



BLENDED, BRIEF, BUT IMPACTFUL? EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ERASMUS+ BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAMS

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Abstract:

This study evaluates the effectiveness of Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) in fostering intercultural competences and international collaboration skills among higher education students. Conducted over three years with participants from five European universities, the study uses pre- and post-program surveys to assess changes in student attitudes and self-perceived skills. Although statistical differences between the pre- and post-tests were not significant, participants reported perceived improvements in intercultural teamwork, international project engagement, and personal development. Qualitative feedback further emphasized the value of practical experiences and cross-cultural collaboration. Suggestions for improvement focused on the organization of the physical mobility component, including better planning and more cultural activities. The average program rating was 7.6 out of 10. While findings highlight a possible participation bias favouring already internationally oriented students, they also indicate the potential of BIPs to serve as impactful, inclusive international learning experiences. Future research with larger samples and control groups is recommended to better understand long-term outcomes and address access equity.

Keywords: blended mobility, international education, Erasmus+, intercultural competence, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Europe are increasingly tasked with preparing students to navigate complex, multicultural environments, one of the consequences of the Bologna process aiming at the integration of European Higher Education (Roy et al., 2019; Terry, 2008). One of the aspects of the Bologna process is the increased attention for bringing students into real life practical learning situations, something not always fitting within traditional academic

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frameworks (Bazen & Duma, 2019; Reichert, 2010). The Erasmus+ program offers fantastic opportunities for students from the program countries, as well as from partner countries, to study abroad at a partner university for up to one year in any cycle of study: bachelor's, master's, or PhD. Despite the generosity of the Erasmus+ program, both in terms of financing and variety of participating universities, in the past years, the authors observed a relative stagnation in the number of students studying abroad (Bazen & Duma, 2019). To address this issue, the authors came up with the idea to organize some short-term exchange programs, in the form of one-week intensive learning and practical research on a specific topic in mixed groups of students. The main idea was to take the students out of their comfort zone and to help them break the ice in internationalization activities. Short-term programs present some clear advantages for the participating students: relevant for their CV, a good (first) exposure to a different culture, possibility of learning and working in an intercultural team, receiving ECTS for these activities, not interfering too much with the regular study program and so on. Therefore, already since 2010, we started a cooperation between two Universities, one from Romania and the other from the Netherlands, from opposite corners of Europe and very different cultures, so that the students can truly learn and benefit from the intercultural differences. Another reason for this long-time cooperation between our schools is that, despite distance, there are very strong economic relations between these two countries, explained by the fact that the Netherlands is the biggest investor in the Romanian economy. This proved to be very helpful in easily finding several Dutch businesses in Romania interested in being involved in our project, receiving the students for visits and providing practical assignments in connection with the theoretical part of the program. Over the years, short-term exchange projects were organized, for groups of 10 to 15 students from each university, accompanied by one or two academic staff, with courses, company visits and research work on a practical assignment.

The observation of the authors about stagnating Erasmus+ participation at their universities was seen throughout Europe. Recognizing the gap between the intended direction of European Higher Education and the educational practice, the European Union's Erasmus+ programme has introduced Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) as an innovative approach to international education. BIPs aim to foster comprehensive skill development and intercultural competence among students (European Commission, 2025; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024) as well as contributing to the policy of digital transformation within the EU (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education & Culture, 2022). BIPs are short, intensive courses that integrate online learning with a brief period of physical mobility, typically ranging from 5 to 30 days. These programmes are developed collaboratively by at least three higher education institutions from different Erasmus+ programme countries, ensuring a diverse and interdisciplinary learning environment (González-Pavón et al., 2024; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The nature of the ERASMUS+ Blended Intensive Program

BIPs are a type of short term exchange programs, with both a virtual and a physical component. There is some debate as to whether short term physical exchange programs do actually bring the desired benefits to participants in terms of knowledge and skills development, or whether a longer term exchange would be required to improve these skills of the participants.

