

# The perceptions of study abroad coordinators about digitalisation and Erasmus + virtual mobility

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## Abstract

Most study abroad research focused on the experiences of students, perceptions of study abroad coordinators received little attention in research. Addressing this gap, this study examines how changes after 2020 (i.e. digitalisation of the Erasmus + processes and virtual mobility) impacted the perceptions of study abroad coordinators ( $N = 23$ ) in a large public university in Turkiye. An open-ended online questionnaire was prepared and shared with the participants who were active in the last 4 years and who experienced both traditional and virtual mobility processes and analysed via the content analysis method. Our results revealed that our participants mostly welcomed changes in digitalisation and virtual mobility in terms of their impact on their duties and responsibilities. However, they thought that the impact of virtual mobility was limited on their students' academic, communicative and cultural development. Our study also includes a discussion of these findings and implications for mobility staff and/or administrators.

## Keywords

Study abroad, Erasmus + mobility, study abroad coordinators, digitalisation, virtual mobility, traditional mobility

## Introduction

More and more students around the world are choosing to study abroad at universities as a part of their studies (Gérard and Lebeau, 2023). The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand are among the countries with international student flows (Kaushal and Lanati, 2019). It is also known that the highest participation in international education

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is from Asia and Europe (OECD, 2023). One of the flagship study abroad programmes, Erasmus + mobility was founded in Europe in 1987. After 30 years of its foundation, it reached 13.7 million mobility activities as of the end of 2022 (Erasmus + Annual Report, 2022). Student mobility, which is the focus of this study, takes the form of ‘a temporary enrolment abroad to pursue one’s studies but finish them in the home country’ (Erasmus + Report, 2015, p. 68). The Erasmus + mobility has been a recognised and successful European Union initiative that supports intercultural competencies and promotes European cultural values and collaboration (Breznik and Skrbinjek, 2020). Despite many challenges, it stands out as a programme that functions successfully at various levels (Ballatore and Ferede, 2013).

Student mobility has been an important aspect and criterion of internationalisation, and it has significantly impacted teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Mobility brings a variety of benefits not just for the students themselves, but also for the institutions, surrounding communities, and even entire countries. However, alongside these advantages, there are also challenges. One level of the challenges entails administrative issues and mobility support staff. Previous research demonstrates that issues such as the lack of a well-defined administrative framework, intense workload, and multi-layered roles and responsibilities, among others, taunt study abroad coordinators (Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023). After 2020, new challenges, as well as opportunities, have been added to the Erasmus + mobility scheme as the COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on higher education institutions worldwide. One of these newly-added challenges/opportunities is virtual mobility. Virtual mobility not only increased the workload of the study abroad coordinators but also made their multi-layered roles and responsibilities more complicated. While most study abroad/Erasmus + mobility research focused on the perceptions of students (e.g. Mert et al., 2023; Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018; Trapani and Cassar, 2020), there has been a recent interest in the staff and coordinators who organise and manage these programmes (e.g. Allen, 2023; Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023; Mammadova, 2023a). This study aims to build up on this recent work and examines how virtual mobility and digitalisation of the Erasmus + administrative processes were perceived by the study abroad coordinators in terms of their impact on their daily routines and students’ development. Our study provides a valuable contribution to the existing literature by focusing on the perceptions of study abroad coordinators regarding virtual mobility and digitalisation, which is often overlooked in favour of student experiences during Erasmus + mobility. By highlighting the administrative challenges faced by study abroad coordinators, we aim to depict the overall processes of the management of the mobility programmes, which, in turn, may contribute to the development of more effective administrative frameworks and support systems.

## **Review of literature**

Universities worldwide are rapidly becoming more international (Knight, 2008). With that aspiration, they carry out various international activities, including academic mobility for students and teachers; agreements, partnerships and collaboration with international higher education institutions; and various international academic programmes and research initiatives (Knight, 2008). In the Turkish context, internationalisation has been one of the driving forces of the expansion of higher education institutions in the last 40 years (Yuksel et al., 2024a; Yuksel et al., 2024b). The Great Student Project, which aimed to bring students from the Turkic Republics in Central Asia with state scholarship in the early 1990s, joining the Bologna Process in 2001, and the *Turkiye Bursları* (Turkiye Scholarships) programme to create Turkiye’s soft power among the neighbouring countries and other dominantly Muslim-populated countries in the last decade are the main macro level strategies of internationalisation (Aras and Mohammed, 2019; Yuksel et al., 2024b; Ericok and

Arastaman, 2023; Kavak and Baskan, 2001). This trend of internationalisation entails a changing view of quality education to be competitive in the global knowledge economy. Türkiye, with 209 universities and a large international student and faculty population (Caliskan and Buyukgoze, 2022), aims to be a major regional education hub. Study abroad programmes, in general, and Erasmus + mobility programmes particularly, are significant components of internationalisation in the Turkish higher education context (Aba, 2013).

### *Study abroad*

European higher education has witnessed a surge in international mobility, reshaping the educational landscape. This trend, while accelerating internationalisation and fostering collaboration, presents both advantages and challenges (Dias et al., 2021; Mammadova, 2023b). On the positive side, international mobility fosters comparability of academic programmes, enriches campus diversity (Knight, 2012; Nada et al., 2018), and diversifies HE institutions themselves (Dakowska, 2017). For many, studying abroad is regarded as an opportunity for academic and intercultural growth in another cultural context (Allen, 2023). Many students benefit from studying abroad by gaining new academic perspectives and enhancing communication, language, and digital skills (Gómez and Vicente, 2011). This is also seen as an opportunity to increase the chances of future employability (Erasmus + Annual Report, 2018). This type of mobility has a multifaceted nature that entails both academic aspirations and social and cultural enrichment opportunities that are provided while staying in the host community (Nada et al., 2018). Previous research on student mobility reports various benefits of studying abroad and student mobility, including developing foreign language skills (Borràs and Llanes, 2021; DeKeyser, 2007), critical thinking skills (Cai and Sankaran, 2015), leadership capacities (Earnest, 2003), intercultural communication (Allen, 2021), and personal growth (Dwyer, 2004).

