

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PROMOTING THE ERASMUS+
PROGRAMME IN UNIVERSITIES. PILOT STUDY AMONG
STUDENTS FROM THE FACULTY OF PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT, BUCHAREST
ACADEMY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES**

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Abstract: *In a society where education is increasingly based on experimenting rather than retaining information as such, the study of good practices implemented in other universities, the exchange of experiences and the application of theoretical aspects have an extremely important impact on students, but especially on their personal and professional development. This research paper aims to study the extent to which students of the Faculty of Public Administration and Public Management are familiar with Erasmus+ study mobilities, but also to identify a set of recommendations by which the Erasmus+ programme will become known to a higher number of students. Therefore, in order to achieve the purpose and objectives of the paper, we combined two types of research methods, a qualitative method - document analysis and a quantitative method - opinion poll, and a questionnaire was conducted and distributed to students. At the same time, the results collected and interpreted indicated that Erasmus+ study opportunities are visible to some extent among students of the Faculty of Public Administration and Management from Bucharest University of Economic Studies, but reluctance to go abroad and the difficulties related to language, to culture and people have left their mark on students' decisions to study abroad.*

Keywords: *ERASMUS+, marketing campaign, public administration, higher education, students.*

Introduction

With the emergence of globalization, many advantages and opportunities have arisen not only in terms of economics, politics, infrastructure, or culture but also in terms of education, with particular reference to university education. The continuous

development of society has highlighted the needs and desires of young people to develop both personally and professionally, go beyond the borders of the country and interact with different international cultures. Observing the growing tendencies of young people to travel in the last fifteen years, we can say that Romania's accession to the European Union has opened the door to a completely different world, new opportunities to study, but also the possibility to work and move to another country. Moreover, other facilities are represented by projects with European non-reimbursable funding, various volunteering opportunities or exchanges of experience, but also the possibility to live temporarily for studies in a European country with all living costs covered.

Since the Erasmus+ programme requires special attention and students should enjoy these mobilities and be aware of the many benefits it brings, we conducted this research to identify the degree to which students of the Faculty of Administration and Public Management from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies are familiar with Erasmus+ mobility, but also the formulation of certain recommendations that will increase the notoriety of these opportunities among students.

Literature review

In such a digitalized world, access to education and, in particular, quality education has become increasingly easy with the evolution of technology and the elimination of barriers between cultures. However, Kabanbayeva et al. (2019) consider that one of the major challenges that exist at the higher education institutions level is represented by the differences that exist between the curricula of universities in other states, which can affect the educational process and the academic mobility of students. However, new generations of young people are increasingly curious and eager to explore other cultures (Popescu et al., 2021), travel, experiment, and learn more from practice than from theory (Păceșilă & Popescu, 2022). The Erasmus+ mobility programme has been launched in 1987 and has become one of the most important initiatives in the fields of training and higher education in the European Union. More than three decades after its inception, over ten million people across Europe have enjoyed educational and cultural experiences in various countries (European Commission, 2017). The Erasmus+ programme aims to support European citizens to become active, involved and equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to meet the challenges of digitalization, rising unemployment or climate change, challenges that currently exist in Europe (European Commission, 2022).

For 35 years, Erasmus+ study mobilities have helped to improve the level of education of young people, the development of emotional intelligence, and the diversification of skills and competencies in order to have a fulfilling life. These experiences awaken the feeling of belonging to a community, increase the degree of familiarity with distinct cultures and contribute to the empowerment of young people, self-knowledge, and preparation to enter the labour market (Stilianos et al., 2013). Various researches among the beneficiaries indicate that a student who has taken advantage of such an opportunity is twice as likely to be hired compared to another student, one in three students is given the chance to be hired in the country where they studied temporarily, and in terms of programme satisfaction, 96% of beneficiaries said they were pleased with the experience they had (European Commission, 2017).

Given that students desire to develop and participate in various activities and projects to add value to their person, first of all they must be motivated to get involved in activities. Over time, specialists have identified several types of motivation, the most known being:

- Intrinsic motivation - carrying out activities leads to a high level of satisfaction and commitment for those involved, is fun or challenging in its element and does not involve consequences or pressure to fulfil a certain task (Ryan & Deci, 2000: 56; Nica et al., 2021);
- Extrinsic motivation - an activity is completed in order to obtain certain benefits after its realization or to avoid sanctions in case of non-achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000: 60);
- Positive motivation - aims to maximize efforts and increase the involvement of human resources in fulfilling organizational tasks and objectives by using incentives such as increasing salary income or the level of recognition within the organization (Bîrz, 2012: 12);
- Negative motivation - aims to increase the efforts and level of involvement of human resources in order to fulfil specific tasks and objectives, using means that involve decreases in salary income or employee status within the organization (Bîrz, 2012: 13).

