

ATTITUDES, MOTIVATION, AND STRESS IN INTERNATIONAL TEAMWORK: A COMPARATIVE FOCUS GROUP STUDY ACROSS FIVE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a comparative qualitative study examining the attitudes, motivation levels, and stress experiences of former mobile students in relation to teamwork and collaboration within international communities of practice. Conducted within the framework of the ERASMUS+ project eBelong2 – Sense of Belonging in the Context of New Higher Education Alliances, the study draws on focus groups carried out at five European partner universities. A total of fifty participants were recruited across the five institutions.

Employing a shared semi-structured focus group protocol developed collaboratively by the consortium, the study explored six thematic dimensions: students' motivations and expectations prior to departure; academic and social integration experiences; institutional support before, during, and after mobility; teamwork and collaborative practices in international settings; intercultural communication and role distribution within group work; and the stressors, coping strategies, and transferable competences associated with working in culturally diverse teams. Data collection followed a coordinated timeline, and all transcripts were anonymised and subjected to thematic narrative analysis, enabling both institution-level interpretation and robust cross-partner comparison.

Findings reveal a broadly consistent picture across the five institutions: international mobility is experienced as deeply transformative, fostering intercultural competence, self-confidence, and collaborative capacity. Students consistently reported that exposure to different academic cultures substantially enhanced their openness, adaptability, and capacity for constructive teamwork. Peer networks and informal digital communities emerged as crucial compensatory mechanisms for belonging and emotional support in the absence of robust formal structures. Across all sites, participants highlighted that working in culturally diverse groups became, over time, not merely an obligation but a genuinely valued practice.

At the same time, the comparative analysis identifies significant divergences and recurring stressors. Four principal challenges emerge: (1) administrative and logistical uncertainty, including fragmented information systems, late communication, and mismatched academic calendars; (2) financial vulnerability, particularly during the first weeks abroad, due to delayed grant payments, rental deposits, and elevated living costs; (3) uneven teamwork expectations, with role clarity and evaluation criteria differing markedly across national and institutional contexts; and (4) social isolation in early stages of mobility, especially where dormitory placement or self-selection perpetuated national clustering.

On the basis of these findings, the paper advances five evidence-based recommendations for higher education institutions and mobility programme designers. The paper concludes by situating these recommendations within the broader literature on inclusive internationalisation, arguing that sustainable mobility ecosystems require not only structural access to programmes but also pedagogical care, equitable financial conditions, and institutional responsiveness to the emotional dimensions of international learning.

Keywords: International student mobility, intercultural teamwork, communities of practice, stress and coping, ERASMUS+, CIVIS, sense of belonging, collaborative learning, higher education alliances.