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Fostering Multilingualism and Intercultural Engagement in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Supportive Institutional Actions

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ABSTRACT: Over its 40 years, the Erasmus program has significantly shaped the European Higher Education Area. However, many students show limited integration into host languages and cultures, often socializing mainly with other exchange students and relying on English. As international relations offices play a key role in fostering integration, this study combines a systematic literature review with an analysis of university initiatives to identify effective institutional practices. Following PRISMA guidelines and the PICO framework, it examines peer-reviewed studies and institutional actions supporting multilingualism and intercultural engagement. The findings highlight ten successful initiatives, including Erasmus Student Networks, buddy programs, tandem exchanges, and language cafés. The results also reveal significant variability across institutions in terms of organizational structure and access to resources. Overall, the study identifies practical actions that enhance social integration, cultural participation, and multilingual development, offering guidance for improving the exchange of student experiences in higher education.

Keywords: Higher education, intercultural exchange, internationalization, multilingualism, student mobility

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INTRODUCTION

European and national higher education policies have increasingly highlighted the need for inclusive, sustainable, and pedagogically grounded approaches to multilingual and intercultural education. Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Rome Ministerial Communiqué (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2020) and the Tirana Communiqué (EHEA, 2024) emphasized the development of a more inclusive, innovative, and interconnected higher education system, linking higher education to quality learning and teaching, democratic values, and social responsibility. The Council recommended a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning, identifying multilingual competence as essential for mobility, employability, active citizenship, and social cohesion in Europe (Council of the European Union, 2019). Moreover, the report titled The European Higher Education Area in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024) shows that many higher education systems are strengthening policies on inclusion, learning and teaching, mobility, and internationalization. As higher education institutions (HEIs) across the EHEA expand their international programs, the demand for institutional structures that support multilingual development and intercultural engagement has substantially increased.

Recent research also indicates that students' decisions to participate in Erasmus+ mobility are driven not only by academic goals but also by aspirations related to foreign-language development, cultural experience, and career advancement; however, these motivations are still shaped by structural constraints that affect access and participation across national contexts (Sułkowski & Ulatowska, 2025). Despite these policy commitments, multilingual programs often rely heavily on monolingual or first-language instructional traditions, providing limited opportunities for authentic linguistic immersion or intercultural interaction. Although the exact proportions vary across contexts, previous studies have shown that language barriers, limited local peer networks, and weak engagement with the host community remain recurrent challenges for exchange students (Aydin, 2020; Németh et al., 2025; Resch & Amorim, 2021; Schoe et al., 2021). This is especially relevant in large-scale mobility programs such as

Erasmus+, where institutional support is needed to ensure that mobility leads to meaningful multilingual and intercultural participation rather than only physical presence abroad. They may follow courses primarily in English, socialize predominantly with other international peers, and remain peripheral to local sociocultural dynamics. Such patterns can weaken both linguistic advancement and intercultural competence and abilities that are increasingly essential for employability in globalized professional contexts. This concern is reinforced by recent evidence from Németh et al.'s (2025) study showing that language barriers and difficulties in building meaningful relationships with local peers remain among the most significant obstacles to exchange students' integration, often intensifying social distance and limiting intercultural engagement.

This study analyzes institutional initiatives designed to enhance the linguistic, cultural, and social integration of exchange students in European HEIs and updates the current knowledge on organizational practices that promote multilingualism and intercultural communication, offering recommendations grounded in evidence from both the literature and institutional practice. In general terms, the results reveal that although many institutions offer introductory activities such as orientation sessions or short language courses, these actions are often fragmented, insufficient, or difficult to access. A lack of structured, long-term support may hinder the establishment of meaningful social networks and the development of students' multilingual identities. Finally, the complete set of identified actions is compiled with evidence in an interactive digital flipbook (Molka-Danielsen, J., et al., 2024) to guide institutions in designing sustainable and student-centered support systems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is organized around three interrelated analytical axes: first, a plurilingual understanding of language development; second, intercultural competence as a developmental and communicative process; and third, the social and relational conditions that enable interaction between exchange students, local students and host communities. This organization allows policy documents, theoretical models and empirical studies to be interpreted according to their specific function within the review. Mobility does not guarantee intercultural learning or multilingual participation. From this perspective and considering the internationalization of higher education as an institutional and curricular project, Knight (2004) conceptualized internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into higher education. In this sense, international mobility becomes educationally meaningful when higher education institutions intentionally connect formal curricula, informal learning spaces, student support structures, and opportunities for sustained interaction with local communities. Similarly, Leask (2009) reported that meaningful interaction between home and exchange students depends on how institutions deliberately design, encourage, and reward contact across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

In relation to a plurilingual understanding of language development, the Council of Europe (2020) distinguishes plurilingualism from a static view of

multilingualism by emphasizing that learners draw on an integrated repertoire of languages and cultural resources across situations. This perspective is particularly useful for exchange settings, where students often navigate between their home languages, English, and the host country language. In parallel, the model of intercultural communicative competence moved language education beyond grammatical accuracy by highlighting attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). Byram (2021) also established the premier intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model used in global education. His research shows that language learning must extend beyond vocabulary and grammar and that true competence requires specific attitudes (openness and curiosity), knowledge of how social groups function, and skills in interpreting, comparing, and discovering other cultures. Furthermore, language instruction must include cultural literacy to be fully effective (Byram, 2021), which means that institutional actions should be evaluated not only by whether they improve host-language proficiency in the narrow term but also by whether they expand students' communicative repertoire, confidence, and ability to act across languages and cultures.

