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International mobility in Adult Education: Exploring the Impact of Erasmus+ from the Learners' Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of short-term European mobility on adult learners within the Erasmus+ Programme, addressing a research gap as existing literature has predominantly focused on students and youth. The purpose of this study is to systematically explore the range of learning outcomes experienced by participants in mobility activities in adult education. An exploratory qualitative research design was employed, using problem-centred interviews and qualitative content analysis. The sample consisted of 24 adult learners from Austria, Germany, Latvia, and Slovenia. The findings reveal a broad spectrum of outcomes. Across all cases, mobility strongly fostered intercultural learning, social connections, wellbeing, independent living skills, and communication in multilingual contexts. In contrast, outcomes related to environmental awareness and vocational skills varied depending on the thematic focus of the mobility activity and participants' individual backgrounds. The study provides an empirically grounded overview of the potential impact areas of Erasmus+ mobility for adults and highlights its transformative role in fostering lifelong learning. These findings contribute to a better understanding of adult learning processes in international mobility contexts and offer implications for the design of future Erasmus+ programmes.

Keywords: Adult learner mobility, Erasmus+ Programme, intercultural learning, mobility learning outcomes, transformative learning.

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Introduction

The Erasmus+ Programme is a key pillar of the European education policy and contributes to European priorities such as sustainable growth and social cohesion. Since 2021, the European Union (EU) has extended the scope of the Erasmus+ Programme's Key Action 1 (KA1) to support individual and group mobility of learners in adult education.** Prior to this expansion, transnational learning opportunities primarily targeted young people in initial education or involved in youth and sport exchange activities, with the exception of pedagogical staff. This policy shift substantiates the programme's claim to contribute to lifelong learning, ultimately "resulting in an improvement or update in knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes or participation in society from a personal, civic, cultural, social or employment-related perspective" across the entire lifespan of individuals (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 13). As participant numbers gradually increase following a disrupted start due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this raises the question of what impact international learning mobility has on this newly addressed target group. The impact of

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** Key Action 1 'Learning Mobility of Individuals' supports mobility of staff and learners in schools, in vocational education and training, in higher education, and in adult education, as well as youth participation activities and mobility of staff in the field of sports and language learning. Erasmus+ conceptualises Adult Education as non-vocational learning that promotes solidarity, equity, diversity, tolerance, intercultural awareness, European values, democratic participation, environmental sustainability, and digital literacy by providing learning opportunities for (disadvantaged groups of) learners (European Commission [EC], 2025a).

international mobility on young learners has been extensively studied and demonstrates benefits in terms of personal development, intercultural competence, language skills, and employability (Brunner, 2015; e.g., Roy et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, there is still a striking lack of empirical research on similar effects for adult learners (Buiskool et al., 2024). While existing studies consistently highlight positive effects of mobility for younger learners, these findings are often grounded in formal education contexts and specific developmental stages, which may limit their transferability to adult learners. Given the heterogeneity of adult learners and their diverse life contexts, it remains unclear to what extent similar effects can be observed in this group. This study seeks to address this gap through an exploratory approach, investigating how such experiences may influence adults' learning as well as their personal, professional, and civic lives from the learners' own perspective.

In doing so, the current study explores three interrelated research questions:

- RQ1: What learning effects do participants in adult education report from Erasmus+ mobility actions under KA1?
- RQ2: What changes do adult learners report in domains such as their social, professional, and civic lives as a result of mobility?
- RQ3: What are the broader impacts of Erasmus+ mobility on adult learners' social environment and communities?

Taken together, the results of the analysis based on these three research questions aim to build an inventory of potential effects of learning mobility in the sector of adult education, thereby contributing to the limited evidence base in this field and providing relevant insights for policy and practice as well as a basis for further research. The study is based on qualitative interviews with adult learners conducted in the context of the European-wide RIA-AE Network in Austria, Germany, Latvia, and Slovenia.[†]

Erasmus+ for Adult Learners

With the introduction of the new 2021 Erasmus+ programme generation, adult education providers (including adult education centres, libraries, lifelong learning centres, community centres etc.) can apply for funding to finance mobility activities for individuals or groups of learners. Participants and accompanying staff can receive traveling and accommodation grants. In 2024, a total of 10,100 learners in adult education took part in learning mobilities across Europe (European Commission, 2025b). The overall Erasmus+ budget for the 2021-2027 period allocated to education and training amounts to EUR 20.4 billion, of which the smallest share (5.8%) is allocated to adult education (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021).

The programme is fundamentally open to all learners in adult education. An important policy goal, however, is to reach out for an "inclusive and balanced mix of participant profiles and significant involvement of participants with fewer opportunities, in line with the objectives of the action" (European Commission, 2025a). Following the programme guidelines, the term "fewer opportunities" refers to barriers that may prevent individuals from equal participation in lifelong learning, due for example to disabilities, health problems, social or economic barriers, low educational background, cultural differences, discrimination, or living in a remote area (op. cit., p. 7). According to a survey conducted for the interim evaluation of Erasmus+ in 2024/2025, around six out of ten participants in KA1 can be considered as having fewer opportunities on at least one of the above-mentioned grounds (van Lieshout et al., 2025). This indicates that the profile of adult learners participating in mobility is highly heterogeneous.