### *Erasmus + mobility*

The European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, more popularly known by its acronym Erasmus, emerged from a 10-year pilot programme focused on Joint Study Programmes (Maiworm, 2001). Launched in 1987, Erasmus aimed to facilitate and enhance cultural, social, and academic exchanges between European universities and their student populations (Toprak Yildiz, 2022). The European-level governmental support enhanced the impact and significance of the mobility programme as the European Ministers highlighted that ‘learning mobility is essential to ensure the quality of higher education, enhance students’ employability and expand cross-border collaboration within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond’ (EAHE, 2012). In 2014, the programme underwent a name change and consolidation, becoming part of the broader Erasmus + initiative, which encompassed various existing mobility programmes within the education and training sector. The Erasmus + mobility has demonstrably fostered significant student mobility within the European Union (EU), creating a trend that aligns with the ambitious goals set forth at the November 2017 Gothenburg Summit, which envisioned a Europe where educational and professional opportunities transcend national borders by 2025. Erasmus + student mobility basically entails those who remain enrolled in their home countries while receiving semester or year-long lessons from foreign (host) institutions (Van Mol and Ekamper, 2016). The current Erasmus + programme covers the 2021–2027 period, supporting students and organisations in the fields of education, training, youth, and sports (Erasmus + Annual Report, 2022)

### *Study abroad and Erasmus + mobility in Türkiye*

The Erasmus + student mobility programme holds a special appeal for Turkish university students, offering them a unique opportunity for personal and academic growth. It allows them to live abroad for a period, not only honing their language skills but also gaining exposure to diverse cultures and ways of life (Fidan and Karatepe, 2021; Goztas et al., 2019). Although language improvement, global awareness, and European travel are key motivators, Erasmus + ultimately fosters a deeper outcome: adapting and thriving in a new cultural environment (Erdem Mete, 2018). Recent research on Erasmus + mobility has focused on the factors affecting the student flow from Türkiye to different countries (Gunduz, 2018), its impact on language development (Altıntaş and Sarçoban, 2023; Fidan and Karatepe, 2021), perceptions of the students (Onen, 2017), students' attitudes towards the local (host) languages and cultures (Mert et al., 2023). Albeit limited, study abroad coordinators and their challenges have been the focus of recent research in the Turkish context as well (Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023). These challenges included administrative complexities, intense workloads, and diverse and multi-layered responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these challenges due to uncertainty, virtual mobility, and mental health concerns. Coordinators must navigate inconsistent guidelines, bureaucratic hurdles, and limited resources while providing comprehensive support to students and managing relationships with partner institutions (Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023).

### *Changes after 2020: Digitalisation of the Erasmus + processes and virtual mobility*

We have observed two major developments after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted higher education (HE) across Europe in 2020. These were the digitalisation of the Erasmus + processes and the strengthening of virtual mobility. A significant development within the Erasmus + programme has been its embrace of digitalisation. While the groundwork for this transition began as early as 2013, the concrete implementation commenced in 2022 with the launch of the Erasmus + Without Paper initiative (Bruhn-Zass, 2022). This initiative represents a crucial step towards streamlining administrative procedures associated with Erasmus + by transitioning them to a digital format (Kavrar and Cankaya, 2022). This encompasses the digitalisation of various tasks, including the renewal of inter-institutional agreements, the management of learning agreements, and the facilitation of specific signature processes.

Another major change was felt mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities rapidly transitioned to emergency remote teaching (ERT; Iglesias-Prada et al., 2021), placing unexpected demands on faculty and students to adapt to new learning methods (Kulić and Janković, 2022). This disruption also had a profound effect on the Erasmus + Mobility Programme, the EU's flagship initiative for student exchange (Koris et al., 2021). The closure of university campuses left many international Erasmus + students stranded abroad, far from home institutions and support networks. Both host and home universities faced the challenge of supporting these students and ensuring programme continuity. While many institutions were unprepared for such a crisis, they quickly implemented solutions to maintain the Erasmus + experience for incoming and outgoing students.

One potential solution that gained traction during this period was virtual exchange. In fact, building on the success of the Erasmus + programme, the Erasmus + virtual exchange programme was launched in 2018 (Helm and Acconcia, 2019). This innovative initiative aimed to provide a more accessible way for young people to engage in intercultural learning (Erasmus + Annual Report, 2018). The Erasmus + virtual exchange functioned as a complement to the traditional programme, expanding its reach by leveraging the power of new media platforms. Defined as technology-facilitated, sustained programmes enabling communication and interaction between

geographically separated individuals, virtual exchange programmes offered an alternative for internationalisation in higher education (Erasmus + Annual Report, 2018; Ruiz-Corbella and Álvarez-González, 2014). While acknowledged to have less impact on students' real-life experiences compared to physical mobility (O'Dowd, 2017), virtual exchange programmes had grown in popularity prior to COVID-19 (Helm and Van der Velden, 2020).

However, the COVID-19 crisis has further emphasised the potential of virtual exchange in higher education. Even with a return to physical mobility, a blended approach incorporating virtual elements has emerged as a component of Erasmus + mobility (O'Dowd and Werner, 2024). The virtual exchange involves students engaging in online intercultural collaboration projects with international partners, with the goal of fostering intercultural understanding, developing global citizenship skills, and/or enhancing language learning, all under the guidance of teachers (O'Dowd, 2017; O'Dowd and Dooly, 2020). The virtual exchange aims to offer benefits similar to physical mobility, fostering academic experience and developing students' digital, linguistic, and intercultural competence (Helm, 2019). The pandemic's acceleration of virtual learning has yielded positive outcomes. Studies indicate increased student satisfaction (Suleri, 2020), improved study habits and performance (Gonzalez et al., 2020), and positive institutional and student responses to ERT (Walsh et al., 2021). These findings suggest that successful online higher education hinges on factors like student connectivity, motivation, and study skills; professorial expertise in online teaching; and robust IT infrastructure (Teräs et al., 2020).

