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# Erasmus student motivation: Why and where to go?

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**Abstract** The ERASMUS exchange program is considered an important contributor to the tourism industry and higher education within and beyond the European Union (EU). However, the questions arise: (1) Why do participants elect to go on a study exchange? (2) Why do participants opt to study in a particular location? Identified international mobility motives reflect students' needs for professional and personal growth, but evidence also suggests some leisure travel motives. In line with such conceptualization, the present paper identifies the mobility and destination choice motives of 360 ERASMUS students from 26 European countries. One mobility motive (professional and personal growth) and two destination choice motives (infrastructure and image, and lifestyle and commercialization) emerged and are discussed in light of students' personal and situational characteristics. Conclusions are that international study mobility is driven by students' desire to grow personally and professionally while studying abroad, but students' choice of a destination depends on the destinations' general as well as touristic factors. Both mobility and destination choice motivations depend on students' personal and situational characteristics. As the student and educational tourism market is growing steadily, the EU is recommended to build on this market via ERASMUS and international student mobility to boost its weakening economy.

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## Introduction

The European Union (EU) has developed several mobility programs to enrich students' opportunities for exchanging cultural, professional and personal experiences within its confines. Among programs such as Grundtvig, Leonardo da Vinci, Ceepus and Comenius, the ERASMUS program drew our attention. Introduced in 1987, the ERASMUS mobility (EM) program has successfully involved approximately three million European students to date (European Union 2014) with the original objectives as:

1. to achieve a significant increase in the number of students from universities spending an integrated period of study in another Member State, while ensuring equality of opportunity for male and female students as regards participation in such mobility;
2. to promote broad and intensive cooperation between universities;
3. to harness the full intellectual potential of the universities;
4. to strengthen the interaction between citizens in different Member States;
5. to ensure the development of a pool of graduates with direct experience of intra-Community cooperation (Council of Ministers 1987).

As such, it is recognized that the collaboration of educational institutions within the program positively affects the higher education policies of countries and institutions involved in the ERASMUS Mobility Exchange Network (cf. Rivza and Teichler 2007).

A key issue with respect to international EM is the extent to, and the way in, which the program objectives are achieved, believed to be contingent on the reasons and motives of its users. Aligned with their motivations and expectations, international exchange students frequently report benefits pertaining to professional and personal growth (Duffy et al. 2003; Keogh and Russel-Roberts 2009). It is clear that the ERASMUS Exchange Program (EEP) offers: (1) opportunities for individuals to grow (develop) professionally and personally; and (2) opportunities to change the living environment (escapism) and other leisure-related opportunities. Prior research (e.g., Daly 2011; Findlay et al. 2010; González et al. 2011; Keogh and Russel-Roberts 2009; Pyvis and Chapman 2007; Teichler 2004; Van Hoof and Verbeeten 2005) reveals: to learn a foreign language; to experience and appreciate different cultures; to increase their self-confidence; to get a new horizon; to grow as a person; to learn academic or profession-specific skills; to experience adventure; to have a good time; and to travel as key motivators to stimulate international students' exchange. However, this list is not completely in accordance with the aim of the EEP, namely when an individual engages in international study mobility through the formal educational institution, s/he should be primarily motivated by professional growth and/or development. It has also been acknowledged that there is a need to address the varying environment of the EEP, which seems to be too bureaucratic and does not meet originally planned capacity or quality (De Wit 2012).

Given that EEP engages more than 4000 higher education institutions from 33 countries, with students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., educational levels, study fields or majors and academic achievements) and that such situational factors have been shaping students' educational motives, it can reasonably be assumed that the motives of

ERASMUS students are contingent upon their personal, academic and country-specific characteristics. Despite being discussed in previous studies, the influence of personal factors on students' mobility motivations remains indefinite. To address this issue, Daly (2011) proposed that future research should scrutinize the impact of demographic factors and academic discipline on students' decisions to join exchange programs.

Preliminary evidence debates students' engagement in international educational experiences for vacation-specific reasons and interests (Findlay et al. 2010; González et al. 2011; Keogh and Russel-Roberts 2009). As ERASMUS students engage in shorter mobility periods than students seeking a full international degree, it is postulated that their motives are potentially less oriented toward professional and more toward personal growth and other benefits, which are not harmonized with the original objectives of EM. The student and educational tourism market is growing steadily; it accounted for more than 20 % of the international arrivals in 2012, and a conservative estimate of its value is approximately US$320 billion by 2020 (Student Marketing 2012). To examine the motivational perspective, the present paper explores the underlying factors that motivate students to undertake EEPs and that influence their destination choices. Thus, two research questions are put forward: "What motivational factors influence European ERASMUS exchange students to participate in the EEP and to select particular destinations?" and "What are the roles of students' personal factors in shaping those motives?" Despite conceptualizing (e.g., Daly 2011) and identifying personal characteristics as key factors in students' mobility decisions, few studies offer empirical evidence about the link between students' personal characteristics and their mobility motives (e.g., Van Hoof and Verbeeten 2005), and no prior study was located that examined the impact of ERASMUS students' personal characteristics on destination choice motives. The present study fills these research gaps. Further, the present study contributes to extending the knowledge and understanding of students' international study mobility motivations and supports previous predominantly qualitative research by contributing findings from a micro-level survey-based approach.

## Literature review

Motivation to learn "is an inner process, action or a will which forces individual toward actions that satisfy their needs" (Lipičnik 1998, p. 154). It is an important factor in predicting individuals' benefits from learning and is thus always goal-oriented. Most associated prior studies examined the phenomenon of students' educational motivation from the self-determination theory perspective (e.g., Hill 2013; Kember et al. 2008; Vallerand et al. 1992), thereby providing insights into the sources of motivation, that is, the origin of the study motivations. However, the present study seeks to determine the nature or the content of motivation, which is part of the push–pull framework of student mobility (González et al. 2011; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Push factors are elements that operate in the home country of the student whereby they stimulate the individual to study abroad; pull factors are elements of a host country that attract a student to study abroad (González et al. 2011). A combination of push and pull factors determines a student's decision to study abroad then his/her destination choice. With a focus on the present study, the push–pull factors in the context of study mobility motivations then destination choice motivations are discussed.

