

# Perspectives of studying abroad The case of the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates criteria that influence the development of students' mobility at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria over the last 12 years. Generally, there is an increase on the number of incoming students while there is a decrease on the number of outgoing students. To identify reasons for this development, a total of 223 learning agreements have been analysed. In order to help interpret results, interviews with students engaging in an Erasmus programme aiming at spending a term studying abroad and a person in charge of coordinating Erasmus programmes have been held. In accordance with other studies on student mobility, this research identifies aspects that are generally conducive and others which are unfavourable for study abroad. The analyses of the outcomes show that the prospect of gaining intercultural experience, the interest in further developing soft skills, the language of instruction at the university and country of destination on the one hand, and the conditions at the home university including the amount of credits recognised by the sending institution on students' return, as well as the probability of time loss on the other hand are the main criteria that are influential on a teacher trainee's decision whether to spend a semester studying in a foreign country. Moreover, strategies for encouraging student mobility such as the organisation of information events, the provision of language courses, and a more extensive credit transfer system for outgoing students are identified.*

**Keywords:** *Erasmus, study abroad, intercultural experience, personal development, teacher education.*

## **Article History**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Signed in 1999 by ministers for higher education of 29 European countries, the Bologna Cooperation Process has influenced higher education not only in European but also in non-European countries. The currently 48 participating countries commonly aim at developing and fostering aspects such as the mobility of students and staff, a common degree system, social inclusion, lifelong learning, a European system of credits, quality assurance in higher education, and at establishing Europe as an attractive knowledge region for learning and teaching. The three key commitments of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) include the implementation of a three-cycle degree structure, the recognition of qualifications, and the realisation of quality-assurance measures. Within the three-cycle degree structure, undergraduate studies lead to graduate and doctoral studies. The application of the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS) includes the issuance of diploma supplements which show admission requirements, objectives, and course contents. For recognition of qualifications obtained in other countries or study fields, academic studies need to be comparable and equivalent. In this context and to assure the quality of qualifications, higher education institutions need to develop and publish quality assurance strategies and evaluation reports (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2018).

Austria has been a full member of the Bologna Process and EHEA since 1999. With reference to teacher education at University Colleges of Teacher Education, the European Credits Transfer System was introduced in 2007, the year in which the Austrian „Pädagogische Akademien“ which may translate as “Pedagogical Academies” or as “Teacher Training Colleges” turned into „Pädagogische Hochschulen“ (University Colleges of Teacher Education).

**Table 1.** Overall numbers of students at universities participating in an Erasmus+ programme in Austria between 2014 and 2017

Austrian Province/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017
Burgenland	87	99	76	107
Carinthia	293	299	288	376
Lower Austria	568	628	579	703
Upper Austria	591	668	657	778
Salzburg	473	507	557	595
Styria	1321	1694	1315	1760
Tyrol	976	1074	944	1153

Vorarlberg	140	147	149	189
Vienna	3656	3819	3503	4193
Sum	8105	8935	8068	9854

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Source: OEAD Annual Report 2017

Figures of the overall development of student mobility in Austria over the last few years show a general decrease in the numbers of students participating in an Erasmus programme between the years 2015 and 2016. This decline is true for all Austrian provinces except for two, Salzburg and Vorarlberg, which are popular skiing regions.

In the academic years 2015/16, a new teacher education system was implemented. It ended the era of the three teacher education programmes for primary schools, special needs schools and lower secondary schools that each were completed with a bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Education, BEd) after a six-semester study of 180 ECTS. Since then it is no longer possible to study lower secondary education for students aged between 10 and 14 at a University College of Teacher Education as all secondary education has been transferred to university. There, the programme comprises a study of at least six years including a bachelor's programme of 240 ECTS and a master's programme of 120 ECTS. The former six-terms and 180 ECTS bachelor's programme for primary school teachers has turned into a programme including an eight-semester and 240 ECTS bachelor's study which is completed with the academic degree BEd and a compulsory two or three semesters, 60 or 90 ECTS master's programme which is awarded with a Master's of Education (MEd).

