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Europeanizing Universities: A Catalyst for Social Cohesion and Sustainable Economic Development

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Europeanizing Universities: A Catalyst for Social Cohesion and Sustainable Economic Development

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative potential of intra-EU student mobility as a cornerstone for fostering social cohesion, economic resilience, and pan-European identity. By analyzing historical trajectories, policy frameworks (e.g., Erasmus+), and case studies from Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, and Eastern Europe, we argue that achieving 50% intra-EU student mobility by 2035 could counteract nationalist fragmentation, address labor shortages, and catalyze innovation. However, systemic challenges—brain drain, political resistance, linguistic tensions, and funding inequities—necessitate asymmetric funding models, retention incentives, and phased implementation. Drawing on empirical data and policy evaluations, this study proposes a roadmap for harmonizing EU higher education while mitigating regional disparities. While moving forward towards more mobility attention needs to be paid in national policies for national concerns.

Keywords: student mobility, European integration, brain drain, Erasmus+, labor markets

Summary

The European Union stands at a crossroads, grappling with nationalist resurgence, economic disparities, and an aging workforce. This paper posits that intra-EU student mobility—a cornerstone of educational integration—holds transformative potential to address these challenges. By advocating for a target of 50% intra-EU student mobility by 2035, this study argues that such a policy could serve as a catalyst for European social cohesion, technological competitiveness and sustainable economic growth. Drawing on historical analysis, policy evaluations, and regional case studies, the paper presents a roadmap for elevating higher education to a higher quality level across the EU while mitigating brain-drain.

Historically, student mobility has laid the groundwork for cross-cultural exchange. The Erasmus+ program (1987–present), involving credit mobility as distinct from degree mobility, alone benefited over 12 million participants. Yet, mobility rates remain stagnant at 15%, with stark disparities between Western and Eastern Europe. The paper analyses trajectories of mobility policies, underscoring the Bologna Process's role in standardizing academic credentials and the European Education Area's vision for borderless learning. Case studies reveal divergent outcomes: Denmark and the Netherlands, with mobility rates exceeding 25%, report enhanced innovation in sectors like renewable energy and tech, attributed to diverse graduate networks. Germany's dual education system integrates mobile students into regional labour markets, addressing skill shortages. Conversely, Eastern Europe faces "brain drain," with 40% of Romanian graduates not returning, exacerbating demographic decline.

The proposed 50% mobility target aligns with the EU's Europe 2020 goals, fostering labour market fluidity and countering aging populations. When combined with science and technology policy along the Draghi proposals of 2024 the impact of mobility could be even greater. Economic modelling suggests a 1.5% annual GDP boost from improved innovation capacity and workforce matching. Socially, mobility cultivates mutual understanding; surveys indicate 68% of Erasmus+ alumni feel a

stronger European identity, reducing xenophobia. However, structural barriers persist. Linguistic tensions surface in countries like Denmark, France and the Netherlands, where resistance to English-taught programs limits inclusivity. Funding inequities leave Southern and Eastern institutions ill-equipped to host mobile students, while political resistance in nations like Hungary prioritizes cultural homogeneity over integration.

To address these challenges, the paper proposes a European policy directed towards an extension of the Erasmus program to encompass asymmetric funding, directing 70% of mobility funds to lower-income member states to upgrade infrastructure and offer language support. Retention incentives, such as tax breaks for graduates returning to regions with labour shortages, could also mitigate brain drain. Phased implementation—voluntary targets until 2030, binding commitments thereafter—allows gradual adaptation. The roadmap emphasizes “circular mobility,” encouraging temporary migration with reintegration pathways, and curriculum harmonization in strategic fields like AI and green technologies. We also suggest ways to adjust national policies to deal with the political unrest on student mobility in particular in Denmark and the Netherlands.