Intercultural competence as a developmental outcome of higher education internationalization can be conceptualized as a process involving attitudes such as openness and curiosity, the acquisition of cultural knowledge and self-awareness, and the development of skills that ultimately enable appropriate and effective interaction in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006). This processual approach is consistent with that of several researchers (Aksezer et al., 2023; Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska, 2023; Ivenz & Klimova, 2023) because it suggests that intercultural competence is not acquired through mere exposure to diversity but through guided participation, reflection, and repeated interaction. The theoretical implication is that multilingual and intercultural engagement require developmental pathways and structured support, not simply access to an international campus. Recent qualitative research with Erasmus participants (Primorac et al., 2025) suggests that mobility contributes to intercultural growth when students engage in concrete communicative practices such as active listening, question-asking, shared activities, and reflective awareness of their own cultural positioning rather than through exposure alone.

With respect to higher education mobility, the social and relational dimensions of language and cultural learning help explain why casual coexistence on campuses is often insufficient, whereas structured peer initiatives can be much more effective. This relational perspective is also supported by Aydin (2020), who shows that social interaction between local and exchange students cannot be assumed to be an automatic outcome of physical presence on campus. In other words, meaningful interaction depends on the conditions under which students meet, communicate and develop friendship networks. This finding reinforces the need to understand institutional initiatives such as buddy programs, language cafés and ESN activities as structured opportunities for sustained intercultural contact. Contact theory has long suggested that prejudice is reduced and mutual understanding is enhanced when interaction occurs under favorable conditions

such as cooperation, common goals, and institutional support. In this sense, Resch and Amorim (2021) reported that facilitated encounters contribute to inclusion and social network formation among exchange students. Similarly, Mas-Alcolea and Torres-Purroy (2022) and Strawbridge (2023) reported that foreign language development during study abroad is strongly mediated by social networks and the kinds of relationships students can build. In other words, learning occurs through participation in communities of practice. From this perspective, buddy programs, tandem schemes, conversation assistance, and ESN activities can be understood as mechanisms that move exchange students from peripheral participation toward fuller participation in the host institution's linguistic and social life.

Consequently, the present review proceeds from the assumption that multilingual and intercultural engagement should not be understood as an automatic byproduct of student mobility but as an institutionally mediated process. Successful institutional action is therefore understood as an action that makes multilingualism visible and enables sustained intercultural learning socially embedded across the whole mobility cycle, from prearrival to departure and possibly reengagement. The reviewed materials consistently foreground actions, which suggest that multilingual and intercultural engagement should not be understood as an automatic byproduct of student mobility but as an institutionally mediated process.

However, the literature still has several limitations. Many studies focus on students' motivations, experiences or perceived outcomes, while less attention is given to the concrete institutional actions that make multilingual and intercultural engagement possible. On the other hand, policy documents frequently emphasize internationalization, inclusion and multilingual competence, but they do not always clarify how these principles are translated into everyday university practices. Finally, empirical studies often analyze specific initiatives, such as buddy programs, language activities or virtual exchange, without offering an integrated overview of how different actions operate across the mobility cycle. These gaps justify the need for a review that connects theoretical principles, empirical evidence and active institutional practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study was framed within the interpretive paradigm and followed a qualitative review design aimed at identifying institutional actions that support home language visibility and recognition and intercultural interaction among exchange students in European higher education. From this perspective, institutional actions were not treated merely as isolated services or administrative resources but as educational practices that may facilitate linguistic participation, intercultural contact and social integration during international mobility. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when the research seeks to understand educational practices, meanings and processes within their real contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the analysis was understood as a form of documentary analysis, which allows researchers to examine meaningful sources of qualitative evidence about organizational practices and institutional priorities (Bowen, 2009). In

accordance with this approach, the following two primary research questions were addressed to guide the review and development of the repository:

1. Which institutional actions are implemented by European HEIs to support home-language visibility and recognition and intercultural interaction?
2. Which actions are demonstrably active and successfully implemented within the EHEA?

The resulting dataset highlights good practices that can be integrated into strategic plans for multilingual and intercultural support.

The methodological design was derived from the theoretical framework outlined above. In particular, the selection of institutional actions was informed by three analytical assumptions: First, plurilingual development requires opportunities to use and value different linguistic repertoires; second, intercultural communicative competence, following Byram's (1997) model, requires situations in which students can interpret, relate, interact and develop critical cultural awareness; and third, social integration depends on sustained and institutionally supported contact rather than mere physical copresence. For this reason, the review did not include every service addressed to exchange students but focused specifically on actions that combined linguistic support, intercultural interaction and evidence of active institutional implementation. The resulting dataset was used to identify good practices that can inform strategic planning for multilingual and intercultural support in higher education. In this sense, the methodological design connects academic evidence with verifiable institutional initiatives, offering a basis for analyzing how universities promote multilingualism, intercultural engagement, and student integration beyond formal curricular provision.

