

ERASMUS+ STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA**ERASMUS+ STUDENTI: LATVIJAS UNIVERSITĀTES PIEMĒRS****Elina Apsite-Berina, Viktorija Alise Kukite**

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Erasmus+ students at the University of Latvia. It analyses trends in student mobility, the factors influencing their choices, and perceptions of the university's academic environment. The study found that the number of Erasmus+ students at the University of Latvia has fluctuated, with a significant increase in recent years. Most exchange students come from Central and Southern European countries, with Business Administration, English Studies, and Political Science being the most popular study programmes. An analysis of student surveys reveals that while students appreciate the university's academic choices and support services, they often struggle with language barriers and networking with locals. The study highlights the importance of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for international students to enhance their overall experience and academic performance.

Keywords: *international students, economic impact, ISM, Baltic states*

Introduction

Erasmus+ is not just a study exchange programme. It is a gateway to personal growth and development. The internationally recognised name "ERASMUS" is an abbreviation of the "European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students". Initially called "Erasmus," the programme originally focused solely on higher education cooperation within the EU. However, it gained momentum, grew in popularity, and expanded its objectives to include learning, youth exchanges and sports. The "+" added to the name indicates its broader scope beyond higher education, a testament to its evolution and adaptability.

Erasmus+ is the cornerstone of the educational landscape of the European Union (EU), bolstering education, training, youth exchanges and sport in Europe. The

programme's role in facilitating student mobility in higher education cannot be overstated. Over the period from 2014 to 2021, a staggering 13 million EU citizens used the opportunity to participate in an Erasmus+ project, underscoring its growing popularity and significance (Erasmus to Erasmus+: history, funding, and future, S.a.). This exchange entails students from various countries studying at a higher education institution in a member state.

Since 1987, Erasmus+ has retained its place as the most successful EU student exchange programme, confirming its enduring impact (Senci et al., 2022). The programme's initial goal was to foster closer cooperation between universities and higher education institutions across the EU. This mission has not only been achieved, but it has also expanded to other sectors. In 1999, Latvia's inclusion in the Erasmus+ member states further bolstered the programme's reach, leading to significant cooperation in mobility for transnational exchanges (European Commission, S.a.). A 2018 survey of young people aged 15 to 30 revealed that over 90% considered providing opportunities for exchange experiences essential, a clear indication of the programme's success (European Commission, S.a.).

Higher education exports have become a component of Latvia's economy, making it crucial to ensure that international students choose to study in Latvia (Auers & Gubins 2016). In Latvia's Erasmus+ exchange projects, the largest share of funding is allocated to the higher education section (European Commission, S.a.). Understanding the motives that Erasmus+ students from abroad have for studying in Latvia, as well as their experiences and degree of social inclusion, is essential in order to ensure a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students. This understanding could enhance the university's reputation, promote student success, and strengthen the internationalisation of the Latvian higher education system.

Typical criteria for choosing a country to study in are diverse, such as an internationally recognised university, an engaging culture and lifestyle, the availability of scholarships, the desire to remain in the chosen country after studying, language improvement, and other reasons that attract international students (Van Mol et al., 2024). International students often experience culture shock and difficulties in adapting to an unfamiliar environment. Language barriers and administrative and bureaucratic challenges also create difficulties for international students (Reinold, 2018). Low levels of social integration and infrequent official and informal interaction between Erasmus+

and host students is an issue at many European universities (Senci et al., 2022). Being in another country for an extended period can lead to culture shock as a reaction to the unfamiliar environment; one may feel helpless and confused due to the need to adapt to new customs and social norms (Mihailovska, 2016). Creating a positive experience for these international students is crucial for successful educational outcomes and the student's development.

Erasmus+ currently involves 33 countries, including the 27 EU member states, the European Economic Area member states Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein, and the EU candidate countries Turkey, North Macedonia, and Serbia (European Commission, S.a.). A higher education institution can participate in the project if it has been awarded an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) or a national higher education mobility consortium (European Commission, S.a.).

The new Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme, with an indicative budget of €26.2 billion, almost double the funding of its predecessor (2014–2020), is not just about numbers; it is about a renewed focus on social inclusion, green and digital thinking, and promoting young people's participation in democracy. This shift in focus is a testament to the programme's adaptability and commitment to staying relevant in a rapidly changing world (European Commission Representation in Latvia, S.a.).

Educational exchanges allow students to develop valuable skills and to broaden their horizons by studying abroad. The Erasmus+ programme enables students to study at a university in another country, gaining language, culture and study experience, resulting in young people who are experienced and well-qualified (State Education Development Agency Republic of Latvia, S.a.). This programme, which has become a key driver for internationalising higher education in the EU, is a source of pride for all involved (Senci et al., 2022).