One of the most known theories about human resource motivation is Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs developed in 1954. According to this theory, five types of pressing needs that people feel when carrying out activities in the daily life have been identified, (Maslow & Murphy, 1954), often described as hierarchical levels within the pyramid, starting from the physiological needs, security, social, esteem and self-realization. When a need is met, its intensity decreases, and the need for the next hierarchical level is felt. In addition, Maslow emphasizes the belief that a need must not be fully met before moving to the next level of needs (Haque et al., 2014).

On the other hand, certain factors can negatively influence motivation, leading to a decrease of it. For example, fear of the unknown, resistance to change, lack of self-confidence, anxiety or low self-esteem may be factors that have an adverse impact on young people's motivation to step out of their comfort zone. Chamine (2012) discusses in his book how we sabotage ourselves trying to cope with the challenges that may arise in everyday life. Thus, of the ten saboteurs mentioned by the author, we can mention a few that are relevant to this study:

- The Judge: this is the main saboteur that makes us worry all the time about mistakes or risks that may arise;
- The Avoider: it focuses only on positive things and avoids all tasks that may seem difficult or unpleasant;
- The Pleaser: this saboteur puts the needs and expectations of others first and does not focus on his own needs or desires.

These saboteurs function as guardians and act to protect our physical and emotional health. However, we cannot allow them to influence us in making important decisions, so we must have the courage to step into the unknown and experience as many things as possible, reaching to the fullest extent possible. For many people, the Erasmus+ programme represents a moment when some students cross the country's borders for the first time and this opportunity can be a major step towards beginning a new chapter in life,

outlining plans or finding a job that meets the current workforce market needs. For this specific reason, young people need to overcome their fear of the unknown, the fear of living in another country or meeting new people, and look at them as optimistically as possible. According to Swatridge (2021) and, over time three consistent benefits have stood out as being mentioned by students that took advantage in participating to an Erasmus+ study mobility:

- Increasing self-confidence: Young people realized that they were able to leave their homes, travel individually, and live in a foreign country;
- Expanding the circle of friends: They met people from different countries, and what made them stay in touch after completing the Erasmus+ programme were the intercultural differences;
- Improving the level of communication (Sabie & Androniceanu, 2012): English was, during mobility, the main way through which they were able to communicate with other people.

As we all know, 2020 was a year with a lot of challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, Table 1 shows the impact of the Erasmus+ programme in 2021, compared to 2018-2020 both in terms of budget and the number of students who enjoyed this experience, according to data provided by the National Agency for Community Programs in the field of Education and Vocational Training (ANPCDEFP, 2019 - 2022).

Table 1. The evolution of the Erasmus+ programme in the period 2018-2021

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>	<i>2021</i>
<i>Contracted amount</i>	78 000 000 €	100 457 000 €	144 073 220 €	91 037 216 €
<i>Funding applications</i>	2525	2887	2756	1627
<i>Funded projects</i>	654	1263	1381	850
<i>Mobility projects</i>	520	633	664	622
<i>Strategic partnership projects</i>	130	621	710	228
<i>Youth dialogue projects</i>	4	9	7	-

Source: data processed by the authors based on the ANPCDEFP reports from 2018 to 2021

There is a significant decrease in the budget allocated for 2021, but also a decrease in the number of funding applications by about 80% compared to the previous year. Undoubtedly, this was a direct consequence of the pandemic that affected society globally, and the European Commission argued that there was a budget surplus in 2020 due to declining demand for study opportunities, explaining, thus, the decrease of the budget in the first year of the period 2021-2027. However, the budget for this period compared to 2014-2020 is estimated to be almost double, respectively 26.2 billion euros (European Commission, 2021).

To conclude, the Erasmus+ mobility programme has had a positive evolution and a satisfactory impact on its beneficiaries since its inception. Even though various social, political or economic problems have arisen over time, the European Union authorities have taken care to make it a priority in higher education, putting the needs, desires and development of young students first.

Methodology

Purpose and specific objectives

This study aims to identify the extent to which students are familiar with the opportunities of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as to formulate a set of recommendations to increase the visibility of Erasmus+ mobility. Its specific objectives are:

- 1) Identifying and analysing the main motivating and demotivating factors that affect the students' decision to apply for an Erasmus+ grant;
- 2) Determining the main benefits of Erasmus+ mobility in the opinion of students;
- 3) Identifying the main sources of information for students regarding admission conditions and Erasmus+ mobility opportunities.