Review Framework and Search Strategy

To identify actions that influence strategic policy, the coauthors conducted a systematic literature review using two main sources of information: published research from peer-reviewed journals and open-access websites and platforms of European higher education institutions. The authors followed the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and used the PICO framework (population/research object, intervention, comparison, and outcome) to define the search terms (Richardson, 1995; Sackett et al., 1997; Schardt et al., 2007). The PICO framework can be used to develop a search strategy for systematic reviews. Although typically applied in systematic reviews in health disciplines and in evidence-based research, the PICO framework has also been applied in other disciplines, such as mapping software engineering trends in education. (Cico et al., 2020). The inclusion of outcomes (segment 3) in our search term has been found to reduce recall (Frandsen et al., 2020). However, we provide several types of outputs with the intention to increase the recall.

The literature search was conducted in ProQuest's Education Collection, focusing on peer-reviewed, full-text journal publications (2021–December 2025) in English.

The Boolean search included keywords related to the PICO framework: population (segment 1), intervention (segment 2), and outcome (segment 3). Segment 1 included terms such as “higher education,” “exchange student,” or “ESN” paired with “Europe”. Segment 2 focused on interventions such as “Erasmus experience,” “intercultural exchange,” “buddy programs,” and “home language”. Segment 3 targeted outcomes such as “experiences,” “practices,” “strategies,” or “policies”. This search yielded 343 results, which were independently screened into a short list of 147 articles relevant to multilingual and intercultural student support.

Identification of Action Types

The coauthors (2 and 3) extracted key concepts from the literature, providing evidence of strategies or protocols related to integrating exchange students and offering support for home language use, concepts related to institutional support, language development, intercultural contact and student integration. A list of key concepts was extracted from the 147 papers, including mobility networks, Erasmus networks, social networks, field trips, friendship networks (buddy networks), intercultural contacts, informal educational experiences, sociocultural identities (exchange students), storytelling, intercultural teaching competence, global citizenship, guided encounters, multicultural dialog, virtual exchange, virtual mobility, cultural tourism, intercultural mediation, and emotional proximity to contacts (e.g., program peer and host community member). The researchers compared their coding, discussed discrepancies and grouped semantically related codes into broader action types. The 10 final categories were therefore not predefined but derived inductively from repeated patterns in the literature and then cross-checked against the institutional website database. Interrater reliability was addressed through independent coding, comparisons of coding decisions, consensus discussion and final validation by the research team.

Open-Access Website Review

After the systematic literature review and to address the second research question regarding active implementation, an open-access website search was conducted to identify active institutional initiatives implemented by higher education institutions. This procedure was approached as a qualitative documentary and web-content review, since institutional webpages, program descriptions, event calendars and university service pages provide publicly available evidence of how organizations present, structure and operationalize their actions. Web-content-based approaches allow researchers to analyze preselected organizational websites systematically, reducing their reliance on unsystematic interpretation of institutional information (Raum & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2022) and the use of online public data to increase procedural transparency (Cheong et al.,

2023). In general terms, in this study, the self-reported open-access website review complemented the academic literature with verifiable examples of multilingual and intercultural support actions currently offered to exchange students.

The open-access website review resulted in a convenience sample of 282 data entries. With respect to the geographic distribution of the data, the sample was collected from six countries: Portugal (85), Spain (81), Finland (39), Sweden (39), Norway (32), and Poland (3).

Data Collection and Methodology

While restricted to six countries, English descriptions were used to verify the relevance of intercultural exchanges. For each entry, researchers collected the university name, location, action description (beginning, middle, or end of stay), and evidence via a direct URL.

Selection Criteria for the Digital Repository

From the initial entries ($n=282$), 28 active examples across 10 categories were identified for a digital repository (flipbook). Entries were excluded if they were duplicated, inaccessible, purely administrative, insufficiently described or unrelated to multilingual and intercultural support. The remaining entries were assessed according to three criteria: language promotion, social interaction, and active verification.

Language promotion referred to concrete opportunities for students to use, learn, practice or value one the home language in the context of mobility. Social interaction was defined as planned reciprocal contact between exchange students and local students, other exchange students, university staff, volunteers or members of the host community through academic and/or daily activities that allow natural, flexible, and balanced interaction. In general terms, social interaction includes activities that add value to a student's integration into university life and the surrounding environment. Active verification required more than a working URL, and it had to include evidence that the initiative was currently available or recently implemented, such as updated dates, registration information, contact details, event calendars, responsible units or explicit indications that the program was ongoing. When several initiatives met these criteria, priority was given to original or high-value actions with clear potential to support students' integration into university life and/or the local environment. Additionally, an action described anything from a simple individual activity to comprehensive, multicomponent programs or strategies designed to support an institution's intercultural exchange goals.