## Study mobility motivations

Several authors (e.g., Stone and Petrick 2013; Vossensteyn et al. 2010) claim that students are motivated to study abroad by personal and professional skills' development, career opportunities, leisure, relaxation and other benefits. As such, study exchange experiences enhance not only students' but also teachers' personal and professional growth (Duffy et al. 2003). In this context, personal growth encompasses all elements that can enhance self-confidence, self-reliance and widening one's horizon through meeting and experiencing new people and environments within diverse cultures (Ingraham and Peterson 2004); in essence, professional growth of study mobility focuses on activities that enable knowledge and competencies' acquisition to aid students' career and academic development (Bracht et al. 2006). Based on the literature (Souto-Otero et al. 2013; Stroud 2010), students from diverse backgrounds prioritize motives differently according to economic situation, culture, education opportunities and length of the exchange programs offered. Studies (e.g., González et al. 2011) examining motives and reasons for pursuing an international degree abroad consistently show that students realize increased employment opportunities after graduating from foreign universities, but with some differences across regions. Cantwell et al. (2009) determine that while European and American students are motivated by better job opportunities, European students hoped that this experience would increase their chances of employment outside their home country while American students hope for better employment opportunities within their home country. However, male Americans who have lived abroad are more oriented toward international careers (Gerner and Perry 2000). Evidence from Turkey establishes that students from Western European countries aim more to benefit their personal growth, while students from Eastern European countries more frequently report financial and educational rationales (Kondacki 2011). Further, Malaysians are motivated by career goals in large multinational corporations to study in Australia, while non-Malaysians seek personal benefits (Pyvis and Chapman 2007).

Benefits from experiences and actions are good ways of understanding drivers or motives of a particular behavior (March and Woodside 2005). Evidence pertaining to the motives of students involved in the short-term international mobility suggests that objectives pertaining to personal benefits dominate. Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005) identify personal development as the only consistently highly rated benefit from spending one or two semesters at a North American university. While benefits pertaining to students' professional growth, such as job opportunity and graduation at home institution, are very or extremely relevant to around half of the respondents, their relative importance varies across the sample. More than 97 % of international students consider study exchange experiences as "extremely or very relevant" for their personal development. There is some empirical evidence to support the fact that exchange students are motivated by reasons pertaining to leisure or vacation time (González et al. 2011). This motive is understandable as students follow Rojek's (1989) suggestion to use their rights (to participate in EM) to seek leisure as a pleasure of escape from routine and regulated work at their institutions to other universities located overseas, and at the same time hoping to gain new knowledge. Teichler (2004) identifies two-thirds of the surveyed ERASMUS students are inspired by leisure–vacation-related desires, while half of the international exchange students to the UK consider student mobility as an adventure opportunity (Findlay et al. 2010). Stronkhorst (2005) argues that students' motives to study abroad are "predominantly geared toward having fun and adventure and much less to the academic growth or developing competencies" (p. 304). These findings buttress the exploration of the factors that motivate

students' mobility exchange also in the context of the chosen destination's vacation-specific pull factors.

Although not discussing motivational factors but rather types of motivation, Hill (2013) confirms different motivational backgrounds for students' engagement and experience with undergraduate studies, and those motives might be affected by situational factors including university setting, academic year and study program. Kember et al. (2008) conclude that individual's interests in learning, as well as career-related desires, are guiding individuals in their education. They also assert that these two forms of motive, often regarded as extrinsic and intrinsic, are not exclusive, but are rather present in each individual at various degrees. Because there is some contrasting empirical evidence about the impact of contextual (e.g., economic situation, educational opportunities and quality) and personal factors (e.g., gender, level of degree and major) on students' mobility motivation, it is noteworthy to further examine such aspects of international study mobility (Daly 2011).

## Destination choice motivations

Moscardo et al. (1996) claim that activities are major motivators for destination choice, citing consistent relationships between travel motivations and activities, and between activities and features of chosen destinations. As activities, international educational experiences present an important source for students to self-check their knowledge of business theory and experience of business practice. However, Kim et al. (2006) remark on the dearth of information relating to students' travel motives that might help to explain or predict their travel decisions, identifying important push motivation factors as knowledge, sports and adventure plus a unique factor, labeled "lifestyle," embracing experiencing a simple lifestyle and rediscovering self; the latter findings were attributed mainly to the 18–26 years age group.

Subsequently, applying the push–pull approach (cf. Baloglu and Uysal 1996; Kim and Lee 2002; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Sirakaya et al. 2003), Kim (2008) comments that students' leisure destination travel decisions may be pushed by intangible factors (e.g., escape, relaxation and exploration) and pulled by tangible factors such as natural attractions, sports and recreation, entertainment and events, and night life and partying venues. On the contrary, youth (15–25 years) and students are mostly budget travelers seeking adventurous remote destinations that are not very expensive to live in and yet to be discovered by the mass tourist market (Richards and Wilson 2005). In addition, safe and secure environments, standard (high or low cost) of living and geographical proximity, are recorded as factors influencing Asian students' destination choice motives (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Due to the nature of the "trip," which is primarily educational, one might assume that students' EM destination choices would be based solely on the academic pull factors. However, Kim (2008) developed a model that, when tested, confirmed that the push motivations of students (getting away; adventure and excitement; discovery and learning; connecting with family and friends; engaging in nature and rejuvenation) are good predictors of pull motivations, but are not particularly good predictors of their cognitive or affective involvement. Pull motivations (lodging and transportation; convenience and value; recreation and entertainment; cultural opportunities; natural scenery; sun and beaches; and family friendly) are shown to be good predictors not of affective, but of cognitive involvement. Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005) identify female to be more motivated than male students by pleasure trips (cf. Reisinger and Mavondo 2003; Zalatan 1998). The latter report significant differences in the key travel motivations (exploring cultures; excitement; increasing knowledge) of American male (preferred sports and

