

Emancipation or Instrumentalisation in Erasmus+ Mobility: A Literature Review

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European education tools and policies show growing social concerns for inclusion while embracing standardised approaches that may put diversity at risk. The Erasmus+ programme is a tool that aims for cultural awareness and European citizenship while promoting a linkage with the needs of the globalised labour market, starting with the higher education field. Given the programme's expansion to other education fields, namely school education, adult education, and vocational education and training, it remains uncertain how such an extension influences scientific research about Erasmus+ mobility and the relative position assumed therein by each field. Taking emancipatory and instrumental perspectives as a reference, the present study aimed to ascertain which concepts drive the published research about Erasmus+ mobility, mapping their position in the different education fields embraced by the programme. To do so, a literature review was conducted covering articles published between 2014 and 2022. The data analysed through content analysis showed that concepts driving emancipatory and instrumental perspectives are present in the selected articles, although approaches that are not directly linkable to either perspective prevail. The data also show that higher education remains the hegemonic field in Erasmus+ mobility research, indicating that studies focused on the programme's effects occur mainly in this education field. These findings highlight the importance of in-depth knowledge about the programme's effects on school education, adult education, and vocational education and training.

Keywords: literature review, Erasmus mobility, emancipatory education, Europeanisation

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Emancipacija ali instrumentalizacija v mobilnosti Erasmus+: pregled literature

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Evropska izobraževalna orodja in politike kažejo vse večjo družbeno skrb za inkluzijo, hkrati pa sprejemajo standardizirane pristope, ki lahko ogrozijo raznolikost. Program Erasmus+ je orodje, ki si prizadeva za kulturno ozaveščenost in evropsko državljanstvo ter hkrati spodbuja povezavo s potrebami globaliziranega trga dela, začevši s področjem visokošolskega izobraževanja. Glede na razširitev programa na druga področja izobraževanja, in sicer šolsko izobraževanje, izobraževanje odraslih ter poklicno izobraževanje in usposabljanje, še vedno ni jasno, kako takšna razširitev vpliva na znanstvene raziskave o mobilnosti Erasmus+ in na relativni položaj, ki ga na njih zavzemajo posamezna področja. Namen te študije je bil na podlagi emancipatorne in instrumentalne perspektive ugotoviti, kateri koncepti spodbujajo objavljene raziskave o mobilnosti Erasmus+, in opredeliti njihov položaj na različnih področjih izobraževanja, ki jih zajema program. V ta namen je bil opravljen pregled literature, ki je zajemal članke, objavljene med letoma 2014 in 2022. Podatki, analizirani z vsebinsko analizo, so pokazali, da so v izbranih člankih prisotni koncepti, ki spodbujajo emancipatorno in instrumentalno perspektivo, čeprav prevladujejo pristopi, ki jih ni mogoče neposredno povezati z nobeno izmed perspektiv. Podatki tudi kažejo, da visoko šolstvo ostaja prevladujoče področje v raziskavah mobilnosti Erasmus+ in da se torej študije, osredinjene na učinke programa, izvajajo predvsem na tem področju izobraževanja. Te ugotovitve poudarjajo pomembnost poglobljenega znanja o učinkih programa na šolsko izobraževanje, izobraževanje odraslih ter na poklicno izobraževanje in usposabljanje.

Ključne besede: pregled literature, mobilnost Erasmus, emancipatorno izobraževanje, evropeizacija

Introduction

After nearly three decades devoted to promoting international student mobility, and after having engaged millions of students in mobility activities, it is important to know the effects of the Erasmus programme. Since 2014, this programme has adopted the designation Erasmus+ (E+) and implemented a framework that has expanded its most successful features to additional education fields. Beyond higher education, adding the “+” symbol to the programme name rendered it an extended framework in terms of conceptualisation, operationalisation possibilities and the domains covered.

Among other distinguishing features of the programme’s funding cycle initiated in 2014, compared to previous funding cycles, it underwent a transition to encompass four fields of education and training within a single instrument – higher education, school education, adult education, and vocational education and training (VET) – as well as incorporating the cross-cutting domains of youth and sports. Through these reforms, the foundational role of the programme as an instrument of Europeanisation in education has been fortified, while it also serves as a reference for an amplified connection between education and the labour market (European Commission, 2021).