Analytical framework

The synthesis of findings followed an analytical framework that connected evidence from the literature with institutional practice. Concepts extracted from the reviewed studies were first grouped into broader analytical dimensions, including linguistic development, intercultural contact and social integration. These dimensions were theoretically informed by research on plurilingual development, intercultural communicative competence and social network formation in international mobility contexts (Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2020; Deardorff, 2006; Resch & Amorim, 2021). They were then used to interpret the institutional website data and to classify active initiatives according to their main function, following a qualitative documentary and web-content logic (Cheong et al., 2023; Raum & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2022). In this way, the 10 final categories emerged from the convergence between recurrent concepts in the literature and verifiable practices identified in higher education institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We identified ten recurrent categories of actions that support multilingualism and intercultural exchange, as shown in Table 1. The list should not be interpreted as exhaustive. One action, whether a simple action or a complex program, can support many key concepts, such as those identified in the literature review. The full repositories of our findings may be accessed from the digital flipbook (Molka-Danielsen, et al., 2024).

Table 1: Categories of Actions and Supporting Strategies

Categories of actions	<i>Literature review</i>	<i>Supporting strategies</i>
Erasmus Student Networks	Abdulai and Roosalu (2022); Kosztyán, Kiss and Obermayer (2023); Resch and Amorim (2021); Sobkowiak (2021); Unver et al. (2021)	Erasmus network
Buddy Program	Aladegbaiye et al. (2022); Gadár et al. (2022); Peng and Fred (2022); Strawbridge (2023); Tavares (2023); Trang and Phuong (2023)	Intercultural network
Orientation Days	Aksezer et al. (2023)	Friendship network
Conversational Assistance	Mas-Alcolea and Torres-Purroy (2022)	Social networks
Language in a Nutshell	Ivenz and Klimova (2023)	Guided encounters
Welcome Center/Point	Cuzzocrea and Krzaklewska (2023)	Multicultural dialog
Virtual Tours	Peng and Fred (2022); Marin-Pantelescu et al. (2022)	Emotional proximity

Tandem Experiences	Resch and Amorim (2021); Strawbridge (2023); Marin-Pantelescu et al. (2022)	Intercultural contacts
International Student Day	Resch and Amorim (2021)	Virtual Exchange
Language Cafés	Resch and Amorim (2021)	Intercultural teaching

These categories align with key concepts from the literature, including social networks, guided encounters, informal learning, storytelling, and emotional proximity.

Erasmus student network (ESN) activities

Across European higher education institutions, Erasmus Student Network (ESN) sections implement various activities aimed at fostering social integration and intercultural exchange among exchange students. ESN structures provide a wide range of support before, during, and after mobility periods. Activities include welcome events, guided cultural visits, social gatherings, and peer-led language practices. ESNs may operate in different contexts. Some operate independently, while others are operating in partnership with university international offices. To provide an example of an operation context, the student organization SiMolde in Norway partners with the International Relations Office to share responsibility for supporting exchange students. These organizations offer a variety of inclusive activities, such as a managed calendar of social events, student events, and access to facilities such as training rooms, relaxing spaces, and swimming areas. While the operating and governance structure of the ESN office may have implications for how active students are in the design of integration and intercultural activities, the assessment of the effectiveness of alternative operation strategies is beyond the scope of this paper.

The ESN at the University of Helsinki (Finland) also organizes initiatives such as guided city tours, international dinners, and excursions to culturally significant sites such as Suomenlinna, a UNESCO World Heritage site, which allow students to engage with local history and community life. Similarly, ESN at the University of Porto (Portugal) promotes intercultural interaction through a ‘World Dinner’ event, where students prepare and share traditional dishes from their home countries, participate in a friendly chef competition, and engage in karaoke sessions featuring songs from diverse cultural backgrounds, often accompanied by national symbols and traditional attire. At Linköping University (Sweden), ESN activities are structured around smaller buddy groups and include informal social events such as movie nights, barbecues, and outdoor hikes, creating opportunities for sustained peer interaction and social bonding. Collectively, these initiatives illustrate how ESN activities contribute to meaningful intercultural engagement and community building within exchange student populations.

The Buddy Program

According to the literature on different university platforms (access to links in the institutions references below), buddy programs are widespread and effective mechanisms for promoting integration into university life and to the municipality where students are located. It fosters strong social networks and creates opportunities for meaningful contact with local students. In summary, the buddy program facilitates both the social integration and practice of the local language.

The most common activities associated with buddy programs are typically structured across the different stages of student exchange. At the beginning of the exchange, incoming students are assigned buddies who act as mentors who welcome them to the institution, introduce themselves, and explain their role in supporting the exchange process. This initial phase also often includes goal-setting discussions, during which buddies and incoming students reflect on objectives related to cultural and linguistic adaptation. During the exchange period, buddies provide ongoing guidance and support concerning university life, such as information about facilities, services, and institutional rules, while also addressing students' questions and concerns. In parallel, a range of social activities, including cultural events, excursions, informal gatherings, and shared meals, are organized to encourage participation and social interaction. Regular follow-up is maintained throughout the exchange, both in person and online. At the end of the student exchange, an evaluation phase allows both buddies and incoming students to reflect on the experience and identify successful elements and areas for improvement, often through feedback mechanisms or activity reports.

