BIP as an "international experience" or "international collaboration". The same emphasis could also be observed in pedagogical practices. For example, when forming teams for groupwork, in all the BIPs, the importance of having international mixed teams was emphasised. This was achieved either by instructing students to take this into account when creating groups themselves, or by teachers deliberately assigning students to groups to reflect different home institution nationalities. The international dimension was also made visible through symbolic practices. In BIP B, for instance, when the group photo was taken, visiting teachers from one of the partner institutions unpacked the national flag of the country where their home institution was located and gathered their students around it. Afterwards, the organiser of the BIP (I3) asked students to take photos per institution and provided each group with a printed illuminated image of their national flag. From the very beginning of the programme, institutional

national belonging[175] was also displayed on the name tags students were asked to wear, which included the flag of their home institution's country.

Not only was the students' national diversity within the group explicitly addressed during the BIPs, but the programmes also emphasised the country and region in which the host universities were located. When analysing the programmes of the BIPs, it becomes apparent that each of the BIPs, though to varying degrees, incorporated activities connected to the local context, either through the formal curriculum or informal elements. In particular, BIPs B, C, and D included pedagogical activities deliberately designed to engage with the local environment. All three featured visits to local companies, and in BIPs C and D, the evaluation assignments were directly linked to the host region. In addition, aspects of the host country's "Culture"[176] were woven into the various social activities across all of the programmes. Interview data indicated that these locally embedded elements were intentionally integrated by the organisers (*cf. infra*).

In BIP A, the international advisor (I1) deliberately included a brief "Crash Course: [country of the host university of BIP A] Culture" in the formal programme on the first day. This 15-minute presentation, delivered by I1, aimed to offer an introduction to "typical local values" and to "how things are done in [country of the host university of BIP A]", covering themes such as equality, interpersonal distance, and other stereotypical traits. The session also introduced the concept of "cultural lens", explaining that national cultures "shape" people's perspectives. When asked about the inclusion of this session, I1 stated:

> *"I mean I looked at [the principal teacher's] programme and you know, I'm just like wait a second there is nothing about [country of the host university of BIP A] and we need something about [country of the host university of BIP A] in here, so then I put that in. […] I just think that the context is really important and you know you have to make the most out of, you know, when you are here for a week, a little bit of context like what is happening around you with the [country of the home university] culture." (I1, organiser, BIP A)*

I1's efforts to offer students "the best taste of [country of the host university of BIP A]" were also visible in the social activities that were planned in the evening, which included a guided city tour or, for instance,

[175] I want to emphasise here that students were categorised according to the country in which their home university was located, which in many cases differed from the country the students themselves associated with.
[176] The capitalisation of "Culture" is intentional to signal an orientation towards "high culture", with cultural elements primarily framed through "national" food, sightseeing, architecture, and the arts.

a dinner of local specialities. I1 reasoned that the inclusion of the crash course and events related to the home country became extra important due to the primary lecturer (I2) not being from the country of the home institution and because there were no "local" students participating.

Although it was mentioned that one of the benefits of organising a BIP was to provide home students with an international experience, during both BIP A and B, no "local" students from the host institutions were involved. Yet, the organisers (I1 and I3) regarded the involvement of home students as a key component of intercultural learning. In the case of BIP A, I1 reflected strongly on this as an issue throughout the interview, referring to the absence of home students as "the big failure" of the programme. This reflection centred on two points: (i) a sense of having "missed the mark" in leveraging BIPs as a more inclusive approach to internationalisation by not giving home students the opportunity to have an international classroom experience, and (ii) the resulting limited exposure to the local culture for incoming students. Especially the latter point is touched upon in the excerpt below:

> *"I was disappointed that there weren't [national students of the home university] in there and they didn't actually experience working with [nationality]. So, it was a very international thing, but not a very [country of the home university] thing. So, I don't think that those students that came here experienced a [country of the home university] classroom what it is like to be a student in [country of the home university]. No, they didn't. They experienced what it is like to be on an Erasmus+ exchange and it could have been anywhere." (I1, organiser, BIP A)*

Although no home students participated in BIP B, nor were the teachers who normally teach the corresponding course at the host institution involved, the organiser did not view this as a shortcoming or reflect on it as such. Rather, the frequency and importance of contact were regarded differently in this context. I3 instead framed the situation as an opportunity for home students to encounter international students on campus and to have brief exchanges with them, which, according to I3, occurred when a student helper brought along some of their classmates. During the observations of BIP B, on one of the mornings of the PMP, the student helper[177] arrived with a small group of classmates. They mentioned that they had come because they were curious to see "the international students" before heading to their own

[177] There was one student from the home institution who was assigned as "student helper" during the week. This student did not participate in the BIP but joined on several occasions to show the incoming students around. For example, where to find the canteen, how to connect to the Wi-Fi, to point them to the supermarket, etc. The student helper joined during their breaks from their own classes.

class. The group entered the room giggling and stayed near the door, speaking in their native languages. I overheard them jokingly daring one another to approach the international students in English. Eventually, one student called out "HELLO" in a playful manner and immediately ran out of the room, followed by the others. I3 referred to this incident as an example of internationalisation at home, suggesting that it demonstrates how students at the local campus can also meet international students.

I3 also expressed numerous times how they found it important to provide the incoming students with a local experience. For I3, a key feature of this was that students had the opportunity to stay at host families for the duration of the BIP. During the interview with I3, the intentional integration of this element was touched upon several times, emphasising the integral part this was for them when organising the BIP. I3 appeared throughout the interview very passionate about the importance for students to have an international experience and especially to explore the national and local culture, which, according to I3, was mainly done by spending time with a "real family":

> *"So, the students to be in contact with the real life and the real family and sharing some food they like, you don't like, but first sharing some food or habits. […] [I]f I were a student to say, okay, I have been, I was in the country and we have a whole week we were working every day and during the day I could have some discussion with the family where I could play a game, a new game with a kid and so on. So, I think it was the experience it wasn't just the mobility and to study something. […] It was a global experience and even to sharing some discussion […] I mean that is the culture and so I think that it is very important for give the opportunity to the students to come in [country of the home university] and to make their own opinion of the situation." (I3, organiser, BIP B)*

In BIP D, the academic lead (I6) was advised that a BIP should be "participative and related to the territory" (*cf.* section IV.1.2.2., p.165). This led I6 to revise the programme to include three days of neighbourhood-based exploration. These days combined guided city tours with data collection for student assignments, directly linking the local context with the academic content. Interestingly, I6 referred to the city tour and neighbourhood exploration as part of the social programme but also emphasised its strong integration with the scientific content. The inclusion of these three days of neighbourhood-based activities, directly linked to the students' assignments, meant that this BIP had a deliberate and specific connection between the course content and the geographical context in which it took place.

On the other hand, in BIP C, "cultural learning" was extended by not only integrating elements about the national culture of the country and region of the host university, but also the national culture of the countries in which the partner universities are located. For instance, during the second online session, students from each university had to collectively prepare a presentation providing "country introductions". These presentations covered: (i) their country and region (including showing the geographical location on a map), (ii) university name and facts, (iii) cultural characteristics, (iv) examples of food, music, student life, and celebrations, and (v) commonly used social media platforms.[178] These same groups were then tasked to prepare a case study in the form of a five-to-seven-page report and a presentation about Christmas shopping and Christmas markets[179] in "their"[180] respective countries, delivered directly on the morning of the first day of the PMP. It was after these presentations that students were intentionally placed in groups mixing different universities for the remainder of the week to work on their task of developing a business idea for the local Christmas market in the town of the host university.

What became noticeable during these "country presentations" was a recurring pattern. They usually began with some factual information about the students' universities' home countries, such as size, population, historical background, and other fun facts. This was often followed by stereotypical generalisations like "we are known for our punctuality", "we like silence and are reserved" or "we like to eat a lot of sausages and bread". The next part tended to include a promotional element, for example, highlighting the university's international partnerships, its global ranking, or the city being described as one of the best places to live. During the PMP presentations about national Christmas markets, these tendencies became even more pronounced. For instance, one of the first groups remarked, "we love sausages and beer", which prompted laughter from the audience. Another group responded with a joke: "we love ham". Following this, the next presentations included more stereotypical content and what could be described as almost competitive talk. In these, some jokes took on a competitive tone, such as "maybe in your country you had this, but in our country we invented this" or "we are known for having good cars".

[178] These criteria are directly taken from the document that was distributed with information about the assignment. They have only been slightly rephrased to adjust wording that directly addressed students, such as "you", to fit the sentence structure.
[179] Such a topic also carries a load within the hidden curriculum (Leask, 2015; *cf.* II.1.3.4. Calls for more inclusive internationalisation strategies p.39), which will be further elaborated on in Chapter V - Discussion.
[180] "Their" is placed in quotation marks to reflect how this was used by the teachers, who referred to the students' country as the country where the university is based. I distance myself from this framing, as several students did not identify this as "their" country (*e.g.*, FG11 and FG12).

Moreover, in BIP C, culture was explicitly touched upon twice by the lecturers during their teaching. In this regard, culture appeared to be mainly equated with the international dimension. For instance, one of the visiting teachers gave a lecture on "Christmas markets from a cross-cultural marketing perspective". The teacher emphasised that every country has different perspectives on Christmas and asked students to consider whether Christmas markets differ across countries, giving food as an example. Using the iceberg metaphor, the teacher suggested that while Christmas markets may appear similar on the surface, below the waterline, they may differ in terms of traditions, expectations, environment, availability, and consumer behaviour. The teacher further underlined the importance of cultural backgrounds in consumer behaviour and highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity in products and services, as these do not necessarily work in the same way everywhere. To illustrate this, the teacher referred to Christmas markets in Japan and linked this to describing Japan as a "very, very strong collectivist country". This was followed by the statement that these cultural differences need to be understood to utilise this knowledge in marketing.

IV.3.1.2. Framing intercultural learning through international interaction and groupwork

All of the interviewees specifically pointed out that international contact, whether through social activities or through internationally mixed groupwork, was an important element in the BIP that supported student learning. In particular, they emphasised that these international encounters are what make a BIP distinct from students' usual learning trajectories at their home institutions. For instance, I5 noted:

> *"I think the experience to work in an international team was the best outcome for them because we can provide this type of knowledge, and during the classrooms, during the semester in our own universities, but learning how to work in an international team this is the main benefit." (I5, Organiser and Teacher, BIP C)*

This highlights the idea that while content-specific knowledge can be delivered in students' home institutions, the opportunity to collaborate across national cultures is more particular to the BIP format. The importance of international teamwork was often linked to the challenge of students learning how to navigate national cultural differences, as also expressed in the following comment:

> *"[T]eamwork […] is important but could be really challenging to work in an international team and the BIPs are the I think the perfect opportunity because they have to learn*

> *how to deal with different cultures, different people, and also different rules in different universities." (I5, Organiser and Teacher, BIP C)*

In all of the BIPs, the groups were intentionally created to include students from the various participating universities (*cf. supra*). This implicitly suggested a deliberate pedagogical focus on international interaction. In particular, I1, I6 and I7 reflected in the interviewees on this explicit directive approach to internationally mixing the students, suggesting that students may not naturally engage across national boundaries without structural prompts:

> *"[Y]ou need to have group work, which is forcing students to leave their comfort zone. They need to mix with the other international students, and be forced to do it, and that will help even if they hate it. So, you have to force the students to mingle, yeah, forcing students to mix internationally."* (I7, Visiting Teacher, BIP D)

While both I5 and I7 outlined that it was important for students to work in teams together on "a product of common endeavour" (I7), several interviewees also highlighted the importance of informal social interaction as a means of fostering international engagement. As I6 explained:

> *"[T]he added value of this kind of programme is to give to students the opportunity to meet people from other countries […] to compare perspective, point of view, and so on. And this can be done mainly the…yeah, having free time together." (I6, Organiser and Teacher, BIP D)*

Despite the recognised value of international teamwork and interaction, I1, I4 and I7 identified the duration of the BIP as a barrier to deeper intercultural engagement and more substantial academic integration.

> *"[I]f you manage to do this kind of [international collaboration] over time for a whole semester, that you have got not just one digital component, but you are meeting digitally once a week for example, then just by virtue of seeing things from different perspectives. […] then I think […] the idea of supporting students with a little bit more, more like in cultural communication skills along the way would be, it would be doable because you would have the time if you stretched it out over the full semester." (I1, Organiser, BIP A)*

Here, I1 appears to be addressing the lack of time to properly support students' enhancement of intercultural communication skills, which they described as a missed opportunity. Although a brief local cultural introduction was included, the compressed structure of delivering a 7.5 ECTS credits worth BIP over just five days onsite was seen as limiting:

> *"[The principal teacher] had to compromise, [they] had to compromise a lot. [They] wanted to do a lot more academic, academic stuff. So yeah, it was just too short far too short." (I1)*

Interestingly, although most interviewees emphasised the importance of international groupwork and interaction, both the data from the focus groups and observations suggest that limited guidance was provided on how to carry out collaborative tasks. For instance, in BIP C, a significant amount of time was allocated to independent groupwork.[181] During these periods, teachers were observed to be present only briefly and did not consistently engage with student groups. In several instances, they left shortly after the groupwork session was announced, with students continuing to work independently. In BIP D, students also carried out groupwork autonomously in different neighbourhoods. In addition, some students in BIP A reported feeling that they had insufficient support when encountering challenges during groupwork. Several students described having approached a teacher on several occasions and being encouraged to resolve the issues independently.

While I1 believed this support is important but was not possible due to the short-term duration of the BIP, I2 and I4 addressed the idea that students should mainly come in with the right "mindset" to work in a diverse group. Especially, I2 consistently emphasised this point, repeatedly highlighting in both informal conversations during the BIP and in the interview the importance of preparing students not only for the academic components of the programme but also for the social and intercultural aspects of working in diverse groups. Instead of bringing in a different teacher or someone external to address group dynamics, they saw this as something students should learn through the experience itself. For them, the key was to manage expectations from the start. I2 reasoning for students overcoming clashes in groupwork was that students would already be informed during the application process about the collaborative nature of the programme, the intensity of the week, and the diversity they would encounter. I2 described this as needing to be "psyched up" so the students are "open" to not just attending classes, but to have the right mindset

[181] To be precise, almost two full afternoons and one full day was dedicated to the students working independently in groups on their assignment.

to work with people from different backgrounds, different disciplines, and with different levels of knowledge.

IV.3.1.3. Framing ICC as a "natural" yet somewhat structured by-product of BIPs

As previously described, the learning objectives of the studied BIPs were purely subject-specific and did not encompass any elements related to ICC (*cf.* section IV.1.2. BIPs in practice: Implementation of BIPs). Nonetheless, there appeared to be a general consensus that BIPs support the development of soft skills, particularly through the international context, which was perceived as enabling students to gain different perspectives. The intentional integration of social or pedagogical activities linked to the local context, together with deliberately mixed international groupwork and social activities designed to facilitate student interaction, suggests that these elements were viewed as conducive to student learning. However, the extent to which students were explicitly supported in making sense of these experiences was only limitedly observed, leading to the assumption that learning within such contexts occurs naturally.

Especially, in the case of BIP A, it was explicitly stated that ICC was not an intended learning outcome, but rather an assumed by-product of students' participation. This assumption is exemplified in an early email exchange with the departmental head of BIP A, following my request to attend as a participant observer. After receiving approval from I1, I contacted both I2 and the departmental head to clarify expectations and the scope of my involvement. The response was as follows:

Figure 25: Email emphasising ICC as a natural outcome

Dear Romee,

It is nice hearing from you!

You are more than welcome to follow the summer school. **We do not focus on intercultural competence as a part of the summer school, but it will of course be a natural learning outcome**

for the participants.[182] You can learn more about the summer school and the course module here: [website link]

I'll make sure to invite you to our next planning meeting with all the partners. If you would like to have chat before that, please feel free to suggest time during week 30.

Best,
[Head of department, BIP A]

While the tone of the message appears welcoming, the content reveals the key assumption that ICC is positioned not as an explicit goal, but as an implicit "natural" outcome of participating in the BIP. This notion of ICC development as incidental rather than intentional, but also a "natural" outcome, emerged consistently across interviews and observations with organisers and teachers, forming a recurring theme in their discourse. However, the interviewees did comment on intentionally facilitating a context by intentionally setting up mixed international groups, including socialising events, and learning about the local area and community. From this discourse, the connotation of ICC seems to be strongly related to the view of being able to work with students from different countries and being able to gather different perspectives.

In the specific case of BIP A, the positioning of ICC as a non-priority was already evident in the departmental head's initial response, where ICC was framed as a "natural" but unintended outcome of participation. This understanding was subsequently reflected in the position and discourse of I2, the main academic responsible for the BIP. When asked whether any of the course objectives addressed competencies beyond the listed field-specific goals, I2 consistently framed such elements as lying outside their academic remit, implicitly aligning with the departmental vision that ICC did not require explicit curricular attention. The following interview excerpt, presented here in extended form, illustrates how this perspective was articulated and justified in relation to time constraints, academic responsibility, and programme priorities:

[182] Bold added to emphasise this sentence as it is central to the analysis in this study.

Figure 26: Extended interview excerpt - ICC not a learning priority

"RJ: So, we have talked about the course objectives. I mean, they were, of course, entrepreneurship and crowdfunding-focused, but were you also asked to include any course objectives that have to do with the diversity of the students or with soft skills around this?
I2: No, I was not asked, but I thought that was something, I mean, because you tell me to teach entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, then that is what I'm going to handle as an academic responsible, right? So, and diversity, of course, is something that I am not saying it is not important, but probably they can also make different arrangements for that if, if, if that is a necessity, right? But I think [name of I1] handled that, right? [I1] had had a session about differences in culture or something.
RJ: The crash course on [country of the home university] culture that [I1] did?
I2: Yeah, yeah, Yeah, but you know, it also goes back to what I mentioned before, once if the students are aware of this because it is one week, it is intense, we don't have the time to wait the whole day on kind of diversity lectures, you know. Once we just let the student know that, okay, this is there, these are the expectations, and then if they are still willing to do it, then they will apply. And I think you know we received a lot of applications even more than what we were expecting. And I think you know most of them expressed that they were interested based on the crowdfunding element in it, especially the business students who were already kind of introduced into entrepreneurship before. So, it depends on the subject area, maybe I don't know."

Here, I2 distances themselves from responsibility for anything unrelated to the subject-specific learning objectives, delegating this to the international advisor. In the excerpt, I2 refers to the fact that I1 had added a "Crash Course: [country of the host university of BIP A] Culture" during the daily schedule on the afternoon of the first day. I2 reflects on this as content differing from the field-specific and was treated as non-essential, and mainly as time taken away from the actual important matter. During the observation, I2 repeatedly emphasised that "such social things" hindered students' learning and involvement in the course. The case of BIP A provides a clear, verbalised example of the different interpretations of what BIPs should prioritise, the varying importance assigned to ICC, and how these perspectives differ among actors involved (head of department, teacher, and a staff member responsible for internationalisation). While the notion that ICC is a "natural" outcome was explicitly voiced in BIP A, in the other BIPs it was not directly stated. Nevertheless, across the interviews as a whole, the discourse often gives the impression that ICC

is assumed to emerge naturally — for example, through having an international student group or engaging in international experiences such as staying with host families or interacting with local communities. Before elaborating on these dynamics, the next section turns to students' accounts on ICC.

IV.3.2. ICC for students

Turning to students' discourse relating to ICC and interculturality more broadly, it should be noted that ICC does not only emerge when it is addressed explicitly. Rather, it also surfaces across various elements of the focus group discussions, particularly in students' reflections on groupwork. In this respect, the discussion of groupwork frictions (*cf.* IV.2.2. Student experiences of BIPs) is especially relevant, as it illustrates how students accounted for collaborative challenges through different constructions of "the Other", whether framed in national or disciplinary terms. While these examples are analytically closely connected to ICC, they were discussed earlier for reasons of structure and narrative flow and therefore constitute an important reference point for the present section. The following subsection, therefore, focuses explicitly on how students articulated their understanding of interculturality when asked directly about ICC, as well as on the different ways in which they related to interculturality more generally, before turning to the role of course duration in shaping their perceptions of the degree to which intercultural learning took place.

IV.3.2.1. Different ways of relating to interculturality

When, near the end of the focus group, students were explicitly asked about their understanding of ICC and how they saw it in relation to their participation in a BIP, it became evident that most students were not particularly acquainted with the term. When the term "intercultural competence" or "intercultural communication competence" was used explicitly by me, in both the focus groups of BIP B and C, students responded with apparent confusion, indicated by pauses followed by clarifying questions such as *"can you repeat once more the question?"* (FG8, BIP B), *"was the term competence or confidence?"* (FG5, BIP B), or simply asking *"you said intercultural? Intercultural?"* (FG12, BIP C). Similarly, even when students stated they had come across the term before, they often struggled to articulate what it meant. For instance, FG15 said they had heard of it, but found it difficult to explain:

> *"So, I, I heard about it before and I think it's about how different cultures can connect between and how they can…so how am I gonna explain? Because it's easier to think*

> *than to put in words, it's kind of like, it's higher, but so yeah. I mean, it is different cultures bonding and helping each other. Yeah, just connecting, and yeah, I think it's, it's about that." (FG15, BIP D)*

The above excerpt illustrates that there is some understanding of the term, yet it is challenging to phrase its meaning. Moreover, students appeared to be uncertain about whether their understanding of ICC matched my question, evident in statements as *"I guess it is about […]"* (FG14) or *"Is that how you consider it?"* (FG12). However, after repeating the question or asking if anyone would like to start, it was observed that students who were unable to explain what the term meant at first, after a moment of thinking, could provide examples of their understanding and explain how it related to the BIP according to them. These responses revealed a range of conceptualisations of ICC, from very general comments to essentialist interpretations to more interactional and processual views.

The students who spoke first after the question was posed responded mainly with a general understanding of the term. As the conversation continued, it often shifted towards examples of their own learning or observations they had made during the BIPs. For instance, FG12 commented the following on their understanding of interculturality:

> *"[…] I mean as per my understanding like intercultural is like you are connecting, understanding between two or one culture to another culture. You know, how do they perceive each other's cultural behaviour? Or, you know, something like that, yeah." (FG12, BIP C)*

After this, their BIP colleague added that it is also not only about differences but also about commonalities which can be learned when talking about this with the "cultural Other":

> *"I think that also we are talking about the differences between our cultures, but also, but the things that we have in common because maybe we have a lot of things in common, maybe we don't. So, this is what I think about is the culture, we learn about our connection to each other when we are talking about the culture." (FG10, BIP C)*

When asked whether the BIP supported this process, students responded affirmatively and pointed to the presence of participants from multiple countries as a key factor. As FG10 reflected:

> *"Yeah, we were four countries. So, I had the chance to learn a lot about Finland, and about Germany." (FG10, BIP C)*

This latter comment reflects a view of interculturality as synonymous with national diversity, reinforcing a more essentialist orientation toward culture as something fixed, bounded, and linked to nationality. Noticeable from the interviews is that when students were specifically asked about the term, many participants provided examples in which ICC was primarily framed in terms of cultural facts and behaviours associated with national identities. This was even more apparent when relating the question to their learning. For example, FG8 explained:

> *"I had enough time to, for example, to explore the [country of the host university] culture because I, for example, I went to the restaurants, I tried [local specialities], but they were like nice. […] As for example, for other cultures, let's, let's say [FG5's country of the home university], I get to know that they are so silent and they are so, you know, convenient and private, and as for a [nationality of the people in the host country] people, they are really nice and outgoing and they are always here to help, let's say. And for [nationality], I can't, I can't judge the nation, you know, there is the whole group of people that were, was there were nice persons and we get along with each other. There was no quarrels and we had fun just." (FG8, BIP B)*

Here, learning is equated with exposure to local food and generalised national characteristics indicative of an experience framed through cultural stereotypes and essentialist assumptions. Yet, although after these examples were provided, FG8 also emphasised not being able to judge the whole nation.

In addition to, or in contrast with, seemingly essentialising comments, many of the responses reflected an interactional approach to ICC, with BIPs being recognised as facilitating a context for enhancing one's ICC. In this case, students described ICC as an emergent, interactional process shaped by communication, collaboration, and negotiation. As some of the above excerpts already address, students link ICC to the idea of "connecting" or "bonding" with each other. FG5, for instance, emphasised the personal and relational dimension of learning:

> *"[…] I would say that individually it grows this for you because you come with your baggage and you have to make those like social contacts with others, you have to*

participate in those workshops, you have to remember some things, you have to search for somethings, and yeah, I think it gains this, it grows this. (FG5, BIP B)

FG3 similarly highlighted the cumulative, often invisible nature of intercultural development:

> *"[…] It has a value anyway because the fact that you meet new people through networks, as young people that is very important. And you always learn something even if you just don't feel it or you don't see it, but you always learn something in the end, and you progress in English, that is already something important and discovering a new culture. What we can tell is that of course, there are some advantages like these cultural advantages in terms of knowledge, in terms of experience for students […] Even if it is a bad experience, even from Finland. It is just amazing memories and such awesome opportunities for students. So yeah, it is always something." (FG3, BIP A)*

This more process-oriented view of ICC positions it not as a static set of cultural facts but as something co-constructed through interaction and reflective practice. While some students maintained a notion of culture as equated with national identity, others moved towards understanding interculturality as something relational and dynamic. However, it must be noted that while students were in conversation, either in their own discourse or reacting to one of their colleagues' perspectives, they reflected what Fred Dervin (2011) describes as a Janusian understanding (*cf. II.2.* Intercultural communication competence*, p.72*). For instance, the following conversation with FG14 partially reflects such a vision:

Figure 27: Extended interview excerpt - reflection on ICC

FG14: I guess it's about compromising like I said that before, like not thinking that your culture is better or it is the right one. It is just, it is the way you live and there are other people that live in a different way. There is not a right one, not a wrong one, just it's a way of living.

RJ: And do you think that this programme helped somehow to develop this?

FG14: Definitely, yeah. Especially when we were crossing the street, we were about to like die from the cars and there were people from [city of the host university of BIP D] and they were like when we crossed the street, people, like cars don't stop. It is stupid, but it made me think about like what is normal for us, it is not definitely normal for other people.

Here, FG14 initially articulates an ethnorelative view of ICC, acknowledging the importance of not judging other cultures based on one's own norms. However, when asked whether this awareness could be developed through the programme, the illustrative example offered reflected a rather essentialist perspective, focusing on surface-level behavioural differences. Following this, another student joined the discussion, and the conversation shifted into an informal exchange about behaviours in the country of the host university — such as crossing the street and young boys driving scooters without helmets — further illustrating how easily discussions of interculturality can shift between deeper reflective insights and essentialist generalisations.

IV.3.2.2. The role of duration in perceived ICC enhancement

The majority of students viewed the BIPs positively, recognising them as contexts that enhanced their ICC. This development occurred either through gaining factual knowledge about "the Other's" culture — by exploring local habits, traditions, and customs — or through interaction with "cultural Others", which according to the students, led to either a better understanding of cultural behaviours or exposure to different perspectives. However, FG1, FG2, FG6 and FG7 also added more critical notes and questioned the degree to which BIPs enhance their ICC. For both FG1 and FG2, who were Erasmus exchange students at the host institution of BIP B, participating in a BIP was not seen as added value for enhancing their ICC, reasoning that they already had an international experience. However, they did acknowledge that for students who do not have the chance to go for a semester abroad, BIPs might be a good alternative:

> *"I think that for students who are not able to go to a semester abroad but still want some international experience, I think then this is a good alternative, but I don't think that for, like it is not for people who already having the international experience, I don't think it has extra value." (FG2, BIP A)*

FG6 and FG7 expressed reservations about the extent to which BIPs can effectively enhance ICC due to the short-term duration of their BIP. Both questioned whether a one-week format[183] allows sufficient time for learning about the "Other" culture. Interestingly, however, they approached this concern from different perspectives. FG6 suggested that some intercultural learning does take place, but framed this primarily in terms of acquiring factual knowledge about another culture, reflecting a somewhat essentialist view:

[183] Hence, only relating to the PMP of the BIP.

> *"I believe it is happening to some extent, but maybe a week is not enough to learn about someone's culture and their background to know enough. But if it were like a semester long mobility, then it will definitely be enough time in a way to learn about tradition, about what they do, what they eat, how do they behave and so on. But you know, like, it is really difficult to see and observe these things and also to understand them in a way." (FG6, BIP B)*

Moreover, FG7 drew on a metaphor, describing the BIP as *"the trailer of a film",* implying that participants merely begin to get acquainted before the experience ends:

> *"When we meet and we meet new people because in one week, you know, maybe the, when you know the first things about some cultures and you try to, okay my country is like this, in your country is like this. And I don't know, maybe one week is fun, but I don't know, maybe one month it would be much better." (FG7, BIP B)*

Both statements reflect a shared perception that the short-term nature of BIPs tends to support initial inroads to learning about their peers and that sustained exposure is needed to move beyond initial cultural comparisons towards a more complex understanding of "the Other". This aligns with the widespread view among all actors in this study that BIPs are a second-best option when participation in semester-long mobility is not possible. However, it needs to be underlined that the ways in which students relate to ICC mask a set of complex experiences that can seem contradictory yet also work in synergy. At some points, students reflected on their learning in relation to "the Other", while at other moments they emphasised that there were not enough opportunities to do so. For some, this form of learning was central to their experience; for others, it remained something in the background. This will be further developed in the discussion.

IV.3.3. Reflection: ICC for teachers, organisers and students

What can be noted is that, when looking at the pedagogical activities, moments in which explicitly "cultural" references were made within the formally structured part of the programme (*cf. infra* for a discussion on the different components of the programme), often revealed teaching practices that fell into essentialising "traps". This was exemplified, for instance, by including a "Crash Course: [country of the host

university of BIP A] Culture" or by having students deliver presentations framed around national cultural comparisons. Such approaches reflect positivist ideas that seek explanations at the national level, offering simplified interpretations of culture. Indeed, this tendency persists, as the focus on cultural differences observed at the national level continues to be a dominant paradigm, largely because of its intuitive nature, particularly among those seeking to apply interculturality in a simple and accessible way (Frame & Noonan, 2024). Hence, it is interesting to note that despite the teachers' and organisers' emphasis on the international aspects of the BIPs and what can be categorised as an essentialising approach to culture, this was not reflected in the same way in the students' discourse on their experiences. For some students, elements of this national or stereotypical framing appeared, particularly when they were specifically asked to describe "their" countries, as a way to initiate interaction, or when they tried to relate their experiences to familiar concepts. Similarly, when inquired about in the focus groups, the responses varied from essentialist to more fluid perspectives to Janusian perspectives in which students shifted back and forth from more fluid to stable approaches.

However, the difference in perspectives of the phenomena happening during the BIPs was especially seen in "friction points" – understood here as moments during the BIPs when tensions, misunderstandings, or challenges emerged in students' interactions. Teachers mainly appeared to seek answers in groupwork difficulties lying in national differences, framing them as potential challenges for which students needed to be "psyched up" or prepared in advance, alongside the expectation that students should come in with a mindset to be ready to collaborate in an international environment. Students, by contrast, drew on a wider range of explanations when making sense of groupwork frictions. When faced with differences that disrupted collaboration — whether linked to national background, disciplinary training, working styles, or levels of commitment — participants often sought explanatory frameworks that rendered these differences. In some cases, this took the form of national cultural dimensions, as in the case when students referred to Hofstede to account for communication styles, or personality-based explanations, such as the suggestion that groups should be formed using personality tests. In other instances, disciplinary background or academic socialisation was foregrounded as the key source of difference. At the same time, students frequently attributed groupwork challenges to factors that extended beyond national differences altogether. These included the composition of their groups, particularly the role of interdisciplinarity; varying levels of engagement and motivation among participants; and issues related to ECTS allocation and academic recognition. While students did, at times, rely on simplified or essentialising explanations to

navigate uncertainty, their accounts suggest a more situational understanding of what shaped collaboration and highlighted the importance of relationship building.

Overall, while teachers and organisers tended to reflect on BIPs primarily in terms of their international character, students appeared to frame their experiences in a broader way in which meeting and working with the "cultural Other" was embedded within both the relational and academic setting of the BIPs. This idea is powerfully reflected in the image chosen to represent their experience and in the accompanying comment by FG14, who referred to the mural artwork "All the World" by Keith Haring as capturing their BIP experience, explaining the following:

Figure 28: BIPs about uniting diversity



"This is actually a piece of artwork by Keith Haring […] The reason why I chose it is because it is about the diversity of human population and the way it can work together and in harmony. And I feel like Blended Intensive Programmes are about that. It is about uniting diversity and making it work, for a single like a task, and I feel like it worked for us because everyone had a different ethnic background, we studied different things, we were different people in general from a cultural point of view, but we managed to make it work. So, I feel like the

diversity in this artwork represents the project as well […] Like the different points of view and the way they can work together." (FG14, BIP D)

This quote is exemplary for the general impression provided by the students that indeed many of them faced certain challenges during their BIP participation, whether practical, organisational, relational, or academic, yet nevertheless, the majority of them evaluated the experience positively in retrospect. For several participants, this positive assessment was further reflected in their continued engagement in BIPs, with some going on representing the "Bipsters".

Chapter summary: Bringing accounts together

The teachers and organisers in this study all acknowledged the importance of providing students with an international experience, which they saw as beneficial for students. Comments such as that the organisation was a "nightmare", yet worth it for the experience the students would have (*cf.* section IV.1.1. Rationale for designing and implementing BIPs), illustrate their view that BIPs can play a meaningful role in students' learning trajectories. The benefits of BIPs were emphasised throughout the interviews, with some referring to them as "a gift" that could "change a student's career". At the same time, these benefits were often described in vague terms, with broad references to soft skills, personal development, broadening perspectives, and, in some cases, intercultural communication competence. This lack of specificity highlights a gap between emphasising the value of BIPs beyond subject-specific knowledge and articulating it in concrete learning outcomes, which is also reflected in the fact that none of the BIPs included non-subject matter specific knowledge in their learning goals. Possibly, this stems from a perspective in which ICC is expected as a natural outcome of having international students interact with one another. Such vagueness is not surprising, given that the literature review has already demonstrated how ICC is understood as a multifaceted and contested concept. Students similarly described their participation in BIPs in terms of broad benefits. Many framed BIPs as an opportunity to explore a "new culture", often linked to travelling to a country or city they had not visited before. At the same time, students highlighted personal motivations, such as improving social skills, connecting with others, and fostering personal growth and development. Several students also emphasised the potential career benefits of participation, with one noting that a BIP experience would provide "a solid background working with international people".

Aligned with the official discourse surrounding the introduction of BIPs and the aims of the latest Erasmus+ programme to be more inclusive, digital, and green (*cf.* II.1.4 Internationalisation of higher education: Towards an intercultural communication competence approach), teachers and organisers frequently described BIPs as a more inclusive mobility activity, reaching students who might not have the opportunity to go abroad for a full Erasmus semester. Several students noted that they had always wanted to participate in an Erasmus+ activity but had not previously had the chance. In this regard, BIPs were regarded as an activity that could engage students with an international experience who otherwise would not have had such an opportunity. Moreover, organisers and teachers highlighted the European Commission's suggestion that BIPs can encourage IaH, by providing home students with an "international flavour" seen as a key advantage for higher education institutions.

The results revealed differing importance placed on the relational element by students, teachers, and organisers. Students were generally more motivated by cultural and social immersion than by academic or subject-specific interests, with only a few exceptions. This was evident in remarks that their interest in the academic content was either limited or already familiar, while their primary motivation was "to focus on the culture and on the people". The images students selected to represent their experiences further reflected this emphasis, predominantly depicting the social dynamics of the programmes rather than academic aspects. Teachers and organisers, on the other hand, acknowledged that relationship building is important for supporting students' ICC development. They recognised that students' opportunities to build relationships with "the Other" represented an added value of BIPs and considered the format itself conducive to fostering such encounters. At the same time, relationship building appeared secondary, with a clear distinction often made between the "scientific" and the "social" dimensions. Throughout the BIPs, subject-matter knowledge was actively prioritised, while the time, space, and guidance needed for relationship building were less foregrounded. In this regard, there appeared to be a tension between the discourse that BIPs bring added value compared to existing courses and the inclusion of interactional and contextually grounded elements alongside subject-specific knowledge. These patterns and tensions point to the potentials and barriers of BIPs in relation to enhancing students' ICC, which will be further explored next.

Chapter V - Discussion

Before commencing the observations of the BIPs, I had undertaken one and a half years of extensive literature research on the internationalisation of higher education, culture, intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence, and intercultural learning. Combined with my master's degree in intercultural management, this background led me to adopt an interpretivist, perhaps even critical, approach to intercultural communication (*cf.* Chapter I -Introduction). This positioning carries the risk of assuming one's own understanding is widely shared. Having also studied the Erasmus+ programme in depth, particularly its discourse and the way in which BIPs were introduced and framed, I developed the expectation that fostering students' ICC would hold a prominent place within these programmes. However, even prior to my first BIP observation, these expectations were tempered by an email from the departmental head of BIP A (*cf.* Figure 25: Email emphasising ICC as a natural outcome). My initial observation strategy, therefore, focused on identifying how and to what extent ICC was addressed during the BIPs. However, it quickly became evident across all the programmes that the emphasis was strongly on discipline-specific content, rather than explicitly on ICC.

At the same time, I quickly came to recognise that the limited explicit attention paid to ICC represents a significant finding in itself. However, taking a greater analytical distance, it appears more complex than simply noting that there was barely any attention paid to enhancing students' ICC. Across the interviews, it became clear that organisers and teachers were often involved in BIPs due to an intrinsic motivation and belief that such programmes enable students to develop competencies they would not easily gain in their regular study paths, including implicitly ICC. Although ICC was not verbalised as a learning objective in any of the BIPs, the broadly accepted assumption that it would develop naturally, and the seemingly limited attention paid to it at first sight, does not imply that no intentional actions were taken to foster intercultural learning. As the results outlined, from the teachers' and organisers' perspective, such intentions were embedded through (host) country linkages and creating opportunities for international interaction, such as groupwork activities. The shared perception among organisers, teachers, and students that BIPs can positively enhance students' ICC underscores their potential as a means of fostering ICC. This potential, however, appears to depend largely on how ICC itself is conceptualised. It is therefore necessary to reflect on how ICC has been understood within this thesis, to consider whether this understanding

requires revision, and to examine how the results point to several factors that may constrain this potential, in order to formulate recommendations on how BIPs can be leveraged to foster students' ICC.

V.1. Potentials and barriers of BIPs as a vector for fostering students' ICC

Conceptualising ICC between theory and practice

As discussed in the literature review and reiterated here for ease of reading, I understand intercultural communication competence as: (i) an interpretation of effective and appropriate communication, (ii) in contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants, where this competence is (iii) situational and contextual, (iv) is a continuous and dynamic process (v) based on interaction. This definition adopts a relational approach, viewing interculturality as fluid and negotiated in interaction, and as drawing upon multiple cultural repertoires.

Reflecting on the findings of this study, however, it needs to be acknowledged that the participants discussed interculturality in a range of different ways, which were not always aligned with the understanding described in this thesis. This applies not only to students but also to a considerable extent to teachers and programme organisers, whose accounts similarly tend to frame interculturality through pre-defined cultural categories. It is therefore necessary to begin this discussion by revisiting point (ii) of the definition, namely the assumption that ICC operates in contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants. One limitation of this assumption lies in the fact that individuals' initial understandings of intercultural communication are often shaped by essentialist frameworks. As noted by Sommier *et al.* (2021), due to the prevalence of essentialist perspectives, many students' initial – or sometimes sole – exposure to intercultural communication is limited to post-positivist competence models, oversimplified assumptions about national cultures, idealised portrayals of customs and traditions, or basic guidelines of dos and don'ts. Such perspectives tend to foreground national differentialism (Dervin, 2011), or culture-comparative approaches instead of culture-interactional ones (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), and reinforce the association between ICC and being knowledgeable about national cultures.

This is clearly reflected in the empirical material. While students frequently describe their BIP experiences in relation to factors such as disciplinary background, level of study, or individual dispositions, national categories become particularly salient when participants are explicitly asked about culture. Similar patterns are also visible in teachers' and organisers' narratives, where interculturality is frequently operationalised through national groupings or country-based differences, particularly in relation to group composition and pedagogical practices. In these moments, ICC is predominantly framed through cross-national encounters, suggesting that intercultural situations are identified as such primarily because they occur in international contexts. This reinforces the understanding of ICC as fundamentally linked to national cultures, even when participants' broader accounts point to more complex and multidimensional forms of difference.

This tendency raises questions about whether interculturality is always consciously recognised by interactants, or whether individuals necessarily perceive one another as "cultural Others". In this regard, an alternative conceptualisation of interculturality is helpful. Abdallah-Pretceille (2006) conceptualises interculturality as hermeneutic, stating that:

> *"No fact is 'intercultural' at the outset, nor is the quality of 'intercultural' an attribute of the object. It is only intercultural analysis that can give it this character. It is the look of the beholder that creates the object and not the other way round. Thus, for example, to say that we are in an intercultural society, or that we are working on intercultural things, would in fact be a misuse of language. The uniqueness of the intercultural approach lies very much in the manner of questioning and not in a field of application presented as intercultural." (p.480)*

This does not render earlier definitions of "intercultural situations" obsolete. As discussed in the literature (*cf.* II.2.2.3. Intercultural communication competence: Towards a working definition), the idea that an intercultural situation is one in which interculturality is relevant to the interactants, or in which perceived cultural distance is significant, remains analytically useful. However, the hermeneutic perspective adds an important nuance. As Frame (2025a) argues, these positions are not incompatible but can be understood as complementary ways of defining the interculturality of encounters. When individuals foreground anticipated cultural differences in their interactions, it is analytically justified for researchers to focus on these elements. At the same time, interactions in which cultural difference is not explicitly anticipated should also remain open to intercultural enquiry. Adopting this broader approach allows the following

discussion to separate participants' discourse on ICC from the perspective taken in this thesis, and to explore the extent to which ICC might be supported through BIPs.

From country-specific knowledge to knowledge of communicative processes

Most students expressed a clear motivation to join their BIP, driven by cultural curiosity and the opportunity to travel and explore another country. For some, this was the first time visiting a country other than the one in which they were born, and for many, it was their first experience of travelling alone without family members. Students articulated a strong wish to see local sights and to experience the host country's national culture. These motivations are particularly aligned with the orientations of "Bipsters" and "experience seekers". These findings are largely consistent with the literature on individual-level rationales for participation in internationalisation activities, which suggests that students are primarily motivated by personal factors such as leisure, travel, making new friends, creating international social networks, and learning about other cultures and traditions (*e.g.*, Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska, 2023; Kosmaczewska & Jameson, 2023; Lesjak et al., 2015; Sousa et al., 2024; Teichler, 2004). Teachers and organisers similarly acknowledged the importance of incorporating cultural elements and connecting BIPs to the local context as a way of learning. Across the programmes, efforts were made to foreground the country and region in which the host universities were located, to encourage students to share information about their "home" countries, and to include sightseeing or "touristic" elements. These activities were incorporated to varying degrees but were generally positioned as secondary components of the programme, often scheduled in the evenings or framed as a "break" from academic work.

In BIP D, the connections to the local contexts were mainly seen as providing the students with some sightseeing and a cultural experience of the host country. In BIPs A, B, and C, this went further with the idea of aiming to offer students the insight into the "typical local values" of the host country, for instance exemplified by the "Crash Course: [country of the host university of BIP A] Culture" which included dos and don'ts of behaving in country X and the presentation of cultural dimensions, or through the idea of letting students live with a "real family" and see what they eat and what they do in their free time. Similar tendencies were visible in BIP C, where students prepared and presented "country introductions" and case studies on national Christmas markets. These activities, while designed to promote learning from the "Other", also tended to reproduce national stereotypes and competitive cultural comparisons, for instance, through humour about food or expressions of national pride in products and traditions.

Across these examples, culture appeared to be primarily equated with nations and approached through a logic of "differentialism" (Dervin, 2011), both in programme activities and in certain teaching content. Even when culture was explicitly addressed in lectures, it was frequently framed through cross-cultural or comparative lenses that reinforced, rather than problematised, national distinctions, for instance by describing Japan as a "very collectivist country". Such approaches reflect what Sommier et al. (2021) describe as teaching practices that rely on monolithic and essentialist understandings of culture and "the Other", and reiterate the risks of banal nationalism that reduce culture to dominant national discourses. As Sommier et al. (2021) note, this might reflect what students expect, given their motivations for seeking a "cultural experience": "given the popularity of essentialist narratives, many of our students' first – or only – understanding of intercultural communication is limited to post-positivist models of intercultural competence, essentialist shortcuts about national culture, celebratory rhetoric of diverse customs, traditions, and food practices, watered-down discourses about clashing civilizations, or convenient lists of dos and don'ts" (p. 3).

While it must be acknowledged that providing insights into the "Culture" of a country can offer some context and encourage students' interest in internationalisation activities, if we understand ICC as fluid and situational (see II.2.2.3), this also calls for a more dynamic teaching approach. Although the literature commonly conceptualises ICC as comprising knowledge, skills, and attitudes or motivation, the knowledge dimension in the observed BIPs appeared to be primarily associated with what Liu and Darling (2024) describe as an information approach, namely the transmission of culture-specific knowledge. Indeed these national dynamics provide context, but from an interactional perspective, this also points to the need for a shift towards more process-oriented approaches to teaching interculturality, through which learners can develop reflexive understandings of communication processes, including the uncertainties, anxieties, and potential stereotypes that may arise in intercultural interactions, and how these might be navigated (e.g., Frame, 2022; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Importantly, this does not imply replacing practice with abstract theory, particularly given that the space within BIPs for such engagement may be limited, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Indeed, as Frame (2022) cautions, while learners may be supported through different phases of understanding interculturality, teaching should avoid becoming excessively theoretical or detached from lived experience. Instead, conceptual input should be combined with practice-based and experiential approaches that allow learners to engage with ideas as they emerge in interaction. In this regard, BIPs offer a particularly relevant context, given their international and interdisciplinary character and their emphasis on learning beyond the traditional

classroom. At the same time, Frame's warning about the risk of proposing "exoticising" activities with little conceptual depth is especially pertinent in short-term and intensive formats, where difference may be foregrounded without being critically examined. In such cases, activities may reinforce rather than problematise essentialist understandings of culture.

As highlighted in the literature review, knowledge alone, particularly when framed in essentialist terms, does not necessarily enhance ICC and may even be counterproductive if it reinforces fixed representations of difference. As the adage goes, "a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing", potentially leaving students reliant on macro-level cultural explanations as a source of predictability in interpersonal communication (*cf. II.2.3.* Fostering students' intercultural communication competence in higher education, p.89). In such cases, students may remain at an early stage of intercultural learning, in which national-level cultural differences function as explanatory shortcuts, rather than developing the interpretive and reflexive capacities associated with more interactional understandings of ICC. From an interactional and relational perspective, fostering ICC requires shifting attention away from national culture as the primary explanatory framework and towards the situated, contextual, and dynamic nature of communication. This includes supporting students in recognising how prefigured cultural knowledge shapes expectations, how meanings and identities are negotiated in interaction, and how connections, or "threads", can be identified across perceived differences, rather than reinforcing "blocks" that sustain "Us" versus "Them" distinctions (Holliday, 2016; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020).

Ensuring meaningful engagement through interaction

BIPs, by design, bring together students from at least three higher education institutions from different countries and provide them with an international mobility experience. This explicit international dimension may partly explain the strong emphasis on national cultures and the implicit assumption that participation in a BIP fosters students' ICC. Such assumptions are evident in preliminary research published on BIPs, in the official discourse of the European Commission, and in the discourse of teachers, organisers, and students participating in this study. For instance, from a scholarly perspective, Frampton *et al.* (2025) state, "Three or more European universities collaborate to organize each BIP, making them intercultural in delivery" (p.2), reflecting the tendency to equate international collaboration with interculturality.[184] Similarly, the Erasmus+ programme framework implicitly suggests that participation in international mobility activities, including BIPs, contributes to the development of ICC. Among the teachers and

[184] Obviously, not all scholars do so, but as discussed in the literature review, this view remains dominant.

organisers involved in this study, intercultural learning was often framed as embedded in the international setting itself rather than as something requiring explicit pedagogical attention. At the same time, they frequently incorporated activities linked to the local context, alongside groupwork and social components, thereby creating opportunities for "intercultural encounters". This results in a clear juxtaposition: ICC is positioned as a natural outcome of exposure to diversity and interaction within an internationalised learning environment, yet there is little targeted pedagogical attention to building interpersonal relations, to how interaction unfolds, how tensions are negotiated, or how learning might emerge from moments of discomfort. In this regard, I argue that BIPs provide a valuable *context* that has the *potential* for enhancing students' ICC, but that this potential is contingent on the intentional integration of elements that support intercultural learning.

The generally positive belief among teachers, organisers, and students that BIPs enhance ICC is important for their perceived value and legitimacy. Moreover, the strong emphasis placed on student interaction aligns with interactional understandings of ICC, according to which it can be enhanced through communicative engagement to develop a "cultural repertoire". However, the assumption that such development occurs "naturally" through contact alone is problematic, particularly when the space and conditions provided for relationship building across the BIPs examined in this study remained limited. As discussed in the literature review, ICC is not conceptualised as a direct outcome of exposure to perceived "Others" or the acquisition of culture-specific knowledge, but as a situated, dynamic, and continuous process in which meanings, identities, and relationships are negotiated in interaction. Fostering students' ICC, therefore, involves enabling students to recognise how prefigured cultural knowledge shapes expectations, how interactional contexts configure communicative possibilities, and how identities and meanings are enacted and contested in practice. It is important to recall that even early theorisation of contact, such as Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, did not posit interaction alone as sufficient, but outlined a set of conditions (*e.g.*, equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support) under which contact may lead to learning. The findings of this study underline that BIPs are no exception to other forms of international mobility or VE with regard to potential unintended outcomes. Instances of reinforced stereotypes, communication challenges, frustration, and even withdrawal from interaction were observed. Some students reported strong emotional responses, including crying, stress, and discomfort with group communication. Although most focus group participants evaluated their groupwork experiences positively overall, many of the challenges identified in the literature were also present and acknowledged by the participants and were reflected upon as a concern for participation. Moreover,

despite teachers often stressing the importance of forming internationally mixed groups,[185] students did not always mix, and international interaction was only partially achieved. As I7 described, students need to be "forced" into mixed national groups. However, once the formal groupwork had concluded, students tended to revert to familiar, mono-national groupings. Some students reported that they had not interacted with peers from other partner universities until the final day of the PMP.

Even within mixed groups, tasks were sometimes divided along national lines, resulting in what participants described as "groups within groups". This was especially evident in BIPs B and C, where students from the same study programmes attended the BIP together, compared to BIPs A and D, where students applied individually. The notion that many of the focus group students also perceived groupwork as some sort of "Russian roulette", where the degree of a satisfactory experience depends on chance or compatibility with group members, warrants closer consideration. Such perceptions raise questions about how students understand intercultural groupwork; rather than viewing it as a process using interpersonal and communicative competences to build relationships with "the Other", they appeared to frame it as a matter of chance whether you would like "the Other". This raises several questions about why students view groupwork difficulties, or not being socially integrated, as "inevitable". Some of these questions are: should students get away with the idea that working in a culturally diverse group is based on chance, or should they develop the confidence in having the toolset of how to deal with such contexts? Moreover, is it the responsibility of the teachers to provide students with such a toolset, or do we believe that developing such skills simply comes from experience? And if we believe that this does need intentional pedagogical interventions, then how do we provide this? To what extent should intercultural communication be explicitly taught and addressed within BIPs? Particularly given the notion that for some, BIPs are "about uniting diversity and making it work", while for others, it reinforced the idea of simply not liking their group members.

From an intercultural learning perspective, moments of tension, discomfort, and friction can be understood as potential sites of disequilibrium. Even though students may assume that avoiding disagreements makes their groupwork more effective, conflict can be described as an essential part of learning to balance and integrate diverse perspectives (Reissner-Roubicek & Spencer-Oatey, 2020). As outlined in the literature review, ICC development is closely linked to experiences that disrupt taken-for-

[185] Some groups were assigned by teachers to ensure national diversity, while others were self-formed and teachers emphasised mixing nationality.

granted assumptions and prompt reflection, reorientation, and secondary socialisation through encounters with perceived "Others". However, for such experiences to become learning opportunities rather than sources of frustration or withdrawal, pedagogical support is required. In the BIPs examined here, students experiencing groupwork difficulties frequently sought guidance from teachers. In BIP A, in particular, there were numerous instances of students approaching teaching staff for support in managing group dynamics. Yet these requests largely remained unanswered, suggesting that while interaction was present, it was not consistently framed or supported as learning.

Students themselves unanimously pointed to a greater need for structured opportunities for socialising to build interpersonal relationships with each other. Although interaction was widely recognised as a defining feature of BIPs and as a key distinction from students' regular courses, it was often treated as secondary to task completion. This was reflected, for instance, in the systematic lack of opportunities for students to introduce themselves at the beginning of the programme, as well as in the strong emphasis on deliverables and time pressure. As one student noted: *"at the first day you are meeting your team and then you are just like okay, you have to do that, do that, and everybody is like, okay, but what was your name again?"* (FG10, BIP C). Frequent reminders about the limited time available encouraged students to divide tasks efficiently, which in some cases reinforced mono-national collaboration patterns as a pragmatic strategy. In this regard, the short-term duration of BIPs emerges as an important factor shaping interaction and relationship building. While some students described bonding quickly and forming strong connections, others experienced the compressed timeframe as a constraint, noting that they only began to feel comfortable engaging on a more personal level towards the end of the physical mobility period. These findings highlight a tension between the intensive design of BIPs and the time required for building trust, negotiating roles, and engaging reflexively in intercultural encounters. In this context, it should be noted that across all participants, BIPs were frequently framed as a pragmatic compromise or the best possible trade-off, in comparison with a traditional Erasmus semester abroad. This framing may help explain the prioritisation of discipline-specific content and the secondary positioning of cultural and intercultural learning elements.

V.2. Going forward: A holistic integration of ICC within BIPs

A question that is sometimes raised, and that also emerged following a conference presentation,[186] concerns why enhancing students' ICC should be an objective within BIPs that focus on a variety of learning themes rather than explicitly addressing intercultural communication, or indeed why ICC should be addressed at all. While from the perspective of intercultural communication scholars, ICC lies at the heart of what we teach and research, such questions are valid and warrant closer consideration. Addressing them requires a more fundamental reflection on the purpose of BIPs as a particular instrument for internationalisation of higher education. BIPs involve substantial financial and human investment and enable student mobility, which also carries environmental implications. They therefore cannot be understood merely as a means of offering learning experiences that could equally be provided within students' home institutions. Rather, BIPs constitute a distinctive type of learning environment, characterised by temporal and spatial particularities that bring together international and interdisciplinary students from different study cycles for a short but intensive period of interaction, both online and onsite (Frampton *et al.*, 2025). I would argue that within such contexts, intercultural communication is not an optional or peripheral element but an inherent dimension of the learning experience that deserves attention. Even within European Commission discourse, BIPs are described as initiatives that go beyond the traditional classroom, combining academic and cultural value, and existing literature has demonstrated that ICC is relevant across all disciplines (*cf.* literature review; Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Deardorff & Arasaratnam, 2017b; Kulich *et al.*, 2020; Martin & Nakayama, 2022). Therefore, rather than asking *why* ICC should be enhanced in BIPs, it might be more appropriate to critically ask ourselves *what place* ICC development holds within BIPs and *how* BIPs that are not explicitly situated within the discipline of intercultural communication can still serve as a means to foster students' ICC.

It must be acknowledged that there is no single or straightforward way to answer these questions. However, I would argue that reflecting upon these questions already reduces the risk of assuming ICC enhancement as a taken-for-granted outcome of BIPs. Naturally, because of their flexible character, there

[186] At the Nordic Network of Intercultural Communication 2025 Conference, after presenting the paper: «Will I Get Along with Others?» Intercultural Encounters and Relationship Building in Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes.

are multiple ways to design and implement BIPs as illustrated in this research, and the place for ICC within them will vary according to programme objectives. The extent to which ICC is foregrounded thus depends on the specific topic and intended learning outcomes of each programme. In other words, the role of ICC will naturally differ in a BIP focused on intercultural communication compared with one centred on, for instance, nuclear power. This raises the broader question of how explicitly intercultural communication should be taught and addressed within BIPs, and to what extent the ICC dimension needs to be made visible in their design.[187] While it could be argued that ICC should form one of the learning objectives, it must also be recognised that it remains one objective among others. Despite the noble aims with which BIPs have been introduced, the question remains: how much space can realistically be devoted to ICC development within the constraints of disciplinary content?

In some cases, the answer may be very little, as other academic requirements often take precedence, as was found in this study. At the same time, this raises an important consideration of how ICC elements could nevertheless be meaningfully integrated, particularly when the development of such competences is clearly intended as part of the overall internationalisation strategy. Importantly, leaving intercultural learning largely implicit might be counterproductive, as it carries the risk of reinforcing stereotypes or resulting in negative intercultural experiences (*cf. supra*). This suggests that some form of minimal pedagogical guidance may be needed, potentially including minimal guidelines and a tighter framework on the European level, in terms of not just *what* but *how* things must be done to obtain the funding. I also acknowledge that this creates a possible tension, as such measures could make BIPs more prescriptive, potentially limiting the autonomy that currently defines them. On the other hand, it is worth questioning how well the specific features of BIPs are understood by their implementors, as the findings of this study suggest that participants were not always fully aware of the distinctive nature of the programme or of what sets BIPs apart within Erasmus+ and their specific requirements. Moreover, several of the organisers and teachers expressed multiple times an interest in having a template or guide for organising BIPs, or in seeing concrete examples of implementation.

[187] For instance, in the BIP designed by Alexander Frame, Lotta Kokkonen, Henriett Primecz, Kata Beck-Biró and Kanako Nishizumi, which was not part of the present corpus, the focus was explicitly on multilingual and intercultural communication competence. In this case, the ICC dimension was very strongly represented in the learning outcomes. These included distinguishing different theoretical approaches to intercultural communication, reflecting on multilingual communication and intercultural communication competence, and participating effectively in multilingual and multicultural environments, both onsite and online. Nevertheless, BIPs outside these disciplinary areas may not have the same level of time, expertise, or curricular space to address such dimensions of interculturality in comparable depth.

Within this context, I argue that BIPs create conditions conducive to enhancing students' ICC across the entire learning experience; however, this potential requires careful design and implementation in order to translate this framework into the actual fostering of students' ICC. Building upon Leask (2015), I conceptualise this learning experience as comprising four interrelated dimensions: the formal academic component, the structured social component, the hidden component, and the unstructured experiential component. It is important to note that these dimensions do not occur in distinct silos but rather overlap and complement one another, creating a dynamic environment in which intercultural learning can emerge through both planned and spontaneous interactions that take place during BIPs, as illustrated in Figure 29. By the whole learning experience, I refer to the totality of learning opportunities: academic, social, implicit, and experiential, that together contribute to the potential of BIPs as a vector that enhances students' ICC. These overlapping and merging components can be understood as follows:

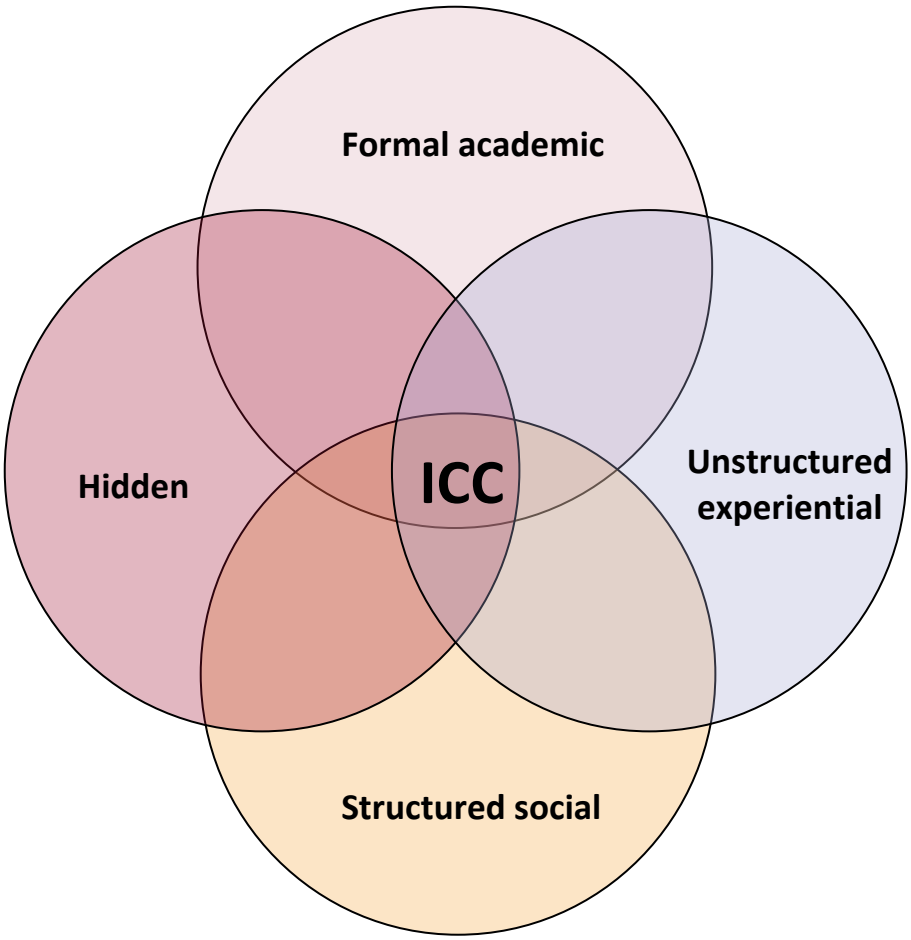
Table 9: Four interactive components of BIPs

Formal academic component	The orderly planned schedule of academic experiences and activities that students must undertake to earn the required ECTS credits. While the formal curriculum focuses primarily on the disciplinary topic, the topic is approached from an intercultural angle and often includes intercultural elements embedded in the content, groupwork, and/or classroom interaction, under the support and guidance of the teachers.
Structured social component	The planned social activities that are embedded in the BIP schedule which create spaces for relationship-building and informal learning through shared experiences. Examples include guided city tours, social evenings, or group excursions.
The hidden component	The implicit messages communicated through the design and delivery of the BIP, which reveal assumptions about where learning takes place (for example, the prioritisation of the physical mobility phase versus the online mobility phase, or the scientific versus social distinction), and whose perspectives, languages, and behaviours are valued. These messages may surface through the choice of working language, the distribution of responsibilities in pedagogical activities, teaching practices, or groupwork, as well as through expectations about who should adapt in intercultural encounters. Such aspects shape how participants

	perceive their own and others' roles and expectations, even when they are not explicitly discussed.
Unstructured experiential component	The free time and informal spaces that students inhabit outside formal and organised activities which allow for spontaneous intercultural encounters, personal reflection, and social bonding beyond structured settings.

Somewhat in line with researchers who argue that ICC should be integrated into curriculum content in its broadest sense (*e.g.*, Dunne, 2011; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017), I suggest that, within BIPs, ICC can and should be embedded holistically across the programme. The challenge, however, lies in how this can be done in practice. In the following, I examine these dimensions in more detail, discussing how ICC is situated within them and the role it may play in shaping the overall intercultural learning experience for students.

Figure 29: A holistic integration of ICC within BIPs



Formal academic component

Within the holistic learning experience of BIPs, the formal academic component constitutes a central element, occupying a substantial proportion of the time and space. It is therefore important to recognise that it is also here that ICC enhancement can either be marginalised or meaningfully embedded. While teachers and organisers have considerable flexibility in planning and delivering their programmes, this also shapes how and to what extent intercultural learning is supported within academic activities. As discussed above, assuming that ICC will emerge automatically through international participation alone is problematic; rather, the formal curriculum plays a key role in translating the BIP experience into meaningful learning experiences. At the same time, the scope for embedding ICC within the formal academic component is largely dependent on disciplinary content requirements and credit structures. In the studied BIPs, academic content was often prioritised, either because ICC was assumed to develop implicitly or because organisers lacked concrete strategies for integrating intercultural elements into subject-specific teaching. This highlights the need to remain realistic about what the formal curriculum can accommodate, while also recognising that it offers important points of entry for ICC enhancement.

At the same time, a juxtaposition can be observed between a focus on ICC and the need to balance academic requirements with the standards expected for ECTS recognition in BIPs.[188] This raises questions about whether ECTS credit criteria are appropriate for BIPs, as well as about the extent to which these criteria are consistently respected across universities and whether the OMP might at times be used to justify this alignment retrospectively. While BIPs are bound by the specific requirements of awarding at least 3 ECTS credits, it is worth questioning what these credits are based on and whether ICC enhancement could be more explicitly recognised within that framework. Considering the rationale for bringing students together in an international format and the inherent cultural dimensions of such encounters, it seems reasonable that ICC-related learning outcomes could form part of ECTS-bearing components. Addressing ICC elements in BIPs, even in those not explicitly focused on intercultural communication, can therefore

[188] For instance, I2 described feeling pressure to combine two existing semester-long courses within the limited timeframe of the BIP, achieving the same academic content and objectives worth 7.5 ECTS credits in a five-day PMP and two online sessions. These challenges reflect broader time, financial, and curricular constraints. BIPs must align with national and institutional requirements; in this case, I1 explained that BIP A had to be 7.5 ECTS credits to be offered as an elective within the home students' regular study programmes. Additionally, awarding more credits also benefits the home institution, as I1 noted: *"I also mean for us at the university, the credit, the credit point, the credit production is important for us, and that is something that increases all of our numbers, you know. This is something for us we report on, so for us, the more credit the better, this is a good way to get more credits, kind of a thing as well. Definitely. That is a motivation…So, it is students completing more credits, results in money for the university in [country of the home university]."*

connect disciplinary content with professional and societal contexts, giving ICC enhancement practical direction and relevance (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Kokkonen *et al.*, 2025).

An illustrative example can be found in the BIPs on social work described by Frampton *et al.* (2023; 2025). Although the main disciplinary focus was not on intercultural communication, the organisers emphasised that relating to "the Other" constitutes a key professional skill in social work. They explicitly stated their interest in "*how*[189] the relationships and communication between the international students can be nurtured". Besides identifying contextual and field-specific needs of ICC within BIPs, ICC can be supported within the formal academic component through pedagogical choices such as structured groupwork in mixed international or disciplinary teams in which this is discussed and reflect upon as formalised practice, the use of varied teaching approaches, the integration of disciplinary content with the local context and different learning settings, and, where possible, the explicit provision of tools to acknowledge and reflect on communicative processes during these diverse learning contexts.

Structured social component

The importance of interpersonal/international/intercultural interaction has been profound in both the discourse of all actors in this study, and notably in relation to its role in enhancing ICC according to the definition used in this thesis. However, the time, space, and opportunities provided during the programmes for activities that would allow such interaction varied considerably. The findings in this study show that students mainly reflect upon their learning of the BIP experience in terms of personal growth and the development of a diverse set of soft skills, among which ICC, for which they identified the social components as key places for learning. This is aligned with research on semester-long mobility, as in the study by Nada and Legutko (2022) Erasmus alumni often highlighted personal learning outcomes rather than academic learning as the main result of their experience, seeing it as transformative and influential in later choices made in life.