Being the major European tool promoting and funding the international mobility of youngsters, E+ actively promotes intercultural encounters within an enlarged region of more than 30 countries, encompassing dozens of languages and different cultural habits. Based on two premises of the programme – intercultural promotion and the connection between education and the labour market – two perspectives of education are derived and used in the present study. On the one hand, it is through the emancipatory perspective that individuals are empowered as full members of society, become aware of their rights and duties, and consolidate their human dignity on equal terms (Habermas, 2012). In a society of individuals (Elias, 2001), such emancipation implies interaction and social interdependence as promoters of social justice (Fleurbaey, 2020). The present study brings *soft skills*, *digital literacy*, and *active and European citizenship* into the emancipatory perspective. On the other hand, it is through the instrumental perspective that individuals are *instructed* to comply with labour market requirements in order to succeed in professional settings within a globalised world (Habets et al., 2020; Winchester & Bailey, 2012). This study brings *hard skills*, *the labour market* and *Europeanisation tools and policies* into the instrumental perspective. The Europeanisation of education (Lawn & Grek, 2012) relies on the process of standardisation inherent to the European Union’s common policies in education, reconfiguring approaches, curricula, pedagogies

and professional identities, of which the Bologna Process in higher education is a powerful example (The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, 1999; Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004; Symeonidis, 2018).

Concerning the labour market's relationship with education, the strongest link between the four education fields of E+ is given by *vocational education and training*. Its goals and outcomes rely on the connection between education and the labour market, either at initial or continuing VET. Initial VET (iVET) commonly occurs in articulation with secondary school systems, aiming to provide *students* with an initial qualification for a given occupation before they start their working life. Continuing VET (cVET) typically occurs during professional life, aiming to upskill *workers* and promote their professional development (Cedefop, 2023). An example of iVET is the case of vocational education courses applied in the school system, leading to double certification: a school diploma *and* a professional qualification. This happens in some countries, such as Portugal (Cedefop, 2021b) and Germany (Peters, 2021), with the aim of facilitating the transition from school to work. An example of cVET is the case of workers attending a VET course to improve their professional performance, or unemployed people attending a VET course to acquire new skills to increase their employment possibilities (Mara et al., 2022).

In initial VET, mainly targeting youngsters of upper secondary or post-secondary school aged around 15–18 years, this direct relationship might overshadow other results, particularly those related to the role of education as a catalyst for social mobility and social justice (Apple, 2012; Belavi & Murillo, 2016; Biesta, 2017; Fritsch & Leite, 2019; Gutmann, 1999; Leite & Sampaio, 2020; Sampaio & Leite, 2021), feeding an emancipatory perspective that goes beyond mere market-driven instrumentalisation (González-Faraco et al., 2019). This framework creates the need for in-depth knowledge about the effects of E+ in the VET field, particularly related to promoting individual and social dimensions able to drive the emancipatory perspective (Avis, 2018).

Studies show that *adult education* involves an emancipatory (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021) and an instrumental perspective (Ioannou, 2023). However, while following aims of equal opportunities for adults lacking basic education and supporting socioeconomic mobility, the tendency of adult education is mainly emancipatory, as revealed by the Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021–2030 (Council of the European Union, 2021). The priority areas of the agenda evidence this tendency by focusing on emancipatory dimensions, inferred from their “special attention on vulnerable groups”, “quality, equity, inclusion and success”, and “green and digital transitions” (priority areas numbers 3, 4 and 5).

The *school education* field, particularly in its goal of universal access to school and quality education for all children, as declared in Sustainable Development Goal Number 4 (United Nations, 2015), also embraces a prior emancipatory perspective following the aims of equity and inclusion.

Higher education is mainly connected to the emancipatory perspective, not only supporting the maintenance of sociocultural and economic elites (Ball et al., 2006; Bourdieu, 1984), as the aspirations of upward social mobility of underprivileged classes and individuals (Gale & Parker, 2015).