The programme guidelines allow educational institutions substantial discretion in designing the content of mobility activities, which, as a common feature, always involve physically moving to a country other than the country of residence for a period of at least two and up to 365 days (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021). Beyond language and other types of courses, eligible formats include, for instance, peer learning, work-based learning, or volunteering, thus combining structured and unstructured or informal forms of learning.

Literature Review

The experiential nature of learning through traveling abroad requires a broad understanding of learning in order to capture the wide range of possible impacts on learners' abilities, attitudes, lives, and environment. For this study, the transfer of learning and subsequent behavioural changes, as well as related effects in the participants' lives, are also relevant. This includes what has been termed the "wider benefits of lifelong learning", encompassing non-economic benefits and benefits occurring "above the level of the individual, i.e., from family/household through community to the wider society, as well as those accruing to individuals, and therefore contributing to 'social cohesion'" (Bynner et al., 2003, p. 342; Manninen et al., 2014; Mikulec & Kristl, 2025). This study does not differentiate between intended and non-intended effects of learning mobility but instead seeks to identify all types of changes that learners themselves trace back to their mobility experience (Schuller, 2017).

[†] RIA-AE (Research and Impact Assessment in Adult Education) is a Training and Cooperation Activity funded by Erasmus+ (2021-2027) and implemented by a network of National Agencies in charge of Erasmus+ in over 20 member states and associated countries. For more information see <https://www.ria-ae.eu/>

Going abroad involves learning that extends beyond formal settings, such as language courses or workshops. It also takes place incidentally – over lunch, while strolling through the city, or in unplanned encounters and interactions (Falk et al., 2012). It is therefore largely informal and to a great extent also implicit, as learners are not necessarily aware of changes in their attitudes and beliefs or the development of their knowledge and skills (Krichewsky-Wegener, 2020).

While the study does not aim to examine learning processes in depth, grounding it in learning theory helps to shape the methodological approach and inform the interpretation of empirical findings. A theory widely used to analyse learning in mobility contexts is transformative learning[‡] based on Mezirow's foundational work (Kristensen, 2004; Lyon, 2002; Nada & Legutko, 2022; Perry et al., 2012). Mezirow defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindset, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 116). Transformative learning is driven by critical reflection of experience, triggered by a sense of “contradiction among one's thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Taylor, 2000, p. 5). In the context of learning mobility, such contradictions may arise from discrepancies between individuals' frames of reference and the cultural environment, leading to experiences of “disjuncture” (Kristensen, 2004).[§] Learning occurs through the critical reflection of this experience, the questioning of assumptions and beliefs, and re-interpretation of experiences, often supported by communicative learning settings (Taylor, 2000, p. 5). For the purposes of this study, transformative learning theory serves as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954) for identifying indications of learning effects in participants' narratives. On the one hand, reports of disjuncture – for instance, moments of surprise or disorientation during the stay abroad – can be a hint for related learning effects. On the other hand, engaging interviewees to report on their thoughts and reflect on their experience can foster the emergence of learning effects in their narrative.

Methodology

The study utilizes qualitative methods to investigate the subjective perspective of participants in KA1 mobility activities. Diving deep into learners' own perspectives on mobility and its impact provides a way to account for unintended effects and to generate evidence on the link between mobility experiences and effects. The research design is therefore based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with learners. The interviews were mostly conducted in person by five different researchers, based on the same collaboratively developed interview guide. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. In a few cases, the interview was conducted online or via telephone because of time and mobility constraints. Interviews were all transcribed and translated into English and documented in a short protocol describing the circumstances of the interview and the mobility. The interviews were conducted following the problem-centred interview method by Witzel and Reiter (2012). In this approach, stimulated narratives enriched by dialogues employing semi-structured prompts reveal how individuals interpret and make sense of their experience. Starting from the recollection of concrete situations, the interviewer stimulates the reflective process of the interviewee by steering the discussion towards the research focus (e.g., “what did you learn through this experience?”, “what difference does it make to your perspectives on life?”, “what changed in your life following that experience?”). This approach gives interviewees room to define their own areas of relevance while also allowing researchers to test emerging hypotheses as they become more familiar with the research topic. In addition, the interviewer's interventions can support interviewees in verbalizing and reflecting on their experiences, which proved particularly helpful in cases where participants faced challenges such as limited language skills or cognitive impairments. At the same time, the method entails inherent limitations, as it relies on participants' ability to articulate their experiences and is based on self-reported accounts, which may be influenced by recall biases or social desirability. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the interview may shape the narratives produced, despite efforts to ensure openness and consistency across interviews.

The qualitative content analysis followed the analytical steps described by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023) and combined inductive and theory-informed category development. In a first step, inductive coding was applied to identify overarching areas of impact emerging from the data (see Figure 1). In a second step, these categories were further differentiated by introducing analytically derived dimensions of impact, thus following the abductive approach described by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023) as “hermeneutic circle”. These dimensions (sub-categories) allow for a more nuanced description of each impact area by distinguishing between changes that pertain to awareness (i.e., sensitivity towards a topic), attitudes, knowledge and skills, self-competence and identity, planned behaviour and actual behaviour. In addition, changes reaching beyond the individual, for example as a result of behavioural changes, were reported in the sub-category ‘societal impact’ (Kaufman et al., 1996; Molenda et al., 1996). In order to draw boundaries as precisely as possible between the level of behaviour and societal impact, we differentiate between effects that occur at the level of the individual (actual behaviour) and those that are reported by the learner to extend beyond the individual and affect the wider society (family, household, community etc.) (Bynner et al., 2003; Manninen et al., 2014, p. 9).

