

EXPLORING EBELONGING IN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY EXCHANGES

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of eBelonging in the context of hybrid and international university exchanges within the CIVIS European University Alliance. Drawing on qualitative data collected through focus groups and workshops with students from Aix-Marseille University, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the Autonomous University of Madrid, and the University of Bucharest, the study examines how belonging is negotiated in transnational and digitally mediated learning environments. Building on the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu, Wenger, and Strayhorn, the analysis highlights how institutional support, collaborative learning, intercultural interaction, and access to social, cultural, and digital resources shape students' experiences of participation and inclusion. The findings reveal that eBelonging is not automatically produced through mobility itself, but depends on coherent institutional ecosystems capable of fostering meaningful participation, support, and equitable access to international learning experiences.

Keywords: eBelonging, Student Belonging, International student mobility, Intercultural collaboration, European University Alliances, Inclusive internationalisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The expansion of international mobility in European higher education is widely framed as a driver of inclusion, collaboration, and shared academic experience. Yet, this narrative obscures a persistent paradox: the very programmes designed to broaden participation often reproduce, and in some cases intensify, forms of inequality. Students do not enter international exchanges on equal terms, nor do they experience them in comparable ways. Access to mobility, as well as the capacity to meaningfully engage within it, remains unevenly distributed [1], [2].

This tension is particularly visible in the diversification of mobility formats promoted through initiatives such as the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Universities Initiative. While long-term Erasmus exchanges (typically lasting six to twelve months) continue to favour students with sufficient economic and cultural resources, shorter and hybrid formats such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) have been introduced to widen access. However, rather than resolving inequalities, these formats reconfigure them. Participation increasingly depends not only on financial capacity, but also on digital access, linguistic competence, and prior familiarity with international academic environments [3], [4]. Moreover, students must navigate diverse teaching methods, institutional cultures, and administrative systems.

Internationalisation should therefore be understood not simply as an expansion of opportunity, but as a transformation of the conditions under which participation becomes possible. Students operate within fragmented learning environments spanning institutions, countries, and digital platforms, where the ability to connect, engage, and develop a sense of belonging is neither automatic nor equally distributed [5].

2 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To account for this, the present paper conceptualises belonging as a socially structured process shaped by unequal access to resources, recognition, and participation. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, belonging is understood as dependent on students' positions within overlapping institutional fields and on their access to forms of capital (social, cultural, and increasingly digital) that condition their capacity to engage

[6], [7], [3]. From this perspective, belonging is not the outcome of participation, but contingent upon the conditions that make participation possible.

This position challenges integration-based models such as that of Vincent Tinto, which assume that belonging emerges through progressive academic and social integration [8]. While such models highlight the importance of student engagement, they tend to overlook how access to integration is itself unequally distributed [9]. In hybrid and transnational contexts, integration is no longer a linear or coherent process, but a fragmented experience distributed across multiple physical and digital settings.

At the same time, the emphasis on participation developed by Etienne Wenger provides a valuable lens for understanding how belonging is enacted in practice. However, participation in international exchange contexts cannot be assumed to be equally accessible. Students' trajectories are often characterised by partial or peripheral engagement, reflecting unequal access to recognition, legitimacy, and opportunities for interaction [10], [11].

3 RESEARCH CONTEXT: CIVIS AND THE EBELONG2 PROJECT

Despite growing attention to internationalisation and student experience, limited research has examined how these dynamics unfold within European university alliances, where hybrid mobility and digital collaboration are central [12]. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on the CIVIS European University Alliance as a case study. Building on these perspectives, this paper introduces the concept of *eBelonging* to capture how belonging is negotiated within digitally mediated and hybrid mobility environments. *eBelonging* refers to the process through which students attempt to establish meaningful participation across fragmented academic spaces, under conditions shaped by unequal access to digital, social, and cultural resources.

The paper asks: under what conditions do students succeed, or fail, to establish *eBelonging* within hybrid and international university exchanges, and how do institutional arrangements shape these possibilities? Situated within the Erasmus+ project *eBelong2: Sense of Belonging in the Context of New Higher Education Alliances*, the study draws on students' lived experiences to examine how belonging is constructed, negotiated, and constrained in contemporary transnational higher education environments.