Hypotheses

In the context of these specific objectives, the working hypotheses formulated for the present study are:

Hypothesis 1: At least half of FAPM students want to apply for Erasmus+ study mobility as a result of the benefits of this programme;

Hypothesis 2: The main demotivating factors among students to apply for Erasmus+ mobilities are the cultural differences and the difficulties of communicating in a foreign language;

Hypothesis 3: Students consider that the main advantage of participating in the Erasmus+ programme is the improvement of their soft skills;

Hypothesis 4: The FAPM website is the main source of information for students about Erasmus+ mobility.

Research methods and tools

The research conducted by the authors is quantitative. The research methods used in this study are document analysis and a sociological survey based on a questionnaire. According to Şandor (2013), the document analysis method offers the possibility to obtain data and information about a certain subject or phenomenon that we do not have the possibility to analyse directly. To carry out this research work, various sites, reports and documents available at the national and global level were analysed on the opportunities offered by the Erasmus+ programme and its impact over time. A real advantage of using this method is that we had the opportunity to access studies that cover a larger geographical area, and the results extend over several years.

The main advantages of using the opinion poll are the standardization of questions that allows easier processing and analysis of data, as well as the saving time and resources by applying the survey online.

Study population and sampling

The target group consisted of students from the Faculty of Administration and Public Management (FAPM). According to the FAPM management report, the students are distributed according to Table 2.

Table 2. Number of students enrolled at FAPM in the academic year 2021-2022

Specialty	Year of study	TOTAL
Public Administration	I	297
	II	263
	III	249
	III additional	46
	TOTAL	855
Human Resources	I	110
	II	101
	III	104
	III additional	8
	TOTAL	323
BACHELOR TOTAL		1178
Administration and Public Management	I	40
	II	35
	II additional	5
	TOTAL	80
Public Administration and European Integration	I	31
	II	32
	II additional	4
	TOTAL	67
Human Resources Management in the Public Sector	I	28
	II	40
	II additional	2
	TOTAL	70
MASTER TOTAL		217
GRAND TOTAL		1395

Source: FAPM, 2022

The questionnaire was made using <http://www.isondaje.ro> and then it was distributed online on the WhatsApp groups of students between April 1-30, 2022. The snowball method was applied, as the questionnaire was sent to the series representatives of the students, then to each group representative and then to all the people in a study group. 15 closed questions were asked:

- 5 of them represent the identification questions regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of the students (gender, age, year of study, background and employment status);
- 10 questions were aimed to identify students' views on the Erasmus+ programme and its benefits for young people's education.

The total number of respondents was 653, whose socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Gender	Female	77.3%
	Male	22.7%
Age	18-21 years	61,1%
	22-25 years	32,6%
	26-29 years	3,1%
	Over 30 years	3,2%

The environment of origin	Rural area	32,6%
	Urban area	67,4%
Labour market status	Full-time employee	24,5%
	Part-time employee	10,9%
	I am enrolled in an internship programme	1,2%
	I am enrolled in an internship programme as the faculty requires	21,4%
	I volunteer in certain activities	4,3%
	I am not employed	37,7%
Year of study	First-year bachelor	21,6%
	Second-year bachelor	36,6%
	Third-year bachelor	14,2%
	First-year master	12,1%
	Second-year master	15,4%

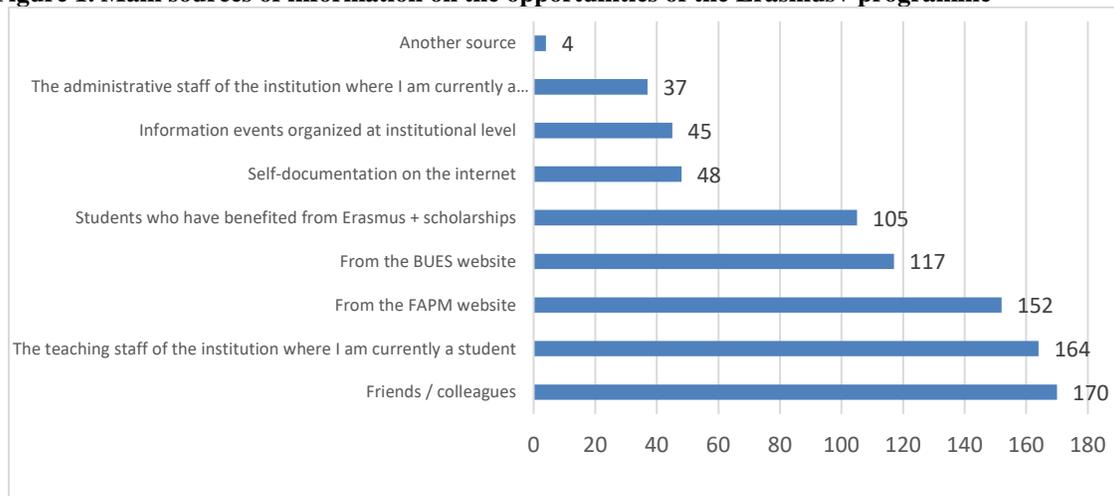
Source: Authors based on results

The response rate of students in master's programs was 84.9%, while the response rate of students in bachelor's programs was 41.71%.

