

*Internationalization of higher education:
Intercultural Encounters*

Dana Hanesová



Banská Bystrica

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From the reviews...

“Thank you for giving me the opportunity to read these records of intercultural encounters. What I especially liked is that we can hear the students’ voice through this ‘research’. It is nice to hear directly from them ... I think internationalisation and stimulating intercultural and international exchanges is important for every individual, and this research project and its outcomes help us to remind us of the importance of our work.”

Ms. (E.L) Lydia Bor, International office and
Erasmus Coordinator,

Driestar Christian University for Teacher
Education, Gouda, the Netherlands

“This report of intercultural encounters is written in an enthusiastic spirit. It has a logical structure and framework which allows different experiences to emerge. It gives voice to a wide variety of experiencers... The viewpoint of the material that was collected from the involved exchange students and teachers can be studied from three perspectives: experiences, reflection, and conceptualization (cf. Kolb 1984). For the experiences to be successful, a particular kind of relationship and interaction is required which must entail virtues and emotions such as collaboration, openness, respect, and trust. Also, concern, affection and hope are important. They are connected by faith in the inherent value of education and intercultural education especially.”

Prof. Emerita Säde-Pirkko Nissilä,

Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Oulu,
Finland

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Foreword

This handbook is intended for all university stakeholders - teachers, university management, non-teaching staff and students - everyone who wants to contribute to raising the level of internationalization of their university. This collection of statements by students, and some teachers, about their intercultural encounters during Erasmus mobilities at various universities presents their personal perceptions and experiences of intercultural encounters during their international exchanges.

What do we mean by the intercultural encounters? In this booklet, we have adopted the definition by Byram et al. (2009):

“An intercultural encounter can be an experience you had with someone from a different country, but it can also be an experience with someone from another cultural background in your country. It might be, for example, someone you met from another region, someone who speaks a different language, someone from a different religion or from a different ethnic group.” (p. 3)

“... When an individual encounters a member of another cultural group, and critically reflects on that experience, this can initiate a process of self-reflection and self-examination. As a consequence, intercultural encounters can precipitate change not only in attitudes towards the cultural group of the other person but also in attitudes towards one's own group. This critical reappraisal of the ingroup may even lead to changes in patterns of identification. Intercultural encounters are therefore a prime site in which identifications can be re-evaluated, revised, customised and personalised through the construction of new meanings, values and symbolic contents.” (p. 14)

This material is a collection of extracts from the stories told by students (and several teachers) who have been on Erasmus mobilities. In their reflections, they describe their own experience of intercultural encounters in their own words. The reader may agree with them or even disagree with some. However, in order to create a true picture of what is happening in the real university world, we have preserved their original formulations (modified for the sake of clarity only in terms of grammar). The aim of this collection is to encourage readers to reflect on the essence and meaning of various international exchanges (primarily via Erasmus exchange programs, but also any other exchange study schemes). The author, being a university teacher involved in teaching methodology and linguo-didactics, considers them an authentic opportunity to learn about other cultures. To become interculturally competent teacher does not only mean to have knowledge of some cultural facts about the countries that the students are from. It means to be able to reflect upon them, to think before reacting to some differences, to think critically about various cultural issues, to compare them and to strive to understand the differences, to learn about and from the differences in educational approaches, to respect the fact that the students are coming from a different educational culture, to sense their needs – including those from other countries - and to at least try to ‘walk in their shoes’ as they walk ‘around a foreign country’ and study in a foreign university. This includes understanding that students from other countries may have different ideas about effective ways of learning, about setting learning assignments and about ways of assessment, about building relationships at university and so on.

Stories in this book were recorded by two groups of mobility participants. One group were Slovak outgoing students, i.e. students who studied outside Slovakia. The second group were incoming students from various European and other countries. They were collected by two methods: (a) interviews with students with whom the author came into personal contact during 20 years of teaching at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, (b) a qualitatively focused questionnaire with open questions. These stories were partly ‘cut’ and relatively loosely divided into several phases of that are part of every mobility abroad. However, this is not a qualitative analysis in the true sense of the word. It is not about scientific processing of the stories, but about creating a vivid picture of students’ experience arising from intercultural encounters. The rigid scientific research process does not enter this flowing river of student (and teacher) memories. The reader can enter (and exit) the flow of this

river at any time, in any place, and let himself or herself be influenced and soften his/her perceptions about how 'the others' feel and think.

Acknowledgements

Examining the impact of Erasmus program on developing intercultural competence and the European identity of university students is part of a broader action research project KEGA 004UMB-4/2019 "Plurilingual and Intercultural Edulab Supporting University Strategy of Internationalization" at Matej Bel University (MBU) in Slovakia.

I also wish to thank all those international and Slovak students who participated in our research and were willing to fill in the questionnaires and talk about their international learning experience.

Above all, however, I thank Associate Professor Anna Zelenková, PhD. who inspired me most to notice the beauty of intercultural encounters and pointed out the need to increase competence of university teaching in culturally mixed groups of students. I dedicate this publication to her.

The author

Dana Hanesová, 2021

1 INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, we have witnessed growing pressure on universities to raise their overall level of internationalization. This does not only mean that we should offer more courses in foreign languages to international students. For a university to be considered ‘international’, all educational and research processes, the whole university curriculum, should reflect the need to take into account the diversity of students who may apply to study there. We agree with Caruana (2011) who identified a few ‘internationalization enablers’ of the university curriculum, such as the presence of international students with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, international collaborations and partnerships, international accreditation programs, international staff and staff who have experience teaching and conducting research in other countries, learning materials and resources originating outside the host country and an opportunity to learn other languages. Observing successful universities around the world, we can say without exaggeration that the increasing level of internationalization of a university is a prerequisite for its further sustainability and competitiveness. But what is equally important, it creates in students a sense of global citizenship (Yemini, 2015).

Currently, an unprecedented acceleration of internationalization at universities—especially the influx of international students—is evident, which creates a growing need for the whole university staff to be personally and professionally prepared to welcome all their students, regardless of the culture from which they come from. Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not stop this process. On the contrary, the potential for international student and teacher exchanges seems to have increased, thanks to the possibilities of online learning as well as various hybrid ways. Such a boom in intercultural mobilities requires university teachers to face new challenges in continuous professional development, updating their teaching skills via learning new or innovative teaching techniques. But not just the teachers, but non-teaching university personnel also have to learn to provide inclusive care and international student-friendly administrative processes.

It is important to note that the inclusive approach to students from all cultures helps not only foreign students, but also domestic students to have a more internationalized experience - as Jones (2013, 2017 – online interview) recommends using the term ‘interculturalization’ of the whole university rather than ‘internationalization’:

“I believe that transformative internationalization can come not only through international engagement but through encounters with cultural otherness of any kind. And – in a way – it is the wrong term to use internationalization – really we should be thinking about interculturalization.”

All students – domestic and international – have to be included equally in the educational process and to get the same chance for success in their education (see the example of good practice in Australia (<http://ioc.global/>)).

Now more than ever before, university students, teachers, researchers, and other staff are exchanging their place of work or study to gain international experience and share their expertise in teaching/learning processes, educational management, publishing and research collaboration. Since 1987, Erasmus has enabled an unprecedented number of university staff and students to exchange their workplace or place of study in a culturally different context. We are witnesses of exponential growth of studies focusing on the internationalization of higher education – especially in the specific area of international student mobility since 2005: „Of the various aspects of internationalization, student mobility has received the greatest attention from international organizations, national governments, and higher education institutions all over the world“... „Three Western countries, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, have published the most significant portion of ISM literature“ (Gümüş et al, 2020, 16 & 17).

Note: The use of the abbreviation ESN in the following pages means the Erasmus Student *Network*, which is the official name of a European students network, created in 1989 in Ghent, Belgium (<https://www.esn.org/>).

2 HOW THE STORIES WERE COLLECTED

The question is how international exchanges, such as Erasmus, impact the personal, social and professional development of Erasmus participants. We assume that Erasmus represents a positive authentic input in building their intercultural competence and European identity. Of course, to confirm this assumption would require further extensive research. One of side-effects of this collection of students' own experience with Erasmus might be to stimulate researchers towards such research (examples of the existing research by Stoeckel (2016), the EU's Erasmus Impact Study (2014), Mitchell (2015), Kushnir (2016) or Kuhn (2015) in Ciaglia et al (2019) were already published in Hanesova & Brenkusová, 2020). However, there still remain "significant country-level differences unexplained." (Ciaglia, 2019, p. 6).

In this publication, however, we want to build not only on research, but on examples of good practice and on the advice of experts who have been actors for several years in implementing ideas of internationalization at various universities around the world, especially the Anglo-American world. Specifically, we are going to build on the long-term experience of a Scottish Emeritus Professor E. Jones from Leeds Beckett University and her advice on internationalisation and the student intercultural experience. In one of her interviews she gave ideas on how to enhance students' international experience while studying at a foreign university (Jones, 2013, p. 101; discussion). Jones (2010, 2013, 2017) suggests (1) preparation of the educational environment long before the international students arrive at the host university and (2) internationalization of the whole curriculum, i.e. to make it easy and interesting for international students. The second resource we used that was also mentioned by Jones, is the website of the project *Prepare for Success* by the University of Southampton <https://www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk/>), an excellent bank of facts and activities supporting an inclusive approach to students from all cultures and speaking any language. Yet another source is the Australian website <http://ioc.global/> - Betty Leask's Australian Government-funded National Teaching Fellowship in 2010-11 entitled 'Internationalisation of the Curriculum in Action', especially The Questionnaire on Internationalisation of the Curriculum (QIC) which is designed for academic teams to evaluate their

own program and think about how international they are, what they could do instead¹. Another interesting, theoretically and practically balanced source is the study by B. Crose from the U.S.A. called *Understanding the international learner* (2011).

Based on the study of these reliable resources and at the same time practical advice, that give hints using examples of good practice of “interculturalization” of the university, we identified areas in which all these resources overlap most. These served as a starting point for our simple framework, in which we place the experience of students, and in particular, their intercultural encounter in the Slovak context. As it turned out from the overlap of these sources (and others that are mentioned in the other book by Zelenková & Hanesová *Internationalization of Higher Education: Teachers’ Manual* (2021)), the following stages or components of the international mobilities are important for the evaluation of the success of foreign mobility stays for most students:

1. Preparation before the real start of the mobility: the source of information about the host university, the motivation of students to study there, their arrangements before leaving their home university etc.;
2. Meeting the foreign culture(s): the first intercultural encounters right after arrival in the foreign country, first cultural shock, any further cultural shock, feeling homesick and getting to know the domestic culture, people /the other foreign cultures and people
3. Being welcomed and helped by the host university : their coordinators or buddies or other staff who carry out introductions /showing round the dormitory/ university/ city etc.
4. Facing new language(s): pros and cons of being under pressure, opportunities to learn the domestic (or other) languages and attitude toward the language of the host university
5. Difference in educational culture: in learning arrangements, setting learning outcomes and defining learning assignments, ways of assessment, administration, etc.

¹ <https://studylib.net/doc/16113986/questionnaire-on-internationalisation-of-the-curriculum-->

6. Building relationships in the new culture (teacher, students)
7. Experiences while on the university campus and living in the students' dormitory
8. The overall evaluation of the study exchange (mobility): What have I learnt?

Here we present “raw statements”, not yet published, that were part of the results from our qualitative search analysis of feedbacks written by outgoing and incoming Erasmus students (and teachers) (2019) in the context of a wider research project.

3 STORIES OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

3.1 Students' intercultural encounters

Before arrival

Motivation, preparation, arrangements before the intercultural experience

"I have a great interest in traveling and I have always wanted to travel abroad for Erasmus. One day I met a classmate and we talked about Erasmus, Finland, the ... University. After our interview, I thought about applying to this university. I knew that the Finnish education system is considered one of the best education systems and both my choice and the choice of my friends was more or less clear ... To tell the truth, I had not been preparing for the stay very much..." (01 Slovak, 2019)

"Slovakia was not my first choice, but I have been happy coming here. I was doing research about the university website. A big positive part of choice was the tourism program studies in ... university. I didn't know anything about Banská Bystrica. Also almost nothing about Slovakia so I did some research before I came to Slovakia about the country and the language" (02 Finn, 2019)

"I wanted to go to Slovakia and the only offer for studying my programme was Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. I didn't know a lot about Banská Bystrica, only what I was reading before Erasmus so the more I wanted to come ... I did not need much time to prepare for departure, I bought a suitcase and some other necessary things." (03 Polish, 2019)

"From many options I chose Slovakia, because it wasn't as far from my home, as the rest of possibilities. It was my first Erasmus trip and I was

a little bit scared of the transport. At the time we had two options to study in Slovakia. I chose Banská Bystrica, because of photos of the city, and the University communicated well with me. I had never been interested in Slovakia earlier, and I didn't know anything about Banská Bystrica. Before my stay in Slovakia I saw what the weather was in Slovakia. I think it was the most important information for me that time ... But also other information on the Internet really helped me. Students who were on Erasmus earlier had written a lot of guides. There were a lot of helpful hints." (12 Polish, 2019)

"I chose a university in the Czech Republic based on my previous visit to this university city. I liked the city, commuting was not time-consuming and I heard good reviews about the University. I knew that Olomouc was a nice city. There is a nice library in it, which I can confirm now. I wasn't preparing in any special way. I was able to use the Czech language. Apart from packing things for the boarding school, I didn't have to prepare anything special." (04 Slovak, 2020)

"Back at my home university in Turkey, I applied for the Erasmus programme to get more opportunities to travel and know people. The only things I knew about Slovakia were that it is located in the centre of Europe, things are cheap, it is a mountainous region, and people are kind. I tried to learn some basic Slovak words." (05 Turk, 2020)

"I chose MBU because it was the only one available with my university in Europe giving courses in English." (06 French, 2021)

"Location of Banská Bystrica in Europe. I wanted to discover the Central European culture. The only things I knew about Slovakia: A member of Visegrad 4. And a strong Catholic culture. I did not prepare in any special way – it was an adventure!" (09 French)

"I chose Spain, Palma de Mallorca – based on my study field, popularity, reputation and, last but not least, location. I had never visited Spain before, but it seemed attractive to me. I had only some basic information... No special preparation before my stay, only some "paperwork" – travel insurance, looking for accommodation etc." (07 Slovak, 2020)

“It was one out of five possible partner universities to study at. The deciding factor was the available double degree. Also, I never have been to Slovakia and found it interesting to live there ... Preparing before arrival? Honestly not much. I had some basic knowledge about the location, the history and the landscape but not more. I did not know where Banská Bystrica was for example. Getting a place to stay and finding a way to get to Slovakia were the most important aspects. Our buddies sent us the address of the dormitory and it was no problem to find it.” (08 German, 2020)

“After I found out online about your study program in Slovakia, I got interested in doing my studies here. I like to get to know other cultures as I come from a multicultural country myself – and there are several communities of Slavs there as well.” (10 American, 2020)

“My motivation? I had very good references from Vilnius from my schoolmates and my friends. They told me about their amazing experiences here. The high-quality university and also amazing people. Also I like that the city is medium sized. It is a capital city of Lithuania, but it is quite small. There is everything I need and even though I came here during the pandemic, I was still able to travel and see Lithuania...”