4 METHODOLOGY

The research is based on qualitative data collected through a series of student workshops, focus groups, and semi-structured questionnaires conducted in collaboration with academics and students across partner institutions, including the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), the University of Bucharest (UB), the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), and Aix-Marseille University (AMU). These participatory sessions were complemented by individual reflections gathered through semi-structured questionnaires, allowing for both collective discussion and personal perspectives.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach, which views belonging as a subjective and socially constructed experience that can only be understood through participants' own perspectives. This approach is particularly suited to exploring *eBelonging*, as it enables the analysis of how students interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to their experiences within complex hybrid and transnational learning environments.

Data were collected between 2024 and 2025 within the framework of the Erasmus+ project *eBelong2: Sense of Belonging in the Context of New Higher Education Alliances*. A common discussion guide was collaboratively developed by the partner institutions to ensure comparability across contexts. The workshops and focus groups explored students' motivations for mobility, experiences of teamwork and intercultural collaboration, perceptions of institutional support, stress and coping strategies, and suggestions for improving international mobility experiences. Participants were encouraged to share both positive and challenging aspects of their experiences, enabling rich and reflective discussions across institutional settings.

The study involved internationally mobile undergraduate, Master's, and doctoral students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including humanities, social sciences, psychology, economics, geography, chemistry, mathematics, and languages. Participants had engaged in different forms of mobility, including Erasmus+, CIVIS activities, Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), summer schools, research exchanges, and joint degrees. Focus groups generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or online depending on institutional conditions. Sessions were audio-

recorded, transcribed, and anonymised to ensure confidentiality. In some cases, visual prompts such as photographs from mobility activities were used to stimulate memory and encourage reflective narratives.

The workshops and focus groups were designed to encourage students to reflect on their experiences of connection, identity, and community while interacting with peers and institutions during their international exchanges. Particular attention was paid to the ways students interpreted and made sense of their academic and social experiences abroad and at their home universities. By analysing their narratives and reflections, the study seeks to understand the conditions that foster or hinder the development of eBelonging, as well as the ways international academic environments can better support students' sense of connection, participation, and inclusion.

Using a thematic comparative approach, the analysis focused on recurring experiences related to participation, exclusion, stress, institutional support, intercultural collaboration, and belonging across different mobility contexts. Special consideration was given to moments of tension, uncertainty, and disconnection, which were understood not as isolated difficulties, but as expressions of broader inconsistencies between institutional ideals of inclusion and the realities students encounter in their everyday experiences.

Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent. All data were anonymised and used exclusively for research purposes within the eBelong2 project. Finally, the study acknowledges certain limitations, notably that the sample primarily consisted of highly internationally engaged students, many of whom had already accumulated multiple mobility experiences. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect the perspectives of students who face greater barriers to participation in international mobility programmes.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Profiles and Mobility Trajectories of Internationally Mobile Students

The students who participated in the focus groups across the four partner universities shared several common characteristics while also reflecting different institutional and social realities. Overall, participants were highly internationally oriented students who had engaged in Erasmus+, CIVIS, Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), summer schools, research exchanges, and other forms of European mobility. Many had accumulated multiple international experiences and viewed mobility as both an academic and transformative personal experience. Their profiles correspond to what Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska describe as "super-mobile" students embedded within transnational mobility structures [13]. They also reflect broader transformations in higher education identified by Brooks and Waters [14], who argue that international student mobility has become central to the internationalisation of higher education and increasingly shapes students' educational trajectories and identities.

The groups included undergraduate, Master's, and doctoral students from diverse disciplines such as humanities, social sciences, psychology, economics, geography, chemistry, mathematics, and languages. This interdisciplinary diversity enriched discussions about academic cultures, teaching methods, and collaboration practices encountered abroad.

From a theoretical perspective, these students possessed relatively strong forms of cultural and social capital that facilitated participation in international mobility [3]. However, the discussions also revealed persistent inequalities linked to financial resources, linguistic confidence, and familiarity with international academic systems.

Across all four universities, participants appeared academically engaged, adaptable, and strongly motivated by intercultural experiences and personal development. Their narratives resonate with Wenger's [10] conception of belonging emerging through participation, collaboration, and shared academic practices.