In this study, the gap has already been noted between organisers' emphasis on academic content and their distinction between the scientific programme, where most of the formal learning was expected to occur, and the students' emphasis on activities that allowed for interaction and informal learning. The teachers and organisers in this study, except for I2, also recognised that the social components were important and that, especially, there should be room for students interacting with the "cultural Other". However, in

[189] Italicised as in the original text.

practice, very little structured guidance was provided to facilitate these interactions. Examples of this include very basic aspects, as none of the BIPs in this study allowed students to introduce themselves at the start of the overall BIP, whether online or in person. The programmes began immediately with teacher-led lectures, despite students expressing a wish for more opportunities for interaction. However, it is important to remember that for some participants, this was their first time going abroad on their own, without knowing any colleagues. Arriving in a classroom where no one is familiar, possibly following a course in English for the first time, and beginning straight away with a lecture focused on subject-matter content, can be a challenging experience. Students were then placed into groups to complete assignments under time pressure, often without any initial introductions. These experiences of disorientation, disequilibrium, and cognitive dissonance can induce anxiety, especially when students face unpredictable interactions with unfamiliar peers. Indeed, many students reported hesitations regarding the BIPs in terms of whether they would be socially integrated in the group. Similarly, also reporting on BIPs, Frampton *et al.* (2025) noted that many students had felt anxiety upon BIP participation. This aligns with other research on international exchange, both virtual and physical, as studies have reported students' worries about collaborating with peers from different national cultures, uncertainty regarding language and communication capabilities, and anxiety about mutual understanding (*e.g.*, Kokkonen & Jager, 2024). Even more so, several studies suggest that anxiety or stress can be more pronounced in online settings (Kokkonen & Jager, 2024; Niinivaara & Lehtonen, 2023; Unger & Meiran, 2020), which may negatively affect students' engagement and willingness to participate. In this study, increased withdrawal and dropout were observed during the OMP compared to the PMP, particularly in relation to groupwork participation.

To some extent, as discussed in the literature review, experiences of disorientation, disequilibrium, cognitive dissonance, or even anxiety can serve as catalysts for intercultural learning (Killick, 2012; Lilley *et al.*, 2015; Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Taylor, 1994; Vromans *et al.*, 2023). Nonetheless, certain moments of discomfort may correspond to very high levels of anxiety, which can lead individuals to rely on simplistic information such as stereotypes and to become less open to learning. As noted by Gudykunst and Nishida (2001), "when anxiety and uncertainty are either very high or very low, they do not predict effectiveness of communication" (p. 56). In line with this, Kokkonen *et al.* (2022) observed that although some students reported heightened anxiety at the start of the VE course, the

experience highlighted the important role of the teacher in recognising such emotions and responding to them in a timely manner[190] (p.13).

Moreover, structured social components should be designed to allow students time to interact on a personal level, develop deCentred threads (Holliday, 2016; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020), and identify commonalities with peers (Kokkonen *et al.,* 2022), moving beyond essentialising blocks. The argument by Frampton (2023) that "relationships are not an add-on aspect of the week's learning: instead, they form the week's pedagogic heart" (p.4), resonates strongly here, suggesting that greater attention should be given to fostering interaction, social activities, and relationship-building both during the online and physical components of BIPs. In practice, this means providing intentionally structured spaces and activities that encourage students to co-construct small cultures on the go, where they can actively connect, reflect, and build meaningful relationships.

The hidden component

Similar to how Leask (2015) draws attention to the hidden curriculum, within BIPs there are also "various unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students—messages we may not even be aware we are sending" (p.8). Hence, when taking a holistic approach to IC in BIPs, it is essential to be attentive to these hidden elements and the implicit messages communicated to students. The hidden component involves recognising the power relations that shape ideas about where and how learning takes place. This has been evident in this study through the central role given to the PMP and the way activities were structured, with the scientific aspect of learning taking centre stage. It also relates to whose perspectives, languages, and behaviours are valued in these settings. Hidden messages can be found in the selection of learning materials, the choice of assignment topics (such as Christmas markets), or decisions about including visiting teachers and company visits. They can also emerge from admission criteria, such as requiring proof of a certain level of English, which implicitly establishes what linguistic proficiency is valued. The position of host students, although outside the main focus of this research and listed as a recommendation for further research (*cf. Chapter VI* - Conclusions), offers another example. Teachers often asked them to take on additional tasks, speak on behalf of their groups, or guide visiting students, as they were seen as those who knew how things worked. The same applies to the position of visiting teachers, the roles they occupy in the teaching process, and who is responsible for giving grades. The ECTS recognition, the composition

[190] The important role that teachers play in fostering ICC among students during BIPs will be discussed into greater detail below.

of the organising partners, and whether they are part of an EUA or external to it, also influence the character and direction of the BIP. It could even be argued that the hidden component reveals the approach taken by teachers and organisers towards ICC, as their assumptions and practices shape the kinds of intercultural learning opportunities that become visible to students. Hence, ICC is not only addressed through explicit teaching aims but is also reflected in the hidden messages that are sent. Although these elements are not entirely invisible, they become visible only when the underlying structures of learning and participation are questioned. The hidden component operates across both the formal academic and the structured social dimensions of the BIP and shapes how students experience and interpret their learning. Therefore, when planning BIPs, teachers and organisers should be made aware of the various implicit messages that, while not immediately obvious, can influence students' experiences. These hidden messages are naturally difficult to recognise, yet I would argue that simply being made aware of some of them can encourage reflection on elements that are often taken for granted.

Unstructured experiential component

As the name implies, BIPs are intensive programmes, and this intensity was noticed by all of the participants in this study. This intensity was especially noticeable during the PMP, which often included long days of structured academic and social components. Interestingly, focus group participants noted that beyond the formally structured social activities, it was often during unstructured time or free moments that they were able to connect with others, gain insights into different perspectives, and engage in meaningful interaction, often leading to the formation of friendships. For instance, in all of the BIPs, students had created WhatsApp groups with their fellow BIP members in which they not only informed each other about practicalities but also organised things to do together, from watching the sunrise to visiting the mall, and in many cases, going out to party. The comment by I7 that "all the coffee breaks, all the coffee break dynamics, yeah, they play into how this group is established", reflects this idea. This raises an important question about the balance between formally structured and informal spontaneous learning: to what extent should intercultural experiences be deliberately planned, and how much should be left to emerge naturally? The challenge lies in determining how much formal interculturality is needed to support informal learning in ways that foster reflection, perspective-taking, and openness, without constraining the spontaneity that often makes these experiences most meaningful or becoming essentialising blocks. In other words, the design of a BIP should allow space for students to explore and negotiate their own intercultural experiences while providing sufficient scaffolding to guide and sustain their learning. In practice, this could mean avoiding programmes that run continuously from early morning to late evening,

as observed in several of the studied BIPs, and instead intentionally leaving moments for students to organise their own interactions and activities as group dynamics develop while providing support.

V.3. Strategies to leverage BIPs as a vector enhancing students' ICC

Taking BIPs as an object of study to examine how they might act as a vector for enhancing students' ICC made it apparent that fostering ICC emerges through the interplay of four components that make up the BIP experience: the formal academic, the structured social, the hidden, and the unstructured experiential dimensions. Together, these illustrate how students' intercultural learning arises from planned academic activities, structured social engagement, implicit messages within the programme, and unstructured experiential opportunities. This holistic perspective highlights the importance of designing BIPs that balance content delivery with meaningful intercultural experiences, allowing students to learn through both formal and informal channels that characterise BIPs. At the same time, as an intercultural communication scholar, I must warn that incorporating ICC across these elements carries the risk of essentialising culture and reducing it to national stereotypes. Teacher support and guidance are therefore crucial to mediate learning and help students critically engage with the experiences they encounter.

BIPs provide opportunities that go beyond traditional classroom approaches, including exposure to interdisciplinary content, varied teaching perspectives and styles, and the chance to learn from peers perceived as culturally different. These experiences enable students to encounter new ideas and ways of thinking, expanding their understanding beyond familiar disciplinary or national frames. What appears to be lacking, however, is an emphasis on the dynamic and fluid nature of culture and on understanding culture beyond national boundaries. In practice, this has often led organisers and teachers to focus on national differences rather than engaging with the richness of cultural diversity that also arises from the interdisciplinary nature of BIPs. Ultimately, teachers should aim to reduce the risk that students leave with the impression that working in intercultural groups is inevitably frustrating. Instead, students should be provided with the tools and guidance needed to navigate such experiences effectively. Within this context, three elements stand out as particularly important for using BIPs as a vector to enhance students' ICC: (i) thoughtfully structuring the BIP experience by strategically combining the PMP and OMP, (ii) incorporating

ICC explicitly within the learning objectives and holistically throughout the programme, and (iii) recognising the pivotal role of the teacher.

(i) Thoughtfully structuring the BIP experience by strategically combining the PMP and OMP

One of the key insights emerging from this study is the widespread dissatisfaction students expressed regarding the OMP. Alongside this, the findings reveal a clear imbalance in how the two phases were valued and prioritised by organisers and teachers (and, in return, students as well). The OMP often received limited pedagogical attention and was implemented primarily as a formal requirement rather than as an integrated element of the overall learning design. This disparity highlights how the potential of the online component remains largely underexplored. While the PMP was consistently framed as the central and more meaningful part of the BIP experience, the OMP was frequently treated as supplementary, despite its significant potential for fostering intercultural interaction (see II.2.3, p.86: Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Helm, 2024; Helm & Guth, 2022; O'Dowd, 2021b, 2023; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Considering the intensity of the programmes and the pressure for them to be worth the stated ECTS credits, the OMP could and should be used more strategically to distribute learning across both components, particularly since the Erasmus+ blended mobility guide specifies that physical mobility must "always [be] combined with a virtual component to make sure that the overall experience is long enough to be meaningful in the same way that long-term physical mobility traditionally is" (p. 9).[191] In this sense, the online phase is intended not as an add-on, but as an integral part of the learning experience.

The numerous technical challenges encountered throughout the online phase of the BIPs, the perceived lack of organisational structure and guidance, overlapping schedules, low engagement and limited collaboration in groupwork, and online sessions often described as "boring" or "Covid-resembling" are the most prevalent reasons for students reporting dissatisfaction with the online phase. Hence, it is unsurprising that the focus group participants of the various BIPs strongly expressed a preference for PMP over the OMP, with several even suggesting that future BIPs should exclude the OMP altogether. Yet, given that the integration of online and physical elements constitutes a defining feature of BIPs, this position cannot simply be accepted. Besides, existing research has already emphasised the potential of online collaboration and virtual exchange for enhancing students' ICC, leading to disregarding the OMP at all would not do justice to the potential it has.

[191] Of course, we can question here what this "meaningful in the same way" entails.

At the same time, it appears that many teachers and organisers in the study lacked the experience and/or pedagogical expertise to design effective online learning. Just as BIPs are sometimes perceived as a compromise in comparison to traditional Erasmus exchanges, the OMP was frequently regarded as a trade-off relative to the PMP. This lower emphasis on the online component is aligned with the literature on blended learning. For example, Nissen (2016) notes that most publications on blended learning implicitly consider the face-to-face sessions as the lead or dominant learning mode and the online sessions as a complementary mode. On a somewhat similar note, Guth (2016) observes that "there is often an assumption that study abroad inherently leads to intercultural learning, and teachers and institutions alike are often skeptical that virtual collaboration can provide authentic communication and intercultural learning" (p.97). In this regard, I would argue that within the BIPs observed in this study, the potential value of the OMP has not been fully realised. As Helm (2024) notes in the book *Intercultural Communication in Virtual Exchange*, one of the overarching challenges with the methodologies of VE is *how* to do a VE in which sometimes the ultimate aim of a VE and the reasons as to *why* we engage our students in this are lost from view. Looking at the results of this study, these concerns can only be echoed. When the OMP is implemented merely to satisfy formal BIP requirements, without thoughtful pedagogical planning or integration, it risks being perceived by students as irrelevant or secondary, possibly resulting in a higher drop-out rate. Such an approach not only diminishes its educational potential but also undermines the idea of BIPs.

By some, especially in the field of foreign or second language teaching, VE is considered to be a distinct pedagogical approach (*e.g.*, Dooly & Vinagre, 2022). Within the context of blended mobility O'Dowd (2023) draws attention to the need to develop methods outlining how both physical and virtual periods of blended mobility courses should be combined, and which types of activities are most suited to each stage of the course. The fact that in the studied BIPs there appeared to be a clear distinction between activities that were seen as suitable for the online phase supports this statement. The pedagogical design of the studied BIPs illustrates that both instructional (teacher-led lectures), practical (preparation for the physical mobility phase, *e.g.*, travel arrangements, programme information, *etc.*), evaluative (students' final groupwork presentations), and collaborative activities (students' groupwork) appear to be seen as most suitable for the online phase (*cf.* IV.1.2. BIPs in practice: Implementation of BIPs). Interestingly, the data from this study suggests that, especially in the design of the OMP, there seems to be a clear separation in the types of activities carried out according to the organisational structure of the BIPs. Whereas the instructional and practical activities were used during the online phases of BIPs B and C, evaluative and

collaborative activities were used in BIPs A and D. These findings are somewhat aligned with the results of the study by O'Dowd and Werner (2024), in which their survey revealed that BIP coordinators expressed differences in the activities suitable for the online phase and physical mobility phase. Their results indicate that instructional activities[192] were seen as most suitable for the online phase, while, in contrast, this was way less frequently considered to be suitable for the physical mobility phase. Secondly, many survey respondents also mentioned collaborative[193] activities as suitable for both phases, but they were significantly more frequently mentioned as suitable for the PMP. Moreover, practical activities[194] were mentioned to be more suitable for the physical mobility phase.

The specific pedagogical design of the OMP warrants further research, beyond this thesis. Nonetheless, it is notable that although the OMP was intended (in BIPs B and C) to foster interpersonal relationships among students, in practice, it was largely treated as a separate component from the PMP. This separation points to a missed opportunity: the two phases could be deliberately linked to create a continuous and integrated learning experience. This point is also reinforced in the literature on blended learning and virtual exchange. For instance, Nissen (2016) notes that many guidelines and best practices on blended learning focus on activities suitable for each mode in isolation, without considering how online and face-to-face components can be coherently connected. However, the crux lies in exploring how both the OMP and PMP can be most successfully combined (see Colpaert, 2020; Nissen 2016; O'Dowd, 2021a for further discussion on this).

(ii) Incorporating ICC explicitly within the learning objectives and overall learning experience

Considering the discourse on BIPs being an "inclusive" internationalisation activity within the European Union's HE strategy, the idea of leveraging BIPs as a vector to enhance students' ICC is paramount. However, as a red thread running throughout the results, it appeared to be seen as a "bonus" learning outcome alongside content-specific knowledge. Therefore, I would argue that ICC, as understood through the definition used in this thesis, should be more explicitly included in the pedagogical design and learning aims of BIPs (*cf. supra*) in order for its potential to be leveraged. However, one of the implications of

[192] In O'Dowd and Werner's (2024) study, instructional activities include: lectures, presentations, mentoring and organisational instructions.

[193] In O'Dowd and Werner's (2024) study, collaborative activities are described as: "activities that engaged students in groups or teams to achieve a common goal such as group discussions, group projects or workshops" (p.10).

[194] In O'Dowd and Werner's (2024) study, practical activities include teambuilding exercises and preparation for or follow up from the physical mobility phase.

arguing that ICC should be integrated holistically within BIPs – across the overall learning experience and explicitly including it as a learning outcome – is that it could raise questions about assessment. Although it lies outside the scope of this research to discuss ICC assessment in educational settings in depth (for that, please see Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Blair, 2017; Deardorff, 2017; Fantini, 2009; Kokkonen & Natri, 2024), it cannot be entirely ignored. In light of the processual and relational understanding of ICC adopted in this thesis, ICC cannot be meaningfully assessed through static, individual-centred instruments; rather, it should be situated at the level of interactions between specific individuals, considering the contextual and situational factors that shape these encounters over time.

In this regard, if ICC is explicitly included in the learning objectives of BIPs, assessment should be formative if any and should align with assessment for learning. One attempt to address this, applied to higher education, is the MICC framework, presented by Lotta Kokkonen and Teija Natri, whose work has also partly informed the conceptualisation of ICC adopted here. Kokkonen and Natri (2024) propose that the framework, which covers many of the traits found in other models of intercultural competence (*i.e.*, attitudinal and motivational, knowledge, and skills elements), with the addition of a linguistic dimension, should not be used to judge someone's level of competence, but instead to begin discussions leading to self-reflection and learning, based on peer feedback:

> *"The framework of MICC can be applied and used as a tool for giving and receiving feedback as well as for reflecting on one's communication in a certain situation and context. Assessment is conducted through peer feedback and self-reflections. Feedback is based on the selected and discussed elements of MICC, and the situational and contextual nature of the phenomenon needs to be taken into consideration. The only ones able to assess what is being interpreted as effective and appropriate in a given situation and context are the ones participating in that interaction" (p. 36).*

This framework is particularly relevant given that, within this study, students often seemed unfamiliar with the term ICC and may have lacked the vocabulary to discuss it. Hence, there appears to be considerable potential in integrating the MICC framework into BIPs as a reflective tool, enabling students to analyse their groupwork and to reflect on and provide feedback on communicative behaviour. In this way, MICC can offer both the language and the conceptual resources to discuss interculturality collaboratively.

(iii) The pivotal role of the teachers within BIPs

It almost goes without saying that within higher education classrooms, teachers play an important role in facilitating students' learning process. Beelen (2017) already pointed out that shifting the focus from mobility to IaH challenges how internationalisation is organised and supported within universities, stating that when internationalisation was primarily associated with physical mobility, international offices typically took the lead. In contrast, the focus on IoC and IaH has repositioned academics as the main actors in the internationalisation of teaching and learning. Going further, I would argue that within the peculiar learning environment of BIPs, the role of the teachers in facilitating students' learning becomes even more pivotal (Jager, 2025). In this context, it must be realised that BIPs represent a distinctive form of learning environment due to their temporal and spatial particularities: they bring together international students from diverse academic backgrounds and study levels to interact intensively within a short period, both online and onsite. In this sense, everyday interactions among students in BIPs are shaped by the formal academic, the hidden, and the structured and unstructured social components of the programmes. From this perspective, BIPs can be seen as instances of "small culture formation on the go" (Holliday, 2016; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020), where meanings, norms, and relationships are continuously negotiated within the specific interactional contexts.

In such a setting, teachers are responsible not only for facilitating learning but also for creating a secure and inclusive atmosphere that fosters positive and rewarding experiences for all participants. Teachers may therefore act as "cosmopolitan role models" – influential educators who inspire students and challenge their thinking, reasoning, and frames of reference (Lilley *et al.*, 2015). In addition to managing culturally diverse classrooms, teachers in BIPs must also navigate the pedagogical and technical complexities of the OMP. As O'Dowd (2021a) notes, VE requires specific pedagogical expertise, including course integration, task design, the choice of digital technologies, and coordination with international partners. At the same time, intercultural learning does not emerge automatically from online interaction, instead, "the vital task of helping students to learn from this experience remains in the charge of the teacher" (O'Dowd, 2021b, p.11). It is through pedagogical mediation, particularly guided discussion and reflection on moments of misunderstanding, that students can become aware of how their communicative intentions have been interpreted by others and begin to make sense of these experiences as part of their intercultural learning (O'Dowd, 2021b).

Given that BIPs are open to all disciplines, teachers from various academic fields may have limited experience in managing culturally and linguistically diverse groups or in intentionally designing activities that support the enhancement of students' ICC within a blended setting. As Parkhouse *et al.* (2019) observe, many educators complete teacher preparation programmes without sufficient preparation to work in culturally diverse settings. Teachers often lack awareness of cultural and linguistic influences on student learning, accept inequities as inevitable, or do not consider attending to cultural diversity to be part of their professional responsibilities. Moreover, as Parkhouse *et al.* (2019) note, some teachers believe that their subject matter is objective and therefore not related to issues of cultural diversity. This was also found in this study, although internationalisation was for instance seen important by I4, they still stated that *"I think this is a topic that is common to everyone and I'm not sure if there was something to specifically adjust to it, so we were just, you know, kind of teaching kind of universal things and that would be, I guess from the perception point of view, the same to everyone"*. Such perspectives clearly limit opportunities to integrate intercultural perspectives and elements into both the formal academic and hidden components of BIPs. Consequently, despite the benevolent intentions "unreflexive intercultural communication teaching practices might have significant repercussions as they reproduce social divisions and inequalities rather than promote unbiased curiosity, respect, connecting, solidarity, and social justice" (Sommier *et al.*, 2021, p.2).

The question is then: when does this become a block for enhancing students' ICC? As the findings of this study show, despite organisers' and teachers' essentialising practices, students appeared to have a more Janusian vision. However, it clearly becomes a block when students withdraw from the BIP experience, return with the conviction that they never wish to participate in such a programme again, or maintain the idea of cultural difference as inevitable. In this regard, there is a clear need for pedagogical guidance to help students make sense of their experiences. Students should therefore be educated to recognise and critically reflect on the cultural elements they bring into intercultural encounters, to identify threads that connect them with others while avoiding the blocks that hinder meaningful engagement. This approach necessitates a form of critical education that emphasises the importance of focusing on similarities rather than fixating on differences (*e.g.*, Kokkonen *et al.*, 2022).

Looking at the reflections of the students in this study, there appears to be a clear gap between the students' need and demand for guiding and making sense of intercultural groupwork experiences, both online and onsite, and the support the students received. This raises a broader question: to what extent

can we expect educators, who are specialists in their own academic fields, to engage in intercultural learning and virtual exchange facilitation without a clear understanding of its practical implications or the pedagogical tools and expertise to support it, both online and in person? We have to acknowledge the importance of pedagogical design, as addressed in the holistic approach, and the crucial role laid out for the teachers and organisers involved in these programmes to create a context that could positively foster students' intercultural competence – a situation that enhances openness and curiosity to learn from and with the perceived "Other" – in which teachers can provide guidance and pedagogical tools for students to "successfully" interact in such settings. In this regard, two solutions could be implemented to help teachers and organisers to optimise BIPs as a means of enhancing students' ICC: (a) providing teachers with adequate training opportunities in both online and blended teaching and intercultural communication, so that they have the pedagogical tools to help students make sense of their intercultural learning; and/or (b), aligned with Clement *et al.* (2023), adopting a design-team approach to BIP development in which technological, pedagogical, content, and intercultural expertise are distributed across different team members rather than assumed to reside in a single individual. In this regard, both solutions (a) and (b) could be facilitated by (but not exclusive to) an EUA, whose shared resources and infrastructures provide a context in which the implementation of BIPs can become more streamlined. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that organising a BIP already requires a high level of motivation and a considerable investment of time and resources from those involved. Taken together, these considerations highlight both the potential of BIPs to enhance students' ICC and the challenges involved in doing so. At the same time, these findings cannot be separated from my own role within the research process. Before turning to the conclusion, I reflect on my positionality during the data collection.

V.4. Reflection: Researcher's positionality

In the following, I turn to reflect upon my own positionality throughout the data collection process. This is particularly important in ethnographic research, where the researcher's presence and interactions inevitably influence the field and the knowledge produced (Armstrong, 2008; Clark *et al.,* 2021; Jackson, 2016). Across and during the different BIPs studied, I occupied multiple, shifting roles: at times a researcher observing, at times a participant observer, occasionally enacting aspects of a teacher, and at other times engaging as a student. These roles were neither fixed nor fully under my control, but were continuously negotiated in response to the interactions, needs, and expectations of students, teachers, and organisers.

My experiences illustrate that in ethnographic research, positionality is not simply a static attribute to be declared, but a lived and relational practice that shapes both the field and the knowledge produced.

I will start reflecting on this by returning to the observed groupwork challenges described in Figure 21 and Figure 22. While observing the groupwork challenges described in Figure 22, I became very aware of my dual role as both a researcher and, in a sense, a member of the teaching team. The atmosphere in the room was tense, voices were raised, gestures firm, and the atmosphere felt uncomfortable. I noticed my own emotional response immediately; I felt uneasy and had a strong impulse to step in. In my fieldnotes taken directly afterwards, I wrote: *"I wanted to interrupt because I don't like tension within a group, but as I am observing, I decided not to do so directly."* As a lecturer, I have some experience with managing group dynamics and mediating conflict within student groups. My professional and personal instinct is to intervene when a situation feels too tense for my judgment. At the same time, I was conscious that I was present as a researcher and not formally responsible for the students themselves. When the students eventually turned towards me, seeking some form of reaction, my role shifted. I asked questions to understand what had happened and later introduced a short reflective exercise, inviting them to draw a piece of bread to illustrate how people perceive the same object differently. This appeared to help the group to reframe their disagreement; they connected the exercise to the concept of a "cultural lens", as introduced by I1 earlier that week, and acknowledged the importance of kindness and perspective-taking in collaborative work. Yet shortly afterwards, I recorded a moment of doubt in my field notes: *"I'm not sure if I did well to interrupt here, as perhaps I should have seen how the group would have continued without any guidance."* This reflexive hesitation captures the instability of my position, being aware that my presence, questions, and even my own discomfort shaped the unfolding interaction. At the same time, this engagement provided insight into how students negotiated linguistic differences, divergent expectations, and task interpretations under time pressure. The example illustrates the tension between observing and participating: between allowing the field to unfold and acting in ways shaped by my own experience and discomfort. This tension became even more apparent when contrasted with the situation described in Figure 21 during BIP C. In that case, although the atmosphere was tense, I deliberately chose not to intervene. I wrote in my field notes:

> *"I also decided not to intervene in the discussion, even though I found it quite awkward as the conflict was very intense and the atmosphere in the room felt incredibly tense. As someone who feels a sense of responsibility, partly from my role as a teacher, and also because I tend to mediate in such situations in my personal life, including when I*

> *was a student, I felt very uncomfortable letting them continue like that. But I also felt that it wasn't my place to interrupt, as doing so would have shifted my position as a researcher."*

These examples show that non-intervention is not always passive but an active, sometimes uncomfortable decision. My response depended on the situation: in BIP A, students screamed at each other, whereas in BIP C, students largely ignored one another. Across these situations, my role was continuously negotiated: at times an observer, at others a mediator, institutional representative, or quasi-teacher. My experiences as a student and lecturer shaped when I felt compelled to act and when to step back. Ultimately, these experiences illustrate that positionality in ethnographic research is an ongoing process of role-taking and role-making rather than a fixed attribute, and that both action and inaction shape the knowledge produced.

My role within each BIP also differed, and I often left my level of participation open to the wishes of the teachers, organisers, and students. I moved between being a complete observer at times, a participant observer at others, and occasionally more like a student participant, for example, when joining a groupwork session. In one BIP, this was particularly noticeable, as it took place on a campus attached to the university I am affiliated with, and there was no teacher or organiser present for the entire day. In that context, I became a kind of representative for the host university. In my fieldnotes, I captured moments that illustrate this shifting role. For example, when the helping organiser messaged me during the lecture: *"please could you tell me if the students are in the videoconference? I participate to a reunion in the university."* Later, as practical issues arose in the classroom, I noted:

> *"A student came to me to say that water had been spilt on the floor, so our conversation stopped, and I helped the student clean it up. Reflecting on this, I found it a bit funny that the student came to me for help. On the other hand, perhaps they saw me as the only person from the host university present, since the others were the professors from a partner university and an outside facilitator. I suppose they see me as being somewhat in charge, which I am not, but I do take on that role when students ask me about directions, the day's programme, and similar things."*

During the BIPs, I was especially aware of my presence as an observer during note-taking, striving to document the unfolding classroom events without drawing attention. At times, the pace and density of

interactions made note-taking challenging, as I tried to capture everything that might be relevant. As I noted in my field notes: *"I quickly wrote up some notes above because my head was spinning with all these details, but I will write further later as I would like to observe the groupwork."* Finding moments when I could write more comprehensively without disrupting the participants or drawing attention to myself was important. On one occasion, I reflected:

> *"For me, it's nice to be able to write up all these notes in the morning from the back of the room without being very noticeable. I can just sit quietly and work. I especially feel tired on days when I can't take many notes because then I feel like I have to remember everything. Having the time to write down what's happening, like this morning, helps me feel a bit relieved."*

I went into the field with the intention of documenting as much as possible to give some validity to the research. This meant recording even seemingly minor or irrelevant moments, such as: *"I want to visit the bathroom, but I was interrupted as one student approached me and said that they couldn't find their group members. I helped them to search. It turns out the group had gone to the cafeteria. I smiled and approached them and they told me they are hungry."* Or, trying my best to enact thick description: *"So, student raises hand – I2 points at them – student starts talking. Hand raising common sign to ask question."* Although much of this material might not appear analytically significant, I aimed to capture the fullness of the experience, aware that even small interactions could provide insight later. At the same time, I recognised that taking notes can disrupt immersion: participants notice when you are writing, and the act of documentation inevitably shapes the field. Writing structured observation notes, much like preparing interview or focus group questions, offered a degree of security and helped reduce uncertainty. Yet, as Ravindran *et al.* (2020) emphasise, ethnography is learned through doing. This became evident in my own practice: for BIP A, I produced over 70 pages of observation notes, while for subsequent BIPs the total ranged between 40 and 55 pages, reflecting both a growing confidence and a more selective focus in my note-taking.

At other moments, my fieldnotes reveal how closely observation and interpretation were intertwined. Towards the end of a long day in BIP A, I noted: *"The day is getting long – I'm starting to yawn a little. The student next to me is saying to another student how tired they are. Students start whispering a little during the presentations, more whispers than before. I interpret this as a sign that they are getting bored, perhaps. But maybe this is my interpretation, as I'm getting a little bored, it's 4.30 pm."* Writing this, I became aware

of how easily my own physical state could shape how I made sense of what was happening. I was tired, and perhaps slightly less focused, and I immediately connected the whispering to boredom. I also caught myself in that moment, questioning whether I was projecting my own fatigue onto the group. The same applies to my notes a few minutes later: *"4.46 – one student in the back has their eyes closed and I'm wondering if they aren't sleeping. Is the programme too intense?"* Here, too, I moved quickly from observation to interpretation. These entries illustrate that my fieldnotes were never purely descriptive. They contain my assumptions, doubts, and immediate sense-making processes. Rather than removing these reflections, I chose to keep them visible, as they reveal how I interpreted things while happening. They also remind me that what I interpreted as disengagement or tiredness might have had other explanations. In this sense, the notes do not simply document the field but also document my own presence within it.

Especially during moments within the structured social and unstructured experiential components, I became particularly aware of how relational my position in the field was. During the barbecue on the first evening of the PMP of BIP A, I mingled among the students and joined different conversations. They did not alter their discussions when I approached and readily involved me. Conversations ranged from football to universities and experiences abroad, and students asked about my own background. I answered briefly and redirected the focus back to them. One interaction in particular stayed with me. A student described me as "really cool" and said that my presence did not feel like being "a lab rat", contrasting this with previous research experiences they had found awkward. Although I felt slightly uncomfortable with this characterisation, it suggested that my presence was experienced as non-threatening. Shortly afterwards, the student shared more openly that their motivation for joining the BIP was less about the topic and more about experiencing being abroad before their Erasmus semester. This moment illustrates how I was positioned simultaneously as part of the ingroup and as a researcher to whom certain disclosures were directed.

Reflecting on this, I recognise that aspects of my identity may have facilitated this ease of interaction. Although I am slightly older than most of the students, the age difference is not immediately visible, and I may not have appeared as a distant authority figure. I can easily engage in conversations about sport or student life, which may have lowered barriers. These characteristics likely shaped the kind of access I had to informal conversations and influenced what students felt comfortable sharing with me. At the same time, this relational closeness raises questions about distance and analytical positioning. Being perceived

as friendly and approachable may have enabled openness, but it also positioned me less as an external observer and more as someone temporarily embedded within the group. Until only a few weeks before submitting this thesis, I had intended to include all my field notes in the Appendix to ensure full transparency. However, I ultimately decided against doing so due to concerns regarding participant privacy and relational closeness. In interviews and focus groups, it is a specific moment to capture responses, and everyone had the opportunity to redact something afterwards. However, during long, intensive observation days, social relationships were constructed alongside observation, and my role as a researcher was not always at the forefront. Especially because I used thick description, my field notes contained many personal accounts of conversations I had with students and teachers, which I carefully chose not to include in the thesis.

Not only with students but also with teachers and organisers, I developed relational closeness. For example, I had many conversations with I2 about sports, with I7 about travelling and cooking (including exchanging recipes and receiving a picture three months later of their son having recreated one of the recipes), and with I5 about academic careers and family situations. BIPs are intense, and within a short time spent together, relationships are built. This raises ethical questions: would it be unethical to immerse oneself in these relationships, or to remain an outsider? These boundaries remain blurred. At times, as I note in my observation notes of BIP C, *"I also feel a bit lonely and uncomfortable"*, as a PhD researcher, I was neither fully a student nor fully a teacher. This dual status was something I experienced throughout my PhD, leaving me sometimes feeling like an outsider. You cannot be "simply" a student or build strong interpersonal relations, because you are also a teacher with responsibilities; at the same time, you are not fully a teacher in the programmes.

Some final reflections on my positionality emerged symbolically from the final stages of the physical mobility observation phase, as my mixed positionality became very visible in the farewells during BIP D. In my fieldnotes, I wrote: *"Many students said goodbye and gave me a hug and the other teachers a hand. They thanked I6 and then left. Some went to grab a final drink together and asked if I wanted to join."* Watching the goodbyes, I noticed a clear pattern: students hugged each other, shook hands with the teachers, and hugged me. The teachers shook hands with one another but hugged me too. It struck me that these small gestures made my position in the field visible. I was neither fully staff nor simply an observer, but somewhere in-between, able to be close to the students while still maintaining a connection with the teachers. From an interpretivist and constructivist perspective, the field is co-constructed through

these interactions, making reflexivity a methodological necessity. Considering my roles through a symbolic interactionist lens highlights that observation and interpretation are inseparable, and that reflexivity guides how I documented and made sense of the data.

Chapter VI - Conclusions

This thesis set out to critically examine the potential of Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes to enhance students' intercultural communication competence within the broader landscape of European higher education internationalisation. By situating BIPs within the historical and policy development of internationalisation, they can be understood as one of the initiatives that fall under the umbrella of more "inclusive" internationalisation. In this sense, they fit with the rhetoric to "boost" internationalisation figures, reach a wider range of students, and encourage internationalisation at home initiatives. In line with the recognition, as discussed in the literature, that internationalisation is driven by multiple and sometimes competing rationales, BIPs attract participants with diverse profiles, motivations, and levels of engagement. In this thesis, four orientations have been identified in the sense of Max Weber's ideal types: the knowledge seeker, the credit seeker, the experience seeker, and the Bipster. These ideal types do not describe individual students in a fixed or exhaustive manner; rather, they serve as heuristic tools that highlight contrasting ways of approaching BIPs and provide a structured lens through which participants' motivations, expectations, and experiences can be interpreted. Consequently, students and staff do not experience or interpret BIPs in uniform ways; instead, they take different things from the experience. Nevertheless, across these varied engagements, there appeared to be an implicit expectation that participation would contribute, in some way, to enhancing students' ICC.

This thesis approaches ICC as the interpretation of effective and appropriate communication in contexts where interculturality and cultures are relevant to the interactants. It is understood as situational and contextual, and as a continuous and dynamic process grounded in interaction. Such a conceptualisation warrants a more critical consideration of the extent to which BIPs create the conditions under which students' ICC can be fostered. Although this understanding of ICC was adopted in this thesis, in practice, the participants in this study did not always share this view. The study reveals that understandings of ICC among students, teachers, and organisers are complex and varied. At times, interculturality was framed in essentialist terms, closely linked to nationality and cultural difference, while more interactional and process-oriented perspectives were less consistently articulated. This was particularly evident in the discourse of organisers and teachers, whereas students sometimes related to experiences in which they encountered "the Other" from a more pluricultural perspective. Similarly, the findings have noted that experiences of intercultural engagement were ambivalent: while many participants described encounters

as enriching, enjoyable, and personally transformative, others reported moments of discomfort (which can also be moments for learning), stereotyping, uneven participation in groupwork, and challenges that reflected a desire for more pedagogical guidance in navigating the experience. From an interpretative perspective, BIPs provide a context in which ICC may emerge, but this potential is shaped and at times constrained by the programmes' short duration, limited pedagogical scaffolding, and assumptions that intercultural learning occurs organically through mere contact. At the same time, the barriers identified in this study may be understood as developmental potentials. A shift from country-specific knowledge towards a focus on communicative processes, combined with the deliberate facilitation of meaningful interaction, can reframe BIPs as sites of intentional intercultural learning. Within BIPs, this learning experience can be conceptualised as comprising four interrelated and overlapping dimensions through which elements of ICC can be integrated holistically: the formal academic, the structured social, the hidden, and the unstructured experiential. Although there are various rationales for implementing and participating in BIPs within the broader context of the internationalisation of higher education, the following recommendations for good practice are proposed to support the intentional use of BIPs as spaces for fostering ICC development:

- Recognise that ICC does not develop automatically through participation in BIPs. Intentional pedagogical design, structured reflection, and guided interaction are advised.
- Embed ICC holistically across the four identified learning dimensions of BIPs: formal academic, structured social, hidden, and unstructured experiential components.
    - Formal academic: Identify context- and discipline-specific ICC needs. Integrate structured groupwork in mixed international or interdisciplinary teams, use varied teaching approaches, connect disciplinary content to local contexts, and explicitly provide tools for reflecting on communicative processes and cultural experiences.
    - Structured social: Design intentional social opportunities that allow students to interact on a personal level, recognise commonalities, and move beyond essentialising perspectives. Facilitate opportunities across both online and physical phases for students to introduce themselves and to build relationships and co-construct shared group cultures.
    - Hidden: Raise awareness among teachers and organisers of implicit messages embedded in programme design, such as power relations, language hierarchies, and the prioritisation of academic over social components, as these shape intercultural learning.

    - Unstructured experiential: Build flexibility into the schedule to allow space for self-organised interaction and informal engagement. Avoid overly dense programmes and provide light scaffolding to support reflection without over-structuring the experience.
- Structure the BIP strategically by coherently combining the PMP and OMP.
    - Ensure the OMP is pedagogically integrated rather than treated as a prescribed element that requires little attention.
    - Provide guidance and support in online collaboration to address engagement and organisational challenges.
    - Align activities across online and physical phases to create a continuous, coherent learning experience.
- Incorporate ICC explicitly within learning objectives and throughout programme design.
    - Encourage teachers and organisers to openly share their understandings of ICC at the outset of the BIP and discuss which aspects are most relevant in the context of the programme. This could help align expectations, foster shared goals, and support more coherent intercultural learning experiences.
    - Use formative assessment methods, such as the MICC framework, to support self-reflection and peer feedback on intercultural communication.
    - Provide students with language and conceptual tools to discuss, analyse, and reflect on intercultural experiences collaboratively.
- Recognise the pivotal role of the teacher.
    - Equip teachers with training in online/blended teaching and intercultural communication to provide the pedagogical tools needed for guiding ICC development.
    - Consider a design-team approach for BIP development, distributing technological, pedagogical, content, and intercultural expertise across team members rather than relying on a single individual.

Research agenda

In the words of my colleague, Aiolfi (2025), “No academic work is ever complete or perfect, nor should it aspire to be. The beauty of research lies in its uncertainty rather than in its stability, in the question it raises rather than the answers it provides” (p.206). In this case, BIPs as new objects of study within the broader Erasmus+ programme create particular excitement, especially when examined within the context of EUAs, which are themselves relatively recent phenomena. The novelty of BIPs establishes a clear need

for dedicated research, and this study has contributed to the emergent body of research on BIPs in the context of internationalisation of higher education by bringing in-depth, qualitative insights into how BIPs can act as a vector for potentially enhancing participants' ICC. The research was exploratory in nature; the intention was not to limit the interviews and focus groups to questions of ICC alone, but rather to situate ICC within participants' wider experiences. Consequently, several themes emerged during the analysis that were not examined in depth because they fell outside the scope of this thesis. These include the topics detailed below, which represent areas for further research.

Organisational challenges in implementing BIPs

An important theme evident in the interview data concerns the organisational challenges that teachers and organisers described when reflecting on their BIP experiences. Although it was beyond the scope of this thesis to examine these challenges in depth, one of the largest coding categories that emerged from the interviews related to the practical difficulties involved in setting up and delivering a BIP. These included challenges involving colleagues, the heavy workload associated with organising a BIP, and the sense that its preparation was a highly time-consuming process. Further difficulties arose from differing timetables across institutions and from the recurrent pressure to meet the required number of incoming students. This requirement, previously fifteen and now ten mobile students, often created financial uncertainty because BIP funding depended on reaching this threshold. These findings are consistent with research findings by O'Dowd and Werner (2024), who reported similar problems and challenges experienced by academic coordinators of BIPs. There is, therefore, an avenue for further research that examines BIPs as a policy-driven initiative that depends on sustained bottom-up engagement. The interviews indicate that while BIPs are encouraged at institutional and European levels, much of the practical responsibility falls on individual teachers and organisers, some of whom described the process as highly demanding or even a "nightmare". Future research could explore what kinds of institutional support, workload recognition, or incentives are needed to make BIPs a sustainable activity, rather than one that discourages those responsible for delivering them. This would help identify how BIPs can be better supported and embedded in institutional practice.

The central role of host university students in BIPs

In BIP D, the reliance on host students was especially noticeable, as the data collection task required engagement with the local population and the language barrier limited the participation of incoming students. Several host students mentioned that they felt uncomfortable when they could not fully involve

the incoming students, which often resulted in them completing most of the work. This was recognised by all students and, for some, created challenges within the groupwork process. A similar pattern appeared in BIP C, where host students were implicitly expected by organisers and teachers to guide and support the incoming students in practical and organisational matters. They showed the way to lunch, acted as "experts" on the regional Christmas markets, created shared resources such as a Google Drive folder and a WhatsApp group, opened classrooms, and generally ensured that the incoming students found their way around. The central responsibilities that host university students took on raise important questions about how roles within BIPs are distributed and how these shape both the academic and social experiences of host and incoming participants. Future research could look into how host university students experience this position, how these expectations are communicated, and how such prominent roles influence group dynamics, task division, and intercultural interaction. At the same time, the absence of host students in BIPs A and B – which was seen in BIP A as "missing the mark" – also leads to further inquiry into the extent to which host students are positioned as "local experts" or representatives of the national culture. This raises broader questions about how BIPs contribute to institutions' IaH strategies and the implications of relying on host student involvement.

Role of visiting teachers in mobility programmes and BIPs within the EUI framework

Another underexplored theme concerns the role of visiting teachers in BIPs, including how they are integrated by host organisers in the BIP, their role within the BIP, their motivations, and the benefits of their involvement. Future research could examine the role of staff within BIPs and the partnership between institutions organising a BIP. An additional point that merits further research relates to the positioning of BIPs within EUAs; BIPs were perceived as capable of strengthening collaboration with an EUA, and such representations appeared to both facilitate the organisation of BIPs and actively encourage institutional participation within the alliance.

Building on this study: Possible next steps for research and practice

Beyond the topics outlined above, the findings of this thesis point towards further questions that warrant more detailed research. These concern both the pedagogical underpinnings of BIPs and the broader dynamics of intercultural communication within short-term, blended learning environments. One promising avenue, which I believe has considerable potential, involves further developing the findings of this research by engaging the interviewees in a workshop session to discuss the results of this thesis and identify additional good practices for implementation more systematically. These practices could then be

tested within a BIP to examine how they work in practice and how they are experienced by students. Including students, teachers, organisers, and relevant experts in this process would ensure that a wide range of perspectives are represented so that the voices of the different actors involved can be meaningfully incorporated.

In addition, drawing on the TPACK-I model, the study could be strengthened by bringing together a group of intercultural communication, pedagogical, and online education experts to participate in a Delphi technique process. As mentioned earlier, BIPs are inherently interdisciplinary, and their successful implementation also depends on interdisciplinary knowledge. My expertise lies within the discipline of communication sciences; however, I believe that this research can be further strengthened by integrating insights from education sciences and online education. Admittedly, as a researcher, I also must acknowledge having fallen into the same trap of underestimating the distinctive pedagogical value of the OMP, an oversight clearly reflected in its limited space in the literature review. In retrospect, themes such as online intercultural learning and blended learning should have received more space. Such an approach would support the development of a more comprehensive understanding of how intercultural communication competence can be fostered within blended and intensive learning environments. This would require action research looking further into (i) how to thoughtfully structure BIPs by combining the PMP and OMP, (ii) how intercultural communication elements can be integrated holistically within BIPs, and (iii) how to better facilitate settings within BIPs that support the development of interpersonal relationships and interactions among participants.

Other topics for further research lie within the broader gap between policy and practice in the internationalisation of HE context. There is a need to explore how institutional policies, funding schemes, and strategic priorities actually shape pedagogical practice within BIPs. Similarly, more research is needed on teaching approaches to intercultural communication that move beyond essentialist understandings towards more interactional, relational, and situated perspectives. Greater attention must also be paid to teacher preparation for working within BIPs. This includes not only how teachers can promote intercultural communication competence among their students but also how they can develop their own competence while becoming more aware of differing online and onsite practices across diverse contexts. Future research should investigate how teachers can be adequately prepared for the pedagogical, interpersonal, and organisational challenges of BIP teaching. This involves questions such as: what skills and competences are necessary for “effective” teaching within BIPs? How can teacher training and professional

development programmes support teachers in building the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively with partner teachers? What forms of institutional support are needed to sustain such collaboration? What kind of assessment can take place within BIPs? Finally, the short duration of BIPs requires closer examination to better understand how such intensive mobilities influence students' experiences of internationalisation and whether they encourage continued engagement in further mobility or international activities. In sum, more research is needed into good practices and support systems for the implementation of BIPs in order to leverage them as an endeavour that could positively foster students' intercultural competence – a situation that enhances openness and curiosity to learn from and with the perceived "Other" – and that could allow teachers to provide guidance and pedagogical tools for students to "successfully" interact in such settings.

This research has highlighted certain barriers that have been identified for BIPs acting as a vector enhancing students' ICC and highlighted possible areas for improvement. However, it must also be noted that the BIPs in this study were among the first BIPs being carried out by motivated organisers and teachers who had their best intentions and no blueprints available. Besides accounts of dropouts, withdrawal, communicative challenges, and emotional accounts, there were plenty of accounts from students reflecting positively on the overall experience, and this is something that paints the majority of the picture. Interestingly, although I suggest pedagogical guidance is needed to help students reflect upon their experience, an additional observation from the data complicates the argument for stronger pedagogical guidance: it was also evident that moments of difficulty in groupwork sometimes led to unexpected forms of bonding among students. In situations where teachers were not present, and challenges arose, students occasionally expressed shared frustration about organisational aspects or about a perceived lack of guidance. In these moments, the teachers appeared to become a reference point against which students aligned themselves. This process can be described in terms of blocking and threading: while teachers were temporarily positioned as an external "Other", students developed a sense of connection through their shared experience. Without overstating this finding, it indicates that solidarity among students in BIPs may sometimes develop not only through structured activities but also through shared experiences of challenge. This represents a possible avenue for further research, particularly in examining how blocking and threading processes unfold in short-term, intensive mobility contexts and how these dynamics shape participants' experiences.

Final thoughts

To end this thesis, I would like to return to the instance of one of the focus group participants (FG14) reflecting on their BIP experience through describing their choice of image, the mural art known as "All the World" by Keith Haring. According to Keith Haring, the mural carries a social message, representing thirty figures in motion, connected like pieces of a puzzle, with each figure symbolising a different aspect of a world at peace (Comune di Pisa, n.d.; The Keith Haring Foundation, n.d.). FG14 explained that this image captured their experience of the BIP: despite differences in nationality, discipline, and background, participants were able to collaborate and work together, generating connections that reflected both the relational and academic dimensions of the programme. As Haring explained in an interview, "I really want people to interpret it and see it with an open mind" (Haring, 1998). In this way, I chose to include this image at the start of this thesis, as the findings of this study have shown that BIPs attract a variety of participants, who engage and experience these programmes differently – from the knowledge seeker and the credit seeker to the experience seeker and the Bipster – in which, following some of the recommendations proposed in this research, working with the "cultural Other" does not inevitably lead to difficulties, but can instead result in collaboration, connection, and harmony in practice. BIPs can give rise to "Bipsters": students who, through participation, are motivated to embark on further international experiences, gain confidence in intercultural settings, and actively build social and intercultural networks. This thesis makes contributions at the levels of policymaking and implementation by offering empirically grounded insights that can inform strategic decisions as well as practical design and delivery of BIPs. As the current Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027) approaches its conclusion and preparations for its successor (2028–2034) are underway, the question of what the future holds for BIPs becomes increasingly pertinent. It is hoped that this research can contribute to ongoing reflection on the role and design of BIPs within future Erasmus+ frameworks, as the findings indicate that BIPs provide situated learning experiences with the potential to serve as a vector for enhancing students' intercultural communication competence. In doing so, they have the potential to support students in their lifelong endeavour to enhance their ICC.

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Appendix

Appendix I - Erasmus+ general eligibility criteria

A higher education mobility project must respect the following formal criteria in order to be eligible for an Erasmus+ grant. These general eligibility criteria address general requirements at the project level, whereas the specific criteria listed in Appendix II - Erasmus+ specific eligibility criteria for BIPs, addresses the requirements for the implementation of BIPs. These criteria have been directly taken from the Erasmus+ programme guide 2021-2027 Version 2 (2022): 26-01-2022, pages 48-50.

Table 10: Erasmus+ general eligibility criteria

Eligible activities	Higher education institutions (HEIs) may implement one or more of the following activities: • Student mobility for studies • Student mobility for traineeships • Staff mobility for teaching • Staff mobility for training • Blended intensive programmes (not for mobility projects supported by external policy funds) Eligible mobility activity flows: • For mobility projects supported by internal policy funds: from EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme to any country in the world (EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme and third countries not associated to the Programme from the Regions 1-14). • For mobility projects supported by external policy funds: between EU Member States or third countries associated to the Programme and third countries not associated to the Programme (excluding the Regions 13 and 14).

Who can apply?	Organisations with the following accreditation may apply for a grant: • For an application as an individual HEI: higher education institutions established in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme and awarded with an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). • For an application as a mobility consortium: coordinating organisations established in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme and coordinating a consortium awarded with an Erasmus accreditation for higher education mobility consortia. Organisations that do not hold a valid consortium accreditation can apply for this accreditation on behalf of a mobility consortium during the same call as when applying for a mobility project grant or a previous call. All the involved higher education institutions from EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme must hold an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). These organisations will be eligible for a mobility project only if their application for the consortium accreditation is successful. Higher education students and staff cannot apply directly for a grant; the selection criteria for participation in the mobility activities and in blended intensive programmes are defined by the higher education institution in which they study or are employed.
Eligible countries	For participation in activities: • any EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme • any third country not associated to the Programme (for possible conditions in mobility projects supported by external policy funds please see the section "Additional information for mobility projects supported by external policy funds" of this action and "Eligible countries" in Part A)

Number of participating organisations	The number of organisations in the application form is one (the applicant). It is either an individual HEI or a mobility consortium coordinator established in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme. During the implementation of the mobility project, a minimum of two organisations (at least one sending and at least one receiving organisation) must be involved. For mobility projects supported by external policy funds, minimum one organisation from a non-associated third country must be involved. For blended intensive programmes in mobility projects supported by internal policy funds: in addition to the applicant (applicant HEI or a HEI in an applicant mobility consortium), at least two HEIs from two other EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme have to be involved in the organisation of the blended intensive programme during implementation.
Duration of the project	Mobility projects supported by internal policy funds: 26 months Mobility projects supported by external policy funds: 24 or 36 months
Where to apply?	To the National Agency of the country in which the applicant organisation is established.
When to apply?	Applicants have to submit their grant application by **23 February at 12:00:00 (midday Brussels time) both for projects funded with internal policy funds starting on 1 June of the same year and for projects funded with external actions instruments starting on 1 August of the same year.**
How to apply?	Please see part C of this Guide for details on how to apply.
Other criteria needed	A HEI may apply for grants to its National Agency via two different channels: • directly as an individual HEI, • via a mobility consortium of which it is a coordinator/member. A HEI can apply only once per selection round for a mobility project as individual HEI and/or as the coordinating HEI of a given consortium. However, a HEI may be part of or coordinate several different mobility consortia applying at the same time. Both channels (individual application and consortium application) may be used simultaneously. However, the HEI remains responsible of preventing double funding of a participant when the two channels are used in the same academic year. The mobility project should implement the European Student Card Initiative to facilitate the online management of the mobility cycle and other more environmentally friendly and inclusive approaches in line with the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) and the ECHE guidelines.

Appendix II - Erasmus+ specific eligibility criteria for BIPs

The following highlights the specific criteria that have been directly taken from the Erasmus+ programme guide 2021-2027 Version 2 (2022): 26-01-2022, pages 58-59, highlighting the specific requirements for BIPs.

Table 11: Erasmus+ specific eligibility criteria for BIPs

Eligible participating organisations	A blended intensive programme has to be developed and implemented by at least 3 higher education institutions (HEIs) coming from at least 3 EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme. In addition, any other HEI or organisation located in an EU Member State, third country associated to the Programme or third country not associated to the Programme may participate in order to send participants. The HEIs sending students and staff to participate as learners in blended intensive programmes must be a HEI from an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme awarded with an ECHE or a HEI from a third country not associated to the Programme recognised by competent authorities that has signed inter-institutional agreements with their partners from an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme, before the mobility takes place. For teaching and training staff involved in the delivery of the programme, it can be any organisation from an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme or from a third country not associated to the Programme (see eligible participants). Participants can be sent with Erasmus+ funding or take part at their own costs. HEIs from third countries not associated to the Programme may send participants with Erasmus+, if the receiving institution has, in parallel, a mobility project funded with external policy funds funding incoming students and staff from these countries. These participants from third countries not associated to the Programme do not count towards the minimum requirements. The receiving HEI must be awarded with the ECHE. The receiving HEI can be the same as or different from the coordinating HEI. Other organisations may also co-host participants in the receiving country during part of the physical activity.

	The coordinating HEI must also be awarded with an ECHE. The coordinating/receiving HEI is either the applicant HEI or a HEI member of the applicant mobility consortium for a mobility project funded with internal policy funds.
Duration of the activity	Physical mobility from 5 days to 30 days of programme duration. No eligibility criteria is set for the duration of the virtual component but the combined virtual and physical mobility must award a minimum of 3 ECTS credits for students.
Venue(s) of the activity	The physical activity can take place at the receiving HEI or at any other venue in the country of the receiving HEI.
Eligible participants	**Students:** Students registered in a HEI in an EU Member State or a third country associated to the Programme or a third country not associated to the Programme, and enrolled in studies leading to a recognised degree or another recognised tertiary level qualification (up to and including the level of doctorate). **Staff:** Staff working at a HEI in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme or a third country not associated to the Programme. **Teaching and training staff involved in the delivery of the programme:** • Staff working at a HEI in an EU Member State, third country associated to the Programme or a third country not associated to the Programme. • Staff invited to teach at a HEI: coming from any public or private enterprise/organisation (with the exception of HEIs awarded with an ECHE); the enterprise/organisation should come from an EU Member State, third country associated to the Programme or a third country not associated to the Programme active in the labour market or in the fields of education, training and youth, research and innovation; employed doctoral candidates also count as eligible under this action.
Other criteria needed	Blended intensive programmes for students and staff must comprise a short-term physical mobility abroad combined with a compulsory virtual component facilitating a collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork. The virtual component must bring the learners together online to work collectively and simultaneously on specific assignments that are integrated in the blended intensive programme and count towards the overall learning outcomes. Blended intensive programmes have to award at least 3 ECTS credits for students.

	The minimum number of Erasmus+ funded mobile participants in a blended intensive programme is 15 (not including teaching/training staff involved in the delivery of the programme) in order for the programme to be eligible for funding. The individual support and, when applicable, travel support to participants for the physical activity is provided by the sending organisation (and the receiving HEI in the case of invited staff from enterprises and participants from third countries not associated to the programme funded with external action instruments).

Appendix III - Components of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006)

Figure 30: Components of intercultural competence as highlighted in the study by Deardorff (2006)

Specific Components of Intercultural Competence with 80% to 100% Agreement Among Top Intercultural Scholars in the study by Deardorff (2006)

- *Understanding others' worldviews*
- *Cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment*
- *Adaptability and adjustment to new cultural environment*
- *Skills to listen and observe*
- *General openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures*
- *Ability to adapt to varying intercultural communication and learning styles*
- *Flexibility*
- *Skills to analyse, interpret, and relate*
- *Tolerating and engaging ambiguity*
- *Deep knowledge and understanding of culture (one's own and others')*
- *Respect for other cultures*
- *Cross-cultural empathy*
- *Understanding the value of cultural diversity*
- *Understanding of role and impact of culture and the impact of situational, social, and historical contexts involved*
- *Cognitive flexibility—ability to switch frames from etic to emic and back again*
- *Sociolinguistic competence (awareness of relation between language and meaning in societal context)*
- *Mindfulness*
- *Withholding judgment*
- *Curiosity and discovery*
- *Learning through interaction*
- *Ethnorelative view*
- *Culture-specific knowledge and understanding host culture's traditions*

Appendix IV - Learning objectives BIP A

Learning objectives as stated on the webpage with information on BIP A:[195][196]

"Learning outcomes

On successful completion of this course the students should be able to demonstrate:

- an ability to recognize business opportunities, identifying market gaps, generate and critically evaluate business ideas
- an ability to formulate business plans for new ventures, while addressing issues of concept development, market analysis, and financial planning
- familiarity with crowdfunding principles, types, and models, and discuss the differences between them
- familiarity with key actors in crowdfunding markets, including platforms, types, functionalities, and business models
- skills in crowdfunding campaign planning (campaign budget and financial planning) and process development
- skills in crowdfunding campaign marketing and promotions planning
- understanding of success and failure factors in crowdfunding practice
- understanding of ethical dilemmas in entrepreneurship and crowdfunding practice and possible mechanisms for mitigating them

Course contents

The goal of this course is to acquaint students with fundamentals of entrepreneurship and crowdfunding while focusing on:

- Practicalities of entrepreneurship and startup management, with a specific focus on market validation and business plan development skills.
- Fundamentals of crowdfunding and digital fundraising, with a specific focus on campaign planning and development."

[195] To retain anonymity the source cannot be revealed.

[196] In contrast to BIP A, BIPs B, C, and D did not provide formally articulated learning objectives that were communicated either prior to or during the programme, nor were any publicly available. Therefore, none are formally included in this thesis, as is the case for BIP A, but references to learning objectives were mentioned in all the interviews and reflected upon in the results chapter.

Appendix V - Focus group consent form







Focus Group Consent Form

Consent to participate in the scientific doctoral study and subsequent publications and presentations:
Questioning the impact of internationalisation in higher education training: which intercultural competences are acquired through Erasmus+ « Blended Intensive Programmes »?

Purpose

You have been invited to participate in a focus group for the doctoral study (and subsequent scientific publications and presentations) of Romée Jager, the main researcher of this study, who is under the direction of Prof. Alexander Frame (University of Burgundy, France) and Dr. Lotta Kokkonen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland). The study is attached to the doctoral school LECLA and the research group TIL of the University of Burgundy. The purpose of this focus group is to gain insights into students' experiences and reflections of Blended Intensive Programmes. The information learned in this focus group will be used to set up a pedagogical guide for future teachers and organisers wishing to set up such programmes in (but not limited to) the framework of the European University Alliance FORTHEM, for research publications and presentations related to the internationalisation of higher education and intercultural communication competence, and for the doctoral study named above.

Procedure

As part of this study, you will be placed in a group of 4 to 6 fellow students of the Blended Intensive Programme you participated in. The moderator, Romée Jager in this case, will ask you to carry out several activities and will ask you several questions to facilitate the discussion. With the approval of all participants, this focus group will be audio and video-recorded for data transcription and data analysis purposes. However, the researcher will do her utmost best that your participation will remain confidential, meaning, your name will not be reflected in any of the research and pseudonyms will be used.

Voluntariness

Participating in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in this study or cancel your participation at any time by informing Romée Jager directly (contact details below).

Please note that there are no right or wrong answers or comments to focus group questions and activities, your insights are highly valued.

Research costs

No fee will be paid for participating in the study.

Benefits and Risks

Your participation may benefit you and other participants by the opportunity to reflect upon your experience and if ever participating in a Blended Intensive Programme you could benefit from the possible improvements made due to your insights. However, no risks are anticipated beyond those experienced during an average conversation.

Confidentiality

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to respect the privacy of other focus group members by not disclosing any content discussed during the study. Romée Jager will personally analyse the data, and her two directors will have access to this as well, but—as stated above—your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in any subsequent publications or analysis sent to anyone apart from Romée Jager, Prof. Alexander Frame, and Dr. Lotta Kokkonen.

Direct identification data will be removed as a protective measure when generating the data (pseudonymised data, in which case persons can be later identified on the basis of a code or similar data, and new data can be merged with the data). Identifiers are removed from interview and group discussion data when transcribing them. Participants' identity is protected through image processing in potential videos.

Rights of data subjects

- Right to access data (Article 15, GDPR)

You have the right to obtain information about whether your personal data are processed, and which personal data are processed. If you want, you can also request a copy of the personal data processed in the study.

- Right to have data rectified (Article 16, GDPR)

If there are inaccuracies or errors in your personal data processed by us, you have the right to request their rectification or supplementation.

- Right to erasure (Article 17, GDPR)

You have the right to request your personal data be erased in certain situations.

- Right to the restriction of processing (Article 18, GDPR)

You have the right to restrict the processing of your personal data in certain situations, such as if you deny the accuracy of your personal data.

- Right to object (Article 21, GDPR)

You have the right to object to the processing of your personal data if the processing is based on public or legitimate interest. As a result, the university cannot process your personal data unless it can prove that processing is based on a highly important and justified reason that supersedes your rights.

Contact

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact:

Romée Jager, PhD researcher at the University of Burgundy
romee.jager@u-bourgogne.fr

If you have questions on the rights of data subjects, please contact the data protection officer of the University of Burgundy:
dpd@u-bourgogne.fr

I understand that participating in the study is voluntary, and that I can, at any time, cancel my participation in the study with no negative consequences; however, research data collected up to that time can be used in the study. I can be contacted regarding further research.

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above:

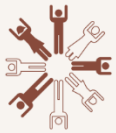
First and last name _____ Date _____

Signature (in print or electronic)

_____

If the document is signed, it will be retained in the archives of the person in charge of the study. This consent form will be retained securely for as long as the data is in an identifiable format. If the data is anonymised or erased, this consent form no longer needs to be archived.

Appendix VI - Research notice



INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Internationalisation of Higher Education & "Intercultural Competence"

Romée Jager
University of Burgundy
romee.jager@u-bourgogne.fr



Information on the Study

Hi!
Great to spend the Blendend Intensive Programme [title of the BIP] together. Here is some information on the study:

The research is part of a PhD study that focuses on the internationalisation of Higher Education and the acquisition of "intercultural competence". The study specifically focuses on Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) as examples of "curriculum internationalisation" and looks at how these might act as a vector for reaching internationalisation objectives such as developing "intercultural competence" or other "global competencies" among students.

Any thoughts? Just talk to me about it!



Methodology

Observation & Interviews
Besides an extensive literature review, the study uses qualitative data-gathering methods. Blended Intensive Programmes in different disciplines (such as the one that you are participating in) will be followed by terms of observation. This will be complemented by interviews with some of you (the students participating in the programme) and the staff involved.

Observation is a way to gather data by watching people, events, or noting physical characteristics in their natural setting. This could include Romée taking notes of what is happening, what is being said and taking pictures of the setting.



What does this mean for you?

For you it's simple – just enjoy the programme and participate in the classes as you would always do!

Romée will be joining the programme and will be around (like a fly on the wall). She will sit in the class, listen to all of you and look around. When there is a break, she will most definitely get a coffee and might have a brief chat with you. Romée might ask you a few questions about your motivation to participate, your experience and your thoughts on everything that is going on.

She is also looking for participants who are happy to have a more elaborate conversation with her about their experience of the programme. Are you willing to do so? Great, just reach out!



Data Handling

Participation in this study is on an **anonymous** and **voluntary** basis. You can refuse to participate or cancel your participation whenever and without giving a reason. If you wish to not participate you can let Romée know directly or send an email.

The data gathered is confidential. When reporting the findings of the study, all data will be anonymized. This means that you or your answers cannot be recognized.

Only Romée and her supervisors Prof. Alexander Frame (University of Burgundy) and Dr. Lotta Kokkonen (University of Jyväskylä) will have access to the original data.



Research Results

The findings of this study will be used to set up a pedagogical guide for future teachers and organisers wishing to set up such programmes in (but not limited to) the framework of the European University Alliance FORTHEM, for research publications and presentations related to the internationalisation of higher education and intercultural communication competence, and for the doctoral study of Romée.

Contact

If you have any questions or would like to discuss further, don't hesitate to ask Romée directly when you see her or to send an email to romee.jager@u-bourgogne.fr

Appendix VII - Interview guide for teachers

All interview guides were slightly tailored to each interviewee, for instance, by incorporating questions that emerged from the observations or by referring to specific incidents that occurred during the BIP. However, the overall structure remained consistent across all interviews.

Aims:

1. To gain insights into the process of and the teacher's involvement in the BIP.
2. To explore the teacher's experience and perspective of the BIP.
3. To explore the view on BIPs as an internationalisation method enhancing ICC among students.
4. To explore whether the teacher adjusted their pedagogical design to adjust to the diverse context.

Table 12: Interviewee guide example for teachers

Theme	Optional questions	Aim

Introduction	• Before we start, do I have your permission to record this interview?
	• Briefly explain that the interview will probably take around 30-45 minutes but that it depends on the topics that we will cover.
	• It will be like a free-flow conversation where I'm just curious to learn more about the BIP and your reflections on the BIP.
	  ○ First some official explanation about the research protocol, confidentiality, etc.
	  ○ Then some general questions about your role and how you got involved
		• To introduce the reason for the interview.
		• To inform about the interview structure.
		• To ask explicit permission for recording.
		• To explain the research protocol: confidentiality and data usage.
		• To facilitate a welcoming atmosphere.

	○ And then more specifically to the BIP • Inform that the interview will be confidential and that the data will be used anonymously. • Data will be used for my PhD research and possible subsequent publications. • Inform that I will afterwards transcribe the data and will send the transcript to the interviewee to check whether they agree with the transcript and whether they want to add or change anything. • Inform that they can decide at any moment not to discuss a certain topic or to inform me later to withdraw the information. • Do you have any questions before we start?	
Clarify the role in the BIP	• Could you please tell me what your current professional role is? • Could you explain a little more about how this relates to your role in the BIP?	• To clarify the teacher's role in the BIP. • To understand the process of the teacher's involvement in the BIP (as a visiting teacher).
Clarify the process of the BIP	• Could you tell me about the process of how you became involved in the BIP?	• To understand the process of the BIP.
Experience of the BIP	• Could you elaborate on your experience of the BIP? • What are your overall thoughts on the BIP?	• To start very openly to explore the experience of the BIP from a teacher's perspective.
Teaching approach & learning goals	• Did you experience it as similar or differing from a "normal" course that you would teach? • How did you prepare for the course and the teaching? Were there any specific instructions given? • What were the main learning goals?	• To explore whether the BIP was approached differently compared to the "normal" course. • To explore whether the teaching approach was adapted to the BIP format.

	• How were these set? / Have these been met? • What do you think of the students' outputs"?	• To explore whether the teaching approach was adapted to take into account the diversity. • To explore whether any internationalisation objectives (among ICC) were included in the LGs or any "soft" skills. • Also to discover if any instructions on this were given.
Online part	• What do you think of the combination of this blended format? The combination of online lectures with a physical component. • How was the online part set up? • How do you look back at this?	• To explore experiences of the online part.

