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Institutional Barriers to Mobility and the University: Policy Issues

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Abstract: This paper addresses the gap between policy objectives for participation in mobility and their implementation in higher education institutions. It examines potential institutional impediments to mobility at the university level. To this end, it adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on semi-structured interviews with administrators involved in implementing the Erasmus programme from a diverse range of Greek universities (purposive sampling). Our findings align with the international literature, which identifies funding, complex bureaucratic procedures, difficulties in recognising study periods, and incomplete or inadequate information about the programme as crucial factors of institutional barriers to mobility. Furthermore, the interviewees' status and geographical origin provided insights into the non-supportive institutional context of participation in mobility. The university does not address student participation inequalities, and the existing institutional framework may discourage students from participating in mobility. Sometimes, this leads to cancelling students' participation in the Erasmus programme, which challenges higher education institutions. Research findings may have practical implications for institutional policies regarding institutional barriers to mobility.

Keywords: higher education institutions, credit mobility, Erasmus+, comparative education.

Introduction

Erasmus is the most extensive mobility programme in the world, a flagship programme for the EU, and a brand name (Brandenburg et al., 2015; Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; Rachaniotis et al., 2013). Encouraging greater participation in the Erasmus programme¹ is a key policy objective within the EHEA (Teichler, 2012, 2017, 2019).

Research Problem

The observed participation rates in the context of the Erasmus programme are incongruent with the stated objectives at both the country and institutional levels. Hence, the EHEA member countries continue to face significant challenges in meeting the Louvain or, more recently, set objectives² (European Commission, 2021). International literature focuses on quantitative studies of samples comprising students to address a particular issue. In parallel, institutional barriers to student mobility are ranked higher in the countries of South-East Europe than in the rest of the EAA countries (European Commission, 2019). Our study focused on the institutional level and interviewed people in Greece who managed the Erasmus mobility. Accordingly, this study diverges from the relevant research in two key aspects: the sample selection (Cairns, 2019) and the geographical origin of the participants.

Research Focus

The present study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the institutional barriers to mobility. In particular, it examines the potential obstacles to student mobility at the university level and, by extension, the institutional support provided to students for their participation in Erasmus mobility. The study employs a qualitative methodology with a sample of 11 Erasmus office administrators from selected Greek higher education institutions. The study examines how administrative staff in Greek universities perceive institutional barriers to student mobility, focusing on two critical issues identified in the international literature: the recognition of study periods abroad and the quality of the information provided to students about the Erasmus programme.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The research objective is to identify institutional impediments to student mobility and ascertain the underlying causes of the low participation rate in Erasmus mobility at the university level.

The research questions are as follows:

- a. How do university administrators conceptualise the barriers to student mobility?
- b. What issues arise regarding recognition of study periods abroad, and how are they resolved?
and

¹ Student mobility is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be defined in many different ways (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; Rachaniotis et al., 2013). It may include: a) temporary mobility – such as the Erasmus programme; b) mobility which refers to studying abroad for a degree and is the most popular form of mobility; and c) the type of mobility which refers to students participating in a programme of studies that has resulted from cooperation between different Universities (Wit et al., 2008). Finally, Teichler's (2017) suggestions on vertical mobility are also of great interest. This paper discusses the issue of student mobility in the context of the Erasmus programme.

² In Louvain Bologna Ministers set the following objective: "By 2020, 20% of graduates should have had international experience through study or internship in another country for at least some period". Recently, Council Recommendation, "Europe on the Move" – learning mobility opportunities for everyone, set an ambitious target of 23% for mobility in higher education, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/europe-on-the-move-a-proposal-on-the-future-of-learning-mobility>, access in 19.04.2024 .

c. How does the university promote mobility and inform students?

Therefore, after outlining the issues raised by the international literature concerning institutional barriers to mobility and describing the adopted research methodology in detail, we will present the results of our study, with particular emphasis on highlighting the context of participation in mobility. Finally, we will discuss the implications and challenges for institutional policymaking on this issue.