The programme is implemented by the European Commission, which is fully responsible for its management, budget, priorities, targets, and benchmarks, as well as monitoring, coordinating, and implementing follow-up and evaluation. Numerous agencies, organisations, and other bodies, such as the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and National Agencies, significantly contribute to the programme's implementation. National agencies play a crucial role in adapting the programme to the various national education systems and in cooperating with the

European Commission, other organisations, and member states (European Commission, S.a.).

Trends indicate that European students are more likely to study abroad for a short-term period, such as that offered by Erasmus+, than for the long term in order to obtain a full degree (Van Mol et al., 2024). However, each European country has unique student mobility trends and characteristics, making it essential to examine Latvia's specific characteristics in more detail.

Erasmus+ Students in Latvia and the University of Latvia

The trend of international students studying at Latvian higher education institutions is increasingly significant. While Erasmus+ students participate for a short duration and only from programme member states, there are also international students from various other countries worldwide seeking longer-term studies and education. Therefore, examining the characteristics of these international students is equally important.

Countries with smaller populations tend to have higher mobility intensities. An analysis of five countries (Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Poland and Sweden) reveals that Latvia experienced the fastest increase in Erasmus+ mobility between 2014 and 2016 (Technopolis Group, 2019). Overall, the highest number of Erasmus+ participants arrived in Latvia in the 2016–17 academic year (see Figure 1) In 2017–18, the number of Erasmus+ students gradually decreased. The academic year 2019–20 saw a markedly lower number of exchange students (1,478), likely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the number of incoming Erasmus+ students has since increased again, reaching a new high in 2021–22, with 2,957 participants.

Specifically, at the University of Latvia (UL) Erasmus+ offers study exchange opportunities for international students. The programme is not just about earning credits but also about fostering intercultural education and exchange experiences. It is an exciting opportunity for international students to immerse themselves in a diverse learning environment. Students nominated by partner universities can apply for study exchanges at the UL.

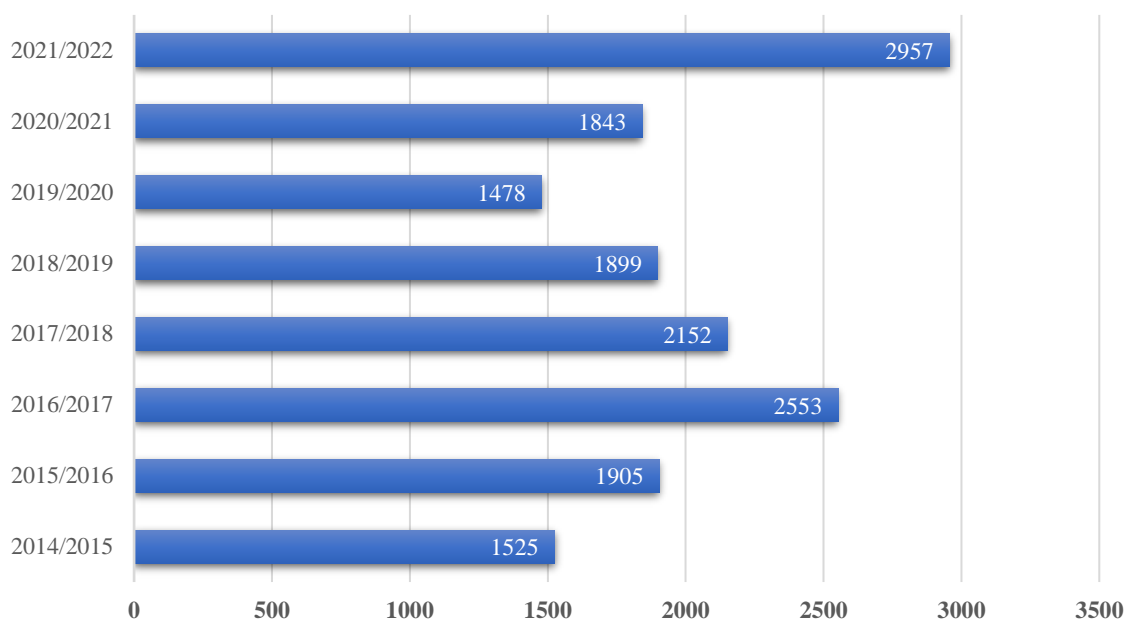


Figure 1. Number of Erasmus+ students in HEI in Latvia, 2014–2023 (authors' figure using CSB data)

The UL cooperates with 33 Erasmus+ member states, with the partner universities varying depending on the faculty (University of Latvia, S.a.). Erasmus+ also provides scholarships to cover part of the mobility costs, including travel, accommodation, and insurance. The scholarship amount depends on the student's country of origin, host country and exchange duration. International students can participate in the exchange for just the autumn or spring semester, or for a full academic year. Applications are submitted electronically via its website (lu.lv), which provides information on the application process, scholarships, and admission criteria.