adrenaline experiences) and female (preferred walking, trekking and cultural events) and older/younger student travelers, all of whom sought new experiences. Furthermore, American students cite knowledge of foreign language as a factor influencing their intentions to study abroad (Stroud 2010). Younger travelers (under 26) place more emphasis on social contact and excitement, while the older group seek relatively individualized, less extreme experiences. Examining the travel motivations of British tourists to Turkey, males are more likely to be fuzzy, recreational and active tourists than females who prefer to escape and relax but with no significant age differences (Andreu et al. 2005). Keogh and Russel-Roberts (2009) demonstrate destination climate, culture and other characteristics to be important factors in destination choice for international students. With reference to ERASMUS students, they consider that awareness of information, personal background and financial situation, the comparability of higher education system in the host country, and ERASMUS administrative and funding conditions are obstacles to participation (Souto-Otero et al. 2013). Although these barriers are not directly influencing students' study destination choice decisions, they do have an impact on their destination choice motives. In comparison, Vossensteyn et al. (2010) identify that proximity of the host country to, and its cultural and social ties with, the country of origin are influencing ERASMUS students' choices of study location; furthermore, González et al. (2011) postulate that Mediterranean countries tend to receive more ERASMUS students due to their focus on tourism and attractive climate and suggest that countries with developed tourism are more attractive as ERASMUS exchange destinations.

## Formulation of the hypotheses

The reviewed literature advocated tourism attractiveness, location and features of a chosen destination motivated ERASMUS students' mobility and destination choices rather than the reputation of the universities and opportunities related to curricula. Furthermore, the disparity rate of participation in study abroad programs found among American students, according to their gender and academic major (Stroud 2010), warranted the present study to determine whether gender and subject of the degree (major) influence European students' ERASMUS Mobility Motivation (EMM) and ERASMUS Destination Choice Motivation (EDCM). A previous qualitative study conducted in the UK concluded, based on 85 students' accounts, that undergraduates and postgraduates were differently motivated to study abroad, and their destination choices were influenced by cheap tuition and mostly limited to North America (Brooks and Waters 2009). Hence, it is rational and justifiable to determine whether level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate) is associated with EMM and EDCM through the lens of this present quantitative study. Further, grade point average (GPA), a calculation of the average of all of a student's grades for all of complete education period, is selected as a testing variable because learning is not reliant on marks or academic accomplishment (Hadis 2005); hence, Stone and Petrick (2013) propose future research associating GPA with study mobility. Finally, the ERASMUS participation rate in new Member States of the EU is forecasted to surpass the stagnated or declined participation rate in mature Member States (Vossensteyn et al. 2010). Moreover, given the option within the ERASMUS program for students to cross from Central and Eastern (C&E) European to Western European (WE) boundaries, it is considered that (EMM) may be influenced by the geographical location of students' study origins. Based on the literature, the following hypotheses were established to test those premises:

$H_1$ Female and male students have different scores on the EMM and EDCM scale.

$H_2$ Students studying on higher-level courses have different scores on the EMM and EDCM scale as compared with students on lower-level courses.

$H_3$ Students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scale are dependent on their study topic (major).

$H_4$ Students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scale are dependent on their GPA achievement.

$H_5$ Students' scores on the EMM and EDC scale are dependent on the region of their country of origin.

## Methodology

A structured self-administered questionnaire was distributed to all outgoing and incoming ERASMUS students from the 2008/09 and 2009/10 cohorts at 11 EU universities. All these universities have signed a European charter, and they were selected to participate due to the researchers' network. Primary data were collected via an online survey with an open-source user-friendly interface tool called "Lime Survey 1.90" (http://www.limesurvey.org/). The questionnaire comprised three sections: demographics; ERASMUS mobility motives (EMM $n = 14$ items); and ERASMUS destination choice motives (EDCM $n = 12$ items). The EMM scale was measured on a 5-point scale, 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 meaning strongly agree. The items included in the EMM scale were as follows: to improve my academic knowledge; new contacts in field of studies; academic support for my thesis; experience different educational system; it was compulsory; to have a semester away from home; improve foreign language; to learn about different cultures; enhance employment opportunities; meet new people; grow personally; experience European identity; experience something new; and take advantage of ERASMUS grant. The EDCM scale was measured on a 5-point scale, 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 meaning strongly agree. The items included in the EDCM scale were as follows: very popular; rich in culture, arts, history; offers a lot of events; not very expensive to live in; yet to be discovered by tourists; easy accessible; safe and secure; rich natural attractions and sights; interesting night life; familiar language and lifestyle; is sustainable and ecological; and high living standard. The motivational statements were derived from the ERASMUS Student Network Survey 2010 (International Student Exchange ERASMUS Student Network E-Value-ate your exchange) and the studies of Hosany et al. (2006) and Kim (2008). A five-point Likert-style scale measured students' EMM and EDCM; respondents were asked to mark the importance of each reason in their ERASMUS destination choices and mobility engagement. Prior to finalizing the instrument, questions and items were reviewed and discussed by a pilot group of 40 experienced ERASMUS students in order to justify and validate the items and to amend the wording so increasing reliability, including international understanding. As a result of this process, some unreliable statements were rephrased or excluded.