Literature Review

In this part of the paper, we are interested in identifying the issues highlighted in the international literature about institutional barriers to mobility.

The Erasmus programme affects the entire university, including academic and administrative staff (Scott, 2015) and students. Especially for the latter, it is a given that participation in the programme develops specific personal attributes (Teichler, 2017). Skills such as teamwork and attitudes such as self-confidence are significantly improved due to participating in mobility. Problem-solving skills, self-organisation, time management and planning skills, critical thinking, creativity, tolerance, understanding of others, empathy, responsibility, interpersonal and intercultural communication skills and, of course, language skills belong to the same category (European Commission, 2014; López-Duarte et al., 2023). Teichler (2017) highlights, in this regard, learning through the experience of difference. He sees 'learning from contrast' as adding to international understanding, enhancing reflective thinking and leading to a slightly higher level of academic and general skills but also various horizontal skills, functional at professional level – i.e. employability (Asderaki & Maragos, 2014; Brandenburg et al., 2015; Dolga et al., 2015; Souto-Otero et al., 2013; Teichler, 2019; Vassilopoulos et al., 2021; Wiers-jenssen & Støren, 2021). The relationship between participation in mobility and employability is somewhat controversial. On the one hand, the *EIS+* reports that 80% of Erasmus+ graduates found their first job only three months after graduation. In contrast, 72% of Erasmus+ graduates acknowledged that this experience positively affected their job search process (European Commission, 2019). On the other hand, however, the literature acknowledges that the importance of the effects of mobility in this field is related to the given specificities of the Erasmus student profile—the Mathew effect (Cairns et al., 2017)—while it may also, vary according to the geographical origin of the students. In particular, it is implied that students from the European South or countries with little tradition of mobility or with high unemployment are more likely to benefit from their participation in mobility programmes (Wiers-jenssen & Støren, 2021). In any case, participation in mobility is not an opportunity for rapid career advancement, "*entrée for super-careers*", but rather invaluable for enhancing students' work readiness, particularly in an international environment (López-Duarte et al., 2023; Teichler, 2017). In the same respect, it has been argued that the expected, potential, career-level benefits, although acknowledged as significant, do not seem primarily engaged by mobile students, except those moving for an internship period (Deakin, 2014).

Despite the benefits, many students do not participate in mobility, predominantly for financial reasons (Hauschildt et al., 2021). A literature review indicates that Erasmus students perceive the financial support for travel and accommodation abroad as inadequate³ (Allinson & Gabriels, 2021; Hauschildt et al., 2021). According to *EIS+* (2019), students who do not participate in the Erasmus+⁴ programme often acknowledge financial and personal⁵ reasons as their primary obstacles to mobility.

³ It should be noted here that the funds available for mobility vary from country to country and are positively related to participation in the programme (Vossensteyn et al., 2010).

⁴ Overall, it has been estimated that the number of students who do not participate in Erasmus for financial reasons is close to 1.5 million (European Commission, 2019).

⁵ Personal reasons include family obligations, the presence of a partner, work obligations, etc. (López-Duarte et al., 2023; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). By far the most frequently cited barrier to participation in mobility activities across

Regarding, specifically, university-related barriers to mobility, the literature highlights the recognition of study periods or internships abroad among the most critical⁶ (Allinson & Gabriels, 2021; European Commission, 2019; López-Duarte et al., 2021; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). The intricate bureaucratic procedures (Teichler, 2012) and dearth of information or inadequate information⁷ about the programme serve as significant deterrents, particularly among non-mobile students (Allinson & Gabriels, 2021; European Commission, 2018; López-Duarte et al., 2023). Notably, there is a correlation between students' participation in mobility and their background (European Commission, 2018, 2019).