[‡] Newer publications refer to Mezirow's theory as “perspective transformation” in order to distinguish it from transformative learning as a metatheory, which includes theoretical developments in different disciplinary fields (Hoggan, 2016).

[§] Disjuncture as a trigger for learning is described by Jarvis (1998, as cited in Kristensen, 2004, p. 121) as: „I do not learn from my experience if I can presume upon it and act in a taken-for-granted manner. But if there is a disjuncture between my biography (the sum of my experiences, both conscious and unconscious) and a particular experience, I might seek to learn to close it”.

Coding was carried out by two researchers in an iterative process aimed at enhancing intersubjective agreement. Initial coding of each interview was done by one researcher and reviewed by the other. Coding differences were discussed and resolved through consensual agreement, leading to the iterative refinement of the category system. To further strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the analysis, two validation workshops were conducted with the team of authors, in which the category system was critically examined and further specified.

Sampling and Data Collection

The study was conducted in the context of the EU funded RIA-AE-Network, which monitors the impact of Erasmus+ in the adult education sector. With the support of National Agencies in four member countries (Austria, Germany, Latvia, and Slovenia), a total of 24 interviews were conducted with learners who participated in a KA1 mobility. Providing a detailed description of the possible effects of learning mobility in adult education required a comparative and contrastive analysis of a sufficiently large number of cases to reach saturation effects. Following the analysis of these 24 interviews, it was decided that no additional interviews were required, as thematic saturation had been reached and no substantially new categories were emerging.

Sampling followed a purposive (maximum variation) strategy. Decisions were based on the assumption that learning among adults – particularly in informal and non-formal settings – is strongly influenced by learners' life situations and subsequent interests and developmental goals (Holzkamp, 1993). Accordingly, the authors sought to include participants of different ages, genders, nationalities, and socio-economic backgrounds in the sample, also including as many learners with fewer opportunities (following the definition of the Erasmus+ Programme guidelines) as possible (see Table 1). This was facilitated by the transnational character of the study. First, the funding policies of the National Agencies differ in their approaches to targeting learner groups. Austria places a stronger emphasis on learners with fewer opportunities, while the other three countries follow a more balanced approach. Second, the scope of adult education differs between the countries, with Latvia focusing strongly on vocational aspects of adult education (Šūpule, 2024), while the other three countries place more emphasis on basic education (literacy, numeracy, digital skills) and personal development, which is more aligned with the non-vocational understanding of adult education in the Erasmus+ Programme.

Table 1. Number of Learners in the Sample According to Different Characteristics

No	Demographic Characteristics	Number of cases
Gender		
1.	Male	8
	Female	16
Age		
2.	<30	2
	30-60	10
	>60	12
Educational Background		
3.	Basic education	3
	Higher levels of education	19
Occupational Status		
4.	Student	1
	Working	11
	Unemployed	2
	Retired	10
Country of Residency		
5.	Austria	7
	Germany	6
	Latvia	6
	Slovenia	5
Duration of Learning Mobility (Days)		
6.	2-3	4
	4-5	13
	6-7	3
	8-9	1
	unknown	3

The mobility activities the learners were reporting about took place between September 2024 and February 2025, with the exception of one interviewee who had been abroad in 2023. The mobilities had a broad thematic focus (e.g., arts and

culture, sustainability, digital skills, language, literacy). The short duration of the mobility – an average of 4.7 days was observed in the sample – is a specificity that differentiates Erasmus+ mobilities in adult education from mobilities in other sub-sectors of education.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the learner interviews conducted for this study reveals a wide variety of effects of European mobility across several life domains. In total, eight areas of impact were identified, which are succinctly described below. As shown in the code-matrix (see Figure 1), all learners mentioned effects in the area of Intercultural Learning and effects relating to Social Connection. Most interviewees also reported effects related to Wellbeing and Independent Living Skills. Around half of the interviewees or fewer also reported effects on Volunteering and Civic Engagement, Communication in Multilingual Settings, Work and Vocational Training, European Citizenship, and Nature and Environment.