Exploration of internationalisation stance and understanding of ICC	• To what extent do you think the teaching and learning arrangements across the programme encouraged student engagement in intercultural interaction and international experience?
	  ○ Do you think this is relevant?
	  ○ Where you asked to take this into account?
	• What, for you, is the most compelling reason to internationalise HE?
	• BIPs are by the EU introduced as a new "more inclusive" method for IHE, what do you think students gain from such an experience?
	• What do you think are the benefits of BIPs?
		• To explore the rationale for BIP from a teacher's perspective.
		• To explore teacher's understanding if and how BIPs relate to IHE initiatives and the enhancement of students' ICC.

	• If normally these courses run for “local” students, then what according to you could be the reasons for now running it as a BIP?	
Any advice	• What do you think went specifically well during this BIP? • Do you identify any areas for improvement? • Any advice for future teachers or organisers of BIPs?	• To understand from a teacher’s perspective on how BIPs can be improved.
Closure with an open-ended question	• Are there any other questions, issues, considerations, or discussion topics you would like to raise or that you think I should pay attention to?	• To give the possibility for the teacher to express any questions, issues, considerations or discussions on the topic that interests them and haven’t been addressed yet.

Appendix VIII - Interview guide for organisers/teachers

As with the interview guide for teachers, the interview guides in this case were also slightly tailored to each interviewee, for instance by incorporating questions that emerged from the observations or by referring to specific incidents that occurred during the BIP. In addition, the guides were adapted depending on whether the interviewee had solely an organising role or a combined organising and teaching role.

Aims:

1. Find out more about the organisational process of the BIP.
2. Find out the rationales for and objectives of the BIP from an organisational level perspective.
3. Explore if and how this BIP is seen as a method that can contribute to the IHE.
    a. How internationalisation objectives are embedded in the BIPs and;
    b. How they see BIP as a method potentially enhancing students' ICC.
4. Explore the overall experience of the BIP and possible challenges.

Table 13: Interview guide example for organisers/teachers

Theme	Optional questions	Aim
Introduction	• Before we start, do I have your permission to record this interview? • Briefly explain that the interview will probably take between 30-45 minutes but that it really depends on the topics that we will cover. It will be like a free-flow conversation where I'm just curious to learn more about the organisational side of the BIP and their reflection on the BIP.	• To introduce the reason for the interview. • To inform about the interview structure. • To ask explicit permission for recording. • To explain the research protocol: confidentiality and data usage. • To facilitate a welcoming atmosphere.

	○ First some official explanation about the research protocol, confidentiality, etc. ○ Then some general questions about your role ○ And then more specifically to the BIP • Inform that the interview will be confidential, and that the data will be used anonymously. • Data will be used for my PhD research and possible subsequent publications. • Inform that I will transcribe the data afterwards and send the transcript to the interviewee to check whether they agree with the transcript and want to add or change anything. • Inform that they can decide at any moment not to discuss a certain topic or to inform me later to withdraw the information. • Ask permission to use the data from the interview in my research. • Do you have any questions before we start?	
Role clarification	• Could you please tell me what your current professional role is? • And; how does this relate to the organised BIP?	• To clarify the role in the BIP.
Organisational process	• Could you take me through the process of how the BIP came about? ○ Why/who/when/ how • Last year, it was also organised as a BIP, could you explain to me a bit about the reasons for organising it again? ○ Last year, it was with 6 universities, while this year there are 4 involved, including one new	• To understand the organisational process of the BIP.

	partner. Could you elaborate on why there was one new partner involved? ○ Was there anything from last year that you decided to do differently now or anything specific that you kept into this year's programme?	
Rationales	• Could you explain to me what the motivations and reasons were for setting up this BIP? • If one of them is internationalisation or enhancing ICC, then follow up on this. ○ How do they see this? • If so, how is this addressed?	• To understand their rationale for the BIP and explore whether ICC is integrated as one of the rationales for organising it. Maybe the rationales will already be given in the questions above.
The programme	• How did the programme come about? • Mix between formal content and social activities? Why did they include the social activities? • How about the online sessions? ○ Why did they include them? ○ What are your thoughts about the online component? ○ Any specific choice for having them beforehand?	• To understand how the programme came about and the reasoning for the topic of the BIP and understand the process around the involvement of the visiting teachers.
Objectives of the BIP	• What were the expected outcomes of the BIP? Were there any specific learning outcomes decided upon? • To what extent have these been met? • How about the evaluation for the students, could you tell me a bit more about this process?	• To understand the expected outcomes of the BIP and whether these have been met.
Experience and reflection	• How do you reflect on the BIP? • What are your overall thoughts on the BIP?	• To explore experience of the BIP.

Exploration of internationalisation stance and understanding of ICC	• BIPs are by the EU introduced as a new "more inclusive" method for IHE, how do you see this? How is this integrated? • How do you define/see internationalisation? ○ What other "methods do you use" (if BIPs is seen as one) • What do you think are the benefits of participating in the BIPs for students?	• To explore internationalisation stance and understanding of ICC. Go more into ICC if it's mentioned. • This part is here only to address if it hasn't been addressed before. Otherwise, I would follow up on it earlier.
Advice	• If you were to organise the BIP again, is there something that you would do differently? • What advice would you give to other organisers of BIPs?	• To understand from a teacher's perspective how BIPs can be improved
Closure	• Are there any other questions, issues, considerations, or discussion topics you would like to raise? / Well, I think that is everything that I wanted to talk about. Is there anything that you would like to add or to ask me?	• To give the possibility for the teacher/organiser to express any questions, issues, considerations or discussions on the topic that interest them and haven't been addressed yet.

Appendix IX - Interview transcripts

IX.1. Interview Transcript I1

Interviewee: BIP A I Senior university staff member responsible for internationalisation I Organiser in Charge
Date: Monday, 13 November 2023
Time: 10:00-10:45 AM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 45 minutes / 36 minutes of recording

Start Record
A: Okay, so I have just started the recording. So directly to start, as I started recording; do I have your permission to record this interview?
B: Yes, you do.
A: Okay, great. So, as I quickly said before, this interview will probably take around 30 to 40 minutes and it is part of my PhD research on Blended Intensive Programmes and the data collected with it will be used in my research but also perhaps in any related publications. The data will be used anonymously, meaning that I will not mention your name whenever any data is used and it will be used confidentiality. Do you have any questions about that?
B: No, I'm fine with that.
A: Okay, so after the interview, it will probably take a few weeks before I have done so, but I will transcribe the data. Then I will send the transcription record to you. So, if you have anything to add or you would like to change, you could always let me know and I can do so. Also, if we will discuss any topics today that you feel rather uncomfortable with, you can let me know directly or you can always let me know after the interview and then I can keep it out of the data record.
Participant nods
Yes? Okay, so do you have any other questions for me about my research or protocol?
B: No, I'm ready.
A: No? Okay, perfect.

A: So, maybe to start with, could you explain me a bit more about what your role is exactly?
B: Yeah, I'm a [Senior university staff member responsible for internationalisation and, within this role, involved in FORTHEM] so that means that what I'm trying to do is to connect [the home university] to all of the activities in FORTHEM and kind of build up this strategic partnership with for that.
A: Okay, so [Senior university staff member responsible for internationalisation and, within this role, involved in FORTHEM] so working together with the other universities, if I understand correctly?
B: Yes, yes.

A: And in the summer school or BIPs, how have you been related to this?
B: Well, this was the first BIP that we did at the [the home university] and also the first summer school that we did with FORTHEM. So, as the institutional coordinator, I wanted to make sure that everything went as smoothly as possible. So, I was kind of you can say like navigating the waters, I guess. For and

helping the academics with all of the administrative support there and then I was also onsite during the summer school to help with, yeah, help with the administrative things, and then I held a little, a little intercultural communication, well, more like, more like a [nationality of home institution] culture, it's kind of a speech or an introduction when the students arrived.

A: Yes. So, you have been saying, you have been kind of navigating the summer school somehow. Could you maybe take me into the process of how this summer school came about?
B: Yes, yeah. So, the summer school is, or yeah, the summer school in entrepreneurship is an activity in the FORTHEM Erasmus+ project and so the idea was there already from the application stage of the project and the [the home university] already has a fairly strong programme in entrepreneurship at the business schools. So, and, we were trying to figure out what would be the best way to run the summer school and we liked the Blended Intensive Programme, was a new thing, and we liked the idea of it. We liked the idea of having this digital component and along with the physical summer school, because we wanted to make it a part of our kind of our, kind of like our, general offer so this 7.5 ECTS credits thing would never have been possible with just the physical component, but by stretching it to basically last 2.5/3 months then we could put more content into the programme and stretch it to be a 7.5 credit course, so that it could be, go in as an elective in the students' regular study programmes. So, that was kind of one aspect to it plus that it is kind of a goal for the [the home university] to try out the blended intensive, intensive, programmes. I had tried very hard as soon when the first new programme came, to try to get people engaged in it, and there were some people that thought it was a good idea but didn't really have the time to plan it. So, we kind of fast-tracked this because of FORTHEM through the faculty we had to go through a regular process to establish this course as a new course at [the home university] we did all of that. And for us, it was kind of a first try, let's keep our fingers crossed that this BIP works well because then it could be a pattern, then it could be something that other people do.
A: Yes.
B: It could be something that other, that other people, that other people do. So that was so the process was first like internally getting this, they, it has to go through the faculty board to get the course itself approved. So that went well. And then we advertised in you know FORTHEM on the website there and I thought it was a very, very, very short deadline for the applicants, but we had almost 90 applicants, I think. I think we had 90 applicants in the end which was a lot more than we were expecting, but the real negative, the real downside was that we didn't have any [national students from the home university] applicants. So, our internal process there, something went wrong there, so that our students didn't get enough information to choose that elective. It was, it was open for all of our, all of our home-based [national students from the home university] students but it seems like we didn't, that wasn't enough. We should have promoted it much more actively, and that was definitely the plan, but I think somewhere that fell through.

A: Because from the [the home university], I understood that there were exchange students from the [the home university].
B: Yes.
A: But not "home students"?
B: Yes, exactly, yes. And I think that is because the, because the course was offered in English, it came up on the list for exchange students very clearly.
A: Okay.
B: But it seems to not have come up on the list of electives that our home-based students could choose. That I think the problem was. Or, it could be that our home-based students have a lot of variety of what they can choose and maybe they saw that this was a one-week strange one-week summer school kind of thing and with the digital component and didn't want to choose that, we really don't know, and we really

don’t know what the problem is there, we really don’t know, but we know that the next time we do something like this, we have to make a special, you know a special way of marketing it to the [national students from the home university] students to make sure that we have [local nationality] in the course. That was also something that the students who participated complained about and with good reason that they didn’t meet any [local nationality], yes.
A: Yes. And as I mean, as an organisational, as an organisational university, for how many home students were you aiming for? Do you have any…
B: We were hoping to have like 5 home students, five to 10, yeah.
A: Yes, yes, a little gap there.

A: And about, so the summer school if I understood correctly, already existed before but then in another form?
B: No, no, it was completely new. It was just, no, it was, no. It didn’t exist. They had something called an entrepreneurship lab but it was different so this was a completely new course for…
A: So, it was something within the entrepreneurship group within FORTHEM to organise the summer school?
B: Yes, so it was a proposal. So, yes, what you are saying. It was a proposal in the application that we should, that we, would run for summer schools in the four years, but we had to create, create it. So, it was just an idea at that stage, yeah.

A: Yes, and then the 7.5 ECTS that was chosen was in order to make it a full course that home students could also participate in as well?
B: Yeah, exactly, yes.
A: Okay, I understand.
B: And it’s not necessarily going to be that way for the others. No. So the next summer school for entrepreneurship is going to be in [one of the FORTHEM partner universities] and it will be up to them to decide if they are going to use run it as a BIP or how many credits and all of that, so that it could be, could take on a completely different form next year.
A: Yes. And, would you recommend them for organising it as a BIP as such?
B: I would. I would, and especially because I just spoke to [the Vice Dean] about it and they were really, really happy with the, with the digital component of it, and they said that they saw that the students really learned a lot of soft skills after the fact in that kind of time, and listening to them talk about it, I thought okay, now you can advertise for this, and this is why, this is the real added value of the BIP. So now that we have that experience, I think that we should be able to do more of them and I hope that it is something that, that a lot of people will start using. So, I recommended it for the two summer schools that we are going to have in the in 2024, and that we do it this way. I think the digital component, it gives you kind of like more depth of learning and all of these soft skills came as a real bonus, yes.
A: Because these soft skills were not necessarily intended from the beginning?
B: No.
A: No?
B: Not really. I mean we were, they thinking very much about the learning outcomes in terms of entrepreneurship and not really this kind of, not really, very conscious, I don't think about the teamwork aspect of it and the presentation skills aspect of it. And like making sure that everyone will have to deliver and participate in order for everyone to succeed. So, yeah, I think that came a little bit as of an unintended. It seemed that way when I talked to [Vice Dean] anyway.
A: Yes, well, it is always good to have like, positive unintended outcomes.
B: Absolutely, yes, yes.

A: And, so just to ask, you were talking about the BIP, also because of the digital component but were there also other reasons why you chose for it to organise it as a Blended Intensive Programme?
B: Well, we had the money here already through Erasmus+, so it was a little bit like we knew we were trying to think creatively about how could we get the scholarships for the students as well. And, but then, as it turned out, the, not very many of our partner universities in FORTHEM had the money set aside for the scholarship. So, many of the students that came, ended up coming with the FORTHEM scholarship and we haven't finished the reporting yet, so we don't know how many people used the regular Erasmus+ and how many people used the FORTHEM. So, it was a mix in terms of the scholarships, but that was also a primary reason was to be able to allow more students to come with a stipend by doing it, by doing it as a BIP.
A: Yes, because if I understood correctly, I have been talking with the FORTHEM office here at the University of Burgundy, and they told me that they did not send their students on with BIP funding.
B: Yes, correct.
A: But as organisers, you organised it including Blended Intensive Programme funding and then the sending institutions kind of sorted it out whether it was a BIP funding or FORTHEM funding?
B: Exactly, exactly.
A: Okay.
B: Exactly, yes.

A: But it was, it was, if I understand, intended to also send the students with BIP funding or was it really something up to the different universities?
B: When we started it, the intention was that they would use the BIP funding because we didn't have any FORTHEM scholarship funding. And then what happened was that they reallocated so suddenly we had some FORTHEM scholarship funding as well. So, then it was up to the universities to say, okay, maybe we have two from two with FORTHEM funding and one with BIP and or maybe all BIP, but I don't know what scholarships everyone ended up with in the end, yet. Once they, so with the BIP reporting now, all of the universities will have to register their students as participants and then they have to say whether they had a scholarship or not.
A: Okay, so, that is something that is still like in progress of finding out.
B: Yes, I think so. I think so. I need, I could check with our Erasmus+ coordinator here, he is the one that is doing all of that administrative work, reporting.
A: Yes.

A: And, about the Blended Intensive Programme, if I understood like you wanted to organise something within entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, but could you maybe tell me a bit more about what the rationales or motives were for organising this?
B: They have had kind of an idea about a summer school for a long time at the business school. So, they kind have always were internationally oriented and they kind of always have wanted to do something like this. And in terms of entrepreneurship and they thought, oh well FORTHEM would be a good opportunity, and then this kind of gave a framework and then this was very much of a "let's do it!" kind of a thing. And then [the Vice Dean] pitched in some ideas and said, well, this crowdfunding is kind of something we are very good at, we have a centre for crowdfunding here. And people really liked that idea, so then that became like the focus of the first one and then the one in [one of the FORTHEM partner institutions] will have a different focus and on, and on, and on kind of a thing. So that was really the motivation of it, was to sort of, like, I mean that team is very much of a "why not, let's do it, this sounds very much like a fun kind of thing". But then, I also mean for us at the university, the credit, the credit point, the credit production is important for us, and that is something that increases all of our

numbers, you know. This is something for us we report on, so for us, the more credit the better, this is a good way to get more credits, kind of a thing as well. Definitely. That is a motivation.
A: So, I'm sorry to ask but how does it work? Like the more credits the better for the [the home university] like the more courses that you provide the better?
B: Yes, yes. Well, the more credit, the more credit production. So, it is students completing more credits, results in money for the university in [country of the home university].

A: Okay, okay. So, also is it there are international students from other universities who produce credits that it is beneficial?
B: Yes.
A: And from what I understood from what you first said, like okay, we have this idea of a Blended Intensive Programme and then we tried to search other people that are also enthusiastic, was it easy to bring people on board?
B: So, with this one that we started because it was in the framework of FORTHEM it all made sense. So that was fine but previous to that, I talked to other academics that were interested in doing something, a summer school or a winter school or something like this, before FORTHEM, so that was before FORTHEM, outside of it. And so, I floated this idea of the Blended Intensive Programmes and all of the academics were like "oh, that is really interesting". Okay. So how can we, you know how much funding is in it? And it is like well, it is not much, it is just a little token and they were still just sort of like "okay, but that is all right, I wanted to do this course anyway. And then the administrators are like well, "this is going to be so much work", and "this doesn't fit into the study programs as it is", and "I just don't see how this is going to work and definitely not this year", so those became completely torpedoed. But it was because it was in FORTHEM and we did already kind of committed to doing this and [Vice Dean] is a very, very, positive person so they kind of like drove it through.

A: Yes. So, were you involved in the application for the Blended Intensive Programme in order to get the funding?
B: Yeah, I helped [the Vice Dean] with that but basically the way that we have it here is that we contacted our Erasmus+ coordinator with the plan for the, the plan for the study, for the course, after it was approved by the faculty and we said we would like to run it as a Blended Intensive Programme. And, he said fine, you know, you need at least 15 students to get this funding and yeah here we go.

A: Yes, so you just told me a bit about the objectives, were mainly also the credits and also because the [the home university] is well known for its entrepreneurship and crowdfunding courses, but by the European Union, Blended Intensive Programmes have been introduced as kind of an "inclusive" internationalisation method, how do you see this?
B: I think that that is the best intention of the BIP and I think we missed the mark on that. I don't think we did that with this BIP, because ideally, what you would like to see is more students participating digitally, whereas here, because the way that it is the BIP is actually described, you can do what we did now which is a physical component and a digital component. I think that the intention with the BIP would have been that that digital component would have included a 100 more students in [country of the home university], for example. We didn't do it that way but that is the way I would like to do it in the future, that is the way how I would like to do it, that is the intention of the BIP. So, I think that we were inside the framework, but we did the minimum of what the BIP was intended to do.
A: The minimum in regards of the internationalisation objectives here?
B: Yeah, we should have been able to get a lot more home students involved and we didn't do that.
A: But would you then involve them onsite or in the digital part of the BIP?

B: I would have definitely involved them in the digital part of it even if we hadn't managed to. But, and like, even say you would have had five [local nationality] students in the physical part of it and then later on included a 100, in a, just a regular you know regular bachelor programme, included them somehow in the digital component of it that would have been much, that would have been what I would have wanted. But what we did is that we had this format for the summer school and forced it into the BIP instead of really using the idea behind the BIP.

A: Okay, so the format was there and then in order to fit it into the BIP framework instead of the other way around?

B: Yeah, yeah. If we are being honest, that is what happened there. So, when and there is a little bit back to, you know, when they, when the BIP idea first came out and I started going around to try to find people to do this on and oh this is great. Then I was thinking very much more like okay and this is an opportunity for our students to have an international classroom and some of them will get to go abroad and that is really when the administrators were like this is going to be very, very, difficult to organise. And a lot of it is because the students who are taking a bachelor's degree they need to be here. How can they just go run away for a week to Germany or whatever? And so that is why that ideal format of a BIP didn't take off in the first round. But now I think with the [Vice Dean]'s experience we can use that in example and then add on that layer of what is supposed to be there to include the home students, yeah.

A: Yes, because perhaps it also takes more time to organise for the administrators…

B: It definitely does. It takes, I mean it takes planning. You need to be more than a year ahead, so the, at the whole plan, needs to be in place a year ahead in order for it to work well and for our students, because of timetabling and things like that.

A: Yes.

B: So, that is the thing. But now we have a little bit of an idea of it. And I haven't seen any of the BIPs yet that have worked, that have worked that way, the way that they are actually intended. So, I hope that it is going on at other places and that you find other examples that are more with that intention the internationalisation at home intention, the inclusion.

A: Because it is something, it is something that is still, even though it is now introduced since like two years, it is still something that is really in development and it is just the first ones are being organised.

B: Right.

A: So, I think that is also why it is so important to study these and to help teachers and organisers of how to set these up in different perspectives.

B: Yeah, yes, and how to get that inclusion? And, I completely agree, yes.

A: And, you said maybe you will organise future Blended Intensive Programmes as well?

B: Yes.

A: Would you have any other things you would do differently or any advice that you would give to future organisers?

B: Yeah, definitely keeping an eye on the home students and what is in it for them. So, that was the big, that was the big failure. I would say for sure. And I mean, I would also involve more lecturers from the other universities. So, we only had [visiting teacher from one of the FORTHEM partner institutions] in on the journey. So, on the jury, so, I would have shared the teaching more with lecturers from the other universities as well.

A: And why wasn't that the case this time?

B: There was kind of an open offer to do it, but I think again it was because of that it was such a, it was organised so quickly with such a short amount of time, that the people who are working on the entrepreneurship task didn't really know each other well enough. So, [visiting teacher from one of the FORTHEM partner institutions] was the only one who said yes, we were hoping that someone from

[other FORTHEM partner institutions] would also join on, but I think it was just a time issue. So, I think in the future, definitely the one that's happening in [one of the FORTHEM partner institutions] is already going to have more variety. So, someone from [country of the home institution] will be there and someone from [another FORTHEM partner institution] will be there so that will be more diverse, more international really.

A: Okay, so with the objective of being more international and more diverse set of teachers.

B: More variety, yeah. Yes, more perspectives you know, perspectives from different countries.

A: Yes, and if I may ask you, how did the programme came together because there was first the social activities in the evening and then during the day there was the course, how was this organised? Was this set together with the team or?

B: Yes. We just sat together with a team of about six of us that worked out the whole programme and everything, and we really sat down and thought how what would be fun, would be fun, and what can we do? And then we went out and figured out what the costs were for all of these things and what could we afford to do to make that? To give the students like a taste of the best of [country of the home university] during the summer.

A: Yes, and is that why you included this crash course on [local nationality] culture as well?

B: Yes, yes, definitely, because I mean I looked at [principal teacher] their programme and you know, I'm just like wait a second there is nothing about [country of the home university] and we need something about [country of the home university] in here, so then I put that in, yes, yes.

A: Yes, and why did you felt that this was important to include?

B: Well, I just think that the context is really important and you know you have to make the most out of, you know, when you are here for a week, a little bit of context like what is happening around you with the [country of the home university] culture. And I think it became even more important when we didn't have the have [national students from the home university] students there too, so that so, you know, why did you come to [country of the home university]? Why? Why? You know, what is it about [country of the home university] that that maybe can give you a context for entrepreneurship? And how does entrepreneurship work in [country of the home university]? Kind of everything.

A: Yes, yes, and as well, I know you did a survey with the students as well about their experiences of the BIP and that they were like the experiences were highly positive from the survey as well.

B: Yes.

A: How would you reflect back on the process?

B: Yes, well I mean I was really happy with the results from the survey. I think it has a lot you know to do with you have got some good students, motivated students. They were very kind to each other, they were very nice with each other, they worked a lot in teams as well. I think a lot of them really appreciated that way of working and I think that [principal teacher], [Vice Dean], [visiting teacher from one of the FORTHEM partner universities] created a really, a really nice learning environment. So, I'm really happy that everything went that way and then as I said I was disappointed that there weren't [national students of the home university] in there and they didn't actually experience working with [nationality]. So, it was a very international thing, but not a very [country of the home university] thing. So, I don't think that those students that came here experienced a [country of the home university] classroom what it is like to be a student in [country of the home university]. No, they didn't. They experienced what it is like to be on an Erasmus+ exchange and it could have been anywhere.

A: Yes.

B: So that is my honest opinion about it. We didn't dose into the [country of the home university] aspect as well and especially you know, our primary lecturer also wasn't [nationality of the home university] you know, so that is kind of what I would reflect upon. The students definitely appreciated all of the social

stuff as well, I'm a little worried that we went overboard on that and that it might be difficult for our other partners to match that. So, I have a few concerns about that. Another like learning point is that we opened it out to students from both Bachelor and Master level. Now I have advised the other people that are applying for BIPs or shorter things to set the level either Bachelor, Master or PhD, don't try combining them. So, that is another thing that I would change.

A: Because why? Why would you not combine them? Do you think there was a lot of differences in level with the students that came?

B: Yes, I think that is it, yes, and the students said that so.

A: Okay, so yes, I'm just looking at because I just have some themes listed and I'm just looking if I still have something that I haven't covered yet.

B: Yes.

A: So, I think these were maybe, oh yes only… So, 90 students applied for the to attend the BIP, and then how did you do the selection procedure, if I may ask? Because they had to write a motivation letter if I understood correctly and they had to fill in like a short online questionnaire.

B: Yes, yes. So, we looked at, we wanted to give students, this was part of the inclusion aspect, we wanted to give students who hadn't been on a regular Erasmus semester a chance, so that was one of the criteria that we looked at. We checked that all of them had the like said that they had the language skill, the B2, I think it was requirement. And then we looked purely at motivation, but also a little bit at the mix like what was their background we didn't want to just have business students so we thought as an asset as they were coming from different academic areas. So, for most of the countries, there were you know 3 applicants so it was quite easy but then for especially from [country X] we had a lot of applicants and for [Country Y] we had a lot of applicants so for them we looked at the motivation and then the mix.

A: Okay and the University provided this selection for the other universities?

B: We made our recommendations, we made a ranking, and then we let the universities make the final selection.

A: Yes, yes it is also something I think from my opinion that you saw back within the class is that a lot of students had came from different Bachelor or Master background from different disciplines and it's yeah.

B: Yes, yes, we thought that that was exciting but that makes the selection quite difficult when you are trying to do this because it is not necessarily the most motivated person. You know, if you have got 3 motivated from business and you will only take the one top motivated there and go for the most motivated from computer science for example but that is what we did. We did in fact do that.

A: Okay, and were there any major challenges within organising this whole BIP? Is there something that you think oh like that was really an obstacle that we had to overcome?

B: I guess the biggest challenge was, you know, the housing, we don't, we couldn't provide student housing, we couldn't provide reasonable housing, so we tried to do the…make the best out of it with the hotel, the hotels that we had and then the students were a little bit up on their own for booking hotels or Airbnbs or things like that. So, it would have been really great if we could have had them in student housing.

A: Okay, is that something that came back in the feedback from the students or?

B: No, actually no, it didn't no.

A: Okay, so it is something you felt that could have been an added benefit?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to express or any future recommendations for people who are organising Blended Intensive Programmes? Or about the process itself?
B: I mean, I would really, I would really like to see examples of how you do, how you get that inclusion component and how that you actually internationalise the classroom and do it maybe more as a combination of the physical thing as a reward for, you know, like as a reward in a way for participation in a digital component. So, to make it more of like you have got a regular offer of courses in, say three of the different universities and then you involve, maybe, you know, fifty students from each university and then 5 from each university actually participate in a physical thing. I would like to see more examples of that and I would like to see us doing that, I did like to learn how to do that. So, I would like to push toward using the BIPs more in the way that they are intended instead of more like we can get away with this to get some extra money to fund it, to put it, that is putting it very bluntly and very honestly.
A: Yes, so like on a larger scale in which also internationalisation at home is included.
B: Yes, yes absolutely.

A: And how, just like one last question that I'm just curious about myself. Like how would you see this internationalisation perspective besides different students from different nationalities coming together?
B: I think that the team, the teamwork aspect of it is, is very, very important and I think that also if you manage to do this kind of overtime for a whole semester, that you have got not just one digital component, but you are meeting digitally once a week for example, then just by virtue of seeing things from different perspectives. And I would do, I mean, as we did with the summer school, the problem-based learning and gives you a really, really, great opportunity for that and then I think, you know, they the idea of supporting students with a little bit more, more like in cultural communication skills along the way would be, it would be doable because you would have the time if you stretched it out over the full semester.
A: Because is it that within this summer school the time was just too short within those 5 days?
B: Yes, as it was [principal teacher] had to compromise, they had to compromise a lot. They wanted to do a lot more academic, academic stuff. So yeah, it was just too short far too short.

A: Yes, okay. Well, thank you very much for all of your insights. It is very interesting to speak with you and to learn from how this all came about from an organisational matter as well. So, thank you very much. I don't know if you have any questions for me?
B: No, no it is a pleasure. I look forward to reading your data and reading your thesis when you are finished.
A: Yes, thank you. Okay, I will now just quickly stop the recording.

IX.2. Interview Transcript I2

Interviewee: BIP A I University teacher in entrepreneurship-related subjects I Leading teacher throughout the BIP
Date: Wednesday, 22 November 2023
Time: 09:15-09:55 AM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 40 minutes / 31 minutes of recording

Start Record

A: Yes, I think the recording is now on. Yes, it is good.
B: Yes.
A: OK. So, [name of the interviewee], thank you very much again for making time available. I have just pressed the recording of the interview. Do I have your permission to record the interview?
B: Yes, sure.
A: Okay, thank you. So, today it will be, it will be like kind of a discussion. So, it is not an interview where I have like specific questions ready, but it is more discussion where I'm just more curious about your experience of the summer school and to learn more from your thoughts about it. So, I have certain questions that I might want to cover, but furthermore, it's really like a free-flow conversation where you can just address any points that you believe are important.
B: Yeah, yeah.
A: It will probably take around 30 to 40 minutes, but it really depends on the topics that we will cover or not. I will first start with saying a bit more first about the official research protocol and then I will just ask you some general questions about the summer school.
B: Yeah, yeah.
A: So, the basis of my research is based on that it will be anonymous. So, even though we are doing this interview, I will try my best to make it anonymous afterwards which means that your name will not be reflected in any of the research. The data from this interview and also from the observation will be used in my PhD research and subsequent publications. After this interview, I will transcribe all the data and then I will send it to you as well. So, there you have still the opportunity to see if you want, if anything, you prefer to have out of the interview. Also, if we discuss anything or I ask any questions that you rather don't want to answer, feel free to just let me know and always after the interview, you can still contact me as well to keep anything out of it.
B: Yes, yes.
A: Yes? So, do you have any questions about my research protocol or about my research itself?
B: Not really. I think, I think when you, you joined us during the summer we had some talks around it in informal ways so I think I am a bit briefed about it. So, there is not much to ask about it at the moment as I know. I hope it is gonna go well and I hope that you will get some interesting findings for your PhD.
A: Yes, yes, thank you. It is just this discussion is mainly to… I mean if we haven't discussed things yet during the week in [country of the home university] to see if there is anything that we missed that is still important.
B: Yes, yes.

A: Okay. So, during the week in [city of the home university], you were the main teacher of the course…
B: Yes.
A: But to start, could you maybe clarify a bit more about your role and how you came into the summer school as well?
B: So, well regarding my role, I have been teaching some entrepreneurship programmes here at the [the home university] and these programmes involve different groups of people. I mean, we have entrepreneurship for the... I had business students themselves, I mean those who are enrolled in the business administration and business-related courses, they have entrepreneurship courses for this group of people. And we also have entrepreneurship programmes for different groups of students, for example, the engineering students, they ask students and other stuff. So, I would say, I mean, teaching this programme for some time and not only entrepreneurship, also been teaching entrepreneurial finance, specific courses, like crowdfunding, also for different groups of people. And then, so when I was invited to take on this, this course, this summer school, I was interested but I didn't know that they were

coming from different backgrounds, like from law, some from arts, some from psychology, business, you know. I didn't know that.

A: Yes, yes.

B: But then that was a nice experience to see this kind of different group of students in the same class, you know, because as I mentioned before, of course, I've been teaching these different groups of people, but not combined in the same class.

A: Yes.

B: So that was a nice experience. And so that is that, yeah. Yeah, so I was just invited and I was asked if I have time to take on this and I am like, OK, yeah, why not? Let's do it! I think it is gonna be fun. So, and then I, yeah, then I put together some teaching materials. Try to, you know, not load it a lot as compared to other programmes. I mean one week wasn't that much. I did my best to not overload it but it was loaded, but it was too loaded in a way because you know new environment for the students and everything. So, but overall, it was a nice experience actually, yeah.

A: Yeah. So, just to clarify, you weren't aware of the different backgrounds of the students until you were actually teaching the summer school?

B: So, I didn't get, I didn't know until the, you know, when I was invited like okay can you handle this and I was like yeah okay I can do that. Then, I mean I was involved from the beginning that was like the admission progress, who can apply, but I didn't know that they were coming from different fields of studies, you know. Then we got to this and then I tried to kind of adjust the teaching material so that it doesn't become very, very, complex or complicated in a way to make it simpler so that people can really, really, really buy into it, so.

A: Yes.

B: So, I think maybe what could be done…Again, is maybe from the beginning those teachers that will be handling these programmes saying okay in these programmes we involve students from diverse backgrounds, different level of studies, for example, maybe Masters or PhD or people from the industry or whatever it is, and yeah, if that could be mentioned that would be great for the teachers in preparing their teaching materials.

A: Yes, because you said once you knew, you tried to adjust it to make it a bit easier, but how did you try to do so?

B: Yeah. So, you know, of course I did prepare my teaching materials for the whole session, but then after every meeting, I know, okay, this will be very complicated for them. So, it's either I change the content little bit or I choose to change the delivery style, right?

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: Yeah. So, you see like I either changed the content somehow in a way or changed the delivery style so that you know people can really buy into it. So, these were the areas and that this was based on the feedback that I was getting from the students.

A: Yes.

B: Okay, some were really up to it, you know, some just, some will get it because I understand they have different level of understanding, different level of education, masters and bachelors students. So, you get it and then some too did not get it such adjustments in them you know, modifications were made based on the level of the class so anybody there in the class should get something, so I tried to change as I said, change the delivery style or change the content of the teaching material, which I mean was a bit extra work to do.

A: Yes.

B: But again, we were there to create a positive impact for the students.

A: And I mean, you already mentioned the diversity in the class, what kind of impact do you think this had on the course overall?

B: I think the diversity was great, it was amazing. And I mean they have different perspectives, different views. When it comes to their level of understanding, and even on of how they relate to each other. It wasn't just a diversity in in the field of studies, but also diversity nationality, culture and this also comes with how they deal with the other students, the other students that they are working with. Remember, they worked in groups for, you know, a very intense week working in groups, different culture, different level of understanding, but I mean, that was the beauty of it. And, but, there were certain challenges as well. You know. Dealing…I mean, if you are in a group where you expect your group member to have this certain level of understanding and this group, this group member is not showing up to that standard it is… I mean, if you are part of this group, you of course exhibit some, some, dissatisfaction, which could probably lead some group problems. And, but I think overall the challenge was to make sure that despite all these differences, the students can work together, and as you recognise, we have some other initiatives outside the teaching kind of the teaching programmes to, to, to handle these issues in the groups.

A: Yes.

B: And, so, I think this is this after that could be also brought into consideration because you cannot take away the diversity that is the important thing you want to bring it from different background, different cultures but again they should be informed and told that they will work with different people that you don't know and this is one of the reasons of why you are going on the exchange or why you are here to join the FORTHEM programme. But again, they should be psyched up. Not here to learn the course, but also to learn how to deal with different people from different backgrounds in terms of culture, in terms of field of study, in terms of knowledge level.

A: Yes.

B: I think once they are told this, they, they will try to work in a cohesive manner.

A: Yeah. And how would you see that this would be, would be integrated? Kind of like a side programme in it? Or specific teachers come into place to discuss these kinds of things? Or how would you see that?

B: I think, even though at that level, I think you should start from the beginning. The students they should be informed, it should be part of the application process. Okay, this is the environment of the programme, you are going to meet people from different countries who probably might not even speak your language, different level of understanding. So, you should be someone who is open minded and willing to work in different groups, right. So, that the students are kind of psyched up, they know what they are, they know what they are going to deal with, I mean, in a way. And also, we should also have, I mean we don't necessarily have to have different teachers coming in to talk about how to cope with issues, I think this is part of the learning process as well, but my main point is this should be clearly stated in during the application process. Okay, this is the working, the environment of the programme. Okay you are travelling, it is one week it is intense, it is summer you want to have fun, you are going to work with people that you don't know. So, expect more pressure than normal, yeah.

A: So, did you feel that at like this time the students were kind of under-prepared for that? For the workloads and maybe for the diversity?

B: Some of them. Some of them. You know I think some of them knew. Not just, not just, I feel like the workload I tried to reduce it as much as possible because of the allocated ECTS you know but then it was…You know people were not willing to work in groups but again I think working in groups is one of the learning, the learning experience that we want to have. That we want the students to kind of take with them. Otherwise, you can just do your work individually and submit, fine, but that wasn't the objective of this programme. You are travelling to meet people, to learn the course, and learn from how to plan and work together with other colleagues because in the real world that's how it works. So, I think

the challenge is not informing them in advance, so maybe in the next, the next arrangement this should be part of probably the application process or even when there is an interview. The issue, I don't know if there is an interview, I'm not 100% sure?

A: This time there wasn't an interview selection I believe.

B: Okay. So, if there, if there is an interview maybe, maybe they can also explicitly mention this, but this is the working environment and of course it's summer school but they are not going to have summer, you are going to school, so yeah, yeah.

A: So, the school part is important here?

B: Yes, yeah, that is good, the school part it is important, yes.

A: So, you have already said a bit about like that the students maybe put in like a bit less work, but how did you see it? Like…because you also normally teach this programme to, for example, the engineering students you told me or in the business programme, did you experience this summer school as different from that?

B: Yeah, I mean, not to say less work. Some of the groups really worked hard, you know? Some really worked hard, even beyond the one week that they were here, when they left somewhere, sending emails, arranging meetings, asking questions, some were here, they really were working hard, right. And, so, I will not say that they work less. It was just their in-group issues that led to some people being reluctant and not just reluctant and you know when you want to deal with something you cannot deal with it, you might end up, you know, okay, losing interest in a way. Regarding the comparison with the courses that I have been teaching, especially you mentioned the engineering students, is you know…I think… Again, the only difference is having different fields of study in one single classroom. Me as a teacher, it was a great experience for me, right? Because it's a way to see how you can adjust with different learning experiences and different learning curves, different orientations in this whole classroom. And I think, it is a challenge, but there lies a beauty within this challenge, and I think that is…they can continue with that. That is great. That is amazing. I would prefer handling these classes with different background than having business students in the class, right. So, I think they should continue on doing that, but then, I don't know how they, they may arrange the future programmes, but one thing could be that if it's masters, fine. If it's bachelor fine. And again, if they want to blend these, that is also fine. But then they should let the students know, right, I think they should know. I think the students were not even informed until they arrived. That okay, oh okay, this is a bachelor student, this is a master student. They didn't know. So, maybe. And also, my main point was like the environment, different place, new environment, new people, you are going to meet people from different fields of study, some will be having masters. The students should be informed about this, right? So, that they become more open to what the, the, I mean they are going to be asked to do. So, once they are going to get this information ahead of time, I think they can really prepare.

A: Yes, so preparation here.

B: Yes, yes, exactly.

A: And so, how about the learning objectives, I mean, assuming that you created learning objectives for the course, did you adjusted them throughout the course when you found out about the different disciplines?

B: No, I mean that, no the learning objectives didn't change. And nothing was changed when it comes to the course and expectations. It is just that I found out, I mean during this reviews I managed to find a different delivery style you know, to make sure the impact or the objective for the course is delivered. So, the objectives for the course itself did not change. What was changed was the delivery style and sometimes I modified the course content. I mean I didn't take anything away, but just how to make it much easier, examples that I gave, for instance, yeah.

A: And so, what were the main learning objectives if I may ask?
B: I mean, we have, we listed it on the course programme. I cannot remember everything I have heard, but then one was clearly was to being able to set up your own business plan and identifying an idea which starts with your idea identification, idea generation, refining this idea and looking into the market potentials, and being able to put all these together in a proper business plan which includes all the values and everything through marketing as I expect. As I mentioned to you, financials and putting this campaign out there, you know. So, the idea was more, it wasn't like a course theory-based course, we wanted to have the practical aspect, you know. So, and after you got to know, some of the students got to work on ideas that they were really into, some also got the idea from the idea generation stage. So…so that was that was the expectation and I think we managed to get it in our… I was amazed from the…regarding the final delivery that we received from the students in the end.
A: Yes, yes, because I was actually wondering about, because of course I was attending the final presentations as well.
B: Yes, yes.
A: But how do you overall feel about the deliveries from the students?
B: Yeah, I think you know, they some of them managed to, not even some of them, I think I'll say they managed to work you know overcome some of the differences when they left. You know because I think they had when they left they had to continue working with each other for like a month or two months or something. So, you know, then you get to, you get to know each other.
A: Yes, around two months.
B: You know how people express themselves, so that really helps. And, also, I was hoping, okay let me know if you need any help, if you need any guidance after they left until they deliver their final project also for necessary, that was very important as well. I mean we are, we are teaching two main courses in one week, right? So that was very intense. I must accept that, but then we only tackle the important both theoretical and practical issues that were necessary in achieving the course objectives that we highlighted.
A: Yes, and so about, I mean the online part…Included two online meetings and the students were expected to meet during this online part together in their groups, right?
B: Yes.
A: How was this? How was this set up? I mean where you specifically asked to include this online part or…
B: No, I yeah, that was part of the course programme. It was part of it from day one. If so, if you go to the course websites the two university websites was that, there are two online meetings sessions, that was there. But what was in part was that there were real normal emails. Like Hey, [name of the interviewee] if you have time you like to, you have 10 minutes, if you will have a question, then okay. Then yeah, these were not part of it, but there were these two online sessions that were part of the programme.
A: Yeah. So, furthermore, you offered support throughout if students had questions or not.
B: Exactly, exactly.

A: And, so, we refer to it as a summer school but this summer school has been organised as a blended intensive programme, were you aware of that?
B: Once more, if you can come again, I didn't get that.
A: Yes, so I mean it's called the summer school in entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, but it has been organised as a blended intensive programme.
B: Yeah.
A: Are you aware of this or are you familiar with the term?
B: Yes, I mean I have, I had blended programmes and other stuff, but I mean, I don't know if you mean something specific in here. Maybe you can explain further?

A: Yes, so, under Erasmus they have introduced these blended intensive programmes as a type of funding for which then the university or institutions can organise these kind of programmes, get funding for it, and the students are being sent on these programmes and it's like different from a normal exchange in the sense of that…
B: Yes, yes.
A: It is a short-term mobility, including an online element.
B: Yes, yeah. So, I mean that is and I think this course had all these elements that you mentioned in it, it is just that the intensive part you know this is part of the name, but I don't feel that the students are aware that it is intense.
A: Mm-hmm.
B: You know, we should, and again this goes back to the environment, we should outline in a very clear manner this is the expectation: it is gonna be one week, it is very intensive, you know, so that they can get themselves ready for what is coming, Yeah.
A: Yeah.
B: So, I think the students should be well informed during the application process, but this is, this is how it is going to work. And okay, summer school "YEEEAY, I want to go!" And then you come in and it is very intensive and you are kind of, you know, surprised in a way.
A: Did you have the feeling that the students were surprised after the first day?
B: So, yeah. I mean, I mean, the first lecture that is a normal observations, you know. Some students will have okay, okay, there is a lot to do, you know? And it is the same. It is okay you have the same feeling so, but that was normal.
A: Yeah.
B: And some were also curious to know oh okay, how is it going to look in the end, you know? And in the end, it was amazing I think.
A: Yeah. So, you look at it from a good experience?
B: Yeah, yeah, sure. Because some of them haven't even know what a business plan was, you know. And in the end, if you can pick, that is students for them to deliver business plan in the end, that alone is an, is an impact. So, I think the course objectives were achieved**.**
A: Yeah.
B: Yes, if you ask me, yes.
A: Well, I mean, that is great news, obviously.
B: Yep.

A: So, we have talked about the course objectives. I mean, they were, of course, entrepreneurship and crowdfunding-focused, but were you also asked to include any course objectives that have to do with the diversity of the students or with soft skills around this?
B: No, I was not asked, but I thought that was something, I mean, because you tell me to teach entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, then that is what I'm going to handle as an academic responsible, right? So, and diversity, of course, is something that I am not saying it is not important, but probably they can also make different arrangements for that if, if, if that is a necessity, right? But I think [I1] handled that, right? I1 had had a session about differences in culture or something.
A: The crash course on [country of the home university] culture that I1 did?
B: Yeah, yeah, Yeah, but you know, it also goes back to what I mentioned before, once if the students are aware of this because it is one week, it is intense, we don't have the time to wait the whole day on kind of diversity lectures, you know. Once we just let the student know that, okay, this is there, these are the expectations, and then if they are still willing to do it, then they will apply. And I think you know we received a lot of applications even more than what we were expecting.

A: Yeah, yeah, I think there were more than 90 applications, so I believe. So, there were a lot of students interested in joining this summer school, yeah.
B: And I think you know most of them expressed that they were interested based on the crowdfunding element in it, especially the business students who were already kind of introduced into entrepreneurship before. So, it depends on the subject area, maybe I don't know. Hopefully, the next session will also be amazing and great, and I think the students will also have fun.

A: Yes. So, if I may ask you, because I mean, this kind of summer school they would like to organise it next year again and then at the [FORTHEM partner university], would you have any advice for, like organisers or teachers of this programme, like in the future, what needs to be taken into account?
B: Yeah. I think my, through the whole discussion probably I have hinted on this, but to make it clear, I think the whole thing is about the information, informing the students of what they should expect. It is not just a summer school, as you mentioned, the BIPs is an intensive programme, so that you know that, that it is gonna be intense. And third, will be letting the students also know that this will, this programme involves students from different backgrounds within culture, or field of study, or level of education, you know, so this information should be given ahead of time. Pre-application, you know, the application information that is given to you. And I think, my advice would be the same thing that I did here to the teachers maybe will be also, okay, of course, you are gonna prepare as a teacher for your courses, you might have your material, but also try to listen to the students since they are different levels and see how you can adjust your materials, you know, as time goes on. When you are using examples, since it's a programme with different students from different fields of study, try to cite cases for example from it could be case from normal business environment, it could be cases from psychology or law, you know, so that everybody they are really part of the class, you know. If I'm teaching the engineering students, they have different cases that I use for them. Of course, the same title or topic, but I use different cases in such instances.
A: Yes…
B: So, cases are very important so that everybody feel that they are, they are part of it, yeah. So, I think in a in a concise way, I think this is this would be my recommendation.
A: Yeah. So, to try to adapt to these different backgrounds of the students.
B: Exactly, exactly.

A: And is there anything else that you think that I should take into account while doing my research? Or is there something that we haven't discussed yet that you think is important?
B: I mean not really, not really. So, I think what I would say is also connection, you know, to get the students involved, trying to connect from day one. I'm not saying… Just finding a way anyway that I can connect and I think teachers, always different teachers, have different teaching approaches and that would be one of my recommendations: direct connection because you know sometimes when you get connected to the students they can really deliver in a way despite the intense, the intense nature of the programme in the way. So, you can just keep them going and yeah. So, apart from that, I don't think I have any major recommendations apart from what I'm hearing so far, yeah.
A: Yes, just to be sure, like you say, connect, what do you mean with connecting to the students?
B: I mean so that they can feel open and talk to you. You know, so that he can really come up and open up and say what the challenges are, what the problems they are facing because remember, it is one week they are people, they have their own pressures from home and families there, they are in a new environment, it is one week working with people they don't know, it is a new subject that has been taught right, all that like in a day we tackle a couple of issues, you know. So, create an environment that they can say what they want to say, yeah.
A: Yeah, so, to create an open trusting environment where they…

B: Exactly, exactly, yeah, yeah.
A: Okay, well, good. Is there anything else you would like to add or?
B: Uh…no, not really. I think at this point the importance of have been covered so far.
A: Okay, well, thank you very much! I'm just going to stop the recording then, thank you!
B: Thank you!

IX.3. Interview Transcript I3

Interviewee: BIP B I University staff member in international relations I Organiser in charge
Date: Friday, 12 April 2024 at 2:30 PM CET
Time: 2:30 PM- 16:00 CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 85minutes / 72 minutes of recording

Start Record
A: I just started the recording, so just to be sure that I have it on record as well, you just said that it was okay that I would record this interview. Could you please confirm that I have this confirmation from you?
B: Yes, but do I need to confirm by clicking somewhere or?
A: I don't know if you got in your screen that it started recording or not?
B: Yeah, there is something in there, something that, that the recording has started.
A: Yes, you can click ok.
B: Yes, yes, I accept, and closed the window, so I close it, the window. But is it working?
A: Yes, for me the recording is working, so, if it is not annoying for you in your screen then it is fine.
B: Ah, yeah, okay, sure. Yes, I now see something is red!
A: Yes, it is the red dot at the left side, yes, but I will also let you know again when it stops recording so that you know when.
B: Okay, okay.
A: But in general, I would just record from now until the end of the questions and then I will stop the record.
B: But is just a recording for you?
A: Yes, yes. So, the recording is for me so that afterwards I can transcribe the interview and then I can analyse the data from the questions, so that I have it not only orally, but that I also have it on paper documented. But, whatever we will say during this interview, first of all, is confidential. So, meaning that nobody else will see the recording of this interview. The only thing is that for example, my committee of my PhD, which exists of four people, could read over the research, over the transcript of it. But in the transcript, everything will be anonymised as well. So, meaning that I will do my best that it can't be traced back to you. So, your name will not be reflected, neither any of the other details that can be reflected back to you. So, if you use for example, any of the names or places, this will be changed into fictional names or places or left out of the transcript at all.
B: Thank you, okay, okay.
A: So, it is really the basis of my whole PhD and the interviews as well is that it will be anonymous. And whenever I do, any publications or hand in my PhD or any research articles that nothing is directly used that can be traced back to you or anyone of the programme that was involved.

B: Okay, okay.
A: Yes, do you have any questions about this?
B: No, that is fine.
A: Okay. So, today's interview will mainly be just like a free-flow conversation between the two of us. We already did a little bit of debriefing, but I would like to hear more from you as well since we are now a few weeks past, perhaps you have other insights again. I have a few themes that I want to cover with you and a few specific questions, but furthermore, it is really up to what we think that is important, and it's like a two-sided conversation really. So not a traditional one-on-one interview where I will be only asking questions. So, first I will ask you a bit more about your role in the BIP and then we can go further into the experience if that is okay for you?
B: Hmm, hmm, okay.
A: Yes, so do you have any questions so far before we go further?
B: No, no.
A: Okay.
B: Sounds good, yes.
A: Okay, so, I just want to emphasise as well that after this interview I will transcribe the interview into a document, and then I will also send it to you, so that you can read over it again. And if you wish you can always rectify certain information or ask for certain changes or to leave things out. And this can be done until I hand in my PhD by the summer of next year, or by any publications. So, for that, we still have time and the opportunity to go over it as well.
B: Thank you. Yes, we talked about that. And yes, I said yes, I can help you to have a look on the document because I know it will be very useful for the other teams or professors or administrators. It depends on who is applying for the BIP or response models exchange, and I know this is very important to get the experience from the others and the good practice for instance. Yeah, it's very important to gain some time when you are doing this kind of job.
A: Yes, yes.
B: Yes, so no problem.
A: Only from analysing and experiences we can improve and help to make the process also smoother for future Blended Intensive Programmes. So, that is great.

A: So just before we start into the questions, could you maybe just clarify for me what your professional role is at the university and how this relates to the Blended Intensive Programme?
B: Okay, so I'm [University staff member in international relations at the home university]. So, I'm in charge of the mobilities of the students or professors at the [the home university] or at the [incomprehensible]. I'm in charge as well to set up some agreement between universities, and that is my main job. But I'm doing this, because we are a small campus, so I'm in charge of the validation or to add the student to apply for the financial help from Erasmus Mundus or Regional Council, yes. And, I'm in charge as well to welcome the foreign students and to help them to validate their visa or to renew their visa, dependents on the situation since how long they are here. So yeah, I'm in contact with the students from the Bachelor, Masters, it depends. And, sometimes I follow the people working in the, because people, I mean people, I said people, but I will say the employees or employers, so, any kind of questions related to the international topic, because I think I'm in the service department, but I'm alone, as you know. And, so, and people it is professor, even the others, imagine that because I'm doing some international stuff. So, they thought that I can have a reply or what? Everything related to the international problem. So, so, yeah.
A: Hmm-hmm, yes.

B: Yeah, so, I'm doing a lot of things, but my name, I think the mission is to the mobilities. So incoming students and outgoing students or professors as well. And to set up some agreements, yeah, that's our thing.

A: Yes, so a very, a very interesting and large and all-encompassing role, if I understand correctly. And could you maybe tell me, because I know you have been the main organiser of the Blended Intensive Programme in Circular Economy that was carried out. Could you maybe take me into the process of how the programme came about and why this was organised?

B: I'm… because since the creation of the FORTHEM Alliance, so I've been involved in the team staff week and in the other teams I mean. So, and so, I heard that it was possible to create this short-term mobility under Erasmus exchange. So last year, with one colleague…because I tried, so I am as well correspondent coordinator for the local campus for FORTHEM. So, I spread the information about all the opportunities with FORTHEM, of course. And because we are a small campus and it is difficult for the other professors to participate to another project, and because they are very busy every time, and so on. So, I got the opportunity with the professor, so [name of a colleague at the home university], so was very interested last year to try to organise a project with the FORTHEM. And, so, we got this idea about the circular economy in [region of the home university]. And, so, we thought maybe we can try for the first time, like, to do this project, this short-term mobility under Erasmus+. So, we did that last year, it was success, and so, because [name of a colleague at the home university] is a Spanish teacher, so is not very comfortable with the English things.

A: Hmm-hmm

B: So, I applied with [them] and organised with [them] the mobility last year. And so, [name of a colleague working at the local FORTHEM office] told us that it was possible to organise, that the same topic or another topic was possible under a BIP. And we were very interested because last year we had the [the home university] had to finance everything, and so as you can imagine, as the [the home university] doesn't want to finance everything, so they have to make some choices about the budget and about the project because we have a lot of project in the UK and different kind of projects, and so for this year, it was very interesting for them. So, a very good opportunity to apply for the BIP, and so we almost organised the same, the topic was the same, the week was a little bit different, and yeah, yes, I don't know what I should say.

A: Yes, yes, so how was the week a little bit different?

B: It is about the intervention from the lecturer. Last year we got more professors coming here and more visual conferences as well. So, it was a little bit different about that. We have been to, we have been, we have made a visit tour in [name of a company], not this year, it wasn't possible. And, because the main problem we got at the end, it was from the company because the group was, last year, two years ago, last year, the group was about 24 students, I think between 22 and 24, and finally for the companies, it was difficult to manage with the big group of students. They prefer to get a small group like 10 or 15, and I can understand that because okay those students are older, but some of them like to talk, or so it's not, so as you, you got this experience this year. So, it is there, they are not children anymore, but they are big children, I mean.

both laughing

A: Yes, yes, they need some guidance now and then.

B: So, it is not so easy for the company to manage a big group and he learned to make the presentation or to reply to all the questions, I don't know. So, it wasn't so easy. So, [name of a company] for this year said, okay, we prefer not this year, it is not possible. So, there we have a very diplomat, and they just say no, not this year, maybe next year we will see, but yeah. But one more thing is about the, there is another thing about, you know, the problem about the security. Because coming from Europe is not a big

deal, but of course some students are in a European University, but their nationality won't be from Europe. They could be from China or from an African country, and it could be a problem because I know that if the case, I think I was there, but I know that, you know, sometimes the company, when professors organise a visit, for the company ask from the security of the students. And last year, they didn't ask for that, but I thought maybe because we said yes, it is a European Alliance, and so all of this argument. So, maybe they didn't pay attention, but last year when we came for the visit tour, so they can see in real that some students weren't from a European country, but from an African country. So maybe could be a problem? I know it could be a break, so.

A: Hmm, and, how in security wise, in, in, for example with insurance wise or…?

B: The, no, not the insurance but it is more about the terrorist, you know. The GPR were under, the GPR, right, and so it is not so easy. In this situation, even if the topic is not related to secret things, yes, but because there are as you can, then you are entering in the company and you can access to a lot of information, visual information. So yeah, could be a problem about that. So, the change was between the two mobilities, this week was more about getting the visit of the companies and some later came last year and didn't came this year.

A: Yeah.

B: So, but we didn't, we didn't contact them again except for the person for instance, of the college, because this person, when she came last year for the full day long, she said yes, it's a very good idea and so maybe if you do it next year, I will be there, you can contact me, it is not a problem, so yeah. And the other lecturer came, it is about the professor, about the…So it is a professor from the [the home university], so, I forgot his name.

A: Ohh yeah, yes, I remember. Yes, me too, but I know who you mean. It is a very kind, young professor, yes.

B: Yeah, I can see his face, but I don't remember, I don't know, I don't know.

A: Yes, yes.

B: So, the same thing. Last year you told me it was a very good week, so I'm, if you do it again, I'm in no problem, you can contact me. So, it was very important for them because as you can see this here, let's see, it was the same thing where two people were organising a lot of things, so it was not very easy. And we thought that for next, for this year, we should have more people involved in this project. We try to explain to the other professor or head of the department, if they can, they can come join us. And either we can change the topic because, so we thought, maybe if the other department would be more involved with another topic, they will be more and more people to internationalise everything.

A: Yes.

B: But it doesn't work. Not in this way.

A: Yes, yes, because that was actually something I was wondering about, because you, during the week, you also explained to me that there is a topic on circular economy which is an optional course as well being taught at the [the home university]. How about the teacher who is involved there, [were they] also asked to contribute to the programme or?

B: I mean, as you know, during the option, the students can visit other companies. So, it is the same thing. I mean, we don't need to be too much people to organise everything. So, we got the contact from last year, so we used this contact to organise this, the visit tour for the student. And I know, [a teacher at the home university] for instance gave some courses as well. So, I mean, with the small team already we got from the experience of last year, we could check everything and say okay now we go for the student with this option about the circular economy. So, with the people here and the contact that we got last year, now we can offer them in a two months because it was only once a week. So, the Thursday afternoon. So, the constraint is different when it is during one week or during the three months every day, it is totally different.

A: Yeah.
B: So yeah, it was in this way, yeah.

A: And how about the other two professors we get, there were two visiting professors from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A]. Could you maybe explain how they, for example, became interested and perhaps why there were now less visiting professors than last time?
B: Last time it was the project was Erasmus Mundus, so it is different, okay. So, we offer the student from all the student that has the alliance who applied for to come here, but for this year it was a BIP. So, the BIP is different because you had to find two other co-partners to organise everything. Yeah, to propose this BIP, even we organise everything, but we need to get two partners. So, we got the partner from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A] and from, and from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B], and another partner, but this is not a real partner because it was completely about the administrative organisation of about you need to apply your authorisation to get a BIP, or that. I don't know this part much, but for sure because when we apply during, it was, we tried to contact the other partner, it was in June last year, and so we contacted first the partner in [city], this university, because [name of a colleague at the home university] say "okay for me will be easier to exchange with them and so on".
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: And, so, they quickly reply, okay, for us is not a problem. But we contact FORTHEM office in Valencia and they don't reply very quickly, but we got a contact from two professors of Valencia.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So very quickly we have been in contact with these professors and it was easier. I mean to communicate and to exchange by visual to know what we really want to do. So, they were very excited and very quickly they said, okay, okay, we can organise the video call and as well we can come during this week. One of them because we said that two professors can, until two professors can come during this week. So that was this, and part of the deal… But at the end, a few months later… We heard that from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], it wasn't possible to be co-organiser of the BIP because their university didn't plan or didn't budget the money for the BIP…
A: Okay?
B: For me, it is very strange when we heard that, because I was so surprised, because I every time, I asked to my FORTHEM office and they explained, we can deposit a BIP anytime, anytime. Do we have to respect something? So, they give me all the information, and they told me yes, you can deposit this BIP anytime and the same for the partners. And of course, they have their own meetings and everything, and at the end when [country],just sends me an email "Oh, sorry it's not possible. We cannot be a coordinator". So, we were so surprised when I contact my FORTHEM or I think they told me.
A: Yeah.
B: Yes, it seems that for some, any reasons, but there are maybe misunderstandings somewhere, but we don't know where exactly. So, it's not possible for [one of he FORTHEM partner universities] to be a coordinator. So, we have to find another coordinator. Then we got a contact with [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B], because one professor, because there is a professor in [the home university], so [name of a professor at the home university].
A: Yes, yes.
B: So, [name of a professor at the home university] but yeah, I'm trying to remember everything. So, yeah, one professor of [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B] contacted [name of a professor at the home university], and [name of a professor at the home university] said okay maybe you can be in contact with him because he could come during this week, and so on. Yeah, but I mean, I was, we were. I guess we got the contact from the professor in [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B] because, [name of a colleague at the home university], checked, you know, all the offers for the students and she

has noticed that they have a subject about the blue economy or something. So, she told me about that. So, I said, who is the professor in charge of this project? So, she told me it is [name of the professor at a FORTHEM partner universities, B]. So, I said we have contact her, so maybe we can reach the right person and she will be interested, because we don't get any news from the FORTHEM office in [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B]. And at the end, so we contacted her, and she said, okay, no problem, I'm very interested in maybe my colleague as well. I have another colleague and maybe there is this professor in [the home university]. This is how the way we got the information of contacted [name of a professor at the home university]. And, the thing is crazy because I know this guy, but for me, he was in charge of the one of the lab of FORTHEM, and because I'm not focused on what he was doing in his research, so I didn't think, ahh maybe we have some human resource in contacted [the home university] in [one of the campuses of the home university] because still we are divided campuses. So, I'm in [one of the campuses of the home university], the connection. And so, since we still need to have another partner and [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A], the two professors from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A], the contact of the professor has been given by a FORTHEM officer of [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A]. So, very quickly we got contact with them and some video calls as well and they, and, the… ah the name of the guy, the professor I forgot. I don't have…

A: Oh, you mean, [name of the visiting teacher, A].

B: Yeah, yeah, [name of the visiting teacher, A], yeah. So, and [name of the visiting teacher, A] was very excited and he told me I am professor, so I'm teaching the circular economy to my students, so it would be very interesting for me, and I have a group of students, so maybe I can tell them go there. So, I can come with another professor. So, they were very involved, I mean, very quickly. So, it is like, even I mean after one week, he just say okay, I need to get the information about the money, about the grant and everything, and I say, okay, slow down. But a few things, because at the beginning I have one FORTHEM partner, but I mean he couldn't come and I found another partner, but he wasn't enough, so it was crazy. I mean we were very nervous to prepare the week and lot of things about [one of the campuses of the home university], but all the administration with [one of the campuses of the home university] and with the other partner was very complicated.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: And, I mean, if I will say there is a… It wasn't very, this part wasn't very funny for me because I couldn't, I tried to do my best to help more with what I could do, but it was very complicated because even the partner, I think, when the, for about the application for the mobility we were not at the same page. So, for me, from outside, so I was like, okay, it should be easier. The students have to apply for the [incomprehensive], and then the students have to apply for the mobility online because that is the process and then I send all the learning agreements and everything and I should do that in 15 days and okay it should be very quickly.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: But at the end, it wasn't terrible because I think, okay, we are I think, even okay, the FORTHEM Alliance has been created in 2019, so it is a few years ago, but maybe it is not too long to get all the experience and to improve the process for the application and to make it smoother. Because for the errors, which I think is easy, because we know to do that all the universities know to do that.

A: Yes.

B: But regarding the application for the BIP, it seems, I say "seems" because I'm not in the process more complicated, or it was more complicated. And so it was, yes, a huge problem, but anywhere with the professor where we have been in contact from, the professor from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A] or from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B], the contact duration was very smooth, very easy, and everyone did try to do their best. Even when their students, I don't know, if they didn't understand how to apply to mobility online, or because even I had sent an essential guide explaining what they have to put in the learning agreement.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: But, even me, I was very surprised when they sent me the learning agreement because it was, I don't, I don't know the problem with [the home university] but the learning, there were all the options, if you are a PhD student, a bachelor student, a different kind of mobility. So, I can, okay if I am in the shoes of the students, I can say okay WOW, where should I tick? Or What should I choose?
A: I can say the application process was complicated?
B: For this one, the application was very complicated and even if I put a note and explained you have to put this information, this information, it wasn't enough. So, it was very time-consuming, and of course, there are some students even if you do everything every time, they won't pay attention because they just want that you fill in all the information and so they don't have to do anything. There are these kinds of situations, of course. But just a few students, it is not all the students. And, but I mean the professors really wanted to do their best as well I can notice that. Because sometimes I said I don't have any reply from your FORTHEM office, so…and two days after I have confirmation from the FORTHEM office.
A: Because the professors requested or required FORTHEM…?
B: I think yes, and even because, for instance, when the professor asks about the grants, something like this, I said no, you have to check with your FORTHEM office or your mobility office in your university because [the home university] is not paying this part, it is your university. And so, yeah, I'm trying to, I mean, I have my part of my job, you have your part of your job.

A: Yes, Sure. So, you tried to moderate directly with the professors, directly with the students. And with the FORTHEM offices, if I understood correctly, the communication was a bit more challenging, if I'm not mistaken?
B: Yeah, and first as well, so when we deposit the project and we said for instance…So, I don't remember the deadline for the application for the students, but the like the deadline was supposed to be in December, but we were, it was so complicated before to get all the co-partners so we postponed the deadline, but even when we postponed the deadline, it seemed that it was still complicated for the students to apply. So, I mean it was very, it was a lot of pressure over that, how many students we will get because, of course, as you know, if we don't reach the 20 students, the number of 20 students, it is not possible, we can organise this mobility but not under BIPs.
A: Yes.
B: And the problem is if the student apply for a BIP but, at the end, it is not a BIP, will they be still eligible for Erasmus Grant or BIP grant if not possible. So, it was very complicated and very stressful for everybody, so…
A: So, at what time did you know that there were enough students to participate?
B: Oh, maybe, I think it was at the end of February. Because as you know, we have local, like we have local vacation.
A: okay, and yeah, the winter holidays as well.
B: And look, we have the yeah, we have winter holidays, but in February as well, we have been in vacation in February. So, I know that normally we have like 15 days, but I had one week, and I remember that the first week I was sending a lot of messages to [name of a colleague at the home university], is being okay we have another application we have to reply very soon just to be sure.
A: Yeah.
B: So yes, I was, because when the student apply we request like motivation letter and CV. So, it is not a, it is not a lot of documents, but it is still enough to check and to picture the motivation of the student. So, it is a, when you analyse the application, of course, it takes time to read the letter and everything, but not too much than if you request for a transcript and so on, and a lot of other documents.
A: Hmm-mmm.

B: But we got like a in total…but I didn't have time to have an appointment with [name of a colleague at the home university] because [of a family situation]. So, since, 10 days, [they are] is not here, and [they] won't be here next week as well. So, we do not have time to say, okay, because usually after this big, big event at the university, every time I say with the professor, okay, now we need time to make like a debriefing to see if you wanted to do it next week and to think about that and everything. And we did not have time this time to speak about that.

A: Yeah.

B: And even about the budget, because last year, for instance, we spent like…so I'm speaking about another thing.

A: No, no, no, but that is good. Just whatever is important, so I'm just letting you go. So, please go ahead.