My preparations? I was very lucky to have a helpful mentor from Lithuania – she helped me very much. The ESN organization created Telegram group chat for all of us Erasmus students. After our arrival we spent two weeks in a quarantine. It is an experience for life. All of the answers for our questions about the lockdown, rules, where to get tested to shorten our quarantine were provided to us by either the ESN team or the International Office of Vilnius University” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“My friend and I were among the first students from the University of Mauritius allowed to go for the Erasmus programme. We were recommended to go to Matej Bel University. I personally chose to come because I met two teachers from Matej Bel University the previous year in Mauritius and, frankly, they were very convincing and, above all very kind. It was comfortable to imagine how much they could share with me in terms of education and culture if I went for Erasmus to Slovakia...What I knew at the time was that Slovakia is the heart of Europe and its main beauty is nature. I learned a bit of the history of this beautiful country and I was so excited to learn more from the Slovaks. I also heard about the different cultures and the good food; I can definitely say that the food

is absolutely delicious. I also knew that Slovakia is a very conservative country and traditions and culture are very important.

Before coming to Slovakia I thought that it would be very, very cold in Slovakia. And when I arrived I was quite amazed by the sun and the warm weather in October. In order to have a comfortable stay I brought a lot of warm clothes. Back at home I did some research on Banská Bystrica in order to know what is waiting for me there. I was also amazed that the cost of living is not so high for students...

Arrival arrangements? – Actually everything was already organised from Mauritius. We had prior general information from the Slovak coordinator too, we got to know some rules of the university and we already chose our modules before coming. We already knew where to go when we arrived. We got very good help from the university as there was someone who came to pick us from Vienna Airport and brought us to Matej Bel University. Our buddy also helped us a lot. She explained to us everything and accompanied us to do all our official tasks.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“It was not me who would somehow choose Matej Bel University. It was the teachers from Slovakia who came to Mauritius to talk about Erasmus. It was the first contact between Slovakia and Mauritius, also the first Erasmus project for us since we never heard of this before. When the application form was out, I tried my luck ... Honestly, I knew nothing about Banská Bystrica nor even Slovakia. While I was preparing my C.V and application letter, then I did some research ... I also bought with me food from Mauritius.

We already prepared all our documents from Mauritius after consulting with our lecturer in Slovakia. Our teachers and both Erasmus coordinators helped us. We also had a chance to mail or get on group chat with Erasmus students from other countries.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

„My coordinator recommended that I go to Slovakia, because it is close to the Czech Republic and there are lot of foreign students and I can speak in English with them. I did not have any information about Banská Bystrica before. I had a buddy but she did not have enough time to give me some information, so I had to solve everything by myself.” (15 Czech, 2019)

„I chose Tallinn (Estonia) because I knew that Estonia had a very good education system and the university was at a very good level. I chose this city also because it is very well located for traveling around to surrounding countries. Also, that Estonia is not one of the most expensive countries to live in... Before my Erasmus stay, I found some basic information about the country. I tried to make sure that I would have enough money so that I would not have a problem abroad if I had higher expenses than I expected. Erasmus contracts and basic info on arrival were provided by the coordinator at my home university.” (16 Slovak, 2020)

“My decision was influenced by the positive experiences of students studying at the University of Sarajevo, as well as the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of my favourite countries. I had known many things about the country because I like to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina as a tourist and it is a country bordering my home country, Serbia; the cultures of both countries are very close to each other.” (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

“I chose the university according to the experience of my classmate, who had been at that the University of Florence before. I had had only basic information about the country, and that they use Euros. I did not have any special time to prepare for my move.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“I decided for Slovakia and this university based on the excellent experience my friend had with it. I had already been to Slovakia two times before and so I had enough information before I applied for Erasmus. I planned my stay down to the smallest detail.” (19 Ukrainian, 2020)

“I chose the University in Salzburg, Austria for three reasons: (1) because of the language: German and English, (2) a nice historic city-environment, and (3) a short distance from Slovakia. To a large extent, I was aware in advance of all that was important to know about the country. I didn't have to prepare in any special way.” (20 Slovak, 2020)

“I chose the University in Nantes, France. The main reason for this choice was the fact that I wanted to go to a French-speaking country and I really liked the idea of getting to know a city other than the Paris area. I was also fascinated by Nantes because it is located near the Atlantic Ocean. I think France is a country that a lot of people have quite a bit of information

about, at least Europeans. We can learn about France in schools, and also because the French have many ways to present their country outside their territory, mostly through their culture. Because I have been studying French for several years, and I have visited this country in the past, I had quite an overview. In any case, I must admit that after arriving, there was still something to learn.

Apart from all the basic tasks before any long journey (packing, shopping for the necessities, arranging insurance, etc.), my friend and I had to deal with quite a lot of “bureaucracy” before leaving, which is what the French are actually known for (which we later found out) – they needed a paper perhaps for ‘everything.’” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“I was looking for a good experience on Internet sites and I saw nice reviews of other Erasmus students who had been on Erasmus in Banská Bystrica. Finally, it is true. I was looking for study in English and I knew that in Slovakia my classes were going to be in English. But at first I knew nothing about Slovakia. Just that it is in centre of Europe and has a good connection with the surrounding countries. But I did not make any special preparations. I was not thinking about my study in Slovakia until I came here. I was just thinking about the possible cold weather and my procedures with documents.” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

“When I was thinking about Erasmus I wanted to try something different, to get to know a different culture and people from other cultures than mine. I wished to visit a country that does not border with Slovakia. I was deciding between the Netherland and Finland. I read many blogs about Erasmus experiences in these two countries. After that I saw that in Finland there is ESN which is Erasmus Student Network so I thought that there would be many students from different countries and that influenced my decision to choose Finland and Åbo Akademi University.

When my schoolmate and I decided on Finland, the only thing we knew was that it would be really a cold country with lots of darkness. We read many blogs about experiences in Finland and in Vaasa. We read that Vaasa is the sunniest city in Finland so that was for us positive news. I also tried google maps and looked at the city, streets, and university. I can say that everything was much better than I expected. I bought many winter warm clothes new snow boots. I also bought vitamin D for those dark days.

Before my arrival I received an email from my tutor, he texted me that he would help me during my orientation week and also with my accommodation. Because my flight was late he got the keys for me and waited for me at the train station at 3 am and help with luggage. I cannot be more thankful.” (23 Slovak 2019)

After arrival

First impressions, experience with a new culture, further intercultural encounters

"In Finland, it was very cold on our arrival and the train was almost two hours late at the station. However, we were returned almost 50% of the price of the tickets for the delay, so it was quite a pleasant shock. Tutors had provided us with information regarding refunds due to delays... Next positive surprise: Mutual trust between teachers and children in primary schools. Also their friendliness and tolerance... I did not experience any negative cultural stress, only positive 'shocks'.

Missing my family and friends, being homesick? I have never been alone because I was there with two classmates and we helped each other.

Cultural discoveries: The way the kindergartens operate in Finland... From my experience with two nationalities in Finland, I think the Swedes are open and communicative. Finns, on the other hand, are more closed." (01 Slovak, 2019)

"One of the biggest shocks after I arrived in Slovakia was that most people did not speak English at all. People in the Bratislava train station were not willing to speak English. I had some problems with arrival from Bratislava to Banská Bystrica, the train broke twice, and the conductor did not speak any English. At the start of my studies I had a hard time fitting in with the ways of studying here, but now I realize it is just a cultural difference and I needed to adapt to it. I still find it strange that most people are afraid to speak English. It makes travelling and discovering the country harder for foreigners...

Missing anything? Yes, my family, food, friends and my own bed back at home. Meeting new people in parties helped me mostly. And I also like spend time alone quite a lot so I do not consider loneliness as issue.

Main cultural differences? Behaviour differences in language, body language and general behaviour. Finnish people are quiet comparing to other cultures. Slovak people are not open to speak English and can seem rude at first. even though they do not mean to do that. I found

them to be Hard drinkers. People I discovered were mostly genuinely nice people, helpful and interested meeting new people from other cultures. Food culture in here is missing diversity, there are not really many ethnic restaurants in Slovakia ...

I also found out that people here are more frugal toward money, as we in Finland appreciate quality over quantity, choosing to use money more freely. Appreciating quality of life is important in Finland, being able to make your individual choices in life. Most young people in Slovakia are making life choices based on their parents' expectations beside their own. Student culture is more concentrated on parties than studying.

Slovakia has beautiful history and really nice nature, you should advertise it for tourists because people outside Slovakia are not aware of them. Travelling would be nice but you just need to find a local guide to travel with you because like I mentioned earlier people are afraid to talk English. But this is a beautiful country full of potential and nice people. I would call it a hidden gem, nobody knows much about Slovakia even though they should." (02 Finn)

"I didn't have any culture shock because Slovak and Polish cultures are very similar ... But I missed my family and friends the most. Luckily, my girlfriend was with me on Erasmus here, so the feeling of homesickness was not very intense ... And I spent a lot of time going to the gym and calling my friends ... But now I also have friends in Slovakia. I perceive Slovaks as friendly, modest people who are very friendly to Polish people. I learned that Slovakia is a country with beautiful vistas and friendly people. Both the country and the university made a very good impression on me. I got to know some things about other cultures too, e.g. that the Spanish and French are more able to have fun, do not worry, and do not mind mess." (03 Polish, 2019)

"A very pleasant first impression in Slovakia when I got up the first morning: Our room was on the sixth floor, and the view of the city and the surrounding country from the room window was simply amazing. I have never seen such a beautiful view before ...

My first culture surprise moment was when I noticed that my dinner (the main meal of the day at 3:00 p.m.) is lunch for people from Spain or Italy who eat dinner (the main meal) at 10:00 p.m.! But I did not

suffer any culture stress. I was not homesick as I had constant contact with my family via the Internet ...

Cultural observations: I noticed differences between Polish and Slovak cuisine. Slovaks mix things on a plate that Polish people wouldn't mix.

I think that Slovaks are very peaceable and outgoing. Every Slovak was trying to help me, with my problems, even if they didn't understand me." (12 Polish, 2019)

"I did not experience any culture shock. The Czech Republic is very similar to Slovakia. The people there were friendly. The cars always gave the right of way to pedestrians, which surprised me a lot ... back at home, this does not always happen... I also met people from other countries. We talked to the Finns and the Italians. It was fun with them and they told us about their education and their country." (04 Slovak, 2020)

"My first cultural shock after coming from Turkey: People in Slovakia are so kind. But also, they do not use English as an official language. My shock later on: I saw some racist people to black people. That was a big shock for me because there is not this kind of racism in my country ...

Culture stress? I never suffer because of culture stress. I'm totally fine here for now... But, yes, I missed Turkish foods a lot and my family, of course. I overcame my loneliness by going to ESN activities, doing some sports, meeting more people ...

I learned that Slovaks are a bit conservative about making friends or changing their lifestyle. At the same time Slovaks looked peaceful to me. I learnt that while Slovaks or Germans are punctual and calm, some nations like Spanish, Italian and even Turkish people are opposite of them. Slovaks are kind and helpful however a bit shy. The main difference between our cultures is life is running slowly here, in Turkey people are always in hurry. But I experienced that Banská Bystrica has a good night life and people can be crazy in the clubs when they are drunk." (05 Turk, 2020)

"I had many experiences with Slovak people and I've been keeping in contact with some of them since I left... What was negative: I went to the emergency and also polyclinic and it was really hard to find information

about them even with the internet, especially to find the location of the good polyclinic. It was also really hard to communicate with doctors as they are not speaking English and internet connections are really bad or non-existent in medical buildings like this... Slovak people are really kind and even if it's hard to communicate, they are always trying to help you. I had the chance to meet a girl who integrated me into her family and in her village's life. So I've got the chance to meet a lot of Slovaks and started to get used to the language but also to their culture." (06 French, 2021)

„The first impression on my arrival to Slovakia: the coldness of the cashier in Bratislava. Any culture shock? – We don't kiss to say Hello. Girls were shocked. But no culture stress, just a few language issues, but that's normal. What did I miss? – French food. I did not mind being alone, I like it and I always had friends to talk to in the dorm.