The focus of the present study is ascertaining which concepts prevail in the published research about E+ mobility, mapping tendencies in the four education fields outlined above, and determining the relevance of each field within E+ mobility-related research. The emancipatory trend is anchored in the programme's priorities defined for the period 2021–2027: “inclusion and diversity”, “digital transformation”, and “participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement” (European Commission, 2021). Simultaneously, an instrumental dimension is found within the perspective of the Europeanisation of education, of which the programme is a cornerstone, as well as in the focus on and mobilisation of the needs of the labour market.

The present article has five sections. A theoretical framework follows this introductory section, outlining the authors' main concepts and theoretical lines. The third section describes the methodological approach and steps, followed by a presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, the concluding section focuses on the main outcomes and suggests further research.

Theoretical framework

In August 2023, the Fifth Newsletter of the European School Education Platform celebrated the European Year of Skills (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2023) by stating the importance of skilled and prepared young professionals, especially when facing digital and green transitions. The document pointed to the relevance of VET and its teachers in moving towards inclusive education, ensuring that students from disadvantageous contexts and backgrounds are included, while stressing the importance of apprenticeships and work-based learning to achieve this goal. This approach is particularly interesting because it included several aspects and priorities of the E+ programme presented in simple and short information that was widely disseminated. While consolidating a prior turning point of higher education in 2014 exclusivity under the “Erasmus” umbrella, it aligned VET with concepts appealing to an emancipatory dimension beyond its inherent instrumental

perspectives, which are also present, driven by the labour market's needs.

Soft skills, digital literacy and active citizenship

The “skills” dimension brings immediate concerns, as it feeds divisive debates, namely the divide between “knowledge and skills” (Costa & Couvaneiro, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2022; Young, 2015) and the divide between “hard and soft” skills (Lamri & Lubart, 2023) and their corresponding role in education. This assumes particular relevance when equated and conceptualised within the two different perspectives: emancipatory and instrumental. Whereas hard skills, or technical skills, are more consensually allocated to the instrumental perspective of knowledge and its formal application in a work-based context, *soft skills* are more challenging to define both in conceptual (Matteson et al., 2016) and teleological terms (Pinto et al., 2023; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Tsirkas et al., 2020). Given their characterisation as “skills”, which implies the operationalisation of given knowledge, soft skills are often taken to conform to the ambitions of the labour market: “Soft skills help learners to become more employable and give them more chances to succeed in different competitive situations” (Elmoutanna & Motii, 2022), in this sense becoming “instrumental”. Many studies consider soft skills an increasingly necessary condition for good professional performance (Aryani et al., 2021; Cimatti, 2016; Meeks, 2017).

While not undermining their value to the labour market, the present study proposes allocating soft skills to what we consider to be a wider dimension simultaneously active upstream and downstream of the labour market's instrumental perspective: emancipation. While implying economic independence – for instance, when referring to the emancipation of women, Sen (2000, p. 181) points out two conditions, “literacy” and “employment”, the latter implying financial subsistence – emancipation also implies autonomy. Indeed, notions such as “autonomy”, “critical thinking”, “creativity” and “empathy”, among other soft skills, are decisive in the construction and experience of freedom and self-determination, a theory that intertwines autonomy with relatedness and competencies (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Sartori et al., 2022). Such a relation is transversal to the multiplicity of soft skills. It even overcomes difficulties in their conceptualisation, evoking them as simultaneously involving intrapersonal and interpersonal factors, in line with the inseparability of the individual and social dimensions advocated by Elias (2001).

Beyond the individual approach concerning self-empowerment and self-development, the social dimension of soft skills makes them relevant, if not a necessary condition, to tolerance, social cohesion, social peace and social

justice. The capacity for intercultural relationships, recognised as a soft skill within the sphere of communication and empathy, is an example (Messelink et al., 2015), showing how, despite being called “skills” and being widely redeemable by the “labour market” as the “competences of the 21st century” (Cobo, 2013; Dean & East, 2019; Hilton, 2008), soft skills are a necessary condition for emancipation.