B: Because last year we spent like around €3800 for the whole week, last week, last year, sorry. And for this, we this year, I don't know, I didn't have time to check everything, but I think it should be around the same budget or maybe higher because we make a special things. So maybe should be higher so, but that is okay really, because we got 20 or so students, and we could do different kinds of things with the students. So, let's, let's…

A: Yes, so the difference was as well that it was organised as a BIP that you got BIP funding under Erasmus as well?

B: Yeah, it is because even last year, because when the beginning of February because we got a meeting with the director and I said okay, if indeed, political things that we don't have the financial from the BIP should we continue on that? Because I cannot decide about that. So, the director told me, okay, you put so much effort and organisation and everything and it is very good for [one of the campuses of the home university] as well. So, for this year, exceptionally, we can finance if it is not possible to get the BIP. But at the end, okay. So, in the end, *sights relieved*.

A: Yes, I can understand!

A: So, how do you look back actually on the experience of the BIP? Of the of the week? I mean, you have already touched upon a little bit about the process of it that it was sometimes a little bit hard as well. How do you look back in the end, at the experience overall?

B: I mean I'm a very optimistic person, so, about the organisation, about this administrative stuff, I think it should be have a good improvement because it is very time-consuming, and as you know I imagine that you are the people applying for this kind of project they are working with other things during their day. So, it is an additional job to do, and so it's very…except if you have a team of maybe three or four people, so, it is easier so you can dispatch the work. So, it is different, but still, we are in [one of the campuses of the home university]. I also know that the colleague of FORTHEM in [one of the campuses of the home university] can help, but just in few things, and I mean when you have to reply to the question of the students, who to accept the student, you have to redo it again. Please put the right information to the right place and everything. So, it is not, so yeah, it is time-consuming. So, I think it is about the process, the administrative things, it was very complicated, this year it was more complicated and it was supposed to be easier than last year because…

A: Could you give maybe some examples of what was more complicated?

B: Yeah. Because, for instance, last year, my FORTHEM office told me, okay, students have to send you the learning agreement and you validate the learning agreement. I say, okay, I will do that. But at the beginning, I thought because, we are when we depose the project I did not know that I should do that, but I didn't understand why, because I'm in charge of the international. But The thing is, I thought because the main entrance for the project is in [one of the campuses of the home university] is not in [one of the campuses of the home university], you know.

A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, I think maybe the team in [one of the campuses of the home university] will have to validate everything and then that is it. So, but it was, okay, for last year, I don't need, it was, I could do that. So, it was okay for last year. So, but, for this year, they told us that okay now there is a new process, so the student can apply directly online. They won't send you a learning, a paper learning agreement, so you have less administrative stuff to do. So, I said okay, why not? But it was the theory, because in reality…the thing is that they have to, because of this problem of the platform that I don't know the other university was not on time to do the same. The other university, I think it was only later could apply for the OLA, so the online learning agreement, all the other universities, a student send me the learning agreement, okay, and they do that and even students from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A] have to send me the learning agreement.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, for me, it was more work, more paperwork to do.
A: Yes, more paperwork.

B: And so yeah, because as, maybe you don't know this part but once, but I mean, when a foreign student or in any manner a foreigner is coming in [one of the campuses of the home university] and preparing like a guide for the students, for the professors, and then everybody. So, I know to do that, and I know to put all the main information to prepare their arrival in [one of the campuses of the home university]. So, I know, because, so, I have done that, but it was crazy because I have to prepare as well a special document to add the student to fill in the learning agreement, and sometimes as I was in contact with the contact of the International Office in the partner university and so they need to exchange information and the problem is about the BIP…you know, when you depose this BIP, then [one of the campuses of the home university] registered the BIP. Okay, so there is a code for the BIP at the beginning.
A: Hmm-mmm, yes.
B: I didn't know that the there is a code for the BIP, so the thing is crazy, but then the partner contacted me, asking for this code. So, I was like what code? Which code? I don’t know, the only code that I know is the Erasmus code. Okay, so I can give this one, but okay, so, then I have to contact [one of the campuses of the home university] explaining that and that information is missing. So, I need this number, this code for the partner, so they say okay no problem. So, they give me the code. So, I mean, everybody are involved in their work, but sometimes don't think ah maybe [name of the interviewee] needs some information, so [ther] work will be easier, but they don't think like this, so I know it is not their fault because, okay, there are maybe too many things to do and we don’t think and usually go.
A: Yes, yes.
B: It is the same thing. I mean the closer, if I were in [one of the campuses of the home university], for sure I will be every day in their office, I can question oh I need this information please, so I will do that. But because I'm here, it wasn't possible. So, I sent an email or I give a phone call, but still I'm yes, I'm losing a lot of time for this.
A: Mm-hmm. Yes, this streamlining of communication is different.
B: Yeah, I think the problem is that, so, the most important when universities are organising a BIP is to say to the professor, to the order of the project, to say okay, here is an information sheet this is important, your BIP has a number, will have a number, you have to communicate this number to the student to the professor. I mean, it seems silly, but if you don't say that and you don't know because it is a first time, you cannot think about that. But later in the process, someone will ask you for this question, and then you will need to find this information.

A: Because were you given any guidelines of how to set this up, or how to organise this, or how to communicate about it?
B: I created a guideline for the students, but I didn't receive any guideline. And my experience because I used to send some students under the Erasmus Mobility. So, I know which document is asking for this mobility, so my experience was very useful. And, when I received the learning agreement from the student, I was like, wow, the document is like this, they ask for this question, I know to reply to that, that, that, so, at the end, I say okay, now I prepare this guide, but yeah. In this situation, I think yeah. And I'm working in the international [office], but I can't imagine a professor not working in this part, and in international exchange, and for the first time, you will say "oh I stop, I quit".
A: Hmm-mmm, hmm-mmm, yes, yes.
B: I mean, you know, the professor can be very passionate when he studies something or looking for research or things like this, but about researching process sometimes, and when they know that somebody has, can do it for them, he could be mad, by experience.

A: Hmm-mmm, yes. So, what was the motivation for you to organise this, really? What was the objective behind it?
B: Because I think, I'm, for me, I think it is very important to make some different offer for the students, international student, [students of the nationality of the home university] students, and to show to the [students of the nationality of the home university] students at the [one of the campuses of the home university] students it is possible to make international in [one of the campuses of the home university]. International events in [one of the campuses of the home university], and to, and even for the other professors. But I think we are at a local university, we have local habits. So, I want to show to the other that we are not in the main campus, but it is still possible to be very active, but we need that…professor, administrative, to be involved, to be a part of that. I think it is a really good experience, so it is very, for me it is very refreshing. I mean, I know it is a lot of work, but you have nothing if you do nothing, I mean. So, I mean, you know you need to do something to get other things and to discover other things. And for me, it is a lot of work, it is crazy because I say that it is a lot of work, but it is like to reward every time and…
A: Yes, yes.
B: I cannot, I'm not this kind of person saying, okay, I know to do my job, I had this routine, so, I stay my routine, I'm not this kind of person at all for me, and I don't like to have too much work. But, it is like for me, I think it is very important. So even, last year it was very interesting when the student from [one of the campuses of the home university] came to me and said okay, Madam, can I speak with your student here from FORTHEM when they are here, where they are coming from? So, I say yes, you can chat with them or have lunch with them, it is not a problem. So, this year we try to do the same thing, but we don't have the same question from the national students. But still, I think that, for me, if I was to learn it would be a very good opportunity to speak with another student coming from another country or another university, even for few hours. I mean this like, okay, what are you doing here? I think it's a really very good opportunity, and even if you are shy or…I think still it is the opportunity to go, still to be yourself, but to say, okay, you are coming from here, so maybe we can still be in touch or you can speak about your country is interesting for me, so yeah. I think it really for the [one of the campuses of the home university] because maybe next year I have another colleague she contacted me and she said maybe we can have a meeting because maybe it would be interesting to make a short-term mobility. So, I but I was thinking good!
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, I was like, okay, but maybe you need to find another colleague as well. It should be better, so I, because I know that I have my own process and I know I can be very useful to help the other professor even to apply for this for the project, for the application, for the guidelines, even all the document we

prepare for this special week. I know this, like like I have a drive for a lot of things, so I know it will be smooth about that, but for sure, but the administrative part managing in [one of the campuses of the home university], I'm, I'm so sorry. It is like, you know, when you have bitten by a cat or an animal, the next time when you want to pet the animal, you pay more attention to what you are doing, it is the same thing about the [one of the campuses of the home university] question and administration. No, it is not so easy.

A: Yes, yes.

A: So, I, from what I hear, I mean you are very passionate about internationalisation and also bringing this element to [one of the campuses of the home university].

B: Yeah.

A: So, how do you feel about, how is it to get your colleagues involved in this?

B: It is complicated, it is very complicated, because most of my colleagues and I understand their reaction, because they said, okay, I have enough work, is difficult for me, or I am with children or I have a lot of things to do after work and so on. Even the argument about the children, they don't say too much to me, not so fun because I have four children, so they know that. But most of the time, when I say "oh, but you can just join us for a part of the event", and they are just like okay, but you are a person very active, I said no, I'm not active, I just liked what I'm, I like to do that. So, it is not a question about if you have too much energy or things about that. But, so, it's very difficult to involve my colleagues. But I'm still not…I'm not…I'm not thinking okay I won't tell them about FORTHEM or I won't speak about that with them. Because time to time, I can realise when people is coming to see me an administrative or professor saying that, oh by the way, three months ago you send an email to the side of [one of the campuses of the home university] explaining that it was possible to do something about mobility and so on.

A: Yes, hmm-mmm.

B: So, I can and now I will have, I will need to get more explanation, or even about FORTHEM, because for them for the tough administrative, they don't take the time to read everything about FORTHEM and every time I'm like I heard that for instance, I know that the communication department of [one of the campuses of the home university] went for mobility in [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B], I think it was [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, B] or [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A]. And they went and they come back in [country of the home university], they just say, oh, it was wonderful and so on. So, I explained that to my colleague and some of them told me, but I don't speak English. I said "it doesn't matter! In the group, only one person seems to be fluent and the others just not so at all". The language is not a real barrier. I mean it is, it was very interesting for the group to go there and when they came back they were they were very happy. So, I explained that to them. So, then they are like, oh, maybe we will see, but we, you know, with the work it will be very difficult to leave for one week. I said one week? But it is like working, and you are not, okay you are not supposed to work when you are there, of course, but when you came back, maybe you will have more work, more things to reply to your email, but I mean, it is a human experience, but it is not really working, okay?

A: Yes, hmm-mmm.

B: But I mean, so I know they are sensitive to my speech about that, but I can see there is this barrier that they can say oh it is difficult for me to leave or it is difficult to me to be involved in the project. And for BIP or Erasmus Exchange we got about the circular economy, I can involve for instance with me the communication department. Because I have, there are, there are so many things to do when you are organising this week that I couldn't do it by myself. And for example, [a colleague from the communication department at the home university], I think remember her.

A: Yes, yes, sure.

B: So, when she, because sometimes, most of the time, okay, I stay very late at the office and when they are coming bye, bye, bye saying to me that they are leaving. So, she was just like, okay, if you need something about the communication, just ask me. Or even for the tag, for instance with the name. So, I was preparing something but because it is not my job so it is taking for me time to do that. So, I was like, okay, I want to show you something just tell me if it is okay or if we are, if it is wrong, totally wrong. And she told me a very good idea, but you know, I can do that with my other application and then even I can prepare everything. So, don't need to stress about that because I know that you have a lot to do and everything to be finished on time.

A: Yes.

B: So, she helped me with all that, [a colleague from the communication department at the home university].

A: Yes, so, to get them involved and to get help from others as well.

B: Yeah. So, about the communication department for this project and for other project, very often I asked them to help me or ask them to give me advice, events or about something when I'm preparing a poster or something. Just to be clear and to be attractive, not to be, because I'm an administrative so sometimes I want to put a lot of information, but too much information can kill the information. So, yeah. And I don't want to or spread the students or the professor when they are reading something. So yeah, and even for, but during the BIP for the week, even to prepare the coffees and things I didn't have time to do that. So, I request to another colleague if she could prepare everything and she said okay, no problem, and so on. So, I have this kind of participation, but like to make a real big interest from my colleagues or other professors is very, very difficult.

A: Yeah.

B: I'm working here since, now I've been there 15 years, and…since a long time I'm every time I'm saying to the director and other professors at the [one of the campuses of the home university], it should be interesting that you switch some [local language] courses in English or part of the courses in English for instance.

A: Okay.

B: And I'm fighting this very, very big fight. I mean not a big fight, I mean, it is like a fight every day and every time. I'm like, because if you want, I tried some Erasmus students at the [one of the campuses of the home university] most of the time they will say I don't speak [the local language], so the courses need to be in English or part of the courses in English and it is very, very difficult because most of the professors are just like, I don't know, I don't want to switch my course in English. There are some exceptions, because we have some professor researcher, researcher professor, so they know they work in English, so it is different. But it is very complicated, so his is why it is a mentality, and I mean we have to change things and I'm trying to change things since a long time and I know it's difficult, but I'm….

The Teams meeting got cut, so we re-started another meeting

A: Yes, so, the recording, the recording started again, and in our previous meeting we were just discussing about how you are really trying to promote internationalisation and to get your colleagues involved as well and your students. Actually, I was mainly wondering, I think it is good if we are now going into, we have discussed it a bit before about some of the recommendations that you have for future implementations of Blended Intensive Programmes.

B: Hmm-mmm.

A: So, could you maybe discuss a bit more about this, please?

B: About the accommodation, the idea was not to be too traditional. I mean because it will be easier to offer to the student the possibility to stay, to book an accommodation, to the hotel in [city of the home campus]. But the idea was to have a different experience of this mobility and to share the culture with

the host family in [city of the home campus] and this is why last year we suggest to the students to be accommodated by a family from [city of the home campus].

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: And we thought that the beginning it was maybe easy to find a lot of families. I mean in the, from the campus, and last year we got some students we offer, they offer this opportunity to the other students. But it was difficult for the students from the [one of the campuses of the home university], because most of them have an accommodation with a small accommodation not to big accommodation. So, it is not very easy and at the beginning when we make like a survey to be an administrator, they say the oh yes it is a good idea maybe for one week we can host a student, it is not a problem, but at the end when we asked the professors and administrative to confirm their participation to be with family, at the end we will be only like 3 persons, 1 technician and then we were very surprised from him because I didn't talk too much with him. And so, it was a very good surprise, of course, and the two other persons and another person was a professor, so we were 4 because [name of a colleague at the home university] begged her, please. So yeah. And the two other person was [name of a colleague at the home university] and I, and two of them we first start two students just to be sure to have everybody fostered by a family. So last year it was very complicated and till the end we didn't know if all the students were accommodated by a host family, but I will at the end it was possible, but very difficult and very stressful as well. So, for this year, we thought just in case we said to the student, it will be possible to be fostered, but we don't have enough places.

A: Yes.

B: So maybe some of you will have to book an accommodation in the hotel or Airbnb. So, it was the option, but because it was my idea, so I don't know, it was very good idea. But because I'm just thinking globally, the experience, I think, okay, they will explore the circular economy in [region of the home university]. And so maybe it will be very interesting for them to share an amount of life of this family in [city of the home campus]. Okay, [city of the home campus] is not the [country of the home university] of the [country of the home university], but I mean it is still interesting. So, the students to be in contact with the real life and the real family and sharing some food they like, you don't like, but first sharing some food or habits. And so, for me, it was very important to have this experience. So they can for me, I was like, if I were a student to say, okay, I have been, I was in the country and we have a whole week we were working every day and during the day I could have some discussion with the family where I could play a game, a new game with a kid and so on. So, I think it was the experience it wasn't just the mobility and to study something. The topic, a special topic. It was a global experience and even to sharing some discussion because we have all…I'm not involved in the political things but I think most of the time when people are in war or when people are bad description or the discrimination and everything is because they don't know or they are afraid or the other. And so I think when you have this opportunity, you can think of, oh finally I can hear the news that there are something like this or I can hear a lot of clichés, but I don't know to make the difference or I don't like the this ability to make the difference when someone thinks something I say maybe you are right. So [local nationality] people are crazy or are…I mean it is like you can say Italian people are when you are in Italy, they are honking every time in their car and make me crazy, yes, right. I mean that is the culture and so I think that it is very important for give the opportunity to the students to come in [country of the home university] and to make their own opinion of the situation and to say, okay we are different. But yeah, I think it is very important and now because of the IA, it is a good, I mean application for a lot of things, but it could be very worse and very dangerous. So, I think it is very important when you have this opportunity to make your own opinion and to spread it and to say yes but that is what it is like and people are different, but it is important to be different, by the way.

A: So, is that your motivation for kind of organising these programmes and for the role that you are having, is this kind of your underlying reasoning of why you are doing this?
B: Because for me, I think that if you don't have the opportunity to go somewhere, for me it is important to the students of the [one of the campuses of the home university] so they can share the experience. It is important to the other students to come here so they can see that it is very important to them to travel and to learn, we are learning from each other, even for me, I'm learning from the other students because I really like to, I have difficult to find the time to discuss with them. But when for instance, for this week, on Thursday night there is this party. So, I got the opportunity to speak with some students from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A] and there was this guy, this very big guy, I think it was the tallest one.
A: Yes, him.
B: And he was like, okay, I tried in the past I learned [local language of the home university], but I would like to learn more [local language of the home university] and for this, you know from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities, A] for instance, they booked an accommodation. They didn't want to be accommodated by [the local] family, but I wasn't surprised about that because [name of the visiting teacher, A] told me that. [They] told me that, you know, my safe zone is like I need to put two, two problems like this, I said, wow. So, you have to prepare yourself because. No, in [country of the home university] we are more direct and maybe too friendly for you, but no worries and so on. So, [they] told me it is better that my students stay together. And I say, okay that is no problem, up to you. But at the end, the student told me I should choose this option to be fostered by a [local] family because he realised that the life maybe you had bad ideas about that and I can understand that, of course. And so, this is why I think it was important, it is important when the student could be fostered, because it is just for one week, it is very short, and it is just for the night. And so, yeah, and I think it is everybody is learning about the experience of each other, even the host family. And each year the person is just confirming okay when is the next project? And I'm like, okay maybe next year, we keep in touch.
A: Well, I mean, that is a beautiful outcome, great.

A: So, just because I think, I mean, this is very, very interesting so far, but I just have one final question that I would really like to ask you, and that is if you have any specific recommendations or advice for future Blended Intensive Programmes?
B: Hmm…It is more about the administrative process, I mean, because it is very, I'm saying that every time, it is very time-consuming. Maybe an information sheet, I don't know, what kind of support, but something very clear, and it will for an administrative it will be very easy to follow, and even for a professor. Because I'm here to help the professor, or I won't be here, if I'm not involved in the project I don't know. I mean so the professors they know okay they need to apply for the process. They know they can go to the online, to the website, FORTHEM website, there are all the information and everything. They need a formal document they can follow the steps and everything but additionally they need to validate some learning agreements, I mean something like this concrete. So, it is very important to the professor not to look for information every time he is reading a line or question about something, because I'm quite sure that they will be very, very mad about that. So, it is more like that, I mean demonstration or…maybe yes, the communication as well because I was very surprised when [name of a colleague working at the local FORTHEM office] told me maybe there is a misunderstood that they for all the FORTHEM office normally they can apply anytime for a BIP, but it seems it is not the case in the other university. So, maybe this part but for me it is not a big deal, I mean it was at the beginning, but now I think things should be clear.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: I think by our experience, so now they know that if they need to plan the project for the people, I don't know who is working in the other university. But yeah, it is more but that…no, because for about

the application for instance the CV and the cover letter is enough to get information about the students. And we asked the student when they are selected and we ask another letter for the host family so. And [name of a colleague at the home university] and I will read again all of the letters and we allowed a family, so yes. And we have done that last year it works, this year it works as well. And yes, even I need the family are so open when we say, okay, you know some good things could happen but don't worry, you can contact us and so on. I mean, we are trying to prepare everything and we have a meeting before the arrival of the student as well so all the question could be asked at this moment. Yes and… Maybe the problem for me and even for [name of a colleague at the home university] is that we are not enough people for managing everything. During the application it is not a problem, during the process about the learning agreement, everything is time consuming, but it is still possible I can do it by myself, and as you can see during the visit, or during, even during the week when we need to spread an information you were here this year, so for me it was a really…because I can have more time because my work is still continuing.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: I have some students going or abroad or with some questions or some students abroad with problems, so I need to check my email every day, and so yes, we need people. The most important is to have an additional person during this week.

A: Hmm-mmm. So, if I understand correctly, one very important point is like clear guidance of how to handle the administrative process so that it is less time consuming as well and to perhaps make the progress less time consuming.

B: Hmm-mmm. Yes, yes.

A: Communication is an important point, and several, and thirdly, from what I understood what you said, also being with a team of people instead of organising it mainly with two, if I understand correctly?

B: Yes, it is important to have more people in the team to for the organisation, and yes, it is very important. And because, of course, you know that during the week you will have some new things happening because I think it is a game about that. So, it is not a big problem, but still, so you have to find very quickly or solution and if you have already compared it by you, things during this week it is very difficult to find very quickly a solution about something. So just you just hope that the problem won't be too big. Just to be so quickly in this moment. So yeah, that is the thing, yes. I think the main problem it is difficult to involve other persons, but maybe the same thing in [one of the campuses of the home university], I mean I don't know if it is the just a local problem. Yes, Yeah, and I feel it is not the reason of money or because I'm not paid additionally for that. I mean it is just you feel like to do that or you don't feel like to do that. And I think it is like you want to do that because you are learning, it is enriching a lot personal, and the other people who don't want to do that is for other reason. But for sure, they don't want to spend over-time about this kind of subject or. But I'm trying to convince them, saying that okay, maybe we can find a topic about what you like or something like this. Or they say yes, why not, they say yes, why not just say. Now you can go back to work, I need something to do. But yeah, I don't know, but for sure.

A: Yeah. And is there anything else that you think I should pay attention to in my research or that you would like to add?

B: For me it would be interesting, for instance, because you have, you have been in different countries and you have seen this work in in the other universities of the alliance, is to know if they have the same problem and instruction problem for instance. And as well if they need more people to have them in the project, is it a global problem or just local because it is [one of the campuses of the home university]? I don't know. Yes, I would like to know that if, yeah.

A: Yeah, I will definitely take this account in my research, and also, I mean, at the moment I'm still doing the data collection. So, for example in two weeks I'm going to [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], as you know, and also to [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], so I have more BIPs coming up and then I hope by the end of this calendar year, so starting off next academic year to be further in my research and then I will definitely come back to you and to share results and then we can discuss it together as well.
B: Okay, okay, nice.
A: Great, thank you very much. For now, I will just end the recording.

IX.4. Interview Transcript I4

Interviewee: BIP B I Senior faculty member in business/economics I Visiting Professor
Date: Wednesday, 22 May 2024 at 08:00 AM CET
Time: 08:00 AM - 08:50 AM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 50 minutes / 39 minutes of recording

Start Record
A: Okay, I just started the recording, it started transcribing, yes. Okay, so just before we start and to have it officially on tape, do I have permission to record this interview?
B: Yes.
A: Okay, perfect. Thank you very much. So, first of all, thank you very much for making time available for being here today, because for me, it is very insightful to also hear your insights on the Blended Intensive Programme as you have been there the whole week as a visiting professor. As I quickly discussed already with you during our week in [city of the host university], my research is on internationalisation of higher education, and specifically I'm studying Blended Intensive Programmes and one of my aims is to come up with a guide for future organisers of how to set up such programmes.
B: Hmm-mmm.
A: As this is a rather new activity Blended Intensive Programmes, it just exists since 2021, it is still developing, so that is why I'm doing research about this and the idea of this. The idea of this interview is that it will be mainly like a bit of a free-flow conversation where I'm just curious more to learn about your experiences, your ideas for improving such programmes, if there are things that went well, and also to get the insights from like a perspective of a visiting professor.
B: Hmm-mmm.
A: As I said, I'm recording this interview in order for me to transcribe the data. So, after this interview is done, I will transcribe all the data. One of the important things is that I will anonymise everything, meaning that I will codify specific things that can be traced back to you. And also, this is part of a bigger research project, so also increasing the anonymity because I'm doing several interviews and focus groups. The data will not be shared with anyone before it is codified and I will also send you a transcript of the codified information, which you can always read over and tell me if you would like to change anything or to leave anything out. That also counts during this conversation if there is any question or anything that you did rather not like to tell or for that you think I should remove, you are free to let me know until time of publication of my PhD or an article that belongs to it.
B: Hmm-mmm, okay.

A: So, the idea is that this will maximum take 30 minutes because I understand that your time is very valuable as well, and I will first ask you a bit more about, a bit more general questions about your role, and then we will go more specifically into the Blended Intensive Programme on Circular Economy.
B: Okay.
A: Do you have any questions about this so far?
B: No, all is clear.
A: Okay, good.

A: So, one of the first thing was that I would like to know a bit more, if you could tell me a bit more about what your role is and also what your role was related to this BIP. And I think I need to congratulate you here because one of your students told me that you have been promoted to [a senior position] , so, my congratulations for that!
B: [Response taken out to remain anonymity]
A: Yes, very interesting. Well, congratulations on that. That sounds very promising.
B: Yeah, it is, it is. I thought to myself that this is an interesting challenge and I guess I need something like that in my life right now. Why not? So, about the…about my role in in the BIP. So, like, how should I address this question? Like what were my tasks or like you know, before this visit and during the visit, so you would like to do two parts?
A: Yes, perhaps you, perhaps you could tell me a little bit about how you became involved in this Blended Intensive Programme?
B: Yeah, yeah, I, I think that…Okay, then I have to, of course, I mean you really need like precise details. But I think that maybe it was in like an international office who redirected this interest from the [host university of the BIP]? So, I believe that since they were the organisers, they were just, yeah, circulating this information which was in the FORTHEM network. And when I saw this information, I immediately recognised that this is something of an interest of the Department of Economics. So, I talked immediately to the to the professor who is directly teaching the...actually it is circular economy the course, and it was exactly on the same semester. So, and this means that we immediately recognised this opportunity to be involved. And we started conversations with the [host university of the BIP]. So, like these online meetings, we try to understand, you know what it is and and how we will be involved.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: But I think that organisers, [host university of the BIP], they were kind I guess pretty clear about what it is gonna be. That as participants, we, and as a professors from the [the home university], we will have to deliver online classes before going to…[city of the home university]?
A: Yes, [city of the home university].
B: Yeah. So, but it is not gonna be only us, so it is gonna be others, like I think it is [two other FORTHEM partner universities], right? Professors. So, and we have really found this concept quite appealing that there is gonna be online classes from different professors representing different universities, and we also integrated this to our students, like these online classes and our students were participating in that activity. So, this was the beginning and we thought that it is let's say perfect timing and everything was just great because we had similar course, all of the information would be contributing to the course and also I saw…let's say pretty good opportunity because we are kind of let's say…it is like not maybe…let's say early stage of the development in this field. So, we felt like this is, so these are relatively new courses at this university and that is why we thought this this international perspective would be very valuable for us.
A: Hmm-mmm, yes.
B: So, this was our motivation and that is why we prepared online classes, we delivered the online classes and of course then we started all the preparations for the visit.
A: Hmm-mmm.

B: The visit itself, since there was a certain limitations for the number of students, so we just came up with the basically like a scoring system for the students who have enrolled in the course at the [the home university]. So, I think we just we took based on the, on the grades what the students have, and we started the first round just offering like the students based on the best grades and then the second round was based on the availability. So, if some of the students were not able to join, so we offered the next one, so, and we kind of quickly organised that five students that was joining and joining this study trip to [city of the host university]. So yeah, so this would be, let's say the first part until getting there.
A: Yeah, because you have more students applying than you had spots, if I understand correctly?
B: Yes, yes, yeah, we had more students than actual interest was, I mean, let's put it this way, I guess there were more students who really wanted to go, and I guess a little bit being upset, but you know, that is the kind of competition thing. But still, I mean, of course this is fast forward, I also understand you spoke to some of the students, my students.
A: Yes, yes.
B: Yeah, yes, but at least, I don't know what they told you, but at least I had this impression that they really enjoyed this experience and it is not just an academic, because the professor, like the other Professor [name of colleague from the home university], [they were] with me in [city of the host university], and [they are] also a programme director of Economics programme, and you know, and we talked to the students, you know, what was their experience and how they liked the this concept of going somewhere together. And, we really felt like, you know, maybe sometimes, but it depends on the group. You know, year from year students are different you know, sometimes they are more friendlier in the group, sometimes they are kind of, you know, just going to study and probably don't make much of networking with the other members in the group, but it really, one of the things kind of standing out that they really kind of used this also as an opportunity to…you know kind of strengthen this network and connections between this group. Like this five students of course they spend a lot of time because they travel together, but I think it is very valuable because this is something that I'm trying to also promote within the university, that it is not, you know, the value at the university is not only coming from professors and the knowledge they give to the students, but also the network they build and relations they build with the other students, which could be very, very helpful, you know, later on in during their careers. Right.
A: Hmm-mmm, yes.
B: So, that is why, you know, all the fancy business schools in the world, the very expensive ones, they are so valuable because of the people, like students who are there, you know, and what potential careers they might have globally, right, with meaningful impact, right.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, this means that we really saw like, you know, several things, like one is just the academic part and the knowledge they gained, but also just you know that networking and the cultural part, you know, being in [country of the host university] as well and seeing that part of culture. So, I think that at least, as my perception is that they really enjoyed this experience. Then…and then…so this…are there any like, is there anything I should explain? Like additionally like about the part before we moved to [city of the host university] or this kind of…?

A: No, not especially. I think if it is okay with you, we can move towards maybe the experience of the part in [city of the home university], if that is okay with you?
B: Yeah, okay, yeah. I mean apart of getting there, you know! *both laughing* Because it was like a big question, actually, we spent some time or just planning how to get to [city of the host university], how to get there, because, okay, but that is just a different story, but we solved it. But yeah, so again going [city of the host university] we also had a very clear plan for the week. It was very good that it was perfectly

indicated, you know the timetable and also we knew that we are responsible for a certain classes or, or these like workshops.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: So this means that, at least from our side, me and my colleague Professor [name of colleague from the home university], we prepared these workshops here, probably that, and basically it was, you know, very clear plan and that is what I always appreciate you know, whenever you participate in these activities, you know when and what you will have to do. So yeah, we prepared these workshops and of course we kind of you know acted accordingly to the plan, but I also participated in all of the workshops, because I personally just found it interesting topics, but that is just my principle, or whenever I go to this, you know, kind of whatever conferences or learnings, I just try to participate in everything because you never know, like you always learn something and you always find out something interesting. So, that is just my personal approach to things. But all in all, I think it was on one hand, I really liked how it was designed, so it was like a lot of, you know, kind of days was more workshops, then days was the company visits. And although it was intensive, but I think it was kind of good, good, kind of intensive. Looked like students they were engaged. Yes, they were probably tired at times, but it is much, much better this way than it is like, you know, kind of a lot of free time and then they kind of don't have much of purpose to be somewhere. So, I, I think that all in all this experience was really, really good, and very successful. As I understand it was the first time that the university was doing this BIP and I know that colleagues were kind of a little bit unsure how it is gonna go, but I think that it, it was just let's say everything went perfectly, at least to my understanding of how it should go.

A: Perfect! And there was one thing that I was curious about, because did you also adjusted your teaching or your workshop to this diverse context?

B: What would you mean diverse?

A: Compared to…diverse in the sense of that there were here students from different universities coming together, were you given any pointers to take this into account or not?

B: No, but I'm not sure if this is like even, I mean, I'm mostly working with international students and international groups also here at the [the home university], this means that I'm teaching mostly in English and I have students from all over the world, so I guess it is kind of like a default setting for me, understanding that there is a people from different countries and this is one thing, and then on the other hand, the topic or the workshop we were giving, in both actually mine and Professor [name of colleague from the home university], I don't think it was like, you know, something kind of sensitive towards that diversity. I think this is a topic that is common to everyone and I'm not sure if there was something to specifically adjust to it, so we were just, you know, kind of teaching kind of universal things and that would be, I guess from the perception point of view, the same to everyone.

A: Hmm-mmm, yeah.

A: And I also heard that you are maybe interested in organising a Blended Intensive Programme at your university?

B: It is like you know…Quickly, quickly, before everyone comes down to their senses. No, of course I was, you know, quite inspired you know, inspired by this week.

[part of personal information redacted regarding the new professional role I4 will start and the workload that comes with it, which will impact teaching duties]

At least I think that the process was transparent enough for me to understand that this is doable, right? I mean, it is of course a lot of work in terms of organising it. So, this means putting together or let's say you have to come up with a good kind of topic, which would be interesting to the network of FORTHEM, for example. Then you just have to figure out like how the schedule will look like. You know, again balancing out the classes, balancing out the trips or visits to the companies or maybe some social

activities, but it is doable. And I think that I will, I will stand by my words at this means if you know, I really, I really want to organise it. It is just, I guess, a little bit of a timing question, but I think that at least when dust settles a little bit, I think I will definitely make one, yeah.

A: Hmm, yeah. Because, I mean, I think you already gave a lot of pointers of why this Blended Intensive Programme was successful for you and what the benefits are in it, but could you maybe just summarise a bit why you think these Blended Intensive Programmes, this hybrid format of online classes and five days on site is an appealing format?
B: I think it is very good too because, like for example my lectures, my lecture was also like an online lecture was linked to the workshops that we had there. So, this means that we are kind of gaining a little bit more time in terms of preparing the students for this onsite workshops. So, this means that you know, when we are on site, we are having probably just more interesting activities and not so much just the informative lectures. So, I think in this sense it was a very successful solution because it is a complementary thing for us, at least this is how you know we planned it that it is basically like a you know preparation for this workshops and information that was necessary for the workshop. So, that is what…I think it's let's say, a very really I think it is a very successful solution, yeah, that online basically you are preparing for this week. You don't go there and then you find out what it is gonna be about, but you are, you know, really preparing for this week also by the online. Yeah, so very good.

A: Yes, nice. And is there also anything that…I mean I think you said this was very successful, but are there also areas you think for improvement? Or things that you have noticed that you would do differently, perhaps?
B: To be honest, I think that there were…I nothing really comes to my mind, like you know, that you know, there was some kind of obviously you know this is really, really bad or something like that. No, no, I really, I think that really everything was really well, well organised in and just...really some very good, good, good experience in general, yeah. So, if you ask me like this because you know, sometimes there are, there are some type of events and then everyone notices something, but no, at least from my perspective, I don't know. You know, people are different sometimes people notice everything you know, the water was not to the temperature that is, you know, to the liking or something like that. No, no, I think everything was really good because you know, I think that overall that you know the experience, what do you have to have, you have an interesting programme, you have people who are assisting everything, you know, kind of, you know, making sure that everyone knows what we do and helping out, you know, we had to water and snacks and coffee and these things, you know. So, no one was no one…
A: Everything to survive.
B: No one was really hungry, but let's be honest, this is actually an important thing, you know, because if people are starving, right? So, just and this kicks in this hangry, right? It was hunger and angry. So, hangry. So, I think that these things were taken into consideration and then just content, the content was good. So, I think I don't really see any kind of obvious, I know flaws or mistakes and organisation were all execution of this programme, so I think it all in all very good.

A: Okay, thank you for sharing. And then, well, we are almost at the end of the interview time, as the time goes very fast. Is there anything in particular for my research that you think that I should take into account on Blended Intensive programmes?
B: Yes, I think that, you know, the one day I was invited to the meeting here at the university, it was an online meeting, but I was invited to share my experience exactly on this Blended Intensive Programme and you know how it went because it was at the university level. So, like in the end, this means there were a lot of people who are just, you know, listening about the opportunities because besides this

Blended Intensive Programmes, there were different other type of programmes, and you know just being honest, and I was sitting there and just thinking about like where is the, where are these concepts coming from? To be honest. Because they are the kind of, you know, there are different names to them, and they are all of them are kind of similar, with this like, you know, kind of differences because you know, some time ago it was just all very simple. You have an Erasmus+ something, a semester abroad, and then obviously there and the necessity of kind of more flexibility and maybe not being so much dedicated to study, you know, abroad for the whole semester. And so, this means the necessity of this Blended Intensive Programmes emerged at one point, right? So, and I think from the just the scientific perspective, of course, it is just like a question like why, like why are they there, right? Yeah, because right. Yeah, why are why? Why are they there? And then of course, and I think this is what you are trying to understand, like you know, if they are implemented, so what is the effectiveness of those programmes. I mean, like do you, you know, do you really, I mean, is it really necessary to keep so many different variations of the short-term programmes and because it seems like at one point, maybe even confusing, you know, you have so many different programmes and if you haven't done it…like for example about that Blended Intensive Programmes are clear to me, but then there were others which I was just sitting there and like, wow, how is that different? And to which do I apply? You know and etcetera. But I I think just purely from the scientific, yeah, I think that, you know, what is a necessity like why there was a necessity to implement these types of programmes, which as a hypothesis means that it is mostly for students, you know who can't engage themselves for a longer term.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: But you know, at least it is something, you know, give them a taste of international environment, but yeah, but the effectiveness. Who knows?

A: Yeah. So, you are…

B: I mean because hypothesis is like what is the long term strategy for mobility in the like academic mobility in Europe? What is the long term? Because on one hand, actually I started to think about it because, like, Erasmus for teaching is also like one week basically, you know, as a professor, I go for one week and if I don't have an opportunity to spend a semester abroad, at least I get a one week and which is also part of internationalisation.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: So, this means that similar kind approach to students as well. Yeah, but I think these are really just a bigger things and this is what you are going after to understand how effective they are, right?

A: Yes, yes indeed.

B: Isn't it just a huge waste of money? But sorry, I'm economist.

A: *both laughing* Yes, but no, no, but those are indeed very critical questions and also something that I'm trying to do research about. I mean, of course, there is the official discourse from the European Union about it, and the Erasmus+ programme, but there are always underlying factors as well. And one of the hypothesis what you just said, it is introduced officially as a more inclusive way for students to participate in a internationalisation activity. So, for students who do not have the opportunity to spend one semester or a full year abroad because of circumstance circumstances like money wise, perhaps they are parents.

B: Yeah.

A: Perhaps it doesn't fit into their curriculum, that they can still get the grasp of it, but then indeed the question is how?

B: Yeah.

A: How effective is this? And what do students gain from this?

B: I think that for at least [country of the home university], it is specific about Erasmus. For example, the semester Erasmus, the specifics in [country of the home university] is that education or higher education is, let's say it depends on the programme. Some programmes, for example, you know like in stems they

have quite a lot of government funded places to study but like in social sciences and humanity…sometimes it is like for example, the social sciences, it is like, I think most of the…more than 70% is with the tuition fee. So, this means that students are paying for their education, and it is ever so often that students probably, you know, they start studying, you know, maybe was like, I don't know a study loan or parents are helping out, but as they are approaching like a later year, okay, bachelor is 3 years for most of them, and like in the second or third year, they try to find a job and this is how they kind of finance their studies, and whenever they have a job, this is basically a game over for a semester stay abroad.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: Right? And for the master students, it is almost impossible. It is basically like a luxury if you have a chance to go for the full semester abroad because most students…I think that...It would be rather a bold statement, but I think that most students, just all of them are working, and that is why the master programmes are organised at the studies are all in the evening of the working days or on Saturday. So, this means basically all of their other free time they have, they study in the master programmes, but they work, and mostly they are paying for their studies. So, that is why I think that at least in case of [country of the home university] these Blended Intensive Programmes and basically being away for one week of course is much, much more realistic. You know, you can just, you know, at your work anywhere you can actually have some type of agreement with your employer.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: And for us, I think this is actually very, very attractive I think as an opportunity to be in involved in the internationalisation processes. So yeah, so I would say like at least in in [country of the home university], this makes a lot of sense.

A: Well, it is very interesting. I don't want to take too much of your time because I understand how busy you are…

B: It is okay, but if you have any other questions because we have scheduled until 09:00 for this, we still have like 10 more minutes or something.

A: Yes, yeah, okay we can.

A: Actually, also one of the reasons of why they are also having these kind of programmes is to enhance intercultural competence among students, so they have the opportunity to work in these international groups.

B: Yeah, yeah.

A: Do you think actually that students gain this in one week of interacting together?

B: I can't assess like the level, you know, of this, but even one week, you know, it is all about the mindset. Like if I think about myself, of course they say I am you know, engaged in internationalisation processes, either teaching for international groups here or going abroad, like for a long time now, and of course it seems like quite normal to me and my mind is not wondering anymore about any of the differences, but you have to start somewhere. And I think even one week is a good start to open mind for different systems. Well, this way, different way of thinking, you know, different approach to life, I guess, and etcetera. So, I think that you have to just start somewhere, right? And I think for my students, for some of them probably it was like a first, like this first type of, you know, kind of learning experience abroad. So, and I think that, yeah, it is let's say it is a great initiative because you just have to start somewhere, and even if it is one week, so probably it kind of creates an interest for the students maybe to spend some more time, you know, if they did find it interesting, you know, and curiosity was created. So this is important, and I know like for example about this internationalisation thing here in [country of the home university], I mean, you know, we are small nation and a small country and what I'm trying to promote here at the university and also these, let's say courses in English, because the likeliness or the chances of them ending up in the international company or a company who is dealing with some other companies

abroad is super high, I mean for us, you know, being just, you know, kind of national like just national and localised, it is I I'm not sure, if you know, university degree students are really like searching for career in the localised kind of businesses. So, the chances for them to end up, you know, in the international companies are quite high and that is why they they are gonna deal with the international teams, whether it is online or something else.

A: Hmm-mmm, yes.

B: And somehow I just remember one interesting, somehow it sticked in my memory, and because you know, in some groups I do have some, you know, sometimes it is international students. Sometimes it is just like local [students of the nationality of the home university], but I'm still trying, you know, teach the courses in English. So, this means it is basically it is still about the economics, right? But English is like an additional kind of bonus to give them a chance to practice, and I encourage them, you know, because at the university this is where you don't have to be shy about your, you know, language and it is a platform to practice things for your, you know, for the job market, and I remember this one student and she was let's say maybe you know her English was probably not like the best but she kinda, you know, and she had to present something and she started her presentation with the words that she a little bit apologised that maybe her English is not so smooth, but she still wanted do it in English because, you know, sometimes when students struggle like I give them certain flexibility. But she said, I still wanna do it in English because she is working for the international company. So, in [country of the home university] there is a company which is international and she has to use in English and and you know other international skills in the company and she wants to practice it. And this is this is where I see this quite a lot, that these, you know, international dimensions and diversity and all the other things are very, very useful. So, and this is what I'm trying to promote here in my course this as well.

A: From my perspective of course, that that is very great because I'm doing research about internationalisation and it is very interesting. As we are almost reaching out time limit, is there anything else that you would like to add or that you think I should pay attention to?

B: As I mentioned that I am trying to promote these courses in English and like in [country of the home university] we even have a change in the law. Exactly to support these types of initiatives and right now in our law it is saying that even up to 20% of the programmes like even [national language] programmes, so because we have like [country of the home university] programmes like [national language] language programmes and then in English programmes entirely in English, but a law is giving us a flexibility.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: And those programmes, which are kind of purely [country of the home university] programmes to people studying economics in [national language of the home university], but we are given a flexibility like up to 20% of the programme can be taught in English, right? So of course, like you know, sometimes, you know students enrol in a [national language of the home university] programme and then not all of them are probably are aware of this because as we know, students probably don't read all of their information about the programme…But even if some of them are, you know, kind of surprised about sitting, you know, that all the sudden, you know, courses in English like and teaching economics, and then I explain, you know, I explain why we are doing this and it is not an English course. So, no one should really worry about it because as we know the most widely used language in the world is bad English. So, it is not about the English, it is about the economics. And why and when I explained them this, why are we doing this, because it is for their benefit. Usually they are, let's say most of the students actually are on board right away, they are actually quite happy because, you know, they maybe don't take the English programme, maybe a little bit kind of hesitating and worrying how it is going to be making it difficult. But if you have just, you know, couple of courses in English which kind of gives you an opportunity to just, you know, to get to know the terminology which is used, because you know in economics you like we are talking about [country of the home university] and there is not much of

material that is generated in [national language of the home university] language which is up to date, you know, what is going on in the world and world economy, you have to read in English. You know you have to understand. Like what the European Central Bank is doing what is going on in the United States and stock markets and etcetera. You have to read like, if you want to read the news, you read it in English basically to get the fresh news and I'm trying to promote these things and I'm calming them down that is not about English but usually most of the students are just fine immediately they actually like this idea. Because I think that…you know….most of these young generations they are still mostly…you know…spend a lot of time on watching Netflix or something like that. So, this means that this is something that is not shocking to them at all, I said. And they very much enjoy like, you know, just trying out these things and then...and as you know, maybe it is like a little bit, you know, the kind of reserved it at first rather, but then usually I persuade them this is the good, let's say good skill that they are developing and quite necessary for their international careers, and this is just, you know, maybe to fill the gap information.
A: Hmm-mmm. Yes.
B: Is there anything else?
A: Okay, no, for me, that is it. So, if it is okay with you, then I just stop the recording.
B: Okay.
A: Okay, thank you.

IX.5. Interview Transcript I5

Interviewee: BIP C I Associate Professor in EconomicsI Teacher and Head Organiser
Date: Monday, 17 June 2024 at 08:30 AM CET
Time: 08:30 AM – 09:30 AM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 60 minutes / 46 minutes of recording

Start Record
A: Yes, I just started the recording. I think you should also see a red button.
B: Hmm-mmm, yes.
A: Yes, right. So, just to start, [name of the interviewee], do I have your permission to record this interview?
B: Yes, you have.
A: Thank you very much. So, the idea of this interview or this meeting is that it will take about 30 to 45 minutes, but it depends a bit on what we will cover. Because, yes, it is an interview, but it is more like a free-flow conversation where I'm just very curious to hear more about the organisational side of the Blended Intensive Programme, your experience of the BIP, and your insights. So, I do have a few questions that I would like to cover, but furthermore it just really depends on where the conversation is going, of course. So, the idea is that I will first tell you a little bit more about the official protocol of this research, so, about the confidentiality and that it is anonymous. Then, I will ask you a few general questions about your role and your role in the BIP, and then we will go more into the experience of the BIP. Does this sound okay?
B: Okay, sounds good.
A: Yes. Okay, so one of the most important thing is to explain is that I'm recording this interview so that afterwards I can transcribe the data. This data will then be anonymised, meaning that I will use

codified names so your name will not be reflected, and I will also anonymise any other part that can be traced back to you. In general, this is also part of a bigger research project, so I observed several BIPs for my PhD study. So, it is coming in this overall thing which also increases the anonymity of the data. It is also confidential in the sense that towards the raw data of the interview, only me and my two PhD supervisors have access, but afterwards it will only be used anonymously in any further publications, my doctoral study, or any presentations. During this interview, if you have any questions that I'm asking and that you would rather not like to answer, that is totally fine, then you could let me know and also after the interview at any point until publication you can let me know that you would like to redraw something. I will also send the anonymised transcript to you afterwards. That will maybe take me a few weeks before I have anonymised everything and I have typed everything out, but then you can also still read over it and let me know if you would like to change anything. Does that sound okay for you?
B: Sounds okay.
A: Perfect. So, do you have any questions before we start?
B: Not really. I really hope that my answers will be helpful for your research.
A: Yes, well, I'm more than confident about that. We already spoke a lot during the visit as well and this is just like another formal method in order for me to get the data. So, thank you very much for being willing to participate.
B: You are welcome.

A: Okay. So, to start, could you maybe tell me a little bit more about what your current professional role is and how this relates to the Blended Intensive Programme?
B: Okay, so currently I'm associated professor at [the home university], Faculty of Economic Science. So, my main role is teaching, is related to teaching. I teach economics, European integration and competitive strategies, and also I have the research part and my research focus is of course on macroeconomics, and international economics and European integration, and also the business related part regarding competitive strategies. I currently teach in English for two English programmes, actually three. So, we have one master programme, competitive strategy is the subject, business management is the name of the programme. And also, I teach in English to our business administration and a new programme is business informatics. I think my interest in BIP, it is related to these programmes because we really want to give our students who make the effort to study in English because basically we have [nationality home university] students studying in English, to give them the opportunity to have the international experience, the international flavour.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, that means that we try to offer them internationalisation at home, one part of the experience, and also the opportunity to experience different Erasmus programmes. We saw that the decision is especially for first-year students and is really difficult to decide to be involved in the long-term Erasmus programme. That is why the BIPs are really a good opportunity for them, to recruit them and give this international experience.

A: Okay, yes, it is very interesting. So, I will ask you, ask for it more about this as well, about the internationalisation at home part and how this relates to the students. But first, could you maybe take me a little bit into how this Blended Intensive Programme at [the home university] got organised?
B: Yes, so, this year was our second BIP with the same group of universities. So, we are talking about a [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, A] and the [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, B]. Our cooperation, the background for this…a group of universities is related first of all with our cooperation with [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, A], we run actually two double degrees degree programmes with this university. It was our first double degree started for

Business Administration a few years ago for Bachelor. It was quite challenging, it was the first double degree for the University. For bachelor programmes it is actually is really tough in [country of the home university] because of the restrictions and also we started another double degree for our master's programme Business Management in English. So, this is first part of our background with the [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, A] colleagues and also we…actually had a strategic partnership, Erasmus programmes with six universities. The leader was [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, A]. They applied in Germany and managed to have funding for this programme and we were six universities in the project, one was [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, A], second [the home university], [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, B] and also we had three other partners from Poland, Hungary and the Netherlands. So, in the final stages of our programme, we decided to have a BIP and the first BIP, was a BIP, was organised by [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, B]. And last year we had the experience to be a part of this BIP, as a, let's say, travelling partners. We had 12 [local students from the home university] students and three professors involved in the programme and also our partners had the same number of students and professors involved. The plan was to have somehow a template for BIP.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: So, to use a framework to replicate the same structure with a different topic in all three universities. So, we had the big the topic of practical business skills and for each year we decided on a specific topic for different universities in order to have different experiences in different countries.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: So, the last BIP, the one that you participated in was our second experience as partners. It was about practical business skills and the focus was entrepreneurship because our let's say specific knowledge in [the home university], we are in FORTHEM Alliance, we run a lot of different programmes related to entrepreneurship and that is why we considered that we can provide an interesting programme for the students on this specific topic. So, this is the context, actually, it is a long run cooperation, second BIP and the plan is to have our next BIP in [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, A] next year.

A: Yes, and how come that…because now if I understand correctly, there were first six universities involved and at the moment it is three plus [one of the FORTHEM partner universities]. How about the other universities, why were they not involved this time?

B: So, the three-year project during pandemic could be really challenging. Something…some universities let's say, performed really well during the project and the cooperation with some other partners was not so, not not so strong. It is not about colleagues and working together, but sometimes it is about the compatibility between organisational culture and all that. So, it was a natural selection of first of all. With [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], we decided to involve them because our partnership in FORTHEM Alliance and we considered that it is really valuable to have this, let's say mix between old partners and new partners in order to refresh the framework.

A: Okay.

B: So, it was a natural process and I think the number of students that we can manage for the BIP was another part of the decision because if the group is too small, we consider that it is not enough to have all the teamwork and all that. And if the group is too big, it is difficult to manage for travelling and all that. So, it was a combination between management issues and let's say natural selection after a three-year project.

A: Okay and how about, you just said before that, the idea was to create like a framework or a template for the BIP, how does this look like? In which kind of way?

B: The management part, I think this one. So, it was not about the content, but I think the process of learning about how to organise the BIP, it is really important.

A: Okay?

B: So, the structure, the number of teaching hours, the scheduling between online and onsite part, the part related to the volume and the tasks that we should ask our students, the size of the groups and all that. It was really a learning process and I have to say that for the first BIP we had, I don't know, for the first BIP we had bi-monthly meetings before the we actually start the recruiting process, at least few months because it was a lot of brainstorming about how many people, when should we start the recruiting process, who should be the target, how big should be the group? So, it was really important and we decided to keep the pillars let's say for the next year for the management. So, we kept the same week, for example, almost exactly the same week of…

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: Having the onsite activities because we saw that our academic year, it is, it was really challenging to find the perfect week for travelling for example. And keeping the same week was really easy because it was predictable when we started the recruiting process, also we kept the same deadlines regarding application from our students because we saw that it is really important to have the list before at the beginning of December for the April BIP in order to have the time to schedule everything and to work on the organising part like accusation process, planning the activities in [city of the home university] and all that. So, this was the framework, let's say about deadlines. And also about…I think the templates and the visual part was also a lot of work and it was easier to use the experience because we already knew that we need at least one announcement on the side, we need to have some leaflets for our students. So, all this was really important for us to have…have the most important tasks already…let's say planned.

A: Hmm-mmm, yeah, and were there also certain things that you did change compared to the year before?

B: Oh, yes. So, it was on let's say on the evaluation process and we change the number of participants from [the home university], for example. So, we decided to include [one of the FORTHEM partner universities] from FORTHEM Alliance and in order to have the same total number of students, we had less students from the host university, and this was a process because we did the recruitment in [one of the FORTHEM partner universities] first and second we had the recruitment in [the home university]. So, changing the number of partners, it was a part of our plan, also we changed not only the content, the topic, but also the soft skills that we targeted on the content part. So, we had the focus on entrepreneurship comparing to the other BIP was on marketing and launching events, but also it was not the presentation skills that we focused on changed and we had a pitch this year for example instead of the of the PowerPoint presentation last year. So, we changed a little bit this part also on the soft skills that we want to create during the BIP.

A: Hmm-mmm. And just to clarify, you said the number of students from [the home university] changed from the host institution because last year there was…I mean the year before there were too many students from the host university?

B: Twelve and now we had only eight in order to include the four students from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities].

A: Okay, yeah, okay, thank you. And yeah, one of the things that is…

B: And it was, sorry, I think it is important it was another part that it was important related to this change, our university applied for a different budget funding. It was the €8000, not the €6000, that means the target for our international students was higher comparing to our partners and it was another part of our decision. So, it was about reaching the correct number of international students. It was not difficult, but we considered this in our planning.

A: But okay, yeah, clear. Thank you for the clarification on that.

A: One of the other things that you just said was that the target skills are different. Could you maybe tell me a bit more about what the learning outcomes were for this Blended Intensive Programme?

B: Yes, for this year the plan was to provide students some tools to evaluate the opportunity of opening a business, this was the main topic. So, finally we decided to use as a basic tool, let's say, Lean Business Model Canva, this was the framework, and we asked students to evaluate the opportunity to enter the [city of the home university] Christmas market.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: Christmas market with a business idea. So, this was the main topic and the idea was to cover the different parts of opening a business, starting with the evaluation of the opportunity to open a business in a specific environment, but also we provided the marketing knowledge they needed, the financial topics, so the lectures that we decided to include in the…let's say learning process were related to the big idea to open a business, but we wanted to cover different parts of this, so it was about the opportunity evaluation, marketing, and financial, and also the soft skills related to communicate related to your business idea, and English communication of course.

A: Hmm-mmm, yes, because that was also one of the questions that I was having, what do you think that students actually gain out of these Blended Intensive Programmes?

B: I think the experience to work in an international team was the best outcome for them because we can provide this type of knowledge, and during the classrooms, during the semester in our own universities, but learning how to work in an international team this is the main benefit. Also, I think a BIP is more focused on soft skills comparing to regular classes and also this part is really important part of their…let's say general learning during university years. It is not enough to have the knowledge, but also to learn how to put it in the…and to value all the knowledge that you have. So, these are the main outcomes in my opinion.

A: And do you see that Blended Intensive Programmes are a good tool for these kind of soft skills?

B: Yes, they, they are perfect because we have the online part and this online part is really, really good. We planned the online learning with two sessions before the onsite activity. The first session was about a let's say a kick-off and also we had a first lecture so it was a first part with the description, we explained our intentions related to the programme, and the second part of the meeting was about the first lecture. But also, for the second online meeting, they had their first assignment and their first assignment was a national, working in their national teams on a specific topic, and after that we blended the teams during their week in [the home university]. So, BIPs are perfect to provide the teamwork, international experience, but also the online learning and cooperation. I think it was really good because there is also about skills how to present your idea to a, let's say, of in a virtual environment it was another part of their, and also they had a written report as an assignment, so it was not only about presentation, but also about the ability to write about the specific topic in your team. So, it is, the BIP is perfect for mixing all these methods and targeting all these skills.

A: So, if I understand correctly, you do see Blended Intensive Programmes with the use of teamwork as a good method to enhance internationalisation?

B: Yes. Yes. So, teamwork it is important but could be really challenging to work in an international team and the BIPs are the I think the perfect opportunity because they have to learn how to deal with different cultures, different people, and also different rules in different universities. As an example, for their first online assignment, we asked them to use the templates and all the visual and the requirements from their own universities and it was different quite different because we saw that the requirements in each university regarding the, I don't know, the how to put the information, how many words about this and all that. So, it was first about your own university and after that we provided them a mix, let's say template to targeting all our rules and they had to fit in this. So, it is international and teamwork I think these are the keywords for the BIPs.

A: Okay, thank you. And then I was wondering about the online component of the Blended Intensive Programme, because of course it is a part of the BIP, did you specifically choose to have it before the onsite week?
B: Yes, yes.
A: Could you maybe tell me a bit the reasoning behind this?
B: Yes, yes, we wanted to have let's say the kick-off part and the meeting was really important and I think that it is easier for them to have an idea about their future partners. So, this this was one part of the process, but also, I think we wanted to have a student, the students prepared for the intensive week. So, we really used the intensive week for work because all the…almost I think only two lectures, they needed only two more lectures and theoretical framework in the first and second day because the intensive week is quite challenging when we are talking about the volume of work for students and that is why we try to provide them the information before and also to make them think about it and read and do some research on their own. So, when they started to work in teams, they already knew something about the topic, that is why we decided on this. And the evaluation process let's say the follow-up meeting, we decided to have the follow-up in our last day of the intensive week, maybe it is a good idea to have a follow-up on online version of the follow-up at the end after the intensive week. I don't know, could be a good idea for next year, but I think at least two meetings before it was good for us.
A: And that is also what happens in the during the BIP, the first BIP?
B: Yes, yes, it was an experiment let's say, the first time we wanted to see if it is efficient enough because for the first and second, the first assignment was actually an assignment related more to communication and virtual presentation but also for knowing each other. So, the first one was to ask each national team to have a presentation of their own university, country and city.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, it was the first assignment. It was a something with pass or fail evaluation but the students were great and I think it was better than asked them to research, do some research about partner universities for example. So, it was creative, it was nice to have this part of presentation. The other assignment the written report was more business focused. So, it was about the content and doing the research on national markets just to be prepared for working during the intensive week and not using the time just for general research and all that.
A: Yes, so it is a mix between content specific business-related and between the socialisation, if I understand correctly.
B: And yes. Yes.

A: And how do you look back on the on the work that the students provided?
B: We were really content about the work that students manage to do. I think the intensive week was really good and the final results were good and nice, nice. Maybe, and you remember, we need to work on and to change something, something about evaluation process. From our side, that is why I said that the feedback and follow-up should be something that we maybe we will plan differently in our future BIPs.
A: Do you have any idea how you would plan it differently?
B: I don't know, I had the, well I talked about six partners in our previous project, one partner it was [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, C] and I had…last year I decided to go for the international week to [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, C] and it was really a good experience and we started to talk about future cooperation and I met a professor there and so we decided to try to have a BIP for this year. It was really short time to plan and we decided to have a COIL, that means Collaborative Online International Learning.
A: Hmm-mmm.

B: So, we had a project with only two universities, only online part, and because of the challenges related to the platforms for example that we use. They use Microsoft, we use Google, and they are not compatible, and all that. We asked students to work in international teams but we kept the evaluation process in our own university. So, each professor had the opportunity let's say to evaluate their own students according to their own rules. Also, because being a COIL, it was not a formal credit recognition. So, we needed to have this and I think it was a good idea because we had more flexibility regarding the grading and all that. We have the, we had the discussion about each team and all that but also we had somehow independent evaluation. So, maybe this could be a part. So, changing this, let's say, balance between the evaluation of the team of professors and each university rules. Another part, maybe we can have some individual evaluation. That part was missing in our last year and this year project and somehow I felt that the contribution inside the team it is not really equal. So could be fair to have some individual tasks to be evaluated for the next year. This could be another part of improvement, let's say, and also we are talking about different systems.

A: Yes, yes.

B: We discussed grading, for example, and if it is a 9 or a 10 in [country of the home university], because we have a maximum 10, when they go back to their national standards, 9 equals a maximum also, and yeah, somehow if we give our students a 9 the partners will receive the maximum grade for all students. So, we have to deal with this type of differences in order to improve. And also, we think about introducing, let's say, more specific list of evaluation points to give this…

A: Evaluation criteria?

B: Yes, evaluation criteria. And to give the students the evaluation criteria at the beginning of the process. Maybe it is too early during the online, first online session, but actually for each task we will give them the specific of evaluation criteria. Because we had these criteria for each presentation let's say, each professor told them okay for this part of marketing you should be, you should pay attention to this and this, for financial you should do this, but I think could be really useful for the students to have the criteria on the same page, let's say, and give them before starting to work on the team project.

A: Hmm-mmm, and why do you think that is important?

B: I think they don't have enough time to cover all the aspects. So, evaluating the business opportunity could be really open and sometimes because of a they, I don't know, lack of experience on this topic, different backgrounds of the students. Some teams performed really well in focusing, let's say, and some other teams had nice projects, nice ideas, but they missed some points and for the evaluation part it is difficult to appreciate the creativity or to focus more on the let's say hard part of the business content and all that.

A: Yeah, yes. I have actually, I have now another question, out of my own interest, because you have been involved in the in the COIL as well, do you think the week onsite really adds to the experience?

B: Yes, it is really a big difference. For us is it was not enough time to plan, but we will continue. It was a nice experience, we had a really nice feedback from our students, but we plan to have a BIP next year. Including another university and have the BIP on this idea because the COIL was about EU cultural identity, it was part of my European integration class and [name of a colleague] has a class about also European business environment and cultural issues. So, it was really nice. I think the benefit of having a COIL was the number of students because we had 42 students involved. So, it is not possible to have 42 students from two universities in a BIP, it is difficult to manage, so we will have less students. But, of course, I think the onsite, all the students told us the same, it will be so nice to work together in the same classroom, so.

A: So, you want to change the COIL into a BIP next year if I understand?

B: Yes, yes, to have, to use the, let's say, the general idea of the COIL to focus on the same first year students, it will be a different group of students, of course next year, but to make it a BIP.

A: Okay, yeah, very interesting. I'm just keeping an eye on the time because I know that I said 45 minutes, but if it is okay I would like to ask a few more questions?
B: Yes, of course!
A: Yes, okay, great. So just to round up, well, this is a very big round up question, but what was your overall experience of the BIP?
B: So, I really enjoyed the process of managing a BIP. It was really easy for me having an experience that, the experience of a BIP before have to organise the same BIP. The institutional structure is really, really important that the institutional support is important. It is I think it is quite impossible to organise the BIP without our International Office, without all the departments involved, being there and a being able to deal. So, for us it was the first BIP organised in [the home university]. So, for my colleagues it was also challenging but I think the next one it will be nice. So, the management part it is not really easy but having the experience, and I think my advice for anybody is just to participate in a BIP before organising it. At least having someone, someone who did it before.
A: Because this helps you very much in your planning.
B: It is quite yes, yes, or having the institutional experience is also a really good way to deal with the challenges.

A: Yeah, okay, and do you have any other advice for future organisers of Blended Intensive Programmes?
B: I don't know, planning ahead I think is the most important part for a BIP. We are different cultures, we are not really, [country of the home university] is not country well known for planning ahead, but we had Finland as partners and they plan ahead at least for one year. All the tasks for the academic year, or the I don't know the meetings, the department meetings they were already planned one year before, and we learned from them how easy is to have one month instead of one week to do some tasks. So, I think planning ahead is the keyword. I started to think about a BIP with [a university outside the FORTHEM partner network, C] in November and organising in May, it was impossible. So, I think you need almost a year to plan.
A: Yeah. And why was it impossible?
B: Because we didn't have time to have official approvement for another partner. For example, third partner because everybody needs the formal approvement is a process let's say. It was November that means that the only semester that you have to do is second spring semester and we had the holidays, we had the exam sessions, so the travelling, selecting students applying for it is a process and you need the time. So, I think the best way to do it is to plan the BIP for the next academic year is the easiest way?
A: Okay, good. And do you have any other advice for future organisers?
B: I don't know, involving the right students, it is about selection, it is about rules in each university regarding credit recognition, for example, because the motivation for the students, if they are, if they have the opportunity to travel, is the experience. If they have to be involved in a team at home and in an international team, they should be motivated and they should, we expect them to be available for one intensive week, for example. That means that if you are at home, if you are travelling the things are clear, you are travelling, you have to do only the tasks related to your BIP, but if you are at home, you have to deal with some other parts of your regular activities. So, you have to have the motivation to be available for eight hours per day for the BIP. So, could be different and right students.
A: So, the right student is the motivated student, if I understand?
B: Yes, motivated. I think motivation is the most important part. If they want to do something, they will do it.

A: Hmm-mmm, good. So, this is the final question because I know that we are already going a bit overtime, but I just find it very interesting. Is there anything else that you think that I should pay attention to in my research or anything that I should address?
B: I don't know but I'm really interested in your findings, because for me, for example, participating in two BIPs with the same type of approaching, could be a, let's say a trap, because you cannot see the difference. I think maybe a really interesting part is to have the differences between BIPs and some conclusions related to the different approaches and different outcomes. I think the difference is because we are involved in a specific BIP and we have only this experience, and for example, I would be really interested to see the evaluation system for some other BIPs or the ratio between online and onsite activities for different BIPs and all that.
A: Yeah, good, I can imagine. Thank you very much! So, these were my main questions, is there anything else that you would like to add or?
B: No, I really hope that I covered at least a part of your interest areas but the I don't have any more ideas now.
A: Okay, well, thank you very much, [name of interviewee]. Then I'm just going to stop the recording.

IX.6. Interview Transcript I6

Interviewee: BIP D I Associate Professor of Demography I Teacher and Head Organiser
Date: Tuesday, 6 August 2024 at 10:30 AM on Teams
Time: 10:30 AM –11:30 AM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 60 minutes / 46 minutes of recording

Start Record
A: Yes, so, I just started recording this session, you should see that also, there is the red button on now as well. So, just to confirm before we start, do I have your permission to record this interview?
B: I'm sorry, can you repeat?
A: Do I have your permission to record this interview?
B: Yeah, sure.
A: Yes, okay, great.
B: Yes, again.
A: Just to confirm. So, the idea of this interview is that it will take around 30 to 45 minutes, but it mainly depends a bit on what we will discuss and what we will cover, because it will be mainly a free-flow conversation. So, I have a few topics ready that I would like to discuss, but furthermore, it is really to get to understand better your experiences of the Blended Intensive Programme so to say. So, the idea is that I will first discuss a little bit about the official protocol of my research, and then I will ask you some general questions about what your role is and how this relates to the Blended Intensive Programme, and then we will get more specifically into the Blended Intensive Programme, and by ending to see if you have any advice for future organisers wishing to set up a Blended Intensive Programme. So, that is mainly the idea, is that okay for you?
B: Okay, okay, yes. I want only to advise that perhaps during our conversation around 11, it could be that someone rings me, and in case I have to simply pause for 10 minutes and then we can continue, okay? Sorry for this but it is an appointment that arrived after, so just to advise, okay?

A: Yeah, that is no problem at all, just let me know when the time comes. Maybe we are done before, but let's see how it goes.
B: Yes, okay. So, they can arrive from 11 to 12, so it can be that they arrive or not during our conversation, okay?
A: Okay, yeah, that is no problem. Thank you for letting me know in any case.
B: Okay.