### *Opinions of the stakeholders*

The smooth operation of study abroad programmes relies heavily on administrative staff, including coordinators, managers, and support staff (Allen, 2023; Goertler and Schenker, 2021). These staff support the different stages of the process prior to, during and after the study abroad so that the mobility students can have a successful transition for their academic studies. Tasks that the coordinators carry out include the promotion of the programmes, the recruitment of the mobility students, preparing students for the study abroad session, and supporting the students in terms of academic and personal challenges at various stages (Allen, 2023).

In home institutions, Erasmus + unit staff and department coordinators are the main support staff during the Erasmus + mobility. Within universities, Erasmus + unit staff and department coordinators are the backbone of the programme's mobility efforts. Despite their critical role in ensuring Erasmus + success, research on the experiences of these study abroad coordinators remains limited (Allen, 2023; Bulut-Sahin, 2023). While some studies have explored international office professionals' challenges (Ericok, 2023), there's a gap in understanding how coordinators navigated managing study abroad programmes (SA) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Allen, 2023). Notably, these coordinators often act as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Bulut-Sahin, 2023), serving as programme beneficiaries' primary point of contact. However, more research is needed, especially after the digitalisation processes of Erasmus + mobility and the prevalence of the virtual exchange programmes. Motivated by the lack of research on the perceptions of study abroad coordinators about various aspects of Erasmus + student mobility, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

What do study abroad coordinators think about the digitalisation of the Erasmus + administrative processes?

What strategies study abroad coordinators employ to sustain the relationship with their partners and/or students during traditional and virtual mobility? If they had to adopt new strategies after virtual mobility, how were they implemented?

How have the duties, responsibilities, and roles of study abroad coordinators changed after the implementation of virtual mobility?

What are the perceptions of study abroad coordinators regarding academic success and development in traditional and virtual mobility programmes?

What are the perceptions of study abroad coordinators regarding communicative development and intercultural competence in traditional and virtual mobility programmes?

## Methodology

This study focused on the perceptions of study abroad coordinators and examined (1) their perceptions about the digitalisation of Erasmus + mobility, (2) any change in their duties, responsibilities and roles after the launch of virtual mobility, (3) the strategies they employ to comply with these changes, and (4) their thoughts about the development of their students' academic and communicative skills and intercultural competence during traditional and virtual mobility. Online interview data were collected from study abroad coordinators who had been working in the various departments and units ( $N = 23$ ) in a large public university in Türkiye. An open-ended online questionnaire was prepared and shared with study abroad coordinators who were active in the last 4 years and experienced both traditional and virtual mobility processes simultaneously (see [Appendix A](#)).

### *Erasmus + mobility at the university level*

Turkish higher education is centralised, and since its foundation in 1981, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) has been the leading authority on Turkish HE, among other initiatives, also supporting the internationalisation of Turkish higher education institutions. To organise, support, and administer student mobility, the Turkish National Agency (UA) is a key partner for Turkish universities, particularly in running the Erasmus + exchange programme, which fosters international mobility in higher education ([Caliskan, 2017](#)). The UA oversees the overall process in Türkiye, including the evaluation, approval, funding, and monitoring of school projects submitted by schools and provincial education directorates. Through the Erasmus + mobility, students can participate in exchange programmes with other Erasmus + member institutions. These programmes aim to foster developing, sharing, and implementing innovative practices at various levels. The duration of the study mobility is between 3 months (minimum) and 12 months (months) at each degree cycle. Each university sets its own application and election dates. Turkish universities participate in the Erasmus + programme by establishing partnerships with universities abroad. Students must meet criteria like minimum academic standing and language proficiency to be eligible for a mobility placement. They apply through their home university's Erasmus office, and after being nominated, their application is sent to the chosen partner university. Two types of support staff coordinate the process: The Erasmus + unit, usually housed in the International Relations Offices and Erasmus + coordinators who support students in their respective departments/programmes.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 23 study abroad coordinators from a large public university in Türkiye. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used in the selection process of the participants ([Mackey and Gass, 2015](#)). Convenience sampling is a method where participants are chosen for their practicality, such as proximity or availability, instead of a random selection process. Convenience sampling is economical and accessible to the researcher if the subjects are available. The most important contribution

of convenience sampling to this research is that the target population is easily accessible to researchers, and this target population is homogenous (Etikan et al., 2016). Convenience sampling enabled the researchers to reach the target group easily and to use time effectively without losing data in the research. The time-saving advantage of convenience sampling also enabled the data obtained to be analysed in a timely manner and enabled the researchers to make detailed, comparative analyses. It was also easier to reach out to participants if there were some issues that needed to be clarified in their responses.

12 of the participants were female, and 11 others were male. Five of the participants were experts working in the Erasmus mobility unit of the university. The others were from Engineering (3), Technology (3), Vocational School (3), Political Science (2), Tourism (1), Theology (1), Communication (1), Law (1), Education (1) and Sciences and Letters (1) faculties/units representing a large body of the university. The participants' experience in student mobility ranged between 4 and 19 years ( $M = 8.08$ ). Further details about the participants' backgrounds are provided in Table 1.