In line with these ideas, we followed an operationalisation of soft skills, falling within an emancipatory setting that moves beyond self-interest towards social relationships, since individuals operate their soft skills through their “agency” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Jerome & Starkey, 2022) and their “active citizenship” (Enchikova et al., 2021; Golubeva et al., 2018). Since the study is focused on the E+ programme, “active citizenship” has been combined with “European Union citizenship” (EU citizenship), forming the second category of analysis within the emancipatory perspective. “EU citizenship” is a concept that goes beyond the legal dimension of citizenship, not only because it is supranational and, consequently, limited to the legal dimension of the member state that grants it, but mainly because it is delineated by moral dimensions embodied in the Treaty on European Union (European Union, 2016). This conception can be inferred from values such as “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities [...] pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men” (European Union, 2016, p. 17).

In addition, aligning soft skills, such as critical thinking, with EU citizenship and *digital literacy* as an emerging and crucial dimension of emancipation elicits this last item as the third axis of our emancipatory analysis. Although the field does not directly address the emancipatory perspective, VET is required to participate in this context. Sartori et al. (2022) state:

The contemporary setup of VET contexts underlines (a) the need for VET teachers and trainers to equip students with critical thinking skills and media literacy as well as (b) the lack of formal training paths on the identified topics, thus supporting teachers and trainers in empowering students to become the future generation of EU citizens. (p. 7)

The authors advocate using the capacity of VET teachers for “agency” to promote the emancipatory dimensions based on soft skills such as critical thinking, but also based on digital literacy, in order to increase students’ empowerment as EU citizens. Taking it as a dimension contributing to the

emancipatory perspective in education, our approach requires considering a broader conceptualisation of “digital literacy” by associating it with the other dimensions in use, such as soft skills and EU citizenship, in a sense to which Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer (2016) explicitly allude to when they state that they “propose defining [digital] skills primarily by their necessity for social development (e.g., critical thinking, social, or moral skills)” (p. 169).

The authors point out different features of digital literacy as an intrapersonal process combining knowledge and practice, where soft skills (autonomy, creativity and emotional skills) bidirectionally relate to motivation and social development. Accordingly, digital literacy influences, shapes or even determines social relationships at different levels, turning its absence into an increased risk factor for self-development and social inclusion (Monteiro et al., 2022). As stated by Gutiérrez Ángel et al. (2022, p. 1): “Nowadays, [the term digital competence] refers to a set of technical-processual, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills needed to live, learn, and work in a digital society”. Aligned with this, the OECD project *Future of Education and Skills 2030* has, since its early positions, emphasised the concept of “the learner’s agency”, placing “motivation” and “digital and data literacy” (OECD, 2018, p. 4) as the required factors to feed learners’ current and future capacity for “agency”. The OECD approach combines soft skills, active citizenship and digital literacy within the emancipatory perspective of education, stating: “Education can equip learners with the agency, the competencies and the sense of purpose to shape their own lives and contribute to the lives of others” (p. 22).

Hard skills, the labour market, and Europeanisation tools and policies

The instrumental perspective of education appears more directly explicable, as it is rooted in an approach marked by specific supranational agendas, namely the labour market’s needs and Europeanisation.

Hard skills constitute a subset within the labour market, referring to the ability to manipulate equipment, data and software (Laker & Powell, 2011), inter alia, in a technical approach to knowledge application. Falling within operationalisation and quantification (Kumar et al., 2022), hard skills conform to an instrumental approach to education aligned with the labour market that risks commodifying people as merely “human capital”. Some authors, such as Klees (2016) and Zajda (2020), are critical of the “theory of the human capital” precisely due to such a commodifying risk for individuals. Other authors, such as Brown (2016) and Gobby and Niesche (2019), point to parallel effects on

institutions themselves, such as the school “corporatisation” effect and its potential increase in social segregation.

Following these categories of *labour market* and *hard skills*, *Europeanisation* brings a more complex categorial set, partly due to its links with the emancipatory category of EU citizenship. On the one hand, since EU citizenship is based on Europeanisation and its instruments and policies, it cannot be realised without them. On the other hand, Europeanisation is based on the convention of each EU Member State’s acceptance of and subjection to a European standard, otherwise the “European project” is jeopardised. Taking the example of EU fundamental rights, as emancipatory as such a dimension is, Gill-Pedro (2019) states: “[...] if member states were allowed to assess the validity of EU law by reference to their own national fundamental rights standards, then the uniform applicability of EU law throughout the territory of the Union would be destroyed – there would be no EU law as such” (p. 71).