Some institutional differences nevertheless emerged. At Aix-Marseille University and NKUA, participants were more frequently Master's and doctoral students involved in research-oriented and interdisciplinary trajectories. Students from the University of Bucharest more often framed mobility as a pathway toward personal emancipation and social mobility, while UAM participants placed stronger emphasis on emotional adaptation, peer relationships, and multicultural teamwork.

5.2 Institutional Support, Administrative Vulnerability, and the Development of eBelonging during International Mobility

A comparative reading of the focus groups reveals that institutional support plays a central role in shaping students' capacity to develop a sense of eBelonging during international mobility. Across the different universities, students consistently associated positive experiences of belonging with the presence of accessible, responsive, and human-centred institutional support. Conversely, fragmented communication, bureaucratic complexity, and inconsistent guidance often generated feelings of stress, uncertainty, and disconnection.

A recurring pattern across the institutions is that students rarely criticised the existence of mobility opportunities themselves, but rather the way access to these opportunities was organised and mediated institutionally. At Aix-Marseille University (AMU), students described mobility information as abundant but highly fragmented across multiple digital platforms, coordinators, and communication channels. While support from faculty members was appreciated, the multiplicity of institutional interfaces created confusion and cognitive overload. In this context, eBelonging depended not only on formal inclusion in mobility programmes, but also on students' capacity to navigate complex informational environments. As one AMU participant explained:

"There was information everywhere, but sometimes I didn't know which platform or coordinator I should trust. It felt like you had to learn the system before actually benefiting from mobility."

At the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), students' experiences highlighted strong inequalities in access to institutional support. Some participants described highly supportive Erasmus offices, responsive coordinators, and effective administrative guidance, while others experienced delayed communication, insufficient financial support, and the need to manage bureaucratic difficulties independently. The NKUA discussions particularly illustrate how uneven institutional practices can produce what may be described as "administrative vulnerability," where students are formally included in international mobility schemes but practically left alone to cope with institutional complexity. In these situations, the absence of timely support weakened students' sense of security and belonging during mobility experiences.

Similar dynamics also emerged at the University of Bucharest and the Autonomous University of Madrid. UB students strongly valued the involvement of Erasmus and CIVIS coordinators, especially when communication was rapid and personalised. However, they also pointed to major differences between faculties and emphasised the emotional and financial stress generated by bureaucratic procedures and unequal access to resources. UAM students likewise stressed that responsive coordinators, mentoring systems, and well-organised welcome activities significantly reduced uncertainty and facilitated integration into new academic and social environments.

5.3 Teamwork, Collaborative Learning, and the Construction of eBelonging in International Exchanges

A comparative analysis of the four focus groups reveals that experiences of teamwork and collaboration played a central role in students' construction of eBelonging during international exchanges. Across all institutions, students associated positive experiences of belonging with opportunities for active participation, intercultural interaction, and collaborative learning. Teamwork was not perceived simply as an academic requirement, but as a social process through which students developed trust, mutual recognition, and a sense of inclusion within international academic communities. This finding strongly resonates with Leask's [15] approach to the internationalisation of the curriculum, which emphasises that intercultural learning and collaboration should be embedded not only in mobility itself, but also in teaching methods, learning environments, and classroom interaction. It also reflects more recent research on international student mobility showing that belonging within transnational academic environments is often constructed through collaborative "mobility capsules" and intensive peer interaction among internationally mobile students [13]. At the same time, the discussions also highlighted important institutional differences in how collaboration was organised, supported, and experienced.

A first common pattern concerns the perception that host universities abroad generally promoted more interactive, student-centred, and collaborative forms of learning than students experienced in their home institutions. Participants from UB, NKUA, and UAM consistently described foreign universities as environments where teamwork, discussion, and participation were systematically integrated into the curriculum. Students appreciated smaller classes, open discussions, practical projects, and less

hierarchical relationships with professors, all of which contributed to stronger feelings of participation and recognition. A student from NKUA described this experience as follows: *“For the first time, I felt that my opinion really mattered in class. Group work abroad was more collaborative and less competitive than what I was used to.”* Similarly, AMU students emphasised the accessibility of teachers and the importance of intercultural communication in collaborative settings. Across the four universities, students frequently associated these pedagogical approaches with stronger academic engagement and a greater sense of inclusion.