A: So, this interview is recorded for me in order to transcribe the data. So, meaning that after the interview it might take a few weeks, of course, that I will write down everything that has been said. It is important to note that during this process I will also anonymise the data, so, meaning that I will get rid of any traces that can lead back to you. So, I will use either pseudonyms or codes in order to anonymise the data, and this interview is also part of a bigger research project for my PhD, so I'm carrying out several interviews which also increases the anonymity, of course. One important thing to note is that after I have transcribed the data, I will also send the transcript to you, at that moment you have the possibility, if you want, you don't have to, but to read over it and to see if you want to get rid of anything or not. That possibility you have until I publish my PhD or any related articles of course. And I think that is maybe it, do you have any questions about this or…?
B: Yes, yes, so it is great. Okay, I'm ready.

A: Perfect. So, to start, could you maybe tell me a bit more about what your current professional role is?
B: Okay, I am professor of demography [identifying information removed], and I teach in many undergraduate degrees and some graduate. So, I teach in the degree of undergraduate degree of statistics, of cooperation development, and of European plan, and also I teach for postgraduate students in tourism, hospitality, marketing, management and comparison development and migration. So, these are mainly the students that I have, and obviously, as professor I do many other things more than teaching, that regards research and other duties that I have in the department.
A: Yes, and one of these other things was also the organisation of this Blended Intensive Programme, could you tell me a bit more about how you became involved in this BIP?
B: Okay, I am one of the representatives, the one that participates for [the home university] to the FORTHEM lab [identifying information removed]. Since I am involved in this lab, I think that it would be good to organise something within the context of this lab. So, I, when I saw the call for the Blended Intensive Programme, I proposed to the other colleagues of my lab to organise it all together. So, to organise that, I can organise and they can participate as teacher and sending students. So, this was the starting point of the story, and I proposed to the other members of the lab, and I found the interest of [names of two colleagues within the EUA, A&B], [name of a colleague within the EUA, B], I cannot pronounce it very well. And so, but I need three partners for this, organising this Blended Intensive Programme.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, I tried to find some other partners, and in particular I involved [name of a colleague within the EUA, A] that I met in the context of the other lab on [identifying information removed], that is leaded by the [the home university]. So, I cooperate in that lab, in which I have no official word, but I cooperate with them in a project [identifying information removed] and in that occasion I met [name of a colleague within the EUA, C], so, I thought to involve him and also a friend of mine from [a university outside of the FORTHEM Alliance], that is [name of the friend, D]. So, I tried to have more partners to start to present the proposal, and I have, so the signature of that, all of these four, that is enough to start.
A: Yeah.

B: I thought originally, I thought that the presenting the call was almost the final point of the procedure, in the sense that they found that it is the call, and then the organisation of the course itself and the scientific part. So, but I was wrong because the other part of the story was in the middle among the approval of the proposal and the scientific part at the end of May here. So, in the middle, there was all the bureaucracy that is related with this Blended Intensive Programme that I at that time didn't imagine.

A: Hmm-mmm, yes. So, could you maybe explain me a little bit more about the bureaucracy that is related with this process, so to say?
B: This bureaucracy, I mean, the bureaucracy, the fact is that the call is structured in a strange way, in the sense that the Blended Intensive Programmes must have at least 15 students but 15 students that come from different partner universities.
A: Yeah.
B: So, the, I have some problem with the call with the structure of the project and some others with the not so much experience of the office of [the home university]. But apart from the from the ability, the fact is that all the different universities have its own procedure of recruitment but then when they…you cannot say to each university that the project starts because you don't know if the other partner university have enough students to reach the 15 students needed, and this has a consequence, the fact that the procedure was really long, in the sense that the first one has the numbers, I have, they recruited their students but then you have to wait all the others and no one can really buy the ticket up to the moment in which everybody recruit the students and the students are more than 15. But even if you have more than 15 students recruited, then since they didn't do the ticket, they can change their mind.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: And in this way, the castle passed down and this was really a problem also because the, for example, the cost of flights, the cost of hotel, also the organisation of the agenda of the colleagues that have to participate, for example, [teacher partner outside of the EUA, D] planned to come but since we waited a lot, we waited up to middle of May to say yes or no, and then in the end, [they] cannot come anymore. So, this structure in which all the universities depend on the other, so students depend from other students that they don't know, I mean, it is quite complex.
A: Yeah, so, in the end also the 15 students were not reached? I believe there were not 15 incoming students.
B: No, no, they were at the end I think they were 12 and including you, but we were 15 up to two days before the starting of the BIP. We decided to continue because at the end, because I was really, really worried about the fact that we cannot reach these 15 minimum students, but the International Office of [the home university] said we will pay in any case. Because what I say, since the cost covered by the call was small, I say to the other colleagues that to have students I would have to offer lunch and dinner for all. So, they say to the students, you have to pay only the hotel and the flights because [the home university] will pay for your meals. But if we have not the money, I cannot respect my budget, my work, and so at the International Office of [the home university] said, don't care we will pay in any case. So, let's write, we was, we were 16 at that moment and they said okay, we try and in case, no problem, it will be covered by other funds of the university. And, this this was the reason why I have said okay we start, and fortunately I did everything in advance in the sense that this money in theory are given, was given to my department and so I did the call from my department to recruit the society that then organise all the meals and pay for it.
A: Yeah, yeah.
B: So fortunately, all this part was ready and so when they say that they will pay in any case, I directly had the possibility to sign the contract with the society that pay for everything. Otherwise, the time would have been not enough for this part of the procedure that is then given the money and recruit the society that can pay for dinner plans and so on.

A: Yes, so in the end, you got the security from [the home university] and your department in order to let the Blended Intensive Program so to say go on and for you to be able to book everything. How did the programme came about? So, how did the programme, including the social activities, how did this got established?
B: Okay. The scientific part of the organisation was quite clear from the beginning, and I send many emails to the other colleagues to say in which way to arrange how can they participate. And, I asked to other colleagues who participate in other BIPs about the organisation because at the beginning my idea was to do like a summer school, very scientific, but then I discovered that this kind of experience should be more participative and related to the territory. So, I decided to do this kind of a tour of the city related to the content of the people. And the social experience was really strongly related with the scientific programme because we organised two days of more frontal lectures and then three days of touring the city, that are, it is better, experimental look to the city, into the equality, and so on.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, the social part was really not so divided also because from the very beginning, from the first day, the student work, the students were organised in groups and so also lunch, dinner and so on, they started to and became friends and participate, share experience, and so on. And so, this social part was really related to the scientific part of the programme.

A: Yeah. So, under the social part, I remember that we also had some amazing lunches and dinners together. Why did you choose to include those activities as well?
B: Okay, I think that the added value of this kind of programme is to give to students the opportunity to meet people from other countries and also to stay, to compare perspective, point of view, and so on. And this can be done mainly the…yeah, having free time together. So, since this past week will be, have been followed by another week that is overlying work, what I want to really support is the questions among students so that when they meet online, they can cooperate effectively. So, it was important that they really familiarise and became friends during this first week.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: Because then we have to work together online and this is easy if you really know each other, it is more difficult if you never ever have conversation or things like this. So, for me, this week was important to build the relations, also way to communicate, also for their English knowledge, English fluency, everything. So, having a real common base, yeah, to work and build the future work.

A: Hmm-mmm, yes. So, to build the interpersonal relationship and the social cohesion, as you said.
B: Yeah.
A: In order for the online part, because that is also one of the questions that I wanted to ask. Why did you decided, for example, to have the online part after the physical week in [the hometown]?
B: Okay, it wasn't exactly for the same reason, so, I wanted the equation, the group is built before and in presence, and then to work together when they, when they students are friends in a sense. So, I think that otherwise, I think that the online session would be not so effective, because if we do teaching online with students that you have never meet and that don't know each other, you have this kind of PV session, like that you are passive and stay there to listen, or to I don't know…to cook or wash your clothes or things like this. Okay, if you are not, you cannot guarantee that they really are involved in the, in the project, and decide to switch and to start with the in-present experience and then online, I think that the situation is better. You know each other, you have a common duty, you are like engaged in the project, and so even online, you can work effectively.
A: And do you think it is beneficial to also have this online part besides the physical week?
B: I think that the physical experience is more important than the online part…but there I think, since the money are like always not so much, I think that this can be a good part, but the real added value of the

experience is the experience in present, not the online one. So, stay together, having really international group, this is something that is different from what they normally do. Students I mean. Whereas the online session, yes can work, but it is not something that completely changes your perspective.

A: Hmm-mmm, yeah. So, you already said it is the experience, also the international experience, could you maybe tell me a bit more about what the objectives for organising this BIP were?
B: Okay, we have many students here in [the home university] that never go abroad with Erasmus and…for example, are not so…because of financial constraints, because they want to conclude their studies as fast as they can, or because they are afraid to go abroad, or they have no money to go abroad, or anything else. So, many students have not this opportunity and they think that is something that is really important. And both for those who have a good English knowledge and those also who are not so good English knowledge. So, I think the gift to students in the case of [the home university], to student, to give these opportunities, something that can in a sense change their career and also give them the opportunity to meet other students from FORTHEM university that can be like a someone to communicate to when they have to decide for an Erasmus, or an experience, or an international project in the FORTHEM context and so on. So, building relations among FORTHEM university and friendship relations can be something that is important. Indeed, we, for example, some of our students are now presenting one of the projects in FORTHEM for a student driven project in our lab and this is possible because they meet and they now are friends and have a good knowledge, reciprocal knowledge.
A: Yeah.
B: So, I think that this kind of opportunities, that are nice opportunities, is the starting point for other international opportunities. So, the fact that it is an opportunity for those who would have not participated to Erasmus project, but also an opportunity to meet others from FORTHEM network, and so, to have some relation within the university where they can easily go. I think that is something that can change their future steps in the long term, of yeah, studies.
A: Yes. So, as a first…how to say…like as a first thing in order which can initiate other exchanges among the students or to build upon further in relationships?
B: Yeah, yeah, it is a way to open their mind, to pose them in a European map, in a European perspective and not anymore in the perspective of an university in the [home university]. So, they are in a network in FORTHEM Alliance, in which they can have a lot of opportunities, and they can catch them. It is not anymore something very far from them, it is something that can…they can approach, they can ask for, they can have. Yeah, many more resources.
A: Yeah.
B: So, to think in this perspective.

A: Do you think this is also one of the results of the Blended Intensive Programme?
B: Yes, I think. I think that the students, really appreciate this, the international experience. So, the fact they appreciate the content of the programme, for sure, but the…at least those from [the home university] that never had this kind of experience, I think that they really appreciate this open minded, this experience, this international experience. So, I think that it will have consequences.

A: Yes, so, they learned…perhaps they learned soft skills such as the international experiences and the open mind, but what do you think of the students output? So, the students report that they had to write and the presentation that they had to give, how do you look back at those?
B: Okay, I think that they were really engaged in the project and they did their best for the programme. Obviously it is a two week programme in which they have too many things to do and what I always say to them is that the important is not the…to have like the research paper that you can publish in the top journal but to have an experience of research. So, in this sense, I think that they get the maximum result

from the experience. Obviously, the product are good, the products are good, but are not scientific papers that you can publish. But they face a lot of problems, problems of relations in the groups, problem of building an idea, and translate the idea in the reality, and then…so they have to rearrange some of the frequency that ideas after their experience, and they evaluate their ideas in the light of the field experience. So, I think that they learn a lot in the process. That was my duty more than the perfect output. They learn a lot, both in the soft skills and hard skills. So, I think that…I'm really happy about the product that they gave me because really they were engaged in the work and do their best.

A: Yeah. So, you look back satisfactorily about the Blended Intensive Programme…How do you reflect on the BIP in general?
B: Okay, I think that the experience, the programme is really interesting, the experience is really useful for students, also undergraduate level, not because…at the beginning, I thought that was more for postgraduate students, but I think that undergraduate students it is a good stage to do this kind of experience, to open their mind and so on. So, I think it is really important and interesting but it has many problems, it has many problems from a bureaucracy point of view and also because of the timetable because people…in the sense that the period…the timetable of different universities are different, and so when someone are doing exams, the others are doing teaching and so on, and so, finding a moment that is like, free for everybody is really difficult.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: And then didn't really appoint because many students decide not to participate to the planning, that is a problem for this reason. Because it is, in [country], it is at the end of the teaching period and just before the exam period and the exam periods are for sure the most important part for the students because they have to do the exam and so on and so on.
A: Yeah.
B: And, so, I don't know how it can be solved but we need something that has to be fixed, like I don't know, deciding that all the Blended Intensive Programmes are in a week or in two weeks, one in autumn and one in spring, the same week for everybody that are free for every activity, for all the partner universities. I don't know how they can solve it, but it is really one of the points to be fixed among the other, the terrible bureaucratic, but this one is not bureaucratic, but it has a really a big impact on the organisational procedure. Another point that is…that has a big impact…so, the bureaucracy, the timetable.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: I forgot, sorry. It was another point that I wanted to mention and then I forgot. Okay, it will appear.
A: Okay, no problem. So, the timetable, the bureaucracy…
B: oh, yes. Then the fact that the call was different, so there is not a unique call for all the FORTHEM universities that is promoted by the FORTHEM Alliance, and then also by the offices of their universities. There are many calls, each one with different deadlines, and you have to talk with many actors, there are too many actors in this story, too many actors, and when there are too many actors, it is really complicated. So, I think that in a way, the coordination of this…There is the ring, sorry, we have to pause like 10 minutes.
A: Yeah, yeah, that is fine. So, I just now stop this conversation and then when you are back, just send me a message on Teams and then we can go again, if that is okay?
B: Right, okay, I'm so sorry, sorry.
A: No worries.
B: Okay bye, see you in a bit.
A: See you in a few minutes.

Recording had a 10-minute interruption

A: So, you were just saying about the general experience of the BIP and you were pointing out a few challenges. So, the bureaucracy, the timetable challenges, and then the last point where we were, it was that the calls were different at the different universities.
B: Yes, and the fact that there are too many people to talk to and the process is not so clear. So, this is connected also to the bureaucracy…and but the fact that you have to in a sense communicate to the office of the other universities but also to your office in your university, you have to communicate with those two, and do the social media, to do the communication, the learning agreements, and so on. It is there are too many things to do, and I think that all this part should not have been on the shoulder of the person. So, in my, if I have to say a percentage of work for doing the call, all this parts, and the scientific part it is like, on 100%, 5% percent is preparing the call and communicating with the others, 5% is the scientific part with students and so on, and 90% is all the procedure.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: And I think it is too much, even if we…if…at the end, even if I think that the programme worked well and the students were happy and so on, but I arrived at the start of the programme like exhausted. So, it worked well and so on, but it was not really the way in which it should have.
A: Yeah, yes. So, it is fair to say that as a professor, your scientific job in this sense was very minimal and you had a lot of administrative tasks to carry out and a lot of hurdles to overcome to organise this Blended Intensive Programme?
B: Yeah.
A: Yeah.
B: Yeah.
A: And from what I understand, you look back very…I think satisfied on the plan, the programme itself, so to say, and about the students' learning outcomes but the organisational side is a point for future…
B: Yeah, it is a nightmare, I think that my balance of the experience is that despite the fact that many people try to solve the problem and to help me and so on, because I cannot say that the opposite, they try to help me. But since the procedure is so confused and not well organised, and the call is structured in this way, all this part was a nightmare, whereas the experience with the students was excellent. So, the balance is more than…it is positive but not excellent because of this. So, I don't know if I will repeat it or I will suggest it to others because of this part.
A: Hmm-mmm, yes.
B: Otherwise, I would say you have to do it once a year for your student because it is an excellent, excellent experience. So, I think that it had really an added value from many, from many points of view, from many points of view.

A: Yes, and one of my last questions is…well, I know that you have said that the organisation is very hard, would you have any advice for future organisers or teachers who are wishing to set up such a programme?
B: If I have a plan to organise another one?
A: No, if you have any advice for future organisers or...
B: Ah advice. Yes, yeah, I have, I had a long conversation with from [name of a colleague at the home university], that is my reference here in from [the home university], to say to her all the problems and advice that I have for the organisation and I think that it is something that needs to be solved at the European level…in the sense that this way in which they organise the call that is mutually and reciprocally…like a linked and…the consequence, the fact that one decides to don't go anymore because they have problem with the boyfriend, have consequences on the fact that another one cannot be involved anymore or lose money because we booked the flight and so on, it is really, really another point, and have to be discussed with the European Community, or who is the one that is the reference

point. From the from [the home university] point of view, I think that it should, the person should have like a step-by-step process that is on the shoulder of someone in the administration so that you as professor are involved only to give advice. For example, they have to sign the agreement and need a subject for the registration. This is something that I can help to solve and I'm happy to do it, or there are aspects about the scientific coordination, and this is what I can do with many pleasure, or another professor can do with many pleasure and so on. But all these…the fact that all the processes is in my mind, and not in their mind, it is like crazy because I have to think to who I have to say what. In a new, I think the next BIP will be not organised by me, but by another colleague that will start from the beginning again, it is like crazy. And also, the fact that there is a…this two steps in which money comes from the International Office and go to the department, the department then has to do a lot of work to from the call, for the society and so on, and but with the money, they don't know if it will arrive or not.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: So, also this is an issue, and the communication, many, many things are like really time-consuming, and I think that is something that makes this experience like not so good, like it would be.
A: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for your honesty about this. So, a step-by-step guide or process would be very helpful for organisers as well. Is there anything else that you would still like to say or that you think I should pay attention to in my research on BIPS as well?
B: Ehm…No…I think that you are really an expert of BIPs, more than us, many times. You can work for BIP projects in the future because many times I asked questions to our administrative reference and they have not the answer and spend a lot of time to asking or for having the answer and so on, and then you are the only one that have it from the beginning. So, I think that at the end, really, you are the expert of BIP, of Blended Intensive Programmes, and so I think that having you as partner for our consultant for this kind of project would be really an added value for everything. So, I think that the suggestion, if you will give since you have had many experiences in other BIPs is something that will be valuable for the programme. I would like to have your feedback in this sense, we had a short conversation but in this context, I would like to have your feedback now that you talked with all the students and so on.

A: Yes, yeah. So, I have talked…I conducted focus groups with the students as well after the end of the programme. I, of course, I have to say, I only have preliminary results because I still have to go over all the data and I'm also conducting focus groups with students of other BIPs. So, this is still something I have to analyse, that is the next phase. But I think that, but also, for example, students also mentioned the hurdles in order to attend the programme. So, for example, the learning agreements that they have to fill in and actually I think as an organiser this is one of the compliments because that means that students really enjoyed the Blended Intensive Programme in [the home university] and the content, but that it is such a shame that it is so hard for students in order to participate in this programme. Like a few outgoing students said, like, yes, I almost did not want it to go anymore because I just did not know who to ask anymore to sign this, or in the administrative process. So, I think it is definitely something that needs to improve because it is for the organisational side, but also for the students' side, this is both really, I think a problem of communication, a problem of clarity, and a problem of bureaucracy as well. Furthermore, I think what was especially well done in this BIP was the combination of the social part with the scientific part, and I also heard that back from the students as well that even though during the visits of the different, may I say districts in [the hometown], that was a bit hard for some students. For the [local] students because they felt they had to take the lead because they spoke [the local language], for the foreign students because they couldn't speak [the local language]. But actually, they all said that this was an experience that made them more a team together because they had to rely on each other. So, it was a challenge, but it was a challenge that made everyone step outside of their comfort zone, that actually made them a group. So that was very well done, I think. It is also something that the students, they all look back on with a lot of enthusiasm

as well. What I saw as well that the students mentioned a lot that they learned scientifically as well, but also that this other part, some were already speaking about going on another BIP again or maybe going on an Erasmus exchange, and they also saw this as one of their first steps. So that is something very good that this motivated them, instead of that they are like, oh no, never again. But the online part, I think in general in BIP, that is a point of attention because also it was not the favourite part of the students, neither the online part, the physical week was really nice and then the online part for some students, it was also hard to work together with their team because some were less motivated as well which I think is a regular problem in online teaching. So that is something that is a point of attention for Blended Intensive Programmes and that we as researchers have to figure out how to go about this in this structure. So those are a bit my preliminary findings as well for the programme overall. But I have to say I think this was a programme that was greatly organised, especially the physical week, and the students enjoyed a lot and usually during these programmes with group work, there are always some troubles between group work that I that I observed, but in this programme there were none of the groups that had like extreme clashes or anything. So, the interpersonal relationship that you refer to as well, they really seemed to have been built so.
B: Okay, yes, I think that, if you work the other way round, the problem would have been, definitely more because of this problem of questions, so I made that not all that the members of the group work at the same. Sorry, one second.
2 minute phone call interruption
Sorry, okay, so I only have a question Romée and then we go, but this kind of bureaucracy problems for students are common to other people of other BIPs or are only in our BIP?
A: Good question, this is something, also in the interview, sometimes I feel a bit stupid asking certain questions because there are things we have already discussed together, but then for me it is good to have these on record, because actually this is something that comes back in every BIP, and that is also why it is good for me that I have it in the interviews as well, so that it is not only my observation, but in all this, this has been a point that has come back and there has been also several other BIPs that have problems with the amount of students, with the number of students, which actually led one teacher to who organised two BIPs and then the second BIP she thought, okay, I'm going to over recruit the number of students. And in the end, she had like 30 incoming students, which were way too much, but she said, like otherwise I was too afraid that I would lose funding.
B: Yeah, okay, so it is not a unique situation, it is not something related with [the home university], okay.
A: It is, I mean also in the Blended Intensive Programme what you said that not everybody knows about it, I think it is very understandable because there is like a guide with 300 pages written on it.
B: Okay, thank you very much, I hope to that my comments are helpful for your work and I'm really curious to see the transcript and the result of your work.
A: Yes, the pleasure is all mine, thank you so much that I could join and be invited and that you took the time for this interview. I will get back to you in a few weeks, I will first go on holiday and then I will transcribe.
B: Me too, up to the 26th I will be not anymore in front of the computer. So, at the end of August, so 1st of September, I will be happy to see the results.
A: Perfect. Yes. Well, thank you so much and enjoy your holiday!

IX.7. Interview Transcript I7

Interviewee: BIP D I Research group leader I Visiting teacher
Date: Wednesday 31 July 2024 at 10:00 AM CET

Time: 10:00 AM –11:30 AM CET
Location: Online on Zoom
Duration: 53 minutes of recording

Start Record
A: Yes, I think I managed to start recording.
B: Yes, yeah, it works.
A: Okay, so of course before we start, thank you so much for making time available today to have this meeting. I know you are really busy so I'm very grateful that you are willing to share your insights…Yeah, I have just started the recording, so just to be sure, could you please confirm that I have your permission that this interview is recorded?
B: Yes, yes, you can record it.
A: Okay, perfect. So, the idea of this interview is that it will take between 30 to 40 minutes, but it really depends on what we will cover. It is more like a free-flow conversation. I have some topics ready and a few questions that I would really like to ask, but furthermore, it really depends. It depends mainly on you, I'm mainly curious about what your experience was of this BIP. I mean, even though perhaps it is not really a BIP, but let's see it as a BIP at this moment, right now.
B: Yeah, yes.
A: And the idea is that I will first give you a little bit of explanation about my research protocol and the data collection. Then, I will ask you a bit of more general questions for some context about your role and your current professional role also related to the BIP. And then more specifically to the BIP programme itself, and to see whether there was anything that you think went specifically well or if there are any improvements to be made. And, in order to gather, of course, future advice for future organisers who are interested in organising a BIP. If that sounds okay with you, that will be the programme of today's meeting.
B: Yeah, yeah, sure.
A: So, as I said before, this interview is recorded in order for me to transcribe the data. After I have transcribed the data, I will also send it to you. You can, if you want, you can always read over it. You don't have to, but I just want to give you the opportunity. If you still want to delete anything or want to retrieve anything that can be done at any moment until the publication of any part of my PhD, because afterwards I can't retrieve it anymore. Also, it is very important to note that whatever will be said, it will be anonymised, so I will be using pseudonyms or code names to anything that can be traced back to…
B: Yeah, yeah, sure.
A: It is also part of a bigger research project on Blended Intensive Programmes, so, this also increases the anonymity again, and the raw data will only be available for me to see and my two PhD supervisors. So, I don't know if you have any questions about this research process?
B: No, that is fine, that is fine, yes.
A: Perfect. And, also, at any moment if during this interview I'm asking you certain questions that you rather not want to answer, you always have the right to not answer, of course. Do you have any questions before we start or?
B: No, that sounds really good, interesting, good.

A: Okay. So, just to start, could you maybe please explain me a little bit more about your current professional role and what you are doing?
B: Well, I'm a research group leader in [identifying information removed], this is my main role in the university. And part of this job in [identifying information removed] is that I work together with the speaker of a Research Centre, [identifying information removed], and there we organise a series of

lectures, look after the 80 groups which are collected in that research centre, and do all sorts of administrational things, but also in terms of devising strategies to make our research centre more successful. [identifying information removed]. And then I teach, one course a term, which is not too much. And there I'm very interested in reading research and resilience, meaning that I want to see how reading promotes mental health issues, and that is some part of which I gave my lecturer in our BIP, which is about the development and the importance of learning, reading early in your life because of the neurological implications. And so, this is how this connects to my work and. That is basically my professional role. I have a habilitation, but I'm not a full professor in an institutional sense, but a research group leader.

A: Very interesting, very interesting, we already spoke a bit about it together as well during our BIP. So, could you maybe explain me a bit more or take me with you in the process of how you became involved in the BIP organised in [the city where the physical part of the BIP took place]?
B: That is one part which I'm not being paid for, and so I didn't mention it. I'm in the research…in the, in the FORTHEM lab [identifying information removed] and this is how I got involved in the BIP, obviously. Because we have these very, very interdisciplinary lab meetings, which is bit of problem in the FORTHEM arrangements as well, that the labs consist, in our case, our Lab is so diverse in the approaches we have and the fields we work in that it is sometimes very, very difficult to find common ground. And, I was extremely happy to see that with [main organiser of the BIP], and it always depends on people and personalities, I think what you can do together, because suddenly there is a super connection between economics and reading research. Yeah, because both of us could really integrate my work and my research into that spatial inequalities topic, and that is not the normal thing I find in in our lab work, where we really need to find very, very, very, very general topics to have everyone join in.
A: Hmm-mmm. So, if I understand correctly, in this very diverse and interdisciplinary space, you have met with [main organiser of the BIP] who is the organiser of this specific BIP and you found common ground with each other, mainly because of the attitudes.
B: Yeah, yeah, right. Yeah, because when you have someone who is kind of like really open to… to kind of really different approaches, then you find common ground. If you have very narrow in your view on your own subject, that is very difficult, and in the BIP I found it really, really interesting to see that of course we have statistics in it, we have urban studies in it, we have geographers in it, we have economics, and neuroscience! And neuroscience is all over the place anyways. But I mean this then of course can go together because you start looking for common ground and that is something which I really, really enjoyed. And, because I'm myself very much into interdisciplinary projects, because I mean, you see, I work in the anatomy department, I'm by training a literary scholar, but at the same time, I also work in a Research Centre, [identifying information removed], and so this is kind of like galaxies apart from what I was trained to work at, and then to find topics and research strategies which we can pursue together is something I'm really trained for, and so that really helps to then bring that into FORTHEM and into the BIP.

A: Yeah, because one of the core characteristics of a BIP is also that it is open for different disciplines, what do you think are the benefits of that?
B: I mean we in [country of home institution], we are learning now for…in [country of home institution] for the past, I would say 15 years the general attitude towards research has changed in important areas. This needs to be politically correctly be phrased, yeah…So, in certain areas, we have developed the idea that it is much better to have centres which are centring about a topic, around a topic, or centring on a topic, we are focusing on a topic, and not on a discipline. So, then you get people in working together on their topic and everyone brings in what they need to do, and that is where modern science management leads to. Yeah, because the sub-disciplines or the disciplines are so specialised that, of course you always

need someone from the informatics department, you need someone from statistics, you need someone from methodology, you need to develop a common language about the about the topic, which I find very interesting.

A: Hmm-mmm.

B: Sort of aspect of this sort of interdisciplinary work, because when we, for example, talk about creativity, and neuroscientists will have a completely different look at it and perspective compared to someone from aesthetics or from pedagogy. So, if you, if you look at the creativity of children, if you look at the creativity of artists, if you look at the creativity of mathematicians, it is a completely different thing, but we think we talk all about the same thing all the time. Yeah, but to translate this terminology from one field to the other, that is something which then sparks off new creative energies and that is why I find that the idea of having interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary BIPs is really, really helping you to sharpen your own vision. Kind of like see more clearly yourself what you are doing because you need to explain it to people who come from a completely different galaxy, complete aliens to your field, and you have to find a common language for it. And on the other hand, you can disseminate your ideas about it, and then have a surprising result when you come together and work together. And so, this this is really, yeah, so the idea of the BIPs is actually the idea of how modern science or the humanities really needs to work in order to get the results we want.

A: That is very beautifully said, actually the BIPs are the idea of modern science. So, well, what I wanted to ask you is, did you also take this into account when you were preparing your course for this Blended Intensive Programme that the students came from such different disciplines?

B: Yeah, yeah, obviously. I mean what I tried to bring across was kind of like some demographic data, knowing there were some from that area, to look at kind of general perspectives on it, because we all learn to read, we all handle textual matters all the time, so, it is easy for everyone to kind of follow on. And not to be too specialised in explaining things, don't be too linguistically oriented, don't be too finally neurological, because, of course, you can go much more into detail compared to what I did, but I did what I thought kind of shows plasticity of the brain is the key to kind of learning to read, to learn it well, and so we need to start early. And then also show kind of like the demographic problems we have in [country of home institution] with the illiteracy level, which is very astonishing for a developed country like [country of home institution]. So, of course, the people you teach your course to, you should take into account, yes.

A: Hmm-mmm. And just a very general questions, but what was your experience of this BIP? Was this your first experience of a Blended Intensive Programme?

B: Yes, that was my first. Well, I had a summer school two years ago, but I'm not sure it was a BIP. It could have been a BIP, but the problem in in that summer school was that the teachers or professors coming there to contribute, were just seen as people delivering their goods and that was it. So, there was not really working together, which was a big disappointment to me at the time. It was a FORTHEM summer school, but was it a BIP? Maybe it was a BIP, I don't know. I don't even know that. Because they just expected us to give our lecture and then there weren't any other activities we were doing together except for one dinner, which was nice, and the food was good, but that was not exactly my idea of how things should work, because I don't do this kind of thing to travel for free, but I want to do some substantial academic work. And in [the city where the physical part of the BIP took place] it was substantial, I mean, I worked very hard during that week going on as many excursions as I could, but at the same time I needed to do my work in [city of home institution] as well. And so, it was a very stressful week, but I enjoyed it very much because also compared to that other summer school, the interaction with the students was much closer. We had a lot more to do with them. The excursions we did into the neighbourhoods were really, really interesting. And having the conversations with the stakeholders, and

this hands-on sort of experience was really great because that made me understand [the city where the physical part of the BIP took place] as a city much better. And you really could look into areas which you wouldn't be looking into as a tourist, obviously. And so, I think that was also for the students a very good experience and we had a very mixed sort of group of teachers there and stakeholders. And what I most liked about it was the intensity and the attention the students paid to the topics and also the lessons. And when I gave my lecture, this was really because it was a bit kind of like different from what they had been hearing from the other people, they were really attentive and I really had the feeling they were interested and brought into the classroom what they had, and they were very welcome to do that. So, this was a very good experience on many, many levels because it was a full week of activities together rather than just come give your lecture and that is it.

A: Yes, because could you elaborate maybe a bit more on this? During the other summer school, you were just expected to give this one lecture and that was it, and in during this BIP you were more expected to be involved in the various experiences that were organised?
B: Yes, yeah, yeah. So, because I had that other experience, I thought, okay, this is a long time to spend in [the city where the physical part of the BIP took place] and let's see what happens. And of course, as I had my other work as well to do, and you, I wouldn't be bored, but what I really, really liked was this two days of lectures, which I also was expected to attend, and in the other summer school, we weren't really expected to attend the lectures of the other teachers and that was rather seen as strange. That I thought that was a point of it, to also talk about and have space and time to talk about what the others did, but that didn't happen, yeah. And here in, in this BIP, it was a great experience to see how the colleagues from [the city where the physical part of the BIP took place] or even the online people had a look at, or how they looked at the common topic of spatial inequality from their individual perspective, and so I really wanted to hear these other lectures and that is a great advantage because it also welds together as a group, the teaching staff.
A: Hmm-mmm.
B: And then going outside, having a look at these things, kind of like really being outside walking through town together and having group conversations and talk to students, talking to colleagues, that was really, really, very well done, sort of thing. Of course you can't do that with every topic, but that is something which I think was a great advantage to have activities which were not only classroom activities together.

A: Yeah, and because you also said being able then to talk with the students outside of the classroom, do you think this is important for students to have this opportunity as well with their teachers?
B: Absolutely. I mean, I mean, as it was not kind of like going to the beach together but doing some field work together, it was always related to the academic level of exchange. And, that I think students really enjoy as well because they have the feeling they look into different world of academia by getting closer to their professors. When you just have classroom interaction, which has a very set sort of rules they have, where interaction is pretty predictable in a way, and when you walk around and have lunch together and so that. And, also, having this international group because you could see how the students were at first kind of like still a bit kind of like nation oriented, but that disappeared. It was my impression, I don't know, you have seen much more of that. But in the end, I had the feeling they were really mixed sort of groups of Italian students and international students and that they really enjoyed that as well. Which is…sometimes I have in this sort of thing, if students stick together in their nation groups, they are missing out massive point of authentic intercultural learning, which is really necessary. And by having these groups mixed from different nationalities with a common project, and then being also in the position of being easily talking to the teachers and the professor, that is a very good

arrangement because it has the hierarchical sort of lowering of levels and it is kind of like integrating the different groups. So, you have horizontal and vertical kind of like opening up and that is good.

A: I have…actually now a lot of different questions come to my mind, very interesting, but I will try to keep my head and try to ask it one by one. So, one of the things was that you saw that at the beginning you observed the students were more national oriented and afterwards they were more mixed. Could you perhaps give an example or elaborate a bit on how you saw this change happening and if you also think that there are any specific pedagogical tools or things that have been done of how these students came to mix together?
B: That is a question I can't really answer that well. My feeling was, it was because we were in [the country where the physical part of the BIP took place], and you always needed for the interviews [the local language of the country where the BIP took place] students speaking the language, and then having international students who…well didn't speak the language, the translator thing was important because they were really dependent on each other. I think this group work was, of course not so much fun when they went into the fields for those who stood by listening to a language they didn't understand, so they spent a lot of time waiting, but of course, that is academia, it is hard, it is a tough life, you have to go through hardships, yeah. *both laughing* And so I think that was something that they really had to get going, and get into contact with the population, and that is something which requires also some sort of courage and to do that together, I think that bound them together as a little group of fellow little fellowship.
A: Yeah, so it is…
B: Lord of the Rings slack.
A: So, it is fair to say that the groupwork element was an important aspect in this?
B: Absolutely, yeah, and because it couldn't be done in the way that only the Portuguese stuck together, they had to be together with the Italians or the Polish kids, they had to be together with the [students of the home institution] because of the language, and so that was my impression, at least. I mean, I didn't systematically look into that, but that is the feeling I got that they there was a need to do it together and so they had to.

A: Yeah, yeah, and one of the, one of the things that you just said before as well was that, I mean, they had to become intercultural competent to work together, it maybe sounds a bit like a walk in the door question, but why do you think this is important for students to develop?
B: This is, this is a very important thing. I mean, we in in the FORTHEM programme and in Erasmus, Erasmus+, what not…You always send kids abroad and they come into the situation that the peer group they meet in wherever, Latvia, they have their own set of friends and comrades and so on, and they are not particularly interested of course in a student who comes to their university for a year. Yeah. And, I think it is really important that as many young people have this experience, of being the person going away and being dependent on meeting other students in the country they go to, and not stick to their kind of like the [specific nationality] group, then only groups together and stuff, and to break that up. And so, you need to have students who have been in that same situation and who are more sensitive towards foreign students coming to their university and looking after them in in a better way, because that is something which these programmes, I think don't really reflect how difficult it is, and how lonely you can become in the foreign country you go to, especially if you are not totally socially outgoing and the super party go-er. Then it might be a very lonely time where you stick then to the three other students in the programme because you are not mixing and you are not being made welcome. And if we have more of that movement, I think students will become more kind of ready to open up and integrate students from abroad. And that is something where one should really, also as teachers, kind of becoming

active in having kind of FORTHEM groups, cookouts, barbecues, I don't know what, to have the students who come from abroad integrate more in your universities.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that fits really well with internationalisation at home. So, "utilising" these foreign students or students who went abroad in order to integrate them at the university.
B: Yeah, I mean, it is just, the thing is, in our [identifying information removed] labs, it is a totally international crowd there, sometimes I have the impression where are the others [country of home institution] scientist? Yeah. We have so many people from really all over the world working in the labs, and there, of course, they are totally dependent on being internationally open and in the country aware when you go to the common room you usually find English spoken in [country of home institution] because…or you meet someone in the lab walking down the corridor, you will say hello and not [hello in the national language at the home institution]. Yeah, because you have a 50, at least a 50/50 chance that this is a person who doesn't speak [the national language]. Yeah, they should learn [the national language at the home institution], of course, but I mean, just for their own benefit and the benefit of their kids and everything. But still, the working language is English now our meetings, even I'm organising a lecture, course of lectures, and there is an Italian colleague and with her I only speak English. Yeah, we should speak Italian maybe. But her [the national language at the home institution] is not so good that she would like us to organise things in [the national language at the home institution], yeah.

A: Yeah, yeah. And Blended Intensive Programmes are by the European Union, also introduced as a more inclusive method for internationalisation. So, compared to students going on a six-month exchange, to have the opportunity to go on a shorter exchange, how do you see this?
B: Yeah, absolutely, I mean, because if you have the appropriate activities in that big group and then carry on, or in an online format as we did, which I thought was a really good idea as well to kind of like say, this was not a week of holidays, but this goes on, and you have to do more work to get your points, your credits, and that is very well done, I think, yeah. Because then they, I mean, we now have a little, we have a student-driven project which comes out of that. We have asked a couple of students, the they are kind of like really, really, really, really brilliant ones that we had, we asked them if they would like to continue this kind of topic and work in a student-driven project for our FORTHEM lab, and they were really happy to do it, and we got new students into that as well from [the home institution] who couldn't come to the BIP. And so, the BIP is actually the kind of like flower bed or whatever, where this has started growing and now we have a group of students from [four different FORTHEM institutions]. And those [the home institution] students hadn't been in the project, in the BIP, yeah, but they joined in and they are totally enthusiastic about it, and they really love it. And that is something which is a spin-off effect for our lab from the BIP, which is super.
A: Very interesting, so the BIP was actually a start off to create this other student-driven project as well.
B: Yeah, and they have now travel plans to meet up and do their own little BIP in their way, because we have money for that, we are very happy to give that money to the students to cover travel costs. And so, this is exactly what I think BIPs should be, something which is not kind of a complete capsule, but something which disseminates also into future activities.
A: Yeah. And I know we are already…
B: Yeah, sorry the question, but the question was, is it better to have these intensive things for a short time as compared to the longer stays abroad, right? That was the question.
A: Well, the question wasn't whether one is better than the other but more how you saw this as a new integrated activity.
B: Yeah, okay, yeah, okay, because I would never go against six months exchange programmes because that is really important. That is rather too short I find, six months is a little too, not enough, it should be a

year because it takes you such a long time to settle in and to get things started, so that six months is over like nothing, and a year in academic terms is usually nine months. Yeah, because then you have the next break, and so it is never really 12 months, but it is more like 9 months, 10 months. And two years again, it is too long, yeah, because then you are kind of losing too much of a contact to your home institution and you are getting too deeply into, two years is too long. One year is perfect, half year is too short, and a BIP is a completely different thing, but a very good format, I think. I mean, if it is well done, that depends. Really, you need to mix the students, that is important, you have to have, if possible, spin-off effects for the students to continue that sort of contact, and you have to make it really visible in the FORTHEM landscape. That is something which I think is, has done far too little. My students at home, "FORTHEM, what is that?" They have no idea what it is. And these BIP things now, because some students in my course are now in that student-driven project, they talk about it, and the other students say "oh, didn't know that and this is possible". And because I find students are generally too hesitant about going abroad, the numbers are not good enough, and the interest is not there, because I have the feeling that students have such a strong feeling, they are required to do stuff at home, they need to meet all the course requirements, and they stay within the kind of like time frame of the course, and anything going away for half a year or something that is just disrupting their scheme of things. Or their finances, their money, from the parents or whatever. Yeah. And so, they are hesitant about going abroad and a BIP is a good chance of at least doing a little bit of something.

A: Yeah, yeah. So, I just have to stay that the meeting, because I don't have a paid Zoom account. So, the meeting will be cut off in one minute, but if it is okay for you, we can just then reconnect because I still have a few questions, if you have the time, if that is okay?
B: Oh, yes, yes, yeah, sure.
A: Yeah. So, if it ends, then we can just reconnect again to the same link.
B: Yes, yes.

A: Because one of the things that I was also curious about is, of course, the BIP, it is this blended format, so, it is the online part and the physical week. What do you think are the advantages of also having this online component in a BIP?
B: As I said before, the really big thing is to not see the one week abroad as a sort of interesting academic holiday trip but to really focus on the material and get back into the material which you worked on in the summer school part of it, and go back to the topic, go back to the peers you have been working with together, to make it kind of a lasting sort of experience, because otherwise you go back to your home and forget about everything, maybe, but this way you are forced to stay on.

Five-minute interruption due to ending of the Zoom meeting

B: Can you hear me?
A: Yes, I can hear you again, perfect. I just have to keep one eye on saving the other recording, so it doesn't get lost in the meantime.
B: Yeah. Please. Please, please, please.
A: You were just saying about the importance of the online part is that they don't forget it once they arrive home and to have…
B: Yeah, exactly, yeah. So, in in those dimensions on the level of academic work on the topic, that is one thing, but also on the personal level of staying in contact with the group. So, I think mixed group work as we had it is essential to this. So, that you are not doing individual work, that you are not doing group work within your national group, but that you are forced to have an international group working together, and then handing in, in the end, a product of common endeavour.

A: Yeah. And the online part with a BIP it can be done either before or after the BIP…
B: After, after is better, after is much better because all the interpersonal stuff, which you only have when you are meeting up together in a place, you have lunch together, and so on. All the coffee breaks, all the coffee break dynamics, yeah, they play into how this group is established. So, I would strictly forbid, yeah, by law from Brussels, to have online events before the actual meeting.
both laughing
A: Could you maybe explain a little bit more why it is restricted by the law of Brussels, exactly, from having online before? Because I have also participated in several BIPs that actually had the online meetings in advance.
B: Yeah.
A: Is that because you think of the interpersonal aspects are better?
B: That, yeah, yeah, because online dating is not the same thing.
both laughing
No, but seriously, I think it has really great advantages too, to meet because online is always, I find efficient. Yeah, because it is missing out a lot of things, of course, I mean, when you are shy and you, you want to get to know the group a little better before you actually go there, and but, online meetings are full of misunderstandings of kind of like wrong social signals and stuff. So, I'm very distrustful of online meetings, I mean you know exactly when you know people well, you meet up online, you know, can you see a different person on the screen? Yeah. And you own…we see that in the lab meetings, the colleagues who met in [one of the FORTHEM partner institutions] for that creativity thing, they interact completely differently when we have the online meetings, and the other people you don't know. Yeah, you know the online version, but you don't know the person. And so, that, that is kind of like from my experience, I have no hard data for it, but that is my feeling that it is greatly advantageous to have first the real thing and then use online as a tool to do what online can do well, connect people quickly, talking about stuff they need, to better talk then write. Yeah, because that is also kind of, of course you could do everything by e-mail, just send the script and stuff, but to work together online, I think it is better to have a personal background already.

A: Yeah, so, in this BIP, the students work after the physical week together online to prepare their final report and presentation.
B: Yeah.
A: I know you haven't gone over the final report yet, but the final presentation, I would also be curious, what do you think of that output of the students of the students work? Does it meet your expectations or?
B: Well, I have seen the all the PowerPoint presentations online, and I was very happy about the, the progress, well not the progress so much, but the results of what they presented. I thought all of the PowerPoint presentations were kind of not good as PowerPoint presentations because they were too much text on the slides and stuff, the students didn't trust themselves sufficiently to present their stuff with kind of like just the graph, just a sentence and stuff. And so, they were too full, they were little bit like academic posters, but that, I have been thinking a lot about that actually, because I was wondering, why did the students do it that way? In terms of content, I was very happy because they had not so much material, but they made the best out of it, and they retrieved kind of results from very sparse data bases, because of course they had only three days of interviewing and so on. So, they really saw this as an exercise, and they presented it well. The way they dealt with the data was very good. The presentation as such, I didn't kind of like get too much involved in that, I mentioned it once in, in the presentations, but generally students should be kind of like encouraged to be trusting more in their own verbal skills in presenting a presentation rather than kind of stuffing everything on the screen, and basically you as a as your audience you are just reading the stuff all the time, instead of listening properly

to the presentation. And so, but that was a technical thing. Generally, but I'm still wondering why? Why do they do it? Yeah, maybe they learn it that way in their home countries. Maybe that is the way that they are supposed to be doing it, but it is wrong, it is wrong.
A: So, in general, we can say that the output was quite satisfactory, only the presentation skills and the use of the PowerPoint slides.
B: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: Okay, well I know, I mean, I know you are busy, so I don't want to take too much of your time.
B: I have 10 more minutes, 10 more minutes.
A: Yeah. So, one very important question is then, what I have left, is what advice would you give for future organisers or teachers involved in such Blended Intensive Programmes?
B: Hmm, okay, to allow a lot more time before the BIP to set up your students from your home university, because they need to plan and organise their working, the course work and stuff, really much more in advance than the professor, I have the feeling, yeah. So, it needs to be out in the open much earlier in a very clearly described way. So, you have to have a clear description what is the topic, what are we going to do, what is a programme for the week. And of course you can change it later, yeah, but to have that, and then really advertise that with people you already know is the best thing. Because to send it out to the world, it gets lost. You need to really focus on your lab members, for example, say okay, or if you know some other labs, have you got students who would be interested to do it? And if your colleagues don't kind of like grab the students and offer it to them, rather a kind of forceful way, you will not have enough students. I don't know what the experience is from other BIPs in that, but you really need to have your students going and not any students from [the home institution], because they don't know about it, even if they know about it, they have no attachment, no connection to it. And so, you really, that is I think a strategy which is really important before the BIP to organise it, is to have enough time before, a very clear message of what it is, and direct that message to your own peers, to your own colleagues you know from the labs, and really use the FORTHEM network and not go into the general universe, because that is going to be lost. That is one very important thing for organising in advance, before the actual event. Then okay, the location is really important, to make it an attractive location if you can. Have activities which are not only in the classroom. Yeah, but I think that is matter of the course, but I think this must not be underestimated and it is not all about having dinner together or something, but really do something together, testing field work, that is something which is really, really good, to have actual activities outside of the classroom, which are not eating together.
A: But eating can still be included.
B: Eating needs to be included, that is a matter of course. And then the other thing is, you need to have group work, which is forcing students to leave their comfort zone. They need to mix with the other international students, and be forced to do it, and that will help even if they hate it. So, you have to force the students to mingle, yeah, forcing students to mix internationally. Yeah, and then, of course, the online work is good to have it in these groups of the students, kind of like, plus mixing it with events together. But to organise kind of like a whole week again of online lectures and stuff, I would advise not to, because that can be very boring, and so it should be something which comes out of…out of the work together in the place, yeah.

A: Yeah, okay, well, thank you very much. Then the final question, do you think there is anything else that I should take into account while doing this research or something that you think it is important to focus on?
B: We have talked about so many things…I mean one thing which I think I used in this interview, this word at least twice already; dissemination, that is one of the key things in all this internationalisation. I mean, you will always have a couple of professors who are really keen to do that, really like doing this,

and you will have a vast majority of colleagues who only do that within their own field of research, and FORTHEM is an institution which wants to kind of cover a lot of people, and it is large. I mean just the amount of people in the labs is massive, yeah, but you need to also reach out to your colleagues who are not particularly interested in doing international work for the sake of international work, but only they do that if it helps their research, if it helps them to write a paper. Yeah. And when you look at the exchange programmes on the staff side, you will, I mean, we have in [the home institution] big problems finding colleagues who are ready to go abroad for a couple of weeks, or couple of months or something. We had a programme which I participated in because I like it, and I was the only person applying for it. And they gave you lots of money to do exchange, international exchange and teaching and stuff, it was really easy to get, they organised everything for you, it was really comfy sort of programme, but no one wanted to do it because they don't want to go away from home for a longer span of time. So, BIP is of course good because it is only a week, but even for that, it is sometimes hard to find colleagues. I mean, we saw it, the people from [one of the FORTHEM institutions], they didn't come in person. Because it is difficult. And so, dissemination means to propagate the programme, to get people involved even if they are not kind of people who do it out of their own accord, but they might find it attractive, to make the base of colleagues larger who are ready to contribute to this sort of thing.

A: Yeah, dissemination. Thank you very much for that, so, thank you so much for your time. It has been very useful for me, I think we discussed a lot a lot of interesting things as well that I also would love to discuss about myself, but of course, I have to ask the question here.

B: Yes, sure, and now you have to do the coding, well, enjoy the transcription.

both laughing

A: Yes, but imagine how many interviews and focus groups, like interviews are okay, but focus groups that take two to three hours with multiple students that is very difficult to transcribe and to code and to takes a lot of time.

B: Yeah, so this is easy, okay, I see, good. Thank you so much for your work, I'm very interested for the outcomes. Let's keep in touch and when it is published, let me know where one can get the data and have a look at what came out of it. Yeah, really good work.

A: Yes, for sure, I would love to. Yeah, and thank you so much for your help, of course, because I couldn't have done all this without people being interested and willing to participate.

B: Yeah. Yes, of course.

A: Well, enjoy the summer, good luck, and then I hope your holiday starts soon in the end of August.

B: Yes, I can't wait for it. Okay, so you have a good summer too.

A: Thank you.

Appendix X - Focus group guide

Table 14: Focus group guide

Round	Time	Activity	Materials
Round 1 Welcome & introduction	15:00-15:10 10 minutes	**Welcome & Information** • Thank all participants for being here • Explain the research and why this focus group is important • Clarify the recording of the session • Emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity • Go over the agenda for the session • Rules for the session: all opinions are valued • Any questions?	Teams link
	15:10-15:20 5-10 minutes	**Student introductions** Ask participants to introduce themselves briefly, including study background.	Nothing needed
Round 2 Introductory discussion on experiences	15:20-15:35 15 minutes	**Picture Collage – BIP Experience** Students will be asked in advance to send an image that represents the BIP experience for them. I will show them the collage and ask them to elaborate on the image that they sent as a way to stimulate discussion on their experiences.	- Pictures sent by the students - Picture collage in advance
Round 3 Motivations & reluctancies/hesitations mapping	15:35 – 15:50 15 minutes (5 min adding post-its, 10 minutes sorting and discussion)	**Motivation map** What were your motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP? 1) Students will be asked to add digital post-its to a brainstorming board with words/sentences/pictures answering the questions. Giving them a fixed 5 minutes to do so. 2) Students will be asked to rank the motivations from most to least important collectively. Stimulating them to discuss and	**Flinga** **Join link** **Access code**

		reflect upon their reasoning of why certain motivations were more important. 3) Potentially ask some final discussion questions if needed.	
	15:50-16:10 (5 min adding post-its, 10 minutes sorting and discussion)	**Reluctancies map** Did you have any hesitations or concerns when applying to the BIP? 1) Students will be asked to add digital post-its to a brainstorming board with words/sentences/pictures answering the questions. Giving them a fixed 5 minutes to do so 2) Students will be asked to rank the hesitations from most to least important collectively. Stimulating them to discuss and reflect upon their reasoning of why certain motivations were more important. 3) Potentially ask some final discussion questions if needed.	**Flinga** **Join link** **Access code**
<u>Round 4</u> Reflecting further upon experiences	16:10-16:30 20 minutes	**Smileys and emojis to represent experiences** I call out one of the following themes: • The content of the course • The programme/schedule • Social aspect/programme activities - *How did they feel about the occasions to get to know each other?* • Group work activities (and time for conducting) • Online part Then the participants will be asked to give their reaction to this by way of sending an emoji in the chat function. Next, they will be asked to reason why they chose the specific emoji to stimulate discussion.	**Chat function on Teams**
<u>Round 5</u> **Discussion on ICC**	16:30-16:50 20 minutes	**Discussion round** This is the opportunity to ask questions that I find important that have not been addressed yet or to go deeper into certain topics. The questions will depend on what has been discussed already. In any case, explore ICC stance here. • What did you learn from the programme?	Nothing needed

		• What according to you are the benefits of having students from various universities participating in such a programme? • **One of the objectives of the organisers of these activities is sometimes surrounded around ICC development. How do you understand this and feel about it?** ***Was this also on your mind when joining the programme?*** • Diversity of the group and its impact? • All coming together instead of online?	
<u>Round 6</u> Final wrap-up	5-10 minutes 16:50 – 17:00	**Wrap-up, final remarks, and thank everyone for their participation.** • Would you have any advice for a friend or classmate that will be joining a BIP? Or would you have any advice for the organisers and/or teachers of such programmes? • Is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't discussed yet or that you think I should take into account?	Nothing needed

Appendix XI - Focus group transcripts

XI.1. Focus Group BIP A

Participants: 4 (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4)
Date: Wednesday, 13 December 2023
Time: 14:00 till 16:00 CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 1h51m

Start record
RJ: Yes, so, I just started recording the session, so, you should have received a pop-up, I believe. First of all, thank you all for making time available. I know you are all a little bit busy, you either you just had exams or you are moving from one side back to another. So, I really appreciate that you made time available. It is very important for my research, but also, I think in general it is very important to get your feedback on these kind of exchanges. So, we met each other already in [city of the host university of BIP A] and there I told you a little bit about my research, but just to make sure you all know for what we are here to do today, I am just giving a little recap. So, I am studying Blended Intensive Programmes, this might not say a lot to you, but the summer school was funded as a Blended Intensive Programme. So, meaning that Erasmus+ has this new idea of sending more students on exchanges and to have international experiences by ways of short-term mobility combined with an online with an online meeting or meetings. So, all of you had five days together in [city of the host university], plus you had the two online sessions on Zoom where you presented your projects. I am studying these kind of alternative exchanges, how we call them, in the light of internationalisation objectives. And I am doing this on different levels, so first of all, I do it on the organisational and institutional level, so, that means the framework of FORTHEM, which is a European University Alliance. Then on the teacher level, so I also studied together with the teachers about the programme. What actually got reached and what not? Why they are doing this? And most importantly for me, also the participant level, so, here you, the students of the programme. In order to see how we can improve these programmes in the future. So that is also one of the most important things here today is that you all probably have different experiences of the programme. And for me, it is very important to know more about your experience and how we can improve these kinds of programmes and also what went well, but also feel free to discuss what did not went so well.

So, again, you have all signed the consent form, in there, I have explained more about my research protocol, but today it is based on…it is anonymous and confidential, so, I also trust that whatever we say here, it will stay within this group and within my research, of course. If you have any questions about data protection or your rights, feel free to ask me. You can ask me directly today or you can send me an email. So, does anyone have any questions about that?

[All participants nodding no]

RJ: No, okay, good, but if you want, you can always ask me, of course.

RJ: So, today the idea is that we are doing a focus group. It is a bit similar to a group interview, however, it is slightly different as well. Because I will be moderating the session, so I will not participate myself, so I will sit back and relax, no kidding. I will ask you certain questions and I will ask you to carry out activities as well, but the idea is that I give you certain stimulations and discussion questions and that you discuss it amongst all of you, and I am mainly here to listen to what you have to say and to keep an eye on the time as well. Yeah?

[All participants nodding yes]

RJ: So, even though it is informal, there are two little rules I have to say. The first one, it would be really great if we try not to talk like through each other, and if we could try a bit to talk one by one at the time because I will be transcribing the data and it is like, a kind of a horror to do, if a lot of people are talking at the same time. **[Participants laughing]** But feel free to have a natural conversation as well, and all opinions are valued, so whatever those opinions might be, okay?

[All participants nodding yes]

RJ: Good, I see you all nodding. So, I see that you are all already experienced with online meetings because everybody muted themselves, so that is great, but whenever you want to talk, please feel free to speak up. And I know that you all know each other already from the summer school in [host university of BIP A], but it has been a while ago, so, maybe we could quickly start if everyone of you could quickly introduce yourselves like where you are and what you are doing at the moment? So, who would like to start? Just shout.
FG4: I can go first.
RJ: Right, go ahead.
FG4: Yeah, so yeah, I am [FG4]. I am currently I am doing my master's in information systems. I am currently, I am in my second year and in the process of writing my thesis, and as I said earlier to Romée, like this, like I made it like, I am making interviews at this time. So, it is been really stressful, I don't know. Like I saw your message and you said like it is an enjoying process, and I was like, I am not enjoying this process, yeah. So, I have been working okay-ish I would say. So, all the best for your PhD thesis.
RJ: Thank you very much [FG1], and I do hope that in the end when you look back, that you think like, okay, it was great doing so or that you are just happy that it is done. So, I am confident that you will be able to finish your research.
FG4: I hope so, I hope so, fingers crossed.
RJ: Okay.
[Long pause]
FG1: I can introduce myself. I am [FG1], I am from [country of the home university], and I am back since Monday in [country of the home university], I studied in [country of the host university] for a whole semester. And I am studying Business Administration, and I would like to write my bachelor thesis next semester. So, when uni starts again. Yeah, I think that is it.
RJ: Great, thank you.
FG3: Okay, then I can go. So, I am [FG3], I am 20 years old and I am just in [country] right now. Where I started my master's degree in law to become a judge, so, it is a two year course, quite intense, and it is also a bit focused about economics, finance and all these new topics. Yeah, that is basically it. I recently graduated from my bachelor's degrees.
FG2: And well, my name is [FG2], I am currently finishing up here in [country of the host university] for my semester abroad, and then next semester I only need to graduate, and so yeah.
RJ: So, only a small job to do, only graduate, that sounds good.

FG2: Yeah, it is a programme at my school, so I don't need an internship or thesis, so it is a bit easier.
RJ: I think [FG4] will be jealous of you at the moment.

[Participants laughing]

RJ: Okay, great, so thank you very much for this small introduction again. I had also asked you to send me an image or a picture representing your experiences. I have made a picture collage out of it, I mean, I am not a pro, but I have just created the pictures together, which I would like to show you, and then I would ask you to discuss together why you chose this picture and to discuss your experience. But, please feel free to ask each other questions as well and to discuss mainly the experience together. So, I will share my screen because I can't send a picture in the chat, because of I don't know, there is a limitation with that, but I will share my screen and then I can show you the picture. Okay, do you see the picture or not? The image?

[All participants nodding yes]



RJ: Okay, great.
FG3: Yes, yes, we can see it.
RJ: So, at the at the left corner, I think we have the beautiful Archipel of [country of the host university]. So, somebody who is studying hard here. The right picture is the beautiful picture, but because of my editing skills you don't see it perfectly well, but it was on the boat tour with the [country of the host university] flag. Here we have one of the groups, I believe it was SmarTref at the last day of the day were they also heard that they did a great project. Here at the right corner a similar picture as the middle one. However, here the second candidate has the eyes open and here not, but it is funny that you both chose the same picture, but another picture in it. And at the left corner, we have a person who is trying to push through the computer, the laptop. So, would you mind all of you maybe discussing why you chose this picture and what it represents?
FG3: I can maybe start. What I can tell is that it seems like that it represents well like the overall mood of the experience from all the participants. I am really not surprised by the pictures. So, I chose the one of the group, I think [FG4] probably chose the same, but just not the same picture but the same context.

That is the one we had after we won, like we not really won, but they said the best two groups. Because our group was very committed and united and that was a very pleasing experience to work with peers. So, that is why I chose this one. And then I was like, but also, I want to show [country of the host university], so, I selected the one with the flag because it represents kind of the country, the overall cultural experience, because it is also a lot about culture, I can, I mean, not all of us were studying Business Administration, not all of us will continue and startups. And yeah, because not all of us will continue in that path, but we have all gained a lot with the cultural exchange there.

[Long pause]

FG1: Yeah, now I can continue. I chose the one who is at the sea and the PC in front because the summer school was one of my first weeks in [country of the host university] and I knew that I am staying there for longer. So, I made a lot of new friends and there was, especially a lot of activities at the beginning, and so I needed to find the right mix between being outside and being with friends, being outside, enjoy the nature. I think it is the biggest part of why I chose [country of the host university] as my semester abroad. And but studying because we had a full week, a full intensive week, and yeah, so, I thought it is fitting well. And yeah, it is about [country of the host university] and studying, so yeah.

FG2: So yeah, I had the picture with someone punching through the laptop **[everyone laughing]** because that is basically when I think back of it, that is how I feel about that week. For me, it was a very frustrating week, and if I look back at my semester abroad, it was honestly my worst week here. And all the, also like the other things that come with it afterwards, with the doing the project and stuff like that. And so, that is why I chose that picture.

[All other participants nodding yes towards FG2 (in a kind of understanding way)]

FG4: Yeah, so it is, I don't know whether it was like we discussed it earlier, [FG3] and I, we shared the same picture. But, yeah, so this was like after the intensive course, like after one week of intensive like academic and everything. Like we were able to get some accomplishments, like we have been like awarded the best team or like. I think we were a runner up, or I don't know, I don't remember exactly. So yeah, it was really like an achievement for me personally, like since like our team, like every person like we, everyone had a different perspectives, like, we like, everyone towards the team like everyone added their own like advantage, like pros and cons, like and we were able to, like at the end of the day we were able to find a solution. So, and like I was so like happy to be a part of this team and our communications and like that. So, it was more like a debate I would say, it is more like not a communication, but yeah, I really had a great time working with this team, I couldn't ask more for. So, this was my like, it was really a great experience for me.

RJ: Yes, sure, thank you everyone, for explaining. I think it also shows that people have different experiences, so it shows it quite well. I mean, SmarTreff their project went really good, so, maybe you had like also good team atmosphere, you had a good result, so this picture represents it for you. I do have to say, I have to laugh a bit when I made the picture collage together, because first I had the picture that [FG2] had sent in the right corner, but then it kind of looked like he was going to smash SmartTreff, which I think was not really the intention of the picture. So that is why I moved it a little bit around.

[Participants laughing]

RJ: And, but, I am wondering, so here we really see that at one side the group experience might have been really nice, however, for somebody else, it has been frustrating. How do you think this comes, like how do you think this was influenced?

FG3: I would tell. So, joining [FG2] on his experience, telling that I had a previous experience at the Blended Programme in Finland in May this year, and it was absolutely a nightmare for me too. Like, maybe the worst experience in terms of group work that I had, and I was a bit scared of that in [country of the host university]. And maybe it is a matter of probably chance whether you get to get along with

the people and then you can see if they are active, if they want to participate, if all of them are invested and committed in that. So, maybe there is chance, and then it is also about the personality and the project you have, if you like it or not. And maybe the biggest difference was that in Finland we didn't have people coming from all backgrounds and very diverse backgrounds, we all had one main topic, which was social sciences for our studies. Where here in our team it was very diverse disciplines staying, IT, we had some people studying languages, others business, and I was studying law for example. So, it was very cool to get this variety and the group commitment, but then I can tell from [FG2]'s group observation that some people of your group quit, and yeah, when some people just quit, it turns out to be very bad.

RJ: [FG4], did you wanted to react?

FG4: Yeah, just I was like, I was planning to add some more points to [FG3]. Like initially we had some issues, but once we had like, once we understood like everybody has a diverse person like a background and like everybody add something to the table, and once we were able to give everyone their own role in the team, it was really helpful. And like, [FG3] was being the leader, was like the captain of the ship and like was maneuvering it, I would say. And like, yeah, it was really cool. It was really helpful and it was really a great experience. I have been part of like a kind of similar teamwork in one of my courses here, which is also like an intensive programme, but as [FG3] said, the team which I was a part of in my course, it was like not that much diverse and everybody was like fixated on a point, and nobody was ready to like, what do you say, like nobody was ready to calm down or like sit at a table and like discuss this out. But here it was completely different, like we specifically add a role for each member, and like it is a structured role and everybody did their own part and it was like smoothly done.

FG1: Can I say? Yeah, I think, I think most of the time it is by coincidence that that the groups understand each other well. But as you already said, I think this, to find a structure in your group is very important because that was what our group found out in the end, at the end. So that or there was, I think I had the same experience as [FG2], and my group was a mess, and there was especially me and another guy and he was like, I would say maybe we had a strong opinion, and once we said okay, one girl who said not a lot, you are the leader now. Because the guy said like we need a new leader and he wanted to be the leader and I was like no, but she can do it. And I think once we had this that we had a structure, not maybe not a useful structure, maybe your structure was useful one, but our structure was just to clarify who can say what and that was already a help, and I think that makes a big difference as well.

FG2: I think, I mean, we pretty soon, I got appointed leader of the group already in the week because already in the week we already had like one, the first or the second day we already had troubles within our group. And so, I don't think it is exactly was the structure because we were pretty clear with when and what we want to do. But it is just basically that I think I just had especially bad luck with a group that where two people eventually quit and that you have to take over that work. And also, that I remember that [FG1] and I within the week even went to [I2, main teacher, BIP A] to ask [them] about the fact like, what if people are not doing their work, how will that affect us? And that basically, [they] said like, well, that is probably not gonna happen because of you are all responsible, and eventually in my group that did happen. And that I didn't also didn't really felt helped by for example [I2, main teacher, BIP A] in that case, which even makes it then worse that there is basically no one you can go to, like hey it is shit and but help me, but no.

FG3: But that is, that is where I was very surprised by [their] reaction. Because eventually, what was the most complicated was the part at home, when we all came back home, we had our own life to manage, the studies, and stuff, not the same schedules, and not the same languages, so sometimes there were also language barriers, but I was really surprised to see that some members could quit. And two, but other, and some other groups also quitted in between, because this is a European programme and we were funded by the EU to do this and it was in the contract that we had to come until the end. So, I was very surprised by this to be honest and very disappointed for you. Also, just imagining how much work it

had to be for you, since just we were five and it was already a lot, I can tell. So yeah, I was, yeah, it was very weird.
FG1: But I was also wondering…I think or what I heard that no one was aware of these online dates, that it just when the week began, I was like, yeah, we have online meetings after that? And I think a lot of people were like, oh, I didn't know that I have to have time in October. And I think that was also a problem for some people that they just thought it is one week and I don't need to plan more time. Yeah, I think that was also a problem maybe.
FG3: Yeah, I agree. Maybe it was not that much clearly defined at the beginning, although it was written on the same like on the programme, but I agree, it would have been better if they said probably like Blended Programme in August plus extra sessions in October or teamwork in October continuing. Yeah, I agree 100%.
FG1: All right, I think, yeah, the sentence was just like in groups after the one week, but not like how you do it in groups or what is the aim of the groups' group work? Yeah.