This idea can be applied to other dimensions of the European project. Paradoxically, the decision to take the Europeanisation tools and policies as an instrumentally driven category relies on its standardising character, which necessarily weakens diversity, but also on its commodifying nature, which is grounded on economic concepts, despite its progressively emancipatory tendencies: “[Europeanisation is also seen] as a marketable commodity, as an economic and employment policy and as a policy for the creation of ‘Europe’” (Antunes, 2020, p. 300).

While distinguishing between the emancipatory perspective and the instrumental perspective based on categories addressed exclusively to one or the other, this foundation also establishes relationships between the two perspectives. On this basis, the theoretical framework was designed to learn more about research focused on international mobility, including research in the fields recently integrated into a single programme: school education, adult education and VET.

Methods

The methodology followed in the study was a literature review based on the stages of defining the search scope, data selection, data analysis, and presentation and discussion of findings (Gessler & Siemer, 2020). This exercise constitutes a background study (Templier & Paré, 2015) that aims to support further research about the effects of international mobility in the education fields embraced by the E+ programme, particularly the less-studied fields. The analysis was undertaken by recognising the tendencies towards the emancipatory

perspective of education driven by self-empowerment and social relations, the instrumental perspective driven by the labour market and Europeanisation agendas, or other perspectives. The emancipatory and instrumental perspectives are sought using the established categories for the analysis, while other perspectives are sought through emerging categories that do not straightforwardly articulate either of the previous two perspectives.

The search was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS) and ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) databases, considering their substantial collection of high-impact journals and peer-reviewed articles, as well as their significant representativeness in the field of education. The Boolean search was limited to basic expressions aimed at encompassing the broadest possible range of studies, which would then be subjected to particular inclusion/exclusion and screening criteria according to the study objectives. The research question driving the procedure aimed to ascertain which concepts are deployed in studies on Erasmus+ mobility and to identify the main concerns driving such research. The aim was to find all of the peer-reviewed papers in relevant scientific databases focused on E+ mobility, to gain insights about their main concepts, and to identify gaps, thus preparing the ground for further research.

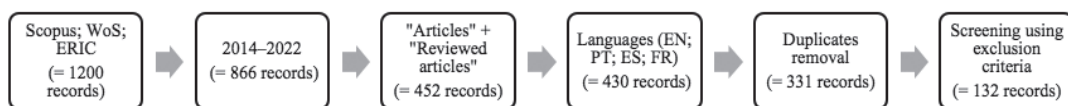
The search equation used was “Erasmus AND mobility”, applied to “Article title”, “Abstract” and “Keywords” in Scopus and WoS, and to “full search (peer-reviewed only)” in ERIC, the assumption being that any publication focused on E+ mobility would necessarily use these terms. Additional search criteria were also general, thus allowing for as many results as possible. These criteria were based on time, type of document and language. The time limitations applied excluded studies conducted before 2014, when the current version of Erasmus started to apply, thus setting the timeframe to 2014–2022. The type of document was set to “article” or “peer-reviewed article”, and the type of source was set to “journal” in order to target high-quality, peer-reviewed publications. Where applicable (Scopus and WoS), languages were set to those within the research team’s knowledge.

The results were subjected to a first screening procedure using the web application Rayyan (<https://www.rayyan.ai>) to eliminate repeated documents. At this point, exclusion criteria were defined and applied to the remaining original articles to eliminate studies that fell outside the research scope and objectives. The exclusion criteria aimed to refine the quality and nature of the results retrieved, namely the relationship to E+ and the context in which the relationship had been determined. The results were screened using an in-depth analysis of the titles, abstracts and keywords, eliminating those in which at least

one of the exclusion criteria was observed. In some cases, rejection was determined by the immediate finding of more than one exclusion criterion. The following criteria were applied: (i) the paper does not concern E+ mobility; (ii) it is not focused on E+ mobility, nor does it establish relationships between mobility and its participants; (iii) it is not based on empirical studies; (iv) it is not exclusively focused on the E+ programme countries; (v) it concerns a study that falls outside the exclusive 2014–2022 timeframe; (vi) it is not focused on a specific E+ education field; or (vii) it is not a peer-reviewed article published in a scientific journal. The procedure resulted in 132 documents selected for further analysis, as summarised in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Search and screening flowchart