Buddy programs are closely connected to key concepts such as friendship networks, social networks and intercultural contact. Through structured peer-to-peer interactions, these programs foster the development of social ties between exchange students, local students, and other members of the academic community. By encouraging active participation in the sociocultural environment of the university, buddy programs create opportunities for sustained intercultural encounters and meaningful engagement with diverse cultural backgrounds. Participation in shared activities and intercultural events further supports social integration and enhances intercultural awareness among students.

At the University of Lapland in Finland, the buddy program emphasizes informal and experiential activities that promote social bonding and cultural exchange. Typical practices include meetings for coffee or tea, cooking together, playing games, watching films, and engaging in outdoor and seasonal activities such as hiking, ice fishing, skiing, ice skating, sledding, and cycling, as well as visits to museums and local cultural sites. These activities allow exchange students to experience everyday social life while engaging in local traditions and the natural environment.

In Spain, the University of Huelva's buddy program strongly focuses on facilitating both academic and social integration. Local students support incoming exchange students in managing administrative procedures, navigating university life, and participating in the city's cultural life. Interested local students register for the program and are assigned an international buddy on the basis of the

information provided. Communication is initiated via email, and buddy students commit to assisting exchange students throughout their stay, helping them adapt academically, socially, and culturally to life in Huelva. Similarly, the University of La Rioja offers a highly structured buddy program that defines a clear set of responsibilities for participating students. Support begins before arrival, with buddies answering questions, providing practical information, and assisting with accommodation searches. Upon arrival, buddies help ensure smooth transition by welcoming students and supporting their initial settlement. During the first days, assistance extends to navigating the city and completing essential procedures related to banking, telecommunications, healthcare, and leisure. Additional responsibilities include providing guidance on university services, participating in welcome activities, engaging in seasonal programs such as the Spring or Autumn program, and providing continuous support throughout the exchange. The program also incorporates reflective elements, requiring buddies to submit reports at the beginning and end of the semester.

At Linköping University in Sweden, the buddy program is closely linked to activities organized by ESN Linköping and places a strong emphasis on cultural immersion through social events. Exchange students are introduced to Swedish traditions through celebrations of national holidays, such as combined Christmas and Midsummer dinners and crayfish parties. Intercultural exchange is further encouraged through potluck dinners, where students share traditional dishes from their home countries, as well as themed quiz nights and “blind test” events featuring Swedish sweets and cultural snacks. Together, these initiatives illustrate the diversity of approaches through which buddy programs support social networking, cultural participation and intercultural learning in higher education contexts.

Orientation Days

Orientation days constitute an important institutional action aimed at welcoming new students and supporting their initial adaptation to the academic and social environment of the host university. These activities usually take place at the beginning of each semester and are designed to provide essential information about the university, its facilities and services, academic structures, and the wider local context. Orientation days often place particular emphasis on the arrival of new students and typically include a campus tour to familiarize participants with key locations such as classrooms, libraries and laboratories.

The core components of orientation days generally follow a structured sequence. At the outset, a welcome and presentation session introduces students to the university in a broad and accessible manner, sometimes supported by the screening of an institutional video. This is followed by informative conferences or talks addressing practical and academic matters, including student services, institutional rules, rights and responsibilities, and the roles of academic coordinators. Campus tours form a central element of the program, offering guided visits to essential facilities and helping students navigate the physical space of the university.

Beyond their informational function, orientation days can be understood as informal educational experiences and guided encounters that facilitate early socialization and integration. Through participation in these activities, incoming students can familiarize themselves with the new environment, meet fellow students, learn about local culture, and access support networks within the institution. Social activities are often combined with academic advice, allowing students to meet with professors, receive guidance on the curriculum and schedules, and begin building academic and peer relationships.

Orientation days also play a preparatory role in easing the transition to formal coursework. Students typically receive practical information, such as timetables, recommended textbooks, and digital platforms used for teaching and communication, related to the start of classes. This combination of academic, social, and practical support contributes to a smoother adjustment process during the initial phase of the student experience.

An illustrative example is provided by the orientation program at the University of Agder (UiA) in Norway, which offers structured support during the first weeks of study, including arrival and orientation days. The orientation day features a welcome from ESN buddies, information sessions led by the International Office, and presentations on key student services, such as the Writing Lounge, digital tools, and health services provided by a student social office (SiA). It also includes an introduction to the social and practical skills needed to live and study in Norway, a campus tour led by ESN buddies within small groups, and opportunities for informal interaction, such as a light lunch and meetings with buddy groups.

Conversation Assistance

Conversation assistance programs are designed to enhance the language learning experiences of both national and exchange students by facilitating direct interaction with native or proficient speakers. Students benefit from language immersion, cultural exchange, and practical communicative experiences that extend beyond the classroom through regular conversations. These programs engage students' linguistic competence, socialization patterns, and interactional skills while also fostering contact between incoming and local students. They incorporate key elements of intercultural competence, highlighting the importance of effective communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding in intercultural contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, conversation assistance can be linked to multicultural dialog, storytelling, and informal educational experiences. The promotion of multicultural dialog requires an understanding of how students interact within culturally diverse learning environments, including the challenges they may encounter. This process involves engaging with multiple perspectives, negotiating meaning, reflecting on cultural similarities and differences, and building relationships through intercultural encounters. Participation in conversation assistance is particularly relevant for incoming students during

periods of mobility, as it supports both linguistic development and social integration.