Whereas Alexander et al. (2022) for example, found no significant differences between shorter and longer term exchange programs, and Gaia (2015) argues that short term student exchange programs can be very effective especially when they are faculty-led programs, most literature however, indicates that longer term exchange programs offer better results (Coker et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Roy et al., 2019), with some scholars even going as far as indicating that short term exchange programs may be not much more than “educational” tourism instead of serious international educational study programs (Coker et al., 2018). At the same time, virtual forms of international collaboration became increasingly popular. In particular, the Corona pandemic in the early 2020s, strongly increased the experience with virtual forms of education, including virtual international cooperation (Bedenlier & Marín, 2020). Ruiz-Molina et al. (2020) argue that virtual mobility can be a useful addition to academic programs and are especially valuable for students without opportunities to travel abroad for whatever reason. Similarly, other authors conclude that virtual mobility can be effective, but usually lead to less impact than physical mobility, although a strong support system from the universities involved can help to improve learning results (Bedenlier & Marín, 2020; Enkhtur et al., 2024; Vriens et al., 2010). The introduction of the BIPs within the framework of the Erasmus+ program was an attempt to use the “best of both worlds” of virtual mobility and short term physical mobility (European Commission, 2025), allowing for projects that offer more than a short period of physical mobility abroad for the participants and at the same time mitigate the usually lower impact of virtual mobility projects, by offering a short physical mobility part that is possible for almost all students to participate in. BIPs combine online activities with face-to-face sessions, encouraging participants to engage in a variety of learning activities, an approach that not only enhances language skills but also fosters a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and mutual understanding (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education & Culture, 2022). Several studies about effectiveness of short term mobility have been published, but the number of studies into the effectiveness of the Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Projects, the combination of virtual and short term physical mobility, are (still) scarce. One of the obvious reasons for this is that the program is still relatively new and not a lot of time has passed to study the results. On the other hand, it is quite complex to study the effects of participation in such a BIP, as it is difficult to distinguish between the effects of virtual and physical mobility on the participants, let alone the combination of the two. Several attempts have been made so far, to study the effects of BIPs.

2.2 Organizational aspects of BIPs

O'Dowd and Werner (2024) have focused on the organizational part of the programs, and have queried academic coordinators for their experiences. Their conclusion is that BIPs are still in their infancy and that these programs are relatively complex and need a strong collaboration and common understanding between academic and support staff in order to be executed successfully. Similarly, Palmquist et al. (2024) describe the challenges of organizing BIPs as such, as well as the challenge to combine existing teaching methods with the organizational requirements of BIPs. Frampton et al. (2025) however, consider the BIP framework to be an “almost ideal” method for organizing education to let students learn by experimenting. This view is shared by others, stating that BIPs are less rigid and easier to implement than other new (international) education models (Moya-Lopez et al., 2025; Piščikienė & Ginavičienė, 2023; Šajn et al., 2024).

2.3 Student experiences and impact on learning

Another direction of studies is into student experiences and student learning related to BIP participation. Even though student experiences in BIPs are to a certain extent context specific and not easily transferable to other academic fields, some general findings can be observed. Šajn et al. (2024) observed that students with BIP experience tend to attach slightly greater importance to cross-disciplinary soft skills than students without BIP experience. Other studies observe a development in cross-disciplinary skills themselves (Barana et al., 2024; Duś-Ilnicka et al., 2024; Moya-Lopez et al., 2025; Podlaski et al., 2025), an increasing self-efficacy among participating students in terms of the application of theoretical concepts in practice (Palmquist et al., 2024; Piščikienė & Ginavičienė, 2023), increasing competencies in intercultural collaboration (Frampton et al., 2025; Prada et al., 2025) and a better understanding of relevant theoretical concepts (Laine et al., 2024; Piščikienė & Ginavičienė, 2023) as well as relevant international business ecosystems (Laine et al., 2024). An important benefit of BIPs is that they lower existing barriers for international experience for students, therefore contributing to more inclusive education (Cobelli & Amato, 2024).

3. PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study deals with the impact of participation in a Blended Intensive Program on the students involved. It deals with a BIP that was running in three consecutive years, 2023, 2024 and 2025 with involvement of universities in Romania, The Netherlands, Hungary, Denmark and Portugal. This BIP was not the first project collaboration between the partners involved, but instead a continuation of more than 10 years of short-term international Dutch-Romanian exchange projects for students. These projects consisted of a one-week exchange program between the students of the home universities of the authors (Bazen & Duma, 2019; Bazen et al., 2015). As these projects were organized yearly (except for the two Covid-19 pandemic years), the partners had a lot of experience in this type of collaborative projects, so that organizationally there were relatively low barriers to commence working together on BIPs. The existing format of the projects before turning them into BIPs, was as a one-week intensive course and research work, with preparation in advance, together with a business and/or a societal organization. These organizations acted as clients and proposed a specific and practical assignment that the students from both countries had to address during that week and came up with a presentation of their solutions and proposal at the end the project. Such clients were usually Dutch companies with activities in Romania, to make sure that students from both countries would need each other and would feel involvement. Clients included companies and organizations such as: Aegon, E. van Wijk logistics, local societal organizations in Cluj, such as Asociatia Cluj 21-Capitala Culturala Europeana, the Dutch business club or the Ethnographic Museum. The assignments proposed throughout the years were very diverse, ranging from improving urban mobility in Cluj with bicycle lines, revitalization of the Ethnographic open-air museum, courtyard developments in the city center and a comparative analysis of the Dutch and the Romanian pension system. The organizers were therefore well prepared to adopt the BIP framework to expand the effectiveness of the projects. The application for the first BIPs was launched in 2022, and already from the first year of implementation, in May 2023 the first BIP was organized, called Financial Management in the international companies. The first BIP brought together more than 30 students and academic staff from the Netherlands, Hungary and

Romania. In 2024, an even larger BIP was organized, this time with four universities involved: Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Portugal, University College of Northern Denmark, Saxion University, the Netherlands and Babes-Bolyai University, Romania, with almost 60 participating students and academic staff. In April 2025, the third BIP was organized, with about 40 participating students and staff with the same four partner universities. During these three BIPs, the students had onsite courses during the physical week at the Faculty of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and online courses, as well, during the online period and, in the end, they received 3 ECTS. Besides the courses, in order to combine the theoretical part with some practical applications, the students were involved in several small research projects within international companies based in Romania, such as DN Agrar, SFC Energy or E. van Wijk logistics. These research projects or company assignments were on different topics such as electrical long-haul freight transport for E. van Wijk logistics, production efficiency increase for SFC Energy, increasing efficiency of financial administration and on circular economy at DN Agrar. The students participating in the BIP were from different study programs, to achieve as much as possible multi-disciplinary learning.

The main research topic for this paper is to measure the influence these three Blended Intensive Programs had on developing international competences and skills in the participating students. To measure this, the students were given two sets of questionnaires, one before the project started and one after the project ended, a “pre-test” and a “post-test.” The pre-test consisted of 24 questions, while the post-test had 28, in both cases, a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questions in both tests were almost similar, just that in the post-test, some questions were changed from the future to the past tense. Some extra open-ended questions for specific feedback and improvement suggestions were added. In the pretest, the focus was mostly on students' expectations related to the program, while in the post-test, more on what the students learned and achieved. By comparing the results of both tests, the perceived personal development of the students after participating in one of the blended intensive programs could be identified. The first questions were about some basic identification information and if they have already participated in an Erasmus+ student exchange semester, and/or in an internship abroad or if they have any international work experience. Then a few questions about how familiar they are with Romania and the city of Cluj-Napoca, where the host university is located. We continued with the main questions, asking the students about their perceived skills, like the ability to work in international projects, desire to have an international career, confidence in working together with people from different cultures, creativity, desire to open their own business, openness for new experiences, desire for working together with students from different disciplines etc. We asked them to grade their answers on a scale from 1 to 5. The last questions were about their expectations and learning outcomes from the program in the case of the pretest, while for the post-test were related to results, feedback and improvement suggestions.

4. FINDINGS

The questionnaire with pretest and post-test was sent out to all participants over the three years of the BIP projects, in total to 130 participants. The total response for the pre- and post-tests was 93, meaning a response percentage of 72%. Individual questions could have lower response percentages, as some questions were left blank by the respondents. In cases where this happened, it is mentioned specifically.