The review aimed to identify which concepts are reflected in the current research and how they portray a particular perspective. Accordingly, the 132 documents obtained were subjected to a second analysis to identify the education perspective underlying the main concepts being mobilised: emancipatory, instrumental or other. Considering a possible conceptualisation of these trends, specific categories of concepts were defined for each one. These categories were then searched in the documents, registered and analysed through content analysis using NVivo release 1.7.1. Each document was allocated to only one category of the perspectives under analysis, based on the text's primary focus. In addition to the emancipatory and instrumental perspectives, the category of "both perspectives" was used for situations in which concepts belonging to each perspective received equal focus. In contrast, the category of "other perspectives" was used in cases where the prevailing concepts did not address either approach. Additional concepts or results assuming relevance in the studies and not directly allocated to the classification in use, such as "gender differences", were also registered in the applicable cases. These are presented below, as they provide additional insights into the conducted studies.

In addition, the content analysis allowed the identification of the education field that was the focus of each study: higher education, school education, adult education, and VET. The fields were ranked in reverse order of relevance to previous research in order to focus attention on fields that were less studied

because they were less known. An in-depth analysis of the papers dedicated to the less-studied education fields was then conducted, and the results were presented in order to gain detailed knowledge about the non-hegemonic fields. This exercise allowed the identification of the main focus and perspectives in place as well as those remaining understudied or less known. This may capture further research interests in E+ mobility, generating knowledge about the programme, its different fields, and possible relational dimensions.

Results and discussion

Concerning the relevance given to different education fields in Erasmus+ mobility, the findings show that, of the 132 records, a significant majority of 127 (96%) are related to higher education. Of the remaining five papers, three are related to school education, one to adult education and one to VET. This result may be related to the historical weight of higher education in the Erasmus programme for almost three decades, thus attracting substantial research interest. This effect is so relevant that, in many cases, the education field is not mentioned in the paper's title, abstract or keywords, thus requiring confirmation by an analysis of the full text. The E+ programme's success and inherent wider visibility continue to be associated with its foundation field, which also justifies the symbolic addition of the "+" symbol to its name in 2014, when it became associated with other education fields and additional domains. This format has been running for nearly a decade and its second programming period lasts until 2027, thus consolidating the association of the "Erasmus" designation to all fields. The former designations of funding programmes in other fields (de Olagüe-Smithson, 2019; Pépin, 2006) have become obsolete and are less and less used.

Regarding the second aim, related to the perspectives in place, each study was allocated exclusively to one case based on its central conceptual focus: emancipatory, instrumental, both, or other. The results emphasise concepts and approaches related to the emancipatory perspective, representing approximately 36% (47 records) of the total results, with only approximately 8% (11 records) addressing the instrumental perspective. While some studies address both perspectives (14 records, 11% of the total), the majority (60 records, representing around 45%) do not present a specific tendency towards the perspectives conceptualised in the present study.

Table 1 presents the main concepts found in studies on higher education, distributed by the education perspective.

Table 1

The education perspective and main concepts driving research on E+ mobility in higher education

Emancipatory (44 records)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intercultural ability (awareness, competence, development, needs, interaction, etc.) (21) - Active citizenship; global citizenship; EU citizenship self-awareness; positive views about the EU (9) - Soft skills (5) - Social media; e-learning; digital skills; online exchanges; online mobility (4) - Participants' emotions; human development; self-development (5)
Instrumental (11 records)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employability expectations; career ambitions; career development; salary prospect; labour market outcomes (6) - Setting a common European entity; improving Europeanism; EU integration policies (3) - Hard skills (2)
Both (12 records)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intercultural awareness/employment and career development (6) - Socioemotional, personal development and well-being/employability, professional life (4) - Politics of difference/consumerist approaches (1) - Voluntarist attitudes towards the labour market (1)
Other (60 records)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobility features, drivers and barriers; Erasmus+ improvement (39) - Language improvement (11) - Inequalities shaping mobility (5) - Destination choice; Erasmus+ and tourism (4) - Environmental impacts (1)