Access is, over time, a problematic feature of the programme. Mobility concerns a minority of students who can, in any case, enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; Ballatore & Stavrou, 2017; Hauschildt et al., 2021; López-Duarte et al., 2021; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). The student population participating in the programme is predominantly comprised of individuals from higher-income families, with parents who hold university degrees and occupy positions in high-status professions. Additionally, these students often have prior experience travelling abroad and demonstrate a more advanced language proficiency than their non-mobile counterparts (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; Ballatore & Stavrou, 2017; Souto-Otero et al., 2013; Vassilopoulos et al., 2021). Conversely, the existing literature posits that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less inclined to pursue studies abroad, not solely due to financial constraints but also because of stronger affiliations with the social milieu of their country of origin and a dearth of cultural capital—such as language proficiency or prior cross-cultural experience gained through participation in student exchange programmes (European Commission, 2018; Hauschildt et al., 2021). Students with disabilities encounter a multiplicity of obstacles when attempting to engage in conventional forms of mobility due to the confluence of financial, technical, organisational, linguistic, psychological, and practical barriers.

To conclude, it is clear that Erasmus mobility is a key policy priority for EHEA countries while maintaining multiple benefits for participants. Nevertheless, the level of participation is not as anticipated. Among the barriers to mobility, those related to universities play a significant role. This research emphasises these barriers by focusing on how administrative staff in Greek universities perceive them. By focusing on administrators involved in managing student mobility rather than students themselves, insights were gained into the institutional management of the Erasmus programme.

Materials and Methods

This study selected a qualitative approach (Bryman, 2016), and the sample included administrators from selected institutions involved in implementing the Erasmus programme. By focusing on administrators involved in managing student mobility rather than students themselves, we gained valuable insights into the institutional management of the Erasmus programme. Furthermore, an explicit outline of activities designed to enhance involvement in mobility was established. Focusing on the university also introduced diversity to the field of mobility research, allowing for a more nuanced examination of the extent to which policy priorities on this issue were addressed in practice. Finally, the

EUROSTUDENT countries is the expected financial burden. On average across all countries, 60% of students who do not intend to move abroad report this barrier. This is followed by separation from a partner and/or child/children (average per country: 41 %), loss of paid employment (39 %) and separation from social circles outside the family (35 %) (Hauschildt et al., 2021).

⁶ To a large extent, these issues are also related to the administrative - bureaucratic convergence between European universities. For example, the academic calendar, language requirements or academic conditions for the admission of mobile students differ greatly not only between the EAA countries, but even between universities in the same country (López-Duarte et al., 2021). In any case they are linked with the fear of prolonging studies.

⁷ More than a fifth (22%) in a Eurobarometer survey say they had no experience abroad due to a lack of information on how to apply to participate in mobility actions European Commission (2018).

focus on the case of Greek universities retained additional interest. As mentioned, institutional barriers to mobility are ranked higher in Southeastern European countries than in other EHEA countries. Regardless, research at the meso level is also emphasised by Cairns (2019) for its suitability in studies exploring the institutional support received by students for participating in mobility.

Sample and Participants

The sampling strategy followed was purposive sampling. *Purposive sampling* aims to select a sample that is relevant to the research questions that have been posed. Because the sample in purposive sampling is not a random selection, the researcher cannot generalise about the population. The subjects⁸ were selected from the list of International Relations and European Programmes Offices posted on the IKY⁹ website. Eventually, there were nine (9) women and two (2) men with diversified experience in the subject, ranging from 10 months to 33 years. The decisive factor in determining the number of sample members was the achievement of theoretical saturation. Bryman (2016, p. 466) describes theoretical saturation as the process of collecting data up to the point where a) no new or relevant data appear to arise for each category, b) the category has been adequately formulated in terms of observed variations between its properties and dimensions, and c) the relationships between the categories have been identified and verified (Bryman, 2016). Theoretical saturation is a relative concept shaped according to the researcher's interests, who focuses on specific aspects of the phenomenon, so he or she determines when theoretical saturation will occur (Tsiolis, 2014, p. 136).

