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TOPIC: Exploring motives and challenges of students in Erasmus+ mobility
program: A Case of Khazar students

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Mövzu: Erasmus+ mobillik proqramında tələbələrin motivlərinin və problemlərinin araşdırılması: Xəzər tələbələrinin nümunəsi

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INTRODUCTION

Background

In recent years, both globalization and internalization of tertiary education in the European Union have resulted in a growing number of different mobility programs. One of the notable programs is Erasmus+ which was launched in 2014. This was due to the tremendous success and getting famous of Erasmus Programme (beginning in 1987), and therefore all the programs which were run by European Commission were collected under a single name of Erasmus+. The program supports school education, higher education, vocational education, adult education and provides grants for running projects in the sport field. Again, the program is aimed at offering effective tools for collaboration among distinguished sectors conforming to the strategy targets of Europe 2020. The Erasmus+ impact study showed that between 2014 and 2018, over two million students and staff in higher education pursued a learning, training, or teaching period outside their countries with the new Erasmus+ program (Souto-Otero et al., 2019). This contrasts with the predecessor Erasmus programs, as Erasmus+ is not limited to intra-European mobility but also enabling students and staff to go beyond their continents.

Many studies have cited professional future as one of the impacts of international mobility since students believe that employers value international experience (Lam et al., 2012). Daly (2011) cited the same reason when most European employers confirmed that students having international experience possess valuable characteristics such as initiative, hard work, and adaptability.

In general, even though Erasmus+ helps students to gain new skills and provides stronger chances for cooperation between higher education institutions, there are still some ongoing learning mobility challenges which are affecting its quality and participation. These challenges include personal motivation, awareness about the program, financial hiccups, Erasmus+ grant conditions and incompatibility between university education systems (Vossensteyn et al., 2010).

In trying to do away with challenges, higher institutions need to strongly understand why students opt to spend some time at a foreign university. Krzaklewska (2008) argued that understanding student motives enlightens us about the values of today's youths through the rationale hidden in their decisions to study abroad. Further to that, it also helps both sending and

hosting institutions to determine student's expectations to render targeted services and thereby achieve students' satisfaction with a program. Additionally, there is also a strong need for the Erasmus+ administrators in the institutions to find the root cause of the challenges so that they put strategies which will enhance a huge patronage of the program.

Statement of the problem

The European Union found Erasmus+ to provide vibrant youth education, training, and sports. As in 2021, Erasmus+ budget was €2.9 billion which was used to provide a meaningful opportunity to Europeans to study, train, gain experience and volunteer both locally and abroad. The budget has also been scaled up to more than EUR 26 billion for the period of 2021 to 2027 (European Commission, 2022). Looking profoundly, the major reason for pumping such huge funds is to help students achieve their educational goals through studying outside their countries. Within Erasmus+ higher education students spend one or two semesters abroad with their partner university mostly in Europe, even beyond.

However, the most important aspect with respect to international Erasmus+ mobility program is the extent to which the program objectives are met, believed to be contingent on the reasons and motives of its participants. Valera et al. (2019) agreed by arguing that the main variable that we must be serious of this program is the motives that the students must leave their countries to a new destination and pursue a new challenge.

On the other hand, another key aspect is understanding diverse challenges that the students meet in the Erasmus+ process. The survey conducted by Sal-İlhan & Külekçi (2022) about challenges experienced during Erasmus+ programme showed that half of the participants (43.2%) admitted to facing a lot of problems. Many of the participants (56.8%) had many challenges before the program while 27% strongly stated that Erasmus was mostly problematic. Other studies have also mentioned paperwork before Erasmus programme as the biggest challenge (Aydin, 2012; Çiftçi, 2016; Önen, 2017). Erasmus+ mid-term review (2022) showed that Erasmus+ problems are not always addressed as they should. Usually, because of lack of transparency of participants' reports which are not published in a comprehensive way. In addition, the student's highest levels of dissatisfaction are mostly related to pre-departure preparation and reintegration support offered by sending universities.

This, therefore, triggered my motivation to explore student motives and challenges of Erasmus+ mobility programme primarily at Khazar University. The whole essence is to provide enormous knowledge of what students really want and their struggles so the program can be tailored accordingly and be fruitful to the students, a void this research intends to fill.

Research Objectives

Main Objective

To explore student's motives and challenges of Erasmus+ mobility program

Specific Objectives

1. To determine students' motives for participating in Erasmus+ programs
2. To determine student challenges faced during Erasmus programme process.
   a. To identify which period (pre, during or post Erasmus) did the students face most challenges.
   b. To determine the kinds of challenges which students face during each stage of the Erasmus process.

Research questions

1. What are students' motives for participating in Erasmus+ program?

2. What are students' challenges faced during the Erasmus+ program?

   a. During which period (pre, during or post Erasmus) did the students face most challenges?

   b. What kinds of challenges which students face during each stage of the Erasmus process?

Significance of the study

Primarily this study will benefit the students who would like to apply for the Erasmus+ program. This paper will enlighten them to make better intentions about what they want to accomplish during their time abroad. They will also be able to foresee the drawbacks of the program and thereby alert them to solve those issues at an early stage before turning critical.

The study will be very vital to both Khazar as an institution and Azerbaijan in general as more students are still and continue to join the program. This is evidenced as in 2019 as a total of 325 students and university staff in Azerbaijan were able to learn and teach in Europe as part of Erasmus+ program (EU NeighborEast News, 2021). Therefore, at an institutional level, the paper

in one way or another will be useful to Erasmus+ coordinators at Khazar university in unveiling the determinants of why students leave Khazar to study in other European countries. It will also help to unfold challenges faced by the students during the challenges which will be vital to organize comprehensive orientation to meet the needs of students and maximize their satisfaction.

As a country, the findings of this paper will also be beneficial to the ministry of Education as proper administration of Erasmus+ program will mean more benefit to students which after getting professional experience, they will increase the labor market thereby driving the socioeconomic change in their respectable communities. It is also the hope that this study will add knowledge to the existing literature since in Azerbaijan few studies of this nature have been carried out more especially using mixed methods. On the other hand, the study will provide an impetus upon which other related studies can be generated and cement the results found. In conclusion, this document will act as a source of reference to all educationists/academicians, policy makers and other stakeholders in the playing field of school leadership, management, and administration.

Rationale of the study/ motivation statement

The researcher as an international student, the decision to understand motives and challenges of student mobility program stems from my personal experience and intellectual inquisitiveness about the life experiences of international students in both sending and receiving counties and institutions. International students possess different motives which inspire them to go and study outside their countries. At the same time, there are numerous challenges that are faced along the way. This study was conceived after a rigorous literature review and uncovering that there is plethora of research and literature on Erasmus+ student mobility program globally but meagre research and literature in Azerbaijan. Based on both this discovery and my inquisitiveness, I was determined to take forward this study and understand Khazar university Erasmus+ student perspective. Personally, for so long I harbored my desire to pursue my MA abroad as a plan to acquire both international experience and exposure, interact with students from distinguished countries. This desire conformed with the conviction among parents and international students that education abroad is a life-changing experience which brings international exposure to students despite having some unseen challenges (Rhodes, 2014).

In ogling student mobility through a couple of lenses, Njuguna and Itegi (2013) contend that probing this phenomenon is much of significance because international education is a tunnel

through which education standards flow, thereby promoting human understanding across the globe, and creating regional bonds to compete with other regions of the world. Additionally, student mobility, which lies in the education service sector of any country, is a strategic sector which contributes to the growth of the GDP as it brings advanced prospects for exports (Othieno & Nampewo, 2012). Ismayilov et, al (2020) found that in Azerbaijan, every one-percent increase in the graduates of specialized education institutions caused an increase in the economic growth of 0.14 in the short term and 0.15 in the long term. In other words, the more the graduates Azerbaijan can produce, more returns to the economic development.

Theoretical Framework

According to Abend (2008), a theoretical framework is a general perspective from which one sees, grasps, represents and interprets his or her world. This study on motives and challenges of Erasmus+ student mobility program on the case of Khazar University was anchored in the migration and mobility theories proposed by many scholars. Despite that many migration approaches are deficient of interdisciplinary perspectives motives and their application to international student mobility (de Haas, 2021), this paper will dwell much on psychological approach which chiefly focused on the motivational aspects of migration, behavior of motivation as well as decision-making process and the consequence of migrating to other countries for study (Schwartz et al., 2020). On the same Krzaklewska (2008) advanced this psychological component by arguing that scholars can probe and examine decision-making processes in student mobility, or they can investigate the major effects or challenges of studying abroad both to an individual or to groups of students. Bircan et al. (2020) pointed out that psychological discourse of migration theories has been dominated by two theories which are conventional value-expectancy model and rational behavior theory. But looking profoundly, these two models portray a reductionist view of human agency when an individual is denuded of social reality. However, the work of Simon (1978) brings forth the important insights of in terms of bounded rationality, which hails the inclusion of 'irrational' or 'noneconomic' aspects in the analysis of decision making and migration (Bircan et al., 2020).

Applying the principles proposed by Krzaklewska (2008), I can argue that decision making process is the first and vital step for one to migrate to another country. An individual has distinguishable motives for moving away from his home country to go abroad, therefore it is a must to calculate and understand the consequences and challenges which may come along the

way of executing the already made decision. This is because the decision-making process for migration by international students has become complex lately (Tokas et al., 2023). The decision to migrate to overseas for higher education cannot not been only compelled by economic motives but even non-economic ones, i.e., desire for travelling, excitement and fun (Waters & Brooks, 2012), understanding different cultures (Findlay et al., 2012); and distinguishing oneself from other people within one's country of origin (King et al., 2016).

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses an in-depth examination of existing literature on motives and challenges of Erasmus+ student mobility program within the higher education sector. The chapter is divided into three sections. Section one presents available literature on the impact of internalization from global, continental, regional and higher education in Azerbaijan perspective, capturing both student and institutional internalization perspectives. Part two presents the overview of Erasmus+ exchange program globally, country perspective and institutional perspective and theories guiding the Erasmus+ program. In the third part, the available literature delves into the previous studies on the motives and challenges of Erasmus+ program. In the end, a summary of the literature review is well articulated and presented.

1.2 Overview and impact of Internalization-Global perspective

The impact of globalization and internalization has made it easier for people from different countries to come together and exchange goods and services, information, and ideas too. Nowadays societies go beyond their country's borders and the interdependence between countries is becoming larger day by day. Consequently, the people's thoughts and doings are shifting from national level to the international arena (Balay, 2005). According to Kohn (2015), higher education institutions have been the most key target of globalization. Aiming at educating students and transforming the world, universities have established connections with other universities outside their borders thereby adopting a borderless education approach.

Due to internalization, within the period of 2010-2020, we notice not only the number of international students being doubled to five million, but we also see the escalation in the franchise operations, articulation programs, campuses being branched as well as online delivery of higher education. There is a powerful competition for skilled and talented international students and scholars, and therefore, all selective immigration policies have been moved to from low skill to high skill immigration (de Wit & Deca, 2020).

The general accepted definition of the term internalization was presented by Knight (2008) who expounded it as the "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education." Other researchers have defined internalization as the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary

education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (De Wit et al., 2015). Teichler (2017) stated that internalization has a potential of improving quality and add value to higher education and can be used as a tool for enhancing different dimensions of research, teaching, and learning. Ward et al. (2015) also supported the same argument that internalization is one the key goals of higher education institutions. De Wit and Altbach (2021) also argued that "internationalization must be considered in the broader context of the changing role and position of tertiary education in the world". On the other hand, the common misconception is to assume internationalization as a goal instead of a means to an end: enhancing the quality of education, research, and service to the affairs of societies. Consequently, international mobility has become an important part of higher education policy.

Similarly, DeWit and Deca (2020) outlined the main trends in internationalization in the past 30 years. Among them includes more attention on the internationalization abroad than on internalization at home, increased ad hoc, fragmented and marginal than strategic and central policies, rising in the interest of small, elite groups of students and faculty rather than focusing on global and intercultural results, therefore contributing to little attention to inclusiveness and equity, changing of political, economic, social/cultural and educational rationales with the increase in economic motivation and also being increasingly guided by national, regional and global rankings.

1.3 National policies for internationalization

The national government continues to recognize internationalization of higher education as a significant factor in the national development of economy, trade, and reputation. Considering of enhanced student and staff mobility, the growing of branch campuses and international providers, and flourishing competition for international talent, all tertiary education institutions and national governments are marshalling to steer internalization. According to DeWit and Deca (2020), internalization strategies for national tertiary education and plans represent the highest tangible and direct attempts to take a proactive and decisive role in relation to internalization, but still there are huge differences in their approached, rationales and priorities.

A worldwide census conducted by Cr˘aciun (2018) on the explicit national policies revealed that only 11% of countries had an official strategy and plans for internalization in their countries and mostly having been embraced in the last decade. The study also indicated that most strategies

have been initially developed and widely used by developed countries in which 3 in 4 are from the members of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Most profoundly, European countries have been leading the way in advancing strategic thinking about internalization at the national level in which 2 in 3 emanates from this world region, and the programs such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 have pushed to strong harmonization of higher education systems (Ilieva, 2017).

However, some countries have not been concerned in putting strategies to enhance internalization. In fact, to gunner support for internalization process, distinguished countries have put both direct measures (e.g., changing their visa policies to provide preferential treatment to international scholars, building bilateral or multicultural agreements through memoranda of understanding, enhancing transitional education using free-trade deals) and direct measures (e.g., encouraging internalization politically and providing autonomy to universities to conduct internationalization programs).

1.4 Internalization of higher education in Azerbaijan

Over the past three decades, the higher education system in Azerbaijan has gone through a significant change. Since getting its independence from the USSR, Azerbaijan had to do away with the Soviet approach to higher education system and mount new institutional systems and legal framework and to meet the needs and demands of the country for human capital. After removal of communist ideology, Azerbaijan newly established government had to overcome a few difficulties to build a higher education system which was different from the Soviet system. In the aspect of internalization, Azerbaijan had to undergo a rigorous policy reform to position its higher education institutions on the international market and competitiveness (Suleymanov, 2020). To ensure its accomplishment, the president of Azerbaijan approved the strategic road in 2018 known as "State Programme on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2023." Since then, there have been notable trends which Azerbaijan higher institutions to embrace internalization in higher education of Azerbaijan. Among them is the increasing significance of international rankings of its higher institutions. There has been growing interest in international rating agencies as they are one determinant of both world and global rankings in universities. In fact, international rankings are strongly considered as a unit of measurement of university scientific prowess, the quality of education and internationalization. Lately, many regional directors of world-renowned rating

companies including QS and Times Higher Education visited Azerbaijan and conducted seminars and trainings with different institutions (UNEC, 2019).