Results analysis

In this section, we have analysed the answers to the ten closed questions meant to validate or invalidate the established research hypotheses. The majority of respondents (369 respondents - 56.5%) answered that they were familiar with Erasmus+ opportunities, thus showing that they had heard at least once about the possibility of applying for such a scholarship and, at the same time, about its benefits. The 369 respondents were informed about the Erasmus+ programme through various channels, but the most successful were: communication with friends/colleagues (20.2%), the official website of the faculty and the university (32%), FAPM teaching staff (19.5%) and beneficiary students (12.5%) (figure 1). Other sources from which students were informed about Erasmus+ scholarships are various projects in which they were involved, during high school or at college fairs (0.5%).

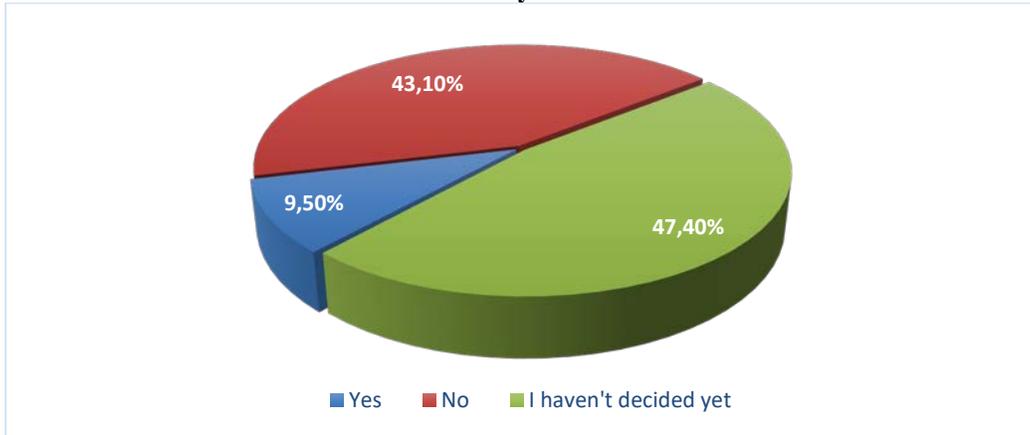
Figure 1. Main sources of information on the opportunities of the Erasmus+ programme



Source: Authors based on results

Regarding the desire to benefit from Erasmus+ mobility and to travel in order to develop certain personal and professional skills, a rather low percentage of respondents, respectively 9.5%, stated that they want to apply for the Erasmus+ programme, while 47.4% are undecided and 43.1% of students familiar with these opportunities said they did not intend to apply for such an experience (Figure 2).

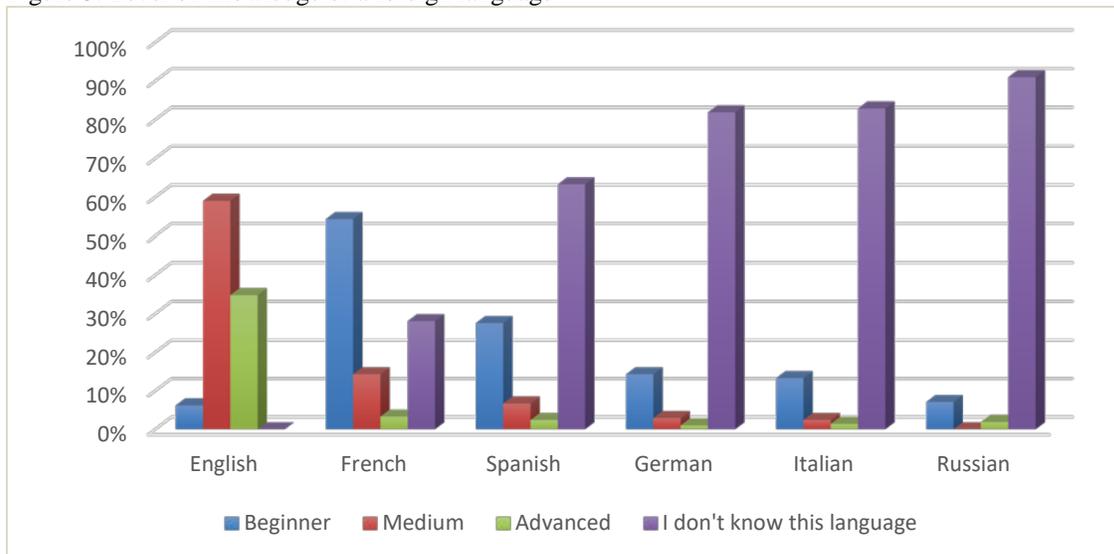
Figure 2. Desire to benefit from Erasmus+ mobility