Although the special needs education programme has been discontinued entailing that it is no longer possible to qualify as a special-needs teacher in Austria, there is the opportunity for primary school teacher trainees to intensively study special-needs education.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Teaching and learning in a new environment are recognised as two of the main objectives of the Bologna Process. In 2009, European Ministers stipulated that by 2020, 20 % of graduating students should have had experience in study abroad (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). This notion is in line with research conducted by Clarke (2004) who suggests making study abroad mandatory for every student. She reasons, as well as Bećirović and Brdarević Čeljo (2018) and Bećirović and Podojak (2018), that global awareness is essential in a society of cultural diversity which is why educational systems would have

to create curriculums that focus on developing and promoting foreign language skills as well as international and intercultural knowledge.

Following the European Commission's stipulation, most participating countries in the Bologna Process have developed strategies for fostering student mobility. In this context it appears essential to identify criteria that influence students' decision on spending a semester abroad. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) distinguish "push-pull" factors that affect a student's decision for a study abroad. They determine "push factors" to be mostly related to the socioeconomic situation of students that would induce individuals to seek higher education in destinations considered to be more privileged than their home country. Although these "push factors" appear relevant for developing countries, they do not seem to play an important role in other countries where certain "pull factors" are more important. "Pull factors", as described by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), are students' knowledge about the destination country and the university of choice, personal recommendations of relatives and peers, the environment, the host country's distance to home, the institution's reputation for quality, and expenses. Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010) define "push factors" which are related to students' personal and professional advancement. According to their research, students' desire for personal development through a once-in-a-lifetime experience, becoming more self-dependent, the ambition to improve a foreign language, and the importance of study abroad for a future career are the most crucial factors in the decision process. Referring to "pull factors", Eder et al. (2002) recognise the educational institution and related issues, climate and location, and the culture of destination as the most influential. A research conducted by Walters (2018) distinguishes pros and cons that are decisive for study abroad. According to his study, financial factors and specific requirements of the curriculum at the home university are the two main hindrances to students' mobility. In many cases, potentially interested students would refrain from studying abroad because they do not want to risk a delay in their studies caused by additional financial burdens that would induce them to take on a job. Further barriers to student mobility are the risk of missing mandatory courses at the home university and difficulty in finding equivalent courses at the university abroad. On the other hand, the opportunity of travelling and studying at the same time is attractive and motivates students to apply for an Erasmus programme. With reference to credit transfer, Walters' (2018) outcomes illustrate students' appreciation of either finding a programme abroad which suits their specific home-curriculum requirements, or an approach applied by their home university that allows credit transfer regardless of the content of courses attended abroad. Both options are welcome as they avoid a delay in graduation. Worldwide, various approaches to increasing student mobility and internationalisation can be observed. With reference to the Report by the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2018), these strategies include the implementation of online programmes, foreign language courses, funding, legal measures, as well as international cooperation projects.

### 3. CURRENT STUDY

As a result of the above described changes in teacher education in Austria, the possibilities for students' mobility at University Colleges of Teacher Education have been reduced to the field of primary education. It was, therefore, aimed at investigating in what way the recent developments may have influenced teacher trainees' mobility. Moreover, and more importantly, this study is directed at providing an overview of the development of students' mobility at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria over the last 12 years, at identifying factors that influence students' mobility and at contributing to research on students' mobility within the Bologna Process. Therefore, the main research question was devised as follows: Which motivational aspects influence students' mobility at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria?

### 4. RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample comprises a total of 223 learning agreements from 76 incoming and 147 outgoing students over the last 12 years at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria. Furthermore, 12 interviews have been held. The participants are four males and eight females including three incoming students, five former and three future outgoings, as well as one person responsible for the coordination of Erasmus studies. The interviewees were selected by applying convenience sampling which is a nonprobability sampling method that involves the selection of participants due to their availability for the investigation (McMillan, 2012).