### Data collection process and procedures

The data were collected using an open-ended online questionnaire. The questionnaire was created based on the insights obtained from researchers' previous background in the administration of academic mobility, research in the field and related literature. The online questionnaire was designed

**Table 1.** Background Information About the Participants.

Participants (Pseudonyms used)	Gender	Faculties or units of the participants	Experience in mobility (years)	Age range
Ayşe	F	Engineering	11	40–50
Bahar	F	Vocational School	5	30–40
Ceyda	F	Engineering	5	50+
Deniz	F	Engineering	6	40–50
Esra	F	Political Science	9	50+
Fatih	M	Tourism	4	20–30
Gulnur	F	Technology	5	30–40
Hasan	M	Theology	5	20–30
Ilker	M	Political Science	6	40–50
Jale	F	Communications	9	30–40
Kenan	M	Vocational School	5	40–50
Lutfu	M	Education	8	30–40
Melek	F	Vocational School	16	50+
Naci	M	Engineering	8	40–50
Oya	F	Erasmus Unit	9	30–40
Pars	M	Law	9	30–40
Remzi	M	Science and Letters	6	30–40
Sedat	M	Technology	4	40–50
Tulay	F	Erasmus Unit	10	40–50
Ulku	F	Erasmus Unit	19	40–50
Vedat	M	Erasmus Unit	5	30–40
Yasin	M	Technology	4	30–40
Zeynep	F	Erasmus Unit	18	40–50

in two sections. The first section included some demographic information about the participants. The second section included two sub-sections to learn more about the thoughts and beliefs of the study abroad coordinators on (a) the digitalisation processes and (b) virtual and hybrid mobility. The original language of the questionnaire was Turkish and participants received it in their first language (i.e. Turkish) so as not to create any language-related barriers.

Before preparing the open-ended online questionnaire, we took into account the relevant literature review (Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023; Koris et al., 2021; López-Duarte et al., 2023; Rajagopal and Mateusen, 2021). Based on the related literature, the researchers prepared open-ended survey questions about the digitalisation of Erasmus + mobility, changes in the roles of study abroad coordinators after virtual mobility and the strategies they use to adapt to these changes, and the development of their students' academic and language skills and intercultural competencies. This is because the responses to open-ended questions represent an unstructured data source containing valuable information. The idea of obtaining information through open-ended questions is widely used in different fields because these data have the potential to represent the criteria of the participants (Roberts et al., 2014).

In order to ensure the content validity of the prepared open-ended survey questions, we sought the opinions of experts from different fields. The field experts consisted of four people: two unit coordinators working in the international relations units of the university, a faculty member of the university's foreign languages department and a faculty member of the educational sciences department. After this step, a pilot application was conducted to test the survey questions' comprehensibility (Malmqvist, 2019). Three experts who are Erasmus coordinators and a department coordinator who carries out Erasmus programmes were included in the pilot application phase. The feedback received from the participants during the piloting phase was that the questions were clear and understandable. After this stage, the online survey questions were checked by the researchers, and the questionnaire was finalised. The decision to employ an open-ended online questionnaire in this study was primarily driven by the need to gather in-depth, nuanced, and unconstrained perspectives from study abroad coordinators. While interviews might have provided even richer data, the survey design offered several advantages such as flexibility, adaptability, and efficiency that aligned with the research objectives and research timeline.

The data were collected in the Spring semester of 2024. All data were analysed by the researchers according to the research questions via content analysis. For content analysis, four main stages were followed: decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation, and compilation. In the decontextualisation phase, the researchers were divided into two teams (Streubert and Carpenter, 2011). At this stage, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading the transcribed text and tried to obtain the meaning of the whole before breaking it down into smaller units of meaning. Thus, they also started the coding process, discovering clusters of sentences or paragraphs containing related aspects. The coding process was iteratively applied to various text sections to enhance reliability.

Following the identification of semantic units in the contextualisation phase, researchers verified if the content aligned with the target (Bengtsson, 2016). The original text was re-read with the finalised list of meaning units. In order to make sense of the data, the coded material was divided into areas. This categorisation process was thematised within the framework of the research questions (Patton, 2014). In the compilation phase, the process of writing by integrating started. The researchers used the participants' words and recognised the need to go back to the original text. In this way, it was possible to stay closer to the original meanings and contexts (Bengtsson, 2016). To ensure the reliability of the coding process, the codings of the two teams were compared and inter-rater reliability was calculated via Cohen's kappa analysis. The results revealed a good agreement between these two teams ( $k = 0.827$ ) concerning coding the main themes and categories. We have also provided a sample coding scheme in [Appendix B](#).



We included detailed descriptions to establish credibility according to internal validity criteria, and expert opinions were sought. To achieve this objective, the acquired data was encoded, and the participant's viewpoints were described using codes (Creswell, 2013). Reliability in qualitative research is ensured in different ways from quantitative research. In order to ensure reliability, firstly, verifiability and consistency criteria are taken as a basis (Miles et al., 2014). In this direction, reliability was ensured by taking the opinions of experts in different fields at the stages of comparing the findings obtained with the literature, research design, data collection tool, and data analysis (Merriam, 2015). In addition, a step-by-step repetition process was carried out to ensure consistency (Streubert and Carpenter, 2011). In this process, the researchers were divided into two teams for data analysis and checked the consistency by comparing the codes and concepts they obtained with each other.

## Findings

Based on the content analysis of the data, we have reached five themes, namely, the digitalisation of Erasmus + mobility; roles, duties and responsibilities after virtual mobility; strategies to tackle new roles and responsibilities after virtual mobility; virtual mobility and academic development; and virtual mobility and communicative and intercultural development. These themes are discussed in detail in the next section by providing contextualisation.

### *The digitalisation of Erasmus + mobility*

One aspect that became a part of the Erasmus + process was the digitalisation of the Erasmus + programme. Even though the planning of the digitalisation process dates back to 2013, it started with the Erasmus + Without Paper initiative in 2022. This entailed digitalisation of the Erasmus administrative processes, such as the renewal of inter-institutional agreements, learning agreements, and some signature tasks, among others.