Again, other changes in the higher education in Azerbaijan have been observed in the expansion of and increasing number of exchange programs and joint degree. Erasmus+ mobility and Mevlana of Turkey have been most popular and prestigious mobility and exchange programs in Azerbaijan. The number of agreements and memoranda of understandings have been on the rise by Azerbaijan institutions and foreign universities. In the last 6 years, a review number of agreements within both Erasmus+ and Mevlana at UNEC showed a more than 100% increase. Like that, there has also been a growing number of joint degree programs offerings. For example, universities like ADA, UNEC, KHAZAR and ASIOU have been offering joint degrees. Khazar University offers a dual degree with Polytechnic Institute of Braganca (IPB) in Portugal while ADA launched the dual degree program with the George Washington University of USA and UNEC offers more than 4 dual degree programs with European and United States Universities (ADA University, 2020; Khazar University, 2024; UNEC, 2019).

Recently, a sharp increase in the number of English language programmes has been noticed in higher institutions in Azerbaijan in response to internalization of its education. According to Suleymanov (2020), there have been huge shift in study programs in English. Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) and Khazar University emerged as the pioneers of the universities to start offering their study programs in Azerbaijan. On the same, there is an international school of economics at UNEC which administers its entire programmes in English. Likewise, ADA emerges as the first public university in Azerbaijan to administer its all-degree programs in English. Additionally, a verified data has showed that, with the last 10 years many universities in Azerbaijan such as Baku Engineering University, Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry (ASOIU), Azerbaijan University have scaled up the number of their English language degree programs.

De Wit and Altbach (2021) contend that internalization has intensified and brought tremendous competition for international students and now has become and more global and competitive industry. In this regard, Azerbaijan have also scaled up the number of international students to study in Azerbaijan universities through scholarships such as Azerbaijan International and Development Agency (AIDA) and other educational Grants. The data from the Ministry of

Education in Azerbaijan (2019) indicated that in the 2017/18 academic year only, the number of international students in Azerbaijan universities rose by 17 percent which translated to 5, 871. These students are from 76 countries worldwide. Now, nearly every higher education institution in Azerbaijan have strategized and planned for the increase of international students. In other words, I can argue that Azerbaijan universities are competing with one another in the process of internalization by enrolling more international students from different countries. All universities in Azerbaijan are putting in place all branding and marketing tools to attract more foreign students, as more foreign means more funding for the university.

Besides the developments discussed the quest for gaining international importance in global ranking has accelerated lately in Azerbaijan higher institutions. The review by de Wit (2019) on the internalization of higher education indicated that rankings at institutional, national, regional, and continental have emerged to play a critical role in higher education. Marginson (2017) concurs with de Wit (2019) by arguing that rankings have shaped global higher education in three ways which includes competition of universities and countries, hierarchy of the universities and performance of universities which stands as "an often frenetic" culture of an ongoing improvement in each university. Yudkevich et.al (2016) talks of the "Global Academic Rankings Game", in which only a small number of the higher education sector competes. This a small portion of institutions gets all the attention and compels governments and institutions to "compete" without acknowledging the need for differentiation. So, in agreement to the arguments above, internalization has forced Azerbaijan institutions to increase its interest in international agencies which ordain the ranking of world and regional institutions. Ismayilov (2020) added that international ranking can be taken as a unit of measuring and evaluating scientific activities of institutions, quality of education and the aspect of internalization. Not long ago, several directors of well-renowned rating companies such QS as well as Times Higher Education have inspected Azerbaijan universities and organized training and seminars in this field with university administrators and teachers (UNEC, 2019). Furthermore, Azerbaijan higher institutions have been implementing some initiative to participate in international ranking and other institutions are heavily involved in putting into effect the action plans in this direction. The institutions see their outcomes in international rankings as important indicators of university's quality of education and its strong image. Nevertheless, it should also be understood that the two measures of QS rankings rating organization which are found in the regional and world ranking of Azerbaijan Higher institutions, 50% of them are determined based on outcomes of surveys university and

employes (*QS University Rankings EECA*, 2020). In this context, universities to get recognition from relevant stakeholders both at local and international market, they need to score high in these surveys. In a similar way, branding plays a critical role in helping the higher institution to achieve the highest results. Again, the efforts done by higher institutions to boost results on other criteria such as the number of research articles and their citations, the proportion of international teachers and students to teachers and students are marked by several changes in the universities of Azerbaijan (Ismayilov et al., 2020). Finally, the statistics has showed that Azerbaijan universities have now made it in the reputable international rankings run by QS, RUR, Webometrics, U-MultiRank and others. In 2020, five Azerbaijan higher institutions made their names in QS regional ranking of Emerging European and Central Asia and two of them were presented in the "Impact Rankings 2020" organized by Times Higher Education (Ocallaghan, 2023; *QS University Rankings EECA*, 2020).]

1.5 Internalization at Khazar University

1.5.1 Brief History of Khazar University

Khazar University is a private-owned university situated in Baku city in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The institution was established in March 1991 by Hamlet Isakhanli as Azerbaijan University in accordance with the N41 resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Its founding expanded the number of non-state-controlled universities in Easten Europe, the Caucasus, and the central Asia and the earliest in Azerbaijan to institute Western style, research oriented higher institution. The name Azerbaijan University was later changed to Khazar University by the University Council in 1992. The university offers undergraduate, graduate as well as professional studies in the quest of boosting advanced study and research, educational policy and enhancing developments in Azerbaijan. Khazar University uses English as a language of instruction with the goal of producing more qualified English specialists both in Azerbaijan and other countries. On the other hand, Khazar is the earliest higher institution in Azerbaijan to have several faculties and departments joined by the similar academic policies and principles which provides various majors in Education, Arts, Management and Business Administration, Economics, and many others. As of today, Khazar University remains the leading University in Azerbaijan regarding its powerful relationships with the industry both local and international (Khazar University, 2024).

1.5.2 Khazar University internalization strategy

It is crucial for higher education institutions (HEIs) to understand the demands, expectations, and trials they encounter to maintain their quest of recruiting and providing the best possible services to international students (Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). Adapa (2013) posed that higher institutions are increasingly adopting strategies for internalization to position themselves on both national and international markets. But every university put in place different strategies according to its rationales, motives, and political conditions. In other words, Internationalization of higher institutions hinges on institutionalizing a strategic planning process that acknowledges and utilizes the power of the culture within which it takes place. On the same, internalization of institutions does encompass many components that must work mutually to meet a common purpose, including a document explaining institutional commitment towards internationalization, mobility programs and joint degree, communication of international chances and activities. Likewise, Khazar University has a very strong internationalization strategy which emanates from the university's main strategy which is purposed to prepare students to meet the needs and demands of the global world (Khazar University, 2024). Similarly, Khazar University is involved in internalization to improve the quality of its education and its reputation, enhance competitiveness, and assist to the research quality which brings financial benefits. Again, internalization has been a prerequisite For Khazar University to build a network of international relations or collaborate with other universities and boost the mobility of its students, staff and create research opportunities for the local to go abroad.

In this regard, Khazar University has outlined four key points of internalization as a vital opportunity for its participants. The first point is to acquire first-hand experience and skills in education and share the knowledge with their colleagues. The argument of Adapa (2013) agrees to this key by stating that people are considered as carriers of knowledge which once gained, they need to share and disseminate to others. This means that, if Khazar sent a staff or student abroad, it will be for the betterment of fellow students and staff as the person will share the experience with them. The second key point is fostering research and developing research projects which can benefit the university both academically and economically. The study by Sahin and Kondakci (2017) showed that in addition to academic gains the participants had strong perceptions of economic contribution of internalization to their higher institutions and even directly affecting positively to their economic well-being of themselves even for the students. The economic benefits are also seen in the aspect of conducting research projects both local and international.

For instance, Khazar University has conducted projects such as Gutenberg, CALIMERA (Culture Applications: Local Institutions Mediating Electronic Access), UNESCO translation project, Library Collection Development Projects, International Society for Science and Religion Library project, Chinese Books and Chinese Corner project just to mention a few. Creating opportunities for intellectual understanding and sharing cultural experiences is also another important key point in the internalization strategy for Khazar University. Students and staff are participating in exchange programs to experience other cultures from different countries and learn how best they can make use of those experience in the academic field and career. Referring social-cultural contribution, Sahin and Kondakci (2017) argues that it is more significant and effective than academic, economic, and politic ones. It continued that social-cultural aspects build intercultural competences and prevent prejudices and thereby increase tolerance among both students and staff. This is mostly for international activities where people from different countries meet and interact, and social-cultural contribution is vital despite the non-existence of academic contribution. The final key aspect is building long-term individual and institutional networks and collaborations to establish a powerful foundation for future initiatives and projects. Building international academic networks and collaborating with different institutions is essential for professional development. For instance, face to face activities like conferences and meetings are necessary for establishing international academic networks, especially for furthering research and publication of academic work. Nevertheless, international academic networks do not only enhance professional development but also development of their fellow workers at the institutions and the graduate students. Furthermore, establishing academic networks cannot not only happen through conferences but also through international projects which the higher institutions are collaboratively working together.

1.6. International Student Mobility – Global context

Over the previous decade there has been a huge hike in the demand for higher education all over the world. This has led to the introduction of borderless higher education which is being run in all education institutions levels starting local national, regional, and international (Middlehurst, 2001). Referring to international mobility, Martin and Rizvi (2014) and Prazeres (2013) agree that among the varied groups of migrants, international students are travelling the most at an international level. The major purpose of this is that physical relocation to another nation is a basic element of the internationalization of higher institutions which has a deep history through

which international people impelled and engaged in the creation of knowledge and dissemination (Li & Bray, 2007; Rizvi, 2011). This vindicates that international student mobility in higher institutions is not a recently developed phenomenon. However, it is the current inquisitiveness and barriers it encounters which has provoked the contemplation and scrutiny of policy academicians and policy makers (Prazeres, 2013). This is because the number of international students going abroad for studies has massively surged worldwide (Beine et al., 2014). Literature sources (Rizvi, 2011) shows that, the importance of gaining global importance and ability in a competitive world, the number of international students moving to other countries for studies continues to grow and it is projected to double each year (Kritz, 2016). This tremendous increase is connected to internalization of higher education institutions the whole world (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Woldegiorgis et al., 2015). As nations are successively benefiting from student mobility, the competition to attract and keep students have enormously broaden the options available to students to undertake international education (OECD, 2012) even though the government's role has changed from merely direct sponsorship of students to being an arranger and being the controller of the emerging industry (Li & Bray, 2007). The leading famous countries and universities accepting international students are spending more funds in building marketing strategies by being supported by national policies (Knight, 2012) which are put in place solely to attract more brightest students to learn and work in their countries as governments seek to achieve their innovation and research goals. This situation compels higher institutions to discern and surveil international mobility inclinations as they centre their attention on advertising strategies (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Again, to fully understand the concept of international student mobility, Teichlar (2015) made an in-depth analysis and presented four distinctions of mobility characters. These include "foreign" versus student mobility, inbound versus outbound mobility, "temporary (credit) versus whole degree programme mobility (degree) and finally "vertical" vs. "horizontal" mobility. In foreign versus student mobility, claims concerning the magnitude of internationally mobile students are mostly referenced to international data and statistics. But the currently available data was by then meant to provide information about international students and study abroad. Durin the analysis, students were categorized based on their "nationality," "citizenship," or "passport." Nonetheless, a small fraction of international students has lived and got education in the nation of study prior to commencing their studies, rather than travelling for that reason. We can also raise an argument that citizenship is a poor tool for approximating student mobility since it dwindles as migration

and mobility increase globally. Crossing borders to study in another or destination country would be a suitable definition of "international student mobility." Teichlar (2015) defined outward mobility as any movement of the student from one to another country which mainly driven from the perspective of the country and more specifically the institution of "origin" or of the "sending" institution, while inward mobility is defined from the perspective of both receiving country and institution. Higher education institutions are used to collecting data on new or even international students, and it is effortless to aggregate this data nationally and internationally. Mostly the collected data on the country of origin of inward mobility or international students is combined. On the other hand, it is very unfortunate that the outgoing mobility data collection is infrequently done and probably lacks completeness. As a result, the international statistics on students who study overseas or who are mobile abroad are derived from the sum of the corresponding data from their country of origin. For instance, the number of French students studying abroad is derived from student statistics of inward mobile (and/or foreign) from all other countries, where France is named, rather than from French sources. In temporary and whole programme mobility, the study indicated that many international students travel abroad for the whole duration of their studies. For instance, three or four years to finish a bachelor's degree entirely in a foreign nation. Others pursue their studies abroad solely to be near a relatively short period of time frame, like a semester or an academic year. Distinguished terms are used to make this distinction: the former may be referred to as "credit-mobile," "short-term mobile," or "temporarily mobile" students, whereas the latter "Degree-mobile," "mobile for the duration of the study programme," or "Mobile Diploma Students." These various forms of mobility all make sense in quite different ways. However, degree-mobile students wish to leave the educational system in which they were educated previously and embark totally different educational system across the board and eventually obtain a degree that demonstrates their ability to achieve and acquire the advanced level of competencies in that country. On the same, students who are temporarily mobile want to experience and pursue another educational system for a while, but usually spend most of their time of study in a the country of origin; study abroad gives a contrast or an addition to study at home at a more or less equal level of quality, and mostly the students hope that their home institution will acknowledge their study achievements during the study period abroad as equivalent to those in native or country of origin and thus do not compel them to study longer period than the non-mobile students in order to obtain a degree. On vertical and horizontal mobility, Teichlar (2017) argued that the distinction between the two terms is not officially

employed in the statistics or being documented in other government reports or even other key organizations in the higher education domain. He believed that it will certainly be employed soon because the classification can be pursued and undertaken easily and would be politically driven and sensitive. However, in research it is often referred to as the aims, process, and the results of mobility of students. In his analysis, he explained that the term "vertical mobility" is well suited to define a move of a person to another country or a higher education institution which seemed higher and prestigious in its academic quality than the education institution where the person belongs to. Mostly, it is a move from an a less advanced economy to a more advanced one. On the contrary, "horizontal mobility" is defined as a move where the quality of education institution and the country of destination is on equal terms with that of the institution which a student originates from.