Every one of the eleven participants had participated at least once in an Erasmus training programme.

Instrument and Procedure

Data production was carried out through semi-structured interviews, seeking an in-depth exploration of the aspects that emerged from the research process (Bryman, 2016). In other cases, interviews were conducted either face-to-face, where possible or via the Internet. The internet interviews were conducted via a synchronous interaction platform¹⁰, meaning that each interview took place in real-time and eye contact between the interviewer and interviewee was possible. According to Bryman (2016), interviewing via the Internet — e.g. zoom, is more flexible and allows for changes in scheduling, even at the last minute, saves time and money; in the case of geographically dispersed subjects in the survey, the usability of the platform can encourage others to participate; the possibility of inviting harm among participants is minimised, especially in exceptional circumstances; there are no indications that reduce the interviewer's ability to form a relationship of trust and mutual understanding with the interviewees. On the other hand, technical or connection problems may weaken the process. Recording the process from the outset may be necessary, and the interviewee may not be present.

⁸ Taking into account our commitment to anonymity, in the context of social research ethics, we do not name the participants or the institutions where the research process took place and participants are listed using letters and numbers.

⁹ IKY in Greek. The Hellenic Scholarship Foundation supervises the implementation of the Erasmus+ in Greece.

¹⁰ According to Bryman, interviewing via the internet - e.g. zoom, is more flexible and allows for changes in scheduling, even at the last minute, saves time and money, in the case of geographically dispersed subjects in the survey, the usability of the platform, can encourage others to participate; the possibility of inviting harm among participants is minimized, especially in special circumstances; there are no indications that reduce the interviewer's ability to form a relationship of trust and mutual understanding with the interviewees. On the other hand, technical or connection problems may weaken the process. It may be necessary to record the process from the outset and the interviewee may not be present.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis of the data produced through semi-structured interviews was completed in five stages (Tsiolis, 2018): transcribing the interviews, familiarising with the data, coding, moving from codes to themes, and reporting findings.

Yardley (2000), regarding validity and reliability, sets the following four criteria¹¹ for data collection and analysis, as well as the extraction of results, in qualitative research: consistency, systematicity, transparency and coherence. The research process was carried out consistently and systematically, engaging and deepening the issue under investigation. The collection and analysis of data were related to the adequacy rather than the quantity of the sample. A sufficient sample yielded 'saturated data' and 'completeness' in interpretation and capturing all views at all levels of data analysis. Transparency and coherence were related to the clarity and persuasiveness of the argumentation. They were ensured by presenting the interview extracts, where readers can discern the coding and meaning patterns. From the coding and thematic meaning patterns, readers can discern the construction of a reality or a convincing narrative, thus ensuring the validity and reliability of the research.

Finally, the present research considered ethical issues raised by Issari and Pourkos (2015, pp. 89–93): informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and protection from potential harm.

Results

The following section presents the results of the data processing and study conducted on the transcripts of interviews with 11 Erasmus Office administrators. The objective is to identify and analyse the institutional barriers to mobility at the university level.

Barriers to Mobility at the University Level

In response to our initial research question, university administrators identified coordination among collaborating universities as a significant institutional barrier to student mobility. Furthermore, collaboration with students and academic coordinators may result in the cancellation of participation in mobility activities, leading to vacancies that cannot be filled or even discouraging participation in mobility, particularly among individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those with low socio-economic status or disabilities. Additionally, the funding issue presents a multifaceted challenge when raised by university administrators.