### 5. METHOD

The data for this qualitative study was obtained through reviewing 223 learning agreements, registration forms and reports on the one hand and by conducting 12 semi-structured guided interviews on the other hand. Regarding the data retrieved from the learning agreements, an analysis of frequencies was performed. The data obtained from the interviews was analysed using topical coding (Kuckartz, 2010). This method includes the following steps. In the beginning, all cases are interpreted separately. Secondly, single cases are compared and analysed. In a next step, categories are developed with reference to the topics that have occurred in the cases and text segments are matched to the codes. Lastly, topics are examined in contrast and the relationships of codes are analysed.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 2.** Overview of the number of incoming students and their countries of origin at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria

Academic year	Total	Number of Incomings and Countries of Origin
2007/08	2	2 Hungary
2008/09	4	2 Czech Republic, 1 Greece, 1 Spain
2009/10	6	1 Greece, 2 Spain, 3 UK
2010/11	8	1 Belgium, 1 Greece, 2 Hungary, 1 Netherlands, 3 Spain
2011/12	4	1 Greece, 2 Spain, 1 UK
2012/13	4	4 Hungary
2013/14	5	2 Greece, 3 Hungary
2014/15	3	1 Ireland, 1 Hungary, 1 Spain
2015/16	9	2 Belgium, 1 Germany, 1 Greece, 2 Italy, 3 Spain,
2016/17	6	1 Greece, 1 Italy, 3 Spain, 1 Switzerland
2017/18	12	1 Germany, 2 Greece, 3 Italy, 6 Spain
2018/19	13	2 Greece, 1 Hungary, 3 Italy, 7 Spain

Table 2 presents the number of students who came to study in Austria at the University College of Teacher Education per country of origin and academic year. Since 2007, the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria has been cooperating with a total of 45 partner universities from 21 countries. Referring to the number of incoming students and their countries of origin, out of the 76 incomings, most originate from Spain (36,8 %), followed by Hungary (17,1 %), Greece (15,8 %), Italy (11,8 %) and the UK (5,2 %). Those students who come to Austria usually take German classes in their home country and often study to become teachers of German as a second language.

**Table 3.** Overview of the number of outgoing students at the university college of teacher education in Lower Austria and their countries of destination

Academic year	Total	Number of Outgoings and Countries of Destination
2007/08	5	1 Italy, 1 Portugal, 2 Spain, 1 UK

2008/09	8	1 Germany, 2 Ireland, 1 Netherlands, 2 Spain, 1 UK, 1 USA
2009/10	9	2 Ghana, 1 Ireland, 1 Netherlands, 2 Sweden, 3 UK
2010/11	13	1 Ghana, 2 Ireland, 2 Luxembourg, 1 Netherlands, 1 Spain, 2 Sweden, 3 UK, 1 USA
2011/12	15	1 Finland, 1 Germany, 1 Ireland, 1 Netherlands, 3 Spain, 2 Sweden, 4 UK, 2 USA
2012/13	15	1 Belgium, 1 Finland, 1 Germany, 3 Ireland, 1 Netherlands, 3 Spain, 2 Sweden, 2 UK, 1 USA
2013/14	19	1 Germany, 7 Ireland, 4 Norway, 3 Spain, 3 Sweden, 1 USA
2014/15	21	2 Belgium, 1 Finland, 1 Germany, 5 Ireland, 2 Italy, 2 Netherlands, 2 Norway, 1 Portugal, 3 Spain, 2 Sweden
2015/16	15	1 Germany, 3 Ireland, 1 Norway, 6 Spain, 4 Sweden
2016/17	15	2 Finland, 1 Germany, 1 Italy, 5 Norway, 5 Sweden, 1 USA
2017/18	7	1 Czech Republic, 1 Italy, 1 Norway, 1 Spain, 3 Sweden
2018/19	3	1 Netherlands, 1 Portugal, 1 Sweden