[Long pause]

RJ: Yes. So, we have, we have already now discussed a bit about the groupwork. So, some had some positive experience, some less positive, indeed. But in this kind of groupwork, if something like this happens, what would you expect from the teacher or the one in charge to do in such situations?
FG1: I guess, first of all, speak with the groups because I have had like it was quite a distance by [I2, main teacher, BIP A]. Like, yeah, I have nothing to do with this. And so yeah, I think first of all to speak to the groups, because I think students still have another relationship to the lecturer, and then to the group members, and yeah, I think first of all, speak to the group and clarify that it is…not that good, like clarify that it is not the aim of the lecture. And maybe also reflect the reaction that people want to quit, so because, the reaction to that was, not now, I have nothing to do with this. But there must be a problem before that they even want to quit, so it is just worse to just say, like, you know, I have nothing to do with this.
FG2: Yeah, I would say like the lecturer needs to need to talk, but also like if a student comes to lecturer saying, hey, there is this problem and we need help with solving this problem, which has the problem which has nothing to do with specifically the project we are doing, but with the dynamics and everything, then I think lecturer should try and at least give some points like hey, maybe this can help or try this or do this. But yeah, that needs to come from the lecturer. I think as a student at some point we have tried everything and you don't know anymore things to do.
FG3: Yeah, although I agree, it is very tricky because we were all adults coming from different backgrounds. Some of us, some of the members were also quite old, comparing to the other students, so it created quite a gap between the participants and also there was something very weird with the group compositions that we had. We had one group on the first day and then after one session, I think, the day after [I2] eventually remixed all the groups and had added one or two persons to some groups, removing some others and yeah, we had six projects originally, we finished with five, so it was complicated to just have something homogenous with these and having groups solid, because we were just working together for one week. So, when you have to integrate one more person, it can happen to be very well and excellent, like in our group, but it can also create trouble for sure.
FG1: I also remember. I think the communication was always or often not clear because I remember when [they] gave us the exercise to write these three or what it was like, what we like and what we don't like. It was announced as just an exercise, nothing more, and after we created something, it was like, yeah, this is your work now. But it was to this point, it was just like a try, a try to create something, but you don't need it, and it is like I was confused that it changed that, I didn't plan to work with the cooking app for like, yeah, so.

FG3: Yeah, at the same time, I feel like it is like innovative in a way. Like you just try to do something that was not too biased and to already that we were choosing our topic. I don't know, I kinda appreciated that different way of teaching it, and like I don't know, it was just to get more ideas since the week was very short and about entrepreneurship, ideas sometimes come like this.
FG1: I was also impressed, I have to say I was impressed that, I think, we are all just human, but we go to different rooms, yeah, and we just come out with so different ideas. And I was like, this is weird because it is just about the thoughts you have in this moment. Maybe one week later it could be another project and yeah…for example, my group, this guy was like, what do we like? and he was like eating. I thought like I am in a business context, so I shouldn't write eating as I am good at eating, and but that was like the basis of our project at the end. So, I thought, it is funny, but I think, I just meant the communication that it could be more clear at the beginning.
FG4: Yeah, to add to that, like I could like reflect with [FG2]'s situation, like we as a group we sign up to be a part of this group and like we agree that we are gonna do this work at the end of the time, and then we are gonna submit it as a group. And like in the middle of the group, like middle of the work, and somebody leaves, and you are here to raise it to the professor and like there should be some solution from the professor. Stating like you can do this, like since initially it was a five member team, now it turned to a three member team, like you can cut short on this or like just provide some solution that would be really helpful. Like you can't expect to do like a five member job with a three member group. So, I think maybe that is also like a communication issue, like maybe in the initial week itself, if they said like, you are like this is the group and you can't leave the group, something like that, I think that would be really helpful. And even like in the middle of the time, like middle of the week, middle of the month, like some people have left the group. So, I think there was no proper communication, I think so, between the group and the like, there is no proper communication from the professor about like what can be done in that cases. So yeah, that could be improved.
FG1: I also think it is not fair that some people have to do more for the same grade, it is like the same for everybody. If you have an individual grade or an individual exam, you, there is no situation you have more work just because someone else did something wrong or left or something. I don't know, so it is not fair that…I think at least [I2, main teacher, BIP A] could say, okay, you don't have or you just have to do your part which was clarified before. So, I think it's maybe also a problem that you just give a group grade because you can't just separate the work, so that someone has to do more work, I think that is not fair for the grade.
FG2: Yeah. For me, like, that it is more work, I mean, that wasn't great, but I could live with that fact. That wasn't like the thing that was, for me, the most annoying part. The most annoying part is that in that week, I said to [I2, main teacher, BIP A], I think this is going to happen eventually, maybe not in my group, but maybe in someone else's group and I am worried what will happen. Then [I2] says, don't worry about it and eventually it happens and then I am stuck with the consequences of something that should not have had happened. And that is then the thing why I am thinking like, yeah, well, that is something what you could have known by now that that could have happened. So, that is like, I mean, the fact about my work, yeah, it is annoying, but we eventually managed. But yeah, yeah, it is mainly the communication part and that.
FG3: Yeah, maybe this reveals us how complicated it is for a teacher who organises this type of programmes to just follow up with the students if the programmes tends to last a bit more than just one week in time and in by zoom and online and remotely, yeah, maybe that was clearly lacking. Like the main communication, but I can also imagine that he had some work to do at [their] Uni and some other classes to give, so maybe it was not planned, I don't know by FORTHEM or by the university when they gave [them] some schedules to do these programmes, that [they] had also to keep following us up during the remote part. I have absolutely no idea as it was planned or not, but maybe not, and that could also explain why [I2] could not act for us.

RJ: Yes. So first of all, I just want to outline that anyway, I mean also the teachers within these programmes that I am studying, they will remain anonymous and it is in the end to come up with kind of a guideline for future teachers and organisers of this, and to be able to take into account. So, from what I have heard until now, you guys point out a lot has to do with the communication. Also, perhaps with providing tools for the group work as well. We can come back to this a little bit later on in this focus group because I have some more specific questions for this afterwards.

RJ: But before we do so, I am also very curious to know a bit more about your motivations for joining the summer school. And here I understand that it is different for the people who were already on an exchange in [host university of BIP A] because you signed up for a course, or for the ones from FORTHEM who signed up to go to [country of the host university] to follow this, and in order to do so, I would like to do it in a little bit of an interactive way. I am not sure if you are all familiar with the platform Flinga?

[All participants nodding no]

RJ: Do you not? No, okay. So, I will just send the link in the group chat and I hope that you [FG4] that you can also join from your phone as well. You can just go to the link and Flinga is kind of…it provides, so, normally in a classroom you have a whiteboard and you could add post-its and you add the post-its, but because we are online, this is kind of a tool that provides this whiteboard online. So, I will send you the link if you could go to it and if you need access code, it probably won't ask you the access code, but if it would, it is this. Are you able to access the website?
[All participants nodding yes]
FG3: Yes.
RJ: Okay, so I will just quickly share my screen again, so it looks like this at the moment for you.
So, I would like to ask you if you could put in as many posts as you want, so one post-it per thing that you will mention about what your motivations, objectives and reasons for joining the summer school were. Then here you can click a color, use any color you like, you can choose what you would like, so a square, a circle, a person, a title, and then here you can just write your message. So, I am just writing here test and then it comes on the white board, okay? So, this is just something individual for you to do first and then we will discuss it together.
FG3: Yeah, just to make sure that we have the one it says hesitations or concerns when applying to the summer school. So, maybe we have the wrong one?
FG1: Yes, the same.
RJ: Yes, sorry that link is for afterwards. So, that is great that you are saying it to me.
[Participants laughing]
Could you go to this link instead? Sorry for the inconvenience.
FG1: Yes, now I can see it.
RJ: Yes?
FG1: Yeah, yeah.
RJ: Yeah. Okay, so feel free to add. I will stop sharing my screen before I get crazy.

[The participants spend four minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]

Students' motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP
BIP A
Finishing a six month internship in Impact Ventures where I understood nothing, it was the ideal occasion

Just thought it was a normal course. Did not know it was a summer school. It looked interesting and liked that it had practical parts
To be honest, drawing from past Forthem mobility, it was also the opportunity to travel in such an expensive country as [country of the host university of BIP A] (the programme did not matter that much at first)
Convenient concept that it was just a full week and it sounded interesting with the practical group work part
I was interested in crowdfunding as a source of income for your venture, also I wanted to experience summer in [country of the host university of BIP A]. So I was motivated to sign up for the event.
After one year-erasmus + one forthem, this was my last chance to do this programme at the uni I quitted for the master right after
Fitted into my course of studies
I also wanted to connect with more students across EU

RJ: Is anyone still typing or trying to add something?
[Everyone nods no, except for [FG4], who does not display any non-verbal cues]
FG3: I think it's fine for me, it is fine.
RJ: Yeah. For the others as well? [FG4], were you able to add anything?
[[FG4] attempted to speak but was muted]
RJ: I don't hear you, yeah, could you please repeat?
FG4: I was able, yeah, I was able to add.
RJ: Okay, great. So of course, we all have different motivations to join. Maybe you could read some of them and discuss them together to explain also to the others why? And maybe some others also recognise it as well. **[Long pause]** So, anyone feel free to start! I can start by reading one out loud and then we can discuss them. So, I just pick the one that is most in front of my eyes. So, one of you states that "I also wanted to connect with more students across the EU". So, does anyone wants to elaborate on that?
FG3: I would just absolutely share this experience, since this is basically the purpose of FORTHEM mobility. It is also one of the main advantages that you gain from this experience. So, yeah, now I am just worried I forgot it in my notes, but yeah, I agree 100%.
RJ: And how about [FG2], [FG1], how was it for you? Because you went to [host university of BIP A], you went there as an exchange student, and then you joined this summer school, but as I can see on the note, you didn't know that, you just thought it was a normal course, did not know it was a summer school, it looked interesting and liked that it had practical parts. I can imagine one of them coming from one of you.
FG2: Yeah, the one you just read came from me. Yeah. For me, I, when I saw it in my schedule, like Oh it is a full week, okay, but only like the moment I was sitting in that class and people were actually explaining, I was like oh, it is not just a normal course, all these people are here only for one week, and yeah, so.
FG1: I also thought it is because I was going to another education system, it is just the way [country of the host university] education is that they often do these kind of courses, because I didn't know this from my Uni, from any experience. And, I thought there would be a lot of [national students from the host university] and then I came to the class and there was no one like, well, yeah, there was no one from [country of the host university]. And yeah, so I didn't know that it is a summer school. And first I didn't even understand this, the concept. But as someone already said, I also wanted to connect with more students across the EU and when I realised what it is, I also thought the idea is great and I also want to

fully agree with that, that I also want to get to know some more students. Yeah, but I didn't sign up because of that.
RJ: But was it a pleasant surprise? Or was it somewhere like you were in there, you thought, oh shit, where did I end up?
FG1: First, I was positively surprised…well, before I came to my group. **[Everyone laughing]**
But, yeah, I came into my group. First, I was very positively surprised because I thought it is an interesting experience, it is a different experience to work with other cultures and, yeah, with other nationalities, yeah, so, I was positive surprised.
FG3: And I agree that it was a bit weird that in the beginning that we could not understand whether they were going to be Erasmus students or [host university of BIP A] students, so all these type of students. But drawing from the experience of another girl who was in the course and who was doing an Erasmus in [host university of BIP A], she told me there was a vertical experience because all of the activities were also funded for the Erasmus students as well as the [national students from the host university] if they would come, but they didn't come. Which was very awesome, I think the EUI, as a university did a lot in terms of activities and social programmes, which is actually not that much mandatory in FORTHEM. Mostly they provide some fun activities, but not that much, not about trips and all these things. So, that was, I don't know, for you guys, but maybe the occasion to just do something for free, I mean doing something for free in [country of the host university], which is very expensive, which is very cool.
FG2: Yeah. For me, I was also like surprised that like that everyone would leave after a week, and for me, it was kind of hard to get, like really get into, a lot of like, maybe becoming friends with everyone, because I think at that moment, because we were here maybe only for one or two weeks. So, we had to still invest a lot of time to get friends over here because these were the people we were going on with the full semester. So, for me it was kind of, I wasn't that pleasantly surprised that most people would leave after a week. And also, in that week it was really nice weather and I felt I felt like I missed out on a lot of things that all the other exchange students were doing. They were going to the beach and they were going to the lake. And so, for me, it was, yeah, it wasn't, that made it also like, it is very unfortunate that it goes like this right now.
FG1: And I forgot to say that it was also my…I thought groupwork is also nice because you get to know the people, but I didn't expect that all people will leave again after one week. So, that was also like, okay, they are just here for a week, but?

RJ: Yeah, and then there were no [national students from the host university] during the summer school. So, [FG3], [FG4], did you expected there to be a lot of students from the [host university of BIP A] as well?
FG3: Yeah, when I read the programme, it was saying that we were going to be 25 from FORTHEM university and then 40 at least, I don't know, the numbers were huge. We were supposed to be a big, big, big group from [country of the host university] and 15 Erasmus students, something like this. They planned it to be much bigger than what it was in the end, which is not necessarily a bad thing if it is smaller, it is even better to just know the people. But yeah, I definitely expected to meet some [national students from the host university] which was not really the case, although I mean we had quite a local experience in [city of the host university of BIP A] and we could meet some people, some cool people. Yeah, it was not the same like in Finland, in Finland it was exactly the way they said, the local students were probably 50% of the group, so it was very more diverse into the Finish filter. Not so much in [country of the host university], but it was also fine. I mean maybe it was surprising for you guys from Erasmus, I don't know, I can understand it should be very weird when you start something and then you [inaudible word], it is supposed to be your Erasmus life, and then all the people are leaving again. So yeah, that must be weird.

FG4: Initially I was not on like, about like there will be [national students from the host university] in our course, but like I had some like interaction with [I1, organiser, BIP A] when [they] picked us up, like [they] said like around 100 hundred people applied for this course, and like and they were shortlisted to 20 something, and like [they] said like we will be also having [national students from the host university] in the course. So, I was like, yeah, it would be a really good chance, like to know about now [country of the host university] culture and everything. But yeah, I think many like [national students from the host university] students signed up for the course, but somehow like they discontinued in the middle of the course like at least the beginning week itself.
FG2: And the only thing I want to add, like indeed I heard in the week that you all had to apply for it, and I, at least I don't know for [FG1], but we didn't need to apply for it. It was just like oh, this is a nice course and oh yeah you are getting it. So, I think that is also a different thing, yeah. So, we also knew, I think less than you guys knew when you came.
FG3: Yeah.
FG1: And…
FG3: Although we knew, I think. Oh, sorry, sorry.
FG1: No, no, just go ahead, sorry.
FG3: But although we knew the programme a bit more because we had to get selected for our grants, I would say, and to be 100% honest, that if you come for a FORTHEM experience, then the programme does not matter that much because also what you want is to discover a new culture and discover a new country. It is such an opportunity to travel in such expensive countries like Finland, [country of the host university], where we would not be able to go as students, and that was my main motivation at the beginning. And also, it depends on the country being partnership of the Union, but in [FG3's home university] not so many people apply for this. So, it is not too selective, you know, but maybe in [another country], where students are maybe more aware of the programmes it is more complicated to get on one. So yeah, although we were supposed to get to know more the programme, because we applied for it, maybe we were less motivated. Yeah, that was a 50/50.
FG1: I just wanted to add that I think it was even worse for me because I didn't… I applied for two, no for one course and it was a time collapse with another one. So, I chose this summer school later and I think it was not clear if, or just someone added me to the summer school, and then I came there, and I think, [I1, organiser, BIP A], I talked to [them] and [they were] like, yeah, but is it in your transcript of record or something? On my Erasmus agreement, something like that. I was like, no, it is not finished yet and [I1] was like oh it must be in there. Maybe you are not allowed to participate, so I didn't know until I finished this course, or until I got my Erasmus agreement, if I am accepted in this course. And yeah, so it was just a normal course for me until I came to the course. And [I1, organiser, BIP A] said to me, now it is not that easy if you want to participate, I don't know. And [they] just said to me yes just go there, so, I don't know.

RJ: So, in the end it turned out fine. Luckily, right? You got, yeah. So, we have already discussed some of them that are in common. Then there is just like one other theme that I see in the motivations, and that was a really particular one to crowdfunding and entrepreneurship. So, somebody interested in crowdfunding as a source of income for your venture, and together with that goes, yeah, the internship in ventures as well. So, that was also one of the reasons specifically entrepreneurship and crowdfunding related for someone.
FG4: So yeah, it was for me, like I was like I was not aware of this crowdfunding aspect to be like a source of funding for your venture. So, like, I didn't know, like it could be a source of funding, like after seeing like after doing some research, I mean like searching in Google, I was able to know this is like really a thing, and it is like many like startups especially in America and India have been doing this for quite a

long time. I was like, yeah, especially with IT industries, it is like, this is really a good aspect. Like you can put your ideas to the public and then the public is funding. And yeah, I just want to know more about it. And also, I wanted to be in [country of the host university] for the summer, like European summer.
FG3: Yeah, that is the exact same for me. Like it was also the hazards of having worked in this field and understanding absolutely nothing about that, but literally nothing for six months. So, it was just cool for the motivation because I had something to tell, and I think it was really clear in my statement, I just said I need to understand what I am doing, so please take me to the summer school. And yeah, it was very nice, but maybe the second motivation, if I was very honest. I would say the first one is travel and the second one is the programme. Of course, I would not take something in physics or biosciences, something very different from my backgrounds, but it is a bit a secondary choice, let's say.

RJ: Okay, so thank you very much for sharing. And then now we can do the other one about that you have already seen. So, the other link that I first sent to you. So, the same idea but about if you had any hesitations or concerns when joining. Or maybe if you were on exchange, I can also for example imagine that during the programme if you have any concerns, maybe if you have got the credits or not, something like that, you can also add. So, it is in the other whiteboard.

[Three minutes of silence while the participants complete the hesitations or concerns exercise]

Students' hesitations and concerns when applying to the BIP
BIP A
ECTS credits are never taken into account in my [home university] but regarding the high number of them with this programme (7), it was a concern: and finally, they did not accept haha
No concerns when I choose the course. Had concerns when everything went not great during groupwork and I might thought we would not pass and that I would not get the credits, because i needed them
I was mainly concerned about financing the programme (you have to advance the money, the grant is given 1 week before), and about finding out for other pple participating from [home university] to travel together
I was hesitant about the acceptance rate for this course, since I knew for a fact all my batch mates applied for the course. Also my concers were true since [I1] confirmed that they received around 100 applications for the summer course
apart from this, Forthem provides a lot for students and it was an absolute pleasure to apply for it (very small statement, 5min candidacy maybe haha)

RJ: Yes, did you manage to add everything that you wanted to add, or do you need more time? I see everybody smiling, so, I guess that is good. Okay, so here we have, I think, a little bit of what we have discussed. So, somebody was hesitant about the acceptance rate for the course because of the batch of the people that applied, and the concern came through when [I1, organiser, BIP A] confirmed that they received around 100 applications for the summer course. I think we just discussed this already, as I think [FG4] has had a fairly competitive candidacy from [FG4's home university] other people applying as well for the summer school. [FG3] had that a little bit less because at the [FG3's home university] there were less applicants, and for [FG1] and [FG2] they didn't have to apply in the similar way…Then, so, the European credits are never taken into account. Did anyone else have this as well? The problem with credit? [FG2] is nodding no. [FG1], did you wanted to say something?
FG1: Sorry, but what is your question? Sorry. What was your question?

RJ: Okay, I will just quickly repeat the question again, yes. So, somebody saying something about European credits, so the ECTS that you get for the course. So, in this it was seven European credits, and for some they were not taken into account, so they did the summer school, but in the end, they did not get the credits, if I understand correctly, what that person is saying here.

FG4: Yeah, yeah, so that was my initial concern for me. Because like in my home university, once I applied, they stated, like the FORTHEM courses, it is not always the credits they say it is. So, like they calculated it and like I did receive my credits, but my other friend who applied and was a part of this, didn't get his credit yet. So, yeah, that also was like another concern. Like we don't, the grades are not reflected, we just get the credits. And I was like there is like no point of like getting the grade like I had put in so much effort for just getting credits, so that was a concern for me.

FG3: I think it really depends from the university, and studying there because my friends, I know it's very rigid, but the ECTS and they would never accept you to get six credits or seven credits from short-term programmes, even when they do the FORTHEM mobility in [FG3's home university]. I know some friends who took part in these experiences and they don't get the credits in [FG3's country of the home university], although the week was in [FG3's country of the home university], in their own university, in their field, and they would not get it. So, that is the same for me. I know it is not lost credits also, because I don't know, they can also be useful, and it is still something you can tell, you can just have this certificate kind of, but it is more like a certificate. It is never really something that they mention in the in the curricula.

RJ: Yes. So, there is also one of the one of the comments about concerns: "when everything went not great during group work and I thought that we might would not pass and I would not get a credit because I needed them". So, do you think this also had an impact that maybe you were working in a group where some people did need the credits while other people did not get any credits for it?

[All participants nodding yes]

I see you all nodding. And [FG2] you are nodding very fanatically, would you like to maybe elaborate a bit?

FG2: Yeah, I know that two people they didn't get any credits at all for what they were doing, and the other two got like, I don't know, maybe two or three credits at max. And for me, it is a 7.5 credit course and which I needed because to get my 30 credits to pass this semester. So, for me there was a lot more pressure on it than for two or three credits.

FG1: But I think as a second factor, that there were, that some people were not from the field, like for example [FG3], you said it is still like related or it is like useful, you wouldn't do something like biological or biology. But I think there was someone from history studies and that that was the moment I was surprised when [I1, organiser, BIP A] said [they] chose the people, the students who participate. Because I was like, why did [they] choose someone from history studies for a financial crowdfunding lecture? Especially when, I mean, we all knew that it is a group work and that it is a group exam or group grade. So, it is just, I don't know, I think it was…

FG3: I mean, I understand, yeah, I understand what you say. I think it is also linked to the number of candidacy they get in every universities and it is also linked to FORTHEM overall, because we have less candidates and then they take whoever is applying for it, because in the FORTHEM it works that since the university is financing, there is a number of seats per university accessible for the students, and they would take anyone applying. There is three positions for [FG3's home university], they would take the three students applying, but if there are six, they would just select. But that is why I was very surprised that I could apply for any type of mobility, including the one on physics and on bioscience in Poland. And, I had one friend at the other, not the one studying history, but she was also studying, not the field of this summer school, she told me she was also taken in this summer school in Poland, although she was studying languages, I think. Which is like absolutely special, I would say, because they should select at least a bit. But it is also linked to that. And to answer to [FG2], to the fact that ECTS can play a role, that

is why I was very surprised, because although we don't have the ECTS, we are supposed to get this grant, and they say in the contract that if we don't meet the criteria, then we would have to reimburse the money that they lent to us. And that is absolutely normal, it is also in the study contract that we signed from ERASMUS+. So, I was very surprised that people could quit, and they didn't have to give the money back. I mean, it's also logical we are students, we cannot really get the money back, but still it is supposed to be the part of the contract, and although we don't have ECTS, we must commit because we otherwise we need to give back the money. Yeah, so, I really don't understand how it was possible because I know from Finland one girl quitted, it was from my Finnish BIP, and she had to give the money back to her FORTHEM office in Germany, I think. So, it can happen sometimes, but not in [FG3's home university] probably.

FG1: Hmm-mmm. Just to address your point with the…that you can choose everything. It is the same in semester abroad or Erasmus+, you can choose any course, you can go to psychological courses or lectures, but I think it is like you have to do the exam for it by yourself, but this is a group exam and a group work, I think you shouldn't be able to choose this or you shouldn't say it is a group grade, at least. It should be an individual grade because, yeah, otherwise it is not working I guess. That someone from a history studies get the same grade as you, that is yeah…**[laughing].**
FG3: But…I mean in the same time, why not? Because that is what brings diversity to the…so the problem is more to the people being committed in the programme or not. It doesn't really matter what you studied, because as I told, for example, I knew nothing really about a crowdfunding and entrepreneurship. Just practical stuff from internship but nothing concrete and I could learn so much in this summer school thanks to my also teammates who could just teach me the things and tell me oh, here is the way we do. So, it is just depending on if you want to learn or not. Yeah, of course, if it is too far from your field of studies, if it is sciences so to say, it is very complicated, but for finance, it is supposed to be accessible, let's say. Even if you study history, you can start an adventure yourself, I don't know.
RJ: Yes. So one of the things with these Blended Intensive Programmes is indeed that everyone from whichever study cycle should be able to apply for it in order to make it diverse, which perhaps has the benefit of making a diverse group, but at the other side, perhaps it could become more difficult when you are studying the subject in itself, and if you weren't aware that this group would be so diverse, and maybe when you get surprised during. Do I summarise that a bit correct?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yes, okay, so, well, thank you all for still being here and I know that it is taking quite some time, so I am happy that you are all still participating at this point. We still have, you can just click away, the thing. Well don't click away the things that you added, but you can click away the screen. So, we just have two more rounds. So, what I would like to do now is a little bit different. I will ask you a topic, which sometimes it might be a bit repetitive of what we have done already, or perhaps not. I will be proposing you a topic or a theme and then just in the chat functions on Teams you can choose a smiley what your reaction to that experience is. So, if you all just go to the chat, you can choose whatever smiley you would like. So, I will propose a theme, then you can put a smiley ready, and then I will count down that we all put them at the same time in the chat because otherwise you might be looking at what others are doing, and I would just like to have all of yours. Okay, so does it sound okay to all of you?
[All participants nodding yes]
Yes, good. So let me see which…okay, let's start with the content of the course. So, what did you think of the content of the course itself? So, entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, the course during the week.
FG1: Sorry, again, could you repeat? There was a problem with the connection.
RJ: Yeah, okay. Thank you for asking. And if I talk too fast, also let me know, because when I get enthusiastic, I sometimes speak very fast. I just proposed a topic, like I did just now, so I said the content

of the course, then you can go to the chat and you can react with what any smiley you have, you think fits that experience or your feelings about that. And then when you all have a smiley ready, I will all ask you to put them in the chat at the same time. So, does that sound clear?
FG1: Yeah.
RJ: Okay, so do you all have a smiley ready for the content of the course?
[[FG1] is nodding no]
RJ: And now we are really curious what smiley [FG1] is coming up with.
[[FG1] nods that they are ready]
RJ: Yes, okay, so you can put them all in the chat.
[Students add chosen smileys in the chat]

Content of the course			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			

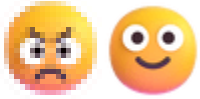
RJ: Okay, so do you all maybe want to explain a bit about your smileys? Because I mean some have a laughing smiley, we can all kind of understand but smileys have different interpretations. So, [FG2], since you were the first one, would you maybe like to start?
FG2: Yeah, alright. I think the contents of the course was fine. I had a bit of overlap with stuff that I already had done, also some new stuff, so well just fine, yeah.
RJ: Hmm. And [FG3]?
FG3: Yeah. Although we didn't have that much lectures, properly speaking, because just the first day we had some introductions, then it was in the group mainly. But I learned a lot from the course and the practical experience definitely brought a lot. So, yeah. And I love that 100% from [FG4], it is very fun.
RJ: So [FG4], do you want to react to your 100%?
FG4: Yeah. So, I signed up for this course for the crowdfunding aspect, so I think I am happy with the crowdfunding part of like the entrepreneurship. As [FG2] said it, like, it was kind of repetitive like with the course I did, but the crowdfunding is the new topic for me and it was really good.
RJ: And [FG1]?
FG1: Hmm-mmm. How to say. I think that the content was good and all, but it was…to be honest, I didn't learn that much in this course. I learned a lot practical, which is also great, a great thing, but like, just from a theoretical view, I think this course what was not that good and the content was good but not really specific and especially too fast to learn it. And you didn't have to…or maybe it is just my group or my work, but you didn't have to apply it that precise to what we have done in the end. If that makes sense. So, I chose this smiley because it is like it was okay, but it was like, yeah. And I think in [country of the home university] we wouldn't get 7.5 credits for that. It was not that much work, especially not theoretical work. There was maybe just time you needed to plan but not the input.
RJ: And how do the others see this when [FG1] is saying this? Do you recognise this a bit?
FG3: I would say that it is like typical from these Erasmus classes you can get. Erasmus classes are less demanding than the other courses that you can get in your home university. So, it was not that much surprise, although quite surprised by the quality of the conferences we can get at the beginning. And also just the mutual learning is was for me the most important and this…again we come back to the experience everyone had from his own group. So yeah, I can understand that. Maybe also for the one studying finance, we had one in the group who was very specialised in that, he said it was a bit repetitive and the crowdfunding part that he was waiting for was that in the end, not so much like covered. We

could talk about, we had some conference, but in the final presentations, this was just one slide and it was optional for us to start it for real or not. And we didn't have that much time or we could have the time but I mean it is also a matter of organisation and it was not mandatory. So, you know…Yeah. I would understand a bit what you say, but I cannot identify myself because it is really not the same situation.
FG1: I don't know if it is still too off regarding your question. But it was also, in the end, when I got my grade and it was a B, I was surprised that it is a B for that. Because it was not a B, like I was afraid that I won't pass, and then it is a B, and that is why I was surprised how low the expectations are. And especially I was surprised how low they might be. In the countries I work with, for example, with the girls from France, I was just surprised. What are they doing in their studies? Because they were, it was maybe too hard for them to do that. I was like, yeah…So, I was surprised about that it was that easy and just the group work, the work together was a mental, yeah, issue.
[Participants laughing]
FG3: But then again, it is Erasmus. And also we had to be autonomous in our work, so depending on where you were coming from and to what extent you were going to work with your group, maybe it was easier or more difficult. Yeah, but the Erasmus for sure validation makes it much easier.
FG2: Yeah, I agree with what [FG1] said about the grade because it in my home university, I wouldn't even have handed it in how we have handed it in. Because I would just have said, just give me the fail grade in my home university for what we have handed in, and I also got a B, so there is like a very big difference and in that.
FG3: Yeah, but you will see with your Erasmus grades in the end, maybe in two weeks when you receive it, you will get A probably everywhere. Like I can tell from my Erasmus in Prague, it was very easy also, but that is also what makes Erasmus, you can travel and have friends.
FG2: Yeah.
FG4: Yeah. I think the grade is for your effort, and not for your final work. So that is, so that the…like how they grade for like one week or the two months of hard work you put in.
FG1: This is maybe me, but I also said to…I think I wrote, I texted you, [FG2], that I was kind of not mad, but that they think now that they did a great work. Like that my group thinks that it is great work and that they are two, I think two or three, no three guys plan to keep on doing this, and they didn't even…it is not realistic, to be honest. I was like, ah, just because you got a B, no? Like, you know, so I don't know.
FG3: Yeah, maybe people being proud because when you don't come from that background, it is already a challenge to do this and that is the short Blended Programme, you know, you you are not into that field and it is already a success to pass and to say oh yeah I can now do a business plan. Which might sound very basic for you but which is already something for us, and but yeah of course it is maybe…But they will realise it sooner or later that they could not continue with it, but it still gives us basis for other projects which we can appreciate in the end.
RJ: Okay, I am just…
FG4: [Uncomprehensive sound]
RJ: Sorry, [FG4], did you want to say something?
FG4: Yeah. So, I think this is a like, I think for introduction level course, I think this is really good like the content and everything is good.
RJ: Thank you. I am really happy that although sometimes opinions differ that you all say what you think and that you are open to listen to each other as well. So that is really good.

RJ: I am just gonna go on with the next one because of course we don't want to spend the whole evening here. Well, I would like to get as much information from you, but I can imagine you rather not. So, the next one is about the programme and schedule of the course.
FG1: Could you maybe specify that?

FG2: Programme, what do you mean with the programme exactly?
RJ: Yes, sure. The programme and schedule of the course, I mean the classes plus the social programme. When you had classes, how many classes you had, and the social programme in there. The breaks you had. So, kind of the schedule, the calendar. Does that make sense when I say it like that? Yeah? Okay. Okay, I see some smiling faces. So, I think some have their emoji ready. Is everyone ready or do you need more time?
[[FG4] nods no]
RJ: Or no, sorry.

RJ: It looks like you are already. Is it? Yeah. Okay, go ahead.

Programme/schedule			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			

RJ: So, [FG3], would you like to start?
FG3: Yeah, to me, that is a smiley, still smiling, because I would not want to choose anything mean or…but less smiley. So, that is the difference. And it is to say that overall it was okay and the social experience was amazing, literally amazing, and the programme was very cool. The classes were quite well arranged, I can tell. I mean, it was fine. I was expecting not to have class during the whole day like in my previous FORTHEM mobility where we only had class in the morning and then the afternoon we could just rest and work in groups. Here we have classes all day, but it was also fine. Maybe just not that smiley for the remote part, which was not that planned and structured as we told before, yeah.
RJ: And then, [FG2], you have one smiley which seems to be the same as [FG3]'s, and you also have one smiley that seems to be a little bit the opposite of the other smiley from my interpretation.
FG2: Hmm-mmm, yeah. So, I think for the social programme and what was around that with the food and the other things that have been arranged, that was really good. So that is the smile, the smile, the one that is smiling. But the schedule was not great, the days were too long in my opinion, with two little breaks in between, and yeah. So, that is why I chose one that is angry and the other one is happy.
RJ: Thank you. [FG1], would you like to?
FG1: I forgot kind of the programme. I think we should appreciate the effort by [host university of BIP A] because I think the programme and the what they invested to show the students it was great, or to offer the students. But the schedule was just I thought we were always fighting against the time. They tried to put all in the few hours, I think it was never possible, or it was always like, oh, we have a delay, oh we have a delay, oh we are too late, oh it is too much time or too less time, and I think it was kind of exhausting. That is why I chose this one like pheww. And, but I also think like the breaks or the like the length of the courses or the parts was okay. I think what maybe [FG2] means the like the group work was really intensive for me. So, it was really exhausting and due to that it was really long or it seemed really long. But I am used to these long days. Like if you work, it is nothing. You just have one break and so I wouldn't say it was too long and there were too less breaks. It is just the environment you worked with, yeah.
RJ: And [FG4] for you to programme? You got an upside-down smiley.
FG4: Yeah. So, I think there is like a there was not enough planning, I would say. Because like I am not saying based on my assumption but like I had a chat with [I1, organiser, BIP A] and [they] said like from admissions perspective, like according to their profile, like I don't know the Dean they asked them to do

the FORTHEM within this year. So, they had to force everybody and make some arrangements for. That is why there was a mess up with some accommodation, like for us. Regarding the schedule I think, yeah it is an intensive course, but it should not be this intensive. Like for me personally, I haven't like my attention span is like very low, I would say. So, I couldn't survive my 60 hours, sorry 60 minutes lecture, so minus like 45 minutes like that is how like I could pay attention for 45 minutes like take it or leave it so that is..

RJ: Then I am really happy that you are still here and still participate.

FG4: Yeah, yeah. So, something like I could work with so, but yeah, not one whole day, I couldn't do it. So, that was like a bit like mishap in my perspective. But I would say like if they could have extended, like since it is like an online, or like a hybrid as they say, like they could have pushed some lectures to online, I would say.

RJ: Does anyone want to comment on this?

[All participants nodding no]

RJ: Okay, then let's go to the next one. We only have two left. So, the online parts.

FG2: Sorry, I already sent it. I am sorry, I went a bit too quick.

RJ: No worries. It is fine. So, the others, do you have it?

FG1: Can I use two?

RJ: Yes, you can.

FG1: Wait a second then. Okay.

RJ: Okay, you may add them.

Online part			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			

RJ: So, [FG2], you are so enthusiastic, do you want to start?

FG2: Hmm, well, the online thing they were quite unorganised. Especially the first one, started like, I don't know, 10/20 minutes later because there were some connection problems and quite often I couldn't really understand people when they were talking because of the internet connections and stuff like that. At the second, like the last one, the internet quit at [host university of BIP A]. So, I also had that problem, but also like the lecturers as well. And after that I had it again. So, at the end I just couldn't get back in anymore, and so that was wasn't really a nice way of them ending it.

RJ: Yes. [FG3], you have the next smiley.

FG3: Yeah, it was more the smiley of “oops”. I've been cursed by the dates and the terms because I think we all kind of started to work a bit late and also we had so many stuff to just do within our own uni and the language barrier sometimes can be important when you are online if you want to explain something then it can be misunderstood. Overall, it was okay we had some debates in the group and we could just discuss and calm down and then discuss again. It was fine, but yeah, we probably had a lack of main guidelines from what we were supposed to do. Even when we had to give back the work at 2:00 PM on the day we had the final presentation, we had absolutely no idea of how to enter in the platform, how to do so, who was supposed to submit. So, it was stressful for the end, but it was, yeah, just maybe part of our responsibility of yeah, we did it a bit late, maybe.

RJ: Thank you. [FG1], you have two?

FG1: Can I ask you how you are, what you, I understood the whole online part. The group work like the over a month and [FG2] just answered the like the actual online meeting.
RJ: It is both, it is how you interpret it. So, it can be either the online meeting or the whole online part as well. I mean, both are online, both are fine.
FG1: And maybe just shortly. The smileys are just for the group work part. Online part, just shortly, I didn't understand [I2, main teacher, BIP A]'s feedback very well because of the I don't know, maybe connection, maybe the accent, the connection computer, but it was really hard to, at least for me, to understand the feedback. But I just meant this my yeah, I used these smileys for the group work, because my group, I know we tend, as students we tend to do it like last minute. There was, my group did nothing the whole time. Like nothing, nothing! And then just one day before the presentation was, so how can we do that? How can we do that? And I texted them, I don't know three times "can you please add your stuff" and they didn't even understand. One girl said, I am doing it in PowerPoint by myself, I will add it later. I was like, yeah, but how can we discuss your content if you don't add it? If you do it by yourself? And the other girl was doing the PowerPoint in Canvas, I guess, and she just added screenshots and she used another font?! So, it was just like a mess. And one girl also started her Erasmus and was complaining that she doesn't have time because she is in Spain now and she doesn't have time to do things because she needs to live a life there. And I was like, yeah, but I am in [country of the host university], so there is no difference between us. Yeah. So, that is, that was just, yeah, maybe I have another expectation for myself, but it was just for me, it was horrible that they didn't at least didn't do anything and didn't communicate.
RJ: Okay, thank you. And [FG4]? Last but not least.
FG4: Yeah, as, [FG3] said, like we had some friendly debates in our group. but yeah, like since it was like our course work was like our own university course work was also going on parallelly. So, it was like it was a bit too much like overload to balance like our coursework like I got my thesis running and then like my personal like other work on. So, it was a bit stressful I would say. But like yeah, we were able to communicate like after some communication issues, like we were able to sort it out after like every work was split, and then we were able to do the work and I don't think we did it in the last minute. We were, we did it somewhere like a week before, so we didn't have that issue.
RJ: Yes, so, your group did meet online during the online part, yeah?
FG4: Yeah.
RJ: Yeah. And if I understand [FG1]'s group, they did not meet online, they just texted at the last moment before.
FG1: No, no, we met them, like we did a meeting, but only the evening before.
RJ: And [FG2], how about your group?
FG1: I am sorry. I think you were sitting next to me in class, and it was like the same situation in class as like online. It was like before the presentation, not even in the group work or when we came back to the classroom and it was before the presentation, they worked like, I don't know, they just added things which doesn't make sense and that was the same thing one evening before the presentation and before the presentation, you know, and we are just like we had a month time or something. So, you can do, you don't even have, I think it was not that much work. I think I needed two evenings or three, yeah.
FG2: Yes, so, first in the beginning, when we were still five people, we tried to do meetings, but usually then everyone said, yeah, we can, and then eventually one or two people would show up online, and so that was always like very annoying. And after a moment, we were only three usually, and we didn't really meet up, it was more via WhatsApp like, hey, I did this can you please look at it and leave some comments or stuff like. That is how we eventually did it, so, yeah.
RJ: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much for all of this.

RJ: I just have I think one or maybe two final questions. You don't have to put in any emoticons, but just, you can discuss amongst each other. Of course, if you are willing to. So, these Blended Intensive Programmes, they are fairly new programmes, they are just being funded under the new Erasmus+ program from 2021. So, these are really the first ones that are being organised. And some organisers, and the European Union also, have the intention to set up these kind of programmes in order to enhance, so in order to improve intercultural competence among students. I am wondering how you, how all of you see this. So, do you see that this is something that BIPs enable this? And how would you see this? Is this kind of a clear question? I don't want to force the questions too much in one direction because I don't want to influence what your opinion on intercultural competence is, but it is mainly about having these students together from different universities, different nationalities in one place, what do you think that this gives?

FG2: I think that for students who are not able to go to a semester abroad but still want some international experience, I think then this is a good alternative, but I don't think that for, like it is not for people who already having the international experience, I don't think it has extra value

RJ: Okay, thank you.

FG3: Yeah, I would it has a value anyway because the fact that you meet new people through networks, as young people that is very important. And you always learn something even if you just don't feel it or you don't see it, but you always learn something in the end, and you progress in English, that is already something important and discovering a new culture. What we can tell is that of course, there are some advantages like these cultural advantages in terms of knowledge, in terms of experience for students who don't want to leave for a full Erasmus experience they can just decide for one week. Unfortunately, there are some downsides as well. Some people would tell that it is very pricey and in terms of eco-friendly reasons, we all take the plane for one week, so that is not the best experience maybe. Maybe we can enhance this with bordering countries so that we could go by train. I would agree 100% if it was just let's say in Germany because it was, it would be very nice and I could go there by train. In [country of the host university] it was just impossible. But yeah, overall, the experience is great. And the other downside is that it is not so culturally open because to take part in these programmes and to be informed that they exist, the students usually have an international experience, or they already speak English, or they are coming from families who let them know that there might be opportunities for them, and in terms of social conditions. So, maybe there is a lack of accessibility of these programmes somewhere and we could manage in the years, they will see the social profile, that we kind of all have the same social profile of people being able to go on Erasmus and having yeah experiences of speaking English. But if anything, it anyway, it is always bringing something, always. Even if it is a bad experience, even from Finland. It is just amazing memories and such awesome opportunities for students. So yeah, it is always something.

FG4: Yeah. So, to add to it, yeah, it has some value I think. Like, as [FG3] said, like people who couldn't do a six-month Erasmus programme can do this like intensive Erasmus. I think it was like a kind of a similar experience for me and I chose this because for the experience and to connect with people from like a different background, right? Maybe if there was a bit more planning from the university side, I think this could be done by another like, for people who are planning to do more on this intensive course. I think some planning maybe should be done like as [FG1] said, like maybe four people with the same background, like same disciplines or faculty they can, like a different culture, but the same discipline they could come in and do an intensive course. And maybe it is not an introductory level course, but maybe some like a mid-level or like even an advanced course could be really good. So, I think maybe a bit plan and some other like advanced course will do.

RJ: [FG1], would you like to add anything?

FG1: I don't know, to be honest, I am not sure. Because I think it is a great way anyways, but I don't know how big the international or these nationals where? Or like what I should think about this, because I think this can happen everywhere or in every, for example, if I am just in [country of the home

university], it can happen here as well that you just get bad group members. So, I don't know what I should think about the expect that there were different nationalities. But as I already said, I was kind of shocked about their knowledge, because there was one point, I think and at the end I asked them what do you study because I thought they don't study business. Yeah. So, and maybe one point which wasn't mentioned yet, I think the language was sometimes a problem, the way for example, I think there were some people who didn't understand really well. Like, [FG2], I think you said you had one group member who didn't understand really well. And I think this should be proven, in especially for a week and for group work, because if you do an Erasmus and you are not that used to English, you can improve it within a half year but if it is just a week, you won't improve your English that much. You will be just overwhelmed.
FG3: Yeah, I agree, but then that is all a problem of how do we manage this? Because then it will mean that we set apart all the students who unfortunately didn't have the chance to learn English that well, or overall French students who are really bad in English speaking, for example. It is maybe 80% or 90% of French students who barely have a B1 level in English and they would not be able to take part to these programmes because of that. So yeah, maybe that is complicated. But in in our group we had one guy, he had a pretty average level of English, and it is fine because you can also, you know, when you are addressing to that person, you have to adapt to yourself and then you can give him some missions that he can understand. So, it is…yeah, but I agree it is complicated with the language anyway.
FG1: Hmm-mmm.

RJ: Is there anything else that we haven't discussed yet that you think is important for me to take into account while doing my research? Or is there still something you would like to add?
FG3: I don't know if it is part of the research, if you are going to work on the sociological profile of people taking part in these programmes, but maybe it would be interesting to know who is applying, and who knows, and to what extent the communication works where they communicate for this programme. because it really, like I know from my personal experience, but FORTHEM doesn't barely make any communication, we just have one email per year and that is it. And for this one in [country of the host university], it was only on the Instagram account, I think. And the [FG3's home university] didn't mention it. So yeah, maybe to see who gets informed, and it is mostly people probably having an international desire. Yeah, I don't know, I am quite curious about that.
RJ: Okay, thank you. Anyone else?
[All participants nodding no]

RJ: Okay. So, yeah, just [FG3], I am not working on the part of who applies because actually there is a lot of research at already confirms what you are saying. And so, I use this indeed in my research, but not as something that I am researching, but as something, okay this is already being stated in research for a while, why is this still the case? So, I go about it like that. But in the communication side, I am indeed very interested in. So, I would like to thank you all very much for openly sharing your opinions and your feedback. I know that I have asked a lot of you for these two hours but I hope that you see that I am very grateful for it, because this is something that I am very passionate about doing. I am teaching myself, I am also involved in internationalisation of universities, and I think it is very important that when we either fund such programmes or when we set this up, that we also see what can be improved, what can be developed, and also what goes well. So, thank you very much and I hope that you also will benefit from this experience of having done this focus group and maybe in the future whenever you join a programme again, that some of these things are actually implemented. And, so if you still have any questions for me or if you have anything you would like to ask, feel free to send me an email about it. What will happen now is that I will transcribe the focus group and I will use it as part of my research.

I am studying various of these kind of programmes, so this focus group will be analysed together with other programmes that have been carried out as well. So again, thank you very much for making time voluntarily available. I am very grateful for it and I am really glad that I have met all four of you and I really hope to one day see you somewhere in the future again.
FG3: Thank you so much.
FG4: Yes, thank you.
FG3: Thank you.
FG1: Thank you very much.
FG3: Good luck with your research.
FG1: Yes.
FG4: All the best.
FG1: Good luck.
FG2: Yes, the same.
RJ: Thank you.

XI.2. Focus Group BIP B

Participants: 4 (FG5, FG6, FG7, FG8)
Date: Thursday, 16 May 2024
Time: 15:00 till 17:00 CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 1h42m

Note: [FG7] arrived 12 minutes late, and [FG6] first joined with audio only due to travelling but was able to switch to video with better audio after 50 minutes.

Start record
RJ: Yes, it is recording. Great. One of the first thing that I would like to start with is to express my gratitude to all three of you who are here today because we have already talked a bit about it during our week in [city of the host university of BIP B], that I am doing research on the internationalisation of higher education, so the internationalisation of universities. And specifically, I am studying Blended Intensive Programmes such as the week that you have been in [city of the host university of BIP B]. Blended Intensive Programmes are mobility programmes that combine an online, online component, such as the three hours online sessions that you had, and then a short mobility onsite. And you might be wondering, but this is not anything new, right? But actually, this is a new type of mobility under Erasmus, that just has been introduced in 2021. So, you are one of the first "BIP-ers" doing this! And I think it is very important that we don't only discuss with students, with teachers and organisers about this programme, but that we also gain an insight into participants' experiences on how we can improve these programmes and make them even better. So, I couldn't do my research without you, so I am very thankful that you are here today. Before we start, do you have any questions about my research?

[Two participants nodding no, [FG6] has the camera switched off]

RJ: No, I see you both nodding no. So, I guess that is good. Okay, so as I have said, I am recording this session. I am recording this session so I can transcribe the data, meaning that after this session I will type out everything that we have been saying. So, I can do further analysis on it. One very important thing to know for you is that all the data will be anonymised, so I will not use your name in your in the data, I will use code names, and any other references that are being said will be taken out. Also, this focus group is part of a larger research, so I am doing this with several BIPs, so this will also increase the level of anonymity. So, I hope that you can just be open in your experiences, because for me it is very good to understand what the positive things, but also what the negative things were as well. And I also trust that you all remain the confidentiality of your partner colleagues who are here today as well. Do you have any questions about this? About the recording or the data?
[Two participants nodding no, [FG6] has the camera switched off]
RJ: Nodding again, perfect. So, I am very clear about that. So, I don't know if you ever already participated in a focus group. Did one of you ever did?
FG5: No, this was my first experience, yeah.
FG8: Yes, for me also.

RJ: Okay, so let's make it a good experience then hopefully. Today we will be having like around two hours, I will keep the maximum of two hours. And the idea is to have an interactive focus group, so I will

not be only asking you questions, but I will also ask you to carry out some exercises which I hope stimulates the discussion a bit amongst you. One thing to clarify is that I will be the moderator of this session, so I will not be actively discussing amongst you, but I hope that you will be discussing together about what is going on and I am just here to keep track of time and to make sure that the questions that I would like are being answered as well. And we will first start with a little introduction of yourself again, even though you already know each other, then I will show you the pictures that you have sent. Then we will do a little interactive exercise on your motivations for joining the programme and whether you have any concerns, then we will go a bit more deeper into the topic and we will end by a discussion round. Does that sound okay to all of you?
FG8: Yes.
RJ: Perfect. Okay, so if you have any questions, you can just let me know. Whenever you can interrupt me, there are no rules for this session except for that all opinions are valued whatever these opinions might be. Okay? Good.

RJ: So, to start, I have already introduced myself and I of course know you all a little bit, but would you mind just quickly introducing yourself again and also mentioning what you are doing right now and what your study background is? Whoever wants to go first!

FG5: Yeah. Okay, I can start. So, should I mention my name or is it easier for you without it?
RJ: You can mention your names and in the end I will change all the names into classified names, so I will do a make-up name for everyone.
FG5: Yeah, okay, yes. Okay, so my name is [FG5] or [FG5] as you prefer. I am a student from [FG5's country of the home university]. My background is in sociology and now I am doing two masters, but two separate ones. They are not like double degree; one is in still in the sociology and the second one is in public administration. And for my work, what I do, I work in a nonprofit private research organisation which researches al lot of, like it is in social sciences, 99% of the time, and what you research mostly are sustainability questions, rural areas development and some circular economy questions as well. So, that is it shortly.
RJ: Hmm-mmm. Thank you.
FG8: And as for me, my name is [FG8]. I am from [country], and I am currently studying in [FG8's home university] in [FG8's country of the home university]. And it is my first degree, I am doing a bachelor's degree, so I don't have any background, but after my first degree, I will have the opportunity and I will continue studying maybe continue studying in economic field or in law, I will choose. And that is it, that is for me, that is it. And I am just 18 years old, so I haven't had a big opportunity to study something earlier.
FG5: If I may ask you, you mentioned law, but isn't it hard for you to to switch between these two subjects? No?
FG8: No, it is not.
FG5: Okay.
FG8: No, it is not. I just for example, I choose for international law and I go to these courses and let's say that I choose like a double degree, yeah.

FG5: Ah, okay.

RJ: Yes. Thank you. [FG6], would you also like to join or not?
FG6: Can you understand this?
RJ: It is a bit windy, but I can kind of hear you.
FG6: So, my name is [FG6]. [Inaudible] I am a student at [FG6's home university], it is also in my

hometown. [Inaudible] That is why I chose and this one of the other ones and so, for my future, I will look over in the economy still as well or is there still something regarding business or just micro or macro economy. [Inaudible] I no longer work at the moment, I have some work to do from the first place summers of mostly, and at the moment I was no longer able to work with the schedule that I have in the university for this semester. That is about it.
RJ: Okay, thank you, [FG6], very much. So, I think I could hear a little bit of it but thank you so much. I know that you are almost home. I also just received a message from [FG7] that [they] would be joining us soon as well, so let's see.

RJ: So, one of the things that I had asked you in advance to share a little image with me that represents your experience. And you might be wondering, okay, why is she asking this from us? But the thing is, the BIP has been now a couple of weeks ago and I thought it is a good thing to see what you have chosen and to discuss a bit of memories again. So, I will be sharing my screen with the pictures, I made a picture collage. Please don't mind my editing skills because I am not good enough. And then I would like to ask you if you could, if you could tell me why you chose this picture and the memory of it. So, let me share my screen. Okay, so you see my screen right now?



FG5: Yeah.
FG8: Yes.
RJ: Okay, perfect. So here at the left corner, I think we have an image of the workshop that we did. And then there are three pictures on the final, well, on the Thursday evening social night. And I think the other picture at the right in the corner is also taken there with all the name tags. So, would you mind starting to say which picture you chose and why you chose this picture?
FG8: I can start from my picture. I send you the picture of us holding this our name tags, let's say, because for me it was my first experience when there were lots of people from different nations and we

had a really good connection with each other, and while we took this photo, we were all laughing and having fun, let's say, and it was our last day and I will remember this day, maybe for my whole life. It was great.
FG5: Yeah, maybe I can continue. Mine is the one with the kinda alien head. It was very easy for me to choose the picture but it was very hard for me to send it on time, I am sorry, but yeah, I knew right away when you asked about the picture, I knew that this represents my whole trip because we had those workshops, plus the green colour, plus the curiosity how this became as something on our this like blanket. Because actually my group didn't even draw it, it was someone else. It was one of the Nigerian guys, he just came, saw what we did there and he just he just draws this. And the idea is that I think the text it is, you can interpret it in in different ways. It can be a positive and negative, positive from like humans what have you done here? Like all of us have, have, came together and made, I don't know some idea, we put together some ideas and created some story and shared experiences. Plus, it can be negative because we spoke a lot about the impact on the nature and etcetera. So, I think it is just that picture is, yeah, represents my whole experience very well.
RJ: Yes. [FG7], I see that you have also joined us now, are you here?
FG7: Yeah. Yes, I am here.
RJ: Yeah, great. Would you mind turning? Yes, we.
FG7: Do you see me now?
RJ: Yes, we can see you.
FG7: Okay.
RJ: Thank you so much. So, I will just quickly fill you in on what happened, so that you are also aware of it. We started with just a quick little introduction round again, but as you know each other, I think it is fine if you just quickly introduce yourself and perhaps can say your study background. And then I have showed the picture collage, which you can see on the shared screen right now. And if you could perhaps say which picture you have chosen and give your reasons for why and what this picture represents for you?
FG7: Okay, my name is [FG7], I am a student, master's degree in auditing expertise and accounting. And the pictures that I choose is the picture in the centre, that is a picture with all of us, and it shows a picture with us when we were very happy, because it was a group party. I don't know if I remember right, yes, on Thursday we have a party with all of you guys, and was very nice because also we have to eat a lot of stuff and try a lot of [country of the host university] stuff, but with also funny with I learned some dances and we listened music, was very, very fun. I have to tell more about another picture or this one it is okay?

RJ: No, this one is okay, is okay. So, the idea of the focus group is that we will do certain exercises in which you, like, discuss the experience with each other and I will just be here to moderate the sessions and to see if everything goes alright. So, thank you very much for your input as well. I think, in my opinion, how I interpret this is that we can see the pictures like the social aspect of it, with the Thursday evening night, and then also the circular economy and the impact of the programme that you followed in itself. Do you see it like this as well?
FG7: Could you please repeat because I didn't hear you very well because you it sounds a little bit weird when your talk, I don't hear very well.
RJ: Do the others hear me well? Just to be sure.
[Two participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yeah?
FG5: I do, I can.
RJ: Okay, okay. So, I hope that you can hear me well, [FG7]. I was saying that for me, how I interpreted these pictures is that you have these social pictures of the social Thursday evening, that evening, so the

group being together, and then also there is one picture that really represents as well the Blended Intensive Programme on circular economy, the topic in specific. With the aliens saying “humans, what have you done?” Which was really I think the message during the workshop that you were being given on Tuesday. And then I was asking whether you saw this the same as well.
FG7: I totally agree with you because probably we remember the whole experience and after that when we want to go deeper, we talk about the team, and I don't know, about the circular economy. I think after this experience I learned a lot of things about it, and I was, I will have, and I have more pay attention to some stuff. Like I don't know about bottles of water, about everything and all the plastic stuff because I saw how important is to recycle and to collect them in a certain way. And this experience made me to do some changes in my behaviour.
RJ: [FG5], I saw you clapping. Yes.
FG5: I am so happy. Yes, I am so happy to hear that because I remember some people didn't understand at all. And it, the circular economy, and it was like it was good to raise awareness and to go to those field trips, but at some point, I remembered the question like how is this, like we were in that water treatment plant, and someone said, how is this circular economy? And I said, but the thing is, you know, because I think somehow in [FG5’s country of the home university], for example, we are very small, very green, these are basic questions, no? Like we, we know, like I don't want to like be rude or something, but this is just basic question for us and another question which comes from the workshops regarding the compost. I don't know how is it, is it in English as well compost? Yeah. Regarding the compost, some people, I don't know from Italy if I remember correctly, they just don't understand how it happens. Like they ask like do you add some like chemicals to it? No, it is just, just throw it out in the yard and it happens, yeah. So, I am very, very happy that you have paid more attention to the circular economy principles and practices in daily life.
RJ: And [FG8], what do you think?
FG8: I totally agree, because as for my experience, I, before coming on this BIP to [country of the host university], I have never come, come up with such circular economy, and after we had some online courses about circular economy for example in Italy. And also it was yeah, then it was really interested, and it raised my awareness and now I am also sorting the plastic, you know, like all the rubbish that I have, and I had a nice experience and we had, you know, I liked it.
FG5: Yeah, one more thing I wanted to add about the social aspect is that, you know, circular economy is, I think based on social things anyway, because they can't, economy is not something which grows in the yard, you know, people are the ones who created. So yeah, I think so. I just hope my picture doesn't stand out because even if it doesn't include humans, maybe just a painted alien, I think it is still very social, if I may call it like that.
RJ: Yes, very well. So, thank you so much. This was just a little quick introduction of showing the pictures of what you have all sent to me.

RJ: One of the other things that I would be very interested in is what your motivations and objectives and reasons were for joining this programme. And the idea of how to do this is that I will create a little online whiteboard in which you can add like sticky notes. I don't know if you have ever heard of the platform Flinga?
[All participants nodding no]

RJ: Okay, I will add a link in the chat.
FG7: I don’t know.
RJ: It is a Finnish platform, so it is of course normal that you haven't heard of it yet. I put a link in the chat and then I will click on it myself and I will share my screen again to see how…Yeah. Okay. So, if you click

on the link, you should be seeing this. Do you see a whiteboard with written what were your motivation, objectives and reasons for joining the BIP?
FG5: Yeah, I do.
RJ: And [FG8], [FG7], does it work for you as well?
FG7: Yes, I think so.
RJ: Yeah.
FG8: Yes, it does.
RJ: Okay, great. Then the idea is that you can select here in the corner any colour that you want. I mean, you can do your favourite colour or whatever colour you feel like using. Then you can choose if you want to do a square, circle, person, title or whatsoever. So, I will do a circle and then here you can just put your message, whatever it is. So, test. And then you can also move it around wherever you want. So, the idea is that I will now give you just a little bit of time and that you enter or put in different motivations or reasons what it was for you to join. It can be whatever comes into your mind really. And [FG6], if you can't access the website, you can also put it in the chat and then I can add it for you to the platform.
[The participants spend three minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]
RJ: Yeah, I will add it to the whiteboard for you, [FG6]. Okay, I will add your things to the whiteboard, [FG6]. Thank you for your message.

RJ: Okay, I see the board is filling itself up very quickly. Does anyone need more time to add something?
[All participants nodding no]

Students' motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP
BIP B
New experience
new knowledge
self-improvement
Raise awareness
meeting new people
new contacts
learning new things
to have fun)
to rest
to be aware
to explore circular economy
Visiting new places
[a local food product]
create bonds with foreigners
Practice my Enghlish
Teamwork and collaboration
Knowledge
Teamwork
To be more self-aware
lifelong friendships
CV record
[a local food product]

find out more about [country of the host university of BIP B]
Explore a new country

RJ: Okay, I see you all nodding. I am just putting them a bit out of each other so we can read them. Okay, would anyone like to start discussing a few that have been added?
FG7: I can start, is not a problem.
RJ: Yeah, go ahead.
FG7: I choose my, my favourite colour, my favourite colour is green and I write the circles. The green circles. The things that I was written was about meeting new people, that is one of the motivations that I want to this, the reason I want to come in this type of project. Learning new things, of course, learning about everything is I think it is a plus no matter what. And visiting new places because I wasn't in [country of the host university], in [country of the host university] before and also in that region. For practice my English skills for sure, because here in [FG7's country of the home university] I don't study in English, I study in [FG7's country of the home university national language]. And for teamwork because if you work in team, you meet also new people, you make contacts and I also keep in time keep in touch with some people that I met in the BIP. And also, for having fun, I didn't write it, but I have, I have seen here.
FG8: I wrote it, by the way, to have fun. My colour is blue because it is one of my favourite colours and it is in circle. To have fun, as I saw, as I tell you before. Raise awareness, we talked about that. Creates bonds with foreigners it was one of the points for me to go on this BIP because my coordinator told me that there will be lots of people from different countries like Latvia, Romania, Italy and I was so looking forward for meeting there and I didn't regret at all. And find out more about [country of the host university] because for the whole life I wanted to go there, and before my 18th birthday I went there, and I was so, so grateful to be and to have fun, and just to raise my awareness into and self-improvement. Of course, new experience and to explore circle economy.
FG5: Then I will continue. I chose purple, is that purple? Yeah. But I tried different shapes, but of course I had to use the circle one the most. Yeah, I remember when I applied, I applied because of the topic. It was very important for me because in my job we now had the one project for three years, which is about circular economy and I just wanted to gain new knowledge, it was the main reason. And to be aware of course because when I opened the, the, application form there was, I think the script of the programme and the participating countries and those are the countries with mostly with whom we don't have, for example, [country of the host university], we don't have any projects in, in, in, in my job with them, and so I just wanted to be aware what are the main problems? What is sustainability and circularity in [country of the host university]? So, I just wanted to be updated on those questions because you can read about things on newspapers or on the Internet, but, but I think it is better to see by yourself and to ask like locals and that. And then of course for the new contacts, new friendships, and of course it looks also good on your as a record in your CV. And plus, another aspect, of course, the food, I love [country of the host university] cuisine. And yeah, I also really wanted to rest because I knew that I am gonna be somewhere in the middle of nowhere because [city of the host university of BIP B] is like a normal city compared to [FG5's country of the home university]. In cities, but I knew that I am gonna live in some family which lives outside from the, and there is no normal Internet, so I just wanted to be there and rest, yeah.
RJ: Yes, thank you very much. And then [FG6], I don't know if you are able to speak for yourself or would you like me to call it out?
FG6: If you can understand the talk, then I will talk about them.
RJ: I think we can hear you enough. It is not too windy.
FG6: First thing, first because. [Inaudible]. Yeah, teamwork. So, then we got to work together so much and given our skills so [Inaudible].

RJ: [FG6], I am very sorry, but it is, it is very windy around you, so I can't hear you very well. So, if yeah, thank you. If it is okay, I just call, call them out, and then you can discuss it afterwards further, whenever you are ready to join, but it is good that they are in there. So, [FG6] is saying that [they] will arrive home in like five to ten minutes, so that is perfect for joining then one of the things was as well, the thing [FG6] wrote was team work and collaboration, explore new country, knowledge, to be more self-aware, lifelong friendship, and [country of the host university national language]. Last but not least, [country of the host university] food. So, I added yours [FG6] in Orange. I hope that you like the colour orange. So, now I think that some of the things that you have mentioned are, are, overlapping with each other as well and also some differences. And even though everybody of course has their own motivations and reasons for joining, I would like to invite you if you could all move around a little bit the different notes that you have added into matter of importance. So, for example, you don't have to make a straight line for most important to least important, but perhaps you can put a reason that are a bit more important that you discussed together to the left and a little bit less to the right. And of course, you don't have to come to the consensus, you can also leave things in the middle, but it would be great for me if you could start discussing a bit what was like the most important and group those a little bit together more to the left side of the whiteboard, if that is okay.
FG5: This is very hard.
RJ: I understand. There is, there is literally no right or wrong, but please just discuss together if.
FG7: We have to put just ours that we read, we have written or just all the stuff?
RJ: You can also add others as well because [FG6] is not available right now either, so that is why you also need to discuss, because if you put one totally at the right, which for somebody else is important, then it might be.
FG5: If I may interrupt, once again the most important ones on the left side? Yeah.
RJ: Yes.
FG5: Why mine stands out?
[Participants laughing]
RJ: Do you need some more time or does it like this look good to you?
FG8: I think that is it.
RJ: So, what, according to you, do you think is the most, one of the most important reasons?
FG7: For me, it is meeting new people, learning new new things, and teamwork, that was the, was the mains for me.
FG8: As for me is learning new things, raise awareness, and new experiences like the synonym to this learning new things. So, I would choose self-improvement.
FG5: I feel horrible now **[laughing],** but I have to admit that I think it was the CV record for me, the most important thing. I wouldn't even say that it was for me personally, but maybe more for the place where I work. Yeah.

RJ: Thank you very much. I know it is very hard to see which which things are the most important because there are of course several reasons, but like this we have created a little bit together. Now we know your motivations, I am also wondering whether you have had any hesitations or concerns, or whether there were any obstacles for you before joining the programme? So, I would like to do the same but then for this. So, whether you have any hesitations or concerns when applying to the programme? And I will send you the link again. And [FG6], feel free to add it to the chat, so then I can add it. So. please go ahead and fill up the whiteboards if you like.
[The participants spend four minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]
RJ: Okay, will you need some little more time or is it?
FG5: One minute could be great.
RJ: Yeah, sure, just let me know.

[The participants take two more minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]
FG5: Yeah, I am done.
RJ: Is it okay for everyone else as well?
[All participants nodding yes]

Students' hesitations and concerns when applying to the BIP
BIP B
how to get to [city of the host university]
fear that i don t speak [the language spoken in the country of the host university]
will I stand out?
will I get along with others?
price = perfomance
the fear of unknown
if I have fun
new country
very small city with poor connections to larger one
little knowledge regarding [country of the host university]
if I ll integrate into the group
where to get good coffee in the afternoon
meeting my professor :D
language skills
will the host family be great?
how to get heard
is it "my thing"?
how to wake up at 7
where will i wash my clothes
what about other [people from their home university]
documents
safe person

RJ: Good. So again, we will, we see several things, does anyone of you would like to discuss, some of them?
FG7: I will also start it. Okay. The hesitations, that I will have fun with the people, if I will integrate to the group is the first one. And fear that I don't speak [country of the host university national language] at all, I just know some words and I think this was one of my biggest fears when I arrived in [country of the host university]. Because to be honest, I don't think I have hesitations or concerns about the stuff that I will learn because I can cooperate and try to know more things and then just these three, this was the main three hesitations.
RJ: Thank you. Thank you, [FG7]. I also see that somebody else also wrote language skills as well.
FG5: Yeah, I did because, I think I am smarter in [FG5's country of the home university]. Yeah, I, I think I am. Yeah, I know more. So, so I would just say that I thought about, I never thought about the language barrier regarding [country of the host university national language], but more regarding English.
FG8: And as for me, to continue, how to get to [city of the host university of BIP B]? It was such a disaster for me because this is such a small city and I was on the road for more than 30 hours and I was really tired after going by bus and all the trains. I was really worried that I won't be on time or something will

happen. Someone will rob me or, you know, this is some overthinking and that is it. And also, is it my thing? I thought also about circular economy because I have never participated in it, and now I know that I am interested in it, maybe I will continue studying it. Also, will I get along with others? Is also one of the most important topics. And will the host family be great? I have been staying in a host family for six days, turned they were nice, but you know, when you are just coming to a new country where you never have been and to a family where you are not, you are not sure how it will be and who are they, but anyway, I, I am grateful for them to host me and I enjoyed it.