Source: Authors based on results

One of the necessary criteria to be able to apply for such a scholarship is the knowledge of a foreign language of international circulation. Currently, the most used language is English, which, according to the questionnaire, turned out to be known both at an intermediate and advanced level by 93.8% of respondents (Figure 3). Other languages are known to FAMP students, but at a lower level, for beginners, including French, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian. As mentioned before, Erasmus+ study opportunities are the perfect way to practice your knowledge of a foreign language, and also improve your communication skills.

Figure 3. Level of knowledge of a foreign language

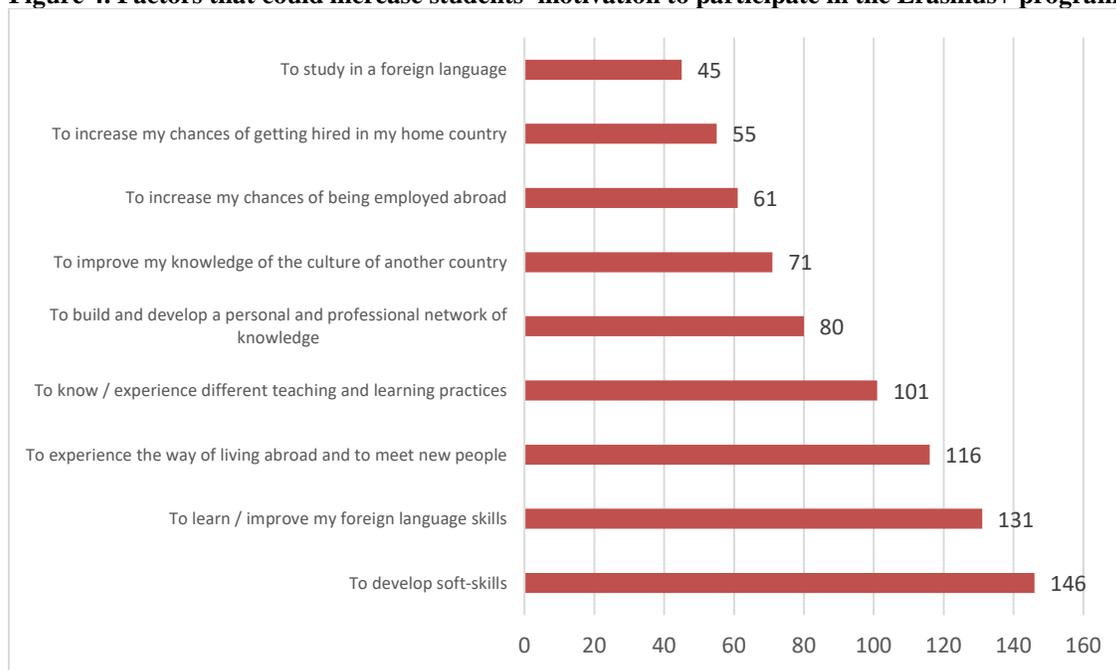


Source: Authors based on results

Regarding the respondents' perception of the motivating factors that determine a person to apply for an Erasmus+ scholarship, among the elements that would influence students the most are the improvement of language skills, but also the development of soft skills (adaptability, efficient communication, problem-solving, teamwork techniques, etc.) and broadening the knowledge area. Knowing several foreign languages adds value to any person and can be a real advantage in many circumstances, such as selection for a well-rated job or participation in various projects, international conferences, experience exchanges, etc.

The main reason for participating in the Erasmus+ programme mentioned by the students who answered this question was the development of soft skills (146 respondents, representing 18.1%), the following main reasons selected being the improvement of language skills (131 respondents - 16.3%) and experiencing the lifestyle abroad (116 respondents - 14.4%) (figure 4). We note that the first two options are pragmatic motivations aimed at improving skills that offer them new career development perspectives, but the third category is related to lifestyle and what Anthony Robbins (2005) calls the need for diversity.