1.7. Erasmus+ program- Global Perspective

The concept of mobility has always been the essence of the Bologna Process, which started with the Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999. The process has become the most complex European cooperation project in the field of higher education. The best-known program is ERASMUS which supports student mobility between EU countries (Marinescu et al., 2022). According to Valera et al. (2019), the word ERASMUS is an abbreviation for the European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, i.e., European Action for the University Student Mobility Scheme. The ERASMUS Program was established in 1987 by the Council of Education Ministers of the European Economic Community (Vossensteyn et al., 2010) and is the most emblematic EU program for education and training. In addition, this short make mention of Dutch Desiderius Erasmus (1465-1536) who was the writer, prominent scholar of the northern Renaissance and the public figure of the early humanist movement (Sal İlhan & Külekçi, 2022). According to Zerman (2014), Erasmus Program has passed through three phases since its implementation in 1987. These phases include phase under the Socrates Program (until 2007), phase under the Lifelong Learning Program (2007-2013) and phase under the Erasmus+ Program (starting in 2014)

In 2014, the name ERASMUS was changed to ERASMUS+. Erasmus+ is the broader term used for the framework programme which renders support for different target groups and ages in the fields of education, training, youth, and sports. The programme is new in the European Union which worked from the years 2014 and beyond. The past programmes which were directed within

the Lifelong Learning Programmes, such as Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, and Grundtvig, and the Youth in Action Programme and the five international cooperation programmes (Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink and the Industrialized Countries Instrument Education Cooperation Programme) were brought together under the Erasmus+ Programme. In his study, he mentions that the primary rationale for renaming the programme Erasmus+ is because the term 'Erasmus' is more widely recognized and known in public if compared to the other titles of the programmes mentioned above. In comparison with the predecessor programmes, Souto-Otero et al. (2021) argued that Erasmus+ mobility program gives stronger opportunities for cooperation between higher education institutions and all parties involved with an enormous focus on quality, impact, and accessibility. The major goals of both past and current Erasmus programmes have been to enhance and promote staff and student mobility across borders and to furnish higher education institutions the tools they need to develop and strengthen international cooperation networks and projects that will raise their quality, standard and relevance through utilizing and creation of networks and initiatives for transnational cooperation. Numerous initiatives supported by the Erasmus programme, for instance, reduced barriers to mobility in higher education have resulted in significant policy developments and reforms through the ECTS, or European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. Varela et al. (2019) added that higher education institutions have contributed to interinstitutional links and cooperation through promotion of educational agents, enhancing scientific research, matching education qualifications and skills through ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) under the Bologna process. The review by Souto-Oter et al. (2021) identifies three main novelties which were introduced by Erasmus+ programme in higher education. Among the first one is strategic alliances (SpAs), the first type SPs which facilitate and facilities the creation of novel products and/or engage in extensive dissemination and exploitation efforts; these activities are typically carried out through Higher Education SPs (KA203 projects). A second kind of SPs facilitates the sharing of best practices to allow organizations to strengthen and expand their networks and boost their ability to function on a transnational scale. SPs are available to all kinds of field organizations. of youth, education, and training, or other socioeconomic sectors, in addition to organizations engaged in cross-disciplinary work in different fields.

Globally, the number of participants benefiting from Erasmus continues to rise yearly. For instance, over 4.4 million students used the Erasmus programme and the Erasmus+ programme (changed in 2014) over the 30 years of its existence to study or work abroad, and an estimation of

over 500,000 young people from Europe would have utilized it by 2016. On the same, Erasmus+ annual report produced in 2018 showed that 350, 000 students pursued their studies or internship under Erasmus+ call (European Commission, 2017). Again, the recent annual report on Erasmus+ in 2021 showed that by the end of 2021, the number of participants in mobility programs and activities reached 12.5 million since its establishment in 1987. The students have mostly pursued their Erasmus+ programme in Spain, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy too. The greatest number of outbound students are from Spain, Germany, France, and Italy (European Commission, 2022).

On the same, the Erasmus+ budget has been scaled up now to expand its programs and activities. The budgets are mostly voted for by the budget authority. According to the Erasmus+ annual report indicates that the last budgetary execution (EU Budget Commitments) for 2018 academic year was mounted to €2.82 billion, which seemed €263 million more in comparison to 2017 (10.3% increase).Compared to the past years, there is a considerable increase in the combined allocation to different activities and programs while the budget share for International cooperation has slightly scaled down from 11% in 2017 to 9% in 2018. In line with past years and according to the legal basis of Erasmus+, the education and training sector received the biggest budget share with more than 74% of the commitments in 2018; the youth sector got around 9% for the same period. The remaining budget was divided and distributed between Jean Monnet, sport, international cooperation, administrative expenditure, and fees for managing the National Agencies. In 2021, the Erasmus+ was revisited and revised again to meet the increasingly complex global challenges which the new decade has come with. In this context, bolstering resilience and supporting recovery and innovation in the fields of education, training, youths, and sports were on the high agenda of the budget negotiations. The negotiations blossomed to a major agreement on a considerable envelope of more than EUR 26 billion for the programming period of 2021-2027, nearly making it double in size if compared to the past seven years (European Commission, 2022).

1.8. Erasmus+ mobility in Azerbaijan

In May 2005, Azerbaijan joined Bologna Process which has triggered subsequent educational reforms and created a new situation in the field of higher education. One of the prominent reforms brought by Bologna process is the internationalization of education manifested in the form of expanding flows of students to foreign universities, as well as mutual exchanges of

students, teachers, and researchers (Amirova, 2019). Erasmus+ program is among the exchange program which has boomed, and more and more Azerbaijan students prefer to study abroad through it. However, little is known especially the statistical data of students who are coming in and going out through Erasmus+ program in Azerbaijan. Despite that like other countries are doing, Azerbaijan is swiftly taking part in Erasmus+ programme since its establishment in 2014. Erasmus+ provides new possibilities and chances for Azerbaijani higher institutions for taking part in the mobility program and benefits its students (European Commission, 2017). Higher education institutions in the Republic of Azerbaijan have been and continue to participate in a significant number of Erasmus+ projects such as Mundus, Credit mobility, Jean Monnet projects but also specifically in part of the program that supports the formation of exchange networks between universities and colleges from the Western Balkans and the EU. The networks have resulted in acquiring useful experience within the common European academic and cultural context and were deemed to be a good foundation for Azerbaijan's full participation in mobility programs in the future. The report shows that 500 students and staff moved from Azerbaijan to other countries while 285 students and staff came to Azerbaijan for their studies through Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (European Commission, 2022). Higher education in Azerbaijan also take part in the Mevlana program. This is an academic exchange program for the students from Turkey to Azerbaijan. Student exchange is arranged within university cooperation and networks. Each of the networks has a definite number of target subjects needed to be pursued at the university. The cooperation is in accordance with the agreement between universities' institutes and faculties which offer the programs or are in the same academic field. In general, different higher institutions in Azerbaijan such as Khazar, ADA, Baku State, Azerbaijan State University of Oil are participating in Erasmus+ program.

1.9 Erasmus+ student mobility at Khazar University

Among the internalization priorities of Khazar University is fostering international student mobility (Khazar University). One of the evident student mobility programs is Erasmus+ which has benefited many students. As mentioned by Vossensteyn et al. (2010), The goal of the Erasmus+ program is to improve the standards of higher education by encouraging international collaboration amongst European universities, recognizing the academic degrees of students, and making contributions to the advancement of openness. Under the Erasmus+ mobility agreements and networks, Khazar University has accorded with several higher institutions in countries like

Turkey, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romani, Slovenian, France, and others. Schnepf and Colagrossi (2020) argued that it is not permitted for students to visit any country university. Instead, the choice of fields depends on the interinstitutional agreements between the participating universities. In this regard, Khazar University has partnered with Sapienza University of Rome and Bologna University in Italy while Middle East Technical University (METU), Manisa Celal Bayar University, Istanbul Aydin University and Manisa Celal Bayar University in Turkey. It has also companioned with Kozminski University and University of Social Sciences in Poland. Other universities include University of Timisoara (Romania), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), University of Cadiz (Slovenia), Middlesex University (UK) and Polytechnic Institute of Braganca in Portugal which offers Dual Degree with Khazar University in the fields of Computer System and Networks, Computer Engineering, Informatics and Management (MBA).

Another key aspect of Erasmus+ student mobility at Khazar university is the selection of students to undertake the program. Diaz (2017) maintains both the sending and host universities must choose students in accordance with the institutions' unique selection standards. Önen (2017) mentions that the principal factor used to select students for Erasmus+ program is their early academic performance. As Di Pietro and Page (2008) put it forward, "there is always a higher number of applicants than the number of spots available, so universities have to put up selection processes that are based on past student performance". As a result, students with strong academic records always have a higher chance to be selected than those with weaker records. This is in total agreement with Schnepf and Colagrossi (2020) who contends that at the university level, merit-based criteria for the selection of students into different programs such as performance mainly should come into play if students' applications top the number of mobilities that can be supported and funded.

Again, Erasmus+ program at Khazar University is handled by the international office. This is because the process of applying for Erasmus student mobility for students is associated with various administrative duties and tasks such as gathering references, reading, and writing letters of motivation. Hence, considering the presented facts, the processes are always complex and imply many efforts from administrative staff and students. This occurs because the procedures rely on the exchange of paperwork and information which the student handles completely on their own so they can participate in the mobility program (Díaz, 2017). Similarly, for a bachelor

or master student to go for Erasmus+ program at Khazar University, he or she can be a citizen of Azerbaijan or an international possessing a cumulative GPA of 85 or higher and completed at least one year of the studies at the university. A student must never have any disciplinary sanctions within the last six months. Likewise, a student who desires to go for Erasmus+ mobility program must notify the Khazar University through the international office by submitting all the essential documents. The documents should indicate the university program the student wants to study and should be offered and listed by the host university. Once this first step is done, the student undergoes a rigorous interview conducted by the Selection Committee of Khazar university. The final decision is either rejection or acceptance depending on the interview results and the requirements imposed by the host university. If the student is rejected, he or she can try to apply again and amend the past mistakes which prevented them from correctly applying for an exchange program. However, if the application is correct on the first attempt, the student gets the acceptance letter and processes all the travel documents and finally goes to the host countries until the entire period of the program (Khazar University, 2024).

1.10. Student motives for Erasmus+ mobility program

The success of the Erasmus+ program is the extent to which its objectives are met, believed to be contingent on the motives or reasons of its participants (Lesjak et al., 2015). This proposition agrees with Varela et al. (2019) that the main variable that we must be serious about is the motives that the students must leave their countries to a new destination and pursue a new challenge. Sova (2017) citing Krzaklewska (2008) asserts that students are compelled to study abroad for a variety of reasons, with different aspirations, goals, and expectations. On the same, numerous previous studies on Erasmus student's motives have really shown that students have different reasons or expectations to go for the program. In a mixed research study Krzaklewska (2008) distinguished four areas of student motives: academic, linguistic, cultural, and personal. She discovered that students choose to participate in Erasmus exchange programs for academic reasons, to practice a foreign language, to live abroad and at the same time to acquire new skills while simultaneously learning about new cultures and gaining new personal encounter. In a similar vein, a Spanish quantitative study of Erasmus students at a single university revealed that cultural and intellectual aspects, the desire to get to know the new environment and to have a European experience are the primary motives for living and pursuing education abroad (Fombona et al., 2013). Gričar and Neary (2016) conducted an interview with eight students who had

studied or worked overseas via telephone or skype. They believed that the promotion of local cultures was one of the problems in which mobility needs support. Lesjak et al (2015) carried out a quantitative survey between Erasmus+ students from 26 Euro- pean countries. Their study showed that students' motive to go to a particular destination is not only propelled by typical professional and personal aspects, previously identified by the researchers, but rely also on tourism attractiveness, location, and characteristics of the opted destination, which include popularity, rich culture, arts and history, events activities, security and safety, night life and others. According to Gonzáles et al. (2011) students motive to go for an Erasmus+ can also be driven by the size of the country, living costs, distance, educational background, quality of the chosen university, the language of the host institution, climate and country's characteristics and time effects. Again, Trujillo et, al. (Trujillo et al., 2020) interviewed 15 student postgraduate students at University of Debrecen about their motives to study abroad. Their study categorized student motives as intrinsic and extrinsic. They further argued that the main domains of student motives are personal, geo-academic, financial, family, and future expectations. On personal motives, students believed studying abroad helps them to learn deeply about themselves while trying to adjust to their new country and comprehend its customs and cultures. They felt that going overseas to study signifies maturity and gaining confidence in oneself, as well as testing one's ability to cope with diverse situations and apply their problem-solving abilities to adapt to new circumstances. About geo-academics, it explained that the students opt to study abroad to maximize their chance of achieving a high level of education. It is the only opportunity to broaden their horizon. The participants also insisted that their motive to study in Hungary was a financial support by Stipendium Hungaricum program. They believed that, although they had typically received a lot of support from their parents, the financial support lessened their financial load and family pressure. Finally, the Concerns regarding the family's expectations were shared by most participants. There was a strong sense of responsibility among them. On the same, the study by Sova (2017) categorized the main students' motives to go for Erasmus+ as discovery, change, and curiosity. Discovery illustrates that students strongly wish to know more about their new country and its culture; they are looking to learn and discover something new. Motives driven by change means that it is the utmost wish of students to change their current environment and learn about a different country and/or its culture. Curiosity driven motives state that students know little or nothing about the host country and its culture and wish to obtain more knowledge to understand situations which are unfamiliar fully. Aslan and Jacobs (2014) investigated the

experiences of Erasmus+ mobility students from Ankara University. The aim of the study was to examine the main motives of participating in Erasmus program, determine the good practices and comprehend whether the good practices differ according to the receiving country. The study indicates that language learning and living in a foreign culture are the primary motives of their participation in the program. Conversely, some research (Di Pietro, 2014; Teichler, 2001) have been carried to throw light on the impact of Erasmus on subsequent employment as a motive for Eramsu+ program from students. Di Pietro (2014) investigated the correlation between student mobility and graduates' job potential. He mentioned that there is a positive correlation between having a foreign education experience and getting a job because during their study abroad, students obtain qualifications, knowledge and skills required to enter the labor market. Souto-Otero et al. (2019) also supports this employability motive in which they argued that Students often believe that mobility experiences overseas, along with the knowledge and skill acquisition and personal growth they gain, will improve their chances of landing a job and employability. In a similar vein, Teichler (2001, p. 212) brings forward an argument that more mobile students than nonmobile students take up job assignments with international elements, are employed overseas (if employed by a home country) evaluate their professional relevance competence highly and have a smooth transition to employment. Another research conducted by Brandenburg et al. (2014) supported this proposition that mobilities are meant to raise the employability of future graduates. In their impact study they found that it was revealed that the rate of unemployment for ERASMUS participating students is 23% lower 5 years following the graduation if compared with non-participating ones. Furthermore, most employers acknowledge that international experience is an asset for job candidates and yields higher professional responsibility. On the contrary, those who object to this proposition argue that students who pursue studies outside may find it difficult to find a job early in their home countries. For instance, surveys conducted in Norway showed that graduates from foreign universities typically have less success in their early careers than those who studied in Norway. According to Wiers-Jensen (2011), this is because some employers are uninformed and sometimes skeptical regarding foreign qualifications. Another academic survey indicated that students hardly expect income advantages through international student mobilities (IDEAConsult, 2013).

Based on the literature cited above, I can argue that students have various motives to go for Erasmus+ program, and these motives are solely on the educational aspirations of individual students as well as cultural exposure, economic situations at play. It does not appear that there is

one overriding motive that determines student mobility direction but, instead, a combination of diverse motives plays a significant role. I further submit that it is not possible for motives to dwell only in economic perspectives but there must be an initial willingness and interest from the students to pursue their studies abroad. In other words, the personal interest, guided by their career aspirations and expectations, that help them to examine their home education system, dig more information on prospective countries and academic institutions, analyze current family financial capacity, among others, that serve as the foundation for all other decisions.