In terms of participation in all the BIPs together, there were more male than female participants, 34 females and 59 males. This gender disbalance is caused by the fact that most students were from technical studies, such as Industrial Engineering & Management or Mechanical Engineering. The participation rate among males/females within the BIP is not significantly different compared to the general population of students from the originating study programs. In terms of the participating nationalities, Table 1 shows the nationalities/citizenships of the participants.

Table 1: Citizenship of the BIP Participants

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Danish	17	18.3
Dutch	28	30.1
Hungarian	8	8.6
Portuguese	18	19.4
Romanian	22	23.7
Total	93	100.0

The BIPs were open for both undergraduate/bachelor and graduate/master students. Of all 93 respondents, 78 (83%) studied at bachelor level and 15 (17%) on master level. Table 2 shows the previous international experience of the respondents, of which none is statistically significantly different for study level or citizenship. In other words, the group of participants appears to be homogeneous in terms of previous international experience when controlling for citizenship or study level. The percentage of respondents with previous Erasmus+ mobility participation is almost three times as high as the average percentage of 9% Erasmus+ mobility participation for all students in the EU (European Commission, 2024).

Table 2: Previous international experience of the participants

Type of international experience	Yes	No	Percentage Yes
Has worked abroad or done an internship abroad before	27	66	29.0
Has participated in an Erasmus+ mobility semester for study/internship before	24	69	25.8

Table 3 shows an overview of the reported proficiency level in English of the participants. The self-assessment of the students indicates, just like with the previous Erasmus+ participation, that the group of participants might have a participation bias, as the reported levels of proficiency in English are higher than those of the average student population.

Table 3: Self-assessment of level of proficiency in English

Level of proficiency	Frequency	Percentage
Beginner	3	3.2
Intermediate	24	25.8
Advanced	36	38.7
Proficient	24	25.8
(Near) native speaker	6	6.5
Total	93	100.0

Given these personal characteristics of the participants, taking into account that they already have on average more professional international experience and language proficiency than the average student population, there may be a participation bias among the participants of these three BIP programmes, in the sense that they have attracted more students who are quite internationally oriented in the first place.

To measure the effectiveness of the educational intervention, in terms of development of skills and attitude towards intercultural and ambiguous situations, a pre- and post-test was filled in by the participants. First of all, both before and after the BIP, participants were asked to fill in a self-evaluation of their level of English proficiency. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare differences between the reported level of proficiency in English before and after the test. As the pre and post-tests were separate questionnaires and both were anonymous, it was not possible to integrate them into paired samples. There was no significant difference in reported level of English proficiency before and after BIP participation, $t = -.664$, p (two-tailed) = .507 (indicating a statistical non-significant difference), Cohen's $d = -.112$ (indicating a very weak effect). This t-test indicates that the post-test participants reported on average a slightly higher level of English proficiency, but that these differences are statistically not significant.

The goal of a BIP is to develop intercultural competences among the participants. To test this, questions on personality, future career and intercultural skills were asked in both the pre and post-tests. Participants ranked their answers on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. An independent sample t-test was conducted for all the different questions in the survey. Although some differences in the results can be observed, none of the differences between pre- and post-tests are statistically significant. Table 4 shows the details of the t-test for each variable.

Table 4: Results independent t-test on scores of pre-test and post-test (n=93)

Statement	Mean Pre-test	Mean Post-test	t-score	Significance p (two-sided)
I have enough skills to work on international projects	3.84	4.04	-1.443	.151
I would like to have an international career	3.88	3.89	-.091	.928
I feel confident in working with people from other cultures	4.02	4.15	-.922	.358
I like to work on projects with open, unknown outcomes	3.49	3.67	-1.084	.280
I consider myself to be creative	3.53	3.51	.122	.903
I would like to have my own business	3.51	3.28	1.051	.295
I consider myself to be open-minded (n=92)	4.32	4.29	.182	.856
I am always looking for new and exciting experiences (n=92)	4.23	4.13	.738	.461
Stability is important for me	3.68	3.84	-.962	.338

To illustrate the differences between pre-test and post-test, the scores are visualized in Figure 1 to 3, with Figure 1 being both scores on personality statements, Figure 2 being the scores on intercultural skills and Figure 3 being the scores on future career ideas. Even though none of the changes is statistically significant in this study, it nonetheless shows some interesting potential directions that are worth exploring further in future studies. Since the

number of respondents of these three BIPs is limited, a larger number of respondents would potentially show more easily whether these changes would be significant or not.