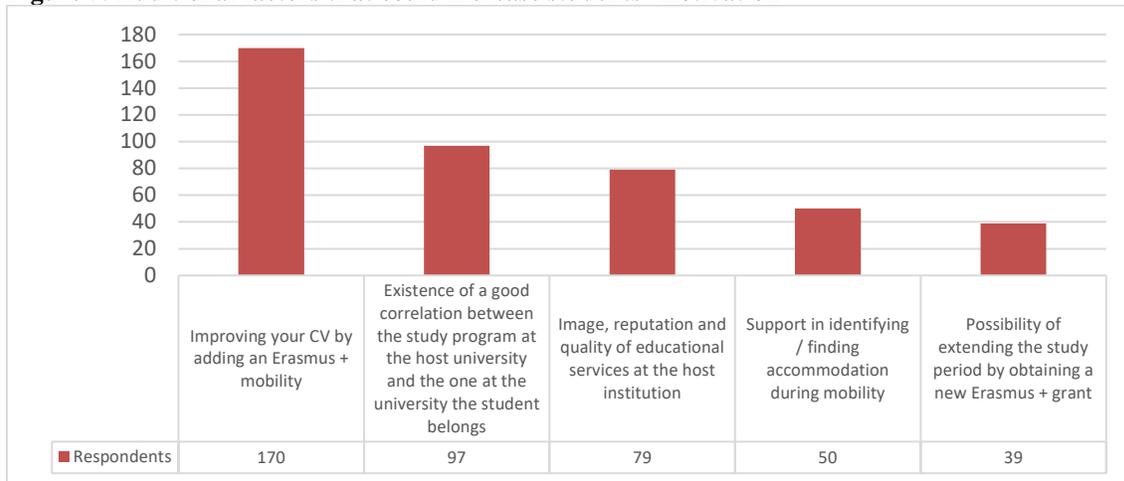
Figure 4. Factors that could increase students' motivation to participate in the Erasmus+ programme



Source: Authors based on results

Besides the main motivating factors mentioned above, the additional factors that fluctuate depending on the person and which provide additional motivation are equally important. To the question "What additional factors would further motivate you to apply for an Erasmus+ scholarship?" respondents had the opportunity to select multiple answers, and in their top was found the improvement of the CV by adding Erasmus+ mobility which 170 of the respondents (39.1%) consider an extraordinary asset (figure 5). The experience itself generates skills and abilities that can be the launching pad for a person in a successful career, as a result of accessing quality educational services.

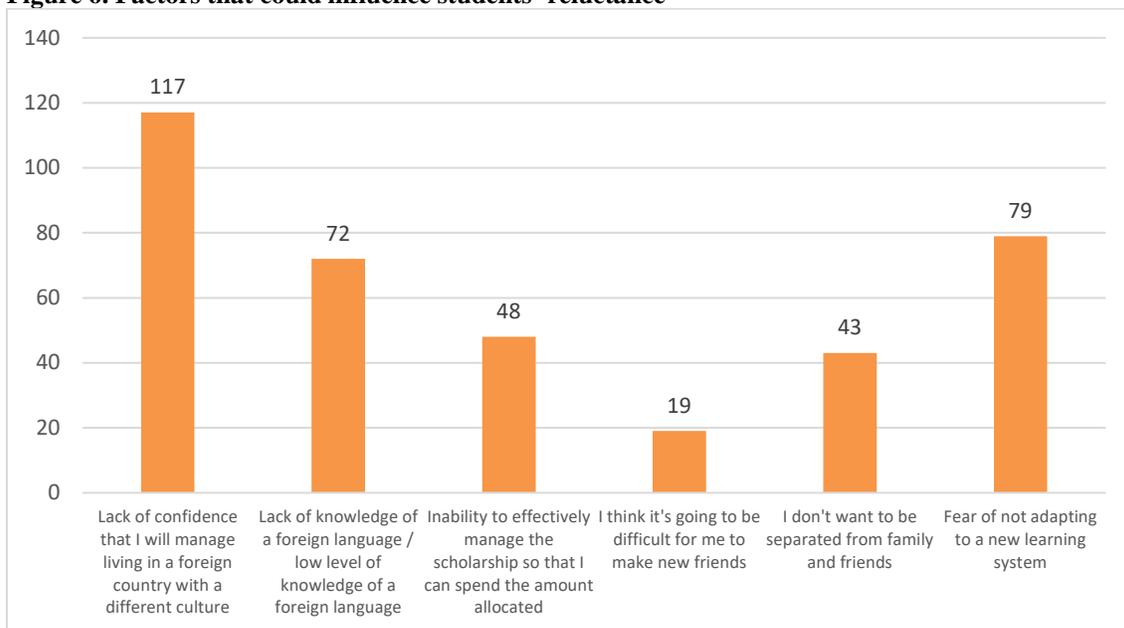
Figure 5. Additional factors that could increase students' motivation