The coordination problems between collaborating universities are expressed in the level of courses offered, the language of instruction, the number of places available and the study periods. In particular, regarding the availability and information on the courses offered, it should be noted that [...] *"the courses offered in English and the study guides are not communicated in time"* (P8). [...] *"They are asking our students to complete the Learning Agreement. Do you think the courses are already posted for incoming students? They are not. The same is true for the institutions abroad"* (P2). Problems with the available courses may also emerge since [...] *"faculty members may make an agreement based on the subject they teach and not on the department's curriculum"* (P1), [...] *"we occasionally discontinue partnerships with institutions... that is because the previous academic coordinator was interested in initiating a collaboration with a particular Department of a particular institution and the new person who took over introduces different collaborations"* (P6). Many students point to the issue of language [...] *"in the sense that I go to a university where the courses are not in English and I return because I didn't come here to waste my time, or I return because the administrators in the respective offices don't speak English"*

¹¹ The four criteria are referred to in the original text as *Commitment, Rigor, Transparency and Coherence* (Yardley, 2000, p. 221).

at all" (S1). Regarding the available places, [...] *"there is no place in the English department and then they have to change the course and they find it difficult to find a match"* (P6). There have also been cases recorded where students have had to extend their study period to participate in the examinations [...] *"they have had to ask for an extension because their examination date has changed"* (P6), [...] *"it is difficult when their contract has differences regarding timetables"* (P3).

The difficulties encountered when working with students can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, the intricate bureaucratic procedures inherent to the programme are incongruent with the prevailing culture of student life, and students appear to be ill-equipped to navigate them effectively. Secondly, other, predominantly personal factors ultimately prompt students to withdraw from the programme. As previously stated, the cancellation of participation has a detrimental impact on the programme. Due to the limited timeframe, it is challenging for a runner-up to join, resulting in losing the opportunity to engage in the mobility experience. Furthermore, the institution exhibits low participation rates and fails to utilise available funding fully.

The Erasmus programme is characterised by complex bureaucratic procedures that are nevertheless considered [...] *"beneficial because it cannot be done without them. Too much paperwork"* (P4). At the same time, however, they can cause [...] *"difficulties in dealing with the students themselves. They do not read the instructions we send them and do not respect the deadlines"* (P6). [...] *'Usually, the problems we have with the learning agreement are related to negligence on the part of the students'* (P9). [...] *"They have to collect a bunch of documents ... from the secretariats and bring them to us, which is another problem that is not the students' fault here but our fault"* (P5).

The process for participation in the Erasmus programme starts in the middle of the spring semester, while departure takes place in early September. The period between the two is quite long, and some participants may reconsider their decision to participate. They cite personal - family reasons and reasons of residence and settlement which contribute to cancelling their participation and there is also the possibility that they go to the foreign country and do not find the expected support and guidance and therefore discontinue their participation [...] *"it is mainly due to personal reasons... Or they might be so excited at the time they applied in March of the previous academic term so by the time it's their turn to leave, they might have decided they just want to finish their studies"* (P1). Subjects in the survey also report that participants may have higher expectations from the host institution than those offered and they decide to discontinue their studies abroad [...] *"if there are high expectations and, in the end, there has not been a corresponding response from the Institution they may discontinue"* (P8), [...] *"they may not have had the demeanor they expected, they may not have been helped by the new state, the university, they may not have been helped by the foreign members of faculty"* (P5).

The role of the academic coordinator for the smooth implementation of mobility is crucial [...] *"the coordinator plays a critical role in Erasmus"* (P1), [...] *"academic coordinators work in advance, and that is very positive"* (P4). Their role is advisory, guiding and influential in terms of student assessment, course selection and completing the Learning Agreement [...] *"Each coordinator knows what to suggest to his students... because coordinators know most of it, which universities to go to, which courses to choose, they solve these problems before the students leave"* (P2). Of course, there are also academic coordinators who do not fulfil their role, and this is reflected in the words of the subjects in the survey [...] *"they are looking for the coordinator because they have to make some changes and the coordinator does not respond in time"* (P5), [...] *"when they cannot find their academic coordinator, they get distracted"* (P4).