The Student Services Department (SSD) at the UL informs nominated applicants about study opportunities, the online application process, and halls of residence. Students coordinate their chosen courses with the Faculty Coordinator and submit the Erasmus+ Study Agreement with their application documents. The SSD evaluates applications, coordinates formalities with the relevant faculty, and decides on student participation. The SSD ensures that international students are informed of all the necessary information while in Latvia and studying at the university. To facilitate a successful exchange experience, the SSD organises an introductory seminar for international students and introduces them to the UL Student Council (LUSP) and ESN

Riga (Erasmus Student Network) (Erasmus+ mobility organisation procedure at the University of Latvia, 2021).

Data and methods

The study used secondary data to analyse trends in international youth migration to Latvia. This data reflects the migration patterns of full-time and Erasmus+ students in Latvian higher education institutions. The database of the Central Statistical Office of the Republic of Latvia contains statistical data on full-time international students in Latvian higher education institutions (2014–23 academic year).

Data on Erasmus+ students at the UL were obtained from the archive of the SSD Mobility Unit at the UL for the 2023–24 academic year.

Results: Erasmus+ students in Latvia

This study provides analysis of the trends in the number, countries of origin, study programmes, and faculties of Erasmus+ students entering the UL. The most recent study period, 2023–24, was specifically examined to understand the most relevant choices of Erasmus+ students. This analysis has given us a comprehensive overview of international student mobility at the university and has identified key trends in the number of arrivals and study choices.

After selecting an Erasmus+ exchange member state, students decide to choose the higher education institution where they will spend their exchange. This choice is not arbitrary but somewhat influenced by academic and personal factors, including the university's reputation; the availability of tuition in English; and the country's culture, society, geography and daily living costs. Understanding these factors provides valuable insights into the decision-making process of Erasmus+ students.

In the academic years 2020–2023, most Erasmus+ students came from Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Turkey. This academic year, 105 international students from Germany, 64 from France, 52 from Spain, and 39 Erasmus+ students from Italy arrived at UL on the Erasmus+ exchange. As shown in the figure, this trend aligns with the countries above of origin of Erasmus+ students entering Latvian higher education. Most Erasmus+ students who choose UL as study exchange destination come from Southern and Central Europe.

After selecting a country and university, Erasmus+ students must assess which faculty offers study programmes that align with their interests and career goals. The Faculty of Business, Management, and Economics at the UL was the most popular choice for Erasmus+ students in the 2023–24 academic year, with 146 international students starting exchange studies there. Other popular choices among exchange students within the UL community included the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities. The faculties of science, such as chemistry, physics, mathematics, and biology, were less preferred by international students.

The final decision for Erasmus+ students before coming to the university is which faculty programme to choose for the exchange. In the 2023–24 academic year, the Business Administration programme received the highest number of Erasmus+ students, hosting 28% of all exchange participants at the UL. A significant proportion of incoming Erasmus+ students also chose English Studies, Political Science, Education, and Law as their programmes of choice. Conversely, exchange students were least likely to choose programmes in optometry, computer science, philology, geography, or psychology, among others.

Notably, most incoming Erasmus+ students at the UL in the 2023–24 academic year came from Central and Southern Europe. The most popular UL programmes among Erasmus+ students were Business Administration, English Studies, and Political Science. These findings offer valuable insights into the migration patterns of incoming Erasmus+ students to the UL, including their faculty and programme preferences.

The SSD Mobility Unit surveys incoming exchange students annually, preparing a report based on the results. Respondents evaluate the university's study courses, lecture quality, learning methods, study environment, learning material availability, integration with local students, Mobility Unit and faculty coordinator/methodologist support, library, canteen, and hostel services, ESN Riga activities and events, and whether they would recommend studying at the UL.

From an analysis of surveys from 2018–19, 2019–20, 2020–21 and 2023–24, respondents gave an average rating of 8 (generally good) to the choice of study courses. However, some students mentioned insufficient English-language courses and untimely or sudden lecture and exam timetable changes. Exchange students gave an average rating of between 7 and 8 points to the quality of the lectures, appreciating the lecture content and the lecturers' attitudes towards international students. Criticisms included

weak English proficiency among lecturers, excessive course requirements, perceived indifference, and comparisons to secondary school level.