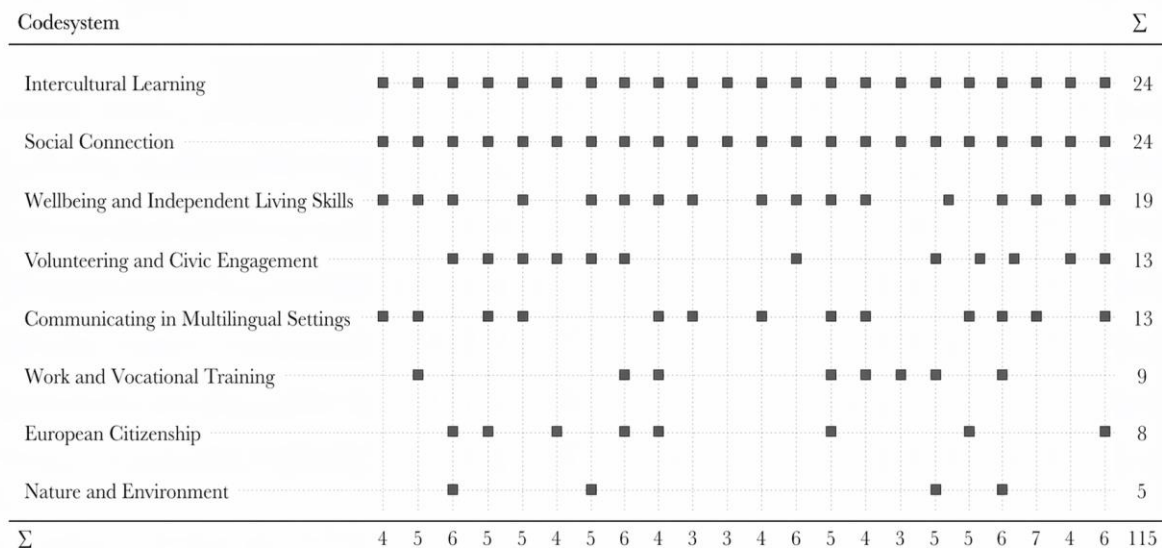


Figure 1. Distribution of Cases by Impact Areas

Interpretation: e.g., on the horizontal line '24 interviewees mention effects of mobility in the area of Intercultural Learning and Traveling, and on the vertical line, interviewees mentioned effects in 5 impact areas, n=24.

In line with the research questions, all the effects of mobility that could be identified in the interviews are summarized below. Not all participants reported effects across all impact areas or across all dimensions within a given area, pointing to the broad heterogeneity of learning opportunities provided through the mobility, as well as differing learning interests and capacities on the learners' side. We did not identify clear contradictory effects between the cases within a given category that would challenge the findings reported here.

Intercultural Learning

Intercultural learning is a core goal of any international mobility programme, not least Erasmus+. Unsurprisingly, all interviewees reported a wide range of effects resulting from immersion in an unfamiliar environment and engagement with other cultures.

Being abroad fosters an *awareness of cultural differences*.^{**} All interviewees reported noticing differences between their home and host countries. These observations form the basis for their *knowledge about the culture of the host country* - anecdotal insights into everyday life and a sense of predominant norms and cultural habits. Topics frequently mentioned include culinary traditions, architecture, religious traditions, and social behaviour and interaction. In some cases, this is supported or complemented by more academic knowledge about the country's history and culture, for instance, when participants recall what they learned in a museum, on a guided tour, or during a presentation.

Reflecting on cultural differences, some learners develop a *greater awareness of their own cultural identity and taken-for-granted ways of living*. This can lead to the adoption of cultural practices experienced abroad, for instance, those related to eating and drinking or to artistic and craft practices. Conversely, it can also lead to an increased awareness and appreciation of one's own way of doing things and one's own environment, as a learner remarks: "It's better at home. It's worth going somewhere else to see that things can be done differently and to understand that what I do is also good." (I216)

^{**} Subcategories of the impact areas are indicated in the following by italic script.

Generalizing from their own experience, some participants consider European mobility and intercultural dialogue as a means to learn from one another and better address societal challenges such as xenophobia:

So we now have 30% right wing party voters here in the village. Yes, and that scares me. And simply making encounters possible and getting out of this complaining and recognising how well we are doing, even in rural areas, when we are disadvantaged. (I414).

Some describe how they share newly acquired perspectives or habits with family and peers, transmit cultural knowledge, and thus contribute to informal intercultural dialogue. This may even extend into political or civic engagement, as illustrated by one participant who emphasized how the mobility fuelled her interest in other cultures and encouraged her to speak out against stereotypes and generalizations in social discussions:

Well, I would say that I've actually always been interested [in other cultures], but that's intensified now. So even in discussions or wherever we are, when we talk about it, it's clear that I have a point of view and I don't take the clichés, well, I might have them too, but not actually these things that we're all getting thrown at us now. So, I try to put things into perspective [...] (I422).

Mobility also stimulates learners' curiosity and interest in other cultures, making them more *open and interested in engaging with people from different cultural backgrounds*, whether abroad or at home. One participant explained how she revised some prejudices and developed greater self-confidence in communicating with others about their culture:

When we looked at these customs, and they explained personal things to us, [...] I dared to ask about these more intimate things. And I can see now that if I go somewhere else, these are things you can ask about. [...] In summary, it has changed me. I look at my neighbour, who I know is Croatian, in a different way. I can say that I know him better, I can ask him questions better because I have learned something new about their culture and their way of life. (I114)

This increased curiosity, mentioned in several interviews, motivates participants to actually *participate in new mobility projects or to make plans for traveling abroad* on their own.

To sum up, international mobility encourages participants to reflect on cultural differences and fosters curiosity and openness towards other countries and cultures. As a result, participants may feel empowered to engage with people from other cultures, to travel abroad again, to speak up against xenophobia, and to encourage others to participate in such mobility programmes.

Social Connection

The impact area Social Connection refers to the effects of mobility on learners' abilities to relate to others, build social networks, and share experiences in social settings, as well as the use of these abilities in everyday life. All interviewees had taken part in a group mobility, and, unsurprisingly, most of them reported building new relationships within their group as well as with people from other countries they met during the mobility. As they reflected on this experience in the interviews, an increased awareness emerged among learners regarding the *importance of exchange and cooperation* for progress or social cohesion. This can be observed independently of the intercultural dimension discussed in the previous paragraph. Learners also reported *social interaction skills* they applied or developed. Upon analysis of the codings, it is striking that the participants' life situations play an important role in the types of experiences they report. Some interviewees appeared very familiar with communicating in groups of unknown people, and they demonstrated the ability to reflect on group dynamics. Others reported simply enjoying being part of a group despite their initial apprehension, as they were not used to spending so much time with others. Some learners also reported that taking part in a mobility with initially unknown people had strengthened their self-confidence in socializing with others: "I used to be less daring. [...] going through all the offices and so on. Approaching people too. That I can talk to people and so on. I'm much more confident about that than I used to be" (I314).