Figure 1: Personality scores and development during BIP participation



Figure 2: Intercultural skills scores and development during BIP participation

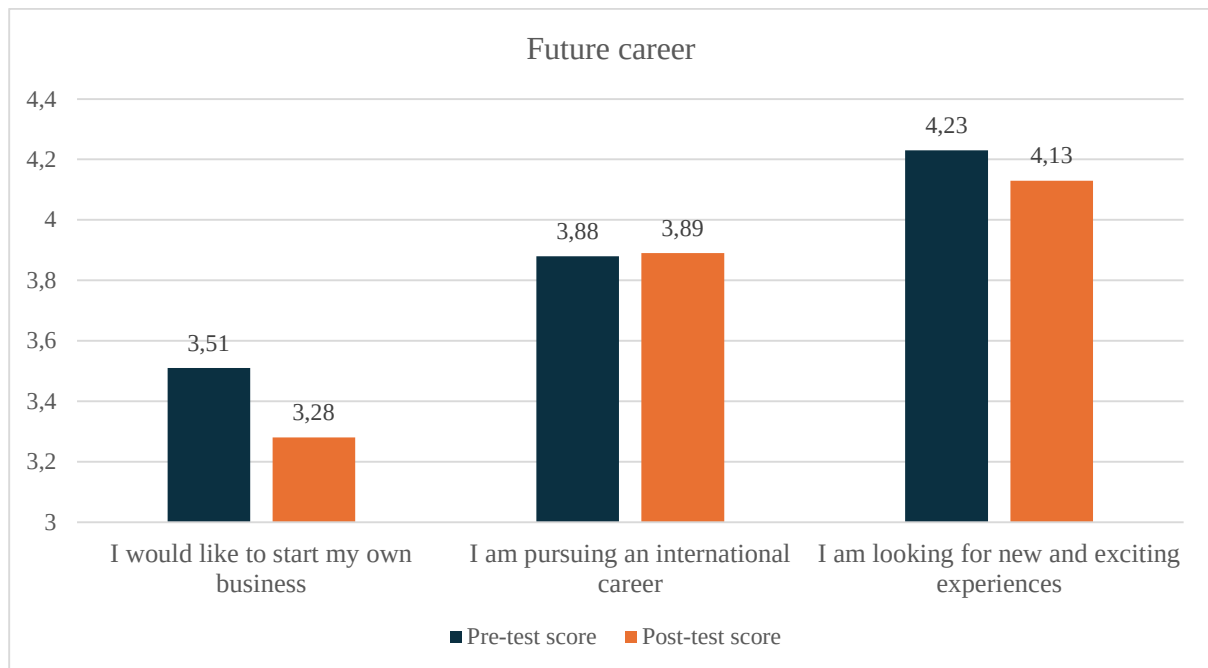


Figure 3: Future career scores and development during BIP participation

Interesting differences on the pre-test and post-test scores can be seen on the intercultural communication skills, which all show an upward direction, and for personality scores it appears as if students perceive stability more on the expense of creativity and open-mindedness after participation. Still, more research is needed to establish whether these relationships are statistically significant or not. In terms of future career, the students appear to be less interested in starting their own business and looking for new and exciting experiences, even though this score remains very high, with an average of more than 4 on a scale of 5.