Access to ERASMUS students' contact information was in compliance with the EU data protection regulation by gaining access to groups of students via the universities where they studied. As the selected universities were reluctant to provide the researchers with students' email addresses, the final questionnaire with instructions was emailed to 11 ERASMUS coordinators from Slovenia, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, Spain and UK, between February and May 2011. With the help of University of Primorska, Department for International Cooperation and University of Ljubljana, Office of

International Relations, the coordinators were asked to share the survey with the targeted group of ERASMUS students who participated in the EM in years 2008/09 and 2009/10. Eventually, an invitation to participate was emailed to a quota sample of 1400 European students. Three hundred and sixty surveys were completed by students from Poland (51), Spain (39), Czech Republic (29), Germany (28), Belgium (27), Hungary (21), Portugal (19), France (18), Slovenia (18), Slovakia (16), Finland (12), Turkey (11) Netherlands (10), Sweden (9), UK (9), Italy (8), Bulgaria (6), Lithuania (6), Latvia (5), Ireland (5), Estonia (4), Norway (2), Denmark (2), Austria (2), Romania (2) and Malta (1), achieving a pleasing 25.7 % response rate. While the sample may not be entirely representative of the ERASMUS population, it does align in terms of gender, geographical location of respondents and the type of degree (ECDGEC 2010). Respondents were divided into five groups, according to the geographical location of their country of origin: West Europe (WE; WE countries are Ireland, France and UK), East Europe (EE; EE countries are Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey), Central Europe (CE; CE countries are Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Slovenia), North Europe (NE; NE countries are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden) and South Europe (SE; SE countries are Spain, Malta and Portugal). Notably, a similar approach to data collection and sampling was employed by Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005), Kondacki (2011) and Doyle et al. (2010), and comparable response rates were reached. Since the variable of the geographical location is nominal, it was transformed into five dichotomous variables (WE, EE, CE, NE and SE) having a 0 value if the respondent was not located and having a value of 1 if the respondent was located in the particular geographical location. When conducting the regression analysis, the dichotomous variables were excluded since their creation from nominal variables leads to multicollinearity, which is not acceptable in the regression analysis.

The primary data were analyzed using IBM SPSS PASW, beginning with gender, age, level of study, educational program (main subject) and GPA via descriptive statistics. Cronbach's alpha assessed the internal consistency (Carmines and Zeller 1979) of the scaled data. Factor analysis (principal axis factoring) with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization (Hair et al. 2009) determined the underlying dimensions associated with students' motivations. Finally, the impact of the specified demographics on the students' motivations was assessed using regression analysis.

## Findings and discussion

### Demographics

The respondents' diverse backgrounds are summarized in Table 1.

The sample comprised 67.5 % females ($n = 243$) and 32.5 % males ($n = 117$) with a mean age of 24 years (range 19–32 years), confirming the gender representativeness of the ERASMUS student population (cf. ECDGEC 2010) (see Tables 1 and 2). In contrast, the majority of non-participants in ERASMUS programs are younger than 24 (cf. Souto-Otero et al. 2013). Similar to the findings of Souto-Otero et al. (2013), the majority of respondents (53.3 %) were studying for bachelor's degrees; the remainder (46.7 %) sought postgraduate qualifications (master or doctoral degree). The respondents were studying about 40 different majors. Following empirical evidence that the main academic subject under study may be associated with students' mobility and destination choices (e.g., Stroud 2010), respondents were split into four different categories of their main study topic: business/economy/finance

**Table 1** A summary of respondents' demographic characteristics ($n = 360$)

| | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 243 | 67.5 |
| Male | 117 | 32.5 |
| Type of degree | | |
| BA | 192 | 53.3 |
| MA | 157 | 43.6 |
| PhD | 11 | 3.1 |
| Study topic (major) | | |
| Business/economy/finance | 58 | 16.1 |
| Management/marketing | 34 | 9.4 |
| Tourism | 92 | 25.6 |
| Others | 172 | 47.8 |
| Missing | 4 | 1.1 |
| Geographical location | | |
| WE | 28 | 7.8 |
| EE | 116 | 32.2 |
| CE | 114 | 31.7 |
| NE | 39 | 10.8 |
| SE | 61 | 16.9 |
| Missing | 2 | 0.6 |

(16.1 %), marketing/management (9.4 %), tourism (25.6 %) and others (47.8 %); the remaining 1.1 % did not respond. This classification was in line with the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011 (UNESCO-UIS 2012). The final grouping concurs with Vossensteyn et al. (2010) who determined that most ERASMUS students are traditionally from business studies courses. Almost two-thirds (63.9 %; $n = 230$) of the respondents were enrolled currently on courses in EE or CE (see Table 1).

## ERASMUS mobility motives

The respondents' EMM is ranked in Table 3. The values of skew and kurtosis indicated that the distributions of the five variables (denoted by *) were too distant from a normal distribution; hence, these variables were omitted from further statistical analysis.

Table 3 indicates that students are mainly involved in ERASMUS mobility because it enables them "to experience something new" (mean = 4.67), "to grow personally"

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics ($n = 360$)

| | Age | Grade point average (GPA) |
|---|---|---|
| Valid | 360 | 236 |
| Missing | 0 | 124 |
| Mean | 23.972 | 8.068 |
| SD | 1.980 | 1.033 |
| Minimum | 19.00 | 6.00 |
| Maximum | 32.00 | 10.00 |

**Table 3** Ranking of ERASMUS mobility motives ($n = 360$)

| Rank | Items | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Experience something new* | 4.666 | 0.659 |
| 2 | Grow personally* | 4.550 | 0.819 |
| 3 | To learn about different cultures* | 4.497 | 0.837 |
| 4 | Meet new people* | 4.483 | 0.803 |
| 5 | To have a semester away from home* | 4.405 | 1.021 |
| 6 | Improve foreign language | 4.322 | 1.100 |
| 7 | Experience European identity | 4.013 | 1.138 |
| 8 | Experience different educational system | 3.986 | 1.098 |
| 9 | To improve my academic knowledge | 3.808 | 1.031 |
| 10 | Enhance employment opportunities | 3.755 | 1.125 |
| 11 | New contacts in field of studies | 3.383 | 1.197 |
| 12 | Academic support for my thesis | 2.405 | 1.296 |
| 13 | Take advantage of ERASMUS grant | 2.400 | 1.327 |
| 14 | It was compulsory | 1.669 | 1.175 |

(mean = 4.55), "to learn about different cultures" (mean = 4.5), "to meet new people" (mean = 4.48) and "to have a semester away from home" (mean = 4.41). These findings concur with Ingraham and Peterson (2004), Button et al. (2005), Pyvis and Chapman (2007) and Lanzendorf and Kehm (2010). The least important reasons are the fact that "participation is compulsory" (mean = 1.67), "take advantage of ERASMUS grant" (mean = 2.4) and "academic support for the thesis" (mean = 2.41).