My intercultural discoveries – Latin culture is different from Slavic culture. Open country / Closed country. Slovakia has values we do not have anymore. I think Slovaks are patriotic people, solitary, cold if you don't know them. So warm if you know them well. And conservative.

Men in Slovakia water women for Easter – that's funny! And I discovered that Slovak girls are beautiful and feminine. In Slovakia I also found some good Turkish food." (09 French)

"Any culture shock in Spain? Not really, maybe just no heating, scooters and noise. No cultural stress – quite the opposite, I felt more at home than at home. I did not feel lonely, not at all. I did not miss anything... And Spanish people? They're amazing, I would consider moving here. They are more temperamental, impulsive, and funny, but also prudent. I feel they are more mature, at a completely different level compared to Slovak peers... No one interfered in anyone's life, I could be whoever I wanted. I don't have that feeling in Slovakia anymore." (07 Slovak, 2020)

"Any cultural shock in Slovakia? – Nothing serious, maybe only the architecture of the whole city seemed a bit outdated for us. One of the most dramatic differences was the opening times of shops. Being able to go shopping every day was nice.

Feeling lonely? – Thanks to the dormitory and the other exchange students I have not been lonely at all ...

My experience with Slovaks? – When you did not know them they seemed a bit reserved but opened up quickly when you got in touch with them. They mostly have been open minded too but had a different mindset to some extent.” (08 German, 2020)

“I love to get to know a new culture, understand and learn the new language etc. I was not really shocked on my arrival to Slovakia. Although this is my first time here, I have travelled so far and studied in several countries, so I am used to cultural differences. I didn’t experience any culture shocks, but I just had to face the new challenges – to learn new things, especially language – the problem is there not all important information is in English at the campus or in the city, in the public transport system. I had some problems with the functioning of my mobile phone here, access to the internet university network via my computer system, problems with bank transfers. There is also a different way of ordering and having lunches in the school canteen. Here the students cannot choose the combination of various vegetables and side dishes on the spot (but they order the whole combination of food) as it is in my country, and as a vegetarian, I would welcome it. I also felt a bit lost when I wanted to return some goods in the shop, at home you can exchange purchased goods much more flexibly than here.

The culture is different than mine but there are some similarities between Slovak culture and other cultures and Slavic countries (which I had visited in the past), and that made me feel comfortable. Policemen and various administrative people who did not know me were very reserved. I also met some people who expressed their racial prejudices. But in general, Slovaks are nice people, who prioritize education and knowledge, and who look quiet.” (10 American, 2020)

„I was extremely happy and grateful that I could come and study in Lithuania. I loved it from the first day here...No shock moment for me, I did not experience any loneliness at all ... maybe also because I had two Slovak friends there. I very much love meeting new nice and interesting people. Our time together was so enriching for me. My buddy was always keen to help me. With every situation. We also went out a couple of times. I very much like her. Also, my other friends showed me everything and after some time I started to discover by myself. – The International Office employees explained everything to us in our first meetings and then also

the coordinator of the Institute of International Relations specifically introduced us to our courses. We could ask anything and they would promptly help us.

Observations of Lithuania? Lithuanians are shy, a bit reserved, but very willing to help. They are very fond of their history and language especially, they celebrate Independence days very seriously. I have experienced 2 of them, and there were flags almost on every house or apartment... I would say the architecture is quite different and beautiful. There are beautiful places in the country, but I especially enjoyed visiting them with my nice friends.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

„Once arriving in Slovakia from Mauritius, I was so amazed by the peace and the fresh air of the city. Banská Bystrica is so clean and peaceful, and the environment is so nice. I was really very happy to stay in a place with a lot of good vibes and surrounded by nature.

The first cultural shock for me was the fact that there is a real lack of diversity and cultural exchange in Slovakia. When I came, my friend and I did not really see any other coloured skin people around.

Any culture stress? At first yes. It was very strange for me to be in a place where there was only one specific type of people. People tend to stare at me for a very long time in the bus, at the supermarket or even at the dorm. When I walked sometimes people just turned to look at me and this was quite awkward. But after two weeks it was fine. I told myself maybe it is something new for them so it was fine. I did encounter some uncomfortable incident like a student stopped me and asked me: Why are you black if you are not from Africa or Mozambique? I was shocked to see how some people tended to associate skin colour to a specific continent. Second incident was that some people at the dorm thought I came from a very poor country because of the colour of our skin and they asked if we had roads and buildings in Mauritius. This comment was quite funny though. One student introduced me as someone who come from Africa to another Slovak student. It was quite offensive for me because Africa is a continent not a country and we can be skin coloured and not be from Africa. And sometimes at some bars or transport people just stared and talked among themselves and this made me uncomfortable and special. Sometimes it was quite scary because I was in a foreign country, I did not

know the language and there were very few people who spoke English and there was very small diversity.

What did I miss? – I really missed the large variety of food in Mauritius. We are a cultural island with a vast variety of cuisine. For example, having a French breakfast with croissant and pain au chocolate, having Indian lunch with Indian curry, having some mangoes, pineapples or watermelon as snacks and having Chinese dishes for dinner. But I did not feel lonely at all because I am quite an outgoing person. I am always making new friends. I am always planning something with the other Erasmus students.

Slovak culture and Slovak people? – My very first impression was that Slovaks are so tall and strong, especially the men, and the women are extremely beautiful. And if I talk about physical characteristics, I would say that Slovaks have very beautiful skin and eye colour. Slovaks are also very nice, I would say especially the youngsters ... all the Slovaks I met were very religious and quite conservative, which is interesting. I think the biggest difference is that there is only one big religion in Slovakia, and Slovaks take religion and culture very seriously. In my country there are so many religions and sometimes people tend to be more tolerant toward other cultures. But there is not a very big difference and I think it is because of the majority of people belong to a certain type of culture.

I feel that I needed just a little time to adapt to the Slovak people and their lifestyle. When I adopt this new perspective, the Slovak society is quite similar to other countries with almost the same rules and values. With time, I think that everyone is the same. The main barrier is the language, but beside of this as human being we share almost the same values and beliefs.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“The first culture shock in Slovakia? – The food consists mostly of cheese, especially sheep cheese; also rice and cheese – which I had never seen or eaten before.

How did I adapt to the new culture in Slovakia? When my stock (of food from Mauritius) finished I bought Slovak sausages, potatoes, fruits and vegetables, and bread to eat. I managed my money to do my laundry each week or wash by hand, to visit and also travel to nearby countries in the neighbourhood. I also planned my homework and revision, family time, going out with friends and also events by ESN.

Social care and medical care – these are the areas which are difficult for me to explain or understand – this was embarrassing.

Yes, I was homesick. I ate a traditional dish with cheese and I got sick. I vomited, also from kebab and drinking the water. So I had to start to drink filtered water or water from bottles and eat dry toast only for one week. I also had a fever and I had to have a shot at the hospital. I missed my family when I was sick, especially my mom and my boyfriend. My family and my boyfriend tried to help me to overcome my loneliness through Skype talks. And I watched movies.

My cultural observations? – As a whole Slovaks are tall, kind and helpful. Some Slovak people are kind and open-minded while others are not. We do not share any similar culture. Everything was new and different and we had to adapt to this culture in such areas as food, drink (kofola, Tatra tea), Slovak dances and music, and language. Spanish people have dinner at 22h or 23h and I like them for being down to earth. Italian people are loud but I also like them. People from several nationalities were arrogant and bullied me or cracked racist jokes ... Maybe in my thinking European people are more personal, I mean individualist compared to us in Mauritius, we too are personal but we also value family time.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

„My first pleasant ‘shock’ was when I first saw the place where I am going to live for this semester. And the kitchen too. I was surprised that there are any dishes, microwave oven etc. in the dormitory... I was surprised listening to Slovak language and realizing the interesting differences between Slovak and Czech words. (pečiatka/razítko, hmla/mlha, ťava/velbloud) ... According to my observations in Slovakia, I think Slovaks are open-minded, kind, talkative, and generous people” (15 Czech, 2019)

“On my arrival in Estonia, the first impression was very positive, whether from the university / accommodation and the city as such... But people in Estonia seemed to me colder than Slovaks, not very communicative, more introverts, and trying to keep their distance. That was a kind of culture shock or surprise for me. I did not feel lonely, but of course, I missed my family.” (16 Slovak, 2020)

“After arriving to University in Sarajevo, I had no culture shock. My first impression was positive. People in Bosnia and Herzegovina are very nice,

hospitable people, happy to help. They meet each other more than in Slovakia, even if they don't know each other well. Typical Balkan culture. In Slovakia, I feel that people have a narrower circle of people around themselves." (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

"On my arrival to my host Italian university, I experienced a kind of shock, because of the university administration's approach to foreign students; this part of the organization at the university was very bad and chaotic. Otherwise, I did not suffer any culture shock or stress. I was never lonely. Based on my experience, Italians are nice, chaotic, kind, noisy... What cultural differences have I noticed? that Slovakia is a good country but homogeneous. There is little diversity, so people are timid, racist and afraid to accept another culture. It doesn't work that way in the world, people of all races and skin colours live together in peace... I have not seen that in Slovakia yet." (18 Slovak, 2020)

"My first impression of Slovakia was good. Generally, it was a good cultural and professional experience. I found out that Slovaks are open, curious, educated and competent." (19 Ukrainian, 2020)

"Salzburg is a beautiful historic city – this was the reason for choosing a university in Austria, the shock could only be in higher prices of food and services, but I knew about it in advance.. the people I managed to meet before the crowd broke out were orderly, nice, quite friendly." (20 Slovak, 2020)

"On the day of our arrival to France, we were supposed to come to the centre for foreign students, where, of course, they helped us a lot. They explained to us all the basic steps that need to be completed on the following days of our stay. What was not very organized, however, was the process of arriving at that university centre, which, of course, was probably more a task of the ESN, rather than of the University."

I have to admit that our first day of stay was not very happy. I had doubts about whether we made a good choice. The main reason was that we arrived during perhaps the worst period when the French protested against Macron, so the traffic did not work all day, everything was very chaotic, and since it was our first day in an unfamiliar environment, it was even worse for us ... So my first impression was not very good, it wasn't a very pleasant first day, just chaos and stress. And it was also shocking

on the first day at university when they told us that we would normally have classes with French students. From this point of view, we did not have enough information, only from a friend who had studied there before – a few tips on courses. Otherwise, we didn't have much information about what our studies would look like.

For me, the real culture shock was probably the significant number of immigrants in France. I don't want to sound conservative, racist or anything like that, it's just that in comparison with Slovakia we are not really used to it at all. Of course, I was not bothered by immigrants in France, I got used to it very quickly, but the culture shock after my arrival was certainly there first... But I quickly got used to it and I had no further stress ... At first I didn't feel lonely, we were together with the other Erasmus students all the time. However, this changed after the outbreak of the pandemic, when many of our friends went home and my friend and I were isolated, each in a different dormitory, and we could not even visit each other because we could move to a maximum of 1km from our building, and we did not meet this condition.

I think we discovered a lot about various cultures. On the one hand, about the French, but also about other cultures (since we had friends from Greece, Turkey, Poland, even from Africa). What surprised me was the French opening hours of the companies. Before, I knew that they used to take a lunch break for 2 hours, but I had no idea that this also applied to restaurants, bars and the like. For example, they are open from morning to lunch, and then from 6 pm let's put it until 10, so we found out that at lunch time we really didn't even have a place to eat. On the other hand, by living in a dorm where there were many students from Africa, I had the opportunity to learn a lot about their culture. I was surprised at how little these university students, living in Europe for several years, knew about other European countries. Many had no idea where Slovakia was, some thought we were under Russian rule. I understand that in Slovakia we learn much less about Africa than about other continents, but I assumed that since they are studying in person in France – a European country, they know also more about its the surrounding area.

My impression of the people? – I do not want to generalize. However, based on my experience in Nantes, the French are nice people to foreigners (when you try to speak French with them), but they seemed to me dissatisfied – which was reflected in the protests. And also, thanks

to the pandemic, I was also able to see that in some cases they were not disciplined, and while most countries were already implementing the first pandemic measures and closing schools, the French organized large-scale elections. This was just one case, but it is very clear from this and from the curfew that was introduced how much freedom means to the French.

Compared to Slovakia, France is truly a multicultural country. In Slovakia, we are still quite conservative, not very open to several things. On the other hand, I do not consider this to be a completely bad thing, because due to the different cultures in France, immigrants and the like, there is very poor safety on the streets, especially at night. We have even learned that especially women who have lived in this area for a long time do not feel safe in their city. Security is what I appreciate in Slovakia. Of course, I am not saying that it's perfect here, but if I could compare it, I feel much safer in Slovakia than I felt in France.” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“Any culture shocks in Slovakia? – Everything was cheap except food ... I did not think that was going to be very fun... Cars seem to have priority, pedestrians have to wait. And yes, I had problems with some courses... But a more serious issue: At first, I was thinking that people were unfriendly but after being involved in university life it does not seem true, they are friendly. But I suppose that in the beginning there were the differences between the cultures of the students. But I did not suffer any type of discomfort. Maybe with the procedures of Erasmus, they required some patience and paying attention. The only thing I missed was just a good kitchen... I did not feel any loneliness, but I think that it is important to take advantage of your time and do productive things, also take advantage of the opportunity to be in another country with international people. Nowadays, with technologies you can videocall every friend or family member you have.