The conclusion underscores mobility’s dual role: as an economic lever for sustainable development and a social bridge against fragmentation. By transforming universities into hubs of European citizenship, this vision transcends educational policy, offering a blueprint for a cohesive, innovative, and demographically resilient EU.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) faces intertwined challenges that threaten its cohesion and global position: climate change, economic disparity, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Internally, nationalist movements challenge transnational cooperation, while demographic shifts and regional inequalities strain economic and social frameworks. Amid this complexity, universities emerge as underutilized platforms for addressing these crises. This paper argues that elevating intra-EU student mobility to 50% by 2035 can be a transformative lever for strengthening social cohesion, labor market resilience, and pan-European identity. Despite foundational programs like Erasmus+, systemic barriers such as brain drain, funding asymmetries, and political backlash continue to impede progress. By analyzing historical trends, legal frameworks, and policy experiments, this study explores how Europeanizing universities through student mobility could renew the EU’s social and economic fabric.

1.1 Triple Threats to European Integration

Climate Change

The EU’s Green Deal targets carbon neutrality by 2050, yet Southern Europe faces desertification and Northern regions experience sea-level rise. Universities, as engines of scientific innovation and regional adaptation, can play a strategic role—but only if cross-border collaboration is strengthened. Currently, national fragmentation limits climate-related research coordination and resource sharing.

Economic Polarization

Economic inequality between member states has deepened since the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries like Bulgaria report GDP per capita less than half the EU average, while Luxembourg exceeds it by over 250%. These disparities fuel populist sentiment and threaten the integrity of the single market. Mobility can redistribute human capital and relieve labor shortages, but benefits are unevenly distributed.

Geopolitical Uncertainty

The recalibration of global alliances, including weakened EU–U.S. ties and rising threats from Russia, underscores the need for strategic autonomy. A European-educated generation equipped with a shared civic and cultural foundation could reinforce democratic values and strengthen resilience. Yet, mobility rates remain low—only around 15% of students currently participate in cross-border education programs.

1.2 Universities as Catalysts for Cohesion and Growth

European universities are centers of research and innovation, yet their broader social role remains underleveraged. The U.S. model showcases how elite institutions can shape national competitiveness. In contrast, the EU's higher education landscape is fragmented, lacking visibility and cohesion. Although Erasmus+ has enabled 12 million mobilities since 1987, participation skews toward higher-income students and Western universities. Germany alone lost 12,000 STEM graduates to the U.S. in 2022. Intra-EU mobility presents a counterbalance—enhancing linguistic and cultural empathy, fortifying social cohesion, and building transnational academic communities.

1.3 The 50% Mobility Thesis

Raising intra-EU student mobility to 50% by 2035 is not just aspirational; it is a necessity. Europe faces a projected shortfall of 7.5 million skilled workers by 2040, particularly in sectors like AI, healthcare, and clean energy. Increased student mobility supports workforce circulation, multilingualism, and adaptability—traits critical for innovation. Examples like Portugal's tech sector show the benefits: a 19% rise in startups from 2019–2023 was partly driven by Erasmus+ alumni. However, barriers remain: only 43% of EU institutions fully recognize foreign academic credits, and housing shortages in cities like Amsterdam hinder enrollment. A new Erasmus 2.0 paradigm, blending credit, joint-degree, and digital exchanges, is needed.

1.4 Varieties of Student Mobility

Three primary models of student mobility exist:

Credit Mobility (e.g., Erasmus+): Students temporarily attend a foreign university for credit. While beneficial for exposure, it risks shallow integration and poor alignment with home curricula.

Joint Degree Mobility: Introduced by alliances like YUFE in 2020, this model ensures credits align across member institutions through standardized joint curricula.

Free Mobility: Full-degree mobility where students enroll directly in foreign universities. While administratively more complex, this mode facilitates deeper academic and cultural immersion.

2. The Historical Evolution of Student Mobility in Europe: From Medieval Latin to Modern Policy Reforms

2.1 Medieval Roots: Latin as the Lingua Franca

In medieval Europe, Latin functioned as a unifying academic language that enabled scholars from different regions to engage with common texts and ideas. Universities like Bologna, established in 1088, reflected this unity, operating as collaborative institutions where students, teachers, and faculties were grouped into a corporate body. Latin was not just a language but the backbone of a pan-European academic network.

2.2 Bologna and the Corporate University Model

Bologna's model empowered students to form associations and negotiate rights, a precursor to modern student representation. Latin allowed for standardized instruction in law, medicine, and theology, and facilitated student mobility across regions. The university's reputation thrived on its ability to attract a diverse, international student body.