In addition, conversation assistance initiatives can be strengthened by fostering participants' awareness of their cultural identities and by developing problem-solving skills in intercultural situations. Strategies such as storytelling play a valuable role in this process, although their effective use often requires guidance and pedagogical knowledge from instructors or coordinators. As an informal educational experience, conversation assistance complements formal academic learning by emphasizing the functional role of language in everyday communication with local communities and university units.

An illustrative example is provided by the conversation assistant program at the University of Jaén (Spain). This program integrates incoming exchange students into foreign language courses as conversation assistants, where they participate in language classes under the supervision and guidance of language teachers. Spanish students enrolled in language courses benefit from interactions with native speakers of the target language, while exchange students become familiar with the teaching and learning practices of a Spanish university language program. The initiative typically includes the assignment of linguistic support for language skill development, personalized follow-up, access to a social support network, and an evaluation phase at the end of the course that allows reflection on learning outcomes and overall experience.

Language in a Nutshell

These language courses are not linked to a specific degree program but are designed to enhance incoming students' linguistic skills in the host country's national language during their period of mobility. Language, in a nutshell, supports the university's broader bilingual, international, and multicultural activities by providing students with essential linguistic tools for everyday communication. This type of course emphasizes active participation, introduces the fundamentals of the national language, and enables incoming students to improve their oral communication skills in practical and socially relevant contexts.

The implementation of these courses typically follows a structured process. First, incoming students' language skills are assessed to place them at an appropriate level. During the mobility period, students regularly participate in the course, engaging in interactive activities that support language acquisition and cultural familiarization. At the end of the course, an evaluation phase allows both students and instructors to assess learning outcomes and reflect on the overall effectiveness of the program.

Formal language courses of this type are widespread across European universities and represent a common support mechanism for exchange students. Language in a nutshell initiative is particularly focused on providing essential linguistic knowledge that facilitates daily life and social adaptation in the host country, complementing other formal and informal integration actions.

An illustrative example is offered by Lund University in Sweden, which provides a short course entitled Swedish in a nutshell (SUSA) worth 3 ECTS credits. This course is specifically designed for exchange students and aims to introduce them to the Swedish language while supporting their integration into Swedish society and culture. SUSA courses are available at different levels, including beginner courses for students with no prior knowledge of Swedish and intermediate courses for those with some previous experience. Students with approximately A2–B1 proficiency may enroll in a higher-level SUSA12 course.

Welcome Center/Welcome Point Activities

The welcome center is a key resource for exchange students arriving at European universities. It provides both support and personalized guidance throughout the adaptation process, helping students navigate academic, administrative, social, and cultural challenges in a new environment. By offering comprehensive assistance, the welcome center fosters a smoother transition and enhances the overall experience of students abroad.

Providing information and advice at the beginning of their stay is a primary focus of the welcome center. Students receive guidance on administrative procedures, accommodations, travel, legal requirements, and other practical matters that are essential for successfully settling in the host country. This initial support reduces uncertainty and enables students to concentrate on integrating into their new surroundings.

Furthermore, during student studies, the welcome center offers academic and administrative guidance. This includes support with course registration, academic adaptation, and obtaining necessary permits to ensure that students can efficiently navigate the academic system. The center also organizes social and cultural activities to promote integration. These events may include workshops, cultural showcases, excursions, and interactions with the local community to foster both social engagement and cultural understanding.

At the end of the students' stay, the Welcome Center conducts evaluations of the student experience. This feedback helps assess the effectiveness of support services, identify areas for improvement, and enhance the overall quality of assistance provided to future cohorts.

Welcome centers often intersect with broader concepts, such as cultural tourism, emotional proximity, and global citizenship. In collaboration with networks such as the Erasmus Student Network and local volunteers, they contribute to sustainable and cultural tourism by providing information, facilitating interactions with locals, and encouraging engagement with the host community. Moreover, students' interactions with diverse cultures and their motivations for mobility foster cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, helping them develop intercultural skills, empathy, and a broader global perspective.

An example is the University of Warsaw's Welcome Point, which organizes a 'Cultural HotSpot' initiative, which showcases traditions, heritage, and academic circles from multiple countries. Past activities included a talk on Moldovan wine production and cuisine; Turkish-style coffee and Azerbaijani

snacks; workshops on calligraphy in Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean; and demonstrations of traditional clothing. These activities provide students with opportunities to explore diverse cultures while engaging academically and socially. Furthermore, the Universidade Autônoma de Lisboa (Portugal) offers extensive support services for exchange students, including volunteering opportunities, inclusion and support programs, access to a well-equipped library, an arbitration center for dispute resolution, counseling services, knowledge transfer initiatives, academic publishing support, quality assurance oversight, health advice and promotion, and career development assistance. Such resources create a welcoming and enriching environment for exchange students.

Virtual Tour

The virtual tour is a valuable resource for exchange students arriving at European universities, offering both support and personalized guidance throughout the adaptation process. Students can explore the virtual tour autonomously or with the assistance of real or virtual guides, making it a flexible and accessible tool for orientation and learning.