How do I perceive Slovaks? – It depends. Some Slovaks are more friendly and some are less friendly. Some Slovaks are not very active and they put weird faces on when I started to talk to them in English, especially in the market or in the gym. But when it is in university, they are more open.

Slovak culture? – Maybe in my Spanish culture we are noisier and here it is more relaxed. There is less urbanisation and great nature environment. I think Slovakia is less influenced by globalization, and one

aspect that was curious for me was that there is little immigration.” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

“My first impression in Finland was very positive. I was so excited about everything. But what shocked me was when we woke up in the morning at 9:00 and it was still dark like at 3:00 at night. The sun rose almost at 11.

Later I realized even deeper another surprising thing: that in Finland nobody steals anything. They just left their stuff anywhere and it stayed there untouched. That was for me really shocking but in a positive way. But it took me some time to adapt to this because in Slovakia we don't trust people so much. I also experienced that Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns were really open to foreigners, they were also really helpful and kind.

The biggest difference between Slovak and Finnish culture I noticed is trust. That is very important in Finland.” (23 Slovak, 2019)

Who helped the Erasmus students

“Upon admission to the Finnish host university, we were assigned tutors to help us throughout our stay. They contacted us about two weeks before our arrival and helped us with practically everything. They found buses and trains for us from the airport to the university town. They picked up the keys to the apartment we were supposed to live in and also picked us up at the station in the university town at 3:00 in the morning. They came for us in the car and helped us with suitcases and accommodation ... The first orientation week we spent at the school was dedicated to Erasmus students. Here we learned from our buddies all the necessary information about the university, courses, student life and the like – from teachers during introductory courses and trainings. Also, all the teachers we turned to for help were willing to help us, not only at the beginning of our studies, but throughout our stay. The international coordinator had a very nice approach and was also very willing to advise us on everything. Buddies were with us all the time during the orientation week and helped us find our way around the school and the surrounding area, they showed us around the university, faculty and dormitory. The coordinators for international students explained to us the issues of administration and information system.” (01 Slovak, 2019)

“Back at home, my coordinator for exchange studies helped a lot. Also every question I had I could ask the Slovak coordinator, she was really helpful. I prepared doing my own research to find out information on the MBU website. We were assigned some buddies by the host university that were to help us with arrival and questions. But I did not see much of my buddy during my stay. Meeting other Slovak students on my courses helped me too with some questions. Also, the information on orientation day helped me with some arrangements. One teacher especially helped me to get information of the library and self-study room. I was not shown round the university, but I think this would be essential help for new students to find out where everything is on the campus. I think this would be an important job for the buddies to show Erasmus students around the dormitory. I got help from another international Erasmus student in the dormitory when I asked for help. Also the Erasmus coordinator helped with questions if I had any.” (02 Finn)

“My Slovak buddy, who was waiting for me at the bus station, who me get to the dormitory and then to the university. He showed me around. We found out where the canteen is, where the Erasmus office is, and other important things. The buddies helped us to choose courses and everything necessary, we could always count on them.” (03 Polish, 2019)

“My arrival was organized amazingly well. I came to Slovakia with my friend. We had an amazing buddy. We arrived to Banská Bystrica about 4 a.m. and she was waiting for us at the bus station, helped us gain to dormitory. The next morning, she helped us take care of the formalities. We are really grateful to her. She also helped us with the orientation at the university. But also one of our Polish friends, who was on Erasmus in Banská Bystrica for the second time, really helped us with some of things.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“During the orientation week, the Erasmus coordinator gave us important information, told us about the university and also showed us the key buildings in the city. We also got help with the study system during this week. They also took us around the city and gave us useful information about the Czech ISI card) and we were able to sign up for trips that were organized for Erasmus people. However, I didn’t have much information about a particular faculty, so I was a bit lost the first week. I had to find my professors on my own. My buddy did not meet me. I don’t know why, but

when I saw that she was not interested, I helped myself. As for learning, I used the services of a library, which was very nice and large.” (04 Slovak, 2020)

“Thanks to the buddy system, I got lots of information about the conditions from my buddy well before arriving in SK. I also got much help from him after arriving from Turkey. I was welcomed at the entrance of the dormitory and informed about accommodation in the dormitory, registration for subjects, travelling cards and canteen services. Faculty representatives helped me select my courses. My buddy and friends who were already in Slovakia showed me around. The buddies worked marvellously. They offered all the help I needed. I got to know everything about here through them. They gave a lot of their time to allow me to visit the faculties, get my ISIC card, go to the bank, and do my first grocery shopping; they also offered me my first travel fee and meal.”(05 Turk, 2020)

“After my arrival to Slovakia: It was hard at the beginning because nobody spoke English and my buddy wasn’t really helpful.” (06 French, 2021)

“One buddy was waiting for me at the bus station in Banská Bystrica. She brought me to the dorm. But other than that the buddy system was not so effective. Each time I needed help; I was asking someone else than my buddy. The Erasmus coordinator especially helped the international students to find our way around the Faculty the first day.” (09 French, 2020).

“The first cultural experience in Spain? I remember it very accurately. My schoolmate from Slovakia and I wandered around the streets of Palma at 5 pm with 5 suitcases, with google maps, and together with 3 other, very willing locals we successfully found our apartment. One lady even closed her driving school so she could help us. I don’t know if that would happen in Slovakia ...

Short after arrival, we had an Orientation and Welcome Day, organized by ESN and by the host university. They showed us around the faculty and university, I really liked it. They even offered us some local food specialties and gift items. It was great ... The local Erasmus coordinator explained to us all about the study system ... On the other hand, our buddies didn’t help because they were so shy. At least mine never approached me. The weird thing is that we had only written communication with each

other. That doesn't mean that we weren't together. But only when there was a group of other students too. So at school we had to be able to help ourselves plus by the help of the Erasmus coordinators and some nice students. I remember one student when I had a problem with the student information system – she arranged everything for me ... There are good and willing people everywhere.” (07 Slovak, 2020)

“My buddy helped a lot in advance and during the stay with university life. She was really helpful. I got all the needed information mostly from my buddy, our professors, and the international offices of both universities. The buddies were extremely helpful in showing us international students around the university, and also the teachers helped a lot.” (08 German, 2020)

“University people and other students were really helpful – we helped each other, for example with the Immigration Office paperwork.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“After my arrival from Mauritius my buddy helped a lot in showing me around the University. She helped me to get my ISIC card, my bank account open here, and in translating as the bank officers don't speak English. She also helped me to get access to the university official website and she was a great help in translating English to Slovak in the beginning of my stay. The ESN helped us discover a few Slovakian activities and I came to know about activities with my Slovak friends from my classes and from the Erasmus coordinator ... For the orientation around the city my friend and I had to manage on our own. At first it was a bit confusing but then it was fine.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“After my friend and I arrived to Banská Bystrica, it was so terrible that I started to cry. Nobody could understand English nor French. There was no Wi-Fi to tell our families that we had arrived safely after 16 hours travelling from Mauritius. There was no help from students to guide us, nor did we know about kitchen supplies that we should buy to cook. My buddy did not live in Banská Bystrica, but in a city 2 hours away. So, it was quite difficult to ask her for help, to come and meet us, for example, when going to see the doctor or to give us information about course registration, especially because she worked. We knew absolutely nothing and were just apart. It took me nearly one month to adapt, due to lack of organisation

especially because we had come from far. To find my way around the University and the city, my buddy and the ESN members helped me and my friend, assisting us also with traveling documents, International student cards, the food canteen, sim cards, online registration of courses, and other explanations.

Any culture shock? – Yes. People stared at me like they had never seen black people, while others would judge or criticize just by looking at us or simply laugh because we did not understand the Slovak language perfectly.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

“Frequently, I had to ask people for help or information, but later I was able to make my orientation easier. Nobody showed me around the school or the city. But some of my teachers and coordinators explained the study system to me. Later on, after some time, the buddies were able to help me and we spent more time together.” (15 Czech, 2019)

“The first days in Tallinn were orientation days at the university, organized by students from ESN. They also showed me around the University. The administrative staff at the University gave me a welcome bag and there was a lot of useful information. I was not assigned a personal buddy but I didn’t have any big problems to solve. But it also helped me a lot that I came to Erasmus with my classmate from my university and we stayed at the same place, so we could help each other.” (16 Slovak, 2020)

“When I had questions, I mainly asked students from Bosnia how it worked at their university. I didn’t have my own buddy, because I speak the language and my classmates helped me a lot. I received help from employees of the University of Sarajevo and the faculty, they explained the system of studying to me. Members of the student organization also helped me.” (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

“I obtained information, especially from the International Student Office and from domestic students. During the first day, the admin took us around the university and introduced us to the university’s systems. The university representatives, including the dean, introduced their study systems to us. The buddies were helpful when I asked where to print the paper and the like. They also explained the grading and testing system at the university.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

"I did not need any special help, no buddies. I myself found my way around Slovakia as I had been here twice before. When I did not know anything, I asked, especially about language courses. And the international student office helped me with the university and study issues." (19 Ukrainian, 2020)

"The University organized the first two orientation weeks for foreign Erasmus students very well ... I was the first student from our university to choose Austria-Salzburg, I could not consult any former students. So I was initially advised about the studies there by our Erasmus coordinator. During the first two orientation weeks, the host university prepared helpful brochures with maps and advice and tips. Their staff and ESN students showed me the campus. The foreign university explained its system of study to us through several lectures. Unfortunately, after applying for a "buddy", I didn't get one. But I found friends at the university, and if they got a buddy, I asked him what I needed." (20 Slovak, 2020)

"After our initial unpleasant shock on the first day in France, the Center for international students, where we actually had to go the first day after our arrival, told us basic information, where to find a boarding place, where to go to school, what to do first, and the like. We received several maps and papers for easier orientation to the campus, and a few gifts (various practical things like a bottle, notebook, pen, canvas bag) with the university logo, which was very nice.

No one physically took us around the university. My colleague and I took care of everything on our own – we were lucky to meet a French student at the bus stop who was on her way to my dorm, so she helped us find it. And as far as the university is concerned, we always looked for classes there where the class was supposed to be, and we also mainly asked everyone around, without that it wouldn't be possible.

At the university we were assigned a coordinator for Erasmus students, who explained all these matters to us, and in case we had any questions, he was always available by email. I only met my Buddy a few times, even at ESN events, which she helped to co-organize. But we communicated through social networks if I needed anything, so she was very helpful in this." (21 Slovak, 2020)

“At first, there were some organizational problems with my buddy. But then another buddy was selected to help my faculty. I also went to the meeting with the coordinator of Erasmus Social Network (ESN). This was really useful. ESN were helping me a lot. Also, among the students we supported each other, especially in the beginning. In all aspects, like having the Internet key, contacting professors, choosing courses, doing activities. My faculty coordinator and another professor helped me choose my courses, thereby relieving some of the pressure. All professors had good attitudes about helping me. I got a lot of help in finding my way. I did not have a buddy, but ESN coordinators were very nice and they were like my buddies” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

“My buddy helped a lot with everything. The coordinators from Åbo Akademi University informed us about lots of things. They gave us also some papers with information if we forget about something. We also had an orientation week in which each coordinator explained everything about the university to us. Our buddies prepared for us a walk around the university and explained everything. They showed us the classrooms in which we were going to have our courses. The buddies were absolutely amazing, helping a lot, including waiting at the train station early in the morning and answering any questions I had.” (23 Slovak, 2019)

Learning foreign languages

Pros and cons of encountering new foreign language(s)

“Studying in Finland was in English. Since I spent two years before the exchange stay abroad as an au-pair, where I taught English to the children, I was not very worried about the stay and the English language ... During my stay, I was always looking forward to my classes in English thanks to the positive attitude and good mood of our teacher. She always informed us about upcoming events that would take place in the area. However, her pace of teaching was too fast and sometimes chaotic.” (01 Slovak, 2019)

“Although I knew I would have most courses in English, before coming to Slovakia I tried to do some research on the Slovak language. I tried to learn Slovak in case I might need it in everyday life, but it is so different from my Finnish that still, even after studying a basic course, I can understand it only a little ... still not really speaking it. But our teacher of Slovak was amazing and I liked her style of teaching. We learned more language using it in practical situations and that is actually more needed in Slovakia than anything else – as most people do not speak English. It would have been nice to have a chance to be more in contact with Slovak students so that we could practice our Slovak speaking skills with Slovak native speakers before our oral exam.” (02 Finn)

“I learned a lot of words in Slovak because I lived in one room in a dormitory with a Slovak. By the way, many words are similar to Polish so I didn’t have to learn the Slovak language in classes.” (03 Polish, 2019)

“Many Slovak people think that all Polish people can understand the Slovak language, but for me each of them are different. It was very hard for me to understand Slovak. I learned some basic Slovak words, but my level of it is not as high as I wanted it to be. I hope, in the future, I will have a chance to make it back to Slovakia and improve my language skill.