Learners also reported experiencing a new *sense of belonging*. This was characterized by an increased feeling of being part of a community that shares a common experience (e.g., living with disabilities, having low literacy), a joint activity (e.g., doing music/making art), or professional themes.

Interviewees often reported sharing their mobility experience with family and friends. Some also used more formal opportunities to *share experience and advocate for international exchanges* via travel reports in their work context or in their community, sometimes inspiring others to also apply for mobility activities.

About one third of participants are *maintaining social networks* after the mobility and reported increased social interactions either in their home country or across national borders. The intensity of these interactions ranges from rather loose contact via social media to close friendships with self-organized follow-up visits. Some interviewees describe how these new contacts broadened their horizons even after the mobility, e.g.,

afterwards, I'll say, you hear from them several times, you ask how they are, what's going on and so on. You are really, I will say, a little bit more insightful, a little bit more curious. You're exploring something that maybe you

wouldn't have explored before if you hadn't seen it, if you hadn't been there. If you hadn't heard it, maybe you wouldn't have been interested in it at all. (I111)

In summary, learning mobilities provide diverse opportunities for individuals to experience a sense of belonging within a group and to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. Participants particularly emphasized positive effects on the development of affiliation to a community and increased self-confidence in social interactions. Moreover, mobility contributes to increasing the social network of participants, who themselves often become advocates of European exchanges and can potentially act as multipliers in their community.

Wellbeing and Independent Living Skills

The impact area Wellbeing and Independent Living Skills describes the effects of mobility on learners' personal wellbeing and general life satisfaction, as well as skills and abilities that enhance wellbeing and autonomy in life. This impact area was addressed by many interviewees, and it encompasses both abstract reflections as well as concrete, sometimes basic, everyday life skills. Mobility abroad can bring *new perspectives and insights into life*. Learners reported a new openness to the unknown, the experience of disconnecting from everyday worries and routine, and their wish to transfer experiences and attitudes experienced abroad to their lives at home, e.g., "Maybe that carefree attitude that everything will work out anyway." (I216). Traveling with a group and in an educational context also enhances the *experience of autonomy*, especially for participants who face barriers in their daily life due, for instance, to physical or mental disabilities. Learners with fewer opportunities, who had never been abroad before, reported gaining confidence in their ability to travel, for instance, by knowing how to take public transport or using a digital map to find their way. Traveling in a group, sometimes with people who face similar barriers, provides a safe testing ground for overcoming inexperience and uncertainty. In line with this experience, some participants report an increase in *self-efficacy*, e.g., "It was interesting hearing how others said they now felt braver because of the trip. Me too." (I313).

In some cases, interviewees reported *adopting practices related to wellbeing* in their daily life, indicating the effects of mobility on individual behaviours:

If you want to keep up with the pace of the workshop and the other visits, you have to be physically strong. That's one kind of exercise, because the spine was often an excuse not to go. I really took that up, exactly after mobility, neck, and spine exercise, to avoid those problems, to overcome them more easily. (I115).

In other cases, learners reported that they became familiar with relaxation techniques and applied them in challenging situations in their daily life, or took a step back and focused more on the essentials.

Summarizing these findings, going abroad with Erasmus+ provides learning opportunities in the field of Wellbeing and Independent Living Skills, as well as the experience of autonomy. Learners reported increased self-efficacy as well as new skills for more autonomy in daily life.

Volunteering and Civic Engagement

In the impact area of Volunteering and Civic Engagement, effects pertain to how learners feel, reflect, and act as citizens in their social environment. Some participants described how being abroad affected their *awareness of social and economic differences* between countries and led them to reflect on different ways to deal with societal challenges. For some, this was a source of *motivation to increase their social and civic engagement* or even a source of inspiration to transfer good practices from abroad to their own community.

In some cases, issues of inclusion or social inequalities are an explicit topic of the mobility activities; in other cases, participants were already aware of certain issues due to their life circumstances, but were able to gain new perspectives. This was the case for one participant who stated: "I took away the awareness of how easy it is, how little it actually takes to include disadvantaged people" (I327).

In the sample analysed, several interviewees participated in a mobility that was thematically related to their volunteering activities at home, enabling them to reflect on their practices and exchange with volunteers from abroad. In these cases, transnational exchanges can act as a catalyst for *innovation within the wider social environment*, where learners actively *transfer good practices from abroad* into their own community. One participant, for instance, who is engaged in community building in a rural area, was inspired by an event she attended during her mobility and that she wants to replicate at home:

In my village, we have 170 inhabitants, and there is the idea of organising an afternoon get-together for all generations. It is still in its infancy. I can't report on it yet, it hasn't been realised, but the idea has been registered, and we are in the planning stage (I414).

In this case, ripple effects of the mobility are visible in the learner's community.

Communicating in Multilingual Settings

One of the most salient areas of impact for adult learners participating in mobility activities is their enhanced ability and motivation to communicate in multilingual settings, including by using a foreign language, despite the short duration of time spent abroad. This impact area encompasses a range of developments - from the rudimentary acquisition of new linguistic elements to increased confidence in multilingual interactions and the uptake of further language learning.