1.11. Erasmus+ mobility challenges

ERASMUS+ mobility programs provide a great opportunity for students to study abroad and gain both international experience and exposure. However, despite these abounding opportunities and benefits, the challenges and risks of international mobility must not be neglected Forbes-Mewett et al. (2009). This is to say that there is a large volume of published studies describing common challenges or barriers students face in relation to Erasmus+ mobility program. For instance, the study conducted by Sal-İlhan and Külekçi (2022) on the impact of Erasmus+ mobility showed that many students encountered various challenges before, during and after the program. During the pre-Erasmus+ period, students had problems with finding the equivalent course and preparation of Learning Agreement, lack of necessary information and insufficient guidance, visa process, paperwork, and many others. During the study more students mentioned academic, financial and socialization challenges. After the program, students faced the biggest challenge described as "Post Erasmus+ Syndrome" which means that students had difficulties in adapting back to their hometown. Similarly, the study conducted by Önen (2017) revealed that pre-Erasmus is the most challenging period. Her research showed that all participants faced some difficulties in Erasmus+ program but more were found in the period of pre-Erasmus+. The study also indicated that communication and socializing, differences in the education systems, language problems and culture shock were the most mentioned challenges encountered during the Erasmus+ period. On preparation and approval or Learning Agreement Diaz (2017) mentioned it as one the frequent complaints made by the students which makes it difficult for the exchange program to be simplified in terms of its administrative management. This is because any errors made on these documents or any phase of the processes can ultimately yield in a lack of validation or nullity of their Learning Agreement, exchange program or academic results acquired abroad.

A pool of studies has categorized Erasmus+ program challenges into five main types: financial challenges, challenges related to ERASMUS conditions, challenges related to comparability of higher education systems, personal background, and lack of awareness (Souto-Otero, 2008). Financial issues are connected to the cost-covering aspect which means that studying abroad often requires a financial commitment on the side of ERASMUS students and expecting financial benefits from participating in entire the program. ERASMUS condition challenges are more associated with the administrative and bureaucratic burden of the program, the choosing of education institutions, or the total duration of the study period abroad. Higher education system compatibility relates to aspects such as the structure of the programs to be studied (if they are flexible enough to incorporate courses completed overseas), academic calendars' compatibility and credit recognition. Personal aspects can also be primary challenges to Erasmus+ participation, which most importantly is the inability to speak and understand a foreign language. Other personal factors, such as having a partner in the home country, duties related to providing care and others may also prevent the students from participating in the program. Lastly, for students to take part in the ERASMUS program, they must be aware of it and receive. enough support from the administrators in terms of Finally, students need to be aware of the ERASMUS program to participate in it and receive support in terms of identifying a suitable education institution or understanding ERASMUS' financial conditions and application procedures very well.

It is also equally important to note that stress and anxiety are other challenges which affect students during the Erasmus+ mobility. Erasmus Network Survey (2022) revealed that Stress and anxiety are among the main pressing issues encountered by students. The survey showed that above five percent of the students reported "experiencing a lot" of issues related to feeling of stress and anxiety. According to Krzaklewska and Skorska (2013), cultural shock is one the reasons which triggers stress and anxiety among the students during their mobility study. In her research she describes cultural shocks in three main dimensions: sociocultural, psychological, and physical. The socio-cultural dimension pertains to a person's interpersonal relationships or social functioning. It entails adopting new social roles in addition to adjusting to altered cultural norms regarding interactions and relationships with others in the host nation. Students frequently encountered difficulties in forming friendships, particularly in Scandinavian nations where the populace is characterized as reserved and shy. However, in "hot cultures," where physical distances are occasionally too close together or where there are disparate norms regarding male-

female relationships, some students report difficulties. Psychological concerns connect to the psychological well-being of a person in the receiving country and an individual's efforts to discover emotion-focused coping strategies which helps to manage emotions resulting from stressful situations, feelings management, and discovering latest means of fulfilling relational needs which includes closeness, support, and trust. For instance, research showed that students feel lonely and do not count on themselves because of unfamiliar people or spaces around. Finally, physical relates to changes in one's psychical well-being linked to the change of climate, time, or programing of schemes of activities such as sleeplessness, fatigue, and problems to do with digestive systems. The study indicated health issues or problems that students experienced while studying abroad which includes stomach issues, diarrhea (which affected a student who studied in Turkey), allergies, and breathing difficulties.

1.12. Summary of Literature

Based on the literature discussed, it was observed that Higher education is becoming more globalized and internationalized, which has made academia's landscape more diverse and interconnected. To achieve this diversity and interconnectedness, student mobility programs have come into play. The most famous mobility program is Erasmus+ which provides students with countless opportunities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, exchange knowledge internationally, and get ready for the challenges of a world that is changing quickly. The interplay of diverse motives and the strength of each determine student's decision and mobility direction. Theoretically, there have been mixed views on whether student's intention to go and study comes from students themselves or undermines the influence of the society and how external factors described in the push-pull theory impact their decision-making. Universities have their own criteria of selecting students to participate in the program and the process remains rigorous and competitive. Due to the high number of applications received every year, only those with higher academic are highly preferred. However, the program has its challenges which students are constantly facing starting from the beginning, during and after the program.

CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the philosophical foundation supporting the study; the research methodology employed in the study; the research design which was embraced and applied in the study; the research institutions and justifications to be chosen; the sampling techniques selection of sample size. This is followed by a discussion on the approaches adopted in the requisite data collection, the type of data, which was collected, and the way in which the collected data was analyzed and presented. The final section in chapter gives the quality measures and ethical considerations utilized in the study.

2.2. Study's philosophical foundation

As cited by Tuli (2010), Cohen et al. (2007) assert that researchers are independently based on world views/paradigms that guide their perceptions of the nature of reality and what they consider to be ultimate knowledge. According to Mack (2010), the combination of ontological and epistemological assumptions forms the foundation of a researcher's paradigm. Bryman (2012) defined paradigm as cluster of beliefs which determines what should be studied by the researchers, how the research should be conducted and the way the results should be interpreted. On the same, Denzin &Lincoln (2005) discussed paradigm as the pivotal point that grips epistemological, ontological, and methodological foundations of a researcher. Considering this view, Ward et al. (2015) argue that when researchers declare their epistemological position, it clarifies their world view and justifies their choice of the methodology which is suitable to the study they are conducting. Additionally, Mertens (2010, p. 469) asserts that paradigms are purposed to brighten researchers' beliefs about ethics, reality, knowledge, and methodology to be adopted. In this study, pragmatist research paradigm was selected as the philosophical foundation of this study. Creswell (2014), Alise and Teddlie (2010) contend that researchers who use a pragmatic paradigm are not tied to any one philosophy or reality in their research activities. My worldview, as seen through a pragmatic lens on ontology and epistemology, shaped the choice of both the research methodology and the research methods adopted in this study. Weber (2004) defined ontology as the study of reality since researchers try to understand what is and what exists to research it particular topic. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) considered ontology as what is thought to be actual or real. It can be clarified that ontology pertains to a person's beliefs and presumptions about the characteristics of social reality or presence, including its definition,

presentation, and nature. However, in principle, ontology is concerned about what we imply when we claim the existence of a particular phenomenon, meaning that *"research state their view on the actual state of things and how they function in their unique systems"* (Scotland, 2010, p. 9). For instance, this study was about finding the students' motive for going to Erasmus+ program and problems they encounter in the process.

In the effort to understand the student's determinants or reasons for participating in the Erasmus+ program and the challenges they face and their response to them, the interpretivist/constructivist ontological assumptions guided the conceptualization of the existence of different motives and challenges of Erasmus+ program faced by students in their respective higher institutions abroad. I maintain the view that students' reasons to participate in the program is linked to what they observe, hear, and expect from the program. On the same, the challenges to be explored are what students really encounter during the whole program. To conceptualize the nature of social reality and put it in context, Mason (2002), cited in Howe (2015) mentioned that the distinct ontological characteristics that international students observe and make interpretations, namely, the people, problem social dynamics and institutions they meet while trying to make sense of their experiences while living in a foreign nation. Given the existence of the differences between the students, their definition of reality is determined by their age, academic exposure, prior social beliefs, and professional interest, and thus, their interpretations cannot be the same, hence instituting the multiple viewpoints and subjectivity in their interpretation.

Tuli (2010) suggests that a constructivist ontology believes that meaning can be created holistically, independently of the researcher and the participants, within a specific context, and that there are multiple, individual, or socially constructed realities. Considering this, the students who took part in research, in response to the survey and the interviews conducted, thought through, processed, considered, and provided the responses on their motives and challenges encountered during the program. Applying the constructive ontological position to the motives and challenges of the students who took part in the survey and the interviews, with their interpretive lens, constructed meaning from their lived experiences. I disagree to the perspective that reality is something that must be physically seen and naturally is it objective, but instead, I subscribe to the perspective that reality is concerned with being constructed socially through personal experiences or individual encounters with different people and the surrounding which they live and make meanings from interacting with each other. Similarly, through the application

of the interpretive lens in the data collection and data analyses, meaning was crafted, as shown in the study's conclusions. The distinction in meaning, as obtained by both students and researchers, corresponds with the assertion by Nicholls (2017) that studies using qualitative methodologies reveal different realities– the methodology adopted in this study. Taking this into consideration, it was acknowledged that the researcher's reality may not always match that of the students participated in the Erasmus+ program. This is in line with Schoonenboom's (2019) theory that sometimes the reality that a study population perceives is different from the reality that the researcher perceives.

Draw attention to the idea of epistemology and define it as the nature of the interaction that is found between the inquirer and the known topic. The stance of epistemology is to analyze how an inquirer knows what he/she declares to know and therefore, it a perspective of how a study researcher finds the knowledge that he/she claims to know about it. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 9). In principle, it looks at the investigator's worldview that shapes the knowledge acquisition process. Likewise, Bryman (2012) asserts that an epistemological stance questions what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in any discipline of research. In this regard, the epistemological stance which was adopted is interpretivist/constructivist. The views of this stance guided the process of acquiring knowledge about students' motives to go for Erasmus+ program and the challenges they encounter in their respective countries of destination, considering the process of application, interviews, and commencement of and finishing of the study. In this case, the knowledge that the students had about the significance of participating in Erasmus+ program and the challenges they faced in the whole process were their knowledge and thus they were in the best position to provide an explanation about it, hence the rationale for using an interpretivist constructivist epistemology. According to this paradigm, an audit of one's level of social connectedness is very necessary to determine what social reality is and how to make sense of the context one lives in. This conforms to the qualitative research framework which emphasizes observing people's interaction and suggest that individuals construct their own knowledge during such interaction, and they also perceive and interpret knowledge differently based on their unique experiences within concerned (Maxwel, 2006). For the purposes of this study, an interpretivist constructivist epistemology was selected and applied for several reasons.

Firstly, this study was aimed to gain an inner view and understanding of student motives and challenges in their natural setting at their institutions of study; secondly, it was to determine the

meaning they had in connection to the social connections they created; thirdly, it was to understand the genuine information within a "real" global environment in different universities abroad, fourthly, it was also an encouragement for student to talk openly as participants in the process of creating knowledge but not as study objects as would have been the case in a strictly quantitative study, and, lastly, to use the right tools and techniques for gathering data in order to fulfil the study's objectives.

2.3 Research Design and its Justification

A research design is a road map for the research study which an interested person would carry with the aim of validating the results or finding of the finished investigation. My understanding of reality and the process of knowledge creation provided credibility to the application of mixed methods and the application of distinguished worldviews and assumptions as well as several approaches to collection of data and its analysis. This study adopted triangulation mixed method, case study approach that systematically combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon. The design was chosen after considering several factors found in the reviewed literature. For example, Bryman (2012) mentions that triangulation implies that the findings of a study using a method associated with the one research strategy are compared or cross-checked with the findings of using a method connected with the other research strategy. According to Kell and Vogl (2008) one of the metaphors applicable to triangulation method is to better understand through complementary findings – a result that could also exist on its own, or to place it in a broader context. Bergman (2008) added that the use triangulation in research helps to validate the results obtained with the individual method. In other words, researcher aims to obtain bigger and valid picture about the research by directly comparing the findings drawn from one method (quantitative or qualitative) to those gotten from another (qualitative or quantitative) for either convergence or divergence (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2017). Silva and Wright (2009) argue that the qualitative interviews are conducted to 'check and correct the quantitative data' and make the survey data more comprehensive and robust.

As mentioned earlier, this study employed case study which is one the empirical approaches to better understand the problem or a phenomenon in their natural environment within constrained time and space (Yin, 1989). Creswell (2014) argues that the case study approach is mostly suitable when an investigator needs to comprehend a particular phenomenon and must

assiduously examine individuals, events, programme actions, process when carrying students' research and when the process of collecting data may be done over a long period. Yin (1989) expands on the idea of a case by conceptualizing it as an action, an occasion, an entity, a person, or an analytical unit. In this study, the unit of analysis or persons are Erasmus+ students and the case of Khazar University. Similarly, Anaf et al. (2007) accentuate that a case study approach is necessary when "an issue or a problem needs to be investigated, and when the is a need to hear voices that have been silenced by talking directly with people". This study on motives and challenges of Erasmus+ students at Khazar University, was designed to understand the students' voices which are unheard, directly engaging with them and get a more profound understanding of their study period.

The relevance of using a case study design was guided by the urge to investigate the real-life reflection of the Erasmus+ program while it also considered that students' opinions on motives and challenges about the programs cannot be the same as it differs from one student to the other. Additionally, the case study research approach was deemed suitable because it provided a chance to use multiple methods of collecting data in to order to get the necessary information from responders with deep information Noor (2008) and adopting the use of open-ended questions to gain a thorough understanding of the research phenomenon (Kumar, 2011). It was also employed because the planned study was an empirical investigation carried out in a natural environment that provided the researcher with a thorough understanding of the subject being studied and given its ability to reveal pertinent activities and problems impacting the lives of those residing in the entity being studied as a case (Noor, 2008). However, I continued to be aware of the criticisms made regarding the case study research approach. For example, as cited Noor (2008), Gummensson (2000) claims that it is not possible to generalize the results when using a case study because it implies less rigor in the research process and ignores reliability issues. However, notwithstanding the criticism, I believed that the There are significant advantages to using a case study when trying to gain a deeper comprehension of a particular contemporary phenomenon. Thus, the benefits of using a case study meant that even with its limitations, it was still applicable in this investigation.

As stated by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), "Numbers do provide precision to words, and words provide meaning to figures." This argument, which is indicative of a mixed-methods study, was found to be pertinent and applicable to the responses offered to the research question and

which expounded the existing knowledge through the findings on student motives and challenges at Khazar University context. The mixed research design was chosen for this study because it was thought to be the most suitable due to its ability to improve the quality of both the research process and the research findings (Briggs et al., 2012, pp. 124–128) and because of capacity to validate or support conclusions drawn from other approaches using data from one study (Molina-Azorín & López-Gamero, 2016). It was justified to use a mixed method because, according to Maree (2014, p. 270), "both numerical and text data" were needed to gain a deeper understanding of the student mobility phenomenon. Both numerical and text data was gathered and thoroughly analyzed in the same study and findings offered a better understanding of motives and challenges of Erasmus+ program at Khazar University in contrast to a scenario in which either purely quantitative or qualitative approaches were applied (Bazeley, 2010).The interaction of various data collection techniques was justified by the study's goal to find comprehensive answers (Siddiqui & Fitzgerald, 2014) in order to find enormous insights into the students reasons for participating in the Erasmus+ program and its challenges it brings. Thus, this justified the use of a mixed methods design in this study. The aim of the study's quantitative components was to ascertain which various motives determines student decision to participate in the Erasmus+ program.