The Slovak language is very difficult for me. The fact of the matter is that I didn't like these lessons. I think that I would be better in Slovak, if the teacher didn't take for granted that every Slav can understand each other. She didn't teach us, she expected knowledge of Slovak from us." (12 Polish, 2019)

"I did not learn Czech – I did not have to, as I understood it. Of course, I came across new words that expanded my vocabulary. I also 'caught' something from English, as we also talked to foreigners and the orientation week was also held in English." (04 Slovak, 2020)

"I tried to learn some Slovak. It was such an interactive class. But there should have been more international students in the class." (05 Turk, 2020)

"I took a language course in Spanish at a language school affiliated with the university. The teacher was very nice and at first I liked the lessons. But at the end I didn't like the intensive teaching. I probably didn't like that the course was taught at an convenient time (in the evening) due to university classes being held during other (lunch) break." (07 Slovak, 2020)

"Yes, I learned some basic Slovak words ... I visited a Slovak course at the university which was really helpful. The course was a basic language course and provided us with some knowledge to have a short conversation and to ask for help. It was nice in a small group and the teacher did a great job balancing the information and also introducing "fun" aspects. However, it still is a lot of new information when you learn a new language." (08 German, 2020)

"We had 3 intense days of leaning Slovak with a great teacher. It was awesome, funny, although quite long – but it achieved the goal. Then I learnt basic communication by talking with locals." (09 French, 2020)

„I tried to enrol in a Slovak course as soon as possible after my arrival. I also attended it, but learning new words and pronunciation and especially grammar were very difficult in addition to studying. There was not enough time to learn so fast that I could communicate in Slovak on my own – and because many non-teaching staff did not speak English, I had a problem (at the gatehouse, at the boarding school). I also tried to translate with Google and then write it on the ticket, and show e.g. in the dining room,

but it didn't seem to be right and sometimes people really got offended – I didn't know how google translated it. The biggest problem was with transport around the city and ordering taxis. When I called a taxi, I told them with my pronunciation where I wanted to go and they did not understand me and often hung up. When I then asked some employees on campus to call me a taxi, it was strange for them and some of them didn't want to. But other than that – I enjoyed my stay here because it is very pleasant to interact with Slovak people.” (10 American, 2020)

“Learning Lithuanian? – No, no time. I know only a few polite words to use when I am in the market. I like the way it sounds though. But I tried to use every opportunity! When I go to shop for groceries I say “Labas diena,” which is “good day,” “Korteles,” which is “I will pay by card,” and “Ačiu,” which is “Thank you,” and then “Viso gero,” which means “goodbye.” I like to be polite and use these words, however elsewhere I use only English.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“Learning Slovak? – Definitely! As soon as I got to Slovakia I learned my three first words ‘ANO’, ‘ZMRZLINA’ and ‘DOBRE’. At first it was quite difficult to communicate. But for me it was a must to learn this beautiful language. I attended two Slovak classes – one for beginners and one for advanced learners. I was very happy with the results after the end of the semester. I truly appreciate the patience and the understanding of the teachers as they were very kind with us. At the beginning it was quite difficult because it is completely different from English or French but once we started I gradually start liking it. The teacher also tried different ways of teaching, such as music videos, songs, short documentaries, and presentations, and before starting each class she gave a short recap and asked questions about the previous class. So thanks to this Slovak class at the university, I can now manage to have a conversation with the basic words. Sometimes my friend and I were trying to talk in Slovak among ourselves just to improve and to feel a bit more Slovak rather than being international students. I have to tell you that at even in Mauritius I am sharing the Slovak language with my family and each time they are amazed and it feels so good.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“I love the Slovak language. I would like to learn more. I am also proud of myself because everywhere I went, whether it was at the supermarket or in public, I would greet people with, ‘Dobry Den’, ‘Dakujem’, ‘Dovidenia’

and more. I attended courses in Slovak. Actually I liked every lesson. It was interesting, I am just sad that I could not learn more of it.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

“I learnt some new Estonian words on my own. But I did not attend any official courses in the Estonian language.” (16 Slovak, 2020)

“I speak the Bosnian language very well, so I had no problems.” (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

“I had not known any Italian words but I learned a lot on my own during my travels, I did not attend any official courses. My Italian is currently at A1 level. But I also improved my English.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“I wanted to learn Slovak, so I attended courses. But it was quite difficult because it was two times a week for 3 hours in the evening. I can speak a few words now. But It was very easy to communicate in other languages, and colleagues were willing to help.” (19 Ukrainian, 2020)

“During the first two orientation weeks there was a preparatory intensive German course. We had an excellent teacher, her pace of teaching suited me, I felt I improved in my German.” (20 Slovak, 2020)

“I learned French for several years before leaving for France. But after arriving, especially by communicating with the people there, I found that my level was not at all as sufficient as I thought. On the other hand, this stay gave me a lot in terms of language, and since we had to handle a lot of things at the beginning of the stay (boarding school, bank, bus card, etc.), it was these experiences that greatly enriched me.

In Nantes, we had classes in French. They were in the evenings, twice a week. I really liked the way of teaching, the teacher was very nice and welcoming, and especially since he was only a little older than us, he tried to show us French in a slightly different light – sometimes he also mentioned expressions that we wouldn’t have a chance to learn at school because they are used informally, in ordinary speech, and it is precisely this group of expressions that is used the most that is not taught. (This does not apply to obscene words, of course).” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“Yes, I learnt some Slovak words. All Erasmus students have the opportunity to choose Slovak language as one of their courses. I applied for it and my professor was very good. So I learnt a few things. I can say little things. The lessons were fun, interesting, and interactive. We talked a lot, and activities were so useful. We learned basic things to survive by introducing ourselves ... Learning languages was fun.” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

“I did not study Finnish during my stay in Vaasa. I can say only thank you (kitos) and Bye (moi moi). But I learnt Swedish, because in Finland there are two official languages: Finnish and Swedish. I lived in the Swedish speaking part of Finland, also my university was the one Swedish university. As exchange students, we had opportunity to learn the Swedish language through a course. So I learned the basics of Swedish and I can speak and understand something ... I appreciated that I could learn another foreign language in a foreign language, because the teacher taught us Swedish in English. I liked that our teacher was very positive and always smiling. She had a pretty fast tempo so I was sometimes confused but still liked it.” (23 Slovak)

Differences in education culture, learning arrangements

Pros and cons of the educational culture at the host university

“The biggest surprise in the Finnish education system was the fact that the university was taught by professors of different nationalities ... I appreciated the variety of teaching methods and techniques, the alternation of various settings, group work, etc. Also, I appreciated that the professors gave us problems and tasks, where we could develop our critical thinking, group discussions about various topics and events that occurred at school. We had a lot more free time than at home. In our schedule we usually had one two-hour class per day. The schedule changed from week to week so the days were not stereotypical. No negative impressions.” (01 Slovak, 2019)

“Slovak teachers were really helpful and nice. They have really good knowledge of the courses they are teaching, are always really friendly to foreign students, and their language skills are really good, but I miss some variety in the teaching methods, not just lectures and write notes, e.g. doing some field studies and practical exercises (of course depending on your study field). They have clear expectations for the students and always help if something is unclear with the studies. In Finland students concentrate on working besides school to support their living. Cons: There could be anyhow bit more diversity of teaching styles. Lecturing and taking notes is a bit one-sided, there are so many other motivating ways to teach and learn.” (02 Finn)

“Each course was administered differently but I think that all classes were led well and substantively by the Slovak teachers ... I think there is no difference between Polish and Slovak students’ approaches to their studies. There are people who study a lot and those who do not. There are students who work at the weekend and those who play all weekend, I think there is no difference in this area.” (03 Polish, 2019)
“During my studies at Matej Bel University, I really liked our English lessons. The teacher helped us to know each other during the first lesson

and let us to speak in our own pace. I think it is the best way to relate and to teach something to new people from different cultures, and different countries.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“It is hard for me to say something about the differences between Slovak and Polish education, because my international schoolmates and I usually had separate lessons (in English). During normal lessons with the Slovak group, I did not see any differences ...

Daily life of an Erasmus student is different from one’s home country. Erasmus students have a lot of free time to travel. Domestic students don’t have enough time to do it. They have to share their time between school, work, family, etc. I think everybody should try living as an Erasmus student. As an Erasmus student in Slovakia you can travel all around this beautiful country.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“My Czech teachers were kind and welcoming. They tried to help me and they were willing to make time for me. The professors were very skilful and knowledgeable. I think their communication with students was at a high level. It is difficult for me to evaluate the students, as there were many of them and everyone was different. At the beginning of the semester, teachers gave clear information about what we would have to be achieved and what would be at the exam. They provided us with study materials and always knew how to advise ... Compared to our Slovak system, we did not have to prepare so many written plans for teaching, not in as much detail as back at our home university. Thus I had more time and could go to the gym in the evenings, we had more time for social life.” (04 Slovak, 2020)

“The Slovak teachers made us feel so comfortable by providing all materials and preparing interactive lessons for us; it was not a class but a social interaction. Some international students already had a background of the language and I had to catch up with them Slovak students are much more hardworking and active, they are very focused on their academic career. They are taken care of more by the teachers and admin staff than in my home university. Everything is clearly explained by the teachers and in notes.”(05 Turk, 2020)

“The methods of education are really different, depending on the teachers. Some of them were really great but some of them were also

disappointing. Because I was almost always alone in classes, lessons were really instructive.” (06 French, 2021)

“What I liked at my Spanish host university – the age average of the teachers, their opinions, approach, and learning environment ... Most teachers valued our international contribution. They expected different opinions from us, they were curious. Others treated us as domestic students. If I am to evaluate the quality of teaching, three out of five teachers of our courses had excellent pedagogical skills – linguistic, communication and interpersonal. The other two were trying at an admirable level, but their lecturing missed the mark. It was lifeless, even though I knew they wanted to give us as much as possible.. The daily life of Spanish students seemed more challenging to me than back at home. No breaks, huge campus, time spent commuting. My impression was that Spanish students were more disciplined than we are here. The teaching methods, content and scope of the curriculum were similar to what we are used in Slovakia ... It was interesting to see that during classes very few students wrote notes on paper, they just used laptops.” (07 Slovak, 2020)

“The lessons were mostly very interactive, which is nice. Some lessons overlapped to some extent. That can be positive and negative.” (08 German, 2020)

“Students are calmer than in France.” (09 French, 2020)

“It seemed to me that the majority of women in Slovakia are well-educated, they have Master’s and PhD’s ... I met some exceptionally good, knowledgeable female professors at the university.” (10 American, 2020)

“I am very content with my studies in Lithuania. Their study system is very different from my home university, I prefer the Vilnius University system. Even though we had so many readings for every class, I enjoyed it and learnt so much new information. The readings were very interesting and most of all available for us in the Moodle system (even before the pandemic online times). Access to the academic text is probably the most visible difference in comparison to my home university. Also, everyone in my class was prepared for each lesson, or at least could contribute to the discussion. In my home university it is usually only me and a few students, so that is why I appreciated studying in Vilnius very much. Even though the courses

were online, the quality was more than high. I am very thankful for the knowledge that I learnt at my home university – that helped me in Vilnius too. In Vilnius we had basically only seminars and no lectures and we had always two or more readings for each seminar. I am very encouraged by the good study results I achieved in Vilnius. My home university was also very helpful too – there was good communication among us. I love it here – the lessons go into greater depth. I can say that I have learned so much and that I am able to think critically in the areas I studied, I enjoyed most of the courses.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“I must admit that there was one course which was not very clear and quite confusing but I did manage to adapt, but most of my classes were very clear and straightforward. I knew what was waiting for me and the teachers were very explicit ... The examinations were quite good and they were very easy. But they were assessed very strictly – in Mauritius it is quite opposite: The exams are very difficult, and the assessments are not so strict ...

I think that student life in Mauritius is less stressful because students have a lot of facilities like free transport, and free health care. The majority of them still live with their parents, so everything is provided. It’s a small island so we can go wherever we want in no time and there are lot of fancy pubs or bowling or activities in the campus or near the campus itself, except its quite expensive compared to Banská Bystrica. So, in terms of facilities, students are stress free in Mauritius. I must admit that it is quite unusual to hear a student in Mauritius doing part time jobs because we don’t really need it but in Slovakia it was very common.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“My main course in Slovakia was quite repetitive of things I already knew, or it was simply learning stuff what we were not supposed to learn.