Given the relatively small number of respondents/BIP participants, it is useful to have some more qualitative data next to the more quantitative data, as discussed before. Participants were asked about what they consider to be the most valuable learning experience in the BIP and what they think could be improved to make participation in such a BIP (even) more worthwhile. Table 5 shows a clustering of subjects mentioned by the participants as their most important learning results from participation in the BIP. By far most respondents mention that they have learned to work better with people from abroad, understood better the different ways that people from different countries work and become more effective in bridging these differences (41 mentions). The second most mentioned aspect was about learning new content, in terms of theoretical knowledge, for example on financial analysis, new previously unknown brainstorming techniques or conditions for investment (15 mentions), the third most mentioned learning was about getting to know more practical knowledge of international businesses work (12 mentions), and the fourth most mentioned learning was about becoming better in teamwork (9 mentions). Indeed, as expected from previous literature on the subject of BIPs and short term mobility, also in these BIPs, the reported learning from the participants focuses on practicing intercultural communication and having apparently the feeling of becoming more skillful and knowledgeable in handling cultural differences and still being able to deliver a meaningful team product.

Table 5: Most important learning results from participation in the BIP (n=78)

Learning results	Mentioned by # of respondents*
Learning to work better with people from abroad	41
Learned previously unknown methods/content	15
Practical knowledge of international business	12
Becoming better in teamwork	9
Becoming more open-minded personally	8
Project management general	7
Becoming more organized	4
Language improvement	4
Knowing more about Romania	2
Motivating others	1
Overcoming fear of public speaking	1
Not much	1

*some respondents mentioned more than 1 “most important” thing that they learned

There were also several issues that participants would like to see improved in future versions of BIPs, some of the improvement suggestions were specifically aimed at the individual BIP in which they participated, some have a more general overarching meaning for different BIPs and could even be useful for policy makers. The suggestions for improvement are listed in Table 6.

Table 6: Most important points for improvement of the BIP (n=73)

Improvement categories	Mentioned by # of respondents*
Better structure/schedule/planning of the physical mobility	37
More (time for) socio-cultural (i.e. not assignment related) activities	10
Communication problems in general	8
Time issues, too little time for group work, physical mobility too short	7
Communication problems during groupwork within and between groups	6
Motivation improvement of group members	4
Bureaucratic hassle to apply for the BIP grant	3
Feeling sort of lost at the host university/lack of support local host	3
No relevant points for improvement	2
Quality of participating lecturers in general	2
Insufficient intercultural competences of some of the lecturers involved	1
Better preparation of the practical tasks during the virtual mobility	1

*some respondents mentioned more than 1 important thing that they would like to see improved

Around half of the respondents (37 mentions) indicated that they considered that more structure or better planning was needed to let them experience the physical mobility period better. This is an interesting finding, especially since it strongly connects with intercultural skills in planning and doing international/intercultural projects. When people from different cultures communicate, ambiguity in communication (e.g. high context communication) may be easily interpreted as an unclear message in general or a lack of planning & control. Other frequently mentioned points were about too few socio-cultural activities (e.g. museum visits & sightseeing activities), either organized or with time-slots for own initiatives (10 mentions). Communication problems in terms of language differences or miscommunication (8 mentions) came in third and that the physical mobility was too short in general (7 mentions) was fourth.