2.3 Nobility versus Meritocracy: The Case of Simonius Ritz

Student mobility in the early modern period remained shaped by class hierarchies. Simonius Ritz, a 16th-century first-generation student, navigated prohibitive fee structures in Germany and France, exemplifying emerging tensions between inherited privilege and meritocratic aspirations. His experience highlights the early barriers to mobility and foreshadows future debates on equity and access in higher education.

2.4 Cultural and Intellectual Networks

Cross-border intellectual exchange was common in medieval academia. Scholars engaged in correspondence, joint research, and debates, all conducted in Latin. Though Latin was later replaced by vernaculars, its legacy endures in the collaborative culture of European academia and the precedent it set for student mobility.

2.5 Post-WWII: The Transatlantic Shift

After World War II, student mobility patterns shifted dramatically. Europe's devastation led to intellectual migration, especially to the United States, which emerged as a global academic powerhouse. This shift marked a turning point, redefining transatlantic academic relations and drawing attention to the implications of talent loss in Europe.

2.6 The Role of European Exiles in Reshaping American Science

Notable intellectuals like Albert Einstein and Enrico Fermi, fleeing conflict, transformed American academia. Their contributions elevated U.S. institutions while exposing Europe's vulnerability to brain drain, prompting questions about how to rebuild and retain intellectual capital.

2.7 Brain Drain and Continental Europe's Struggle

Europe's postwar reconstruction was hampered by the loss of academic talent. While students were drawn to American opportunities, European nations began offering scholarships and grants to retain or recover talent. These policy responses laid the groundwork for coordinated efforts to rebuild a competitive academic environment.

2.8 Reform and Transnational Partnerships

The need to modernize led to new academic alliances. Cross-border networks, shaped by necessity, were early steps toward later European education integration. These partnerships would evolve into harmonized systems aimed at ensuring intra-European mobility and collaboration.

2.9 Modern Legal and Policy Milestones

Late 20th and early 21st-century legal decisions and reforms transformed student mobility from a privilege to a right.

2.9.1 ECJ Rulings and Equal Treatment in the 1990s

European Court of Justice rulings in the 1990s established equal access for EU students across member states, removing national barriers. These decisions formed the legal foundation for a unified educational space and reinforced mobility as a core European value.

2.9.2 The Bologna Process and the 2005 ECJ Ruling

The Bologna Process further standardized academic structures, ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications through the ECTS. A 2005 ECJ ruling strengthened financial support rights, lowering barriers for cross-border education.

2.9.3 The 2020s: European Universities Initiative and Brexit

The European Universities Initiative fosters long-term alliances among universities, creating transnational academic communities. However, Brexit disrupted mobility by reclassifying the UK as a non-EU partner. Changes in fees, funding, and visa requirements now define post-Brexit student exchange, with mixed results. New initiatives like the UK's Turing Scheme aim to compensate but reflect a broader fragmentation of the mobility framework.

2.10 A Framework for the Future: Balancing Heritage and Innovation

Today's system is built on legal precedent and policy innovation. The ECJ's commitment to nondiscrimination coexists with newer strategies like the EUI. Yet this balancing act is complicated by shifting politics, as seen with Brexit. Mobility policy now mirrors broader tensions: national sovereignty versus supranational integration, heritage versus adaptability.

As legal and economic forces continue to evolve, so does the nature of student mobility. No longer a purely academic endeavor, mobility today intersects with economic competitiveness, cultural diplomacy, and identity politics.

2.10 A Picture of Student Mobility in the EU, 2003–2023

Data shows a consistent rise in international student mobility, with significant variation across countries. Denmark and the Netherlands saw rapid growth, while Italy and Romania lagged. Approximately 75% of international students were from within the EU, and 25% from outside—predominantly Asia and Africa.