Teachers, generally, were involved with students, but maybe they need more knowledge. Their relationships with students seemed good. When treating foreigners, some differences could be seen and felt.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

“I appreciated that teachers at Matej Bel University were open-minded, clever, and very kind to me and other students.” (15 Czech, 2019)

“Estonian teachers did not treat us, international students, differently than they did their domestic students. They were very nice and kind to all of us. Their pedagogical competencies, including the command of English language, were on a very high level. They tried to help us as much as possible. (16 Slovak, 2020)

“The professors quickly adapted to online teaching, which was of good quality and went smoothly. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, relationships between professors and students are much more personal, more dedicated to students, they simply have an “ear” for each student. My impression is that in Slovakia they are more distant from the students.” (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

“In my host university in Italy I appreciated that they were offering practical courses, usable in life. The teachers were enthusiastic and energetic, they want to know more about their students. The teacher-student relationship is more open than ours, friendly. Slovak students are lazier, again they have fewer options ... students in Italy live outside every day, in parks ... not in dorms. I have no negative feelings about their education culture.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“The courses took place in different buildings – I sometimes did not have time to get from point A to point B, so that I could come to the lecture at a given time. But otherwise the teaching was good (but my experience was short due to the pandemic). Our teachers’ approach to foreigners was very good. Their knowledge of English was also excellent. We had a friendlier relationship with language teachers than with other teachers.” (20 Slovak, 2020)

“I liked that the French students in Nantes were much more active in the lectures than we were. The lectures did not consist of just dictating the notes to the students and writing them down by the students, but here and there we also had the opportunity to experience a discussion among them. Especially in Master’s courses, I noticed that students are much more involved, without being challenged by the teacher. On the other hand, what I didn’t like at all was the length of the lesson. One hour of one course lasted 2-3 hours, i.e. 120 to 180 minutes. This struck me with great force because I had several such classes during the day. One day a week we were at school from early morning until evening even though we had

chosen the minimum mandatory number of subjects (6) and we did not have any seminars, so I cannot imagine how some students work like this every day of the week and even in the evenings to prepare for the next day. In the case of such long lectures and seminars, in my opinion, the student has no chance to concentrate.” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“Did I like the studying patterns in Slovakia? – It depends, because I had classes alone with the professor, other classes with other students, and some that were just research projects. I really enjoyed the interactive and fun classes. I felt grateful for them as they were sparked my motivation and interest in various types of issue.” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

“Teachers at our Finnish university were really open-minded and helpful. The teachers’ English was great. Every lesson we had was in English together with other students. If not they spoke to students in Swedish but later, they explained it to us in English. I noticed that students appreciated teachers and teachers their students. Students seemed to like to learn something new, there was always a big discussion during the lesson, they were paying attention and communicated with the teacher ... Mostly we had seminars and exercises in which teachers gave us the opportunity to say our opinions and ideas about various topics. Everything about the courses was on the website of the university. But at the first class teachers gave us detailed information ... When I compare my student life before and after travelling, I can say that before coming here I did not really experience the beauty of a student’s life. I was working, studying and traveling there and back home but during my time away I enjoyed every minute there and I enjoyed life. I was always in a good mood and I experienced no stress. (23 Slovak, 2019)

University administration

“Everyone at the Finnish university was willing to help, especially the coordinator for international students, who was always willing to help everyone.” (01 Slovak, 2019)

“First the positive things about studying in Slovakia. The Erasmus coordinators were really helpful with any problems that might occur. A negative aspect would be that there are not enough courses in English in my study specialization here during winter term. I would be glad to know

about this ahead of time since I had to join other study specializations and in spite of getting help I had some struggles with that.” (02 Finn, 2019)

“My Slovak Erasmus experience was just positive: good organization, a nice office worker, no language barriers.” (03 Polish, 2019)

“I appreciate very much pre-assigning buddies to every Erasmus Student. Also, access to materials and giving instructions about how to live at the University and to move around in the city is a good feature. I think it would be really helpful for foreigners if university staff (teachers, doorkeepers, secretary, etc.) could speak better English.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“Everything could be found online on the university website. Every arrangement was done in our first days. But as Slovaks do not speak English, I always had to wait for my buddy to go for any administration help.” (05 Turk, 2020)

“Oh, this was the only thing that bothered me terribly during my Erasmus studies. But I don’t think anything can be changed about it. I was bothered by the terrible bureaucracy. Everything required a signature, and the campus was huge. The first days were very difficult in this regard. Paper here, paper there, pay it. Double registration of courses.” (07 Slovak, 2020)

“In most cases you needed someone who speaks Slovak in order to do it smoothly because not everyone was speaking English. Otherwise it worked pretty well. The structure of the lessons was similar to the structure at home, although we had a lot more presentations in Slovakia.” (08 German, 2020)

“Positive – I always received help from everybody, and everybody in the Erasmus office spoke English. Negative – The lack of information before coming to Slovakia (from May until the end of August, I did not know what would happen).” (09 French, 2020)

“I really struggled with the Slovak academic information system as its structure is in Slovak. To me it was not clear, it was really too demanding to find my way in it. I had to rely on my supervisor to register me for my courses and to make sure everything was OK academically. The system

of study was mostly Slovak-oriented, although some courses were in English.” (10 American, 2020)

“The university administration in Vilnius was perfect, studies were very well organized. Mainly because they love us international students and they really care about us.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“I noticed that teachers at my host university in Banská Bystrica tended to see first what was the capacity of the foreign student, they adjusted their classes to make them feel comfortable. They sounded very experienced and knowledgeable about how to conduct their class although there were only two of us international students. They were very fluent in French and English so it was easy for us to communicate ...

I noticed that student were more free in classrooms in Slovakia, which is not the case in Mauritius where students are obliged to respect some strict rules in classroom. So I really liked the learning atmosphere in Slovakia.

The only difference in learning was that I felt more free and less tired because the classes lasted maximum 1-1.5 hour, whereas in Mauritius each lasts minimum 3 hours. The teachers impressed me with their creativity in class and, just like in Mauritius, they used documentary material and computers to make the class more lively and there were also seminars and lots of group works with which I was quite familiar. So the ways of teaching were not very different.” ... The administration was at its best because the administrators were very kind and helpful top me. We were given prior notice by email, and we were informed in advance when we had to fill out some documents or something like this. And the small meeting with students from different faculty was also a very good idea because we came to know more about the people there and the way of functioning.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“Positives: They tried to respond to other basic needs. Negatives: With few exceptions, no one showed any interest in foreign students.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

“The Erasmus coordinator at MBU was really kind and helpful all the time ... But I had a problem with teaching experience in schools (as I am studying to become a teacher, because some teachers in schools allowed

me to teach children. So the university teacher asked me why the primary school teachers allowed me to teach and who allowed it. They said that it was not possible for me to teach children in Slovakia.” (15 Czech, 2019)

“The university administration was fine, although some of the information they gave us was “out of date” on Bosnia and Herzegovina, and some information was insufficiently provided to us (regarding the residence permit).” (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

“I had a negative experience with administration in my Italian university, especially at the end of my stay, when the university required me to extend the Erasmus stay, due to a misunderstanding. The organization was very bad, I went from office to office for three days and I still didn’t arrange anything.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“I had no problem, I learned to orient myself in it.” (20 Slovak, 2020)

“I really liked the idea of the existence of a university system in Nantes, where students have access to all documents because teachers make public their presentations from lectures. It is very clear and helps to orientate between individual lectures. ... Because as Erasmus students we had lessons with domestic full-time students, most teachers made no distinction at all between them and us. My impression is that the teachers appreciated the extra initiative of the students much more than we do in Slovakia. It also seemed to me that most students had a more responsible approach to learning, it seemed to me that they appreciated the education more than in our country. The biggest difference was in the duration of lectures / seminars, in France I think it is too much. In my experience, French students have far too much to do. A lot of hours spent at school, a lot of hours spent studying. And if any of them desire to be present in all lectures, I can’t imagine how they are coping with any possible part-time job, or even social life. I personally do not consider this kind of a teaching system as effective at all.” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“I think that the problem with one Faculty in Banská Bystrica which does not have enough choices for an Erasmus student to study in English is a big mistake. This is a loss of opportunity because the Erasmus student could learn more and also share experiences with Slovak students. Also, it can be more useful for their future job ...

The Erasmus student's life is totally different from the life of a regular student in Spain, I know that this is an experience that is a bit different from normal life of students in my country. It is simply 'cooler' ... a lot of things to do with your friends and acquaintances. You are always with them having fun, visiting new places ..." (22 Spaniard, 2019)

"For me everything was clear and I have only positive experiences with my Finnish host university." (23 Slovak)

Differences in assignments, tests, assessment

"In my Finnish host university I appreciated that instead of tests – as in our country at the end of the semester – we had to write essays focused on solving problem situations. As a result of seminars we had to write a reflection – aimed at describing our feelings and explaining the benefits of lessons for us as individuals." (01 Slovak, 2019)

"The exam period in Banská Bystrica is totally different from my university, where I have all my exams in one week." (06 French, 2021)

"Assessment at the Spanish host university? Well, assessment measured by various ratings and scales, was initially literally a "Spanish village" to me in Spain. Weighted averages and percentages of each written work – I can hardly imagine that with us. On the other hand, it has something in it." (07 Slovak, 2020)

"Also, at home it is mostly one test to get the grade whereas in Slovakia it was dispersed between different tasks." (08 German, 2020)

"Exam requirements were different from Mauritius, especially for marks." (14 Mauritius, 2019)

“In one course at my Italian university, no international student understood the professor at all, even though she tried to speak clearly. Probably it was because in the course bachelors students and masters students studied together.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“In most courses in Finland we had to write essays about some topics, including our opinions.” (23 Slovak, 2019)

Building relationships in the new culture

“In Finland: We spent a lot of time together with the buddies – not only at school, but we also did joint events outside of school (meetings, dinners, skating). We also explored the country with other Erasmus students; we often went for walks around. We also visited each other often. We spent quite a lot of time in the down-town. We had a lot of encounters with Swedes, Fins (mostly with buddies), but at various seminars, we had opportunities to meet also many local students.” (01 Slovak, 2019)

“In Slovakia: I have the most respect for teachers in here. They are kind, understanding and professional toward Erasmus students. At first I was stunned by how open they were with students, but I have learned to enjoy this. According to my Erasmus experience, teachers in Slovakia are more friendly to their students than in Finland. After class, we went for punch at the Christmas market with teachers – this would never happen in Finland.

Positive side was that most events after school that were arranged by ESN members helped us to get know social life in Slovakia. I think I should have got help from our buddies, but I did not get much from mine. On the other hand, because she was not around I met more Slovak friends outside of ESN or Erasmus and I think thus I had more real experience of Slovakia. I made some new friends ... some of them, I think, for life. One student from the university is interested in going on exchange to Finland. ... We also had student parties, but not every day, and certainly there is no bar in the same building as a dormitory. Here students go eat dinner in cafeterias or in fast food places, in Finland it is too expensive so people cook together and learn to know each other more.” (02 Finn, 2019)

“I especially appreciate university teacher-student relations, but also contacts with students and teachers from outside the university (as I study in a teaching programme).” (03 Polish, 2019)

“My Polish friends and I explored many places in Slovakia as we had free train tickets... We were also interested in town life. We participated in many day events, for instance, World Championships in fire sport, the Christmas Market, the festival of lights, etc ... Most of my friends in

Slovakia were Polish, only a few friends among Slovaks or the community of international students.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“During my stay in the Czech Republic, I took advantage of several options of activities and getting to know other people. I made new friends of students staying in my dormitory apartment, we helped each other in processing the necessary documents. A group of us used to go to the gym for exercise. There were also various restaurants and clubs, which we occasionally went to or visited favourite social places in town and we went bowling.” (04 Slovak, 2020)

“Slovak teachers are more caring about foreign students, they are very friendly to them. They were able to communicate smoothly with us. They are people who would like to know more about us, foreign students ... University social life here is more active than at my home university ... so I made friends from my faculty and dormitory also. Not just Slovaks, but many others, at least from 10 different countries.”(05 Turk, 2020)

“In Spain: The relationship between teachers and students were very friendly ... I tried to make some new friends among Spanish students ... but due to COVID-19 there was not enough time for building deep friendships. I can't tell if we're friends. Here and there we make contact and connect on social networks. Especially with other Erasmus students – I met many young, ambitious and cheerful people from all over Europe and it is completely different from living at home.” (07 Slovak, 2020)

“The relationship between professors and students seemed closer, maybe one of the reasons was the small classes we had. That was really nice. The teachers also included us as foreigners really well and the English level was always fine. When it comes to other students it varied ... But we international students did a lot of stuff together and it was easy to find friends.” (08 German, 2020)

“I was able to get to know quite a few very nice people in Slovakia and started making friends with them. I got into a good relationship with my main Slovak supervisor at the university.” (10 American, 2020)

“My previous Slovak friend helped me to build relationships in Lithuania. Because he did not have to do quarantine – he was already vaccinated

at the time – he told everyone about me, that I was his Slovak friend. Then when I came to the dormitory everyone already knew me from his mentioning me, or I knew them from online classes or from Speed Friending. I loved being at the campus with all my friends. I got to see them every day and, most importantly, I did not have to commute. During my stay at the university in Vilnius I enjoyed meeting other international students in the dormitory kitchen and cooked meals together, went out for walks and trips as well. Due to the pandemic, we had to establish our relationship with the teachers mainly via Teams meetings. I also made some relationships with the Lithuanian people, especially my Erasmus mentor and some students from the Orientation Week, for whom I am grateful.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“Personally I had a very good relationship with most of my teachers. We were very serious in class but we did conduct some activities outside the classroom. I really enjoyed studying with some of my teachers as they were full of new approaches and ideas ... Slovak teachers were very nice with me. And my Slovak classmates gave me some missing notes in class and were very respectful. So yes, I have made some Slovak friends with whom I am actually still in touch. I developed some good relationships with some Slovaks. I also built relationships with other foreign students by spending time with them, e.g. we cooked dinner together or helped each other with homework. After class I did have some small chats with other students and I also had a friendly relationship with certain of my teachers, which was quite nice because I had the chance to know more people outside formal ways. Frankly speaking I had more social life in Slovakia than in Mauritius, pubs and restaurants are very affordable. Taxis were available everywhere and were quite cheap I admit. I had a great social life there, my friends and I were always going out and travelling in our free time.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“Yes, I made some friends among the Slovaks as well as among the international students.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