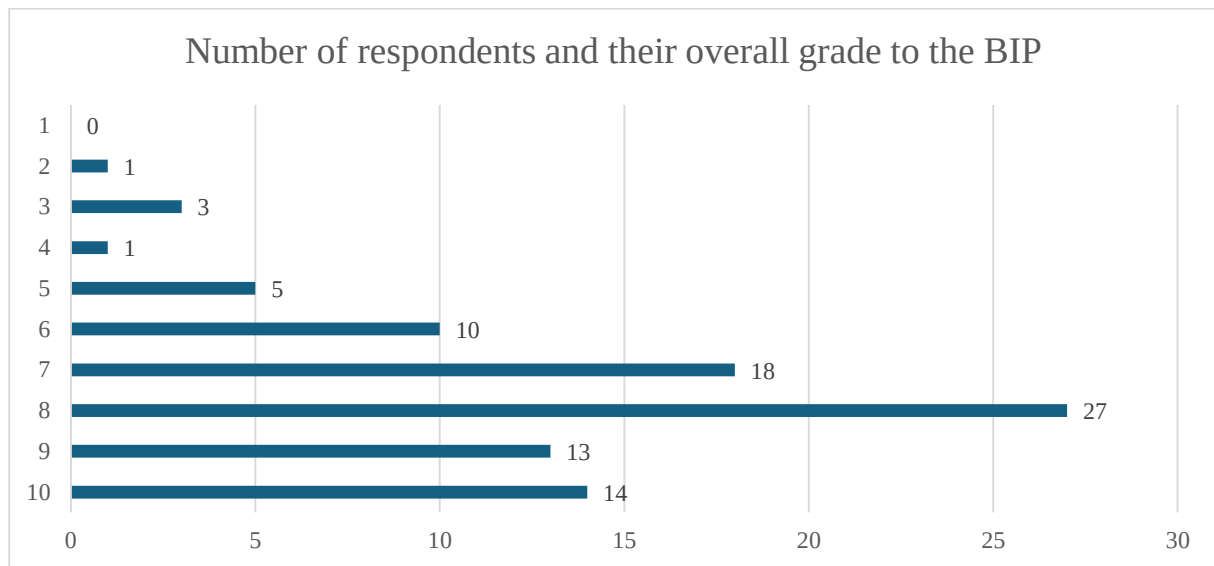


Figure 4: BIP Satisfaction, overall grade of the BIP (1 to 10)

Finally, the question was asked that overlooking everything (i.e. what they learned, what they enjoyed and what could be improved), which grade the participants would give to the BIP, ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 would be extremely bad and 10 would be an outstanding life-changing experience. Figure 4 shows a visual overview of all respondents that gave a certain grade for participation in the program. The range of grades is large: 14 respondents gave the program an outstanding grade, and one respondent graded the program with a very poor grade. The average grade for the BIP is 7.6, with no statistically significant difference between the different BIP editions.

5. DISCUSSION

The effects of participation in the BIP, as measured in between the pre-test and post-test, have not been shown to be significant. This however could change when a larger number of respondents is interviewed, so that sample-size related uncertainty will be lower. The direction of the development of the perceived attitudes and skills of the participants is interesting. Their scores on intercultural skills are apparently all improving, whereas their attitude towards an international career and especially towards entrepreneurship, seems to be decreasing. It is unclear what causes these decreases and that would be a good subject for further, qualitative research.

One of the other directions for further research would be to focus also on the longer term impact of participation in a BIP, and compare the results with a control group which did not participate in such a BIP. From the available BIP literature, the picture arises that long term impact studies are very scarce. Furthermore, even though BIPs have the aim to lower the barriers for mobility participation, it is still questionable whether this aim has been reached. The results of this study show that there is still a likely participation bias. Erasmus+ mobility experience and international work/internship experience are clearly higher than among the general student population. One of the areas of study could be why students, given the generous funding opportunities, still experience barriers to participate in such a program.

6. CONCLUSION

Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) under Erasmus+ represent a promising innovation in international higher education, combining the flexibility of online learning with the immersive benefits of short-term physical mobility. This study investigated three BIPs conducted between 2023 and 2025, focusing on their impact on students' intercultural skills, international competence, and personal development.

Quantitative analysis using pre- and post-program surveys revealed no statistically significant changes across most measured variables. However, there were modest trends suggesting improved self-perception in intercultural communication and teamwork abilities. The lack of statistically significant outcomes may be due to the small sample size, the brief physical mobility period, or the fact that many participants already had above-average international experience and language proficiency—a possible indication of participation bias. Despite the limited statistical findings, qualitative feedback strongly supports the educational value of BIPs. Students highlighted key learning outcomes such as improved collaboration across cultures, exposure to practical business contexts, and the application of theory in real-world settings. Challenges included logistical planning issues, limited socio-cultural engagement, and time constraints during the physical mobility phase.

Overall, while more robust, large-scale, and longitudinal research is needed to determine long-term impacts, this study affirms that BIPs offer valuable experiential learning opportunities. They may not dramatically shift student competencies in the short term but do contribute meaningfully to international exposure and soft skill development. Addressing logistical issues and broadening access to students less likely to seek international experiences could enhance their impact further. BIPs should continue to evolve as inclusive, interdisciplinary tools within the broader landscape of European higher education.

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