For participants without any prior knowledge of the host country's language, being abroad even for a few days can lead to a *familiarity with that language* - a prerequisite for identifying it, even without understanding any words.

Exposure to real-life situations that require communicative engagement can also lead to *improved language skills*, for example, increased confidence and a more functional use of the language. Even without taking any language classes abroad, participants with at least a rudimentary knowledge reported increasing their vocabulary or achieving greater fluency through daily interactions with native speakers. In many cases, progress occurred in English, as this was the language used during the activities abroad. For example, one participant described the transition from passive understanding to active use of English:

I think I was opening up to speaking English. Because if you don't use the language in your daily life, it's hard to start speaking... I think language is a gateway... I used to read books in English, but now I'm even drawn to it. I want to know those words and hear those. (I215)

Participants frequently reported *using digital applications to communicate* during mobility, therefore increasing their ability to interact with others despite a lack of foreign language skills.

Participants express a heightened *motivation to learn and apply foreign languages*, both during and after the mobility phase.

Learning to interact with people speaking a different language is an important benefit of international mobility for adult learners. Here, the effects relate more to the skills and confidence needed to communicate effectively in a given situation, and less to the foreign language skills themselves. However, mobility can also serve as a catalyst for learners to *engage in further language learning activities*.

Further impact areas

Besides the above-mentioned main impact areas, changes in awareness, skills, and behaviours were noted in relation to the themes European Citizenship, Work and Vocational Training and Nature and Environment. Overall, these impact areas were mentioned less frequently, and the last two in particular appeared to be more closely related to the topic of the learning mobility than to mobility itself.

First, since Erasmus+ is a European programme, participants were asked whether their knowledge or views about Europe had changed in connection with the mobility experience. Interviewees reflected on how traveling abroad and meeting people from other countries raised their awareness of European integration in everyday life, expressing appreciation and hope for further developments of the European Union (EU), as described by this learner:

It's cool to get on a plane and fly somewhere. No visas, no anything else, such freedom of movement, a very big plus. It would be cooler if the money were the same, because Romanians don't have the euro. It's quite complicated to convert in your head all the time. If the money were the same, it would be easier to understand what costs how much. When they changed from lats to euros in Latvia [in 2014], I didn't like it, but now I understand that the single currency makes life easier if you travel a lot. (I216)

Several interviewees expressed their enthusiasm for Erasmus+ and encouraged their friends or family to join. Only a few, however, did so as a form of political activism, such as this participant:

So, for me personally, the main effect is not to be even more enthusiastic about Europe, but rather to encourage people to be even more active, to look at it more critically or to become active against those who are pushing something and advocating gun positions. (I411)

Explicit learning about the EU was rare and observed only in one case, as a result of a mobility to Brussels on the topic of European integration. Overall, most respondents did not spontaneously mention the effects of mobility on their identity or thinking as European citizens.

Second, vocational training is not a focus of Erasmus+ in adult education, but some interviewees reported a broad scope of effects of their mobility related to their Work and Vocational Training. This was mainly the case when the mobility activity focused on vocational skills, reflecting the fact that in some member states there is no clear distinction between adult education and continuing vocational education and training. In several cases, interviewees were able to point to particular skills they had transferred to the work context.

In a few cases, when the mobility did not focus on vocational skills, some participants still reported work-relevant effects, such as energy and motivation at work. Taking a break from routine, meeting new people, and gaining new experiences influenced their attitudes and behaviours. One participant who works in a social enterprise employing people with

learning disabilities and who had never traveled abroad before said: "I'm nicer to my work colleagues again. [...] Before the trip, I was slow at work, now I'm faster again" (I325). Others highlighted increased self-confidence, which also benefited them in their work.

Third, the impact area of Nature and Environment was mentioned least often but remains relevant to Erasmus+ as it reflects the programme's horizontal priority "Environment and fight against climate change". Effects on learners' relationship with nature and environmental issues were observed mainly when mobilities addressed this topic directly. Participants gained skills and knowledge for sustainable practices that relate to their everyday life or work, and reported on plans and motivation to act in a more sustainable way or even change habits after the mobility, for example, "Plastic awareness has led me to the point where we separate the waste into those that I can creatively turn into something else, and let the rest go" (I114). An example of a wider societal impact comes from one interviewee, a private forest owner who implements new skills in forest management gained abroad and spreads the word in her community.

Overall, effects in these last three impact areas are mainly reported when mobility directly addresses the respective topic. Across all impact areas, it also becomes clear that learning and its transfer into everyday situations depend on the subjective relevance of the topic and on conditions that facilitate transfer. Accordingly, most reported effects relate to changes in perspectives (e.g., increased awareness of specific topics, shifts in beliefs and attitudes) or to the development of knowledge and skills. Fewer examples were found in which these effects translated into practice, with learners engaging in new activities, modifying certain practices, or changing their behaviour as a result of the mobility experience. Only a small number of cases demonstrated effects extending beyond the individual level and directly influencing the social environment. Nevertheless, such cases highlight the potential of Erasmus+ mobility to generate broader impacts in the lives of adult learners.