2.4 Study Area and Justification of Choice

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2010), study areas are chosen based on factors relevant to the topic of investigation, such as the type of community, the location of a particular organization, or the provision of a service. This study was carried out in Azerbaijan at Khazar University (Neftchillar Campus), a private university established in 1991 as a case study. Khazar University (KU) was purposively chosen for this study depending on several considerations. Regarding the purposive sampling of the university, I considered argument made by Cohen et al. (2007) that this sampling method is appropriate when the study's focus is on a particular group of people (in this case Erasmus+ students) and no attempt is being made to generalize the results. Regarding the choice of KU for the study, Khazar university send many students abroad through Erasmus+ mobility program and it has made mobility agreements with several universities in other countries, including France, Turkey, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia (Khazar University, 2024). In addition, as per the 2022 QS Emerging Europe & Central Asia University Rankings, KU is the best university in Azerbaijan. It has secured the 16th position

overall in the 'International Faculty' cluster and the 9th position in the region in the 'Citations per Paper' segment and it's also ranked 601-800 by Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2023. Furthermore, KU is my university, and I am more familiar with it which makes me more accessible to the data and network. Therefore, the decision to include KU as a participating case in this study was influenced by a combination of these factors.

2.5 Study Participants and Justification for Selection

Cohen et al. (2007) assert that it is crucial for any scientific investigation that data be gathered from a specific study population. The study is carried out with the voluntary participation of 16 students who took part in the Erasmus+ mobility Exchange Program for at least one semester from 2017 to 2023. Most of the participants, 7 out of 16 are in their third year who have experienced their exchange mobility during 2022-2023 academic year. Students who already took part in the Erasmus+ program were deemed appropriate for the study because they would be able to give the correct answers to the research questions being studied. This was founded on the belief that they have undergone the rigorous application process, and they are done with their studies making them accumulate all the program knowledge about and they would be able to share their opinions and feedback. Similarly, Krzaklewska (2008) mentions that most studies on the student motives involve interviewing them after the exchange, so their reflection can give the needed data. A thorough description of each participant is shown in Table 1 below. It displays the total number of graduate and undergraduate participants. Additionally, each participant's Erasmus+ year, gender, host nation, and city are displayed. Erasmus+ mid-term review (2022) provides further justification for the use of students who have already participated in the program by showing that most students voices are not heard as universities only focus on the positive side of the Erasmus+ program and disregarding the challenges which the students encounter in the whole journey.

2.6. Sampling Technique and Criteria for Selection

As cited in Moser and Korstjens (2018, p. 2), Polit and Beck (2008) posit that sampling is the methodical and careful process of choosing a setting, participants, and a condition that will allow to produce rich data on the topic being studied. Mertens (2007) emphasizes that the method you use to select your sample has an impact on the accuracy of your data and the conclusions you can draw from it. This study employed purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves the selection of units based on specific features or characteristics that facilitate in-depth investigation

and comprehension of the central themes and research question (Bryman, 2012). Canesqui (2010) added that, in a purposive sampling, the members are selected with the intention of covering all relevant major constituencies and achieving some degree of diversity. Khazar university was purposively sampled with the basis of basis of sending of students to different countries through the Erasmus+ mobility program. Despite the occasional criticism that purposive sampling is not representative and that the results cannot be generalized, "Its goal is to obtain comprehensive data from appropriate participants" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 115). In this case, Erasmus+ students were purposively sampled based on the view that they were the right participants who had the information needed to answer the research questions on the motives and challenges of the mobility program. The research used a sequential sampling design, as explained by Creswell (2014) and Briggs et al. (2012). According to this design, a sample of participants for the second phase (a semi-structured interview) was drawn from the online survey's first phase respondents. The study comprised of 16 students who had already finished their Erasmus+ period from different countries. To find the 16 Erasmus+ students, an online survey questionnaire (Google form) was sent to all the email addresses by the Khazar International Office with the quantitative data provided by the first 16 responders who completed and returned the questionnaire needed for the data analysis. Regarding the study's qualitative phase, while determining the sample size using human judgement (Cohen et al., 2007), 7 respondents were found to be appropriate semi-structured interviews were randomly chosen to provide answers that would further the understanding of the research topic were Interviews were conducted only with Erasmus+ students who were convenient to the researcher and completed the entire online and also expressed a desire to take part in the interviews.

2.7. Data Collection Process and Procedures at Khazar University

This section explains the processes I used to conduct the survey at Khazar University. Accordingly, the section discusses how the study's internal arrangements were set up by the university international office, and how I access some Erasmus+ student information was made possible. As suggested by Seidman (2006), a researcher needs to familiarize him/herself with the setting in which the study is to be carried out. For this study, the researcher was already familiar as KU was his university. To obtain necessary information about Erasmus+, a formal email of appointment was issued with the help of the Research Supervisor, through the international office to the Erasmus+ coordinator. After the meeting, the coordinator requested all the research tools to

be checked and approved. After a thorough check, some necessary guidance was given to the researcher for amendments of the tools. The methods mentioned above were helpful in getting Erasmus+ students to participate in the study. The formal appointment with the Erasmus+ coordinator was so fruitful as she provided an estimated number of students whom the researcher should expect to get response from. Verbally, she emphasized that, the researcher should not expect higher number of students as students who already finished their study period were not many. Per Meho's (2006) suggestion, which suggests that sending out personal invitations to participants in web-based research could demonstrate how much they are valued, an email invitation to participate in the study, a synopsis of the study and the link to the survey were sent to every email address of the Erasmus+ student by the coordinator while making a copy for the researcher. For the qualitative data, I randomly requested 8 emails from the coordinator to conduct the interviews with the respondents.

In the summary the topic of the study was indicated, and I was introduced to the study population, then the objective of the study; the study purposes; the main research question; and anticipated implications of the research. As advised by Dawson (2019) about confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants, a statement was highlighted that the survey is completely anonymous, and their participation is voluntary the data collected will not be disclosed directly to third parties or neither will it fall into un-scrupulous hands. Considering the nature of the study design and the research questions, three data collection tools, namely a survey questionnaire which had also qualitative questions and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data and the first qualitative data were collected using the survey questionnaire which was emailed to Erasmus+ students by the international coordinator. Subsequently, second qualitative data was collected using semi structured interviews which corroborated and triangulated the findings from the quantitative data (John W. Creswell, 2014). According to Noor (2008) When multiple data collection methods are used in a case study, the outcomes are of excellent quality, and the conclusions drawn from a single method in the same study may be supported by the conclusions drawn from the alternative method.

2.7.1 Using Survey Questionnaire to collect data for the study

Although I am aware that there are various survey approaches, this study used an online survey to address the research question. Specific to Khazar University, an online survey tool was emailed to 16 students in support of the Erasmus+ coordinator in the international office. The decision to

utilize a survey questionnaire was deemed appropriate because of its benefit. For example, Sugiura et al. (2017) argued that Survey questions yield rich quantitative and qualitative information about the various experiences that people have with the topic at hand, with the data being gathered at a particular time and place. Meho (2006) added that when involving many respondents in various locations and sending the survey to them via personal email, the reduced cost and time efficiency gains are an added benefit. As cited by Behr et. al (2014), using online survey helps to give each respondent a similar set of probing questions and gives them enough time to think through their responses without interference from the researcher.

The study employed a combination of closed- and open-ended questions in the online survey questionnaire to achieve complementarity and deep understanding (Molina-Azorín & López-Gamero, 2016) to solicit Erasmus+ student's opinions and feedback. The purpose of the closed-ended questions, which included both solicited and unsolicited responses, was to quantitatively identify the characteristics of the students. According to Behr et al. (2014), open-ended questions are frequently included in online surveys; however, because answering open-ended questions requires more effort than responding to closed-ended questions, they are more likely to elicit no response. They added that respondents typically hesitate to provide information when investigators introduce new questions. Considering this caution, it was thought necessary to ensure that answering the survey would require the least amount of work possible while still eliciting pertinent, descriptive responses. This led to the design of the survey instrument. Sugiura et al. (2017) points out the things that researchers should think about when organizing their online studies. They specifically highlight the difficulties in ensuring informed consent, privacy, and anonymity in the research methodology in contrast to a study that is not web-based. However, the researcher in this study made a concerted effort to minimize these difficulties by carefully planning during the proposal development phase, and the Erasmus+ coordinator at Khazar University approved the strategies intended to address these difficulties. The study allowed for voluntary participation in the survey and the semi-structured interviews to comply with informed consent. The study's specifics, including the necessity of recording the interviews, were explained prior to the interviews commencing to increase the comprehension and approval of the interviewees. Regarding privacy concerns, in cases where a respondent made a personal inquiry about the survey instrument after receiving it, the response was sent directly to the individual in question, without copying the discussion with the other Erasmus+ students.

2.7.2 Using Semi-structured interview to collect data for the study

During my previous visits to obtain the management's consent or approval of Khazar University to carry out the study, I was successful in getting the emails of students randomly to have interviews with them. The interviews that were conducted for this study were carried out in compliance with the approved study design, which called for the use of a survey instrument to collect both quantitative and qualitative data followed by using semi-structured interviews to gather second qualitative data. The semi-structured interview guide, as suggested by Sal-İlhan and Külekçi (2022) in Turkey was chosen for the study because it was deemed to be appropriate for the situation in Azerbaijan. Only those who accepted the emails sent to participate were interviewed. In this case, only 7 students agreed and were interviewed. There was no formal document signed to this effect because the consent to participate in the study was already indicated in the already sent emails that meant that voluntary participation in the interview. All the respondents' data on the study area was gathered using an interview guide (Annexure B) that was created during the proposal stage and authorized and checked by the researcher's supervisor and Erasmus+ coordinator. Key constructs pertaining to the motives and challenges of Erasmus+ students in relation to the research question under investigation were qualitatively investigated using open-ended questions. In compliance with the study's ethical standards, the participants were apprised of their selection process and their rights and responsibilities. Specifically, regarding their voluntary involvement. The right to discontinue participation in the study at any moment, the option to decline to respond to any question if they wished so, and the assurance that their choice would be honored (Leeson, 2014). Furthermore, Pelzang and Hutchinson (2018) argued that the decision to participate in a study or not is ultimately up to the potential respondent. The respondents' verbal consent to take part in the study was requested in addition to the written emails sent two weeks before the commencement of the interviews. Every interview had a duration of 25 to 30 minutes.

Considering that it is hard to write down everything that is said by the respondents during the interviews (Noor, 2008), consent was sought to record the interview from them to ensure the accuracy of the interactions. Every interview was verbatim recorded. Pelzang and Hutchinson (2018) note that asking respondents for permission to record data may lead to them providing shallow information which does not possess richness and depth. Each of the study objectives was covered by the interview protocol's questions. In broad terms, a series of questions were asked

under the following categories, namely, choice of the Erasmus+ country and university; Erasmus+ document process; personal and social life; challenges faced and their study outcomes. In fact, the online survey that was previously completed had the same questions. But the semi-structured interview format allowed for questions that were meant to elicit more in-depth understanding of each international student's experience (Elliott et al., 2015). Open-ended interview questions were used to encourage and motivate participants to give thoughtful and rich responses (Molina-Azorín & López-Gamero, 2016). Chenail (2014) echoes this opinion by affirming that open-ended questions give makes respondents to be more expansive in their responses. To extract rich information, a lot of probing was used depending on the interviewee's response and the need to clarify any answer that was unclear. According to Mattelmäki (2008), probing is an activity that entails talking with others to gain fresh perspectives, consider their life pursuits and discuss their personal experiences. As a result, before answering questions about experiences that are specific to clarity, the respondents are given a fair amount of time to consider the insightful questions. Thus, the goal of probing is to elicit thoughtful and pertinent responses from the respondent by   encouraging critical thinking and exploring unclear issues. Even though Behr et al. (2014) advise against using too many probing questions during an interview. For a variety of reasons, it was decided that interviews would be appropriate for this study. They gave the chance to learn from the Erasmus+ students own accounts of motives and challenges instead of requiring the researcher to conjure up scenarios; they made sure a more in-depth conversation based on the problems that the investigation revealed; and they enabled the researcher to interact with the respondent in a way that allowed the researcher to clearly grasp the students' lived challenges and their responses to it (Mattelmäki, 2008). The need for interaction between the survey and interview stemmed from the fact that the questions in both were meant to ensure a more thorough examination and to complement each other in answering all the research. This illustrates how the mixed methods approach was used in this study to address the research question. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009)state that since the research approach chosen depends on how the research problem and research questions to be investigated are conceptualized, it is not uncommon for data collection instruments to be integrated during the interview phase of a mixed study.

2.8. Pilot Study

As cited in Leon et al. (2011), Porta (2015) defined a pilot study as a small-scale experiment designed to evaluate the techniques and protocols for gathering data that will be employed in a larger research project. The primary goal of a pilot study is to determine whether a method is feasible to employ in a larger-scale investigation down the road. As such, the researcher conducted the pilot study with the Erasmus+ students who finished their study period and were residing in the same dormitory. The students tried to examine and check the questions whether they were understandable or addressed the issues at hand. A total of 4 students (3 females and 1 male) were included in the pilot study. In response to the feedback and input from Erasmus+ students, several questions were updated, and some elements been added both in the survey and semi-structured interview schedule. All in all, the pilot study was important because it provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the entire process of gathering and analyzing data.

2.9. Data analysis

Data analysis, according to Abdul-Khalid (2009), is the process by which a researcher gives the data they have gathered actual meaning within a predefined theoretical framework, methodology, and context. According to Bazeley (2010), most of the data analysis in mixed methods studies is unclear, still in the trial stage, necessitates using whatever method works best for the researchers, and calls for transparency, flexibility, and creativity.

2.10.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data is characterized by its numerical value, with each piece of data having a distinct numerical value assigned to it (Muijs, 2010). This indicates that mathematical computations can be performed using the data or information. In this case, the process of quantitative data analysis begins with downloading all the responses from the online survey and each Erasmus student is randomly given a unique number, such as R1, R2, and R3. As previously mentioned, the survey's first section consists of some demographic data. Based on the answers provided in this section, a data summary sheet was created. As a result, looking through the participant profiles was made simple. In the surveys the second section included multiple choice, Likert-scale, and rank-order scale questions. All this data was analyzed quantitatively using software such as SPPS and Microsoft Excel. Data was prepared and verified to see if predetermined guidelines were followed in its collection. It was later revised and coded. In a quantitative research study, the

researcher uses SPSS software to analyze the questionnaire data and create tables showing the percentages of respondents who responded to the different questions (John W. Creswell, 2014).