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to test the reliability of the scale. The coefficient was (.632) for the 9 items, which indicates a rather low reliability. Several steps were taken to test whether there were any items which significantly affected the value of the reliability coefficient. Following this procedure, two items ("it was compulsory" and "take advantage of ERASMUS grant") were deleted from the scale so increasing the value of the alpha coefficient (.713) to an acceptable level (Pallant 2007).

**Table 4** Factor loadings for ERASMUS mobility motives

| | Factor<br>Professional and personal growth |
|---|---|
| To improve my academic knowledge | 0.666 |
| New contacts in field of studies | 0.801 |
| Academic support for my thesis | 0.527 |
| Experience different educational system | 0.485 |
| Improve foreign language | 0.310 |
| Enhance employment opportunities | 0.516 |
| Experience European identity | 0.309 |
| Total variance explained: 29.39 | |

Extraction method: principal axis factoring, 1 factor extracted, 8 iterations required

After determining that multivariate statistics can be used to for testing hypotheses, factor analysis (using principal axis factoring) was conducted on the 7 items. The initial factor solution suggested two factors (with initial eigenvalues higher than 1) and explaining 52.77 % of the total variance. Because results indicated that solution with two factors may not be the best (factor 1 eigenvalue was 2.67 but only 1.02 for the second factor; total variance explained was 38.16 %), we decided to test also for a one-factor solution. In this case, the explained total variance was 29.39 % with all item loadings higher than |0.3|. This factor was labeled "Professional and personal growth," in line with the literature (cf. Button et al. 2005; Keogh and Russel-Roberts 2009; Lanzendorf and Kehm 2010; Messer and Wolter 2007; Pyvis and Champan 2007; Teichler 2004; Teichler and Jahr 2001). The one-factor solution is presented in Table 4.

## ERASMUS destination choice motives

The respondents' EDCM is ranked in Table 5. The respondents believed that the most important characteristics of ERASMUS destinations were "to have rich natural attractions and sights" (mean = 4.09), "to be safe and secure" (mean = 4.02), "yet to be discovered by tourists" (mean = 3.93), "to be rich in culture, arts and history" (mean = 3.78) and "to offer a lot of events" (mean = 3.62). These findings echoed similarities identified by Moscardo et al. (1996) and Kim (2008). The least important characteristic, as noted by ERASMUS students, is that destination of choice must have "familiar language and lifestyle" (mean = 2.33). No evidence was found to indicate that that the distribution of results for EDCM did not follow the normal distribution. Cronbach's alpha coefficient, for all 12 items, was (.704) indicating an acceptable level of reliability (Pallant 2007). Hence, all items were kept for further analysis.

The initial factor analysis suggested a four-factor solution, which explained 61.54 % of the total variance. However, the factor loadings suggested that a two-factor solution may be more appropriate. More specifically, the initial (non-rotated) solution showed two factors that were not clear (there were items having high factor scores over |0.3| on both factors or on neither of them), so the initial factor solution was rotated using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization or oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization resulted in unclear factor loadings. As the variable "rich natural attractions and sights" loaded onto

**Table 5** Ranking of ERASMUS destination choice motives ($n = 360$)

| Rank | | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Rich natural attractions and sights | 4.086 | 1.066 |
| 2 | Safe and secure | 4.017 | 1.084 |
| 3 | Yet to be discovered by tourists | 3.925 | 1.212 |
| 4 | Rich in culture, arts, history | 3.778 | 0.993 |
| 5 | Offers a lot of events | 3.622 | 1.067 |
| 6 | High living standard | 3.586 | 1.091 |
| 7 | Interesting night life | 3.461 | 1.198 |
| 8 | Easy accessible | 3.419 | 1.219 |
| 9 | Not very expensive to live in | 3.356 | 1.334 |
| 10 | Is sustainable and ecological | 3.122 | 1.241 |
| 11 | Very popular | 2.800 | 1.286 |
| 12 | Familiar language and lifestyle | 2.331 | 1.443 |

both factors, it was omitted from the loadings. The factor analysis was reloaded, resulting in a four-factor solution with initial eigenvalues higher than 1 and explaining 62.58 % of total variance. Since the first two factors had higher initial eigenvalues (respectively, 2.96 and 1.56) and explained in total 41 % of total variance (after the extraction 28.57 %), a two-factor analysis was conducted. The non-rotated solution is presented in Table 6.

As it can be seen, two factors represented EDCM. The literature on the choice of a tourist destination suggests that tourists are attracted by the level of general and tourism-related development, which demands specific infrastructure for safety, leisure and general standard of living as well as a certain degree of popularity or image (cf. Andreu et al. 2005; Kim 2008; Moscardo et al. 1996; Reisinger and Mavondo 2003). Hence, the first factor was labeled "Infrastructure and image" because it reflects the elements needed for living (e.g., accessibility, safety and security) and leisure (culture, arts, history and entertainment), which also reflect the elements of image (e.g., popularity, sustainability and ecology, safe and secure). The second factor was labeled "Lifestyle and commercialization" because it reflects the elements of a lifestyle (e.g., expenses, culture and language) and tourism commercialization as reflected by the relatively lower numbers of tourists. We decided to keep both factors for further statistical analysis.

## Hypotheses testing

The present study attempted to capture the structure of student motivations for engaging in EEPs and their study destination choices as well as their dependence on various individual influences. Hence, hypotheses $H_1$, $H_2$, $H_3$ and $H_5$ were tested using the regression analysis. In summary: one mobility and two destination choice factors were identified and tested for their association with gender, age, type of degree, GPA, major study topic and geographical location. The findings are presented in Tables 7, 8 and 9.