When asked how the digitalisation processes impacted their daily routines, five study abroad coordinators said there were no changes. Four coordinators argued that the change was in a negative direction. One of these coordinators stated, 'The new digital processes prevented "in-person touch" with the students, and digital processes did not help much to connect with the students online either. I do not enjoy what I am doing more as I don't learn about the mobility experiences of my students' (Esra, F, *Political Science, 9 years of mobility experience*). Another coordinator argued, 'Everything became more formal after we started using the online platform for the administration of the processes and video conferencing tools to meet with the students' (Hasan, M, *Theology, 5 years of mobility experience*). 14 of the coordinators, however, were happy with the new process and stated that 'they also became more digitalised' (5 mentions), 'learned new skills' (4 mentions), and 'saved time' (4 mentions). These coordinators also stated that after the digitalisation processes began, 'they had better connections with partner institutions' (3 mentions) and 'things became easier to follow and archive' (2 mentions). The following quote, to some extent, summarises the positive aspect of the digitalisation process: 'Prior to the digitalisation process, it was difficult to track students' transactions separately and track each student's documents separately with the partner institution. Delays and oversights were frequent, both in our institution and in other institutions. Now I can carry out the transactions of students and the host institution through a single platform' (Remzi, M, *Science and Letters, 6 years of mobility experience*). In our open-ended questionnaire, we also had a question about the challenges encountered during the transition period into digitalisation. Eight of our participants stated that the transition period was smooth, and they did not have any specific problems during this process. However, some problems were experienced by 15 others. These

challenges included ‘adapting to the new platform and communication system’ (6 mentions), ‘communication issues with the partner institutions and students’ (4 mentions), ‘e-signing processes’ (3 mentions), and ‘other technological problems’ (2 mentions). Among these challenges, the participants especially criticised the problems about the initial stages of the mobility platform, which they argued, ‘some of the institutions we have agreements with had not yet started using the mobility platform, and this caused considerable delays in the process’ (*Melek, F, Vocational School, 16 years of mobility experience*) and ‘digital platform did not work properly at first and we experienced many problems with data flow as we were facilitating the process between our department coordinators and partner institutions’ (*Ulku, F, Erasmus Unit, 19 years of mobility experience*). In a follow-up question, when asked if these problems still existed, 14 participants stated that they got much better, but one participant stated that he still had communication problems with some of the partner institutions. However, the overall issues about the platform and e-signing processes were all resolved, according to our participants.

### *Roles, duties, and responsibilities after virtual mobility*

Our second research question examined how and to what extent virtual mobility changed the everyday tasks and duties of study abroad coordinators. While some study abroad coordinators believed that there was not much change ( $n = 4$ ), 19 of our participants reported some negative ( $n = 7$ ) and mostly positive ( $n = 12$ ) changes in their roles, duties and responsibilities after the launch of virtual mobility. One of our participants argued that there was no change because ‘[the virtual mobility] imposes new duties and responsibilities that are almost similar to those assigned to the institution in traditional mobility processes. Activating the programme, making inter-institutional agreements for the realisation of virtual mobility, application procedures and subsequent participatory consultancy procedures impose new duties and responsibilities in parallel with traditional mobility’ (*Sedat, M, Technology, 4 years of mobility experience*). Among the negative changes were ‘the increased workload and preparation period needed for the adaptation to the new system’ (*Pars, M, Law, 9 years of mobility experience*), ‘uncertainty about the next steps to be carried out, because [they] had to learn it as they were doing it’ (*Naci, M, Engineering, 8 years of mobility experience*). Another participant argued, ‘the virtual exchange makes the process more difficult. Traditional one was better’ (*Tulay, F, Erasmus Unit, 10 years of mobility experience*) and another participant added, ‘Since it is a new application, it imposes additional duties and responsibilities’ (*Ayşe, F, Engineering, 11 years of mobility experience*).

However, the majority of our participants believed that virtual mobility brought some positive changes to their work life. One of the participants noted, ‘my work has become very simple’ (*Bahar, F, vocational school, 5 years of mobility experience*), and four others confirmed this idea by shortly stating, ‘the new system is better’. One of the participants argued that ‘his workload decreased because, everything became digital and easily trackable’ (*Ilker, M, Political Science, 6 years of mobility experience*). Another participant added echoing what her colleagues stated, ‘I can now follow the students’ progress with more peace of mind, without worrying about missing anything’ (*Fatih, M, Tourism, 4 years of mobility experience*). The words ‘ease’, ‘comfort’, and ‘useful’ were commonly used in the responses of our participants, who believed that virtual mobility brought some positive changes to their duties, responsibilities, and tasks. In a nutshell, the following quote summarised how some participants thought about virtual mobility in terms of their workloads and duties: ‘virtual mobility has created the necessity of developing digital skills. Although the process of developing these digital skills and adapting to virtual mobility is a bit difficult, I think it makes the work I do in my area of responsibility easier’ (*Ceyda, F, Engineering, 5 years of mobility experience*).

### *Strategies to tackle new roles and responsibilities after virtual mobility*

As a follow-up to our previous question that inquired about the changes in the tasks, duties, and responsibilities, we asked our participants about the strategies they employed to tackle the new challenges. As stated before, our participants were mostly positive about the impact of the implementation of virtual mobility on their daily workloads ( $n = 12$ ). Moreover, four others believed that the new system did not make any changes in their daily routines. However, seven others listed some negative issues and challenges deriving from the virtual exchange. To overcome these challenges, for the most part, our participants worked on their digitalisation skills. They tried to improve them either on their own or with the help of in-service training provided by the university's Erasmus unit. One of our participants, Gulnur, stated as follows: 'at the beginning of the process, we were not so much informed about what was going to happen next, so it was not clear how our daily tasks would have impacted. But, the Erasmus unit provided a series of information sessions on the process, and everything was easier afterwards' (*F, Technology, 5 years of mobility experience*). Our participants also tried to make the most of the new challenges. 'After the implementation of virtual mobility and digitalisation in general, I felt that I needed to polish my skills to cope with the new requirements. To that purpose, I attained some freely available online courses to learn more about what I need to know' (*Ceyda, F, Engineering, 5 years of mobility experience*). Our participants also relied on peer support during this process. They consulted their colleagues in different departments to tackle any new and challenging situation. The following quote illustrates how the study abroad coordinators collaborated to tackle new challenges: 'I was a bit insecure about my skills and expertise when the virtual mobility started. I also was over-cautious and did not want to make any mistakes. So I often consulted my colleagues in the different departments who had somehow better digital skills. This helped me a lot in the initial stages' (*Jale, F, Communications, 9 years of mobility experience*).