3.10.2. Qualitative data analysis

According to Kumar (2011), qualitative research takes an interpreted and naturalistic approach to the world, attempting to gather a thorough description of the phenomenon in its natural environment and providing a thorough interpretation of human experiences from the viewpoints of the participants. In this instance, the study used a thematic analysis approach to extract meaning from the field data. Bricki and Green (2002) state that thematic analysis is a methodical process that entails going over all the data to find recurring hemes and then determining the overarching theme that unites all the sub-themes found. Following the completion of data collection, I immersed myself in the data to obtain a broad understanding of the issues that emerged from the data, and then I started the process of thematic analysis. Firstly, I read and analyzed the third part of the survey which contains qualitative data and then the analysis of the semi-structured interviews started. I read the transcript of the in-depth interviews several times, listened to the audio recording of the interview's multiple times; and organized concepts that were similar; went through the field notes and recalled the unique experiences that had been exchanged throughout the interview. I annotated each data set and read script in this process, writing notes in the margins that reflected my initial observations, feelings, and ideas about the data. Following these preliminary steps of getting acquainted with the data, I started a procedure that involved analyzing the data critically to pinpoint the initial themes, which offered an overview of the information that had been stated in the data. This procedure that led to the identification came before the process of coding. According to Basit (2003), coding is an essential step in data analysis that's meant to organize and make sense of the textual data in any study that uses a qualitative design. Maree (2014) notes that coding is the act of carefully going over the transcribed data, line by line, and then separating the data into analytically significant units. In line with the definitions of coding provided by Basit (2003) and Leedy et al. (2014), which state that coding entails assigning tags or labels to give meaning to the textual data gathered, codes were created by going through the line by line transcription of the data, division of the data into units, classification of the data, and use of descriptive terms and distinctive identifying names, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. In order quickly identify the meaning behind each individual data set, I extracted data from the original interview script using Microsoft

Word's cut-and-paste function. The extracted data was combined with related data on the same topic to create a common pattern among the data sets.

During the analysis, the focus was placed more on information that was frequently mentioned by the respondents than on unique information provided by specific interviewees that gave their context a deeper meaning but had limited interpretation in relation to the opinions of the majority (Ayres et al., 2003). Themes were created based on information that was repeatedly provided by various interviewees. As the themes started to surface, I continuously compared them to decide whether to link, reject, or leave them alone (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This supported the claim made by Spalding et al. (2010) that themes and patterns had to show up in the field data that was analyzed. The patterns found influenced the themes that served as the foundation for this thesis report's narrative. This was in line with Creswell's (2009) claim that themes are complete informational units made up of multiple codes combined to describe a commonly discussed phenomenon while Mouton (2011) suggests that to validate findings, they should be connected to a relevant theory.

2.11.1 Strategies Used to Guarantee the Validity of the Quantitative Findings

According to Drost (2011), validity is the degree to which the research findings support the intended outcomes of the study. Similarly, Bryman (2012) argued that the validity of research lies in the integrity or consistency of the conclusions that are produced from it. One strategy that was employed to guarantee the validity of the results was the triangulation of data collection techniques, whereby the necessary data was gathered in the study's first phase via an online questionnaire and, in the second phase there were semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The survey questions served as the basis for the questions that were asked during these interviews. The main aim of integrating the data collection techniques was finding similarities and differences in the data sets. This makes sense to validate the results from the preceding stage and to broaden the understanding gained from the various data collection techniques used. As per Molina-Azorin and Lopez-Gamero (2016) perspective, utilizing mixed methods improves comprehension of the research phenomenon. The process of integrating data analysis approaches led to the achievement of validity, enabling the drawing of high-quality conclusions. By making sure the analysis was founded on the approved study design, the researcher bias temptations Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) associated with favoring one technique of analysis were averted during this process. In addition, selecting Erasmus+ students as the best responders to the

study question guaranteed that the inclusion and exclusion standards (check section 3.6. on sampling technique and selection criteria) were for the respondents and disclosed in the online survey's introductory statement, the guidelines were clear and unambiguous, and the terms and inquiries followed the research protocol authorized by the researcher's Supervisor. In a similar vein, the quantitative results were presented in a balanced manner without intentional bias or omission. To address the issue of inadequate knowledge that could compromise the validity of any study (Ihantola & Kihn, 2011) and establish a foundation for improving the quality of the results, I read and analyzed documents and articles extensively to ensure I had a solid foundation in the topic at hand. The previously mentioned factors supported an integrated process that enabled the objective extraction and documentation of unique experiences from the appropriate respondents, ethically carrying out the data analysis, and presenting the specific conclusions and restrictions that the investigation yielded These factors served as the foundation for the assertions made regarding the validity of this research.

3.11.2 Strategies Used to Guarantee the Reliability of the Quantitative Findings

According to Cohen et al. (2007), a research study's output is considered reliable when researchers use the same data collection tools on the same respondent under similar conditions and the findings are consistent with those of the previous study. In theory, consistency in the findings, dependability, and the replication of a study yielding exact and accurate results are all implied by the reliability of research output (Leppink & Pérez-Fuster, 2017). Even though this was not a replication research study, there were intentional steps taken in the methods to guarantee the validity and dependability of the results, for instance I conducted Cronbach alpha test during the pilot study to ensure reliability of the results to be obtained. Tavakol and Dennick (2011) mentioned that the acceptable values of alpha ranges from 0.70 to 0.95. He continued that a low (less than 0.70) inter-relatedness between items, a small number of questions, or heterogeneous constructs could all contribute to a low alpha value. On the other hand, if alpha is too high (more than 0.90) it may indicate that certain items are redundant since they test the same question but in a different guise. But after conducting this reliability test for the questionnaire used, Cronbach alpha was found 0.862 which lies between the recommended values of 0.7 to 0.95. I also made provision of emails sent to the students about the research gave them an introduction to the researcher; and a detailed explanation of how to access the survey questionnaire by clicking on the online survey link.

2.11.3 Quality Measures for the Study's Qualitative Component

In quantitative research, the quality of the research output is determined by the study's validity and rigor; in qualitative research, it is determined by the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Cope, 2014). In a qualitative study, to claim high-quality research output means upholding the principle of trustworthiness at every stage of the research process. According to Maree (2014) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), the findings of a scientific investigation are considered trustworthy if they are credible, transferable (applicable), dependable (consistent), and confirmable. These attributes demonstrate the rigor of the entire research. In their view the assertion that the process was rigorous must be supported by evidence of the application of tactics, such as peer debriefing, extended engagement, attention to negative cases, ongoing observation, audit trails, and member checking. Certain tactics were used in this study to improve the quality of the results in relation to credibility and trustworthiness, as will be covered in the following sections.

2.11.3.1 Strategies Used to Ensure the Trustworthiness of the Findings

Based on the pertinent literature (Cope, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maree, 2014) and an understanding of the significance of generating high-quality results from the research procedures, particular interventions were carried out, which serve as the foundation for the veracity of this study. As recommended in Ihantola and Kihn (2011), the researcher specifically followed all research protocols as well as the previously approved study design and research questions (Lillis, 2006, p. 467). Again, the researcher documented all the decisions taken throughout the study. This was consistent with Morrow's (2005, p. 257) emphasis on "the audit trail's importance in the research process." Furthermore, the investigator guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity during the data collection procedure, and impartially recorded the respondents' experiences as they had been articulated. During the data transcription process all the words by the respondents were recorded in their unaltered form throughout the whole process. The data analysis process involved the use of codes, the extraction of patterns and themes from the raw data, and a detailed account of the research environment. While writing the report, every attempt was made to avoid generalizing and drawing conclusions from a small number of incidents in the data set. Instead, quotes that demonstrated deep, clear, and relevant meaning were used.

2.12 Ethical Considerations

The study's ethical approaches were in line with Meltzoff's (2005, p. 311) claim that moral considerations are relevant at every stage of the research process. As a result, particular

techniques were used prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, during the data collection and analysis phases, and in the findings report. About the strategies used prior to the commencement of the research, the Erasmus+ coordinator approved the research to be conducted and requested my Research proposal and survey link to be checked before starting the data collection. This is in line with line with Maree (2014, p. 44) who suggests that researchers familiarize themselves with the research policies of reputable organizations that supervise the research activities they are involved in. In the quantitative part of the study, the informed consent for the respondents were gotten when emails of the survey and its introductory note were sent to them by the researcher together with the Erasmus+ coordinator. Also, the respondents were told that their participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary and that they would not be negatively impacted in any way if they chose to end the interviews at any time.

Again, the confidentiality principle was used in the study to guarantee participant privacy. In this case, the researcher protected participant privacy and the provided information from loss, theft, alteration, use, and disclosure by unauthorized parties. It was also explained to the respondents that the data they submitted would only be utilized for academic purposes and would assist the researcher in meeting the requirements necessary to award a Master of Arts. Finally, consent from the participants to record the interviews verbatim for the purpose of additional analysis was requested and granted.

2.13. Summary of Chapter

This chapter covered the study's methodological approaches used in this study. It also provided a rationale for the study design selection and described the study's philosophical underpinnings. The chapter also covered the sampling strategies used, the data collection methods and procedures, and how the mixed methods approach had been incorporated into the investigation process. The chapter also included a thorough explanation of the data analysis procedure and the researcher's fieldwork experience. The chapter concluded with a discussion of quality issues and the study's ethical methods. The presentation of the data, along with a discussion, analysis, and interpretation of the results regarding academic experiences, are the main topics of the following chapter.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the responses from both the survey questionnaire that was administered and the semi-structed interviews that were conducted with Erasmus+ students. The aim of the research was answer to the research question "What are motives and challenges of Erasmus+ mobility program". The quantitative findings focused on the descriptive statistics (tables and percentages) to determine the motives and find the influence of each. The analysis illuminated the main motives because students at Khazar University opt for Erasmus+ program. The qualitative data analysis from both questionnaire and semi-structured interviews provides a deeper understanding of the problems which students face during their study period abroad. After transcribed the audios from the interviews, content analysis was conducted to get the codes and categorize the data, identify the main themes and selecting choosing examples to highlight the problems that the participants had on Erasmus+ program.

3.2 Quantitative data

The results of the quantitative data are presented as follows:

3.2.1 Respondents' Characteristics

Table 1. The distribution of respondents (students) by gender, academic year, duration, university/country

Background Information	N	%
Gender		
Female	11	68.8
Male	5	31.3
Academic Year		
2017-2018	3	18.8
2018-2019	1	6.3
2019-2020	1	6.3
2020-2021	1	6.3
2021-2022	4	25
2022-2023	6	37.5
Duration		
1 Semester	16	100
University/Country		
Anadolu University/Turkey	2	12.5
Istanbul Aydin University/Turkey	3	18.8
Manisa Celar Bayar/Turkey	1	6.3

Middle East Technical University/Turkey	2	12.5
Polytechnic University of Braganca/Portugal	1	6.3
Polytechnic University of Turin/Italy	2	12.5
Polytechnic University of Valencia/Spain	1	6.3
Sapienza University/Italy	1	6.3
Tuscia University/Italy	1	6.3
UCAM/Spain	1	6.3
University of Cadiz/Spain	1	6.3
Total	16	100

Data on gender indicated that out of 16 respondents, 11 students were females representing (68.8%) and 5 students were males representing (31.3%) as shown in the Table 1 above. Although a gender-based analysis is outside the scope of this research, it should be mentioned that most of the respondents are females which illustrates the common fate of the Erasmus+ program at Khazar University. The data also showed that 6 students representing (37.5%) went for Erasmus+ program in 2022-2023 academic year, 4 students in 2021-2022 representing (25%) and 3 students in 2017-2018 representing (18.8%). Regarding host university and country, Istanbul Aydin University in Turkey had 3 students representing (18.8%) while Anadolu University in Turkey and Polytechnic University of Turin in Italy had 2 students each representing (12.5%).

3.2.2 Objective 1: Determine students' motives for participating in Erasmus+ programs

This study used Vossensteyn et al (2010) conceptualization of motives which influence students to go for the Erasmus+ program. The first research question of this study aimed at determining the students' motives for participating in the Erasmus+ program. The students were questioned to evaluate the influence of different motives on their decision to go for the program. The question was *"How much did motives influence your decision to go for Erasmus+ program?* The outlined motives were a chance to study abroad, independence/self-sustainability, benefits for future employment in my home country, opportunity to learn/improve foreign language, quality of a host university, opportunity to develop soft skills (adaptability, demonstrating initiative), benefits for my future employment abroad, a chance to experience new learning and teaching practices, a chance to meet new people and to have fun. All the students' responses were elicited through a Likert-scale in the questionnaire.

Table 2: The influence of various motives on student decision for Erasmus+ program

	No influence at all	Little influence	Some influence	Moderate influence	Big influence	Total
chance to study abroad	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100% (16)	100% (16)
Independence/self-sustainability	0.00%	6.3% (1)	25.0% (4)	25.0% (4)	43.8% (7)	100% (16)
Future employment in my country	0.00%	0.00%	31.3% (5)	56.3 (9)	12.5% (2)	100% (16)
Learn/improve foreign language	6.3% (1)	6.3% (1)	25% (4)	31.3% (5)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
Quality of host University	0.00%	0.00%	12.5% (2)	56.3% (9)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
Developing soft skills (adaptability)	0.00%	0.00%	43.8% (7)	18.8% (3)	37.5% (6)	100% (16)
Employment opportunities abroad	0.00%	6.3% (1)	18.8% (3)	43.8% (7)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
Experience new learning practices	0.00%	0.00%	31.3% (5)	37.5% (6)	31.3% (5)	100% (16)
A chance to meet new people	0.00%	0.00%	6.3% (1)	37.5% (6)	56.3% (9)	100% (16)
To have fun	6.3% (1)	0.00%	18.8% (3)	18.8% (3)	56.3% (9)	100% (16)

Likert scale: No influence at all (0), Little influence (1), Some influence (3), Moderate influence (3), Big influence (4)

In this analysis, N=16 participants. It was observed that all 16 respondents (100%) indicated that a chance to study abroad motive gave them a big influence to go for Erasmus+ program while a chance to meet new people and to have fun emerged second with 9 respondents (56.3%) each confirming that these two motives rendered a big influence on their decision for the program. Similarly, 9 out of 16 participants (56.6%) indicates that the motive about future employment in my country moderately influenced them to go for the program, 7 participants (43.8%) showed that developing soft skills (adaptability) had some influence on their decision. However, 1 respondent (6.3%) showed that foreign language had little influence on his/her decision and another 1 respondent (6.3%) indicated that having fun never had any influence at all. Regarding the quality of the host university, 5 respondents (31.3%) indicated that it gave them a big influence while 9 respondents (56.3%) showed that they were influenced moderately and only 2 respondents (12.5%) confirmed some influence from this motive.

3.3. Qualitative data

The results of the qualitative are presented as follows.

3. 3.1 Objective 2: To determine student challenges faced during Erasmus program process.

The second question of this research was meant to determine challenges which the students faced during their Erasmus+ period. The answers to this research question were elicited through an open-ended question in the last part of the survey and semi-structured interviews which were conducted with seven students at Khazar University. The question was formulated as *"Briefly explain any challenges you faced during your Erasmus period (3 preferably or more)".* Considering that practically Erasmus+ process comprises of three phases-before, during and after the programme, a sub-question was asked for the respondents *"During which period (pre, during or post Erasmus) did the students face most challenges?".* The responses to this question were elicited through a multiple-choice question in the questionnaire. The respondents had to choose the period which was more challenging to them. The second sub-question was *"What kinds of challenges which students face during each stage of the Erasmus process?"* which was more deeply understood by the semi-structured interviews.