FG5: Yeah, I added a few more. Sorry, but I have one more to add. I will add one and then I will share. So, I have a lot of sorry, but yeah from the beginning I thought like will this be price performance? Because I had to come from [FG5's country of the home university] and it is pretty expensive and I didn't knew at the last moment we were be staying in the host family, so I don't mind paying for my own pocket, but when I first saw the agenda, I was a bit like, yeah curious, should I even go? Because I thought it is mostly it will be just something…if it is few workshops are to raise awareness that maybe I already know this. So, should I go? Then another point is will I stand out in a way that…I am not much more older than others but I am a bit. So it is, it is a little age gap and it is always, yeah, that is why sometimes I don't want to participate in some, some places, in some events, because I always need…I added like safe person here, I need at least one person which is like I can call them like my friend, my safe person for the week. So otherwise, I just cannot participate as myself just because I am very, I don't know, not like lonely, but something like that. And then also how to get heard? Because when I have my strong opinion, I need to share it. And then also I was scared to meet my professor of macroeconomics because I, two weeks before [country of the host university] I was in, I was in Spain for, yeah, for a bit more than a week, and so I skipped a couple of lectures and I was scared to meet her there. And then also I have been in [country of the host university] before so I already in my mind had a question where to get good coffee in the afternoon because it is very important for me to, to drink my coffee in the afternoon. And then and speaking about agenda, all of the like workshops and courses lectures started very early, like at 8-9, what was the time? I am not a morning person and so I am very happy that I lived in the host family because, you know, when someone is already up, you can hear some noises, you can wake up because otherwise I will sleep until 10. Then another question, where will I wash my clothes? Because I came straight from Spain, so all my clothes were dirty on the first day and needed to wash them somewhere. And I was a bit worried about meeting other [students from FG5's country of the home university] because I don't know them, like and I knew that all of them are coming because the professor gave me the information that all of them know each other because they are from the same course. And I was like oh, so they are five [FG5's country of the home university], and then I think they were five and I am the sixth one, but I don't know them, they get along with each other and should I somehow join them or not? And I had those questions. And then about the documents, oh yeah, I would say, how to, like who will give them to me? How many documents do I need to prepare before going to and afterwards and all those questions. That is it.

RJ: Thank you very much. Does anyone have anything to add about this?

[All participants nodding no]

RJ: No, I see you nodding your heads. Okay. Thank you so much for, for sharing your motivations, but also your hesitations as well, which is very important to know.

RJ: I will get a little bit deeper into all of this during the final discussion round where I will ask you some more questions about it, but for now I think it is good to leave it here. So, I will stop sharing my screen and you can close the Flinga boards as well. In the meantime, [FG6], have you joined as well from your laptop? Yes! We don't hear you. [FG6], I suggest you try to fix it in the meantime, and in the meantime, I would like to get to you to do another kind of exercise. In this round, I would like to, to propose a specific theme or topic, if you like, and then I would like to ask you to add an emoticon in the chat about how you feel about this. So, I will say a certain topic and then I will count down from three to one, and then I

will ask you all at the same time to put in the emoticon that you feel as a reaction to this and then also to explain why you chose this. Perhaps it sounds a bit abstract at first, but I am sure that once we started that you get the hang of it. Does this sound okay to you? Do you understand what I mean?
[All participants nodding yes]
FG8: Yes.
RJ: Yes, I see everyone nodding. Good. Okay, so the first one, let me check, okay, the first one that I would like to ask you about and I will put in the chat, is about the programme or the schedule. So, if you could all put like an emoticon or whatever ready for it. Okay, so everyone put an emoticon, would you mind explaining why you chose this one?

Programme/schedule			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			

FG8: But I choose this the thick because I approved the time schedule and it suits me. And for me, even though I woke up at 6:00 AM every morning and but it didn't bother me. So yeah.
FG6: I am not sure if you can hear me now?
FG7: I choose that person that…
RJ: Yes, we can hear you too, yes.
FG6: Yes. Okay, you can go, [FG7].
FG7: I chose the emoji that the person that is thinking about something, it is because some days were so full of activities and other days I think we have just like to match with time.
FG6: I chose this emoji because the schedule was pretty nice, I believe for a small city especially. We had plenty of activities, we had the wastewater treatment plant to visit as well and the other was [a local plastic recycling company], I believe it was called. So, the overall schedule was pretty nice.
[RJ sneezes]
FG5: Bless you!
FG8: Bless you.
RJ: Thank you!
FG5: Yes. So, I choose, yeah, I choose the paper clip because it is very important always to, to, receive the all the agenda and tips and tricks and all those documents. But I was thinking of myself like they look very, very well prepared and etcetera, but then we received, I think, three drafts, and I thought to myself, I just hope that no one prints this out. Your mic is off.
RJ: Thank you very much. That was because of my sneeze, luckily, I muted myself on time to spare you the sound of it. And as I said, yes thank you very much.
RJ: So, about the circular economy, so that is also what is my next one, and that would be about the content of the course. So, I will put it in the chat and then you can react again. Okay, so all are again in the chat. Who would like to start?

Content of the course			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			

FG8: I can start because output is the 100 because I like the schedule, the schedule and the course, the material, and the, they were 100% like appropriate and useful. And maybe, oh no, not all, one second, I can, can I choose another one?
RJ: Yeah, sure. Yes, yes, go ahead.
FG8: Can I say something personal like about the course? I didn't really like the course of [one of the guest lecturers] where he was talking for maybe 70% of the time about beer. Maybe it was like, like easier for us to understand, but he wasn't really involved with us and he wasn't trying to get along with us. And maybe this course wasn't, wasn't, really appropriate and it was most of it, it was about food and the production. As for me it wasn't really beneficial.
RJ: In that, do you mean the contents of what was said about this or how it was presented the content?
FG8: Yeah, the content. Yeah.
RJ: And what do the others think about this? If I may ask.
FG5: I liked it, I liked the course. I don't know. Yeah, but yes.
FG6: I was really surprised, honestly, I didn't think that we will learn so many new things, especially from the visit personally, I believe I have learned so much from the wastewater treatment plant in there, so the was [a local plastic recycling company] visit too, and there was so much information even from the little game that we played the climate risk thing that we did, I believe there was so much, just so much knowledge.
FG5: I will continue on my emoji, so I choose a party, but I just wanted to express like celebration because this price performance was real because the content of the course. I don't know how is it in English, it came to my expectations, it no, how to say it correct?
RJ: It met your expectations?
FG5: Yes, it met my expectations. Yes, thank you.
FG7: I also was very excited about the content of the courses. I learned a lot of new things, and that is why I have put that big smile with the white teeth.
RJ: Yes, thank you. So overall, overall, what I am hearing that the content of the course was up to your expectations or maybe beyond, except for one lecture on beer...
FG5: Can I mention, I just remembered one course stood out from my perspective, it was from [I4, visiting teacher, BIP B] about electric vehicles. I wasn't very satisfied, to be honest, because I think it was…[They] also said it is about raising awareness, but the name, which was on the first agenda, was different from what we had on the presentation, because, I think on the agenda it was about policies and then our workshop was a bit different. And I think, it was just, how to you say, I think it was the first workshop we we got first, we didn't know a lot about others from the group. So, you don't know how deep, how deep you can go in this because you don't know in which fields others are specified. So, some introduction to each other to, to, to get used to each other would be better, yeah.
RJ: Yes. Thank you very much. That actually brings me to one of the other points, and that is the social aspect of the course, and in this I would also like to ask you that afterwards, if you could perhaps elaborate a bit on how you felt about the number of occasions or activities that there were to get to know the other students and participants as well.
[Participants take one minute to choose their emoticon]

Social aspact			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**

RJ: Thank you, [FG8]. Okay, so who would like to start again?

FG8: I can start from my GIF. I chose it because I got along with almost all of the people and they, they are such, such a nice persons. And you know, as well as let's say for the lecturers, they were pretty nice and when I had some questions they tried to like to explain me more or getting me into the topic and they try to do is as much as possible. And as for the friends that I have now, yeah, all my expectations are fully like fully completed.

FG5: Yeah, I will continue. So, I choose this upside-down emoji because it somehow represents my, that I was a bit confused because [FG5's nationality] are normally are very introvert, we don't normally speak to others, we don't know how to do small talk, and etcetera. We like our self-company, and so I felt a bit, yeah, as I came alone and I didn't knew any people, I would prefer to have like a small introduction or something. And also, the aspect that not everyone came on the first day, and on different times. So, I would start the whole week with some introduction to each other or something like that.

RJ: Sorry [FG6], I can't hear you.

FG6: Can you hear me now

RJ: Yes, yes.

FG6: Perfect. I have chosen the fist bump one as I believe we had plenty of activities to get to know each other. So, the project itself at the end, which we presented, and let everything that we have done in a way was an opportunity for us to get to know each other for friendships and just meet, meet new people as well. And overall, I believe it was pretty nice and we have come out of this with new friendships and new people that we know.

FG7: And I choose the one that blinks an eye because I think it was the social part was one of the best parts of this project. And because we know each other, I am a very friendly person and I try to speak with everyone and I think it was one of the best parts, the social.

RJ: Good. Thank you. And one of the questions I have about this as well was about the group work, whether you think that there was enough room for interaction and to do group work together as well? Would anyone like to comment on that? I see you all nodding.

FG5: I think the, I think the group work was fantastic because it, we had mixed teams, you know, in in one workshop you work with five, six people, and on the other one that is also switched upside down. So, it was very interesting experience.

RJ: Okay.

FG7: I, I.

RJ: Yes, go on.

FG7: I totally agree, because we were just, we must talk with each other and because we were in different teams, we don't do like small groups with the person from our country and we just we must talk with everyone.

RJ: Well, thank you. Then for this round, I just have one more. So, the last one that you can put in the chat. Of course, if you want to use emoticons later, you can go on, and that is about the online part. So, you had those three hours online sessions.

Online part

BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			

RJ: So please, if anyone can go ahead and explain the emoticon? And I see a little bit of different emoticons than before so perhaps maybe a little bit more into depth about your experience of this part.
FG8: As for me, I put it in the more Jesus with his mouth shut, let's say because I haven't, when I participating in it, it wasn't really interesting and the lecturer had a really bad English. And there was nothing really like important, because she, for example, she was talking about, for example lecturer from [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], [they had] so many struggles, for example, to talk about the topics and I found it fun, but I can't tell anyone about that. You know, I can't, really. How to say that? I don't want anyone to get offended. Let's say that. That is why I chose that emoji.
[Participants laughing and nodding yes]
RJ: And I saw the others laughing a bit and nodding a bit of approval with you. Does anyone else would like to add on this and explain their experience? [FG6]?
FG6: I believe they could have been a bit more interactive in a way most of those classes were just the teacher barely speaking in English, something for like an hour or two hours and so on. If they were a bit more interactive, maybe even the presentations themselves could have been made better and could have had like better templates, or at least a picture there and there, and so on. I believe that would have made all those classes more entertaining for us.
FG7: Totally agree.
FG8: For example, I am sorry for interrupting, or I just want to add, for example, you did, they can could just ask us about how it is going in our countries or just some small talk, let's say, or some jokes. But there was none of it. So.
RJ: Thank you. [FG7], you wanted to say something as well, I believe?
FG7: Ah yes, I put an upside-down face because I was a little bit confused on the online courses because it was a little bit boring because we don't interrupt. And I it was, I expected that to meet each other in online, maybe just some things about us and after we meet in person it will be more easier. Because I feel like I just meet the people in the physics in physic way, not online, that was like we were just saw a, I don't know, a TV show or something, with two, three professors.
RJ: Thank you. And [FG5]?
FG5: So, I choose this loudly crying because first of all, because I felt guilty because I had lectures at the same time. So, I attended only the first one and then I had to watch the recorded information. I think the second one wasn't even recorded yet, yeah it was something like that, but the one in which I was with the [one of the FORTHEM partner universities], professor, it was, that was iconic, if I may call it like that, because [they], after each sentence, [they] said something like, “is it clear? Yes it is”. “Do you understand? Yes, you understand”. And like [they] didn't waited for the response. But just like “is it clear? Yes, it is. Let's move along”. But one thing I really liked about [them], I think [they were] the only one with who spoke about fisheries and aquaculture, but the thing is that it was very, very deep knowledge, it was like physics and like very deep research done, but then I compared to what we had in [city of the host university of BIP B], it was very diverse.
RJ: And if I may ask you, I have actually two further questions about this that I was wondering about. So, I have also watched and rewatched the recordings of these session, and one of the things was that I was wondering whether you…okay, so from [FG5], I know that you have attended one, from the other ones I am wondering if you attended all three sessions? And if not, if you watched the recording? And my other question is that when I watch the recording of one of the sessions, there were a lot of videos used during

the online session, but I did not have any sounds and I am not sure if I was the only one or if the sound wasn't working during that session.
FG7: Well, I think we asked each other about this and we all have the conclusion that we didn't hear nothing, all of us.
[Participants laughing]
RJ: And nobody said something about it to the teacher or?
[Participants laughing]
FG7: Nobody.
FG8: I don't remember, but it seems to me that nobody has said.
RJ: Thank you for the clarification because I was just wondering if this was me or if this was really happening, so that is good for me to know. And then [FG6], [FG7], and [FG8], did you watch all three sessions or not?
FG8: As far as I remember, yes, I attend three.
FG7: Yeah, me too.
FG6: Same, yeah.

RJ: Okay, okay. So, thank you very much for contributing all your smileys. I know I have already been taking a bit of your time, but we just have like around half an hour left in which I would like to ask you a bit more specific discussion questions and please feel free to just throw out your opinion to whatever I am asking and also to react upon each other as well. And one of the things is that I would like to know actually what you think yourselves, you have learned from this Blended Intensive Programme in [city of the host university of BIP B]?
FG6: Personally, for me, I have a semester long project that I have to work on regarding circular economy, more or less, and there has been plenty of information, especially regarding the wastewater treatment plant, which helped me enormously in my project and in my research because at the moment we have to work especially like my part for example is regarding those wastewater treatment plants and a lot of that information like the process itself, how the water, from where the water comes and where it goes and so on. That has helped me tremendously with my project at the moment.
RJ: Please feel free to just add whatever you want. Even if you have learned nothing, that is okay too.
FG7: Like I said in the first like I learned a lot of things about circular economy. It didn't help me, I don't know if my subjects in school, in university, but also help me for my behavior and for what I do in general. What I have recycle, how I pay more attention with some stuff.
FG8: As for me, as I told you before that it raised my awareness, especially the field trips that we had, because it is in a practical view, it is easier to, to get the info. And when you see, for example, when we were in the [a local plastic recycling company] , when we saw how it produces recycling and all the stuff, and I remember all of this thing, and for and now I am using it, and for example when I am, I don't know, just remembering that I have been there and I need to, for example, search the plastic bottles. Or when I just came after this BIP, I told my parents about the fact that we need we need to solve the rubbish, especially in the plastic, because it doesn't recycle at all. And they were, okay, now you are such a clever [kid]. We will listen to you and that, so, yeah, I boost my knowledge.
FG5: Yeah, for me too, I also boosted some knowledge. Plus, some new things which I learned was the [guest lecturer] speaking about making beer and grains, and that because [FG5's country of the home university] drink a lot of beer, but we have never in my institution, for example, we have never researched it. Even if we research a lot of food and food chains, because we are not allowed to research alcohol and etcetera, so that was new knowledge, I really liked it. And another knowledge is that I understood that Europe, you still don't understand how important this is.
RJ: Thank you. Is there anyone who wants to add something else?
[All participants nodding no]

RJ: Okay, so feel, feel free to come back to it at any time if you wish.

RJ: One of the other questions that I have, is of course during this Blended Intensive Programme, as you know, students from different universities came together in [city of the host university of BIP B], what according to you, are the benefits of such programmes?
FG7: First of all, to visit new places because, to be honest, is the better way for us as students to go to another countries, to meet new people and to try to connect with them in one week, because it is different when you, I don't know, go somewhere for a month or when you go for a week and you have to collaborate. Another thing is that we learn a lot of, I don't know, new things, like the circular economy in the in this case. Maybe because we don't have, I don't know, I don't have classes when I study something like this. I just heard about it. I don't know, maybe when I was in my bachelor's degree, some stuff like, but also when I read it in on my own like the news. Another positive thing is that we exchange our, I don't know, Instagram pages or what social media we use the most, and we keep in touch, we stay in touch. And we tell each other about the other programmes that we heard about and ask, I don't know, questions to each other because it's different, we have different educational system and maybe it is better to…and it is nice to know what other students are doing.
FG8: And as in my opinion, it is, the benefits are the engagement between the students and the coordinators, or like lecturers, is that would you. And like new learning experience, for example, as for me, it was the first experience and I liked it. And the flexible and accessibility let's say. So, all our BIP is paid for us and we are allowed to buy for example the tickets and it will be all hosted by the Erasmus office, by the FORTHEM office and it is really beneficial for the student. And then maybe that the possibility for us to adapt to the new environment as to the new country.
FG6: Honestly, I agree with all of the others. To be honest, I really believe that as a student it is such an opportunity, such a great opportunity which you just have to take in a way. As…you don't…even if you go and visit a country by yourself, you won't have the other colleagues with you, you won't have 30 new people to meet, you won't have all those possible friendships which you can, which you can take advantage of in a way.
FG5: And from my experience, I think the biggest benefit was to hear others and to be heard because we all have these same problems regarding like linear economy, but let's say Italy, Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, France, we are on the same planet. It is just we are on different pages, but we still need to, to solve these same problems. So, to hear other experiences and and to hear other like policies which are applied on different countries, it was very beneficial. Plus, staying in the host family and going to the social dinners with the host family was another very, very beneficial thing for me, because it was just I, I had the best time with our host. And I saw that I am, I am her, in I don't know, 50 years or some because she was just amazing and yeah, that.

RJ: Thank you so much. So, here, just one other question, for some of the organisers of these programmes, of these activities, the reasons around organising this is also to develop intercultural competence among students or among participants. How do you understand this and how do you feel about this? Perhaps you need to think about it a little bit but just shout out whatever comes to your mind.
FG8: Can you repeat once more the question?
RJ: Yeah, sure. Thank you for asking. So, these programmes, Blended Intensive Programmes are sometimes also organised by universities or by faculties with the idea of developing intercultural competence among students. I don't know if you ever heard of the term or not? But if so, how do you understand this and how do you feel about this is actually happening or not during these programmes?
FG6: I believe it is happening to some extent, but maybe a week is not enough to learn about someone's culture and their background to know enough. But if it were like a semester long mobility, then it will

definitely be enough time in a way to learn about tradition, about what they do, what they eat, how do they behave and so on. But you know, like, it is really difficult to see and observe these things and also to understand them in a way.
FG5: Was the term competence or confidence?
RJ: Competence, intercultural competence.
FG5: Competence. Okay, so I would say that individually it grows this for you because you come with your baggage and you have to make those like social contacts with others, you have to participate in those workshops, you have to remember some things, you have to search for somethings, and yeah, I think it gains this, it grows this.
FG8: As for me, for my personal experience, I had enough time to, for example, to explore the [country of the host university] culture because I, for example, I went to the restaurants, I tried [the local cuisine] , but they were like nice. Let's say [FG5's national] cuisine is much better, I mean, of course. **[Laughing]** As for example, for other cultures, let's, let's say [FG5's country of the home university], I get to know that they are so silent and they are so, you know, convenient and private, and as for [nationality X] people, they are really nice and outgoing and they are always here to help, let's say. And for [nationality Y], I can't, I can't judge the nation, you know, there is the whole group of people that were, was there were nice persons and we get along with each other. There was no quarrels and we had fun just.
FG7: No, I totally agree with all. I think a week it is let's say like the trailer of a film, something like this. When we meet and we meet new people because in one week, you know, maybe the, when you know the first things about some cultures and you try to, okay my country is like this, in your country is like this. And I don't know, maybe one week is fun, but I don't know, maybe one month it would be much better or I don't know, two weeks or something like this, because when we were in that point that we, okay, we know each other, we have to go home.
RJ: Yes, thank you.

RJ: So actually, I mean we just spoke before we started the focus group a bit, but I know I think, [FG7], I know that you have participated in other BIPs, and I have recently seen you as well during the BIP in [FG7's home university]. [FG6], I have met you already earlier at another BIP as well. And I have just heard that [FG6] actually just comes back from a BIP as well. And [FG8], I will meet you soon, I think in two weeks already, in [one of the FORTHEM universities] at another BIP as well. And [FG5], you will be soon going after to [one of the FORTHEM universities] again to another BIP. So, you are all going to join another Blended Intensive Programme again, and I am just curious, why did you decide to join another Blended Intensive Programme?
FG8: As for me, my coordinator just told me that you have an opportunity to go there and it is a nice programme, so why don't you? And I thought, okay, let's go, it is [city of one of the FORTHEM universities]! And it's just a time, a nice time to be there. And why not? A new experience, new people, new topics. Yeah, just, or just to change the environment, why not?
FG5: Yeah. In my case, we have a tenured professor now in [FG5's country of the home university]. It is a new thing for us, and she offered me this and she said this programme is mostly for PhD students, but would you like to join? And I was like, yeah, I wanna go with PhD students, I wanna get to know them. And actually, yeah, I think, I more wanted to know those other PhD students and their struggles with dissertations than to explore [city of one of the FORTHEM universities] maybe. Plus, but plus another reason was that I made a very good contact with [one of their classmates during the BIP], and she is studying in [city of one of the FORTHEM universities] and it is a double shot like to to gain some knowledge, plus to to meet her.
RJ: Thank you. And [FG7] or [FG6], would you like to add something as well?
FG7: Yeah, for sure I want to apply to another BIP when I have the opportunity. I also saw the [city of one of the FORTHEM universities] BIP but I have some events in family and I can't join. But for sure I will want

to go to another BIPs because it was very, very, nice experience. And I really appreciate it that I meet you guys, for sure. And also, the group, the big group. And yeah, a lot of experiences I think will help me also to improve myself and to also help me to be a little more confident, to be more, maybe friendly or to be more adaptable because I think it is one of the best things to do to be a people person.
FG6: Same. After I am done with my, after the exams and all, I will be thinking about going for, at least thinking about going for a BIP, if not just to sign up and leave the country.
[Participants laughing]
RJ: Okay, thank you very much.
RJ: We are almost at the end of the session, but before ending up, I would like to know if, if you have any advice or tips for future organisers or teachers or future students? So, either future organisers of such Blended Intensive Programmes or future students who are going to join such a programme, if you would have any specific advice or tips of what to do in the future?
FG7: I think it could be, I don't know, I don't know, better or in my opinion, for example, to have more afternoon activities that were organised because when the main activities are finished, people don't know what to do and maybe if they organise it with I don't know, like a bowling night, or I don't know, something that you can do in that place, will be much fun also for us and also for the organisers because they know where, where we are and how we enjoy the whole experience. Maybe some afternoon activities will be better.
RJ: Thank you, [FG7].
FG5: Yeah, I have two things. One is that now for [city of one of the FORTHEM universities], for example, we don't have the offer to stay in the host families, and it is not, like I don't mind just staying in the Airbnb or some hotel, I can pay for it, we get that money for that, but I think it is, the huge benefit to live in the host family. So, you have a lot of inside information, you explore different culture, you adapt to each other, and I think this is a huge part. That was one of the greatest parts of this. So, I would, yeah, if possible to, to offer staying in the host families always on each of these BIPs, even if you have to give up on some money, I don't mind. And the other thing is…I forgot it…I totally forgot it, I had it in my mind, I will add a bit later.
RJ: Yes, just think about it and come back to it whenever
FG7: And, after she said about the host families, maybe the host family must be in the same town because one of the biggest problems to have, I don't know, afternoon activities was when we want to organise something, the majority told us they are in…near like I don't know 10 kilometers or something and you don't have connections and it would, it would be very difficult for them to, to, stay with us or to organise something.
FG5: Yeah, I remember the second thing, which is like community place, which [FG7] also mentioned, I would call it like a community place, I don't know, it, it can be just one room where you know it is only for the attendees of the programme because after each those field works and the all the classrooms were just closed and you are almost nowhere to go. Of course, you can sit outside or somewhere, but for example I wanted to, we had the social dinner one evening, but for example, I wanna ask you guys to join to grab a drink or eat some cheese, whatever, we don't have a place where to do that. Like, I can maybe ask my host family if we can ask these people to come over, but maybe not the, not the best thing to do with your, with staying with random people. So, I would, if you have one room which is open like 24/7 where people, where these students can organise themselves. So, after the courses, lectures, workshops.
FG7: Because we must be honest with after we finish the courses or the I don't know workshops, we want to do something because we are in a new place, also new people, and we want to have some fun activities for sure. We don't want, maybe we can, we want to go to our accommodations just to change or to eat something, but after that we want to go outside because we know that we have a week and okay, let's do something!

FG8: And as for me, I want to continue talking about apartment or a host family. In [city of one of the FORTHEM universities] we won't have a provided apartment or just a hotel, and I was a few weeks ago on another BIP in [country of one of the FORTHEM universities] and they didn't have any, any dormitories, but they provided us with a hostel for us, and it, it was in really good conditions and even though they did, they don't have any academics. And to, but I don't know, just send me the name, the message that you should search for. How to get to [city of one of the FORTHEM universities]? Or they, they offered me some opportunities that you will search in this air flights or buses or taxis or whatever. And then as for apartments. So, you can provide it because they don't have any suggestions. So, and as for, I want to, I want, also the coordinators and the people who are involved in this BIP procedure and document procedure, then I was really stressed while getting all the documents signed by the host university and as for [country of the host university], I have been waiting maybe for two days for them to sign my document. Just one signature, I understand, but there is plenty of students who are waiting for that also, but for example, just sending them an email that you, you are in the queue, let's say, and you know, just to inform me that they didn't forget about me or anything because I have sent lots of, a big amount of emails to FORTHEM to please tell me something. Yeah, that that is my suggestion.
FG6: I can agree with [FG8] regarding the logistics and the paperwork and email stuff. Like if everything will be handled out in a quicker manner and so in a more beneficial one, it would be far easier for us, like even when me and [FG7], came to this BIP to [country of the host university] it was, there were so many logistic problems, there were so many problems regarding where were we were supposed to go, with the paperwork itself, we waited like over a week for one signature or two signatures, actually. And everything took so much time when it wasn't supposed to be like that, it could have been handled in a day or two at most.
FG7: Yeah. And also, a big problem with the fact that we, with the place where we stay. At the first, we know we stay in [one of the campuses of the host university of BIP B] and after that we know that we have to stay in [city of the host university of BIP B], and was a little bit difficult because I don't know we made an itinerary, and also it is a little bit difficult to come there. And I think it is not okay for students to know it, I don't know it was like a week before, they have to change the location. Even if it is I don't know 10 kilometres or something because like [city of the host university of BIP B] it is so small and its connections are not good.
RJ: Yes, I am sorry, I am just reading the chat, okay. So, is there anything else that you think that I should take into account in my research or that I should take into account further during these Blended Intensive Programmes?
FG7: I don't know, maybe the usual things that, for example, are so nice all the stuff, because we have to we are put in a situation like a week, you have to collaborate with your team and I think that is just to develop ourselves.
RJ: Thank you. Is there anyone else who would like to add something or?
[All participants nodding no]
RJ: No? Okay. Thank you very much. Then I will just stop the recording here, if that is okay with all of you. So, I just press stop the recording.

XI.3. Focus Group BIP C

Participants: 4 (FG9, FG10, FG11, FG12)
DatFG10: Monday, 17 June 2024
TimFG10: 15:00 till 17:00PM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 1h40m

Start record
RJ: Yes, okay I started the recording. You should be able to see a little red dot at the left of your screen.
FG10: Yes, it is.
RJ: Yes, perfect. So, first of all, I would like to start today's focus group with thanking you all for being here today and for making time available for me to join this focus group. I will try to keep it a maximum of two hours because I am well aware that your time is also valuable. And at [FG12]'s place, it's already late in the evening because she is joining in from the [country located in a different time zone]. And it's also during the [country of the host university] football match, so let's try to stick to the time. During the Blended Intensive Programme, during the week in [country of the host university], I have already explained to you a bit about my research and I also gave you my research notice, but just a short recap is that my research is focused on the internationalisation of higher education, and specifically on Blended Intensive Programmes. And you might be wondering, okay, why is this so special what we participated in, why is somebody researching this? But Blended Intensive Programmes has only been added since 2021 in the Erasmus+ programme for funding. So, meaning that it only exists a couple of years and that in the last two years the first Blended Intensive Programmes were organised, and the one that you participated in was the first one organised by the [host university of BIP C]. So, it is a quite recent thing. And I am studying these programmes to see, okay, how can we improve this even further? And I am studying these from a teacher level perspective, an organisational level perspective, but I think one of my most important perspective, is the participants' perspective. And that is why you are all here today and we have this focus group, because I am very curious to learn more about your experience. So, I don't know if anyone has already once participated in a focus group?
[All participants nodding no]
RJ: No? I see everyone shaking their heads. Good. Then it can't be worse or better than anything you had before.
[Participants laughing]
RJ: So, a focus group is a bit similar as a group interview. A focus group is a bit different as in it is more interactive. So, I will not participate in the discussions myself, but I will ask you to do certain interactive exercises in which you among each other discuss the exercises, so I understand your experience better. So, I will just be here keeping track on time and giving you the instructions. If you have any questions, you can always ask me, but the idea is that you discuss mainly among each other and also feel free to ask each other questions as well during it. So, it will be like hopefully a fun 2 hours for you as well. And we will first start with me asking you quickly to introduce yourselves again. I know that you already know each other, but a quick refresh. Then I will show you the images that you have sent me. Then we will do two or three activities. Then a final discussion round in which I ask you certain questions that haven't been addressed yet, and then there is the final wrap up stage. So, do you have any questions so far about that or does it sound okay?
[Participants nodding yes or putting their thumbs up]

RJ: Yeah, I see some thumbs up. Good. One of the things that I would like to discuss, which is a bit of a formal protocol that I have to discuss before we start, is that this session is being recorded. It is important to note that I will only use the audio version of the recording, so I will not use the visual aspect of it. I will use the audio in order to transcribe the data, meaning that I will type out everything that is being said, but that the data will be anonymised. So, I will codify your names like make up a name for you, that it will not be traced back, neither anything that you say during this. I will take it out whatever can be traced back. It is also part of a bigger research project of my PhD. So, it is part of a bigger data collection set. And it is also confidential, meaning that I will not share any of the raw data, that can only be seen by my two supervisors and by me. But in any publications or presentations, only the anonymised data will be used. So, I also trust that you all take into account the confidentiality of the others that are here. Does anyone have any questions about the data protocol?

[All participants nodding no]

RJ: No? Okay, good. I see that you all know very well the rules of online sessions, that you are muted when somebody else is talking, so that is great. Afterwards, also feel free to just keep your microphones open so it is easier to discuss with each other. There are no rules for this session. My only rule is that every opinion is valued no matter what your opinion is, but you are all here because I really think that you can bring me valuable insight into your Blended Intensive Programme experience. Good? Ready to start?

FG9: One question; do I have to give my perspective on this particular one or because me and [FG10] also participated last year in [one of the BIP partner universities], in another one.

RJ: Yes. Yeah. So, it would be good if you can also reference to that one during the discussion questions as well. So, whatever you, I mean, the more knowledge the better. So, whenever you think you can make a comparison or something, that would be great. That would be very valuable. Yeah.

FG9: Okay.

RJ: Thank you, [FG9]. Good.

RJ: So, I suggest that we start if you could quickly introduce yourself, also saying what you study or when you are finished with your study right now what you have studied and in which year you were. So, whoever wants to start, go ahead. Yes, [FG10], you want to start?

FG9: Yes, okay. My name is [FG9]. I am a final year student at the Faculty of Economics in [host university of BIP C], and I am studying or I studied finance and banking. And now I am preparing to present my thesis, to have my final exam and also prepare this summer for a job and also for master. And that is it. Thank you.

RJ: Thank you, [FG9].

FG10: Should I go then?

RJ: Yeah, hmm-mmm.

FG10: Alright, my name is [FG10]. I am a second-year student at business administration at [host university of BIP C]. Hmm, what else can I say? I already…I am finishing my exams right now. I am tired and everything, but I am glad to be here and I am glad to help Romée with the study and everything.

RJ: Thank you so much, [FG10].

FG11: Yeah. So, I am [FG11] and as you all know, I am from or I was from the [FG11's home university]. So, I graduated in May. So, right now I am just doing my work and focusing on finding a better job. So, it is nice to be here and meeting again, you all. Thank you.

FG12: Yeah. Hi everyone! If you recognise me, I am [FG12], I am [FG12], and I am classmate with [FG11], but then [they] finished [their] study early, and I am on my second year. Yeah, second year as an international business. So, bachelor's degrees, of course. And then I am, but I am looking forward to finish my studies this December, and I am hoping that I will finish my thesis before that. So yeah, and I

am looking forward to you guys like to have a good conversation today and to share more experience about what we had in [country of the host university], the BIP.
RJ: Great, thank you, everyone.

RJ: As you know, before this, I all asked you to send me a picture representing your experience. You might be wondering of oh why did she wants to have these pictures, but because the Blended Intensive Programme is already a while ago, I thought it would be a good starting point of our conversation. So, I would like, I made a picture collage out of your pictures. But please, I am a scientist, I am not used to a picture collage work, so to say. So, I am sorry if it doesn't look that good, but I will share my screen with you. One second. Yeah. So, do you see my screen with the pictures in it?



FG10: Yeah, we can see it.
RJ: Yes, okay, good.
FG12: Yeah, we can see it.
RJ: Good. So, the idea is to ask you what you think when you see this, and to explain it with your reasoning for why you chose your specific picture.
FG9: Okay, may I start?
RJ: Yes, please go ahead.
FG9: Okay, for context, I chose this picture because I really enjoyed the working with my team. I really enjoyed the, the talking to them, and that is why I wanted to emphasise this picture. And also, I could say that in comparison with the the other programme I participated last year, this one seemed to have been more…I don't know better than the other one. And the project we worked on was way better than the last one and that is why I really enjoyed participating in this one, in this year's programme. So, yeah.
FG10: Alright. Can I continue?
RJ: Yes, please, just continue among each other. I am just making notes, but you all can join in.
FG10: Okay, so for me it is kind of the same thing for like for [FG9]. I chose this because I loved my team and I chose this particular picture because it was from the day with the trip. I think that everybody had a lot of fun, yeah, the trip. And we saw a lot of things and we had fun taking the pictures with the statues

and everything. But mostly I want to make a comparison between the experience from this year and last year, because last year, it was my first time, I was a little bit scared, and I was just like, what is gonna happen? How it is gonna be? You know, it is hard when you have to work with the people that you don't know, because we are used to working in teams and everything at the university but when you have to work with the people from another country, from the people that you don't know, it is a little bit harder, and it can be a little bit scary. So, last year I was shy, I wasn't so talkative with the people, but this year I would just, like, come on, let's do it. Let's show them the country and everything, because our country is beautiful and I hope that everybody had a lot of good experiences here. And it was really nice to meet all the people from Finland, from Germany and from Poland. It was a really nice experience. And when I am looking at that picture, I am just smiling because I remember the time when we took the picture.

RJ: Hmm-mmm.

FG11: Alright, so for me I choose actually two pictures. One is with this [country of the host university], I think if I am not wrong, is the traditional wear. This is the, this was the day that we had our presentation, final presentation. To be honest, it was kind of surprising for me because I didn't know it earlier that I had to wear like that. So, I think it was really good experience and I really enjoyed it. And then the group picture by, it is because I really enjoyed, and to be honest, we had like kind of when we were working with each other, we had different perspectives of working, and of course, we are from different cultures, like not only in [country in which FG11's home university is located], like I am from Asian country, I am [FG11's nationality]. So, the way we work and here the European country people are working is two different. So, even though we, like I had my classmate [FG12]. To be honest, we both had kind of different differences earlier, but I felt the same when we started working with this team. But at the end, when we were finishing the programme programme, we were like good friends and I was able to make good networking. So, I think this programme was really good for me to build up my networking and also it was a good experience, yeah.

FG12: Yeah, for me as well, I have chosen two pictures. So, from top, it looks like me and [FG11] have the same pictures that we submitted, so yeah, but during, during this short trip, like the field trip we had. So, our team, we really enjoyed it a lot and this part was our favourite. You know, like it is so good, and then, like we we build relationship while while we are doing the small task they asked us to do. So, yeah. And the second one as you can see that like I am I was presenting that time. Well, my team, although there is a lot of hiccups, it is not easy really, as, as all of you said, it is not easy to work with different diverse group. You know. Like we have different perspective and and I think I learned a lot when it comes to cross-cultural, you know, like we are coming from different background and then we have our own like…the way, the way the way how we work, and the way how we speak, the way how you know, you know, like that. So, we learned a lot from this because to tell you honestly, like we had like a small problem with my team because we don't know that they are like that, we are like this. Because we work differently, but then at in the end like we understand that, okay, now we understand because she she came from this, this, you know, this kind of culture so we just have to understand the way how they speak, the way how they talk, you know. So, because sometimes, like, we feel that, if they talk so bluntly and straightforward, they don't mean anything, they if that is just their way, you know, like it is just normal for them. But for us, like we feel like, you know, like we are sensitive or emotional. We feel like, oh my God, why she is talking like that. But we know, we learned really a lot from this Blended Intensive Programme, and not but, not but not joining of this, this programme we won't be able to to to know different cultures as well as like we gain a lot of friends as well in this short period of time. And lastly, I really enjoyed my pitching here because my team, like we were running out of time and then we, we, we really need to choose one person who can say everything and explain and present properly. And I am so glad that my team trusted me and chose me to be the speaker and to, to pitch our business idea, which is I am really grateful for because I love presentation. Yeah, that is my experience.

RJ: Thank you everyone for saying this. I think in the pictures, I mainly see a lot of the groups coming back and this is also something we will discuss further into detail later in this focus group. So, this was just a kind of opening for it, but before doing so, I would like to know a little bit more about what your motivations were for joining this programme. In which it is also interesting that [FG9] and [FG10], of course, it is their second BIP that they are attending here. And in order to do so, I would like to use the platform Flinga. It is a Finnish platform, so I don't know if you are all known with it?
[All participants nodding no]

RJ: Okay, I will explain it quickly, I just have to change my screen again. So, the idea is that we will use Flinga, which gives us like an electronic whiteboard, a digital board, in which you can put electronical post-it notes. So, I will ask you, what are your motivations, objectives and reasons for joining this Blended Intensive Programme, and then the idea is that you stick this electronical post-its with as many as you want, with your motivations for joining this. So, I will put the link in the chat that you can use, I just need to make sure I am including the right link, and then I will share my screen again with you. Okay, my screen should be shared. Okay, do you all see my screen again with written what were your motivations, objectives and reasons for joining the BIP?
FG10: Yep, yes.
RJ: Yeah, good. Then here in the right corner you can choose a colour, it really doesn't matter, you can choose whatever colour you like. Then you can choose a square, a circle, a person, a title, a subtitle text. It is again whatever you want, and then here you just type what your motivations were and then here it pops up like that. This is an example. So, the idea is that you just click on the link and that you just post as many post-its as you want to say what your motivations were for joining the Blended Intensive Programme.
FG9: Yes, okay. Could it be only a single one?
FG12: Yeah, just a word or?
RJ: No, you can, you can write a word, you can write a sentence, you can use as many different post-its as you want, but the idea is like one post-it per main idea, so to say.
FG12: Hmmm-mmm. Okay.
RJ: Is it working?
FG10: Sorry, for me it is not working. I don't know why, so that is why I already wrote to [FG9] if [they] can put something, or maybe I can say it?
RJ: You can also write it in the chat and then I can put it in for you.
FG10: Okay perfect. Thank you.
RJ: You can add as many as you feel relevant. It is also okay if there are duplicates of things because…

[Participants fill in the motivation map while FG9 updates RJ on the football match that is going on, and have some chit-chat about the World Cup]

RJ: Let's get back, does anyone need more time or do you think this is it?
FG9: For the moment yes, I think this is it.
FG10: Yes, I think this is it.
RJ: Yes, okay.
FG12: Yeah, I am okay.
FG10: You were writing something?
RJ: Me or [FG12]?
FG10: No, [FG12].
FG12: No, I am okay, I am done.
RJ: Yes, [FG11] as well?

FG11: Yeah, this is fine. Yeah, I am done. Yeah.
RJ: Okay, good. So, [FG10], can you see the screen what is written down or not?
FG10: Yes, I can see the screen.

Students' motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP
BIP C
Networking
International exposure
Personal growth
Diverse learning experiences
Since i also took part in last year's BIP in [name of a city], which i really enjoyed, i wanted to repeat the experience
To develop my language skills
to develop my language skills
To improve my skills and to learn new skills from different learning methods
This will help me with my future career search.
expand my network
To learn new things
To enhance my experience in entrepreneurship as a business student would help me to build my career opportunities
Increase knowledge
it's a nice experience where you get to know people from different parts of the world
To meet new people
Personal development
To experience how the exchange program works

RJ: Yes, okay, so now my next question is for you if you would like to discuss a bit what you wrote down and to discuss together about these motivations.
FG9: Okay.
FG12: Okay, okay.
FG9: Shall I start or [FG12] you could start? I don't mind.
FG12: Yeah, no, it is fine. Okay, let me start. Okay, I will start because I put all my stickers on top. Maybe we can do that arrangement. I will discuss. Okay, first I, I have written here international exposure. Yes, because I am really interested, you know, to, to mingle and meet and work and collaborate with different group of people from diverse background. Second motivation, you know what motivates me to join this short mobility is, of course, personal growth because I don't want to stop in what I have like what I am learning right now from the school or in one country, because I would like to, you know, like to know more, to learn more. So yeah. Then third one would be this will help me with my future career search. I was just thinking about this one because like if I join Erasmus programme, I feel like this will help me in my job hunting here in [FG12's country of the home university] or whatever in Europe or…you know, because this will, you know, this will I, I think that I will have a solid background working with international people if I if I will join, you know, this intensive programme. So, and also, before doing my thesis, I am already reading, and it says there that like some, some, employers are looking for, for, international students or students who are also engaged with international activity. So, that is why I am also interested. I was interested that time. Then fourth, I would like to expand my network, yes. So, I don't want to limit myself in just like in just one group, or you know like this will help me a lot to like if I

finish my study this year. So, I feel that if you expand your network then it will help you as well. Like to, you know, you will get, you will have a lot of referrals maybe or if you know someone that you have met before, maybe they can recommend you for some jobs or you know we will never know. So, this is really, you know, this is really critical and I feel that it will help me in my future job hunting. Then increased knowledge of course, I have learned a lot from this business intensive programme, aside from the courses that we are taking from our university. So, this one it also helps me to learn about more on hands on, hands on, learning not only theoretical but it is more on application skills that we can use in the future. And lastly would be to experience how the exchange programme works. Yes, for those who doesn't know, like I am writing a thesis about Erasmus or Erasmus+. So, I am so interested to know like how it works as well. So, how to be in that position to be participating in at least in a short mobility like this. So, yeah, that is all. Thank you.

FG10: Okay. Come on, [FG9].

FG9: Okay, so I wrote two things. The first one is pretty clear, I said I wanted to repeat the experience because I participated last year and it was a really nice experience. And since I gained some knowledge and whereabouts about this kind of programme, I, and also because it also took place here in [city of the host university of BIP C], and I was free, I really wanted to take part again. And the second one, I said that it is a nice experience where you get to know people from different parts of the world. I still keep in touch with some of the guys from last year and also from this one. And yeah, I also wanted to develop my language skills because here in [city of the host university of BIP C] I am studying in [the national language at the country of the host university] and I don't get to talk to people in English that much and it was a really nice opportunity to develop the my language level. And yeah, that is it.

FG10: Yeah. So, as my colleague said about their experience and everything, I think it is kind of the same for me. I participated to learn new things, to develop my language skills, to manage people, to make new friends. And this experience had me to learn a lot of things about mostly this year because we had the pitch presentation, it was my first time when I heard about that. I was just like, what is that? And my teacher was you have to present in 3-5 minutes your like your ideas and I was just like, okay. And I think this kind of experience can help us to develop to have some knowledge for the future because as a business administration student maybe I will in the future I will have to present my new idea of a business and I have to prepare my presentation for in a pitch style and everything. So, I think we can learn a lot of things from this kind of programmes. And as my colleague said, [FG12], international exposure, exposure, personal growth, and everything, we can learn many things. So, that is why maybe next year I want to join this kind of programme as well. [FG11]?

RJ: [FG11], you are muted.

FG10: You are on mute.

FG11: Oh, sorry for that, sorry for that. Yeah, I will explain about my experience. Yeah, as all of you said, mainly for me, it was the personal development, as [FG12] said, like we have been working for almost two years in our university, but it was a really great experience to meet new people. Where I got the opportunity to do more networking through LinkedIn and it, it, I know it will help us for our future career. And also, as international business students for us, it was really inspiring to know about real life stories. For example, I will, I remember about the story of the [local business in the city of the host university], the entrepreneurship opportunities that they had, and I can remember, like in our, [FG12's country of the home university], we have our own circle of group of students who, who, work always together. So, [FG12], me and there are two colleagues, so, we were talking about the same after coming here. And so, I believe that was really inspiring. We were thinking about something we were discussing, okay, if they can do, we also can do. I think [FG12] also remembers that. So, that was really inspiring. And also, I want to say, even we have like learned about entrepreneurship and of course the business skills during the programme, we met different lecturers from different countries, of course they have different ways of teaching. So, for me that was really a good experience to enhance my knowledge, especially in

the financial calculation presentation that we had, it was really, I would say advanced for me because I am not that much good in at accounting and finance field, but it was really, inspiring the way that teacher told us. Yeah, overall, the these are the main things that I got. And also, as [FG12] said, even I wanted to experience how the exchange programme does because that was my last year that last semester. So yeah, I wanted to experience how exchange programme works. That is all. Thank you.
RJ: Great. Thank you everyone. Is there anyone who would like to add something or who would like to react still?

FG12: I want to ask, like, have you ever experienced like the same we experience in our group about any hiccups or issues with your team members and how you deal, how did, how you deal with it?
RJ: Hmm-mmm. That is a very good question. So, first of all, the second part of your question how to deal with it, I think this is a question that we could perhaps discuss at another time, at another moment, but to answer your first question, it is very common and usual that in international teams or just in groupwork in general, that there are certain frictions.
FG12: Ah, okay.
RJ: This is not unusual. Then the thing is, the question is whether you need tools for your groupwork of how to deal with this or not and what these tools are.
FG12: Yeah.
RJ: And that is maybe something we can come back to another time, but this is a very natural experience.
FG12: Yeah, okay.
RJ: In groupwork.
FG12: Yeah.
RJ: Was there any of the other groups as well actually, [FG10] or [FG9], did anyone of you also had any hiccups in their group?
FG9: Not this year, but we as a team struggled last year. Not because we had something against the other, or we argued or anything. Everybody was chill, but, I mean, we were from three countries, Romania, Germany, and Finland, and it seemed like we were from three different teams. I mean everybody, everybody had some ideas, but we couldn't put them together and form something. I mean, and everybody was…from the outside, it could seem like we were lazy and we were in the first two days because we were behind compared to the others. But in the end, we somehow managed to do everything and it didn't look that bad. But I don't know how to deal with these problems, a lot of patience and I don't know a lot of communication otherwise you can't succeed.
FG10: Yeah, as [FG9] said, I had the same experience. So, the last, last, year was really hard to communicate with the people from my team. I mean, everybody had different perspectives, different ideas. Some of them were okay, other ones were a little bit crazier, and it was so hard for us to understand each other and to put something on the paper. And as [FG9] said, they were behind, I think you are more behind you guys. So, I don't know to deal with these things. This year I was a little bit afraid that it was gonna be the same, but it wasn't. So, I had a great team and we socialised a lot and we talked to each other. And I think that the best thing is to try to listen, to try to put your own ideas, to try to learn from them, to and to come up with an idea that everybody wants. And maybe, if you, maybe, if they are not so okay with that idea, maybe I would just like this year which is like okay, it is not good let's vote. Who wants that? And I don't know innovative ideas, I think that will be the best thing to do if you can create a connection between people.
RJ: And do you think there can be anything on like a programme level, anything included in the programme in order to deal with this kind of situation?
FG9: Maybe, maybe we should start to get to know each other first.
FG10: Yep, yep!

FG9: I mean, I don't know, maybe a day or two of networking and going out visiting that respective city, but I think it is hard to start the programme, introduce what we are gonna do and then put them, to put some students together and make them work. So yeah, I think that would be a good idea.
RJ: Is there anyone who would like to react to what [FG9] says?
FG10: Yeah, yeah, as [FG9] said, it is really good to start maybe with a trip, with a field trip because it was really nice for us to even get to know each other, to talk more, and to have fun also. Because at the first day you are meeting your team and then you are just like okay, you have to do that, do that, and everybody just like, okay, but what was your name again? And it is gonna be hard. So, at, at the beginning to start with socialisation, to communicate and everything. And I think changing wouldn't be so bad.
FG9: Maybe we should extend the programme. I think 5 days isn't enough. Maybe we should start, I don't know, the weekend before that week, something like that.
FG10: Yeah.
RJ: [FG11], [FG12], what do you think?
FG12: Yeah. In addition to what they have said, maybe I was just thinking because I am thinking like based on my experience during the programme, like, I think it would, it would be good, like as I, as I, as I like to have like activities or trips together to know more each other. I think it is also imperative if, if the, the, the coordinators will also prepare something like a short learning or…what, what do you call this? Like a discussion about cross cultural, you know, I think it is for me, it is really critical because it, it, it will, it will create like a massive, you know, issue if we don't understand where are they coming from. Because they are like for example you are from Germany, and from the Philippines, you are from Netherlands and then we have our own you know personality, we have our own, you know, thinking, perceptions and then we don't understand each other, and then when you put them all together, sometimes you know I feel like he, he, he or she got offended, but it is normal for the other side, you know? So, some something like that, but at least just like cross cultural one, one very quick and that it's easy to understand. That is all I can say. Yeah.
RJ: [FG11], would you like to react?
FG11: Yeah. In addition to this, I would think, I was thinking about the we had like one week, including the two online sessions as [FG12] said, it would be really good to have a session where we can interact with each other. Like we were mainly focusing on our tasks from the beginning, from I think it is good to have like, because we are from different cultures, not only from [FG11's country of the home university]. So as [FG12] said, I think it is really important to have a cross-cultural session and also if we can have like small groups sessions like together like we had the same in the week that we have, but it would be better if to, to, have a small session like a small group activity. It doesn't matter like if it is a field trip or something, but even when we meet online, to have, like different teams apart from your own country, that would be really helpful to carry forward with the new task that we had to do. So, I think yeah, that would, that is my idea for this, yeah.

RJ: Great. Well, thank you everyone for the insights and for these ideas, it is very important. But I would like to move to the next topic now, if that is okay with you. And that is the same idea as we did for the motivation, but then also to see if there were any maybe obstacles or hesitations for joining the programme. I have added the link again in the chat. So, [FG10], if it doesn't work for you, you could just add again in the group chat and then I can add it.
RJ: Is it working?
FG9: Yeah. Yes.
[The participants take four minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]
RJ: Is there anyone who would still like to add something? Okay. Is everyone done or do you need some more time?

[All participants putting their thumbs up]
RJ: Good?
FG10: I am done.
FG12: Yeah, we are good.
FG11: I am good.

Students' hesitations and concerns when applying to the BIP
BIP C
Classes Disruption
the only hesitation i had was related to my busy schedule, since i'm in my final year, but that wasn't a problem
Balancing my studies
Work-related schedule
social integration
The fear of the inevitable
Busy Working schedule
FOMO
The difference between the educational level
Overlapping my school timetable

RJ: Okay, good. So, who ended, who was the last one during the motivation map to discuss, maybe that person can start now? I am not sure who it was anymore, but…
FG12: It was [FG11], right? Yeah.
FG11: I think it is me. Yeah, it is me. Okay for me, as I was working part time, so I had kinda time management problem, that was kind of my concern, but I was able to manage with my summer vacation holidays. And also, as I was in my last semester, and I had like two mandatory courses, which is, which were going on and the I already like, it was already overlapping with the online classes that we had in the calls. And then I had to take a special permission from our professor to attend these, like he knew that, but we had to inform that. So, I somehow managed to solve that and also balancing my studies with that. And because while we were studying here with the BIP, we were having some mandatory lectures and also some tasks that we had to we had to go upload that. So, it was quite challenging to balance both of other yeah online studies while we were away from the university and when we were doing BIP. So, these were my main concerns, yeah.
RJ: Yeah. And I see these concerns are a bit overlapping. One of you wrote the only hesitation I had was related to my busy schedule. Since I am in my final year, I think that was you probably [FG9] who wrote that, no?
FG11: I know, but I did with a purple colour those 3 online.
FG9: Yeah.
RJ: Yeah. So, this one also goes about the busy schedule, I think.
FG11: Yeah.
RJ: Would you like to elaborate on yours, [FG9]?
FG9: Yeah, because apart from my bachelor thesis, I also had a lot of projects, a lot of preparation for exams, a lot of different…well programmes I participated at, but I managed to finish them in time, so that wasn't a problem too. I could start a programme, the Blended Intensive Programme without any problems.
RJ: Good. And then, I think [FG12], you also wrote about class distraction and work-related schedule as well.

FG12: Oh yeah. Because like before we joined this intensive programme, so like I was, you know, really concerned about, you know, like the, the overlapping in our timetable as [FG11] said, and we have like a couple of courses that we need to attend, and yeah, but we were able to solve it because we spoke with our professor about that so they know. And also, I, yeah. And also, like in addition, in addition to that, during our, the five, five days intensive programme, so I am also doing, I was doing some deadlines like finishing my schoolwork during at night after, after, our long day in [host university of BIP C]. Then once we are back in the, you know, in the hotel. So, I was doing some deadlines, but it is actually manageable and I already knew what will happen about that. So, it is fine. Then next would be the work-related schedule. Yeah, because I, I am also, I, I am also working, I am a working student, so I am really concerned about my vacation leave. So, that is something I have to really look into and ask my boss.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG12: Like if he will allow me. So, thank God that of course he will, because if it is related to my studies. So yeah, then third would be some social integration. So, I was just thinking like if I, if I can, you know, like if I can easy, to, to, mingle with other nationalities because I know like it is, it is kind of difficult if you don't know each other especially like if we are from diverse background. And then last would be this FOMO, the fear of missing out from our university like some classes or the special event that we had. Actually, during this BIP, like we have a lot of going on like events and activities in the university, so I just included that, that I wasn't there, and you know not able to see those kinds of important activities as well. So, but it is fine then. Yeah, it is manageable anyway, yeah.
RJ: Yeah. And [FG10], I saw you did a thumbs up when [FG12] was talking about social integration.
FG10: Yeah. Yeah. Because as I wrote on the, as you wrote for me, thank you Romée.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG10: To me is the fear of the inevitable, because last year was a good experience, but we had up and downs, and the social integration was harder, and I was a little bit scared about that this year as well. I was just like, okay, maybe it is gonna be just like last year, but it is fine. And I wrote also the difference between the educational level because everybody has an educational system, in every, each country is different. In Romania is one, in Germany is one, in Finland is one, so that can be a difference. I can see that maybe some of the colleagues know more things than me, maybe less, but this year was nice because we get to help each other. So, maybe somebody didn't know that, but the other person knew, so it was a really nice connection, so but for that you need to social integration. You need to speak with the people, you need to connect with them. So, I think the experience from this year, it was a really nice experience and I am looking forward for the next year as well, but also, I have a fear for the inevitable because it can happen.
RJ: Hmm-mmm, yeah. And this makes me curious, like, how do you all look back of this social integration part at the end? Were you, were you satisfied with this part in the experience or do you think this can be somehow improved or there can be something done?
FG10: For the experience this year, it was it was good, I mean, we get to know each other, we get to go out and have fun, mostly in the last days and everything. But yeah, to make a comparison between this year and last year, yeah, that is, there was a big difference, but, as the things to be improved, there are not so many. I mean, as [FG9] said and I said earlier about the getting to know each other better, even in the time when we have to do the task and everything, maybe we can add some more, I don't know things to just like games to know each other or to make it more fun. I mean, I know it is about university, I know it is about studying and everything, but we also had to make connection to make friends.
RJ: Yeah, I see everybody nodding as sign of approval, I guess. Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much.

RJ: We are now one hour into our focus group, so I know that we are starting to get tired. So, I will start stop sharing my screen, and especially for [FG12], where it is already evening. So, now we will not use these digital post-its anymore, but the idea is that I will ask you, I will say a certain theme or certain

topic, and then the ideas that you select an emoticon that you find suitable for this and that you put it in the group chat. So I know this sounds a little bit abstract, but after we go once, I am sure that you get it. So for example, the first one that I will ask is, okay, the content of the course, and then it is up to all of you to find an emoticon that fits to your reaction to this, and you can put it in the chat. So, I will give you the topic and then when everyone finds their emoticon, you don't put it in the chat yet, because I will count down from three to one, so we will all put them at the same time. So, there is no, you cannot really pick what the others have. So, it is really your own emoticon that you choose, and it can be whatever, and then afterwards, I will ask you to explain it. Does that sound okay and reasonable?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yeah? Okay, so the first one is, as I said, the content of the course.
FG12: Yeah.
RJ: So, this is content specific. So, the learning materials, what you learned, and the classes that were given, and the task at hand. So, you can all search an emoticon.
[Participants take one minute to choose their emoticon]
RJ: Okay, wait with putting it in, okay? For this time, it is good, but afterwards I will count.
FG12: Is it right? Is it right? Yeah. Like we just write that.
FG11: Is this like this, okay?
RJ: Yeah, yeah, it is good, but I will count from three to one and then you can all add it in the chat.
FG12: Ah, sorry!
RJ: And then you can add it in the chat, so it is all at the same time, so nobody can change their emoticons according to what somebody else already did. Yeah.
FG12: Ah, yeah, okay, okay, okay. I am sorry, yeah.
RJ: No worries, no worries. So, is everyone else ready?
FG12: Okay.
FG9: Yeah.
RJ: Okay, 3,2,1
FG12: Yeah.

Content of the course			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			

RJ: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so, who would like to start discussing why you chose this emoticon?
FG11: Okay, well for me, I think the course content was really good, even though it is, it was a short time, short time period, we learn a lot. So, for me, the content of the course, like doing our own country presentation and doing the business plan for the [city of the host university of BIP C] Christmas market was really good. So, I think for me, it is 100%, was excellent.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG12: Well, for me I put high-five, high-five. Like, well, the content of the course I don't know like who made it so high-five for them, so like the coordinators for bringing us all together from, you know, the online courses up to the, the face to face, you know, discussions and presentations. So, and well, it is, it was my first time intensive programme, so I can't say enough, you know, I am happy with it because we learned a lot from the, the BIP. So, high-five for that.
RJ: Hmm-mmm. Whoever wants to go.
FG10: [FG9] or me?

FG9: Okay, okay. I chose that emoji because the topic of the course was very interesting for me and I was really curious about what we are gonna learn in terms of entrepreneurship. And I was glad that we got to work with the, the business canvas model, which I haven't really haven't tried until then.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG10: Alright, for me, I chose that emoji because we had a lot of things to learn. There were many interesting things about entrepreneurship and everything, and I, but there were a lot of things that I didn't know about, and I was just like, okay, yeah, let's do this. Let's do it together. Let's learn about that.
RJ: Yes. So, you needed the support of your team as well.
FG10: Yeah, a lot.
RJ: And did you get that support?
FG10: Yeah, I get it, mostly in the presentation part, for the last part, when everybody was just like, come on, go in front, you can do it!
RJ: Hmm-mmm, yeah, okay.

RJ: And then the next one, we have already discussed it a little bit, but here it goes to again, the programme and schedule of the course. So, have your emojis ready and then we can all put them in the same time. Are you ready? There is always someone that already goes.
FG11: Sorry for that!
[Participants laughing]
RJ: No worries, no worries. Good. [FG10] you are ready, [FG9] you are ready. Okay, one, two, you can put it in.

Programme/schedule			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			

RJ: Okay, good. So [FG11], you are the first one to put it in, would you like to start discussing? You are all laughing a bit.
[Participants laughing when seeing the results]
FG11: Yeah, it was like a little bit as it was so intensive, and as I told like, we had our own things to do at our university. So, it was like full packed, but it, it was manageable. So that is why I put the laughing emoji. I can remember how I used to work like, especially with [FG12]. And so yeah, that is why I put that emoji. It was kinda stressful, but it was fun.
RJ: Yes. [FG9], you have the sign like this **[mimics emoticon].**
FG9: Yeah. And so, I chose the emoji because I really thought that it was a good schedule. It was very similar to the one from last year. And I don't know since I was at home, I could do a lot of a lot more things here, because last year in [the country where FG9 and FG10 attended the previous BIP] we didn't have time to relax that much because we also wanted to visit the city and go out doing something. So yeah, it was like.
RJ: Hmm-mmm, good. [FG12], your emoji seems to be blowing off some steam, if I understand it correctly.
FG12: I am exhaling. Huh. Something like that. No, I, I mean like because there is a clash schedule, so mostly my exhaling it is more of this schedule thing. Well, I love also you know how the, the professor and the coordinators, you know how the programme they made it so, so good for us, you know, like. But the schedule is kinda so hectic for us and like, you know, like it is so, it was so busy that time. So, and it is

just like, it is like a compact schedule in a five day and the thing is, like the next day, we are going to do like a field trip for the whole day, but we have to prepare our pitch and presentation the next day. So, I think that was makes us so like so much pressure for each member of the group. But as I, from it like the programme is like I am okay, so the exhaling thing is more about the schedule. Yeah.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG10: Yeah. Okay. And from my side I was just like, yeah, it was a good programme, it was nice. It was really well organised. I noticed this kind of programmes can be a little bit sometimes too much because we have a lot of things to do for the project and this is why, as I said earlier, maybe we need more time, maybe two more days to do the field trip, to get to know each other. Maybe for the future they will think about that because otherwise it can be a little bit full for us and a lot of things to do. But they are nice organised, and I was happy to be home here and to present to all the people, our country and our city and it was really nice this year.
RJ: Yeah, because that actually, a question for the both of you, [FG10] and [FG9], and I am sorry, [FG11] and [FG12], but is there a difference between attending such a programme and being one of the home students of a programme like this?
FG10: Yeah. I mean, I will start and maybe [FG9] will continue. It is a difference because, as [they] said, when you are going in another country, you are really interested to visit new places, to see new things, and you are in a constant I don't know action being just like I have to go there, I have to go there, but when you are at home, in your own country, you are just like after you finish the programme and everything you are going home and have some sleep, maybe. And it is pretty easier, it, it is more easier to be here at home. But the thing is that it is more interesting when you are in another country because you had a chance to learn about, yeah to see new places. So, I loved the experience from last year because I had a chance to see other [two cities in the country where FG9 and FG10 attended the previous BIP]. But I love this experience, the experience from this year as well, but it is nice when you are not really at home, it is nicer when you are in another country. [FG9]?
FG9: Yeah, yeah. I don't think I have to add anything, you pointed out everything. So yeah, and I just, just so you know, [gives us an update that his home country scored in the soccer match]
FG12: Good job!
FG10: Wow, we are not losing this time. Yeah!
FG12: Who is the opponent?
FG9: Ukraine.
FG12: Oh, Ukraine, okay.

RJ: Okay, well, good. And then, the last one for the smileys, emoticons part, and then we will start the discussion round, that is about something we have not discussed yet and it did not come up yet, and that is the online aspect because of course the Blended Intensive Programme exists of the online component. So, you have the two lectures before, and then you have the physical week, but the online component is also something we must discuss. All ready? [FG11], do you also have one ready? Yes. [FG12]? Yeah. Okay, you can add it to the chat.
[Participants laughing when seeing the results]

Online part			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			

RJ: Okay. I see a very diverse set of emoticons here. So, this certainly needs some explanation. Who would like to start?
FG12: Well, for me…
FG9: I, I…
FG12: Oh, go ahead [FG9].
FG9: No, it is okay, it is okay.
FG12: Okay, Yeah, I will just put expressionless. Well, well, online it is good that they have organised for, you know, for the preparation of the pre-task, but it seems that based on our experience, like I think the last online session that there are a lot of missing students who weren't there, that we have to present the country, our university, and then we thought that everyone were present, but unfortunately…And also, me and [FG11] was at, was, was, having class that time during that online. So, it is kind of a bit difficult for us, the professor was, well, well talking, and then we were also listening the, the presentation, but I think online, it is also a good start before we meet on the you know, in the country where we will held the the programme. So, that it is also good like, the like the one that we had, is like they gave us like a briefing on what to do, the pre-task so that we are also ready once we are, we set foot in in the country where we are going to do the, you know the presentation or stuff. So, I am okay, but expressionless.
FG11: Yeah. I think for me also same. I remember the first online class was okay but the second one we were having online we were having our own class which was overlapping. So, I think it was kind of little bit of a distraction for us because we were not giving our 100% for both tasks that we were doing because we had this class going on, we couldn't skip that, because we already when we are we we are we are going to have our classes in BIP in [country of the host university], we will like, we will have to be absent already for like a couple of classes from the same course. So, I think it was kind of a little bit stressful one. So, but I was okay, that is why I put this emoji. It is not the happier face, but it is, it is okay.
FG10: [FG9], maybe you want to continue?
FG9: Okay, it was okay, nothing special about the online meetings. I was already familiar with what was going on, and I also knew the presentation would go, so because last year I also presented our country introduction. So yeah, I knew how to work on the project and also how the case study would have to.
FG10: It was the same for me, I was already familiar with the online sessions. But to tell the story behind my emoji, is just like for online session, you are just standing there smiling but not listening, as always. Being just like, okay, yes, yes, yes, yes, but and you are not 100% focus, you are distracted and there are a lot of things that maybe you are skipping them. So, the online sessions can be good, but in the same time they are not really, you are not giving the 100 focusing on them, so.
FG9: I would like to point something else about the country introduction, the same last year happened, we were trying to put all the things in those five minutes and we were stuck because we had a lot of things to present and I think that is the same for all the countries, and maybe we could extend the, the, the, the time we have for this presentation. And also why not, we could also the face to face and not online? Maybe it is for the best, I don't know.
RJ: And one of the things is, so a Blended Intensive Programme needs to be physically on site between five and thirty days, and there is the online component for which there is no maximum, so that is for the duration of the online component and there is no requirement whether it needs to be before the physical components or afterwards. What according to you, do you think is the best of when to have these online classes? Do you think to have them before, or rather after, or to have them before and after? Do you have any ideas on this? I see [FG10], you would like to say something?
FG10: Yes, I mean to have it before is okay, but to have it after it is okay as well because if you are having them after, you already know each other, you already maybe knew some people, you are more more focused to listen to them, being just like, okay, yeah, that is my friend, let's listen to them. So, I think to do the online classes after would be a good choice, but also to not do them as well it is a good choice as

well. I mean to be everything to be face to face.
[Participants laughing]
FG10: To yeah, face to face and to extend the the days. Not to have online classes, just to extend the days maybe.
RJ: Everything face to face, okay. And I see [FG11] and [FG12] were nodding when [FG10] said just face to face. What do you…?
FG12: Yeah.
FG11: Yeah.
FG12: Go ahead [FG11].
FG11: No, go ahead [FG12], it is okay.
FG12: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I agree with [FG10] because like, I think face to face, like you will pay more attention with the person you are you now talking to. Because like what we have experienced, I just remember that there was like, I don't know if she she was a professor, or coordinator, or some like a guest speaker or something during the online session, she was discussing something and then I think like no, she felt that no one was listening to her and then she said something that "okay I know that you are not paying attention something, blah blah blah". So, I felt, you know that oh my god. Like you know, she knows already that there are students that are not paying attention so well. I know it is kind of difficult to to to to have a discussion online unless you are calling out their names to say something or to do some presentation or present something. So, I think, yeah, for me face to face matters, but maybe the the online also can be…can be held after. Well and then we can share some experiences, like for example this week is completed, then the online session can be arranged next week or you know something like that. Just to share experience and to see each other again. And because yes, as [FG10] said that we know each other, that we have, we went or we went to the mall or to the museum together that time like that, you know, then we can have some discussion or experience or something like that. Yeah.
FG11: Yeah. For me, I think I agree with both [FG12] and [FG10]. I think for me in, in my experience, I think it is important to have face to face interaction more, but then the online classes, even though if we have like, as we discussed earlier, it would be great to have a small session where we can introduce more with each other, with our professors and everything, because I believe some professors will also not available due to some busy schedule. So, I think it is better to have face to face interaction. And of course you can have online class online sessions, but I would I in my opinion I would prioritise the face to face interactions are the best for this kind of intensive programme.
FG10: Sorry, I just want to add up if it is okay. I just remember something from last year that was really interesting. So, we had once online session and the teacher moved all the students in separate rooms, let's say, and we get to speak with each other to know each other, to talk more, and that was nice, that was really fun, and I think it is a good idea to introduce the online sessions to get to know each other and to talk to us and the teachers as well. And as [FG12] said earlier, I was, I was feeling bad too when I heard the teacher, I was feeling bad for her and I was just like we are here, we are listening, but you know.
RJ: Hmm-mmm. So, to use smaller breakout rooms to make the online session a bit interactive?
FG10: Yeah.
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yes, I see you all nodding. okay, good.