Table 1 University Student Statistics by Country and Year

Country	Year	Total Students (mil)	% Intl. EU Students	% Intl. non-EU Students
EU EU	2003	~15.2	~6%	~2%
	2013	~19.5	~10%	~2%
	2023	~22.1	~11.8%	~4%
DK Denmark	2003	~0.2	~3.75%	~1.25%
	2013	~0.25	~6%	~2%
	2023	~0.3	~7.5%	~2.5%
DE Germany	2003	~2.0	~5.6%	~1.9%
	2013	~2.7	~8.3%	~2.8%
	2023	~3.2	~10.5%	~3.5%
IT Italy	2003	~1.8	~2.1%	~0.7%

Country	Year	Total Students (mil)	% Intl. EU Students	% Intl. non-EU Students
NL Netherlands	2013	~2.2	~3.4%	~1.1%
	2023	~2.5	~5.4%	~1.8%
	2003	~0.5	~4.5%	~1.5%
	2013	~0.65	~6.5%	~2.1%
	2023	~0.82	~11.25%	~3.75%
RO Romania	2003	~0.5	~1.5%	~0.5%
	2013	~0.6	~2.5%	~0.8%
	2023	~0.7	~3.75%	~1.25%

Sources: Statistical offices of EU and countries.

The databases do not allow for a clear distinction between credit, joint degree and free mobility. They include bachelor, master and PhD students. The non-EU students are overwhelmingly Chinese. It is to be expected that the interests of US students to study in Europe will rise in the years to come, because of the pressure put on universities by the Government.

2.11 A Sketch of the Impact and the Dilemmas

2.11.1 Denmark: Growth vs. Cultural Preservation

International graduates have significantly contributed to Denmark's economy, especially in engineering and renewables. However, nationalist-driven restrictions on English-language programmes have challenged universities and created tensions between economic needs and cultural preservation. Cities like Aarhus face housing shortages, compounding challenges for international students.

2.11.2 Netherlands: Tuition, Language, and Backlash

The Netherlands has benefited from tuition income but now contends with backlash. The 2023 Balanced Internationalization Act limits English-language offerings and prioritizes domestic applicants, sparking declines in enrollment and debates over cultural identity. Initiatives like "Dutch for All" aim to ease tensions, but the balance between inclusion and integration remains fragile.

2.11.3 Germany: A Model for Intra-EU Mobility

Germany attracts the highest number of intra-EU students, supported by free tuition and strong labor market pathways. Cities like Berlin and Munich have become magnets for European talent, reinforcing Germany's status as a cornerstone of academic mobility in the EU.

3. Social Cohesion, Identity Formation, and Student Mobility

3.1 Quantitative Insights: Tolerance and Intercultural Sensitivity

One of the hallmark achievements of Erasmus+ is its measurable impact on social cohesion, aligning closely with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. According to data from the European Commission (2014), an overwhelming 97% of Erasmus+ alumni reported an increase in tolerance after their mobility experience. This powerful statistic underscores the program's dual function—not only as an academic initiative but also as a transformative social platform.

This enhanced tolerance manifests in greater openness to cultural diversity, reduced reliance on stereotypes, and a stronger sense of European identity. By immersing students in unfamiliar social

and cultural settings, Erasmus+ fosters a process of socialization that goes well beyond classroom learning. In this intercultural environment, students encounter diverse perspectives that challenge their assumptions and cultivate more inclusive worldviews.

Importantly, this increase in tolerance has tangible societal effects. Upon returning to their home countries, alumni often serve as informal ambassadors of intercultural understanding. Their experiences help bridge cultural divides and support the development of a more cohesive European community. Empirical studies have further indicated that such shifts in attitude can mitigate polarization and counter xenophobic narratives—an especially significant contribution in politically volatile contexts.

3.2 Case Study: Polish Erasmus Participants and Political Attitudes

A compelling example of Erasmus+'s influence on political attitudes is offered by a 2021 study from Jagiellonian University. The study found that Polish Erasmus participants were 30% less likely to support anti-EU political parties compared to their non-mobile peers. This finding highlights the potential of international education to shape civic and political engagement.

Exposure to multicultural environments appears to foster support for European integration by aligning young people's experiences with the values of openness, dialogue, and cooperation. For Polish participants, their immersion in diverse educational and cultural settings seems to promote more positive perceptions of the EU and its institutions.

The implications extend beyond individual transformation. A decline in anti-EU sentiment among youth suggests greater long-term political stability and more cooperative policy-making. In countries where nationalism and Euroscepticism are on the rise, the Erasmus+ experience serves as a vital counterforce—cultivating informed, globally-minded citizens who can help sustain European unity.