4.3.1.1 The most challenging period in the Erasmus process

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents and their most challenging Erasmus+ period

The findings reveal that the period before the Erasmus is thought to be the most challenging part of the programme. As seen in Figure 1, most of the respondents, 9 out of 16 (56%), admit that the period before Erasmus was most difficult. 5 respondents out of 16 (31%) state that the during Erasmus phase was challenging to them while 2 respondents out of 16 (13%) indicate post-Erasmus phase which make it least challenging.

3.3.2. The challenges in the pre-Erasmus+ period

The study makes clear that students faced more challenges before Erasmus period (56% respondents). It is, therefore, more crucial to comprehend the kinds of difficulties that students are faced with during this time. Both data from the open-ended question in the survey and the responses from the semi-structured interviews were compiled. Then the data was read, and codes were generated and lastly organized into three major themes. These include paperwork, selecting equivalent courses and preparing the learning agreement, Visa obtaining process and accommodation.

Table 3: Results on the challenges in pre-Erasmus period

	F	%
Paperwork	6	38
Selection of equivalent courses and preparing Learning agreement	4	25
Visa obtaining process	4	25
Finding Accommodation	2	13
Total	16	100

3.3.2.1 Paperwork

Out of the four themes found in the data, "the paperwork" was the most common. This indicates that the pre-Erasmus students have the most trouble with paperwork during that time. Students state that in the pre-Erasmus period, they state that it was more stressful and difficult to prepare, gather, and submit the required documents for applications.

Respondent 1 (Female): *"The application period was too short, and it was too difficult to assemble all the necessary documents".*

Respondent 2 (Male): *"It was really difficult for me to prepare the necessary documents."*

Respondent 3 (Female): *"It was stressful to deal with the paperwork." The paperwork I gathered was as thick as a book. It also took a while to get all the required signatures.*

Respondent 4 (Female): *"Since I was the first student to attend that school, there was no one to assist me while I prepared the agreements and documents.*

3.3.2.2. Selecting equivalent courses and preparing the learning agreement

Selecting equivalent courses and preparing the learning agreement was found to be the second most common theme. Nearly 50% of the respondents said they had experienced challenges in the procedure for choosing a course and creating a learning agreement (LA). Before the Erasmus program, students must confirm their course selections and secure signatures on the Learning Agreement (LA) from the Erasmus coordinators at both their home and host universities. However, recognition and accreditation of these courses at the host university occur after the Erasmus program. During this time, students are encouraged to choose their courses wisely, knowing they will have the chance to modify their selections upon arrival at their host universities by adding or dropping courses as needed.

Respondent 3 (Female): *"I believe that getting enough information about document tracking and course selection was a challenge for me during the application."*

Respondent 5 (Male): "*When preparing the learning agreement, the courses were not yet available at the host institution, requiring me to base my selection on the courses offered in the previous semester. Subsequently, I had to adjust my course selections".*

Respondent 6 (Female): *"After logging to the university course catalogue, I was unbale to understand and make the links with my courses I already studied in my university."*

3.3.2.3 Visa application process

This theme was also mentioned as one of the challenges faced during this period. However, it was mentioned by less respondents, indicating that it was not very challenging.

Respondent 2 (Male): *"The visa procedure proved to be extremely challenging for me. Being my first time applying for a visa, everything seemed overly complex."*

Respondent 7 (Male): "*I received my visa just a day to my flight data. At this time, I was already lost hope if I will go for the program".*

3.3.2.4 Finding accommodation

This was also another common theme, but however, this theme was mentioned by fewer respondents as well.

Respondent 2 (Male): *"It was hard to find the accommodation and fair enough I met my Azerbaijan friends, and I was staying with them for a while."*

Respondent 7 (Male): *"Checking and finding the details of the accommodation on the website was most challenging. Thinking of not having somewhere to stay when I arrived in the city was very stressful".*

3.3.3. The challenges in the during the Erasmus+ phase

As figure 1 indicates, 31% of the respondents indicate this Erasmus phase as more challenging. After the data was examined, the codes were generated, and the major four themes were found to be variations among education systems, language and communication problems, financial difficulties, and culture shock. Although the challenges encountered may differ from one person to another, there are common problems that most students have experienced.

Table 4: Results on the challenges during Erasmus period

	F	%
Variation among education systems	7	44
Language and communication	4	25
Financial difficulties	3	19
Culture Shock	2	13
Total	16	100

3.3.3.1 Variations among education systems

Among the five identified themes from the data, one of the most prevalent was *variations in the education systems*. The common sub-theme emerged was *approach to lesson delivery*.

3.3.3.1.1 Approach to lesson delivery

It was found that many respondents state that the grading systems which they found in the host university were a bit different from Khazar University. This is in terms of work which the students were supposed to do during the lessons. To some students the find it new and hard to cope with it as it was novel to them.

Respondent 2 (Male): *"I struggled because the educational system and the way the lessons were delivered was not the same as what I was used to in my home country. I found it challenging to read the articles that were provided each week because I was not used to doing so".*

Respondent 4 (Female): *"Because of the disparity in the educational system, the school was extremely difficult. I had trouble with the assessment formats, which included an oral exam, a one-hour presentation, and a term paper"*.

Respondent 5 (Female): *"Classes were too difficult than Khazar University. It took me some time to get along with it"*.

3.3.3.2 Language and communication problems

This was the second common theme which emerged from the data. The investigation found that several students experienced language difficulties while on their Erasmus exchange. Specifically, those who were not proficient in the native language of the host country encountered significant hurdles, particularly in instances where English was not commonly spoken or understood by the local populace. This caused a big challenge to communicate with the domestic students and some students felt isolated.

Respondent 1 (Female): *"Language was a challenge for me as I had no knowledge of the native language of the country whatsoever (Italian). This made me difficult to make friends with other people"*.

Respondent 3 (Female): *"Of course, there were additional challenges, such as a foreign environment, culture, language, and people"*.

Respondent 7 (Male): *"At first I had language problem to speak Turkish language and failed to communicate with some of colleagues in the lesson, but later I learned it"*.

3.3.3.3 Financial difficulties

Another prevalent theme which appeared from the data was financial difficulties. The results of the study indicated that some of the students participating in the Erasmus program faced economic challenges despite being recipients of a grant. This finding suggests that the financial support provided through the grant was not always sufficient to cover the expenses associated with their Erasmus experience.

Respondent 4 (Female): *At the beginning I didn't know that it takes time to receive the grant due to many banking process. This made me get my grant very late. I had to call my family to send me money. I would struggle financially if my family was unable to assist.*

Respondent 7 (Male): *"I received my grant 2 months later after I went. I went through some challenges to pay for my rent, student card and travels. All were in Euros as you know Italy is an expensive country. Due to this I spent more money. Therefore, it is essential to save some money before you go apart from the grant"*.

3.3.3.4 Culture Shock

The results showed that some students had problems adjusting to a new culture and other ways of life during their study abroad. The culture of people abroad was new to them and find it a bit difficult to understand and cope with it.

Respondent 2 (Male): *"The lifestyle of students in the University dormitory was shocking to me as girls and boys would visit each other without restrictions which is totally different to my dormitory in my home country. This is in Italy is very normal unlike here"*.

Respondent 3 (Female): *"Their food tasted different with my home country. Although it was kebabs and baklava, it did not sound the same as our country. Although later I just got used to them'*.

3.3.4 The challenges in the post-Erasmus+ phase

although not many respondents (13%) indicate it as less challenging, still other students encountered some challenges during this period. All the respondents were asked to explain in detail what problems did they faced during this phase. In this phase, the prevalent themes which were mentioned are *post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome* and *motivation and engagement*. Table 5 below indicates them and the number of respondents who chose them.

Table 5: Results on the challenges post-Erasmus period

	F	%
Post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome	11	69
Motivation and engagement	5	31
Total	16	100

4.3.4.1 post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome

Some students indicate that they find it difficult to adapt to their school and country life after their study abroad experience.

Respondent 4 (Female): *"After returning, I struggled with adaptation during the initial three months, but eventually, I was able to move forward with my life. The biggest challenge I faced was adapting to my new environment"*.

Respondent 2 (Male): *"After my Erasmus experience, I missed all the food and time I spent in Turkey with my colleagues and Azerbaijan friends, I just wanted to visit it again one day"*.

Respondent 6 (Female): *"When I returned to Spain, I found it challenging to adapt to the environment here."*

3.3.4.2 Motivation and engagement

This was the second major theme which students complained after coming back to Khazar University. After experiencing the excitement and novelty of studying abroad, students find it challenging to re-engage with their studies university which affected their academic performance. However, this challenge also differs from person to person.

Respondent 2 (Male): *"Actually, I did not fail any course, but I just felt demotivated to study here which caused my points to be low and my GPA dropped a little"*.

Respondent 3 (Female): *"I felt like I have just started from the beginning meeting my old friends and have lessons with them. I just wanted to sleep at home and not come for the lessons a little bit"*.

Respondent 7 (Female): *"It took me one month to start my lessons normally, I lacked the motivation to have my lessons here again."*

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the discussions of the findings, suggestions and recommendations, limitations of the study, areas of further research, conclusion, references and bibliography, Appendices and Questionnaire/interview guide that were used in the study.

4.2 Discussion of the Findings

This study was purposed to find out the main motives which compel students to participate in the Erasmus+ programme, as well as the challenges they faced before, during and after the program. The analysis of the data reveals that different factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Erasmus+ programme differently. Teichler (2004) points out that many students lack a predominant motive, and rather they often oscillate between various choices. This means that the students had to be asked the influence of each motive in their decision to go for the program. Similarly, this study asked students to indicate the influence of each motive which was listed and indicate how it compels them to go for Erasmus. The participants confirmed four main motives that gave them a big influence to participate in the program. These motives are chance to go abroad (100%), a chance to meet new people (56.3%), to have fun (56.3%) and gain independence or self-sustainability (43.8%). Regarding a *chance to study abroad*, the findings of the current study confirms other previous studies conducted by various researchers (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021; Krzaklewska, 2008; Souto-Otero et al., 2019; Vossensteyn et al., 2010). All these studies indicated that a chance to study abroad was the main motive which compels students to participate in the program. For instance, a mass study by Vossensteyn et,al (2010) found a chance to study abroad (90%) and an opportunity to meet new people (90%) as their main motives to participate in the program. In the same vein, the research conducted by Souto-Otero et al (2019) revealed 70% of the participants chose the opportunity to study abroad as their main motive to take part in the program. Speaking of a *chance to meet new people*, the participants in Krzaklewska's (2008) study highly valued meeting new people (90%) and having fun (75%) motives as very important to them. She argued that this could be because Erasmus students view "academic learning" as encompassing the entire experience rather than just the traditionally understood academic portion of their stay. Likewise, Varela et al. (2019) found a chance to meet new people as one of the common motives among the participants (80%). When it comes to *gaining independence or self-sustainability*, the study revealed that it did not give a big influence for the students to participate. This result is consistent with those of Krzaklewska

(2008) who found motive 'to be independent' with a lowest score (60%). She argued that one reason could be that it was primarily a consequence of studying abroad (a "resultant component"), and while mentioned in narratives, students did not specifically choose it as a main motive for going abroad. However, contrary to the findings of (Holicza & Tóth, 2018; Kayaoglu, 2016; Varela et al., 2019) citing learning or improving a foreign language as one of the top four motives which compels to go for Erasmus, the current study found that though it was among the listed motives, students considered it not giving a big influence on them. Correspondingly, the study conducted by Jung (2020) on the impact and experience of foreign languages in the Erasmus context showed that many participants in the study expressed worries about the feasibility of mastering the language, citing time constraints and the distinctive nature of language acquisition compared to other learning endeavors. They pinpointed the need for continuous dedication and effort over an extended period as the major hurdle. Again, the research by Olmos (2010) considered improving or learning foreign language as a demotivator in all 77.8% studied cases and as a stimulator in 68.8%. He asserts that the selection process for Erasmus applicants impedes the mobility of individuals with limited language proficiency.

Based on the assertions of Souto-Otero et al. (2019) that, even though every new Erasmus evaluation study shows notable progress, certain issues still exist, and challenges continue to rise which need to be explored and resolved. The current study results also indicated that participants encountered diverse challenges before, during, and after the Erasmus process. Over 56.8% of the participants viewed "the pre-Erasmus process" as the most challenging period. These results agree with Önen's (2017) study findings which showed that many participants deemed pre-Erasmus as the most challenging period. Previous studies (Endes, 2015; Nada et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2020) also indicated that students faced a diverse array of challenges during their Erasmus programme. These findings suggest that, because there are numerous factors to consider during each period, participants in the Erasmus programme must be prepared for a drawn-out and difficult process. The current study validated the findings of previous research by demonstrating that *paperwork* in the pre-Erasmus period was a significant obstacle prior to Erasmus mobility. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) also added that even prior to starting their mobility, students may encounter various difficulties. Similarly, Önen argued that preparing and submitting the necessary paperwork for the applications is an extremely stressful process for the students which makes the pre-Erasmus period more challenging to them. For instance, preparing a convincing Curriculum vitae, filling application form, delays or errors in the paperwork and gathering all the necessary

paperwork within the given timeframe. Therefore, navigating these requirements can be overwhelming, especially for students who are unfamiliar with preparing them or it is their first time doing it. Selecting an equivalent course to be taken at the University presents the second biggest challenge. These findings concur with Diaz (2017) who argued that the primary challenge lies in the course selection process that students undertake to construct the study plan they wish to pursue while studying abroad. She continued that this selection requires approval for the Learning Agreement and administrators must thoroughly check them so that they might be properly signed and ratified. This is because most students eventually find themselves in a position where they must make changes to the previously approved Learning Agreement. Thirdly, students have visa obtaining process. Students complained of not receiving enough support from the university as well as receiving the visa late. This result is corroborated by the study of Kavilanzi (2018) who investigated predeparture challenges encountered by Erasmus students in India. His study pointed out the visa obtaining process as so rigorous and intense to them. In another study by Önen (2017) who investigated students from 3 countries (Spain, Germany, Poland) found visa process challenges emerged as the most troubling to many students. Finally, accommodation was found to be the least challenge faced by the students in this period contrary to the report of Bracht et al. (2006) which indicated accommodation on the first among the list of most common challenges. Similarly, Nielsen's (2020) makes mention of accommodations as a challenge and explained that due to time and financial constraints, some students may go to the Erasmus without any knowledge about where they will settle. These students voiced their stress regarding the situation and shared their experiences of living in temporary accommodations such as hotels or hostels, which proved to be a challenging experience.