The findings show that the primary concerns in the retrieved studies about Erasmus+ in higher education are mainly related to the characterisation of mobility, trying to show its main drivers and barriers in order to improve the programme's design and outcomes for institutions and participants (39 records). The second prevalent concern is about the effect of mobility on raising intercultural awareness (21 records). The concern with foreign language improvement by itself (without addressing a specific perspective) is also addressed to some extent (11 records). However, additional concerns not implying an educational perspective are also present, such as inequalities shaping access to mobility and drivers for the selection of destination, including tourism and environment-related concerns.

In addition to the concepts determining the central perspective found in the higher education records, additional concepts were also identified in order to avoid losing sight of other dimensions, despite their lower relevance to the study. Since the focus of these concepts is not central in the analysed studies, they were not considered in establishing the approach's central perspective, as presented in Table 1. Concepts playing secondary roles were: Erasmus+ programme knowledge and improvement (found in 21 papers); foreign language

improvement (16); mobility outcomes (11); mobility and tourism (10); labour market and employability (8); EU tools & policies (7); digital literacy (7); gender issues (5); informal education (3); social, economic and disability-based inequality (3); and EU citizenship (3).

In addition to higher education, other education fields were found in the retrieved records, albeit with significantly lower frequency. Since the database searches and subsequent screening processes were intentionally broad so as not to limit the sectorial results, it can be concluded that the disparity found reflects an effectively lower incidence of studies in these fields. This effect may be rooted in the previously described historical prominence of higher education in the programme. Still, other reasons may apply, requiring dedicated further study.

Table 2 summarises the findings for school education, adult education and VET, presenting examples of the central concepts on which the allocation to the education perspective was based.

Table 2

The education perspective and main concepts driving the retrieved papers on E+ mobility in school education, adult education and VET

School Education (3 records)	Adult Education (1 record)	VET (1 record)
Emancipatory (3 records)		
Intercultural awareness; learner autonomy; social setting and agency; impact on students' beliefs and values; critical thinking; sociocultural values; (2 records: Normann (2021); Yüzlü (2022))	Active citizenship; fighting ageism; intergenerational, digital, and international relationships and communication; developing digital literacy; personal and social skills and learning to learn (1 record: Baños-Martínez (2022))	-
Instrumental		
-	-	-
Both (2 records)		
Intercultural awareness/ professional development (1 record: Gozpinar (2018))	-	Intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions/ labour market responsiveness and liaison with industry (1 record: de Paor (2018))
Other		
-	-	-

The findings show the emancipatory perspective in evidence for these education fields. While three studies embrace this perspective rather exclusively (two in school education and one in adult education), two other studies also show the instrumental perspective and are thus registered in the category

“both”. These include one study in school education and a single study in VET. In addition to the mobility of students, these papers include the mobility of teachers and administrators, which accounts for the professional development concerns in evidence. This means that, from the students’ perspective, they are retained within the scope of a significant emancipatory approach.

The single VET paper, which considers teachers’ perspectives and concerns over their professional development, presents a particular situation that warrants further comment. As mentioned in the introduction, compared to the other fields, VET intrinsically addresses an intertwined combination of the two perspectives under analysis, as it may combine a school diploma and a professional diploma (Cedefop, 2021a) conferred at an early age (in initial VET, the process starts in the early teenage years). The paper is in line with this and, as the only VET case retrieved in the study, it confirms the significantly low weight of empirical studies on E+ mobility in this field. The analysis shows that the capacity of teachers/trainers for “agency” as a determinant factor shaping students’ international mobility is in evidence (for additional insights on the “teachers’ agency” concept, see, for instance, Biesta (2017); Biesta & Tedder (2007); Priestley et al. (2013, 2015a, 2015b)).