In the first regression model (see Table 7), the factor EMM was taken into account as the dependent variable. In this case, 8.2 % of the total variance was explained. The overall regression model was statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($F = 1.795$, $p = 0.056$).

**Table 6** Factor loadings for ERASMUS destination choice motives

| | Factor | |
|---|---|---|
| | EDCM1 | EDCM2 |
| Infrastructure and image (var. = 20.60) | | |
| Very popular | **.407** | −.246 |
| Rich in culture, arts, history | **.356** | −.010 |
| Offers a lot of events | **.539** | −.033 |
| Easy accessible | **.443** | −.010 |
| Safe and secure | **.615** | .196 |
| Interesting night life | **.510** | −.010 |
| Is sustainable and ecological | **.565** | −.041 |
| High living standard | **.643** | −.048 |
| Lifestyle and commercialization (var. = 7.97) | | |
| Yet to be discovered by tourists | .227 | **.630** |
| Not very expensive to live in | .077 | **.412** |
| Familiar language and lifestyle | .242 | **−.454** |
| Total variance explained: 28.57 | | |

Extraction method: principal axis factoring, 2 factors extracted, 15 iterations required

High factor loadings are marked in bold

**Table 7** Regression analysis for ERASMUS mobility motives

| Model | Unstandardized coefficients | | Standardized coefficients | *t* | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | SE | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | −.271 | .887 | | −.305 | .760 |
| Gender | −.348 | .134 | −.182 | −2.605 | **.010** |
| Age | −.012 | .029 | −.028 | −.417 | .677 |
| Type of the degree | .064 | .128 | .036 | .501 | .617 |
| GPA | .103 | .057 | .119 | 1.809 | .072 |
| EE countries | −.033 | .238 | −.017 | −.139 | .890 |
| CE countries | .011 | .233 | .006 | .046 | .963 |
| NE countries | −.161 | .287 | −.053 | −.559 | .577 |
| SE countries | .025 | .251 | .011 | .099 | .921 |
| WE countries | | | | | |
| Business, Economy, Finances | .181 | .163 | .079 | 1.108 | .269 |
| Management, Marketing | −.099 | .200 | −.034 | −.497 | .620 |
| Tourism | .351 | .156 | .162 | 2.254 | **.025** |

Regression coefficients that are statistically significant at the 0.05 level are marked in bold

**Table 8** Regression analysis for ERASMUS destination choice motives (factor 1)

| Model | Unstandardized coefficients | | Standardized coefficients | *t* | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | SE | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | 2.460 | .884 | | 2.783 | .006 |
| Gender | −.311 | .133 | −.162 | −2.338 | **.020** |
| Age | −.077 | .029 | −.181 | −2.671 | **.008** |
| Type of the degree | −.099 | .128 | −.055 | −.777 | .438 |
| GPA | −.015 | .057 | −.018 | −.272 | .786 |
| EE countries | .099 | .237 | .051 | .416 | .678 |
| CE countries | −.027 | .232 | −.015 | −.118 | .906 |
| NE countries | −.342 | .286 | −.112 | −1.196 | .233 |
| SE countries | .132 | .250 | .056 | .529 | .597 |
| WE countries | | | | | |
| Business, Economy, Finances | .280 | .162 | .122 | 1.722 | .086 |
| Management, Marketing | −.031 | .199 | −.011 | −.156 | .876 |
| Tourism | .112 | .155 | .052 | .719 | .473 |

Regression coefficients that are statistically significant at the 0.05 level are marked in bold

There were two statistically significant effects at the 0.05 level for the respondents' gender and for those who studied tourism in comparison with those who did not. Female respondents who studied tourism had higher mean scores on the factor EMM.

**Table 9** Regression analysis for ERASMUS destination choice motives (factor 2)

| Model | Unstandardized coefficients | | Standardized coefficients | *t* | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | SE | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | .207 | .699 | | .295 | .768 |
| Gender | −.138 | .105 | −.086 | −1.311 | .191 |
| Age | −.028 | .023 | −.078 | −1.212 | .227 |
| Type of the degree | .259 | .101 | .173 | 2.566 | **.011** |
| GPA | .060 | .045 | .084 | 1.351 | .178 |
| EE countries | −.032 | .188 | −.020 | −.170 | .865 |
| CE countries | −.365 | .184 | −.231 | −1.987 | **.048** |
| NE countries | .134 | .227 | .052 | .591 | .555 |
| SE countries | .097 | .198 | .049 | .489 | .625 |
| WE countries | | | | | |
| Business, Economy, Finances | −.036 | .128 | −.019 | −.281 | .779 |
| Management, Marketing | −.014 | .158 | −.006 | −.087 | .931 |
| Tourism | −.338 | .123 | −.187 | −2.755 | **.006** |

Regression coefficients that are statistically significant at the 0.05 level are marked in bold

In the second regression model (see Table 8), the first factor EDCM was taken into account as dependent variable. In this case, 9 % of the total variance was explained. The overall regression model was statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($F = 1.989$, $p = 0.031$). There were two statistically significant effects at the 0.05 level for the gender and age of respondents. Female and younger respondents had higher mean scores on the first factor EDCM.

In the third regression model (see Table 9), the second factor EDCM was taken into account as dependent variable. In this case, 18.5 % of the total variance was explained. The overall regression model was statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($F = 4.550$, $p = 0.0001$). There were three statistically significant effects at the 0.05 level for the respondents' type of degree, their residency in CE and their major study topic, i.e., tourism. Respondents who studied at the master or doctoral degree, who did not live in CE and did not study tourism had higher mean scores on the second factor EDCM.