During the Erasmus period, the most challenging issue was variations in the education systems between the home and host universities. In particular, the differences in teaching methods, course requirements, and grading systems pose challenges for most students. Due to differences in the education system, the study by Marinescu et al. (2022) found that many students faced difficulties in adapting to both universities working style and its teaching methods. Conversely, our research findings regarding differences challenges due to differences in education systems faced during the Erasmus mobility differ from Engel's (2010) study, where participants seldom reported encountering such difficulties during their Erasmus mobility. Furthermore, most students who are not proficient in the native language spoken in the host country experience language barriers. The findings of the current study validate the results of the many previous studies

including (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Önen, 2017; Sal İlhan & Külekçi, 2022) in which language and communication was found as the enormous challenges for the students. For instance, Khanal and Gaulee (2019) argued language and communication as the common challenge in the post-departure time as it dwindles social interaction and academic progress of the students. Comprehending lectures, engaging in discussions, and presenting ideas can be challenging for students when English or another foreign language is not their primary language. Equally, for students who were entirely unfamiliar with the local language, they expressed a sense of disconnection from their usual selves but continued to persevere despite feeling uncomfortable Nielsen (2020). Students confirmed facing financial difficulties during their Erasmus period. Despite receiving a monthly grant and spending it wisely, the students found that the amount they received was insufficient to cover all their expenses. Souto-Otero et al. (2013), Khanal & Gaulee (2019) and Nada et al. (2023) are some of the studies highlighting the fact that the most common issues faced by Erasmus students are financial ones. Millions of Erasmus Grants (MEGA) report (2013) revealed that many students felt that their grant did not offer adequate financial support for the initial expenses of their study abroad experience. The report also indicated that a significant number of students encountered delays in receiving their grants, with several waiting for up to two months or longer. Additionally, in certain instances, the grant amount proved insufficient to meet early expenses, resulting in financial challenges for the students. Consequently, some students had to depend on personal savings or assistance from their parents to manage the initial costs. Finally, the current mentions culture shock as another challenge faced by the students. The primary challenge that every international student must confront after departing is culture shock. Nur and Suhria (2021) admit that there is always a problem that shows up when people go abroad, and it is culture shock. The unfamiliar local environment and interactions often evoke feelings of discomfort, frustration, and confusion (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Onen (2017) also indicated culture shock as one of the pressing challenges during this period. The study also agrees with Ernofalina (2017) who argued that exchange students undergo culture shock at different stages, including initial euphoria, disorientation, adjustment, acceptance, and integration, experiencing varying levels of each.

During post-Erasmus phase, students confirmed meeting some challenges. While the participants did not face as many challenges as they did before and during the mobility period, most of them still experienced "post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome". Sal-İlhan and Külekçi (2022) describe this challenge as an issue which students face in readjusting to their school and previous lifestyle

in their home country. The study conducted by Onen (2017) validates the results of this research by asserting that many students had this syndrome after finishing their Erasmus study. He argued that when they come back to their universities, some students struggle to adapt to the lessons, teaching methodologies, and exams. Similarly, Le and LaCosta (2017) study on the Vietnamese international students who finished their studies in the US and returned to the home country showed that, they had difficulties in readjusting despite having lived in Vietnam for most of their lives. Lastly, motivation and engagement were also another challenge encountered in the post-Erasmus period. As previous studies have suggested, returning to their home university after experiencing a different academic and cultural environment during Erasmus can lead to a sense of disconnection or dissatisfaction. Some students might also feel demotivated if they contrast their Erasmus experience—which may have been more thrilling and dynamic—with their regular university schedule (Zerman, 2014).

4.3 Suggestions and recommendations

Drawing from the research findings, the following recommendations can be suggested:

- As found that more students want to go for Erasmus program as their chance to study abroad, so they must be encouraged to participate in the program, and they fulfil their dream of study overseas. Provide specific examples and success stories to illustrate the value of international education.

- Engage programs and in promoting study abroad opportunities by incorporating international perspectives into their courses, encouraging student participation in study abroad programs, and serving as mentors for students interested in pursuing international experiences.

- Conducting Information Sessions which will offer deep information to different student groups, addressing their specific interests, concerns, and academic goals. Provide information on various study abroad program options, destinations, and financial support opportunities.

- As the study has also revealed the challenges, the Erasmus offices should organize orientation programs prior to students' departure abroad. These sessions aim to raise awareness about potential challenges students may face before, during, and after their Erasmus experience, and provide them with strategies to effectively address and overcome these obstacles.

- On the culture shock the orientation programs should also encompass topics aimed at fostering intercultural awareness and competency among students. Again, create student mentors (buddy) who have been to the partner university previously and connect them to the student who have sent to the same country and assist him/her to solve practical and administrative problems.

- Most participants in the study expressed dissatisfaction with the adequacy of the monthly grant provided, suggesting a need for a review of the grant amount to a sufficient level.

4.4. Limitations of the study

This study's scope is restricted to 16 students from Khazar University who completed their Erasmus period abroad. This sample is sample and therefore, it cannot be extrapolated or generalized to encompass all Azerbaijani students who have finished their Erasmus period. Again, the study predominantly comprises female participants, thereby mainly reflecting the challenges experienced by female students. The motives and challenges faced might be different with men.

4.5 Areas for Further Research

- Examine whether there are disparities between male and female students regarding their motives for participating in Erasmus programs and the challenges they face during mobility programs.

- Furthermore, to obtain an alternative viewpoint on the matter, the Erasmus motives and challenges can be analyzed from the perspective of students who arrived at Khazar University as part of the Erasmus program.

- To evaluate whether the motives and challenges experienced during the Erasmus program vary based on partner Universities, a comparison between Khazar University and another Azerbaijani university, can be conducted.

4.6 Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to analyze the main motives which compel students to participate in the Erasmus program and challenges which they encounter in the before, during and after the program. The study specifically targeted students from Khazar University who have finished their Erasmus period and have returned home. The four prominent motives which were found are a chance to study abroad, a chance to meet new people, to have fun and to gain independence or

self-sustainability in that order. The study also revealed that the most challenging period for many students is before Erasmus and seconded by during the program abroad. In the pre-Erasmus period, the students are stressed with paperwork, selecting equivalent course, and preparing learning agreement, visa obtaining process and finding accommodation. During Erasmus period, the students encounter challenges like variations in education systems, financial difficulties, and culture shock. Finally, when the students finish their study period, they are troubled with post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome and motivation and engagement in the home universities.

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APPEDIX

Survey Questionnaire Instrument

Motives and challenges of Erasmus+ student mobility program

MOTIVES AND CHALENGES OF ERASMUS+ STUDENT MOBILITY PROGRAM:
A CASE OF KHAZAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Dear responder,

I am Hamza Muhammad Chirwa, a Master student at KhazarUniversity. I would like to ask you for some information for my research study about your motives and challenges of Erasmus+ mobility program. In my study I would like to receive responses to the question of what motives you had to apply for Erasmus+ and challenges you faced during the program. The lling out of this survey is completely anonymous and voluntary, it takes about 10 minutes. The responses will be summarized, and I will draw the conclusions.

* Indicates required question

Informed Consent

1.   Do you wish to participate? *

            Mark only one oval.

            Yes   Yes   *Skip to question 2*

            No   No   *Skip to section 2 (Declined Participation)*

Declined Participation

You have declined to participate in the survey. Thank you for your time. You may close the browser or click submit button below.

Demographic Questions

2. **Gender** *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯   Male

   ◯   Female

   3.   **Academic year of Erasmus+ mobility** * *Mark only one oval.*

   ◯   2017-2018

   ◯   2018-2019

   ◯   2019-2020

   ◯   2020-2021

   ◯   2021-2022

   ◯   2022-2023

4. **Duration** *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯   1 semester

   ◯   1 year

5. **Receiving Institution** *

   _____

6. **Host country** *

   _____

7. **What is the level of your parent's education?** *

○   No school completed

○   High school

○   Bachelor Degree

○   Master Degree

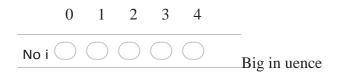○   Doctorate Degree

Motives for Erasmus+ program

8. **What was your main reason to go for Erasmus+ program? ***

     Mark only one oval.

○   A chance to study abroad.

○   Independence, self-sustainability

○   Bene ts for my future employment opportunities in my home country

○   Opportunity to learn/improve a foreign language.

○   Quality of the host university

○   Opportunity to develop soft skills i.e. adaptability, demonstrating initiative.

○   Bene ts for my future employment opportunities abroad

○   A chance to experience new learning and teaching practices.

○   A chance to meet new people.

○   To have fun

○   Others

9. **How much did motives influenced your decision to go for Erasmus+ program?**

Mark only one oval.

         0   1   2   3   4

No i ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   Big in uence

Scoring Scale
0 = No infleuence at all
1 = Little influence
2 = Some influence
3 = Moderate influence
4 = Big influence

10.   1. A chance to study abroad *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Big influence

11.   2. Independence, self-sustainability *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Big influence

12.   3. Benefits for my future employment opportunities in my home country *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Big influence

13.   4. Opportunity to learn/improve a foreign language *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	○	○	○	○	○	Big influence

14.   5. Quality of the host university *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	○	○	○	○	○	Big influence

15.   6. Opportunity to develop soft skills i.e. adaptability, demonstrating initiative *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	○	○	○	○	○	Big influence

16.   7. Benefits for my future employment opportunities abroad *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	○	○	○	○	○	Big influence

17.   8. A chance to experience new learning and teaching practices *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Big influence

18.   9. A chance to meet new people *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Big influence

19.   10. To have fun *

Mark only one oval.

	0	1	2	3	4	
No i	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Big influence

Challenges during Erasmus+ program

Feel free to mention any problem you encountered.

20.   1. Briefly explain any challenges you faced during your Erasmus period. (*3 * preferably or more*)

_____

_____

2. Which period was more challenging for you? ((pre-Erasmus, during the * Erasmus, and post-Erasmus) *Mark only one oval.* pre-Erasmus during Erasmus post-Erasmus

○

○ 21.   4. If you haven't faced any challenges, please specify.

○

Google Forms

Interview Schedule

Interview Questions

Under the direction of Khazar University Master candidate Hamza Chirwa, this is the first in depth study on Erasmus+ students at Khazar. The information gathered for the study is expected to advance our comprehension of the motives and challenges experiences of the Erasmus+ student mobility program and meet the needs of current and upcoming Erasmus+ programs.

You were identified as an Erasmus+ student, and as such, you have been invited to take part in the study. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and will remain completely anonymous. You are free to withdraw from participation in this project at any moment, and if you choose to do so, be aware that doing so won't impact your standing or connection to the university.

It will take about thirty to 30 to 40 minutes to finish this interview. Would you like to participate? Do I have permission to record this interview?

Challenges in the home country (Before)

1. What were some initial challenges you faced upon being accepted into the Erasmus program?

2. What were some of the challenges you faced in the application process for the Erasmus program?

3. Can you describe any concerns or apprehensions you had before applying for the Erasmus program?

4. Can you elaborate on any logistical or administrative hurdles you encountered while preparing for your Erasmus exchange?

5. What were some of the academic challenges or uncertainties you faced regarding course selection or credit transfer before starting your Erasmus exchange?

6. Can you describe any pre-departure anxieties or fears you experienced before embarking on your Erasmus journey?

7. What were some of the personal or social challenges you faced in preparing to leave for your Erasmus exchange?

Challenges in the Host University (During)

8. How did you navigate any language barriers or communication challenges during your time abroad on the Erasmus program?

9. What were some of the cultural differences or cultural shocks you experienced during your Erasmus exchange, and how did you handle them?

10. How did you cope with any homesickness or feelings of isolation during your time abroad on the Erasmus program?

11. Did you face any academic challenges or differences in teaching styles between your home institution and the host institution during your Erasmus exchange?

12. Can you describe any social or interpersonal challenges you faced while integrating into the host country's community or interacting with other Erasmus students?

13. How did you cope with any homesickness or feelings of isolation during your time abroad on the Erasmus program?

14. Were there any financial challenges or budgeting difficulties you encountered during your Erasmus exchange, and how did you manage them?

Challenges in the home country (After)

15. Can you describe any challenges you faced upon returning to your home university after completing your Erasmus exchange?
16. How did you find the transit program to your home university environment after your time abroad on the Erasmus program?
17. Can you elaborate on any difficulties you encountered in readjusting to the teaching methods or academic expectations at your home university?
18. What were some of the challenges you faced in reconnecting with your peers or integrating back into the academic community at your home university?
19. Did you experience any challenges in transferring credits or integrating the coursework you completed during your Erasmus exchange into your academic program at your home university?
20. Can you describe any feelings of reverse culture shock or differences in perspective that you experienced upon returning to your home country and university after your Erasmus exchange?
21. How did you cope with any feelings of nostalgia or longing for your Erasmus experience while back at your home university?
22. Were there any challenges you faced in maintaining the friendships or connections you made during your Erasmus exchange once you returned to your home university?

Declaration

I, Hamza Muhammad Chirwa, affirm that the thesis titled "Motives and challenges of Erasmus+ student mobility program: A Case of Khazar University students" is solely my original work. It has not been previously submitted, either in part or in full, for evaluation at any other university for the purpose of obtaining any degree. Furthermore, I acknowledge and properly attribute all scholarly sources consulted and cited within this work.

Hamza Muhammad Chirwa

Date:

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to the loving memory of my late parents, Marriam Amimu and Muhammad Ameer. Their unwavering support and encouragement have brought me to this point. May Allah bless and illuminate their graves perpetually.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the numerous individuals who have supported me on my academic journey and enabled me to reach this milestone.

First and foremost, I express my gratitude to the Almighty Allah for His kindness in safeguarding me throughout my studies at Khazar University and for granting me the privilege of being a recipient of the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA) Scholarship.

I extend heartfelt appreciation to my research supervisor, Dr. Goshgar Maharramov, for his professional yet approachable guidance throughout this research endeavor. The insights and support provided by Mr. Javid Jafarov during the Research Method Course significantly enhanced the quality of my research.

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Likewise, I wish to acknowledge all my teachers at Khazar University for their dedication in imparting knowledge across various courses since my first year. Their efforts have made a lasting impact and will be remembered with gratitude today, tomorrow, and always.

Abstract

One significant development in educational mobility is the emergence of the Erasmus+ programme, which has facilitated study experiences abroad for many students, including those from Azerbaijan. Consequently, it is crucial to understand the primary reasons behind students' decision to participate in the program and the urgent pressing issues they come across while pursuing it. In the same vein, this mixed research study investigates the motives and challenges of Erasmus+ students at Khazar University. The results showed that the main motives for the program are: a chance to study abroad, a chance to meet new people, to have fun and to gain independence or self-sustainability. On the other hand, the students perceived the pre-Erasmus period as the most challenging. The most daunting challenge for students in this period is paperwork. However, the major hurdles during the Erasmus program include variations in education systems, financial constraints, and culture shock. Following the Erasmus period, most students face what can be described as "post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome."

Keywords: *Erasmus+ motives, Erasmus+ challenges, student mobility, Internalization, Post-Erasmus adjustment syndrome,*

List of Abbreviations

KU   Khazar University

ERASMUS   European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

ESN   Erasmus+ student Network

EU   European Union

GDP   Gross Domestic Product

OECD   Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

UNEC   Azerbaijan University of Economics

IPB   Polytechnic Institute of Braganca

AIDA   Azerbaijan International and Development Agency

CALIMERA   Culture Applications: Local Institutions Mediating Electronic Access

UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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