Virtual tours are typically introduced at the beginning of a student's stay, providing an initial overview of the university, its facilities, and local cultural points of interest. However, these tours remain available throughout the stay, allowing students to revisit information, explore new areas, or seek guidance as needed. This ongoing accessibility ensures that students can continuously engage with their environment and navigate academic and social spaces with confidence.

While they are closely linked to concepts such as virtual exchange, virtual mobility, cultural tourism, and intercultural mediation, virtual tours can complement physical mobility programs by offering telecollaboration and online intercultural exchange opportunities. They enable students to interact in a foreign language, develop intercultural skills, and gain diverse learning experiences. Additionally, virtual tours contribute to sustainable and cultural tourism by providing information, fostering engagement with local culture, and promoting interactions with both peers and the host community as part of a university's welcome center or point.

For example, The Virtual World Tour at the Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain) provides students with opportunities to engage in virtual trips to countries across all continents. Activities include virtual walking tours, museum visits, language taster sessions, and professional networking with students from international partner institutions. The tour also offers live webinars delivered by academic teams worldwide, virtual industry visits, LinkedIn learning sessions, and skill-building workshops focused on transitional competencies. This program allows students to explore different cultures, expand their professional networks, and gain academic and intercultural knowledge. The University of Almería (Spain) website also includes a campus map with a 360 virtual tour with spaces connected by access points. It is very visual and useful for guiding new students to walk through the campus space. Aalto University (Finland) also offers a virtual campus map integrated with the support of a virtual assistant. The tool allows

students to undertake thematic tours, self-guided tours, and VR experiences guided by the virtual assistant. This virtual tour is included within the university's Welcome Point, enabling students to familiarize themselves with campus facilities and services and enhancing their orientation experience before or during their physical stay.

Tandem Experiences

Tandem experience is an educational activity in which two students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are paired to support each other in learning their respective languages. Each student teaches his or her native language to his or her partner and vice versa. Tandem sessions can be conducted either in person or via online platforms. Beyond language learning, Tandem promotes intercultural understanding, social interaction, and communication skills among exchange students, making it a holistic strategy for academic and personal development.

At the beginning of the Tandem program, students are paired on the basis of their language of interest. For example, a native Portuguese speaker may be paired with a native English speaker. Following the pairing, the partners engage in introductory conversations to get to know each other, discuss their individual goals, and agree on a schedule for regular meetings. Planning also involves goal setting, such as improving pronunciation, enhancing fluency, or learning about each other's culture.

During the tandem process, the partners meet regularly to converse in both languages. Each participant typically speaks their mother tongue approximately half of the time, ensuring equal exchange. Conversations may cover personal, academic, or cultural topics, and creative activities such as cultural visits, debates, or games can be incorporated to enrich the learning experience.

At the end of the program, the students evaluate their progress and reflect on their overall experience. This assessment helps them identify improvements in language skills, intercultural competence, and social interaction while providing feedback for the enhancement of the tandem program.

Tandem activities are closely linked to the concept of emotional proximity, as they involve meaningful interactions between peers and host community members. These exchanges foster social integration and make connections with the host culture more impactful. Tandem also encourages informal, peer-led learning that complements formal academic instruction, enhancing intercultural awareness and cultural exchange.

For instance, Stockholm University (Sweden) organizes virtual Tandems in which students from Sweden and the Netherlands collaborate to improve their language skills. Students participate in one-on-one language exchanges using online platforms such as Skype, allowing them to practice both Swedish and Dutch while developing intercultural competencies. Furthermore, the Erasmus Student Network Tandem Program (Poland) facilitates language and cultural exchange between Polish and exchange students. By offering opportunities to teach and learn each other's native languages, the program promotes less formal

approaches to language learning and supports cultural integration among participants.

International Student Day

International students' days are celebrations of multiculturalism and the contributions of exchange students worldwide. It provides an opportunity for students to share their cultural heritage, engage with the host community, and foster social and academic interactions. This event highlights the importance of diversity on campuses and encourages cross-cultural understanding among students.

Typical activities during international students' days include cultural performances, where students showcase their traditions through music, dance, art, and food tastings, which introduce international cuisines and flavors. Sports competitions, such as friendly games or tournaments, promote teamwork and social interaction. Academic workshops are often organized to provide insights into education, scholarships, and career development. The event may also include acts of social responsibility and community service, as well as student union discussions, where students can provide feedback and voice opinions about campus-related matters.

An international student's day can occur at any point during a student's stay, although it is often planned midway through or toward the end of their program. These events allow visiting students to share their cultures with host communities while also strengthening their sense of belonging and engagement within the university.

For instance, the University of South-Eastern Norway celebrates international students' days by welcoming students from around the world with programs conducted in English. The university collaborates with local companies that frequently hire exchange students upon completion of their degrees, creating a bridge between cultural exchange, professional development, and community engagement.

Language Cafés

Language cafés are informal gatherings where students meet to practice language in a relaxed, social environment. Participants can converse in the language they are learning while enjoying a cup of coffee or tea. These events create a friendly atmosphere that encourages conversation, cultural exchange, and language practice. Language cafés are particularly suitable for students who want to improve their spoken skills in one or more foreign languages while interacting with peers from diverse backgrounds.