### *Virtual mobility and academic development*

Even though our participants mostly favoured the transition to virtual mobility when it came to their workloads, responsibilities and duties, they were not so supportive of the virtual exchange for its contributions to their students' academic development. One of our participants, Kenan, was so strict and direct about this issue: 'I think carrying out Erasmus + mobility virtually is against the nature of the endeavour' (*Kenan, M, Vocational School, 5 years of mobility experience*). Another participant summarised the overall consensus about the good sides of virtual mobility for their workload but the negative impact of it on their students' academic development quite succinctly: '[the virtual mobility] just made bureaucratic work easier. It has no contribution to the success of students' (*Fatih, M, Tourism, 4 years of mobility experience*).

When we asked them to compare their students' academic development in traditional and virtual mobility settings, they mostly highlighted the benefits of traditional mobility. The following comments are just 4 illustrative examples out of 17: 'when compared with virtual mobility, traditional mobility makes more significant contributions to students' academic and social skills' (*Deniz, F, Engineering, 6 years of mobility experience*), 'student academic success is higher in traditional mobility' (*Hasan, M, Theology, 5 years of mobility experience*), 'traditional mobility offers more positive outcomes' (*Lutfu, M, Education, 8 years of mobility experience*), 'most of the courses taken at the other institution are taken in the form of preparing assignments/projects. That's why I do not think virtual mobility has an observable effect on academic success' (*Ceyda, F, Engineering, 6 years of mobility experience*). Overall, the following quote by one of our participants summarises the general perspective of our participants who believe that traditional mobility is superior: 'in traditional mobility,

students have the chance to experience other cultures on-site, while they can also find education and job opportunities in different countries by taking initiatives in their academic and business lives. They return from mobility with more self-confidence. They express that ‘they want to participate in the activity again at different levels’ (*Kenan, M, Vocational School, 5 years of mobility experience*).

However, even though they were fewer in number ( $n = 5$ ), there were those who believed that virtual mobility might have more merits: ‘Thanks to virtual mobility, students started to take on more responsibilities. They fill out their education agreements themselves and follow the document processes through the system. So, I find the transition to virtual to be very positive’ (*Oya, F, Erasmus Unit, 9 years of mobility experience*). Those who favoured virtual mobility also highlighted ‘the increased self-confidence from getting to know more about the new learning environment and acquiring new skills’ (*Melek, F, Vocational School, 16 years of mobility experience*). Some of them also believed that the conditions in the job market would change in coming years and the ‘‘virtual mobility and the skills [their] students acquired during it will make them luckier in the job market because most of the future jobs will entail the adaptation of some remote working skills and knowledge’ (*Naci, M, Engineering, 8 years of mobility experience*).

Even though some of our participants did not favour virtual mobility, they also mentioned some exceptional situations, such as the COVID period, and stated, ‘I think that students participating in traditional mobility are better. Since virtual mobility supports little or no support other than the learning activity, I do not think it will be preferable for beneficiaries except in cases of necessity’ (*Ilker, M, Political Science, 6 years of mobility experience*). There were also those who believed that it was not so easy to observe the impact of virtual mobility in academic development so quickly, and they implied that more time might be needed to understand its actual impact: ‘Since virtual mobility programmes have just started, I have no idea how much they will affect academic success. But it will definitely contribute to personal development’ (*Pars, M, Law, 9 years of mobility experience*). These people saw a potential merit in virtual mobility but just believed that it was too soon to reach a decision about it.

### *Virtual mobility and communicative and intercultural development*

Even though some argued that virtual mobility might have some extra benefits in terms of academic development ( $n = 5$ ), when it came to communicative development and enrichment of intercultural competence, participants almost unanimously (21 out of 23 participants) argued that traditional mobility was superior. We can argue that language development and cultural awareness opportunities were very seldom for the study abroad coordinators who participated in our study. The following quote by Bahar summarises the general belief among the study abroad coordinators: ‘[one] cannot demonstrate effective intercultural competence development, without being physically present in a certain institution or country... [because]... virtual environments are not effective and efficient for this’ (*F, Vocational School, 5 years of mobility experience*). Another study abroad coordinator added, ‘traditional and virtual mobilities are very different when it comes to language development and enrichment of intercultural competence. Virtual mobility does not give you the tools to interact with the locals or peers outside the class. I think this is the time that you develop your linguistic skills and learn more about the local culture. The courses and academic content might be similar everywhere but it’s the cultural enrichment that matters most’ (*Fatih, M, Tourism, 4 years of mobility experience*). When asked if traditional and virtual mobility were similar in terms of language and intercultural development, another participant added, ‘No, they are not similar. While the traditional method provides an authentic and rich cultural exchange, this interaction is very limited in virtual mobility’ (*Hasan, M, Theology, 5 years of mobility experience*).

Some others also argued that traditional mobility was better because ‘in traditional mobility, students have the opportunity to organise meetings, trips, and navigate through Erasmus + student

communities. There is no virtual platform other than online meetings where they can spend time together and intercultural communication can take place' (Ayse, F, *Engineering, 11 years of mobility experience*). Another study abroad coordinator added, 'since virtual mobility only covers educational activity and does not require being physically in a different environment, its contribution to intercultural communication will be minimal. I think traditional mobility will contribute more due to the issues I mentioned in the previous question' (Deniz, F, *Engineering, 6 years of mobility experience*).

Even though very few in number, we still had two participants who believed that virtual mobility might be the right way to develop communicative and cultural competence. For example, Sedat argued, 'it would be more accurate to evaluate it personally. While it makes a great contribution to some people, the quality of expectations may vary for others. One of my students really delved into the culture of the country after he started virtual mobility. He mostly benefitted from online resources but also used video conferencing tools to keep communication active with his fellow classmates. So, in my opinion, [virtual mobility] is not a total miss about linguistic and cultural development' (Sedat, M, *Technology, 4 years of mobility experience*). Another participant also argued that both might have different contributions and did not rule out the impact of virtual mobility by stating, 'intercultural communication is actually stronger in face-to-face settings, but virtual mobility enables the expansion of the different online skills and abilities about language use in the job-related situations where face-to-face activities might not offer so much help' (Remzi, M, *Science and Letters, 6 years of mobility experience*).