Table 3 displays the number of students at the University College of Teacher Education who decided to spend a semester abroad. Along with the academic year, the entire number of outgoing students in the respective year is shown and next to that, the country of destination together with the number of students who decided for the particular country are presented. Regarding the total of 147 outgoing students from the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria over the last 12 years most went to Spain (18,4 %), followed by Ireland (16,3 %), Sweden (14,2 %), the UK (9,5 %), Norway (8,8 %), the Netherlands (5,4 %), Finland (4,7 %), and the USA (4,7 %). According to the interviewees, the language spoken in the country of destination and used as a medium of instruction plays a major role in the decision process. Those students opting for a semester abroad at a Spanish university usually learned Spanish at school and want to practice and increase their linguistic skills. The majority of teacher trainees, however, want to intensify their English competency and, therefore, apply for countries such as Ireland, Great Britain, and the USA but also decide for Nordic states such as Norway, Sweden, and Finland, or the Netherlands as those countries use English as language of instruction. In this connection, Bećirović (2017), who conducted a study on motivational factors that induce students to learn English, emphasises the numerous advantages of knowing English which may be regarded as a prerequisite for a successful modern life. Similarly, Ogric-Kevric and Dubravac (2017) and Kovačević, Brdarević-Čeljo and Bećirović (2018) underline the importance and presence of the English language as a lingua franca in numerous disciplines and aspects of

everyday life, which is an actuality that may not only be observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina but is also true for the situation in Austria. Contrary to the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), the proximity of the destination country to Austria does not seem to play an important role in the sample at hand.

While there is an increase in incoming students from the academic year 2017/18 on, there is a decrease in the number of outgoing students. This tendency is in opposition to a request of the EHEA ministers for a more balanced mobility (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). Hence and in order to explain the recent developments, this study aimed at identifying advantages and challenges associated with spending a semester abroad in the new study programme.

The analyses of the interviews reveal the four main criteria that influence a student's decision whether to spend a semester abroad to be the pursuit of intercultural experience, the development of soft skills, the conditions at the university and country of destination, and the conditions at the home university. All interviewees agree that the desire for intercultural experience is the main motivation for studying abroad. In this context, many explained that they would not only like to study abroad but also want to live in a foreign country, not merely as a tourist, but long to experience "total immersion" in their culture of choice. They aspire to learn and practice a foreign language, meet people from a diverse cultural background with various customs, attitudes and beliefs, and would like to discover local arts and crafts. Another incentive is the experience of studying and working in a different educational system, both in their role as a student at university and in their function as a teacher trainee practicing teaching at a local school. They are particularly interested in learning and applying different teaching methods and approaches, not only abroad but also when they return home. Moreover, they appreciate having an insight into different teacher behaviour and classroom management strategies as they are convinced that their international experience would prepare them for working with pupils from diverse multicultural and multilingual backgrounds. In this context, interviewees confirm that their newly gained knowledge would induce them to reflect their own attitudes and approaches.

The second aspect that motivates students to spend a semester abroad are the benefits associated with the development of soft skills. These findings correspond with those of Eder et al (2010, p. 238) who have identified "personal growth" as one of the greatest "push factors". For most applicants of an Erasmus programme at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria, studying in a foreign country is their outset for becoming more self-dependent as it is often the first time they spend apart from their family and friends. Consequently, they become more flexible and adaptable and develop organisational skills as well as problem-solving strategies. These competencies are highly desired characteristics in education and essential for any teacher. In

this connection, the interviewees affirm that their experience abroad has not only fostered their communication skills and their ability to work in teams and groups with members of diverse cultural backgrounds but has also increased their reflective thinking and intercultural sensitivity. These findings are in line with Rizvić and Bećirović (2017) who conducted a quantitative study on the willingness to communicate in English as a foreign language.

Further criteria for spending a semester abroad are the country of destination, the local language, and the individual university. Most interviewees express the desire to experience something “completely new”, a response that is again in line with findings by Eder et al. (2010) who determine the eagerness for a unique experience as highly motivating factor for students to study abroad. Nevertheless, a good command of the target language is recognised by the current sample as well as that of Eder et al. (2010) to be imperative. As mentioned above, the language of instruction at university, which most frequently but not invariably is also the language in which school practise lessons have to be taught in, plays a central role in studying abroad because it is a fundamental element for communication and a lack of fluency in this language is identified to be problematic (Yaman & Bećirović, 2016). The notion of studying on an international level is associated with both, benefits and challenges. Although the experience of interculturality and internationality are sought and greatly appreciated amongst the interviewees, some explain that these elements may lead to shortcomings in interaction with locals, inside as well as outside university.