Exchange students gave an average rating to teaching methods within the 8–10 point range, commending their quality. However, some students criticised the level of study as inadequate and considered the teaching methods outdated. Respondents gave an average rating of between 7 and 9 to the learning environment, emphasising the responsive teaching staff and accessible libraries. Criticisms included obsolete computer equipment and a feeling of not belonging to the UL community. The accessibility of teaching materials was highly rated, with e-learning being a valuable platform for information searches and coursework completion. Some respondents noted that the “e-studies” platform sometimes only provided information in Latvian.

Integration with local students was one of the most negatively evaluated factors. Some exchange students felt excluded from the UL community due to separate lectures for international students and perceived disinterest from locals. The support the Mobility Unit and faculty coordinator/methodologist provided was highly appreciated, receiving a rating of 10. The UL libraries were also rated positively, although some mentioned a lack of required readings. The canteens were generally rated well, but evaluations could have been more objective during the COVID-19 remote studying period. The canteens faced criticism due to staff’s lack of English proficiency and incivility, unclear pricing, lack of English-language menus, and high prices. The UL residence halls were criticised for needing renovation, website pictures that did not match with reality, cleanliness issues, and lack of English proficiency among the service staff. Most respondents were positive about what was on offer from ESN, highlighting its organisation of various events for meeting other students and its welcoming team.

Exchange students generally appreciated the sports activities offered at the university but found it challenging to communicate with coaches due to Latvian-language instructions and scheduling conflicts with lectures. All the respondents rated the UL activities in the 8–9 range, the only negative being their frequent Latvian-language focus.

Several factors influenced the exchange students’ experiences regarding integration into Latvian society. The conditions upon arrival, interactions with the surrounding environment, culture, and new education system played significant roles in their study quality, integration, relationships with Latvians, living environment, and

overall exchange experience. Some students admitted initial difficulties fitting in due to culture shock and adapting to a new environment. However, many found ways to integrate among Latvians over time. Students' willpower and willingness to step out of their comfort zone facilitated integration, along with support from others and positive factors encouraging engagement with members of Latvian society.

Conclusion

Overall, most Erasmus+ students at the UL come from Central and Southern Europe. Their preferred faculties are Business, Management, Economics, Social Sciences, and Humanities. Business Administration, English Studies, Political Science, Education, and Law are the most popular programmes within these faculties.

The UL, a reputable institution, provides comprehensive support services for Erasmus+ students through the Student Services Department (SSD) Mobility Unit. This includes expert guidance on application processes, accommodation, and introductions to student organisations.

Erasmus+ students generally rate the study courses, lecture quality, and teaching methods at the University of Latvia positively. However, some students report challenges with insufficient knowledge of the English language by teaching staff, outdated teaching methods, and limited access to required readings. Exchange students need help socialising with local students, but this is hindered by separate lectures, perceived disinterest from local students, and language barriers.

Most Erasmus+ students, despite the social integration challenges, highly recommend studying at the University of Latvia. They value the university's support services, academic courses, and activities offered. The study suggests that by enhancing English-language support, fostering interaction with local students, and ensuring accurate residence hall descriptions, the Erasmus+ student experience could be further improved.

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Kopsavilkums

Šajā pētījumā aplūkota Erasmus+ studentu pieredze Latvijas Universitātē. Tajā analizētas studentu mobilitātes tendences, viņu izvēli ietekmējošie faktori, kā arī priekšstati par universitātes akadēmisko vidi un sociālo integrāciju. Pētījumā konstatēts, ka Erasmus+ studentu skaits Latvijas Universitātē ir svārstījies, bet pēdējos gados ir ievērojami pieaudzis. Lielākā daļa apmaiņas studentu ir no Centrāleiropas un Dienvideiropas valstīm, un populārākās studiju programmas ir uzņēmējdarbības vadība, angļu valodas studijas un politikas zinātnes. Studentu aptauju analīze atklāj, ka, lai gan studenti atzinīgi vērtē universitātes akadēmisko piedāvājumu un atbalsta pakalpojumus, viņi bieži cīnās ar valodas barjeru un sociālo integrāciju. Pētījumā uzsvērts, cik svarīgi ir radīt viesmīlīgu un iekļaujošu vidi ārvalstu studentiem, lai uzlabotu viņu vispārējo pieredzi un akadēmiskos panākumus.

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