“I missed friends and people to talk to. I arrived on my Erasmus exchange in Slovakia later than others. And then I found out that the international students had already created smaller groups (usually nationalities keeping together) ... and it was really hard to join these nationalized groups of students ... So I felt lonely. I tried to overcome my feelings by writing my

diary, going for walks and finding out about various events and activities where I could meet other people. On the other hand I made a lot of friends among Slovaks.” (15 Czech, 2019)

“I made new friends among international students but also Estonian students.” (16 Slovak, 2020)

“I made several friends with students from the University of Sarajevo, both international and native.” (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

“I was able to make new friends among Italians and also among international students.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“Now I have a lot of new friends, Slovak and also from other nationalities.” (19 Ukrainian, 2020)

“Yes, I made friendships with several students at the university. We also regularly went to French-Slavic parties, where we became friends with the organizers, i.e. native French people.” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“Learning through the music, thinking, and perspectives of other people from different countries is great. With ESN we had a big meeting where we showed elements of our culture to all our partners, with food, music, and curiosities ... Studying as an Erasmus student in Slovakia, I also discover traditional dances, food and history. The history of other cultures is very interesting to learn. We international students, are good friends, all of us. There are some personal relationships that are not so good, of course, but that is totally normal. But not many contacts with Slovak students, only the ESN Slovak students.” (22 Spanish, 2019)

“I made many good friends in Finland and all the time we did things together, so I was not alone at all. Some of them were Swedish-speaking Finns, and others from other countries and nationalities. We are still in contact.” (23 Slovak, 2019)

Experiences at the university campus and students' dormitory

"I really liked the student apartment in Finland. It was large, spacious. Three of us, Slovak girls, had a three-room apartment and each of us had a separate room. We shared a bathroom, toilet and kitchen. What was the only disadvantage that the apartment did not have kitchen equipment (pots, cutlery, plates)." (01 Slovak, 2019)

"In Slovakia, I was positively surprised that they offered washing of bedding and cleaning the rooms. The price was quite cheap for the size of the rooms. Negative comments; there was no hot water in the shower after midnight. Because I like to cook, the kitchen was a nightmare for me, but I think most of the other Erasmus students were okay with it. Our dormitory floor's fridge was broken for 2 months in total so also bit negative." (02 Finn, 2019)

"The dormitory in Olomouc was nice. The lady from the accommodation office was also very helpful and kind." (04 Slovak, 2020)

"I liked the dormitory in Banská Bystrica very much, there were all the things we needed to live and the infrastructure was very suitable. Everything was fine with accommodation and I could stay there with my friends." (05 Turk, 2020)

"I had to find private accommodation. The dormitory on the Spanish campus is expensive. What I found was fine. I can't complain about the price / quality ratio." (07 Slovak, 2020)

"The dormitory in Banská Bystrica was fine for the stay of a semester. For a longer stay I would have preferred another accommodation. The rooms had everything which was needed. It also depended a lot on your room and flatmates since you could hear basically everything in your flat." (08 German, 2020)

"For the price, it was great. Good system of protection with the doorkeeper. But some days, people were stealing food from us. And the vacuum cleaner was not working in March." (09 French, 2020)

“It was clean, quiet, a little small room, but there were no instructions in English – about using the kitchen, washing machine, etc. Then the boarders of the boarding school came to see me and had to draw my attention to various, much stricter rules in various ways.” (10 American, 2020)

“I loved my dormitory in Vilnius. Due to Covid, I had a three-person room all to myself, and next to my room was a two-person room where my friend from India lived. In the hall there were two nice kitchens with an oven, a cooker and 2 large refrigerators. It was very clean here and they cleaned our bathroom every day.” (11 Slovak, 2021)

“I really, really liked my dormitory. I had an amazing room, with an amazing view, and with amazing roommates.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“The dormitory was also good, it was more comfortable and quiet than I expected before leaving Mauritius. I was very satisfied with the room and the atmosphere. However, I must admit that some doorkeepers were quite rude. They spoke very rudely to me and sometimes they just shouted, and, fortunately or unfortunately, my friend and I did not understand the meaning of their words, but from their facial expressions and behaviour we understood that they were not very happy seeing people from a different race. Sometimes they were nice with others but they treated us differently, which made me very uncomfortable. But there were two doorkeepers who were very nice with me and helped me a lot with my letters and other problems. And one more thing I didn’t appreciate was that there were non-Erasmus students living in the same block stealing our food from the fridge and didn’t clean the kitchen after they cooked. These incidents shocked me because food stealing and cooking in dirty kitchen is so unusual for me. The non-Erasmus students were not very nice and sometime were quite rude and offensive, but we had to live together and maybe these were cultural differences, but it made me quite uncomfortable about same hurtful comments.

We had hospitals near the dorm and the nurses and doctors were very kind but the communication problem was still there; they did not speak enough English. So I had to use google translators to help myself understand but otherwise the medical care was very good.

To sum up, living at the university campus definitely has both advantages and disadvantage.” (13 Mauritius, 2019)

“The accommodation was good. I was satisfied.” (14 Mauritius, 2019)

„I found the dormitory myself in Salzburg, the price-equipment ratio was adequate. Everything was clean, the distance from school by public transport was OK – 10 minutes. But the communication with accommodation was at a bad level, it was unprofessional. After checking out of the accommodation they refused to return the deposit, charged me an extra month for accommodation even though I had moved out a long time ago.” (20 Slovak, 2020)

“The dormitory in Nantes was perfect. Although the monthly fee for the room was about 4 times higher compared to what we pay in Slovakia, the convenience of our own room with private bathroom and toilet was clearly worth it. I have noticed that most of the dormitories in France are set up in this way, where the student has a small, single room. These are very logical solutions, in terms of furniture layout, so everything needed for housing is available in the room. I felt at home there. At the same time, I was very comfortable with the way they had secured the use of students’ rooms. Everyone is actually responsible for their room during their stay, everyone must pay insurance for that room for the entire length of their stay, and each individual also takes care of the maintenance of the room. If the student damages something, he/she will pay for the damage. What is also positive is that the staff at the dorm gate plays a more active role, ie if necessary, they will help with what is needed. Therefore, visits are not controlled or prohibited from a certain hour, which is a very common thing in our dormitories. However, this “freedom” also has a negative side, as, for example, communication with the reception in case of questions about accommodation was very weak. (21 Slovak, 2020)

“In Banská Bystrica, I got a room for one person in the dorm and it was incredibly good. The only bad fact was that somebody from the community of students was stealing the food of other students. That seemed very negative to me.” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

The overall evaluation of the study exchange

What have I learnt?

“Positive. Staying in Finland broadened my horizons. I had the opportunity to see and experience how the best school system in Europe works and I am very grateful that I was given such an opportunity. I also improved my English and met a lot of people from all over the world.

I learned to be more tolerant and understanding in case of certain cultural differences. After this experience, I became a more open person, because half a year in a foreign country broadened my horizons. My attitudes toward learning and teaching have also changed. Being in a country with people of different nationalities taught me to see the world through the eyes of people from different parts of the world. Also, being taught by teachers from different parts of the world has given me a deeper look at the world and its problems, e.g. racism.” (O1 Slovak, 2019)

“I do think it has been interesting experience and I do not regret coming to Slovakia. I do not mean it as an insult to say I will be happy to return to Finland to my own university.

I have learned about other countries’ politics, religions, and habits. Finnish people do not discuss politics so openly as people in Erasmus do. I have learned to be more open and loud-voiced since spending time with Spanish, Portuguese and Italian people here. With these people you will fade into the background if you do not learn how to be more extroverted. In most Scandinavian cultures we are peaceful and introverted, so I have been relating to cultures close to mine, such as Lithuanian and Latvian people. One of biggest adaptations would be learning the Slovak language and adapting to Slovak approaches to studying.

... To be honest I hated my first few weeks the country because I did not know anyone from here. Even getting along with Erasmus students at the start was a struggle. Now I can still say I have made friends and that made my life in Slovakia easier. Now I understand other cultures better and have learned to become open-minded and respectful toward them.

You can learn so many things during your stay in another country. It will even change your personality a little bit during a short period of time. Also I learned to love and appreciate my own culture. Understanding other cultures and incorporating some behavioural habits into my own daily life. Now I can take these new things to my working life in Finland, also some new insights in religion, toward tourism and food culture.” (02 Finn, 2019)

“My expectations were met in Slovakia. I met new people, visited a new culture, and saw a few beautiful places so I am very happy with the trip ... I found out that the intercultural barriers are only in our head, if someone is willing to manage any difficult situation ... The biggest advantage of my Erasmus is simply my own growth. Staying in another country requires dealing with situations that you didn’t have to deal with at home and these situations have to be dealt with, often very fast ... to know that everything can be fine. It is such a school of life. I am very happy that I took part in this Erasmus programme and had a really good time.” (03 Polish, 2019)

“I am really satisfied my stay at the University. I had a great time there ... I learned about myself, that I can manage on my own everywhere I’ll go, even if I don’t know the language. I learned also that I have people who would help me if I had problem. I think that I am more open to new things. I know better now that people are different and that we cannot judge ‘a book by its cover.’ I also got to know that people have to travel. The world is big, and we can expand into new things ... I think that after Erasmus I became a better person.” (12 Polish, 2019)

“I appreciate the whole stay (even if it didn’t last long), it was a very positive experience. I’m glad I went. People at my host university in the Czech Republic were very helpful. As for the accommodation, the dining room and the overall environment, I was also very satisfied. The courses I have chosen are still suitable for me. I think both universities did everything to make our stay easier and they helped me whenever I needed to. I can say that it was one of the best semesters of my studies. I would definitely like to go back there ... During my stay, I learned that I have no problem adapting to new conditions and sharing an apartment with five other girls.

At the end of my stay, I am very happy that I decided for Erasmus. It was a very informative and interesting stay.” (04 Slovak, 2020)

“Due to the fact that this is my second Erasmus experience, I already knew about being a foreigner in another country. In Slovakia, I tried not to make the same mistakes I made in my first experience, and to socialize more. It was easier for me to survive in Slovakia because we had a good dormitory here and our coordinators and ESNers were very interested with us.

Initially, when I saw the nature of Slovakia, I was very impressed, also with people – by their fine-looking. I thought that it would be a good place for living. Then the idea about the climate and calm lifestyle here helped me to decide. I could stay here for a few years, however I’m looking for a hot and lively country to spend the rest of my life ...

During my stay here, I improved my survival skills, cooking and language skills especially. I know more about Slav culture and people now.”(05 Turk, 2020)

“In Spain, my Erasmus expectations were met. These were the most beautiful weeks of my student life. I learned that nothing is as difficult as it seems. I’m adaptable, no need to compare, it will always be different. But of course, my experience was that of a student, not of a working man ... The overall experience was very positive Once you master the initial bureaucratic administration, you are no longer cursing the institution, of course. Otherwise, what a great school and country! As for thinking, specifically one subject changed my thinking a bit. So far I know that something needs to be done but I don’t know yet how ... I am very happy to have been able to participate in the Erasmus + program, even if only for a few weeks due to the COVID pandemic. But even that was enough to find out that I was not wrong and such an experience was excellent for me and I will look for this opportunity again.” (07 Slovak, 2020)

“Pros: Slovakia got more “real” for me and I understand the country and culture better. Being out of your comfort zone always benefits you as a person. Being forced to adapt and get to know other people helps a lot to become more socially skilled.

Cons: Maybe it was due to the pandemic restrictions but I learned that being stuck with other people and not being able to get some distance is hard for me. But I definitely want to visit Slovakia again in the future.” (08 German, 2020)

"The best experience of my life. The Faculty was open-minded with Erasmus students, that was beautiful. I discovered in myself a capacity to adapt myself to other cultures. The more culture I know, the smarter socially I get." (09 French, 2020)

"My overall impression of Slovakia: I like this beautiful culture. Due to this experience I have got yet other vision of the world and I understand that the world is global village". (10 American, 2020)

"I am beyond grateful, that I followed my heart and chose to come to Lithuania. It was honestly the best half-year of my life. My expectations were more than fulfilled in Lithuania. My evaluation of the education here would be 10 out of 10 really. The whole paperwork process was very easy due to the supportive International Office in Vilnius University. They were very kind and responsible, and they were always willing to help us and communication was mainly remarkably fast and easy. All the people I met here were nice, intelligent, and funny, but responsible. I enjoyed every day here. The small things made me happy. I must say, that I am 100% grateful that I chose Vilnius for my Erasmus ...

I grew so much and I know now that I can take care of myself. I learned about myself that I would like to live in a different country for some time. Maybe in France to improve my French for a year or so." (11 Slovak, 2021)

"I must admit that this stay in Banská Bystrica made me grow. I had to live with different types of people and it made me more mature as I had to choose what to say and not to say. I certainly came across some racist people in the dorm. Personally that was a totally new and different experience for me. But I must thank them because not answering their stupid comments made me feel that I was becoming a better person and I had a lot of friends from different countries. I strengthened my relationship with other foreign friends by spending time with them in activities such as cooking dinner together or helping each other with homework. Living at the university definitely has both advantages and disadvantages.

I discovered that I am a very patient person and I am quite good at planning and managing money. Actually, my stay as a foreigner made me realise that everything can happen at any time – I mean I have to expect everything and I still have to manage on my own. I had to be mature

enough to be able to live with different kinds of people. I also learned to approach different people in different ways because not everyone thinks the same way. I also learned I have to be very careful and responsible because I am expected to be responsible for my own actions. Sometimes being a 'visitor' is quite fun because people are interested in you and want to know more about your country and do you some special favour or give you their attention.