Discussion

Approaching the impact of KA1 mobility activities in Erasmus+ from the learner's perspective, this study reveals a wide range of benefits of the programme's funding in adult education for participants themselves and, to a lesser extent, for their immediate environment. The cross-cutting areas of impact, which have been described based on the empirical material collected in this study, can be compared and contrasted with other inventories of mobility effects developed in the context of research on international mobility in higher or vocational education (1). In the following section, the results are also discussed in the context of theories on transformative learning (2) and in the context of research on the benefits of adult education (3).

(1) There is a substantial body of research on the outcomes and impacts of learning mobility, as demonstrated by recent systematic reviews in the fields of higher education, such as Roy et al. (2019), Bradly and Iskhakova (2023), and Brunsting et al. (2023), or in the field of youth exchange (Brunner, 2015). Empirical studies typically follow one of two different approaches to assess the impact of mobility. One approach is deductive and examines possible effects based on a theoretical or normative construct, such as the concept of 'self' (Dirkx et al., 2010), the concept of 'intercultural competence' (Goldstein, 2022), 'global competence' (Fisher et al., 2023), or 'career' (Waibel et al., 2017). The second approach investigates the impacts from a subjective perspective, using an inductive approach (Müller, 2023; Prieto-Arranz et al., 2023; Zick et al., 2020). While summarizing the findings of both types of studies, the above-mentioned systematic reviews develop largely overlapping categories, with only slight variations in wording, encompassing 'language learning', 'academic or content learning', 'intercultural learning', and 'professional development'. In addition, a fifth category of effects is sometimes added, which includes changes in identity, personal development, and psychological wellbeing (Brunner, 2015; Brunsting et al., 2023). These categories highly correspond to the areas of impact identified inductively in the present study, despite the usually much shorter duration of mobility in adult education as compared to higher education, VET or youth exchanges. The impact areas of European Citizenship and Nature and Environment identified in this study are closely related to the overarching category of 'content learning', as they mainly include knowledge about environmental protection and about the European Union, while Work and Vocational Training also relate to 'professional development'. Two prominent areas of impact identified in the field of adult education, i.e., Social Connection and Volunteering and Civic Engagement, on the contrary, are not highlighted in any of the above-mentioned systematic reviews.

Social connectedness has been defined in the literature as the perceived experience of meaningful social connection with others, which is strongly associated with positive psychological outcomes and well-being (Taylor-Jackson et al., 2021). In mobility research, this area does not seem to have attracted much attention, and only a few studies addressing it could be identified (e.g., Rahikainen & Hakkarainen, 2013; Sal İlhan & Külekci, 2022). These studies confirm the findings that mobility experiences strengthen social skills and a sense of belonging to a group or (transnational) community, while also extending the network of participants.

In the present study, Volunteering and Civic Engagement was an impact area mentioned by many interviewees, but to varying degrees. Learners who were not active before the mobility mainly reported feeling inspired and thinking about possibilities for active engagement in community activities or volunteering. Those who were already engaged in volunteering reported more far-reaching effects and provided some good examples of how mobility can have a societal impact beyond the individual learner. These differences could be useful to explain the mixed findings of quantitative

studies on the impact of mobility on volunteering and civic engagement in other educational fields (DeGraaf et al., 2013). In particular, selection bias, which is not accounted for in many studies analysing the impact of mobility without a control group, could be a reason for this.

(2) The heterogeneity of effects described by learners on their learning and the transfer after the learning mobility are in line with the understanding of learning presented in the theoretical framework of this study. Constructivist perspectives on learning highlight the relevance of an individual's pre-experiences and interests to explain actual learning and sense making (Illeris, 2018) and explain the differing qualities, quantities, and impacts mentioned. In line with other studies of mobility based on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the learners' narratives show many examples of reflection processes. The review of Hoggan (2016) provides a typology of transformative learning outcomes, framed by a broad understanding of transformative learning, and systematize changes in the categories of worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, and behaviour and capacity. Some of these categories correspond to findings in our study, e.g., worldview, self, and behaviour, while others would need a different framing of the research design and a more in-depth analysis of learning and reflection processes to be identified systematically. For instance, with regard to the category of worldview, participants in this study frequently reported changes in assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations, as well as the development of new awareness and understandings. This points to the transformative potential of learning mobility in adult education, which could be further investigated by analysing more systematically the depth, breadth, and stability of the learning effects over time, as suggested by Hoggan (2016). Transformative learning theory also highlights the importance of a learning setting that allows for and stimulates reflection to foster transformative learning (Perry et al., 2012). In the present study, boundaries between structured learning formats, such as workshops or guided tours, and informal learning sequences are blurred and difficult to define based on the learner interviews. Going abroad with Erasmus+ seems to open up a space of opportunities that offers highly diverse occasions for learning, as described by Zeuner and Pabst (2022) in the context of educational leave. However, a research gap remains regarding the pedagogical aspects of mobility in adult education. Further analysis focusing on learning processes could help to understand how biographical and pedagogical aspects interact to actualize the learning potential of mobility, while also addressing research gaps on the nature of experience and context in transformational learning theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2013). In this context, it could also be worthwhile to further investigate the relevance of duration for the depth and sustainability of mobility effects. Taylor's (2000) review of factors influencing transformative learning points to the relevance of time for reflection processes to unfold. Short-term mobility could be assumed to offer fewer opportunities for transformative learning, as research on short-term mobility in higher education suggests (Strange & Gibson, 2017). The present study does not allow for these kinds of conclusions. However, it demonstrates that in the case of adults, who otherwise might not have an opportunity to participate in a learning mobility, even a few days can have a strong impact in terms of intercultural learning and social connection.