Engaging in international mobility brings additional challenges for young VET students, who are often minors, compared to higher education students. Such challenges are commonly associated with fear of the unknown or lack of confidence in using a foreign language. Using teachers as role models for students and youngsters is essential in order to gain confidence for the necessary but feared steps ahead. Geagea and MacCallum referred to this supportive mechanism in their study about the access, mobilisation and activation of capital, in this case related to navigating higher education: “The positive, supportive and engaging environment built by the mentors and role models helped students to build their confidence to explore and attempt unfamiliar and challenging tasks” (2020, p. 806). In line with this, Kmiotek-Meier et al. also refer to the importance of those who can act as gatekeepers conditioning mobility, particularly in VET, reinforcing the importance of teachers’ agency in such a setting: “young people depend on institutional procedures; for example, the information flow via gatekeepers (e.g. teachers, tutors, support)” (2019, p. 38).

Conclusion

Aiming to identify the main trends guiding researchers in conceptual approaches to Erasmus+ mobility and mapping their distribution across the different educational fields of the programme, the findings of the present

study point to the diversity of conceptual approaches and the prevalence of higher education in recent and earlier research. Despite the integration in the programme of all fields and levels of education for almost a decade, higher education has prevailed as a focus of recent research on Erasmus+ mobility. Compared to school education, adult education, and vocational education and training, the number and diversity of studies in higher education constitute a significant corpus of knowledge about Erasmus+ mobility.

In the case of higher education, which accounts for 96% of the retrieved studies, the concepts addressed and the educational perspectives covered are broad and allow linkages of Erasmus+ mobility to an emancipatory perspective based on social skills, EU citizenship and digital literacy, or an instrumental approach based on technical skills, labour market needs, and Europeanisation tools and policies. In some studies, both perspectives coexist; however, the prevailing situation, “other perspectives”, is consistent with different approaches that do not focus on either of these perspectives. Apart from these “other perspectives”, which are commonly focused on technical aspects of the programme, the results focusing on mobility participants indicate a prevalence of the emancipatory perspective. This indicates that Erasmus+ mobility is considered and sought as a potential tool to generate emancipatory effects related to intercultural ability, active citizenship, social skills, digital literacy and human emotions, in this order of relevance according to the collected data. Furthermore, some studies on the instrumental perspective corroborate the idea that the programme can produce effects that conform to labour market requirements and the standardisation of educational outcomes; however, these are not the main concerns of researchers.

In the case of the remaining education fields, the small number of studies retrieved indicates their lower relevance in research about E+ mobility, limiting the identification and assumption that a particular trend prevails. This scarcity poses challenges, namely determining whether there are common effects of E+ mobility in different education fields or, on the contrary, whether the specificities of each field prevail, given that mobility assumes different forms across fields. This significant knowledge gap on the programme’s effects risks perpetuating lower visibility of E+, but also risks preventing further evidence-based adjustments of the programme and institutional policy enactment within these fields of education compared to higher education. The knowledge obtained from higher education research and findings may feed hypotheses to search and test on the remaining fields, particularly addressing the effects of mobility and barriers present across them. In line with this aim, the programme’s design and the specific education systems of participating countries are likely to emerge since, contrary to higher education relying on the effects of the Bologna

Process, other fields do not rely on a standardised process facilitating mobility, despite existing efforts in the case of VET through the Copenhagen Process (The Copenhagen Declaration, 2002).

The present study cannot determine the reasons behind the lower prevalence of studies in education fields other than higher education, which may be due to the connection of higher education to the history of E+, unbalanced figures of mobility across fields, or other factors. Seeking more consistent conclusions demands further empirical research in order to gain substantial additional knowledge. This limitation may be overcome within school education and adult education, but above all within VET, as it is the field that most directly liaises with both of the education perspectives addressed. Moreover, further connections can be established between VET and higher education, namely the mobility of young participants (not school pupils or adult learners) and the Bologna Process versus the Copenhagen Process. This will be achieved through empirical research in VET schools that are significantly active in E+.

Ethical statement

The research did not involve human and animal subjects. The reviews on which it was based aggregated studies that had already received ethical approval. Consequently, no additional ethical approval was necessary.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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