## Discussion

Our study focused on the perceptions of study abroad coordinators about the challenges that took place after 2020 in the Erasmus + mobility processes. We specifically focused on the impact of the digitalisation of the Erasmus + administrative processes (Bruhn-Zass, 2022) and the impact of virtual mobility (Koris et al., 2021). Compared to the perceptions and experiences of the students about Erasmus + mobility, research on study abroad coordinators is limited (Allen, 2023; Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023).

Our findings revealed that the digitalisation process of the Erasmus + mobility yielded mixed reactions from coordinators similar to the implications found in three-country research with students (Kavrar and Cankaya, 2022). While some study abroad coordinators reported no change in their daily routines and responsibilities, a larger group perceived the changes positively and reported benefits like improved digital skills, time saved, and better connections with partner institutions. Additionally, a centralised platform for student transactions eliminated delays and improved document management. However, the early days of the transition were not so smooth, as 15 coordinators faced difficulties adapting to new platforms, communication issues, and e-signing processes. This was similar to what Ley and Mincer-Daszkiwicz (2022) found in the first 9 months of the implementation. Eventually, though, most participants reported significant improvements, suggesting the platform and e-signing processes are largely functional. While some communication issues persist, the overall impact appears positive for Erasmus + programme efficiency.

Our findings also revealed that the launch of virtual mobility programmes in Erasmus + impacted study abroad coordinators in various ways. While some reported minimal change, a larger group experienced both positive and negative effects on their roles. Negative impacts included increased workload and preparation for new systems, uncertainty about procedures, and a general sense that virtual exchange was more complex than traditional mobility. All of these issues were also reported by Bulut-Sahin (2023) and Ericok (2023). These challenges stemmed from adapting to new systems and learning new processes (Ley and Mincer-Daszkiwicz, 2022). However, the majority of coordinators reported positive changes. They highlighted benefits like reduced workload due to digitalisation and

easier tracking, improved ability to monitor student progress, and overall work simplification. Additionally, some coordinators saw virtual mobility as an opportunity to develop valuable digital skills, ultimately making their jobs easier in the long run. Overall, virtual mobility seems to be a positive development for coordinators despite initial challenges. It offers increased efficiency and improved student support, although some adaptation is required (López-Nores et al., 2022).

As we have seen in the recent section, virtual mobility programmes in Erasmus + impacted study abroad coordinators differently. While many study coordinators found them beneficial for their workload, others faced challenges adapting to new tasks and overcoming initial information gaps. To address these hurdles, coordinators primarily focused on improving their digital skills. Some took advantage of university training, while others pursued online courses. Additionally, peer support played a crucial role. Coordinators consulted colleagues with stronger digital expertise, fostering collaboration and a smoother transition.

Our results also demonstrated that study abroad coordinators generally appreciated the workload reduction associated with virtual mobility (vs traditional mobility), but concerns arose regarding its effectiveness in fostering student academic development. Many coordinators viewed traditional mobility as superior for academic reasons. They emphasised the benefits of cultural immersion, increased student initiative in their academic pursuits, and deeper engagement with coursework – all aspects seemingly diminished in virtual settings. However, a smaller group identified potential advantages of virtual mobility. Some noted students taking greater ownership of their learning, while others highlighted increased self-confidence gained through virtual interaction. Interestingly, some even suggested virtual mobility could prepare students for future job markets emphasising remote work skills. In fact, some students did find virtual mobility situations academically rewarding in previous research (Koris et al., 2021), so virtual mobility, at least by some stakeholders, might support students' academic journeys to some extent.

Our study also explored the impact of virtual mobility programmes within Erasmus + on student development in language and intercultural competence as perceived by the study abroad coordinators. While a small group, only two, saw potential benefits, the overwhelming majority of study abroad coordinators viewed traditional mobility as superior when it comes to communicative and intercultural development, which was also reported in some other studies (Koris et al., 2021). Our participants highlighted the limitations of virtual settings for cultural immersion and language acquisition (Rajagopal and Mateusen, 2021). They emphasised the importance of physical presence for interaction with locals, participation in student communities, and authentic cultural experiences. Traditional mobility was seen as fostering deeper intercultural communication and language development through daily interactions beyond the classroom (López-Duarte et al., 2023). While acknowledging the dominance of this perspective, the study also identified dissenting voices. Some coordinators argued that virtual mobility could contribute to language and cultural development, albeit in different ways. One coordinator noted a student's successful use of online resources and video conferencing to engage with the host culture. Another suggested that virtual mobility might enhance skills for online language use in professional contexts. Overall, the study suggests that virtual mobility offers limited benefits for language and intercultural development compared to traditional mobility. However, further research is needed to explore the potential benefits identified by a small group of study abroad coordinators.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the perceptions of study abroad coordinators regarding the challenges encountered in the Erasmus + mobility processes after 2020. It focused on the impact of two key changes: the digitalisation of administrative tasks and the introduction of virtual mobility programmes.

Our findings contribute valuable insights to a previously under-researched area, complementing existing studies focused on student experiences (Allen, 2023; Bulut-Sahin, 2023; Ericok, 2023).

The digitalisation of Erasmus + processes yielded mixed reactions. While some coordinators reported no change or even positive outcomes like improved efficiency and time savings, others faced initial challenges adapting to new platforms and communication systems. These findings highlight the importance of user-centred design and comprehensive training during programme implementation. Addressing lingering communication issues and ensuring long-term platform functionality is crucial for sustained success.