(3) Taking a closer look at the nature of effects identified in this study, which seldom extend beyond the individual's internal dispositions, the findings are in line with research on the multifaceted factors influencing the transfer of learning (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Kontoghiorghe, 2004; Tannenbaum et al., 1993). The social environment of participants, for instance, can be more or less supportive of behavioural changes or spreading newly gained knowledge and insights within the community. In contrast to continuing vocational education and training, where most transfer of training research is situated (De Greef et al., 2010), the transfer situation in adult education might be less concrete – yet the motivation to transfer could be higher, as going abroad is a voluntary decision.

Overall, linking adult learning activities causally to outcomes remains challenging due to the varying factors affecting those outcomes over time (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2018; Hense, 2025; Zeuner & Pabst, 2022). Following the approach of the wider benefits of learning – as illustrated, for example, by the BeLL study (Manninen et al., 2014) – this study asked the learners themselves to identify and assess such benefits. As a result, it is possible to establish even indirect links between the mobility experiences and changes in the learners' lives.

Conclusion

This study explores adult learners' perspectives on the effects of Erasmus+ mobility, resulting in an empirically grounded inventory of impact areas. Overall, the analysis revealed a wide range of effects associated with short-term Erasmus+ mobility in adult education, ranging from changes in beliefs and attitudes and the development of skills and knowledge to, in some cases, changes in everyday practices. In a limited number of cases, effects extending beyond the individual and influencing the social environment were also reported. Effects span multiple life domains, including personal development, professional life, and civic engagement, although not all participants reported effects across all areas. The findings further show that certain impact areas, such as social connection, or volunteering and civic engagement, are particularly salient in the context of adult education, as compared to other education sectors.

The results indicate that broader and possibly also more sustained impacts depend strongly on both the individual context of the learners and the specific nature of the non-formal and informal learning experiences encountered during the time abroad. The diversity of reported outcomes confirms constructivist assumptions that learning is shaped by prior experiences, motivations, and personal meaning-making processes. At the same time, the results demonstrate that mobility can act as a catalyst for reflective processes and forms of transformative learning.

Recommendations

The findings point to several avenues for future research. First, further studies should analyse the learning and reflection processes underlying mobility experiences in adult education in greater depth in order to better understand how outcomes are generated and how they can be supported in practice. The rich body of research on transformative learning theory may provide valuable frameworks and research designs for such analyses (e.g., Acheson & Dirkx, 2021).

Second, future research could adopt more comprehensive and multi-perspective designs to better capture the full range of mobility effects. A 360° approach, including interviews with family, co-learners, etc., as previously done for youth exchange programs by Olberding and Olberding (2010), may, for instance, provide more insights into the broader effects of mobility, including those reaching beyond the individual.

Third, further research is needed to examine differential effects across learner groups. In particular, it remains an open question to what extent adult learners with fewer opportunities benefit more from mobility in terms of motivation or confidence than others, as suggested by Manninen et al. (2014). This remains a desideratum worth researching for mobilities in adult education, but also in the higher education sector, where such studies are lacking as well (Netz, 2021). Results could contribute to a reflection and clearer operationalization of the concept of “fewer opportunities” used in the Erasmus+ programme, now interpreted quite broadly by beneficiary organizations.

Finally, longitudinal research designs are needed to better understand the sustainability of mobility effects over time. On the one hand, effects on language skills or factual knowledge about the host country may fade out with time. On the other hand, some studies show that “in the long-term, the sojourn seems to serve as a powerful frame of reference and interpretation” (Müller, 2023, p. 284). Future studies should therefore investigate how short-term mobility experiences shape learning, identity, and life choices in the longer term.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative and exploratory design focuses on participants’ subjective accounts of their experiences. While this approach provides rich insights into meaning-making processes, it relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability, and participants’ ability to articulate their experiences. Second, the purposive sampling strategy may introduce selection bias, potentially favoring more motivated or reflective participants. Third, the methodology does not enable systematic comparisons across different groups of adult learners or specific learning arrangements within the mobility. To mitigate these limitations, further research could build on the findings by expanding the research design and integrating context variables on the specific learning arrangement, as well as the participant’s learning biography.

Ethics Statements

This study complied with the ethical standards for human subjects’ research. Participants were fully informed about the aims of the study and participated voluntarily. They provided written informed consent to participate in the study and to have the findings published. Anonymity was ensured by assigning participants’ code numbers by the interviewer and deleting identifying information before starting to analyse the data. Through the implementation of these safeguards, the study was able to maintain participants’ trust, ensure ethical integrity, and improve the validity of its findings.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Generative AI Statement

As the authors of this work, we used AI-based tools like MaxQDA Transcript and Deepl Pro, respectively, for transcribing audio records of the learner interviews and for translating these interviews into English. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools (Chat GPT) were used in a limited and controlled manner to assist with language refinement of the final manuscript. After using these AI tools, we reviewed and edited all outputs. We, as the authors, take full responsibility for the content of our published work.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Erckrath and Krichewsky-Wegener: concept and design, data collection and analysis, drafting manuscript; Mikulec, Humpl, and Šupule: data collection, interpretation, critical revision of manuscript; De Greef and Buiskool: critical revision of manuscript.

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