Source: Authors based on results

Although for some people moving to another country is a source of motivation, for others it is a cause of reluctance, according to the answers to the question "What are the main factors that keep you from applying for an Erasmus+ scholarship?". The 117 respondents (31%) who chose this option considered that they will not manage to live in another environment, given the cultural difference. Lack of knowledge of a foreign language (72 respondents) and inability to manage financial resources efficiently (48 respondents) are closely related to the above-mentioned factor, amplifying the feelings of circumspection and fear of the unknown, according to Figure 6. Thus, young people should be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities that come their way and to enjoy as much as possible each experience and interaction with new people and different cultures.

Figure 6. Factors that could influence students' reluctance



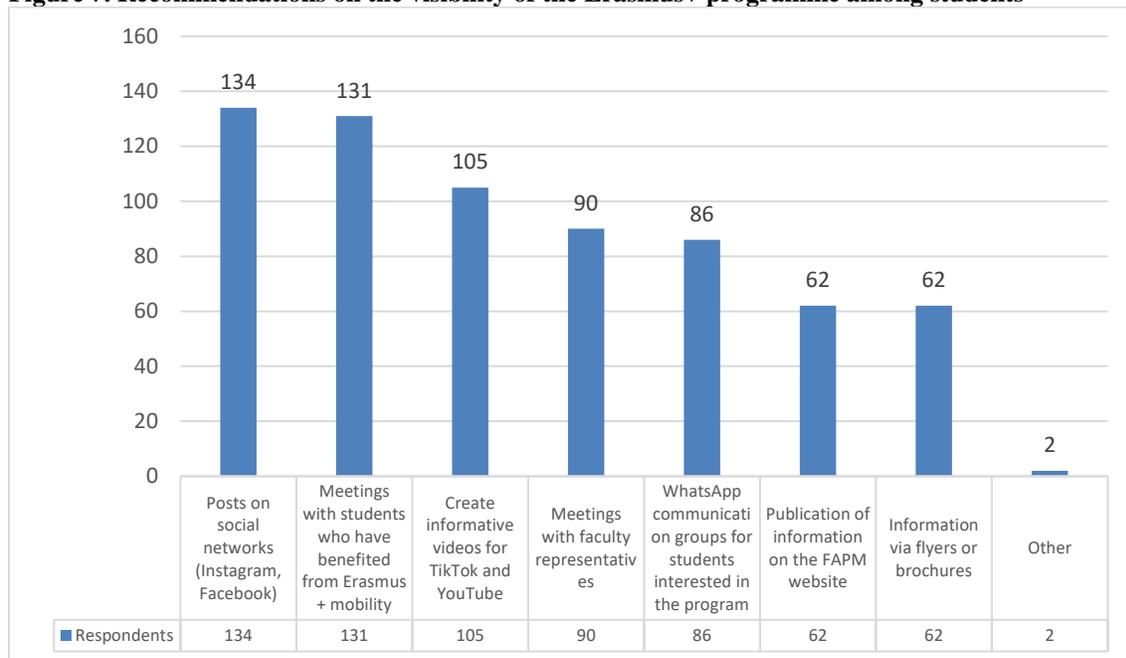
Source: Authors based on results

After analysing the answers provided by the respondents, the advantages of participating in Erasmus+ mobility are multiple, which makes the study experience abroad interesting and a result of which students will learn specific skills and competencies, in addition to memories and relationships created with various people from that university or country. The students believed that among the most significant advantages are the acquisition of analytical skills (logical thinking and concluding), where over 88% agreed with this statement, following problem-solving skills with 89.5% affirmative answers and improving cooperation for teamwork (94.7% of students agreed).

In terms of personal development, it is not at all surprising that a study experience abroad, interacting with many different cultures and expanding the circle of knowledge contribute to the improvement of individual qualities. Thus, over 80% of the surveyed students agreed that the level of confidence in their abilities will be higher, they will know more deeply their strengths and weaknesses, but also their abilities to manage situations will be improved and they will make decisions faster.

Respondents' recommendations regarding the visibility of the Erasmus+ programme among students are structured as follows: 134 of them (approximately 20%) propose to the faculty to use posts on social networks (Instagram, Facebook), 131 students (19.5%) propose meetings with students who benefited from mobility, 105 students (15.6%) want to watch informative videos on TikTok and YouTube in the future, 86 of the respondents (12.8%) consider WhatsApp groups useful for students interested in the programme, and 124 of students (18.4%) suggested publishing the information on the FAPM website and informing through flyers and brochures (Figure 7). In addition to the above, respondents considered the FAQ posts on the implications of the Erasmus+ programme to be useful.