Finally, the programme's funding is based on the available places established annually before the programming period and on the money available for students during their mobility. Starting with the

second, [...] *"communication with the ELKE¹² is another big difficult task because this is also an administrative internal matter... they keep raising new issues and drafting new instructions that delay us, and we do not have time to pay the students on time"* (P5). Participants in the programme may face difficulties when they return to their country of origin if they have not fulfilled their obligations. They may be subject to financial penalties [...] *"if they do not pass at least 20 % of the courses they have registered, they do not get 20 % of their scholarship. This is a strict condition"* (P11). Cases have also been recorded where an extension of the study period was needed to participate in the examination period. If this is not done in time, participants cannot receive the corresponding funding [...] *"They have a problem with their funding because they changed their exam date and did not take the time to ask for an extension. This is a necessary condition in the guidelines, so we cannot give an extension afterwards. Therefore, the children cannot be paid for the extra days left"* (P6).

However, there is another exciting dimension regarding mobility funding.

Our study revealed that the numerical targets for student participation in the programme are set within a specific framework defined by the IKY, which is related to the funding available for the programme¹³ [...] *"We set the targets and [inform] the IKY. It takes into account previous performance and decides accordingly"* (P4). [...] *"That is, you get a fascinating situation where the participation rates in the whole student population are low, but the absorption of funding is high"* (P1). [...] *"We may have low mobility on paper, but it cannot be more, and the reason is that there is no money. There is no option to send more"* (P5). In the words of an Erasmus Office administrator [...], *"We do not have the funding, so we reduced the children to 1/3. But if the money was there, believe me, we would send them"* (P9).

Recognition of Periods of Study Abroad

The research process confirmed the international literature, acknowledging the recognition of periods of study or internship abroad as one of the most common issues related to mobility¹⁴. Problems occur when the terms of the *Learning Agreement* are not upheld. They arise when faculty members raise concerns about the courses' content [...] *"The IKY has requested complementarity, not absolute identity or relevance"* (P1). Through the research process, it emerged that some institutions have solved the issues related to the recognition of courses attended abroad by applying the principles governing the proper drafting and acceptance by all three parties of the *Learning Agreement* [...] *"once the members of faculty sign the Learning Agreement, they are obliged, in whatever way they can, to recognise the courses from then on. We are very strict in this matter"* (P6). However, difficulties remain regarding ECTS obtained abroad. [...] *"Some departments have specific courses that may be included in the Learning Agreement and some that cannot. Another department may recognise all courses obtained abroad from bilateral agreements with their corresponding English title. The recognition process is delegated to the respective departments, who may handle it according to their unique preferences"* (P6). Finally, the research process highlighted that delays in recognising periods of study abroad may occur due to the host institution's failure to provide necessary documents on time. [...] *"The difficulty is to collect all the documents. The*

¹² ELKE in Greek. The Department which is responsible for monitoring funding in Greek Universities.

¹³ It should be noted here that the funds available for mobility vary from country to country and are positively related to participation in the programme (Vossensteyn et al., 2010). Similarly, it should be noted that participation in mobility is not determined solely on the basis of the numerical targets set and/or ultimately funded. There are many cases where students, for various reasons, cancel their participation in the programme at the last minute. In such cases there is no possibility of replacement and the impact for the university is twofold: a. the cancellation of a mobility place, b. future numerical targets are determined on the basis of participation in the programme.

¹⁴ Issues of recognition of periods of study abroad is identified as one of the most widespread obstacles to mobility by 37% of students in South East Europe—more than 10% compared to other regions (European Commission, 2019).

ones we ask for to make the recognition. I will not say it is difficult; it is time-consuming" (P4), [...] "When the student returns from mobility, he/she has to submit the transcript of records and the "after mobility" to each department's coordinator, who will then make a recommendation to the department's General Assembly ... the student may come back at the beginning of June, but the Assembly may be held at the end of the month. We cannot do anything about that" (P1).