*$H_1$ Female and male students have different scores on the EMM and EDCM scales*

No doubt both females studying in America (Stroud 2010) and in Europe expressed stronger intentions to study abroad than their male counterparts. The findings concur with previous studies (e.g., Stroud 2010; Vossensteyn et al. 2010) that gender indeed influences motives for studying abroad and choosing study exchange destinations. Hence, hypothesis $H_1$ is accepted. Although both genders appraised their professional and personal growth as an important motivator to stimulate their study mobility, these perceptions might have been influenced by their prior participation in EM. Hence, they shared similar characteristics with Americans to enhance employment opportunities and to make new contacts in field of studies after living abroad (cf. Gerner and Perry 2000). In addition, the outcome of robust mediation of work–family conflicts and continuous promotion of work–family enrichment to support females' career advancements in Europe (cf. Lövhöiden et al. 2011) might have

prompted females and males having different scores on the EMM scale. With reference to EDCM, both genders perceived infrastructure and image of their choice destinations differently as females were searching for an exciting and very popular place in which to live, with rich culture, arts, history, interesting night life and many local events (cf. Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

*$H_2$ Students studying on higher-level courses have different scores on the EMM and EDCM scale as compared with students on lower-level courses*

It was shown that students studying on higher-level courses did not have significantly different scores on the EMM scale to students on lower-level courses. This finding might be due to students' perceptions that, regardless of level of study, exposure to different cultures and improving foreign language were important benefits of EEPs. Knowledge of foreign languages supports personal and professional growth, because it can promote better understanding of the host culture as well as business (practice)-specific knowledge (cf. Keogh and Russel-Roberts 2009). Regarding EDCM, students on higher-level courses have statistically different scores (on the first factor, the mean score is −0.068; on the second factor, the mean score is 0.179) on the EDCM scales when compared with students on lower-level courses (on the first factor, the mean score is 0.060; on the second factor, the mean score is −0.157). This finding concurred with Brooks and Waters (2009) that, due to lack of financial support, postgraduates are more sensitive to the price of tuition and standard of living than students studying at lower levels. It also suggests that having developing instead of a fully commercialized tourism might be more appealing destination factor to postgraduate students' and contradicts Richardson and Wilson's (2005) claim that younger (15–25 years old) students seek emerging touristic countries. Hence, hypothesis $\mathbf{H_2}$ is partially accepted.

*$H_3$ Students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scales are dependent on their study topic (major)*

Similar to American students (Stroud 2010), European tourism students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scales were dependent on their major study topic. This result might be due to tourism students having a better understanding of the concept of leisure travel (cf. Rojek 1989), via ERASMUS mobility, in emerging and inexpensive destinations while improving their foreign language and academic knowledge, and experiencing different educational systems and European identities. It is reasonable to assume that one will need to understand and be able to use the language of the host country, at least at the basic level, in order to prosper either personally or professionally, or even just to have great time away from home; thus, language should be considered as an important factor to stimulate EMM (cf. Knight and Madden 2010). The present study confirms this assumption and provides empirical evidence regarding the importance of improving a foreign language as part of academic education for tourism students. Hence, the hypothesis $H_3$ is accepted.

*$H_4$ Students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scales are dependent on their GPA achievement*

Based on the regression analyses (see Tables 7, 8, 9), students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scales were independent of their GPA achievements. Hence, the hypothesis $H_4$ is

rejected. The findings contradict Daly's (2011) conceptualization of students' academic performance influencing their study exchange and destination choice motives. Hence, individuals with better academic records should appear to seek professional rather than personal achievements by spending a relatively shorter period in the foreign institution than their counterparts.

*$H_5$ Students' scores on the EMM and EDCM scales are dependent on the region of their country of origin*

The differences in the students' mean scores on the EMM and EDCM scales were statistically significant regarding the region of their country of origin. Hence, hypothesis $H_5$ is partially accepted. The findings of the present study contradicted Doyle et al. (2010), Daly (2011), González et al. (2011) and Kondacki (2011), determining that students' motivations to study abroad were dependent on the region of their country of origin. Previous studies examined international study exchange flows by comparing countries depending on their level of development, differentiating between the "developed" and "developing" countries. For example, Button et al. (2005) showed that students tend to choose developed countries because of the similarity of the language and cost of living to their own countries and developing countries due to the increased opportunities for experiencing new education systems. The present study refrained from conceptualizing the origin and destination countries based on their level of development and rather employed a somewhat more sociopolitical approach (cf. Rivza and Teichler 2007) by splitting them to EE, CE, NE, WE and SE countries, supported by the fact that cultural benefits are considered to be important motives for international study exchange programs.

In addition to motives for engaging in EEPs, the present study was also interested in factors that shape students' destination choices. Past studies show that in addition to personal benefits (e.g., meet new people, experience something new, experience and learn about cultures, gain life experiences) students also travel for reasons pertaining to escaping from everyday environment (e.g., spend some time away from home, travel and leisure purposes). Therefore, it was expected that, when choosing an ERASMUS country, students are motivated by a certain level of attractiveness that addresses various tourism-travel-oriented needs and that such preferences are contingent upon students' personal factors. As such, the present study determined that CE students have lower scores on lifestyle and commercialization as an EDCM (mean score is −0.314) compared to students coming from other geographical locations (mean score for students coming from WE is 0.133, for students coming from EE the mean score is 0.107, for students coming from NE the mean score is 0.138 and for students coming from SE the mean score is 0.214. CE students might be inspired by leisure–vacation-related desires (Teichler 2004) to travel to countries where they are familiar with the language and lifestyle, yet to be discovered by tourists and at the same time are not very expensive to live in. Perhaps they aim to avoid congested destinations, with high level of commercialized tourism activities.

## Conclusions

Exchange students comprise important numbers of international travelers (ECDGEC 2012) and "studying" appears among the top travel motives (Altbach and Knight 2007). Despite the economic downturn, youth, student and educational travel is becoming a stable ongoing industry that might outperform leisure and business tourism in terms of its annual growth

rate. Furthermore, youth, student and educational travel accounts for over 20 % of international arrivals, which equals 207 million arrivals and 194 billion dollar industry in year 2012 (Student Marketing 2012). As a consequence, it seemed relevant to examine the motives that drive students to study abroad, and elements that pull them toward exchange destinations. The present study contributes to extending the knowledge and understanding of students' international study mobility motivations and supports previously predominant qualitatively derived findings, by adding findings from a micro-level survey-based approach.