Figure 7. Recommendations on the visibility of the Erasmus+ programme among students



Source: Authors based on results

The data collected showed that FAPM must constantly update the information on the Erasmus+ programme and must send it in the most attractive way possible so that current students do not lose interest and at the same time want to take advantage of this opportunity. FAPM must consider the suggestions of the target group, thus ensuring an educational process of the highest quality and facilitating the fastest possible access to information for all students.

Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of the study was achieved, as we identified the extent to which students are familiar with the Erasmus+ programme, but also with the many benefits generated by such an experience and the specific objectives set for this research were also met. Regarding the validation of the hypotheses, we have presented below an overview:

- The first hypothesis is invalidated, as the percentage of students who do not intend to apply for mobility and the undecided people exceeds 80%, but through information, communication and awareness campaigns, the insecure ones can change their perspective, thus deviating the research course;
- The second hypothesis is validated, because the current FAPM students have identified that they will have difficulties in a foreign country, and the lack of knowledge of a foreign language of international circulation is a criterion of rejection and, at the same time, a retention factor for them. This problem can be solved through remedial activities held at the faculty level, but also the mandatory introduction of the study of a foreign language of international circulation, such as English, during all years of study, not only in the first year;
- The third hypothesis was validated, as it is obvious that students perceive the Erasmus+ programme as a real opportunity in terms of their personal development by improving their skills and competencies. Moreover, improving skills also adds value to students' professional life and preparation for a career in the wanted field;
- The last hypothesis is partially validated, because in terms of information methods, in the ranking of students, the FAPM website ranked third. It is quite clear that the faculty is actively involved in informing students about the activities and projects organized within the institution through the website, social networks, and also the teaching staff of the faculty. However, the percentage of those unfamiliar with Erasmus+ mobility is still quite high (43.5%) and for this reason, the recommendations of the students following this survey should be taken into account.

The main limitation in conducting this study was the number of 653 respondents, being quite low compared to the 1,346 students enrolled at FAPM in the academic year 2021-2022. One argument for this matter could be that those who did not complete the questionnaire do not want to benefit from a mobility study abroad, feeling comfortable in the university environment in which they are currently. It should also be noted that there was a lack of interest from students in bachelor programs, where only 41.71% of students from both specializations took the time to complete the opinion poll. Of these, based on the results, we found that 247 students are employed full-time or part-time, are doing an internship or volunteering. Thus, due to the lack of time and activities they need to do, they may not have time to get information and apply for an Erasmus+ study mobility. On the

other hand, 226 students are not employed and focus only on faculty, so several briefings can help them become aware of the benefits they may enjoy and how they can be involved for personal and professional development.

Taking into account the results of the survey, we consider some recommendations appropriate:

- Launch an intensive awareness campaign to inform students about the opportunities they can benefit from. During the first semester, posts on the social networks of FAPM (Facebook, Instagram) should be distributed on what the Erasmus+ programme means and the benefits that such an opportunity brings. Also, extremely popular among young people at the moment is the TikTok platform, where short informative videos could be created and distributed, as well as thoughts of students who have already had the Erasmus+ experience. Regarding the YouTube channel, an idea would be to contact the students who left with Erasmus+, and they would film their experience at the partner university, but also the living conditions, people and culture in that country. Various vlogs can be created with the experiences of students who have gone to partner universities in Europe, and students who want to benefit from this programme will have an opinion about the institution they will choose and resonate the most with. This initiative will have an impact not only on the students at FAPM, but also on the students from the other faculties within BUES or from other faculties and universities in Bucharest and in the country, which will increase the visibility of our faculty at the national level.
- Organize information meetings for students, managed by the responsible teachers and students who have benefited from Erasmus+ scholarships must participate to share their experience. These meetings could take place online or on-campus between November and January of each academic year. Therefore, students of all years of study will be able to participate, regardless of specialization, as they will be able to ask questions and get answers to their curiosities about Erasmus+ study mobility.
- Encouraging students to enrol in optional courses organized by the Department of Modern Languages of BUES to study at least one foreign language. This could be a solution to reduce students' reluctance to participate in the programme. Students can improve their knowledge and practice their communication skills with other students in their university activities.

In conclusion, we propose this study be extended to the entire university, being able to analyse the differences (number of students, specific subjects and curricula, etc.) that exist between FAPM and other faculties within BUES. At the same time, this kind of research could take place at other universities in the country, initiating information and awareness activities on Erasmus+ study mobility, which could lead to an increase in the number of funding applications and programme beneficiaries.

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