In any case, each department's policy is fundamental in the recognition issue [...] "It is an academic issue... it may be solved initially at the departmental level, drafting a policy, because more or less all these things are a matter of policy, but this is an institutional decision" (P1). The decisions, the stance towards such issues about mobility also reflect the policy of the department, of the institution [...] "some departments consider that it is necessary to move within ERASMUS while some others do not consider it so important" (P6).

Informing Students about Erasmus

The Erasmus programme is well known to students. However, several events are necessary to inform those interested about the procedures required, the participation criteria and the benefits of participating in mobility¹⁵. Each institution draws up its promotion policy, with no specific guidelines from the IKY "[...] but what most of us follow is the same, we all have Facebook, social media, we all post on our websites what is going on" (P2). Of course, between Erasmus administrators, there is an exchange of good practices/ideas, so they carry out the same actions regarding Erasmus information, "[...] when a national unit invites us and we have meetings and exchange ideas, I think we all pretty much follow the same thing" (P4), "[...] just when we do the stocktaking, from the IKY they tell us watch, this watch that you should do this, there are no restrictions but more recommendations and suggestions" (P6). Finally, the promotional actions of the programme are, basically, of three types¹⁶: a. Those carried out by the Erasmus+ Offices, where, in addition to the detailed description of the process required to participate in this programme, the administrators also refer to the benefits that the participants will gain. b. Briefings organised under the responsibility of individual departments and the academic supervisor, to which members of the Office are invited to present the Erasmus+ programme, "[...] i.e. we are invited anyway, fortunately. We always update our website with everything that comes out" (P4), and c. The promotion of the programme can also be done by distributing promotional leaflets, which contain detailed information about the participation procedures: "[...] leaflets too many of course when we had the live information, we distributed them to the students so that they have the procedures in writing" (P2).

Discussion

This study sought to examine the potential institutional constraints impeding student mobility at the university level, thereby elucidating the underlying causes of the relatively low participation rates in Erasmus mobility despite the contrary aspirations at the European policy level. To this end, we have chosen to focus on how the administrators of the Erasmus Offices of Greek universities conceptualise the barriers to student mobility. Furthermore, we have placed particular emphasis on two specific points that the international literature acknowledges as key institutional barriers to student mobility:

¹⁵ Lack of information about the programme is one of the most widespread barriers for non-mobile students in South East Europe - more than 40%, (European Commission, 2019).

¹⁶ Also, the promotion of the action is done through speeches delivered by incoming students, who share their experience and mainly inform about the institution they come from, while all the subjects in the survey mentioned that they all cooperate with voluntary student groups, which contribute to the promotion of the action. However, the organization that has a catalytic role in the actions to promote the programme is the Erasmus Student Network. The student group that has an active role in the information events - workshops, generally acknowledged by the subjects in the survey, is the ESN. In the information events organized by the Erasmus Office, if there is a local ESN association, their members participate, presenting their lived experience of participating in the action.

the recognition of study periods abroad and the quality of information provided to students about the Erasmus programme¹⁷.

The study confirmed the institutional barriers to student mobility identified in the relevant international literature, namely family obligations, personal reasons, financial reasons (funding), complex bureaucratic procedures, problems in the recognition of study periods -extension of study periods, incomplete, poor information about the programme (Allinson & Gabriels, 2021; Hauschildt et al., 2021). Furthermore, the sample synthesis regarding the status of the participants—Erasmus Office administrators—and their geographical origin (South-East Europe)—provided fascinating insights into institutional barriers to student mobility. Essentially, it outlined the non-supportive context of participation in mobility and emphasised an exciting dimension about the consequences of cancelling participation in mobility (Cairns, 2019).

About the second point, it should be noted that, as previously stated, a student who cancels their participation in the programme cannot be replaced. This hurts the institution, which may experience low participation rates and, as a result, fail to utilise the maximum possible funding. This is because the margins for participation in the mobility action are determined by the available funding, which is defined centrally by the IKY (Vasilopoulos & Pirgiotaki, 2023).