At the same time, a second recurring pattern concerns the importance of structure in facilitating collaboration and reducing stress. Students from NKUA and AMU particularly stressed that international teamwork functioned more effectively when roles, expectations, and responsibilities were clearly defined. NKUA participants highlighted structured role allocation, digital collaboration tools, and explicit teamwork guidance encountered abroad, while AMU students compared the French system with Canadian universities, where group work was supported through formal instructions and role distribution. UB students similarly valued contexts such as BIPs, where tasks and expectations were clearly organised. These findings support Leask’s argument that internationalised learning environments require intentional pedagogical design capable of transforming student diversity into a resource for collaborative learning rather than leaving interaction to emerge spontaneously.

However, the focus groups also revealed tensions and inequalities within collaborative experiences. Language barriers, different communication styles, and uneven participation occasionally produced feelings of exclusion or peripheral participation. AMU students discussed difficulties related to oral participation and intercultural communication, while UB students noted that Erasmus students were sometimes separated from local students because of language constraints, limiting opportunities for integration into collaborative activities. UAM students also described the need to adapt to different rhythms of work, communication styles, and academic expectations. These experiences illustrate that participation within international teamwork is not equally accessible to all students and depends heavily on linguistic confidence, intercultural competence, and institutional support.

Despite these challenges, students overwhelmingly described multicultural teamwork as transformative and enriching. Across all four universities, participants reported becoming more open-minded, flexible, empathetic, and confident in intercultural environments. NKUA students particularly emphasised the development of active listening, trust-building, and sensitivity to diverse perspectives, while UAM students stressed how diversity improved problem-solving and group dynamics. UB students associated international collaboration with increased self-confidence and long-term professional opportunities, whereas AMU participants emphasised intercultural adaptability and multilingual openness. Overall, the findings suggest that eBelonging emerges most strongly in contexts where students are not only academically integrated, but also actively recognised as legitimate participants within collaborative and intercultural learning communities.

5.4 Stress, Vulnerability, and Coping Strategies in International Mobility Experiences

A comparative analysis of the four focus groups shows that stress during international exchanges was closely connected to students’ processes of academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation. Across all institutions, participants described stress not simply as an individual difficulty, but as a consequence of navigating unfamiliar educational systems, intercultural environments, financial constraints, and administrative complexity. These findings resonate with Scharfner and Young’s (2020) work on intercultural transitions in higher education, which demonstrates that international students’ stress and adaptation processes are shaped simultaneously by academic adjustment, psychological wellbeing, and sociocultural integration within unfamiliar educational and social environments. At AMU, stress was often linked to unclear expectations in group work, financial pressure, and subtle forms of exclusion linked to language or social invisibility. NKUA students similarly emphasised administrative complexity, workload, and the emotional strain of balancing mobility with work or family responsibilities. At the UB, students frequently associated stress with language anxiety, financial insecurity, and the feeling of lagging behind local students academically or socially. One UB participant reflected: *“At the beginning, I was afraid to speak because I thought my English was not good enough. I constantly compared myself to local students and felt behind.”* UAM participants, meanwhile, highlighted bureaucratic confusion, housing difficulties, and the emotional uncertainty of the first weeks abroad. Despite these differences, a common pattern emerged across all four universities: students relied heavily on peer networks, informal solidarity, and supportive coordinators to cope with stress and progressively develop confidence and belonging within international academic environments.

5.5 Comparative Approaches to Improving eBelonging in International Mobility

The comparative analysis of the four institutional contexts reveals that students' proposals for improvement converge around several interconnected dimensions: administrative simplification, pedagogical preparation, intercultural support, emotional wellbeing, and structural inclusivity. While each university reflected specific institutional priorities, the recommendations collectively suggest that eBelonging is not produced solely through mobility participation itself, but through the quality of institutional ecosystems surrounding mobility experiences.