RJ: Well, thank you all for still being with me after 1.5 hours. I know that this is also online and online sessions, from research we also know that they are more tiring to all of us, so we are doing very well until now I think as we are all here still and speaking. So now, I mean, you don't have to use emoticons anymore and I will just like to ask you a few more final questions before we round up. And I will start with a very general, general question, which is: what did you learn during this BIP?
FG10: Who wants to start? Can I?

RJ: Go ahead.
FG10: Alright, so we learned a lot of new things, I mean, I think everybody did. But as I said earlier, I learned how to present my own business idea maybe in the future because it was really nice that we had a pitch. And another thing that I had and I developed, it was the speaking, talking with the people because when I was in front of the people that I didn't know, the teachers they were, they were just acting like investors and they were just like a little bit scared at first, but it was nice to have this experience. So, talking about knowledge, we have and is to develop our knowledge more about entrepreneurship, about businesses, to use the business canvas model. And also, the working and the socialising is important because we had the chance to talk more, to speak with different people, from different cultures.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG11: Yeah. Okay. Who wants to talk or should I continue?
RJ: Yeah, go please.
FG11: All right, so for me, yeah, so for me also adding to what [FG10] told, yeah, for me I developed my own skills like how to, especially most highlighted part was about the pitch test, which is pitching within one to two minutes for your investors as an international business students that is really important when you are working in the international environment and with investors or like if you are having your own business. So apart from that, one important thing for me is how to deal with people from different cultures, different countries especially, even though we learn other courses about cross cultural, but that was another experience. Yeah, we had to interact as, as we already discussed, like we had some different arguments, it is not serious one, but yes, we had, but we learned from them, so I think this was really good experience overall and that is what I learned during this, you know, one week or within five days of intensive programme, yeah.
FG12: Yeah and addition to what they have said, like what I have learned in this BIP, of course it is a business, so it really inspires me a lot when that [country of the host university], that coffee, what is that coffee?
FG9: [gives the name of the local business in the city of the host university].
FG12: Yeah, yeah, we try that, you know, like as a business student, second year, you know, it really inspires me a lot that they were able to pull, pull and just at first trying to have, like, setting up a business until they turn it into a real one, you know the business ideas turn into real, you know, that is really, you know, give me like an energy to to do the same thing here. I mean, not, even yeah in [FG12's "home" country] or even in [FG12's country of the home university], you know. And also learning and doing about social media, how to promote your business? Innovative ideas as well. And then yes, of course the most important as well, I think I have learned about pitching under 5 minutes. You know that is gonna be like that kind of experience, so, so intense, but my team members they were so amazing that time and they were so supportive and we learned about teamwork. Especially, you know, like everyone was doing their part and then they are helping me to, you know, to to practice under 5 minutes and thank God that I was able to pull it off. And in addition, last but not the least, what else I am about to say is this, yeah, I, I, I have learned that in this short mobility that people, it is not always the same as what you think you know, like working with different people will not have the same minds mindset like you. So, you have to always understand and put yourself into their shoes. So yeah, so that is what I have learned. So whenever like let's say I, I, will work in another country, first, learn the culture, learn their culture, how they work, how they work, they speak and everything. It will really a big help. Yeah, thank you.
RJ: Thank you, [FG12]. And [FG9], last but not least, did you also learn something during the visit?
FG9: Well, okay, apart from the things I learned about our Christmas market and the [local business in the city of the host university], I also have to deliver and also to prepare a pitch, the short one, to be specific. And also, how to use the business canvas model and it was very useful in order to have that presentation at the end.

RJ: Nice. That seems like a very fruitful Blended Intensive Programme for all of you, if I can summarise well.

RJ: One of the ideas as well by the European Union and by some of the organisers of these Blended Intensive Programmes, is to enhance intercultural competence among students. Have you ever heard about the word intercultural competence? Are you familiar with it?
FG12: You said intercultural? Intercultural?
RJ: Yes, intercultural.
FG12: Yes, yeah, yeah.
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yes, you are all nodding.
FG12: Yeah.
RJ: Could you maybe explain how you understand how these types of programmes can lead to intercultural competence?
FG12: Well, I mean as per my understanding like intercultural is like you are connecting, understanding between two or one culture to another culture. You know, how do they perceive each other's cultural behaviour? Or, you know, something like that, yeah.
RJ: Hmm-mmm. Would anyone like to add to this?
FG10: I think that also we are talking about the differences between our cultures, but also, but the things that we have in common because maybe we have a lot of things in common, maybe we don't. So, this is what I think about it the culture, we learn about our connection to each other when we are talking about the culture.
RJ: And do you think the Blended Intensive Programme is a tool that can stimulate it?
FG10: Yes, a lot.
FG12: Yeah, yeah.
FG10: Most, most likely it was this year, we were persons from three countries or four, right?
FG9: Four.
FG10: Three or four?
FG9: Four.
FG12: Four, four, we were four, yeah.
FG10: Okay, four, four. Yeah, we were four countries. So, I had the chance to learn a lot about [names the countries of the students participating], a lot of things about.
FG12: Is that how you call multicultural for us? Because we are four? Is that how you consider it?
RJ: You can of course. Yeah, it depends on the definition.
FG12: Yeah, yeah.
RJ: Okay, so one of the final questions to ask for you is whether you would have any advice for future organisers who are organising such a programme, if there is anything they should take into account? Or and that is the second part of my question, if you have any of your colleagues who would join such a programme, if you would have any advice for them? So, you can take this from two perspectives. [FG10], I saw that you directly raised your hand.
FG10: Yeah, I was willing. Alright firstly, as we talked until now to expand the days of the programme. Also, the online session to be more interactive. I mean, for us to talk more, the students. I know that we have to listen to the courses as well, but we can put that inside, alright. And also, if a friend would want to join this kind of programme, I would just like be patient, try to listen, don't, don't make it really rough, so be patient, everybody has their opinion, just listen to them and if you don't understand each other, then vote!
RJ: Hmm-mmm, democracy.
FG10: Yes, democracy is really important.

RJ: Hmm-mmm. [FG9], do you, is there anything that you would advise?
FG9: Yeah, yeah, as I said earlier, the, the extension of the programme in general, maybe add some. Personally, I wouldn't have the online classes at all, but it is only my opinion. That is it. And yeah, I would absolutely recommend this programme to everyone.
RJ: Thank you.
FG11: Yeah. In my opinion, also, I would like to say like to expand the time period if it, if it is possible. To have more face to face interaction rather than going for online sessions, but if they have to go for online session as we discussed it, yeah to have after the like face to face interaction classes. That would be okay, like conversation with the participants to us and to get their ideas how the programme was done, that we already discussed. And also to those who are gonna want to participate, I would ask them to participate as much as they can in these kind of programme because this will help to develop their personal skills as well, they will be able to get experience, especially those who are from different countries rather than from European countries, to get an, exchange, exchange study experience. This will be really good opportunity, even though it is a short time period, because we know everyone cannot, cannot afford to go for a long-time exchange period, time programmes. So, this will be a really good opportunity for them to enhance and to experience what kind of programme is about this exchange, our studies. And also, yeah, I think as we, we and also may most important thing we have, we have to respect each other when we were doing whatever the group, group sessions, it is really important because to understand that we are from different cultures, different countries. So yeah, listening and that is only, yeah, I think that is what I can do from my end.
RJ: Thank you, [FG11], thank you. And [FG12]?
FG12: Yeah. I think for me it would be, it would be lovely, like if the coordinators or the teachers will go round, although they did it last time, right? That they were asking each group if they need help. But it would also be great if we will have like a group on feedback mechanism or something like that, and if they if, if they face any issues or challenges inside the group, so they can also help solve or you know do something about it. And then lastly, on the awarding part, although it is, it is so good that we were able to get the certificate and all. So, if there is, I feel like if there is something like a presentation and we were building an innovative ideas, products like that, I think it would be nice as well if they will announce something like, oh we have a winner or something like that. That is to make it more fun and you know more like the groups will make more, you know, more interested to know more about it so that they can make, make it more better for their next Erasmus programme that they will, you know, join. They will prep or something like that. And then, what I would suggest for the, for those prospective students who would like to join this Erasmus short-term mobility, well, I would say is to prepare their mind, you know, physically, mentally, because, especially if this is their first first country, that they will travel, because of course, like there will be a lot of hesitations and concerns on their mind. So, they have to be, you know, and don't expect too much, you know, because sometimes you are expecting too much and then you are there in the country and then “oh it is that”, you know, and then you will feel like “oh yeah”. So that would be most stressful. But yeah, I will also say that this is a good opportunity for them especially like if they would like to improve their, you know their, you know, their personal development, something like that and it will help their career, their career in the future, especially when they are looking for a job, at least they will also experience how to work internationally with international students, yeah.

RJ: Thank you very much, [FG12], thank you. And then, for [FG9] and [FG10], as you have mentioned before, you said that this Blended Intensive Programme was a better experience than the previous one, if I recall correctly. Could you perhaps just briefly outline why you think that this one was a better experience?
FG9: I think it was a better experience in terms of the project in general, not, not because of our experience, because personally, I like to travel a lot. So, I really enjoyed the time in [the country where

FG9 and FG10 attended the previous BIP]. I don't, I didn't really enjoy the time spent in the university, as I said, because we didn't get along very well as a team, but I enjoyed [the city where FG9 and FG10 attended the previous BIP], I enjoyed [the country where FG9 and FG10 attended the previous BIP]. And for our, for this year's programme, I think that we as a team did better and all the projects were way better than last year's. And yeah, maybe the content, I mean the topic of the programme was more interesting and more suitable for us because last year was sort of a marketing one and I am not sure if the students were very familiar with the marketing topic. So, yeah.
FG10: Just to add something up, I mean, as [FG9] said it, everything is right, but regarding the project we had too many tasks to do. They were expecting from us many, many things and we had a short time to do it. And this year, even though again we had a short time, but still the task was, were really clearly, and we had, we didn't have time, but we managed to do it. But last year we were, I remembered it, me and my team, we were in the last day, and we were still preparing the projects, so it was really hard. They were expecting too much from us. The presentations were…to make a comparison between this year and last year, the presentation was 10 to 20 minutes and we have to promote a product that we created, so we had to create a product. So, it takes time even because sometimes you know when you work with international people, so we had to think a lot about the product, about how to do it, and for this year it was easier. I mean, we already, we didn't have to make a product to come with a product, we have to promote something, so I think this year was easier and more organised, I can say.
RJ: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much for these insights as well, because I was just curious about this as well. Sorry, [FG11] and [FG12] for this last question for them, but it is also brings some perspective.
RJ: So, just to end, is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't discussed yet that you think that I should take into account for my research? or that I should pay attention to? or draw attention to in the future?
FG10: I just wanted to tell you good luck and I want to read your research at the end, yeah.
FG12: Yeah.
RJ: Thank you.
FG12: Yeah, same here. We wish you a good luck and I know like you are doing, you are already doing good. So yeah, I know you can do more better.
FG10: Yeah.
FG12: So, let us know and share once it is available.
FG10: True.
RJ: Okay, yes, I will.
FG12: Yeah.
RJ: So, [FG9] or [FG11], do you have anything to add? Otherwise, I will just stop the recording.
FG11: No.
RJ: No. Good. Okay, then I just stop the recording.

XI.4. Focus Group BIP D

Participants: 3 (FG13, FG14, FG15)
Date: Monday, 29 July 2024
Time: 10:00 till 12:00PM CET
Location: Online on Microsoft Teams
Duration: 1h28m

Start record
RJ: Okay, I think I have started the recording right now, perfect. So, before we start with this focus group, I would really like to first express my gratitude to all of you. I am very thankful that you all made time available today. I know it's in the middle of the summer as [FG14] just said that in my place, it is very hot at the moment. [FG13], you have a storm going on right now, but you still made it. And I know, [FG15], that you are on a family vacation at the moment, so I really appreciate that you all made time available today. Unfortunately, [one of the other BIP participants that signed up to join the focus group] is not here because of personal circumstances, but she also would have liked to join. So, we are just here with the four of us today.

RJ: I have already told you, of course, about my research during our week in [city of the host university of BIP D], but to quickly do a recap, my research is about the internationalisation of higher education. So, about internationalisation of universities and as an object of study, I am studying Blended Intensive Programmes such as the one here, I have to say normally this is a Blended Intensive Programme in [host university of BIP D], but blended in terms of the programme, but still a little bit different. But a Blended Intensive Programme combines physical exchange between 5 to 30 days together with an online session or sessions. And you might be thinking “okay, why is she studying this? This is not anything new?” but actually it is something very recent. It has only been added in 2021 as an option of funding under Erasmus, so blended Intensive Programmes are only taking place since, like two or three years, so these are really the first ones that are being carried out and that is why I am researching this to see, okay how can we actually integrate these kind of programmes in order to also achieve the required results. And for this I am, of course doing the observations, like I was with you in [city of the host university of BIP D], I am also interviewing the teachers and organisers, but one of the most important parts is of course the focus group with the participants themselves. Because for me, it's very important to also hear your voices to see how can we improve these programmes so it is very important for me to hear from you today your opinions of what had happened and what you learned. That is also why this session is recorded, because I will be transcribing this afterwards, so meaning that I will type out everything that has been said. However, the recording, I will not focus on video analysis, so even though you have your cameras on, I will just the only focus on the spoken words of what we have been saying and before it will be shared with anyone, I will anonymise the data, which means that I use like codes for every person that is here involved. So, whenever you say a name or something, I will anonymise it and also anything else that can be traced back to you. I will do my best to change that in the transcript. It is also important to say that this is part of a bigger research, so I have done several focus groups, so this also increases the anonymity again. Does anyone have any questions about this?
[All participants nodding no]
RJ: No, okay, good. So, this session of today will be around 2-hours. I don't know if anyone of you ever participated in a focus group?
[All participants nodding no]

RJ: No? Okay. So, then it cannot be worse or better than any of the other focus groups.
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: So, the idea of this focus group is that it will take a maximum of two hours, maybe it takes less time, it just depends how it evolves. The idea is that I will stimulate the discussion through interactive exercises. So, I will ask you some questions or will ask you to do some exercises and then the idea is that you discuss amongst each other. I will not participate in the discussion, but I will be asking questions and am mainly here to keep track on time, but feel free to ask each other also questions when something is happening or to clarify any of the experiences. So, we will first start with a little bit of an introduction, then I will ask you to carry out some activities and in the end we will close with a discussion session where I will ask you some more specific questions directly on your experience. So, does it sound okay for you or are there any questions?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: So, if there are any questions, you can always just jump in and let me know. There are barely any rules for this session, the only rule that I have is that all opinions are valued here and that your honesty about your experience is very much appreciated. So, that is it.

RJ: To first start, of course we have seen each other still last week, or maybe two weeks ago during the online session, I think it was two weeks ago already. But perhaps it would be good for me if you all could maybe do a very quick introduction about yourself and to say what you are actually studying and in which year of your study you are. So, you can decide amongst yourselves who starts.
FG13: Okay, I can start.
RJ: Yes, go ahead.
FG13: My name is [FG13], I am from [FG13's country of the home university] and now I am studying in the [FG13's home university], Spatial Planning Masters, and in the September it will be my second year of my Masters and last year as well, yeah.
FG14: Alright, my name is [FG14], I am 20 years old. I come from [country of the host university], and I study at the [host university of BIP D]. I study economics for international cooperation and in September it would be my second year.
FG15: My name is [FG15]. I am from [FG15's country of the home university], I study in [FG15's home university]. I study sociology and in September will be my last year. So yeah.

RJ: Yes, great. So, thank you all for this. And just to clarify, I think that you were all also in a different group right during the Blended Intensive Programme?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yeah, okay, good. Because I had it written in my notes, but I couldn't read my handwriting anymore very clearly to see who was in which group.
[Participants laughing]
RJ: So that is great. So, another thing to start, sometimes I do these focus groups one or two months even after the event happened but this focus group, because of the summer it is quite directly after the online part. But I would like to show you a little bit of a picture collage. So, you have all sent me one picture that you have chosen about the experience. I would like to show it to you and then if you could maybe say why you had chosen this picture? So, I will now share my screen. One second. Can you see my screen with the pictures?
[All participants nodding yes]



RJ: Yes. Okay. So, we have here some beautiful pictures, would anyone of you like to start with saying why you chose this specific picture?

FG13: I can start. Yeah. My picture is on the all left, the, where you can see the food coming. Why I choose this picture? Of course we are in this programme to study things, but for me it was more like doors to another culture because where I come from, it is so much different and I was really, I really liked the…I don't want to say food culture, but like, when everybody is gathering together and eating and have like this slow lifestyle. Because usually when I am studying, working, I am in this very big rush, but here you can see this balance between, like a school educating and just being together and talking with everybody. And as well, I really like this place with these big contrast with this farm and all around these tall, like 5-6 floor buildings, which for me it was kinda crazy to see. Yeah. And that, that is the reason I choose this picture, because it sums up all like my, all my emotions, the new interest, what I saw in [region of the host university of BIP D], in [city of the host university of BIP D]? Yeah.

RJ: Thank you very much [FG13]. Does anyone want to say something about their picture?

FG15: Yeah, I can, I can tell you about mine. So, it was kind of difficult to choose just one because I had a lot of great pictures and a lot of different feelings from each one. But yeah, I decided to choose this one. So, mine is the social dinner picture.

RJ: This one, yeah.

FG15: Yeah. So, for me what I did in [city of the host university of BIP D] was something that I did in my degree every day. So, instead of the study itself, I decided to focus on the culture and on the on the people, and I have to say that I created a strong connection with almost everyone. But of course, with my group specifically, and so I think this picture shows what a group we created. And that even though we didn't know each other or maybe we just knew people from our college. I mean, for me, I didn't know anyone because I was the only one from my, from my college, except [one of the other BIP participants from the same home university as FG15], but I only known him that day, so I didn't know him before. But I think we created a strong connection with everyone and that we all felt good with each other, and we

helped each other, and so yeah, I think we created like this family kind of vibe. You know, if you know what I mean. So yeah, that is why I chose the picture.
RJ: Okay, thank you.
FG14: My picture is that other picture because I don't love taking pictures. But you said images, so I thought that this was okay too.
RJ: Yes, sure.
FG14: This is actually a piece of artwork by Keith Haring my picture, it is a very famous piece of artwork that is located in [country]. The reason why I chose it is because it is about the diversity of human population and the way it can work together and in harmony. And I feel like Blended Intensive Programmes are about that. It is about uniting diversity and making it work, for a single like a task, and I feel like it worked for us because everyone had a different ethnic background, we studied different things, we were different people in general from a cultural point of view, but we managed to make it work. So, I feel like the diversity in this artwork represents the project as well, and I chose it also because it is, it is street work like street art. So, it reminded me of, like, the street art we saw in the different neighbourhoods, like [specific neighbourhood where the students carried out their data collection], like [specific neighbourhood where the students carried out their data collection]. So, it reminded me of the project as well. Like the different points of view and the way they can work together.
RJ: Well, thank you all very much for sharing your story about the images because sometimes, I mean we send an image, but it is good to know what are the ideas, and the emotions, and thinking behind these images. So, you all already have said quite a bit. So, for example, the family feeling, the friend feeling, the diversity of it, the learning of the new things, the spaces, and these are things that we will come back to later again in this focus group as well, during the discussion round.

RJ: But before, I would like to go back and to ask you a bit more about your motivations for joining this programme. And to do so, I don't know if anyone of you knows the Flinga platform? Did anyone of you ever used it?
[All participants nodding no]
RJ: Okay, so because this is an online focus group, we have to be a bit creative and Flinga is a platform that is kind of like a whiteboard, and on top of it you can post like digital post-its. So, I will be asking you about your motivations and then I will ask you to post some post-its on the whiteboard of why you decided to join this programme. I will send you the link of it in the chat and then we can open it together. I just sent you the link. And if you can click on the link. One second. Yes, do you all see my shared screen?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yeah, and does it work when you click on the link?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yeah, okay. So, the idea is that I am asking you, okay, what were your motivations, objectives and reasons for joining this programme? Then you can choose the colour, you can pick whatever you like. Then you can choose whether you want to do a square, or circle, a person, or whatever you want, and then you can just write your message about why you decided to join the programme. So, here I am just writing test, you click enter and then it comes here. So, I would like to now give you just a few minutes to just write some post-its. It can be as many reasons as you want, if there is only one reason, then you just do one post-it, but if you have like several reasons like, then you can just post a few. And there are of course no right or wrong answers, and you can also duplicate if somebody else has a motivation that was also the same for you.

[The participants take five minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]

Yes, okay, would you need some more time or are you okay with what you have right now?
[[FG14] nodding no, so some extra time is given]
RJ: Is it good like this?
[[FG14] nodding yes]

Students' motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP
BIP D
Learning
pushing my limits
Programm theme was interestingg
curiosity
the country
curiosity
funding
meet new people
get out of my shell
always wanted to participate in an erasmus project

RJ: Yeah, okay, perfect. So here we have all the post-its. Does anyone would like to start and maybe explain something about a few posts that you see that others wrote or that you self wrote about?
FG13: I can start. I was writing everything what was in this red squares. Like I had like many reasons, but my first thought was the theme was really interesting and it goes with my study programme. I don't have any statistics, but I have everything about cities, urban planning, inequalities in the cities, and it was really interesting as all these lectures and what we research. And then there was a thing what I really liked that it is funded because if I am honest then if, if, if it wasn't like funded I won't go because to go from [FG13's country of the home university] to [region of the host university of BIP D] is expensive. And if there is funding, I would go. And then there was like this thing I like to meet new people and as well from other countries to see different perspectives. And I was writing that get out of my shell because [nationality of FG13's] are really how to say…introverted and cold. And to see like other type of people, how they communicate, how they, how they see the world. Yeah. And that is as well to put myself outside of my usually routine, yeah.
RJ: Yes, thank you very much. [FG13], just one question for [FG15] and you, and sorry [FG14], it is not directed to you because it is about the funding which only the outgoing students receive. Did the funding cover your travel expenses and your stay, or did you still have to put in a lot of your own resources as well?
FG15: Yeah. So, for my case I had to put some money and the funding that I will receive will not cover everything. It will help but will not cover everything because when I started looking for the plane tickets and accommodation, I received an email that said that a fund apparently wouldn't be going to happen this BIP programme, so I kind of stopped. And then I think it was like a week before or so I guess, I received another email saying that, no I got a call from my coordinator saying "oh if you are still interested, it is still going to happen". So yeah, I had to of course talk with my parents because the money and like plane tickets and all that was more expensive because it was above the time, right. So, was kind of last minute and yeah, so yeah, it will not cover everything but will help of course.
RJ: Hmm-mmm. Thank you for sharing. [FG13], was it for you the same?
FG13: Yeah. For me, I had a similar situation because I know about this programme, I think one month before, but from my programme coordinator I didn't have any like messages and there was like

celebration in [FG13's country of the home university], Easter and something like that. And about the funding, I known only I think 2 weeks. If I look like a, how to say, the money, what they give me I think they like covered 90 or 80%, but I got this money only when I was in [city of the host university of BIP D]. So basically, I paid from all of my pocket and then I received. And as well, I have to say I am really good at looking for cheap flights, so I basically when I went home I didn't went from [city of the host university of BIP D] but I went from [another city in the region of the host university of BIP D] because it is cheaper and if I haven't like looked for cheaper options as well for accommodation, I think it wouldn't be like funded so much. So, if you are like really smart with resources, then it's, it's, it's, you can be funded, but the thing it was like in really last minute then it's hard to get anything cheap and have a good price.
RJ: Yeah. And [FG14], for you, did you also hear it at the last minute about the programme or how did you get to know about it?
FG14: I got to know about it through a message, I don't remember who sent it, but it was one of my colleagues. And I known for the project for about two months, one month and a half before we started because we had to sign all the documents a month before at least.

RJ: Okay, yeah. And would you mind sharing what your motivations were for joining?
FG14: My motivations were pushing my limits and curiosity. Pushing my limits, I relate to what [FG13] said about being shy and like trying to get out of my shell because I don't, I have a really hard time talking to people I have never met, I am a bit awkward. So, it was like you have to do this because you have to get out of your shell. And it was curiosity because I am not from [city of the host university of BIP D], but I don't really like I am near [city of the host university of BIP D] but I don't really know it, and I think it is better if you know your country before going out and the adventures and such.
RJ: Thank you so much. And [FG15]?
FG15: So, I said, the country. So, as I said before, my sister went to [region of the host university of BIP D] before me, to [another city in the region of the host university of BIP D] specifically. So, when I heard that it was going to be in [region of the host university of BIP D], [city of the host university of BIP D], I was, "yeah, I have to go!" And I and I always wanted to participate in an Erasmus project. I was supposed to go in one this year for like six months, but when I heard about it was also last minute. And so, I couldn't attend. And so, when this opportunity came to my, to my teacher, I said, yeah, of course I want to go. And yeah, like, the learning, the curiosity, the personal limits, meet new people. I mean, I agree with everything [FG14] and [FG13] said here. So yeah.
RJ: Yeah. So, for you it was your first BIP or your first exchange?
FG15: Yeah, yeah it was.
RJ: Yeah. And for [FG14] also and [FG13] for you as well?
[[FG13] and [FG14] nodding yes]
RJ: Okay, good.

RJ: So, well, I am happy to hear about your motivations for joining, because in the end you are all there, so your motivations were strong enough. But I am also curious if there were any obstacles, or if you have any hesitations before joining. So, I would like to do the same, but then for this part. So, I will share with you the link again. And if there was anything, I mean, we just discussed the funding, so you could also write it again, but if there was anything that concerned you before joining or if you had any hesitations, you could share it as well.
[The participants take five minutes adding memos to the whiteboard in silence]
RJ: Would you need any more time or are you finished with writing what you wanted?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yes, okay. So, would anyone like to start sharing about something that you wrote down, or something else that you see that somebody wrote?

Students' hesitations and concerns when applying to the BIP
BIP D
travelling alone
Paper work - Learning agreement
not doing a good job
funding
not knowing anyone
safety
last minute tickets and accomodation
misunderstood

FG13: I can start. Yeah, about the concerns and hesitations, what I said before, like all the papers and paperwork and was last minute, and I was really afraid that I couldn't, like, get all signed papers. As well, I had this, I write as well learning agreement because I just couldn't understand at first how many learning agreements I need to make, because in [host university of BIP D] they have one type of learning agreement, in my university another one, and there was some information I need to write it online. And in the last week, it was like, I was running around the departments to get everything signed and I thought, okay, if I don't get all the signatures, I won't go, because. And I don't know, I think in [country of the host university] it is not so strict but in in my in my university it is. Yeah, and the same with the funding because like I wasn't sure I will, if I didn't get all the signatures if I will have the funding, if I could like, do I need to like book tickets, plane tickets or accommodation and…and I put as well safety because I haven't been in [region of the host university of BIP D] before, but I have been in [a city in the country of the host university of BIP D] and I heard it's kind of similar and I was just kind of afraid because I don't want to put me in some kind of stereotypes, but I know that I am [identifying information removed] and I was little bit afraid how it will be. Yeah. And misunderstood, it was more like how to say, like most of the people are from South Europe and I am from North Europe and we have a little different communication style, and I was thinking if people will understand me, and yeah, and that's why as well I put misunderstood. Yeah.

RJ: Thank you. And [FG15] or [FG14], would any of you would like to say something?

FG15: Yeah, I can, I can say. So, also about what [FG13] said, I also put last minute tickets and accommodation, that it is what she said about the funding. I also agree with what [FG13] said about the paperwork, specifically, specifically, the learning agreement, because I had the same situation. My university has one type, [host university of BIP D] has another one, and so I was like receiving emails from to back every day, and like oh my God, this is too much paperwork to do, and not so much time because it was last minute. So, travelling alone, it was my first time travelling alone, and I had to like take two airplanes to from [FG15's country of the home university] to [region of the host university of BIP D]. And also, not knowing anyone because from [country of the host university] I don't know anyone, from my university it was also kind of the last day that I knew someone was going, but I didn't know who. So, I was kind of like, hmm okay. And yeah, I mean I think it is that.

FG14: Okay for me like my main concern was not doing a good job because I was afraid of not being up to the task of going around and do whatever because I have never done anything like that before and I thought that everyone was like expert of. Then I realised that no one knew what they were doing, so it was almost no one, so it was comforting. And yeah, that was my main concern.

RJ: And did you all get also credits for joining this Blended Intensive Programme, or I know that you don't have your grade back yet, but will you get credits for having joined the BIP?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Yes, and it will be 3 credits I believe?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: And is it all useful for you? These credits? Is it something that you need for your studies or is it something extra?
FG15: For me, I guess it is something extra, I guess. Because I mean, I am going to my last year, I don't have any left subjects to do. So, if I continue like this, I will be getting like three extra credits when compared to my colleagues who didn't come here, so yeah.
FG13: I have the same situation, like it's my last year and I need to write my master's thesis there, so it's not possible to like, it's only extra.
RJ: And [FG14]?
FG14: I think that they are gonna take away these hours from an internship that I have next year because it's the same kind of activity. So, it is just, it is just.
RJ: Okay, okay. Thank you for letting me know. I will stop sharing the screen. And you can click that away, of course. So, thank you all for sharing the motivations and reluctances.

RJ: Now I would like to move on to something else, and when I explain it, maybe it sounds a bit abstract, but I am sure once we have done it, you will get the hang of it. The idea is that I will say a specific theme, a specific topic to you, and that in the chat function on Teams that you reply within an emoticon, what you think of it. So, I will say a certain theme, the first one is for example the content of the course and then you reply within an emoticon. So, I will count down from one to three and then you all put it in at the same time you enter it in the chat, and then we will discuss why you have chosen this specific emoticon. Do you understand what I mean or do you think what is this lady now talking about?
[Participants laughing]
RJ: Okay you are all laughing, so I guess that means it is okay. So, the first one is what I said, the content of the course, so if you could all put an emoticon ready. Don't enter it in the chat yet until I tell you so, so we have it at the same moment. I will just each time write for what the emoticon is, because otherwise afterwards I would have no clue anymore which emoticon belongs to which topic.
[Participants take about one minute to find an emoticon]

RJ: Okay, have you all an emoticon ready or are you still searching?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: Good. Okay, so you may all enter it in the chat.

Content of the course		
BIP D		
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**
		

RJ: Okay, so, we have two similar emoticons, that is coincidental and one other one. [FG14], you were the last one to put it in the chat, would you like to discuss why you chose this emoticon and what it stands for, for you?

FG14: Yeah. I just, it is laughing because I thought that the content of the course was interesting. And I studied anthropology and sociology and methodology for social research, so I thought it was interesting to see how it could be applied. So, I was happy to participate in a project that had this kind of content.
RJ: And [FG15], you have the same emoticon. What does this emoticon mean for you?
FG15: Yeah, for me too, because I had sociology, theology, I had geography, I had statistics, I had anthropology. I mean, I had like everything that was talked about in the first two days lectures. I still did everything and also the research type, it is something that I am used to do, so I was like feeling students in another country and study in another language. So yeah, I mean I am feeling the same as [FG14], yeah.
FG13: Okay, I have the hearts in my eyes. I put it because I really like, in urban studies we call it urban diving. What we did in these three days was kind of similar what I usually do. And I really like the process when you go to the neighbourhoods and you talk with the people and you go to the stakeholders, and I was really, really happy about doing that. Because when I sign all the papers, I didn't know what, what we will do, and I was really happy that we, like, wasn't all five days staying in, the like, and listening lectures. I was really happy and that we will go outside and talk. Okay, we, like for dinners, we couldn't talk with the people, but you can see the reactions, they like, how they speak, what they don't like, what they, we have like, really, you can see the body language and it was really nice and interesting to see.
RJ: Thank you. Is there anyone who would like to add something?
[All participants nodding no]
RJ: No? Okay.
RJ: Then we can go on to the next one and that is the online part of the course, so the online sessions that you had, and the online assignment, of course.
[Participants take about one minute to find an emoticon]
RJ: Okay, [FG15] puts her thumbs up and has it ready. [FG14], [FG13], do you also have one ready?
[[FG14] and [FG13] putting their thumbs up]
RJ: Okay, you may enter it in the chat.

Online part		
BIP D		
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**
		

RJ: Okay, very interesting emoticons, it seems as well. Would any of you like to start to explaining it?
FG15: I, I can start, so I put the same one as the other example before. Because even though there it was an online part, and it kind of reminded me of like the pandemic, you know, because I had two years of classes in online mode and I hated it, like really. And, but it was also good because I could talk with my group, I could see them, and I also could see everyone in the presentations. So yeah, it's kind of like 50/50, you know, it's an online part, yeah, it's not the same as being in person, but it was nice to see everyone again, yeah.
FG13: Okay, I put this emoji because for me the online part was sleepy, first of all. Second of all, we didn't have really good, like coming together in online part, because in my group there was guys who needed to do some other things, so we didn't have like this really nice working together, what I would like. But yeah…because everybody was kind of busy and we had some calls, but it wasn't like, I don't know, I didn't think it was kind of productive.
FG14: I sent this emoji because I usually send it when I feel defeated. I don't, it reminded me a lot of the pandemic, so I didn't enjoy it. Plus, it was so hot, and it was just so tiring, it was many hours. And we

were, I was in a group where there were people that were as obsessed with me, with the work, so we worked from 10 to like 8:00 PM. So, I was so tired and wanted to sleep, but I couldn't, so.
RJ: Yes, because this is actually one of the questions that I have, because of course I wasn't there during the…well I was during the online sessions in the morning, but I wasn't there when you did the group work together. But one of my questions that I am curious about is whether you actually met up with your group, if everyone was there, and like, how frequently you worked together?
FG15: So, in in my case, not everyone could attend at the same time, but and yeah, we for example, the presentation simulation, for example, to see how much time we have and if we needed to cut some information or to add, we did the simulation together, but it was like in the Thursday night/afternoon, I guess. So, it was the only time we were that everyone was together on Teams doing stuff, but other than that, it was like three to four people were online on Teams, but we used to, we worked a lot separately. For example, we have a group on WhatsApp and we were like talking there but do stuff without being on Teams because not everyone could attend at the same time. So, we kinda divided it what we had to do. And yeah, but if we had a question or if we didn't know exactly what to write in some for, for example, I mean, the experience part I was like, I didn't know exactly what to write, so I was asking them on WhatsApp or on Teams. So yeah, I think it was, it was doable in some way, yeah.
FG13: Yeah, we have like similar, we basically after the first meeting with the professors, we meet together like I think for 30 or 40 minutes. We will just talk about our ideas, then we, the, we just went off and everybody do their own thing. And later at four or five we had like another meeting, but usually at this other meeting there was two or three people, yeah. So, kind of doable.
FG14: For me, in my group there were two guys that had to work every like day in the afternoon, so they weren't there, not really. They worked separately. And it was basically just two of us or three of us on a call working together, but our group was not very cohesive as in working together, but we did it.

RJ: And what do you think, the online part does it add anything to the physical week? Or what do you think about having such an online part as well next to the physical week in [city of the host university of BIP D]?
FG14: For me, I, I would have liked it more if you were in present as well, but obviously it's not possible, you know. But I think online is just, it adds distance, it's just harder. It's more practical, I, I recognise that, but I didn't, I don't really enjoy this kind of work.
FG15: Yeah, I feel the same way as [FG14]. I, I get it in the, in a week we can't do everything, we can't have lectures, we can't connect and gather the all of the hours is also the information, and also do the presentation in one week, of course. But yeah, the online part was just I think it was just to do the presentation. Was this so we could do that step? But yeah, also would prefer if it was everything in in present. So, yeah.
RJ: And you, [FG13], do you have any thoughts on it?
FG13: Yeah, I think the same. I was thinking more like, like all the lectures could be like online, but the work what we need to do, it would be better if we are all together. Yeah.
RJ: Okay, thank you very much.

RJ: So, now I am gonna put in the next one, and that is the programme or schedule.
FG15: But only the online part or like physical part?
RJ: No, sorry of the just the whole part the whole.
FG15: Okay.
[Participants take about one minute to find an emoticon]
RJ: And you all have an emoticon ready?
[One of the participants nodding no]
RJ: No? Thank you, take your time.

[Participant puts thumbs up to show she is ready]
RJ: Okay, just enter it in the chat.

Programme/schedule		
BIP D		
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**
		

RJ: Okay, I see that [FG15] is very consistent in the choice of emoticon, would you like to start?
FG15: Yeah. So, for this one, for the, it's like, I was asking if it was only in the present or only the online stuff, because for the presential I have like a really happy feeling, but for the online hmmm not so much, so I was, I didn't know which one to choose because it wouldn't be so….yeah. I just went along with the same because it's also 50/50.
RJ: Yeah. And could you explain a bit more why the 50/50?
FG15: Yeah. So, it's also the same as I said before, for the week we were in [city of the host university of BIP D], I really loved it. I, like, I had so many experiences with my group. We, besides working, we also have fun and learning and talking with other people. So yeah, I really liked it, but and the schedule was also nice. And for example, instead of working at like 8:00 AM or 9:00 AM, the teacher said we could…there was days that we were supposed to wake up, start at 9, but she said we could start at 10, especially after the social dinner, which was really nice. So, it was a little bit more flexible. And for example, [FG15's country of the home university] has an hour less than [country of the host university] for us, so when it's 9:00 AM in [country of the host university] in [FG15's country of the home university] it's 8:00 AM. So, for me to start the online part now, so for me to start it, at your 9:00 AM, I have to be here at 8:00 AM. So, for me it's also it's earlier. So yeah, for me to wake up and be sitting in a computer, just kind of trying to be awake and working was not so easy. So, yeah, 50/50 for me.
RJ: Okay. And then, [FG13], your emoticon with the…I can't do the one eyebrow.
FG13: Yeah, it, it was, I, I really like the programme. Only thing that [incomprehensible] schedule. Why this emoji? How to say, I think I said this already like three or four times, but usually when I am in [FG13's country of the home university], if, if it's written we will start at 9, we will start at 9. And for me it was like the first day, I was kinda shocked, like it's 9, nobody is here? Like what's going on? And so, it's like what??? And that is why I have I have like this interesting eyes. And as well for the online programme, I had as well different time in here, if in [country of the host university] it's 9 and here it is 10, and all the time I needed to like, think at what time I need to like join, because I have different time, and that is why I have like this like crazy eyebrows.
RJ: Okay, thank you very much. And [FG14], how about you?
FG14: Overall, it was a fun, like a really fun experience, like it was extremely tiring, but I remember like the fun of it and the fact that it was like happy to go around and meeting with people. It was fun overall, so yeah.
RJ: Okay, thank you.

RJ: And then now, another one. So, the group work part. Just put your thumbs up whenever you have got one.
[All participants putting their thumbs up]
RJ: Okay. Just enter it in the chat.

Group work		
BIP D		
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**
		

RJ: Okay, so, who would like to start?
FG13: Okay, I will start. I really like the group work because we were from different universities, from different programmes, and it was kind of really fun and nice to see how like all we are together and…or like conflicts, and how we see the things, and it was really nice. I was happy that we, like, had the group work not to like individual one because I think for every group it gives some kind of authentic vibe to their work and how they look for things and as well, the themes were so different from each other. So, I, I really liked the group work.
FG15: Yeah. For me, I put this [uncomprehensible word] slash happy, mixed of emotions because when I was in [city of the host university of BIP D], even though we worked, but we would be like do interviews and we would have like time left and we would use that time to just have fun in the neighbourhood. So yeah, I had a lot of fun, yeah it was an incredible experience, and really, really, really funny one too. So yeah, that's why I chose that one.
FG14: I chose this one because it was that it was, it is a bit like tiring, I am talking about my group, was a bit tiring. When we go around collect people because like some people from our group would go and explore more, and like no, we have to go this way and all. There was a language barrier as well, so it was a bit hard to keep them like concentrate on what we were trying to do, but it was fine. But yeah, it was a bit like, at that moment I felt like so frustrated.
RJ: And why did you feel frustrated? Because it was hard to carry out the task and to walk around or…?
FG14: Because we had a lot of work to do, little time, and we were just so tired, like we were, so we just.
RJ: And in the end, did you all manage to hand in the assignments on time?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: And are you satisfied with what you produced?
[All participants nodding yes]

RJ: Yes, I see you all nodding. Okay good. Because one of the other things and that is the last one for which you have to put your emoticon in the chat, is the social aspect of the course, so the social programme, the activities that you had…
[Participants take about one minute to find an emoticon]
Does everyone have their emoticon ready?
[All participants putting their thumbs up]
RJ: Yeah, okay, then you may enter it in the chat.

Social aspect		
BIP D		
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**
		

RJ: Okay, so I see three kinds of happy smiling emoticons. Would anyone of you like to start?

FG13: Okay, I can start. So, this emoji represents like two of my emotions. One was like when we were talking with everybody with the group, I was really happy and other social aspect was the interviews with [locals]. So, I didn't understand [country of the host university national language] at all and I was just, I mean, they are interviewing, just I was just smiling and waving like I like understood something that I was like, you can say anything. But I am like, okay, yeah.
RJ: [FG15] or [FG14] would one of you like to add?
FG15: Yeah, I can, I can. I really like the, the social aspect. I mean, I, I liked everything. Again, I had a lot of fun. I really liked meeting everyone. I could understand some [country of the host university national language], but I couldn't talk in [country of the host university national language], so I would just be there, yeah, yeah, I am understanding everything, but I can't talk with you. So yeah, it was also nice to see that stuff, and yeah, so…
FG14: And to me, it is the social aspect of it was a very positive experience because we at the end of the day we bonded as a group. Obviously, some people were closer to one another, but at the end was, I actually felt very comfortable with the group, even though I have known them, all the people for not even five days. At the end it was like a bit sad seeing them go, like yeah, so I guess it's a positive thing.
RJ: So, you say you bonded, already before also, I think it was mentioned that some of you made friends. Did you feel that there was enough time in order to meet each other and to exchange with each other?
FG13: Okay, like, how to say? Okay, I will just be, for [nationality of FG13's] we are kinda cold, I am saying like second time. For me it would be, I would like to have more five days. I have some friends but I…so for me, as well from people from north, we had many just need more time to warm up and yeah, I would like that we had like two weeks.
FG15: Yeah, in my case, I think, in the first day after lunch, I just started talking with everyone, especially with the people from my group. I mean, we didn't know we would be in that group, but we just started like talking. So, after the first lunch, we had on Monday, I was already talking with the, with the, with the [BIP participants of the host university] people. And so yeah, I think I, we bonded really quickly and when we started the groups, on Wednesday my group was already so strong and cohesive that when we got on Friday it was like sad, I mean we tried so hard not to cry, I mean, I cried when some people left. Because I was like, "noooo, I have to see you again!" So yeah, I also like prefer to have two weeks instead of just one because we bonded really quickly, yeah.
RJ: Hmm-mmm.
FG14: I would have liked to have two weeks as well because it takes me a lot of time to get used to like people and new things, and I started talking to people like in just like at the last day. I was like, why do I bond with you on the last day of everything? I am usually like that, so it would have been nice to have two weeks as well.
RJ: Yeah, well, thank you for sharing this because this BIP week was indeed five days, but Blended Intensive Programmes can take any time between 5 to 30 days. So, it is indeed the possibility, for example, to extend the duration of a programme.

RJ: Now you don't have to choose emoticons anymore, so no worries about putting emoticons in this chat. And thank you for still being with us because I know [FG14], I see you are doing this, it is getting warmer and warmer, but we are now at the discussion round where I would just like to ask you a few questions. So, it will take just a bit more time still to discuss some interesting answers. And one of the things, this really sounds perhaps like an open-door question, but if you could share with me what you think you learned from this programme? Or is there anything you learned or perhaps you think I didn't learn anything?
FG15: For, for me it wasn't, how can I, how can I say this? Okay, so, it wasn't exactly learning something new because I studied everything we learned. Of course, I learned the, the, the [city of the host university of BIP D] specifics, such as the demography of [city of the host university of BIP D], the urban,

the buildings, how it is like the historic centre, then we have, like all the other areas. So yeah, in the [city of the host university of BIP D] specific way, I learn everything new because of course I did not learn more. But there is like in an in a theoretical way, I didn't exactly learn anything new because I am used to do specifically like the interviews, I have to do interviews in every one of my subjects I do that. I have been doing it since my first year. The focus group, I haven't been in one, but I studied a lot of the focus group, but we just didn't have time to be in one. So yeah, I mean that you are not exactly new, but in a practical way, of course, yeah, 100% new, because I didn't know the country, didn't know the city, so yeah, of course.

RJ: Thank you.

FG13: Yeah, I had a similar situation because I have had as well statistics, and for me like from like academic standpoint, I didn't learn anything. But I was really happy about, about these lectures about inequality as well there was this really nice lecture about education, this was really interesting. But what I learned is, how to say, like more soft skills, how to communicate with the other type of people. Like as well, for me it opened more, more my thinking how I communicate, how I tell things. Because usually, I am just comparing to my home country, we are really direct, what we mean that we are saying like, and here I know that people are not so direct. So, I need to learn to talk little bit differently. And as well what I really liked that people were really warm and welcoming, and like, for like, my not like from academic thing but it's more like how you behave with other people. How, how you are like, what kind of person you want to be in future. Yeah, okay, it's more a little bit philosophical, but yeah.

RJ: Hmm-mmm. Okay, thank you very much. And [FG14]?

FG14: Personally, I learned a lot more about demography and more technical stuff because I have never studied any of that. But I relate to what [FG13] said about soft skills and communicating and compromising with people. There is like, the way, the way they work, the times, was, was an interesting thing to see, like how important it is to compromise and accept and try to work together instead of yeah. Not that I didn't know, but just, yes.

RJ: Yes. This is actually also another question that I had, because what do you think are the benefits of such programmes? So, a programme where international students come together from different universities, from different disciplines, because you are all quite well known with, for example, the content that has been discussed, but there were also students from totally different study subjects. What do you think are the benefits of doing something like this?

FG14: Definitely the different skills that everyone has. For example, there are people that were studying statistics. So, I think for some of them it was easier to construct the graphs or for others it was easier to put together the interviews and to build questions. Me, I was with two urban planners, so they knew, definitely knew a lot more about specially the inequalities than I did. But I study like method, methodological research, so I knew about like a bit more about interviews and stuff. So, it was easier for them to work on certain aspects than it was easier for me to work on. It was collaboration at the end of the day.

FG15: Yeah, I, I feel the same way. I think one of the most benefits that we have, is that we can help each other mutually. So, they know how to do this, I know how to do that, and we all help each other to just go in one direction. And besides, of course, the, the cultural and the social aspect of course, because we learned, for example, I learned things about [city of the host university of BIP D] and [country of the host university], we tried to teach each other. [country of the host university national language] for me, [country of the FG13's home university national language] words for them to say, so, yeah, I think it was a good and beneficial in every aspect. So, yeah.

RJ: And [FG13], do you have anything to add to this?

FG13: Yeah, a little comment. It kind of prepares you for the life because when you are working in the future, you as well you are working with a group, with people who have different backgrounds, different education and it is kind of like beneficial for like your next job, I think.

RJ: Yes, because one of the things is why these Blended Intensive Programmes have been introduced, for some reasons to organise this, is also the development of intercultural competence. Have you ever heard about the term intercultural competence? [FG13], is nodding no, [FG14], is also nodding no. [FG15] is holding her hands up. Do you have any understanding of it, [FG15]? Would you like to say something about it?
FG15: So, I, I heard about it before and I think it's about how different cultures can connect between and how they can…so how am I gonna explain? Because it's easier to think than to put in words, it's kind of like, it's higher, but so yeah. I mean, it is different cultures bonding and helping each other. Yeah, just connecting, and yeah, I think it's, it's about that.
RJ: Yeah, indeed. Thank you. [FG14], do you also had something to add for this? Because I saw you like doubting a little bit.
FG14: I guess it's about compromising like I said that before, like not thinking that your culture is better or it is the right one. It is just, it is the way you live and there are other people that live in a different way. There is not a right one, not a wrong one, just it's a way of living.
RJ: And do you think that this programme helped somehow to develop this?
FG14: Definitely, yeah. Especially when we were crossing the street, we were about to like die from the cars and there were people from [city of the host university of BIP D] and they were like when we crossed the street, people, like cars don't stop. It is stupid, but it made me think about like what is normal for us, it is not definitely normal for other people. Even the times it is 9:00 o'clock, why haven't we started with the project. We were like, no, we usually start like half an hour later and everyone was frustrated, and was normal for us, but it really puts into perspective the everything.
RJ: Yeah. Does anyone have anything to add to this or…?
FG15: Yeah. I just, I just wanted to say because [FG14] talked about like the crosswalks and the cars, and it was something for me and like [one of the other BIP participants from the same home university as FG15], I remember this one specific case where I was talking with him and we were going to the [a location], I guess. To this scene and so I was talking with him and like he saw people walking on the crosswalk and he just like abandoned me and like ran across, ran across the street to get to the other side because the cars wouldn't stop. For example, in [FG15's country of the home university] we have a specifically in [FG15's city of the home university] and all of the cities with too much traffic, we have traffic lights and so everyone kind of stops and we, we know how to, we know when to cross and when not, but even in my city where I don't have traffic lights, but like if someone is at the crosswalk and it wants to cross, the cars normally stop. There it is like you kind of need to just go and like pray, so you don't get I think a car beside you. So yeah, it was kinda, it was funny. And you know, a little okay, so I will just go and pray? So yeah, it was, it was nice to see, but it was, it was also a good to see how different it is, especially for the scooters. I mean, I have never seen so many young boys riding scooters without, for example, helmets. In my country, if you don't have a helmet, it's like you are gonna be charged for it. And like, we don't have young people riding scooters. Especially the way they do, because in [country of the host university], especially in [city of the host university of BIP D], it is like where there is a street, there is traffic. So yeah, it was, it was nice to see that.
RJ: Hmm-mmm, yeah, so a different experience. So, thank you, thank you very much for sharing.

RJ: I just have a few more final wrap-up questions left. And that is, that if you have any classmates or friends, for example, who would be going to join a Blended Intensive Programme, would you have any advice for him, her, or they?

FG15: Yeah, to be open minded, to not criticise the culture or the country they are going. And, and, yeah, for example, if you are going to do a BIP in a more conservative city or country, or that has like a more closed way of thinking, just respect that and just try to understand why it is like that, and just to have fun and not worry too much about if you are going to be judged or not. So, just to be open minded, having fun and to learn. Yeah.
RJ: Thank you. I see [FG13] is still a bit thinking. So, [FG14], would you like to add to this?
FG14: Yeah, I guess my main advice is just try and do the things, try and talk to people, try to do your best. And also, all the things we said before, like be open minded and don't judge other people because they do something that appears strange to you, because it is the way they do things and you do things differently, just that. Yeah, don't judge, talk to people.
FG13: I think go with the flow. Don't be so like strict about your opinions, be open minded, and as well be open for new friendships for different kind of people with different thinking, with different opinions, like be open for everything, yeah.

RJ: So, I hear like open is kind of a keyword among all of you. And what about any improvements for the future? How about any improvements? Do you have any advice, for example, for future organisers or teachers in such programmes that they should take into account? What do you think can be improved?
FG13: Paperwork and all the information. So, it is like all the communication. So, it's not like last minute you need to sign all papers, that it is in some kind of order. And I don't know, as well as this about this learning agreement and at the first minute when my, for my university, mobility department write this information, what I need to sign, etc. And then I thought that I need to sign three learning agreements because and the communication was kinda bad. I think it could be improved as well. These learning agreements could be like, I think in online and for all the universities the same template or something like that. That is the first thing. Yeah. And second thing, there might be, okay, I don't think it's like universities fault or something, but some kind of help with accommodation, and some, I don't know, where to better be about transportation and something, some kind information about that, yeah.
RJ: And [FG14], would you like to go?
FG14: I think more time in presence. As we said before, but as you said, it varies from project to project. And I mean, we had a lot of work to do in little time, so maybe something that can distribute the work and then more in a less tiring way. And yeah, that is pretty much it. So, I don't, I am not the paperwork, I can't say much. I can say the most difficult for me to come like to write on the learning agreement as well because I didn't understand what to write in which, but yeah.
FG15: Yeah, I, for me, it's also the first project and BIP, so I don't exactly have anything to compare to say that this should be improved or this should be better, but definitely the paperwork and specifically the learning agreement. As also what [FG13] says, to just have one template for every university. Because I also had a lot of learning agreements going back and forth. And yeah, maybe have more a bit more time in the, in the city that we are going. And yeah, I think it's just said, other than that, I think it went like for a first BIP project I think it was great really. Yeah, really great.

RJ: And would you consider going on a Blended Intensive Programme again, for example?
[All participants nodding yes]
RJ: I see you all three nodding, yeah.
FG13: I would really, would, I would like to go, but I don't know where I can like search for these BIPs, I don't have any information. And I think it is as well some kind of communication problem.
RJ: Yes, okay. And [FG14], would you like to go again?
FG14: Yeah, I would like to go, but it is the same like I don't know where, because I found out about this project in a kind of a random way through messages. It wasn't really an official communication, so, I guess that if it were like an email an institutional email about this project, because there wasn't any. And

I guess we were 13 out of all people from our university and I guess it was not only because of the language barrier and stuff; it was mainly because people maybe didn't knew that there was this project. So maybe more information about.
FG15: Yeah. For me, it is the same. If it wasn't for my teacher that kind of just sends an email to my whole class, I wouldn't know about this. But yeah, definitely. I mean, like I said before, I always wanted to go on an Erasmus project because I really like, I love travelling, I love meeting new people and their cultures, so yeah, definitely would go even if it was like another one in [city of the host university of BIP D]. I mean, whenever, there is another one, I will just try to go, yeah.

RJ: Hmm-mmm. Okay. So, thank you all for sharing. I just have one final question left and that is if you think that there is anything else you would like to share with me or if there is anything specific you think I should take into account for this research?
FG14: Maybe the fact that I don't know if it is the way this project was built, but maybe more communication with the groups like different groups, because at the end of the day, like the groups we hang out basically with the people from our groups and we didn't have a chance to meet like other people from other groups. So, at social dinner and stuff, yeah, but I noticed that it was kind of like the groups that hang out together, so the people from the same groups. So, I guess maybe, I don't know if it is from this project, but.
RJ: Thank you very much for sharing. Is there anyone else who would still like to add?
FG15: Yeah, I have, I have the same opinion. I would just really like to know besides like the lunches and at the social dinner, we were really separated from each other and that didn't... For example, with [FG14] and [FG13], I didn't talk that much with them in the, during the week. So, yeah, it would be, it would be nicer to be able to talk with everyone except on the social dinner, or like the lunches, yeah.
RJ: Hmm-mmm. And [FG13], is there still something you would like that?
[[FG13] nods no]
RJ: No? Okay. Well, then I would like to thank you all very much and I am just going to stop the recording.

Appendix XII - Focus group data

XII.1. Motivation map: Overview of the answers given

The following Table provides an overview of all the answers given in the different BIPs on the Flinga whiteboard during the motivation mapping exercise. The whiteboards themselves, including the digital post-its, are not included in order to preserve anonymity, as identifiable information could not be removed. Instead, the table reproduces the answers exactly as they were written by the students during the exercise; however, some identifiable information has been replaced, as indicated by the use of square brackets.

Table 15: Focus group data grouped together - Students' motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP

Students' motivations, objectives, and reasons for joining the BIP
BIP A
Finishing a six month internship in Impact Ventures where I understood nothing, it was the ideal occasion
Just thought it was a normal course. Did not know it was a summer school. It looked interesting and liked that it had practical parts
To be honest, drawing from past Forthem mobility, it was also the opportunity to travel in such an expensive country as [country of the host university of BIP A] (the programme did not matter that much at first)
Convenient concept that it was just a full week and it sounded interesting with the practical group work part
I was interested in crowdfunding as a source of income for your venture, also I wanted to experience summer in [country of the host university of BIP A]. So I was motivated to sign up for the event.
After one year-erasmus + one forthem, this was my last chance to do this programme at the uni I quitted for the master right after
Fitted into my course of studies

I also wanted to connect with more students across EU
BIP B
New experience
new knowledge
self-improvement
Raise awareness
meeting new people
new contacts
learning new things
to have fun)
to rest
to be aware
to explore circular economy
Visiting new places
[a local food product]
create bonds with foreigners
Practice my Enghlish
Teamwork and collaboration
Knowledge
Teamwork
To be more self-aware
lifelong friendships
CV record
[a local food product]
find out more about [country of the host university of BIP B]
Explore a new country
BIP C
Networking
International exposure
Personal growth
Diverse learning experiences

Since i also took part in last year's BIP in [name of a city], which i really enjoyed, i wanted to repeat the experience
To develop my language skills
to develop my language skills
To improve my skills and to learn new skills from different learning methods
This will help me with my future career search.
expand my network
To learn new things
To enhance my experience in entrepreneurship as a business student would help me to build my career opportunities
Increase knowledge
it's a nice experience where you get to know people from different parts of the world
To meet new people
Personal development
To experience how the exchange program works
BIP D
Learning
pushing my limits
Programm theme was interestingg
curiosity
the country
curiosity
funding
meet new people
get out of my shell
always wanted to participate in an erasmus project

XII.2. Hesitations map: Overview of the answers given

As for the motivations, the following table provides an overview of the answers shared during the hesitations mapping exercise. The original whiteboards are not included in order to preserve anonymity. The responses are reproduced as written, with identifiable information replaced and indicated in square brackets.

Table 16: Focus group data grouped together - Students' hesitations and concerns for joining the BIP

Students' hesitations and concerns when applying to the BIP
BIP A
ECTS credits are never taken into account in my [home university] but regarding the high number of them with this programme (7), it was a concern: and finally, they did not accept haha
No concerns when I choose the course. Had concerns when everything went not great during groupwork and I might thought we would not pass and that I would not get the credits, because i needed them
I was mainly concerned about financing the programme (you have to advance the money, the grant is given 1 week before), and about finding out for other pple participating from [home university] to travel together
I was hesitant about the acceptance rate for this course, since I knew for a fact all my batch mates applied for the course. Also my concers were true since [I1] confirmed that they received around 100 applications for the summer course
apart from this, Forthem provides a lot for students and it was an absolute pleasure to apply for it (very small statement, 5min candidacy maybe haha)
BIP B
how to get to [city of the host university]
fear that i don t speak [the language spoken in the country of the host university]
will I stand out?
will I get along with others?
price = perfomance
the fear of unknown

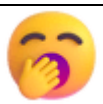
if I have fun
new country
very small city with poor connections to larger one
little knowledge regarding [country of the host university]
if I ll integrate into the group
where to get good coffee in the afternoon
meeting my professor :D
language skills
will the host family be great?
how to get heard
is it "my thing"?
how to wake up at 7
where will i wash my clothes
what about other [people from their home university]
documents
safe person
BIP C
Classes Disruption
the only hesitation i had was related to my busy schedule, since i'm in my final year, but that wasn't a problem
Balancing my studies
Work-related schedule
social integration
The fear of the inevitable
Busy Working schedule
FOMO
The difference between the educational level
Overlapping my school timetable
BIP D
travelling alone
Paper work - Learning agreement

not doing a good job
funding
not knowing anyone
safety
last minute tickets and accomodation
misunderstood

XII.3. Emojis exercise

Table 17: Focus group responses emojis exercise

Content of the course			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			
Programme/schedule			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			

BIP C			
FG9	FG10	FG11	FG12
			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			
Online part			
BIP A			
FG1	**FG2**	**FG3**	**FG4**
			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**
			
BIP C			
FG9	**FG10**	**FG11**	**FG12**
			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			
Social aspect			
BIP B			
FG5	**FG6**	**FG7**	**FG8**

			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			
Group work			
BIP D			
FG13	**FG14**	**FG15**	
			

Appendix XIII - Coding overview

Table 18: Coding overview

Teachers and Organisers		Students		Teachers, organisers and students	
Academic Orientation of BIPs	• Emphasis on academic focus • University's strength in this area as reason for topic choice	Experiential learning in local contexts and global perspectives	• Company & industry visits • Cultural & social immersion • Gaining international perspectives on the content • Learning activities tied to the territory	Advantages of the BIP framework	• Going beyond traditional classroom approaches: ○ More focused on soft skills ○ Interdisciplinary ○ Format saves time to prepare students ○ Provides an international perspective to home courses • More inclusive and appealing mobility format ○ Good alternative for semester abroad ○ Funding provided ○ Short-term nature and flexible format • Spin-off effects
Advantages of organising a BIP	• ECTS improving home university numbers • Funding opportunity • Providing home students and	Students specifically phrasing their learning	• Content specific • ICC & soft skills related	Communication and dissemination challenges	• Lack of dissemination and advertising • Unaware programme was a BIP • Short notice programme continuation

	"international" experience				• Teacher not aware of student composition
Benefits of BIPs for students – teachers' and organisers' perspectives	• International (groupwork) experience • Personal and professional development ○ Building interpersonal relations ○ Gaining different perspectives ○ Gaining soft skills ○ Prepares future career and networking • BBS – XYZ ○ Learning how to cooperate online ○ Organisation "nightmare" but "worth it"	Students' concerns and hesitations for joining the programme	• Content related & differences in level • Financial & funding • Home (university) commitments • Practical administrative • Recognition of ECTS • Social integration & group dynamics • Travel & logistical • XYZ	Duration and perceived intensity of BIPs	• Students' perspectives ○ Preference for extended programme duration ○ Intense workload ○ Time pressure and demanding schedule • Teachers and organisers' perspectives ○ Students had misconceptions ○ Pre-BIP preparation and expectation setting ○ Recognising high volume of work for students ○ Intensiveness XYZ
Diversity of students in BIP – teachers' and organisers' perspective	• Adjusting teaching material • Additional workload due to DOS • Different levels in teamwork • Mixed feelings • Not combining different levels	Students' motivations for joining the programme	• Cultural and social immersion over academic content • International networking & social connections • Personal growth & development • Self and other awareness	Groupwork	• Challenges in groupwork ○ Differences in level of engagement and motivation -Differences in commitment and participation -Differences in language proficiency -Group members quitting ○ Evaluation & academic recognition

	• Not the teacher's responsibility • Provides different perspectives • Diversity is default setting		• Cultural & travel exploration • Interest in the Erasmus programme • Content-specific interest & professional development • Improving language skills • XYZ		-Differences in ECTS and academic recognition -Perceived unfairness in grade composition -Erasmus standard less demanding ○ Examples of unpleasant experiences ○ Groupwork dynamics and structure -Disciplinary backgrounds -Diversity in group composition -Role of "luck" • Positive groupwork experiences ○ Positive experiences ○ Group composition & diversity: different perspectives • Resilience strategies for groupwork ○ Establishing roles within the group ○ Lack of help from teachers & wishing guidance ○ XYZ • XYZ - Groupwork
EUA providing the framework to set up the BIP	• Collaboration among partner institutions ○ Involvement of visiting teachers	ICC students' perspectives	• ICC – when not specifically inquired ○ BIPs about cultural learning	Involvement of (local) home students	• Circular economy home involvement • Expected presence of local students

	○ More inclusion of the partners ○ Relationship among teaching staff • Partnership providing the collaboration for the HEIs • FORTHEM framework providing possibility for the BIP		and uniting in diversity ○ BIPs "door" to a different culture ○ Groupwork & cross-cultural communication ○ Session about cross-cultural differences • ICC question ○ BIPs don't specifically enhance ICC -BIPs not enough time to enhance ICC -ICC not enhanced for people who already have an international experience -Intercultural learning can happen anywhere ○ BIPs help enhance ICC -BIPs can improve language proficiency -Cultural experience (national way) -Interacting with diverse people		• Missing mark due to low number of home students

ICC teachers' and organisers' perspectives	• "Psyched up" – students' should be informed in advance regarding group composition • Accommodation with host family • Activity tied to territory • Challenge based earning • Exploring and learning about the local culture • Groupwork in internationally mixed groups and international contact • Linking teaching to the local context • Nothing related to ICC in objectives • XYZ ○ Intercultural learning is important ○ Not enough time to focus on ICC ○ Short time but creates interest	XYZ FG	• Cultural and travel experience • Content of the course – Satisfied • Content specific • Differences compared to last year • Disadvantage - not eco-friendly • Disadvantage - not that inclusive • Final presentation • Going on another BIP & positive experience • Home Obligations • International experience • Main advantage - Collaboration with international students • Normally not getting this content • Programme / schedule • Second BIP experience • XYZ	Interpersonal relations and social engagement	• FG – Desire for more structured social activities • FG – Desire to have some introductions • FG – Enjoyment of social programme • FG – Group bonding & team dynamics • FG – International friendships • O&T – Students first in national groups and then mixed

Organisational structure of BIPs	• Online phase – physical mobility phase – second online phase ○ Including an online evaluation session at the end • Online phase followed by a physical mobility phase ○ Preparation for the PMP and establishing the theoretical framework • Physical mobility followed by an online phase ○ First establishing interpersonal relations during PP ○ Online phase as an academic extension			Online component	• FG – Desire for more interaction • FG - Disruption due to overlapping commitments • FG - Low engagement & limited collaboration in online groupwork • Online component an extension for learning • Preference for face-to-face • Online component to include more students • Online - XYZ
Student selection and recruitment process	• Balancing the diversity of students • Having “the right” students • Language requirements			Organisational challenges	• FG Practical challenges • OT Bureaucracy • OT Challenging to get colleagues involved • OT Heavy workload to organise a BIP • OT Reaching required number of students

	• More interested than places • Students applied because of topic • Recruitment should start earlier				• OT Time consuming process • OT Timetable • OT XYZ
				Participant information	• FG Participant information • Information about interviewees ○ How they became involved ○ Being engaged in internationalisation efforts ○ Professional role ○ Role in the BIP
				The novelty of BIPs	• Continuation of BIP – Template • First BIP experience • Guidance needed / guide • Having experienced a BIP before helped • Interest in knowing how other BIPs are organised • Questioning the different Erasmus programmes