The introduction of virtual mobility programmes also had a complex impact. While coordinators appreciated the reduced workload associated with the virtual exchange, concerns arose regarding its effectiveness for student learning. The perceived drawbacks included limitations in fostering cultural immersion, language acquisition, and deeper academic engagement compared to traditional mobility experiences. However, some coordinators noted potential benefits such as increased student ownership of learning and development of digital skills relevant to future job markets. These contrasting perspectives warrant further investigation into virtual mobility participants' long-term academic and professional outcomes.

A key strength of our study lies in its exploration of how coordinators adapted to the challenges of virtual mobility. We found that coordinators actively sought to improve their digital skills through training and peer support. This highlights the adaptability and resilience of this professional group. Future research could explore how best to support coordinators in their roles as they navigate an increasingly digitalised and evolving mobility landscape.

Our findings on the perceived limitations of virtual mobility for language and intercultural development align with previous research emphasising the importance of physical presence in these areas. However, the dissenting voices identified in our study advocating for the potential benefits of virtual mobility require further exploration. Future research could investigate best practices for designing and implementing virtual mobility programmes that effectively address these aspects of student development. Additionally, exploring student perspectives on virtual mobility programmes and their impact on language and intercultural competence would provide a more holistic understanding of the programme's effectiveness.

Despite the important findings of this study, it also has some limitations. Firstly, one of the limitations of this study is that it is difficult to ensure content validity in open-ended questions. Unlike multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions cannot be scored objectively, which is a major disadvantage (Romagnano, 2001). For this reason, measurement tools that offer more options to the participants can be developed. In addition to this, the interview method, which allows an in-depth examination of the experiences and experiences of the participants, may be preferred in future studies.

Moreover, although the convenience sampling method has facilitated the researchers in terms of time and accessibility, how the process is handled in different universities and the difficulties experienced in some other contexts are still waiting to be investigated. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, problems can be analysed within the framework of large samples in future studies. Another limitation of our study is collecting data from a single university setting. Although the insights garnered from this particular institution offer valuable knowledge, it is crucial to recognise that the experiences and viewpoints of study abroad coordinators at other universities, especially those with different mobility patterns situated in different countries or with divergent institutional settings, may exhibit variations.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the multifaceted impact of digitalisation and virtual mobility on Erasmus + mobility processes from the perspective of study abroad coordinators. While

challenges exist, the findings also reveal opportunities for continuous improvement and highlight the need for further research to optimise programme design and student outcomes. By addressing these considerations, Erasmus + can ensure a future that is both efficient for administrators and enriching for student participants.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A

[translated version of the open-ended questionnaire]

Items that were included in the study and analysis

In addition to your regular/daily responsibilities, what new tasks and responsibilities have emerged in light of new developments after 2020?

Did your work routines change after the digitalisation of the Erasmus + administrative processes?

If so, in what ways?

What problems do you encounter in communicating with partner institutions? Do these problems differ between traditional and virtual mobility situations?

What strategies do both your institution and partner institutions use to maintain traditional and virtual mobility?

What are the views of your managers/supervisors on virtual and traditional mobility?

Has virtual mobility added new roles/tasks and responsibilities for you?

Has there been an increase in risks with virtual mobility?

In your opinion, is traditional mobility management turning into remote virtual mobility?

Are the levels of contribution of traditional and virtual mobility to internationalisation similar? If there are differences, in what ways?

Are the levels of contribution of traditional and virtual mobility to student academic development similar? If there are differences, in what ways?

Are the levels of contribution of traditional and virtual mobility to student intercultural communication similar? If there are differences, in what ways?

What are the general benefits of Erasmus + mobility programmes for academic development?

What are the general benefits of Erasmus + mobility programmes for intercultural communication?

Do these benefits differ between traditional and virtual mobility situations?

Items that were removed after the feedback from the experts

How do managers (outside the unit, such as Department Heads, Associate Deans and Deans) view virtual and traditional mobility?

Are there any negative sides/impact of Erasmus + mobility on students' academic lives? If so, what are they?

In addition to the regular/daily responsibilities of academic staff responsible for mobility after COVID-19 (or with recent technological developments), what new duties and responsibilities have emerged in light of these developments?

What new challenges did COVID-19 bring to your studies?

How did Erasmus + mobility processes and procedures work during COVID-19?

## Appendix B

### Sample coding scheme

#### Team 1

**General Theme:** Virtual mobility and new roles/tasks and responsibilities it brought together

**Related research question:** How have the duties, responsibilities, and roles of study abroad coordinators changed after the implementation of virtual mobility?

**Related item in open-ended questionnaire:** Has virtual mobility added new roles/tasks and responsibilities for you?

**Participant:** Sedat (M, Technology, 4 years of mobility experience).

Original Turkish response:

Soru: Yurtdışı eğitim koordinatorlerinin görevleri, sorumlulukları ve rolleri, sanal hareketlilik uygulamasından sonra nasıl değişti?

Sedat: "[Sanal hareketlilik], geleneksel hareketlilik süreçleriyle neredeyse aynı yeni görev ve sorumluluklar yüklemektedir. Programı etkinleştirmek, sanal hareketliliğin gerçekleştirilmesi için kurumlar arası anlaşmalar yapmak, başvuru prosedürleri ve ardından katılımcı danışmanlık prosedürleri, geleneksel hareketlilik çok benzer yeni görev ve sorumluluklar yüklemektedir"

Translated version:

Question: How have the duties, responsibilities, and roles of study abroad coordinators changed after the implementation of virtual mobility?

Sedat: "[the virtual mobility] imposes new duties and responsibilities that are almost similar to those assigned to the institution in traditional mobility processes. Activating the programme, making inter-institutional agreements for the realization of virtual mobility, application procedures and subsequent participatory consultancy procedures impose new duties and responsibilities in parallel with traditional mobility"

This is important. Sedat believes that virtual mobility does not bring so many new roles and/or tasks.

Note of the coder Team 1: Add to the analysis of RQ2.

Sedat lists the duties that are similar in both mobility types. It is good to see that various activities and tasks have been listed.

Note of the coder Team 1: Add to the analysis of RQ2.