At the beginning of a language café session, students establish initial connections and are welcome into the social space. During this phase, participants become familiar with each other, share expectations, and receive practical information about campus and city life. Conversation starters often include discussions about home countries, cultural traditions, and personal experiences.

During the session, students engage in active language practice, either in small groups or in pairs, alternating between the languages they wish to learn. Thematic talk, games, and cultural activities may also be included to enrich the experience and encourage deeper interaction. At the end of the session, the language café can serve as a space for farewells and reflection, allowing students to share their experiences, evaluate their progress, and consolidate their learning in a supportive environment.

For example, the language café at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain) offers an informal space for students to practice oral skills in several languages. These sessions are voluntary, not mandatory, and are conducted without formal instruction from professors, emphasizing peer-to-peer learning in a relaxed setting. Additionally, at the University of Oslo, the language café provides new students with informal opportunities to practice languages. Sessions are relaxed and do not require preregistration. Volunteers guide conversations and address basic language questions. Multiple language café sessions are organized each semester, fostering ongoing engagement.

STRUCTURAL VARIATIONS AND DIFFERENCES IN THE TIMING OF ACTIONS

Our analysis revealed significant differences in institutional organization. Some HEIs embed international activities within broader student organizations, whereas others rely almost entirely on ESNs. Furthermore, some institutions manage buddy programs centrally, while others delegate responsibility to student groups. These variations influence the visibility, accessibility, and sustainability of multilingual actions.

Second, our analysis revealed that a greater number of actions are concentrated at the beginning of students' stay, with a noticeable decline in initiatives available toward the end. This pattern may reflect the efforts of the institutions to prioritize available resources during the initial phase to help students feel welcomed and settled. However, these early activities tend to focus primarily on practical matters, with less emphasis on communication, interaction, socialization, and the development of long-lasting social bonds and networks. These findings are consistent with those of Schoe et al. (2021), who reported that the formation of Erasmus+ students' social networks is shaped by contextual factors before and during mobility. From this perspective, the concentration of institutional actions at the beginning of the stay may be insufficient if it is not accompanied by sustained opportunities for interaction throughout the mobility cycle. Therefore, programs such as buddy schemes, tandem experiences, language cafés and exchange student events should not be conceived merely as welcome activities but as long-term mechanisms for maintaining and expanding students' social networks.

Expanding actions toward the end of students' stays could generate additional benefits, such as encouraging return visits and increasing interest in pursuing postgraduate studies or employment in the host country. Furthermore, such initiatives could promote two-way exchanges, as students' peer networks may

become motivated to visit other countries, thereby extending the impact of international mobility beyond the initial stay.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a consolidated overview of institutional actions that promote multilingualism and intercultural engagement among exchange students in European higher education. We conducted a systematic review and an open-access institutional analysis that revealed a diverse landscape of practices, highlighting both exemplary initiatives and significant gaps. We found that meaningful programs frequently arise from collaboration between international offices and student organizations, emphasizing the importance of participatory and codesigned approaches.

The study resulted in a list of 10 programs or actions that evidenced the integration of students into the local language and culture: Erasmus Student Network, buddy program, orientation days, conversation assistance, language in a nutshell, welcome center, virtual tours, tandem experiences, international student days, and language cafés. In support of the theoretical implications of Byram (2021), this research has practical implications. Specifically, across the action types, effective practices share three patterns: they combine language use with social interaction, connect academic and everyday life, and provide structured but flexible opportunities for reciprocal contact. These patterns are consistent with plurilingual development, intercultural communicative competence, and socially embedded learning. However, current approaches often fall short because support is concentrated at the beginning of the stay, unevenly visible across institutional websites and sometimes dependent on student organizations, which may limit continuity and long-term integration.

The study also revealed some procedures for institutions seeking to develop sustainable multilingual and intercultural support structures. First, student organizations should be integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of support programs; second, clear visibility and accessibility of multilingual and intercultural actions across institutional platforms should be ensured; third, continuous support should be provided throughout the mobility cycle, not only during arrival, to facilitate long-term cultural, linguistic, and academic engagement; and fourth, balanced development of students' home languages alongside host language acquisition should be promoted, recognizing multilingualism as a dynamic resource.

Several potential sources of bias should be acknowledged regarding the limitations of this study. The examples of actions identified are from only six European countries. Consequently, the study does not include examples from all European higher education institutions. Nevertheless, we consider this convenience sample to be reasonably representative of current practices, as it includes examples from northern, southern, eastern, and western Europe, thereby offering a degree of balanced geographical coverage. In addition, the study does not allow the tracking of individual student experiences or narratives related to the actions described. This limitation highlights a wide range of opportunities for

future research, particularly to further investigate which actions are most effective and meaningful in promoting intercultural exchange and supporting the maintenance and development of home languages. The analysis relied on institutional websites, which reflect how universities publicly present their actions but do not necessarily show how these initiatives are implemented in practice. Therefore, the study could verify the public availability of actions but not their quality, consistency or actual level of student participation.

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