A first common concern relates to administrative complexity and fragmented communication. Across AMU, NKUA, and UB, students described mobility systems as difficult to navigate because information was dispersed across multiple platforms, coordinators, and procedures. AMU students proposed a unified digital platform centralising CIVIS, Erasmus+, and faculty-level information, while NKUA participants stressed the importance of transparent and timely guidance. UB students similarly advocated for simplified and fully digitalised administrative processes. These recommendations suggest that institutional support should be understood not only as administrative management, but also as a form of pedagogical accessibility. In hybrid and transnational learning environments, students' capacity to participate depends heavily on the clarity and coherence of institutional infrastructures. This finding aligns with research on inclusive internationalisation, which argues that current internationalisation policies often remain accessible only to a limited student elite and therefore require more inclusive and institution-wide approaches [17].

A second major convergence concerns intercultural preparation and collaborative learning. Across all institutions, students emphasised that successful mobility requires more than academic achievement or language proficiency. Participants repeatedly highlighted the need for preparation in teamwork, intercultural communication, conflict management, and collaborative practices. AMU students proposed short modules on teamwork methodology, while NKUA participants advocated for structured intercultural preparation programmes focusing on communication skills, emotional adaptation, and psychological resilience. UB students also stressed the importance of training both students and teaching staff in inclusive and intercultural pedagogies. These findings support Leask's [15] argument that internationalisation must be embedded within pedagogical design rather than treated as an external mobility experience.

The importance of mentoring and peer support also emerged strongly across the four universities. Students consistently described informal solidarity, peer reassurance, and supportive coordinators as essential coping mechanisms during periods of uncertainty. AMU students proposed peer-to-peer guidance systems involving former mobility participants, while NKUA participants advocated for stable mentoring mechanisms providing both practical and emotional support. As one NKUA student explained: *"What would make the biggest difference is having someone who understands what you are going through and can reassure you that stress and confusion are normal."* UB students likewise recommended involving returning students as ambassadors and mentors for future participants. These recommendations illustrate Wenger's [10] conception of belonging through participation, where recognition and guidance facilitate students' progressive integration into transnational academic communities. They also resonate with Strayhorn's [9] work, which defines belonging as a feeling of connectedness, mattering, and social support that strongly influences students' academic adjustment, persistence, and wellbeing. Strayhorn further emphasises that positive peer interactions, mentoring, and supportive institutional environments are fundamental conditions for fostering students' sense of belonging and educational success.

Finally, students particularly at NKUA and UB highlighted persistent financial inequalities shaping access to mobility. Participants stressed that grants often fail to cover living costs, rental deposits, and unexpected expenses abroad. They therefore proposed more flexible and socially responsive funding mechanisms, especially for economically vulnerable students. These findings reinforce Bourdieu's [3] argument that participation in international mobility remains conditioned by unequal access to economic and cultural capital. As de Wit and Jones [17] further argue, mobility alone cannot guarantee inclusive internationalisation if structural inequalities continue to limit access for the majority of students.

Overall, the findings suggest that eBelonging emerges most effectively when institutions provide coherent ecosystems combining administrative clarity, pedagogical preparation, intercultural support, mentoring, and financial inclusivity. In this sense, eBelonging should be understood not simply as an individual feeling of attachment, but as a relational and institutional achievement shaped by inclusive educational practices.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how students construct and negotiate eBelonging within hybrid and international university exchanges across the CIVIS alliance. The findings demonstrate that belonging is not automatically produced through mobility itself, but depends on unequal access to institutional support, collaborative participation, intercultural interaction, and material resources. While international mobility can foster personal growth, intercultural openness, and academic engagement, it can also generate stress, uncertainty, and exclusion linked to administrative complexity, financial inequalities, and linguistic barriers.

By drawing on the perspectives of students from AMU, NKUA, UAM, and UB, the study highlights the central role of institutional environments in shaping students' capacity to participate meaningfully in international experiences. Supportive coordinators, collaborative pedagogies, mentoring systems, and inclusive learning environments were consistently associated with stronger experiences of eBelonging.

The concept of eBelonging contributes to current debates on internationalisation by emphasising that belonging in transnational and digitally mediated higher education environments is relational, negotiated, and socially structured. In line with Bourdieu, Wenger, and Strayhorn, the findings suggest that meaningful participation depends not only on mobility opportunities themselves, but also on the institutional conditions that enable students to feel recognised, supported, and included.

Ultimately, the study argues that inclusive internationalisation requires universities to move beyond mobility as a purely academic or logistical process and to develop more coherent, supportive, and equitable mobility ecosystems capable of fostering genuine participation and belonging for all students.

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