The conditions at the home university are the fourth criterion that is relevant for a student’s decision on applying for an Erasmus programme. The choice of courses offered at the university of destination in relation to the requirements of the home institution are of high importance for students at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria. In that regard, the analysis of the responses suggests the greatest challenge to be the probability of time loss on return to the home university. Similarly, Walters’ (2018) study reveals this aspect as one that would prevent potentially interested students from studying abroad. With reference to the current sample, a loss of time may result from incomplete credit transfer, problems with obtaining the target 30 ECTS per semester due to the lack of teaching practise possibilities, or the deficiency in specific subjects that are required to guarantee complete credit transfer. Slowness in the administration process, may it be caused by difficulties in the communication with partner universities or changes in the curriculum may also discourage potential outgoings. According to the Erasmus coordinator, lecturers at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria report to observe that students returning from their semester abroad would not only profit personally but would also provide benefits for the university community. Referring to these reports, students usually come back with improved language competencies and enhanced social skills, they have experienced new teaching

methods and approaches as well as different classroom management strategies and are motivated to share their newly gained knowledge.

## 7. CONCLUSION

According to data analysis, the interest in intercultural experiences, the benefits of developing soft skills, the situation at the university and country of destination, and the requirements at the home university are the most important aspects that influence a student's decision whether to spend a semester abroad. The outcomes have also revealed that the possibility of time loss is one of the main obstacles to student mobility. In this context, various reasons for the increase in incoming students in the last few years can be identified. Firstly, a number of new courses are offered at university colleges of teacher education due to the change in the degree programme structure from a 180 ECTS bachelor's study to a 240 ECTS bachelor's programme with a mandatory 60 to 90 ECTS master's programme. This structure and the new curriculum seem to be more compatible with the study-programmes of partner institutes and therefore, more attractive as the risk of losing time is minimised. Secondly, there are in-service training courses for lecturers at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria which prepare them in didactics of multiculturalism and multilingualism. In addition, incoming students are accommodated in a culturally more attractive city, namely in Vienna, the capital city of Austria, versus Baden, which is more a residential area.

Although the new study structure has procured an increase in incoming students, it has also effectuated a decrease in outgoing students. This decrease may result from changes within the target group of outgoing students as two study fields of teacher education, namely secondary school and special needs education, have been discontinued. Consequently, only primary school teacher trainees may currently opt for a semester abroad. But not only the target group has undergone alterations, new student administration regulations which came into effect in 2017 do not allow for an "all-inclusive" credit transfer of 30 ECTS per semester. As changes in the curriculum have led to the development of more complex courses which often combine subject matter deriving from various domains, it has become more difficult to find equivalent lectures and seminars to compensate those that are missed at the home university.

Although the University College of Teacher Education is attracting more and more students from abroad, local students have become reluctant to spend a semester abroad. To promote study abroad amongst teacher trainees in Lower Austria, Erasmus coordinators have mapped out a few strategies that are currently carried out. First of all, students are provided with more

comprehensive information on partner institutes, their study programmes, and accommodation facilities. In this context, special Erasmus days have been implemented where overviews of the study abroad possibilities are presented, and former outgoings are invited to talk about their experience. At the same time, staff mobility is promoted as it is expected that lecturers who have formed ties with universities abroad will encourage students to do likewise. This strategy is in line with the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who emphasise the importance of personal recommendations for a student's decision on study abroad. In order to help students to improve their linguistic skills in the target language, language preparation courses for outgoings are offered by the national Erasmus agency. At last and as suggested by Walters (2018), a more comprehensive ECTS-credits transfer of outgoings is supposed to contribute to making study abroad more attractive.

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