I became more tolerant. I have accepted the fact that there are still people who would never change and we still have to live together because it is how life goes. I am more independent and responsible now that I have had to manage on my own. I also came to know about my potential ... about what I can do. I also discovered some good speaking and leadership skills in myself, with which I am quite satisfied. I am pretty sure that these skills will help me a lot in my professional life and will enable me to grow into a better person. I also learned three new languages during this stay, which I am so proud and thankful of.

I would like to say that my stay has been a success because of the kindness and help of the Matej Bel University staff and teachers. I gained so much cultural knowledge there and going to the thermo bath is the best thing ever. MBU teachers are doing an excellent job in making foreign students feel at home." (13 Mauritius, 2019)

"My expectations were indeed fulfilled since I had never thought of being in Slovakia someday. I really enjoyed my stay there. In fact, I miss Banská Bystrica – a small but beautiful city.

I learned to be more independent and to assume my responsibilities – having to survive and adapt, understanding others, sharing our culture and way of living together.

I learned to travel with only the basic essentials and not take lots of clothes with me. I grew and matured as a learner. I can say that this intercultural experience brought me happiness, peace, freedom and amazement." (14 Mauritius, 2019)

"I never give up." (15 Czech, 2019)

"I consider my Erasmus time in Estonia to be one of the best times in my life. Living abroad is a very good experience, meeting students from almost

every country in Europe opened my mind, and I made new friends. It was an experience that I will definitely not forget. Erasmus definitely helped me in my studies, I improved my linguistic skills, I learned new phrases in other languages ... As a city, Tallinn has become very dear to my heart and I will definitely want to go back for a few days.

I learned that one must have an open mind and accept every nationality. Since coming, I have not been afraid to express my own opinion in public, I am not afraid to meet new people. I now try to be even more grateful for what I have, to respect my family, and to enjoy life more and travel more. My Erasmus undoubtedly affected my personality. I'm more courageous, more open, I'm not afraid to try new things. I was able to make strong friendships and gain countless experiences that will definitely help me in my life." (16 Slovak, 2020)

"My expectations were fulfilled. I have very positive impressions of my Erasmus stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am very happy to have overcome all the obstacles caused by the pandemic and that my exchange has not been interrupted. I don't know how I would manage without the support of Erasmus + friends, faculty and family ... I learned how to overcome my own comfort zone and better adapt to unexpected situations. My impressions remained very positive. All this experience will remain in my memory for the rest of my life. The extraordinary pandemic situation during my stay in another country has helped me a lot, as I have had to set priorities, adapt more and value the things I have more. The friends I gained during Erasmus are a big positive, we spent days together and we were like one family." (17 Serb studying in Slovakia, 2020)

"I found out about myself, that I am independent and I can easily make new contacts. I enjoy overcoming such obstacles. My expectations were completely met during my Erasmus in Italy. I am more than satisfied. In general, my stay was good, only from the bureaucracy and chaos at the university, I remained really disappointed when I left.

... Despite my negative experience with the administration of various issues at the university, overall, I rate my Erasmus experience positively, it was a great experience. I went there to meet new people, improve my English and broaden my horizons and knowledge. Everything came true, I am satisfied and the situation of COVID did not have a significant effect on it. I think that my stay in Italy has enriched me a lot,

especially when it comes to accepting other cultures. I can also say that this stay has also moved me personally. Academically, I was enriched mainly by teachers and current subjects taught in Italy.” (18 Slovak, 2020)

“In Slovakia I learned that I need to be more active, productive and effective. I recommend Erasmus to everybody, it was an extraordinary experience.” (19 Ukrainian)

“My overall evaluation of my Erasmus time in Salzburg is more negative than positive, unfortunately, the outbreak of the epidemic, which no one could have anticipated, plays the largest role in it. The life during Erasmus is much busier, more exhausting, the student is dependent on him/herself, he/she has to communicate more (in a foreign language), it certainly moves him/her forward either in language or in his skills and experience ...

Pros of this Erasmus? – improvement in language, meeting new people and their cultures, I gained a few good friends with whom I am still in contact, a good experience. Despite the abrupt termination of the Erasmus of Mobility (after 1 month) due to the outbreak of the pandemic and the fear / fear of how to study online from home, I am happy for the experience and the people I met. Now I know what I would change / do / not do in the future, etc. I found out about myself that I am a bigger introvert than I thought, I am more independent than I thought. I learned to handle stressful situations better.” (20 Slovak, 2020)

“I have a good overall impression of my Erasmus experience in France. Despite the pandemic, I am really satisfied with it. We thoroughly managed to see the city where we were and its surroundings even before the outbreak of the pandemic – thanks to the fact that the semester in Nantes began on the 20th January. We had the opportunity to experience the classic full-time teaching. During the curfew in France, I was also able to create my own schedule and work regime, so in the end I am satisfied ... Personally, I am satisfied with my Erasmus stay, despite the pandemic crisis, I managed to experience enough before its outbreak and even during the lockdown, which lasted in France for about 2 months, I had a productive period.

Mainly I learned that I must not be afraid, because fear is what complicates every decision the most. Before coming to the country, I didn't have a problem taking care of myself, I already knew that before, so I wasn't

afraid of that at all. I used to feel insecure about my level of language, and I couldn't imagine how I would communicate. However, after arriving, along with all the responsibilities I had to arrange, I realized that when no one around is speaking your language, a more basic level of language is also good. Before this Erasmus, I didn't believe in my English (although my level was always very good), but in France, English was exactly what I relied on when the French vocabulary was running out.

At first, it took me a while to get used to life in Nantes and to the university, and my attitudes were rather negative. But gradually I learned everything and got used to it and reconsidered my approach. France is a really beautiful country, with amazing nature, culture, and gastronomy; all this is true. But on the other hand, security is a very serious issue everywhere in France. I have a feeling that they have a bigger and bigger problem with it every year.

This Erasmus travel really gave me a lot. I think I improved a lot not only in the languages but overall I gained more confidence in myself that I can be independent and I can provide everything I need. I am of the opinion that a person is formed most when he/she is abroad, outside the home, ie outside own comfort zone. I had the opportunity to experience that and I see differences, it definitely moved me somewhere and I believe that I will use this experience from France in the future.” (21 Slovak, 2020)

“My expectations were fulfilled. Basically, before coming here to Banská Bystrica I was wondering if this experience was going to be good or bad because all was unknown but once you are in dormitory and you start to participate in Erasmus it becomes normal and fun, essentially this was what I wanted ... It was a great experience to learn and get something so valuable ... I learn a lot of things about myself here. It was a period of reflection how to become more productive and how I could improve my life. Also, it was great to experience adventures and travelling. The next time it would be easier to adapt faster and take it easier, for example in transport, how to go to another places, how to travel in a better way. I had to learn this all from other people ...

Before coming here, I was thinking that it was going to be more complex than it actually was. Also, in the beginning I was feeling like I was going to be more lonely, but that was not correct either. It was easy to make a lot of friends fast. In the beginning I was lost but little by little

I found my way. I made a big mistake with the procedures and I was very worried and I was thinking that I was not going to be able to get my scholarship but I learned that I am very impulsive and I need to relax and think more about what I can do ...

So I think these are the positive side of my Erasmus experience: I learned to be productive. It was the experience of my life. I learned better how to travel and do big things. I also learned more about the world, about different cultures, about studying in other country. I learned languages. I met interesting people. I got new objectives. I learned some organizational things. I was able to find more curiosities.” (22 Spaniard, 2019)

“My Erasmus was absolutely perfect and amazing. It was the best decision of my life to choose Finland and this University for my exchange. I liked it so much, so I decided to continue there also next term ... I learned about myself, that I should have more confidence in myself because I can do anything when I want and when I am brave. I learned many new things and now I know myself much better. I started to be more open-minded and tolerant. Now I am more confident in using English and in communication in general. Also I became more tolerant of other cultures.”
(23 Slovak, 2019)

3.2 Examples of teachers' international encounters

"I benefited from my Erasmus teaching mobilities quite a lot. I had the chance to meet different types of students (Bc., MA, PhD) who were students from different faculties or departments. It was a nice experience for me to meet students from the Czech Republic (České Budějovice, Olomouc) (although in 2021 it was online) and Poland (Krakow) too. Except for meeting students I also benefited quite a lot from meeting my colleagues (people who accepted to have me in their classes and let me teach). They gave me feedback after every class which was very motivating in terms of my future professional development. My intercultural experience has been very positive and I would like to take part in more Erasmus teaching visits in the period ahead. Apart from the human factor, I had also a chance to explore the local area anonymously and to be a part of city life in e.g. Krakow or Olomouc. I suppose that even travelling to the Erasmus destination gave me an opportunity to engage with the new country, new landscape, new people and new challenges. The Erasmus stay helped me to forge new contacts, new friendships and new possible partnerships in terms of project collaboration. I have not met with any negatives during my stay." (Slovak teacher, 2019 & 2020)

"What was the highlight during my teaching mobility in Slovakia? Talking to my Slovak colleagues. It was interesting to hear about their work and also their innovative teaching methods (e.g. the feedback-cards after the lessons). Also visiting the canteen with my Slovak colleagues and tasting the food; tasting the food in the restaurant in the centre as well; looking at and tasting the food in the local shops. Talking to the students, though unfortunately this was only topic-related, no intercultural encounters really - more of a linguistic experience. I can't recall any negative experiences. I only regret that I wasn't able to stay longer and see more of the city and the mountains." (Polish teacher, 2019)

"I had an opportunity to experience an online Erasmus teaching exchange to the Netherlands. It was a great benefit for me to be able to look at the problem from a completely different point of view - after all, it was a different country, a different language, different customs, other people. Working with a group of international students was an experience in itself.

I have good memories of their positive feedback to my lectures. I was also very pleased with the statements of students that they would pay much more attention to the topics I taught them in their future lives. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to influence students hundreds of kilometres away in a positive way. On the other hand, I must admit that my teaching was preceded by very demanding preparation. Since it was a different language, it took much more time. This also created in me a lot of stress before and during the meetings, especially my presentation and leading discussions.” (Slovak teacher, 2020)

“I was very satisfied with my online Erasmus mobility. It was a big challenge for me because of English as my foreign language, also preparing for a different, multicultural learning context in a different culture in a different country (the Netherlands), different expectations and needs of students. But I can say that through this intercultural experience I learned a lot. Our Slovak team was able to represent our Slovak study approaches to specific educational issues there. It was interesting to see how the international students dealt with our tasks and topics, how they worked with our Slovak students on their small projects. I gained a lot of new information and experience and, ultimately, I developed my language skills a bit. Students’ feedback was very, very encouraging for me. It was a very positive experience and gave me the courage to try again, this year 2021.” (Slovak teacher, 2020)

4 CONCLUSION

The overall evaluation of Erasmus verbalised by our respondents was that Erasmus mobility was one of the best decisions in their lives, a unique opportunity to get to know people from all over the world and to acquire information about life in different countries based on their authentic experience.

Based on these stories, we can also confirm that having previous intercultural experiences had a positive influence on higher education students' attitudes towards academic mobility programs (similar to Diler, 2016, p. 13). According to this Turkish study, "Turkish higher education students evaluated mobility programs mainly as opportunities for academic and professional development. The disincentives in this regard were found to be mainly economic, foreign language and social factors. Moreover, it was confirmed that the factors which encourage or discourage students towards academic mobility are influenced by students' socio-economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and also by the value that academic mobility receives in their home land".

What might strike the reader are the differences between "the opinion and satisfaction on the aspects that characterized the Erasmus experience" of the „outgoing and incoming students". This was described e.g. in the study by Amendola & Restaino (2017). According to their research, the incoming students (i.e. foreign students that spend their Erasmus period at the University of Salerno) were less satisfied than the outgoing students (i.e. local students that go to universities abroad)" (p. 542). Also, in our sample, it seems quite evident that the most satisfied were the Slovak students studying in a Western, especially a Scandinavian country. Their evaluation is far more positive than the level of satisfaction of that of incoming students to Slovakia from the same country (e.g. Finland).

We hope that the reader had the courage to enter the "flow of the river" of intercultural memories through the reflections of people who have experienced intercultural encounters first-hand (either as students or

as teachers). We also hope it allowed the reader to see things through their eyes. And thirdly, we hope that there has been some self-reflection on the side of the reader of his/her own experience and readiness for an intercultural encounters within university exchanges, and that there has been some shift in understanding of their importance and growth of enthusiasm and commitment to this important dimension of every 21st century university. To encourage it, here is some final encouragement in the words of an international expert on intercultural encounters, the above-mention prof. Jones (2017):

“The key thing is to think about the whole university being internationalized. Every single person in a university has a responsibility to think with an international intercultural mindset, e.g. governance: Can everybody read the kind of documents that we have produced, the student regulations, the requirements? Are they written in accessible language? What about the person who is on the gate at the university – if somebody is being welcomed in - are they used to seeing people from other countries, are they going to be welcoming and friendly? What about everybody who supports the curriculum, the administrators ... and literally ... everybody in the university should be covered when we think about internationalizing of the university, the campus.

“So, it is not just going to happen automatically, not by putting the whole group of people from different cultural backgrounds together. We have got to be purposeful. It must be intentional.”

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