Conclusions

In light of the observations presented in the section on the presentation of the results, we may arrive at the following conclusions regarding the framework of participation in mobility:

- The bureaucratic-administrative convergence between them hinders the coordination between the partner universities. This includes the academic study periods, the timely publication of study guides, and the availability of courses for Erasmus students in English. In some cases, this may even result in the cancellation of participation in the early stages of the launch of the action¹⁸,
- The coordination of services within the university (Erasmus Office - ELKE - Departmental Secretariats) has the potential to result in problematic adherence to timetables and delays in the funding-repayment of students,
- The complex bureaucratic procedures of the programme are incongruent with the culture of student life, which impedes the smooth implementation of the programme¹⁹,
- The role of the academic coordinator is of great importance in improving participation in mobility programs. This role is multifaceted, encompassing responsibilities related to the pre-mobilization stage, where the coordinator handles the necessary paperwork, provides information about the programme, and offers guidance to students; the mobilisation stage,

¹⁷ On this basis, the particular research focuses on a single country and a specific target population, Erasmus administrators, and this is a key limitation that must be considered in the question of the generalizability of its results.

¹⁸ Cancellation of participation in the mobility action, as a result of the research process, may also be caused by the support that the mobile students receive from the partner university institution or due to their initial expectations from the host institution. However, this issue does not concern the administrative - bureaucratic convergence between the partner institutions.

¹⁹ It is obvious that these first three findings, which largely concern the administrative - bureaucratic convergence within and between the collaborating university institutions, create a negative climate among students and favor the cultivation of an attitude that links the choice of mobility with the prolongation of studies - the logic of the lost semester of studies (Vassilopoulos et al., 2021).

where the coordinator provides ongoing support to students; and the post-mobilization stage, where the coordinator recognises periods of study and facilitates the student's transition back to their home institution,

- Mobile students may encounter difficulties in having periods of study or work placements abroad duly recognised, in instances where inter-institutional agreements are not honoured,
- Institutions retain their independence regarding the actions they choose to inform students: They mainly emphasise the benefits of mobility and the bureaucratic procedures necessary to participate in the programme.

Suggestions for Future Research

What has emerged from this research process is the importance of the strategic choices made by institutions to strengthen and promote participation in mobility activities²⁰ (Vasilopoulos & Pirgiotaki, 2023). López-Duarte et al. (2021) posit that the debate on administrative-bureaucratic convergence preceded the implementation of the Bologna Process, affecting, among other things, the promotion and management of international student mobility. Similarly, Allinson and Gabriels (2021) urge institutions to implement more targeted support measures for students from underrepresented groups and to monitor progress in increasing their participation in mobility activities. They also advocate for more rigorous monitoring of mobility outcomes to facilitate specialised support when necessary. Finally, Breznik et al. (2023), presenting the performance of various European countries on the issue of mobility²¹, underline their importance in the development of universities' strategies to enhance the internationalisation of institutions - e.g. signing inter-institutional agreements with partners from attractive countries, information according to the individual needs of students and their future career prospects.

The latter issue—targeted support for students—especially underrepresented groups of the student population—takes on particular importance when we consider Lesjak et al.'s (2015) argument that, in the issue of participation in mobility activities, the individual characteristics, perceptions, and attitudes of students towards the programme play a decisive role.

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²⁰ Participation in mobility, in the case of Greece in particular, does not seem to be subject to a specific strategic plan and policy on the part of the Institutions but rather appears as the component of the choices of the faculty members in the context of the inter-institutional agreements they conclude. Vasilopoulos and Pirgiotaki (2023), which is consistent with the policy of the Greek university more broadly (Stamelos & Vassilopoulos, 2013).

²¹ The relevant research is of particular interest (European Commission, 2014, 2019; Scott, 2015; Shields, 2016; Teichler, 2017; Vossensteyn et al., 2010).

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