The vision of the EU is to create a competitive international community where several different cultural, political, educational and other social systems can work together for a better and more competitive future (ECDGEC 2010). In line with this statement, the EP allows individuals to spend a limited time in a foreign country, at a foreign university during the period of formal education, when they may develop both professionally and personally and also enjoy some time away from home. More specifically, the present study suggests that the respondents join ERASMUS program, mainly for reasons which lead to professional and personal growth. In light of the fact that ERASMUS students represent a significant amount of individuals engaged in traveling to a foreign country and that such individuals are also driven by vacation-specific motives (cf. Teichler 2004), it can be concluded that the present findings should not be ignored when developing student mobility exchange policies, which could potentially be useful also for tourism development and marketing policies of the ERASMUS host destinations. These are key issues because: (a) the importance of leisure or vacation-related motives among exchange students is increasing (Teichler 2004); (b) ERASMUS scholarship, financial assistance given to students during their exchange period, actually represents a financial incentive for pursuing a vacation (Daly 2011); and (c) international students do contribute to the domestic tourism industry (Davidson et al. 2010).

Although it is shown that students engage in international ERASMUS mobility programs primarily for "having fun motives," which appear to be opposite of the professionally oriented objectives of the ERASMUS mobility program, this should not be of a great concern. In support of this finding, it has been suggested that ERASMUS mobility experiences, which are driven by personal growth (Hadis 2005), and other "playful motives" (Waters et al. 2011) are not necessarily in vain in terms of meeting the academic or professional growth objectives of the ERASMUS mobility program. For example, Hadis (2005) suggests that when students are exposed to host cultures and lifestyle, they develop interest in new ideas and international affairs; this results in students being more interested in academic or professional growth upon return back home. Following this suggestion, ERASMUS students should be exposed to the host culture and should be encouraged to socialize with students from their host institution as well as locals in the host cities. Host institutions may also collaborate with local tourism providers in developing special tours where students can learn about different issues while still having touristic fun. It has been demonstrated that specially designed tours educate people and change their views and attitudes about different local and global issues, including sustainability (e.g., Orams 1997) and that such tours may even influence ones behavior on returning home (Ballantyne et al. 2009). Waters et al. (2011) add that mobility students who are coming from higher social classes may also benefit professionally and academically from engaging in international mobility for playful and "fun" reasons. Such students need to escape from the pressures of everyday life, and, given the opportunity, they will "escape" to good universities where they will also benefit academically.

In terms of destination-related elements, lifestyle- and commercialization-related EDCM are dependent on European students' level of study, major of study topic and the region of their country. These elements can be interpreted as the pull factors of motivation (Li and Bray 2007; Uysal et al. 1994), and they should be promoted with respect to students' personal factors. Destination marketing organizations should work closely with educational institutions to attract international exchange students and, moreover, to meet their expectations. ERASMUS coordinators should be aware of students' needs and expectations as well as the potential benefits of international exchanges and properly address them when advising host institutions. If students are driven mainly by personal motives, they will seek opportunities to improve their knowledge of host culture, meeting new people, learning about European identity and opportunities for personal growth, so destinations that find such a market appealing should cater for those needs. Although those students who seek professional growth opportunities could still form a potential market, they will primarily explore professional growth-related interests. As noted earlier, host destinations should allow students to experience local culture (Hadis 2005) and offer them opportunities for having fun time to mitigate the pressures of growing academically (Waters et al. 2011), which will, in the long term, have a positive impact on their professional growth.

## Limitations, implications and future research

Although during the extraction, the PCAs have retained all the variables with total explained variances higher than 50 % for EMM and EDCM solutions, readers are cautioned regarding the accuracy of the structure (Beavers et al. 2013) as some of the factor loadings were less than (0.7) and which may not reflect all the dimensions of the factor. Hence, it is suggested that future research includes more tourist motivation-related items in the survey instrument.

Although the findings are in line with previous studies on exchange students' motives, the present study attempted to go a step further and analyze in depth the dimensions of the ERASMUS students' tourism-related motivation. This dimension exists in EM in reality, but it is not congruent with the original objectives of EM as established by the EU Council of Ministers (1987). On the one hand, the ECDGEC can employ the tourism dimension to improve the participation rate of ERASMUS students to meet the targeted 20 % mobility rate of European higher education students; however, on the other hand, it can raise potential political and social tensions if using taxpayers' money to fund students' seeking tourism-related benefits. ERASMUS students are not tourists, per se, but they are still perceived as an important tourism market segment (ECDGEC 2012; Student Marketing 2012). As such, ECDGEC may attempt to argue for ERASMUS study mobility to boost tourism in EU Member States. Furthermore, ECDGEC can attempt to convince taxpayers that ERASMUS study mobility is part of a broader learning experience, which includes tourism (cf. Mitchell 1998). From an economic perspective, the EU is recommended to boost tourism and alleviate its weakening economy through ERASMUS and international student exchange mobility. On the basis of the present study, it is suggested that future researchers should examine extensively, positive and negative effects of student tourists' study mobility. Moreover, it is incumbent on the tourism and education policy makers to understand the implications of the educational or tourism appeal of a destination for students and general travelers.

Although the gender participation in this study is imbalanced, motivation discrepancies between the genders are evident. Recent studies in similar areas focus mostly on female

students' motivations. The present study includes male perspectives so complementing previous studies. Hence, future researchers are recommended to employ a gender-balanced sample and to examine the motivations of students from different diverse subgroups and contrasting cultures and backgrounds. Finally, it is regrettable that the present does not examine the socioeconomic status of the participants due to resource constraints and sensitive data collection restriction. As such, future research is recommended to include the discussion of socioeconomic status in depth.

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