3.3 The Role of Free Joint Degrees: The CIVIS Alliance

A further contribution to Erasmus+'s legacy is the expansion of free joint degree programs, exemplified by initiatives like the CIVIS Alliance. Particularly in STEM fields, such programs have proven effective in addressing regional disparities in academic retention. According to European Commission data (2023), participation in the CIVIS Alliance correlates with a 22% increase in STEM student retention at Eastern European universities.

By eliminating financial and bureaucratic barriers, joint degree programs make international education more accessible. Through collaborative curriculum design, cross-border research, and mutual academic recognition, students gain a cohesive and transferable educational experience.

Beyond logistical advantages, these programs also foster a sense of collective identity and shared purpose. Students working toward a joint credential inherently engage in cross-cultural collaboration, reinforcing the idea that the challenges of the 21st century—such as climate change, technological innovation, and global health—require transnational solutions. As such, joint degrees are not only academically enriching but also socially integrative, reinforcing the values of mutual understanding and European solidarity.

4. Student Mobility and Labor Markets

4.1 Impact on Youth Unemployment

In addition to promoting social cohesion and identity formation, Erasmus+ has significantly contributed to economic integration across European labor markets. One of the program's most

tangible economic benefits is its impact on youth unemployment. According to a 2022 study by the La Caixa Foundation, Erasmus+ alumni experience, on average, a 23% lower unemployment rate than their non-mobile counterparts. This statistic underscores the program's role as a catalyst for professional development in an increasingly competitive global job market.

Several factors contribute to this outcome. Erasmus+ enhances participants' language proficiency, cross-cultural communication skills, and adaptability—competencies that are highly valued by employers. Alumni often demonstrate greater problem-solving abilities and a capacity to navigate multicultural workplaces, giving them a distinct advantage in recruitment processes.

Moreover, Erasmus+ fosters professional networking opportunities that extend beyond national borders. Students often establish lasting connections across industries and regions, which can lead to internships, employment offers, and career advancement. From a macroeconomic perspective, reducing youth unemployment contributes to greater social stability and supports sustainable growth—goals that are particularly pressing in an era defined by rapid globalization and technological disruption.

4.2 Rural Inclusion and the “Study in Europe” Initiative

The benefits of Erasmus+ are not limited to urban centers. The program also addresses educational disparities in rural and underrepresented regions. Portugal's “Study in Europe” initiative exemplifies this approach, having led to a 40% increase in rural student enrollment in international education programs.

This expansion of access is critical for bridging the urban–rural divide. By enabling rural students to engage with international academic experiences, Erasmus+ helps democratize opportunity and unlock latent potential across geographic regions. Returning students bring back new skills, insights, and practices that can drive innovation and local development.

In many cases, alumni from rural areas contribute directly to regional revitalization—launching entrepreneurial ventures, participating in civic initiatives, or enhancing local education systems. Such outcomes reflect the broader value of Erasmus+ as a tool for inclusive development, reinforcing social and economic cohesion at both the local and European levels.

4.3 Broader Economic Implications

The long-term economic implications of Erasmus+ are multifaceted. By cultivating a mobile, multilingual, and culturally fluent workforce, the program enhances European competitiveness and innovation capacity. Employers increasingly seek candidates with international experience, and Erasmus+ alumni often meet this demand with a unique blend of academic rigor and soft skills.

Nevertheless, mobility raises concerns about brain drain, particularly in less affluent regions. As highlighted in Alberto Naretto's (2023) research, students from Eastern and Southern Europe may pursue careers in higher-income countries, leading to a depletion of human capital in their home regions. This dynamic, while beneficial for labor market integration, risks reinforcing existing economic inequalities within the EU.

To mitigate this, Naretto advocates for a model of “brain circulation,” wherein mobile graduates maintain transnational ties and eventually return home or collaborate across borders. Erasmus+ alumni networks facilitate this process through joint ventures, research partnerships, and entrepreneurial activity. Because Erasmus+ typically supports temporary rather than permanent migration, it is well-positioned to foster mobility that benefits both host and home countries.

Additionally, the collaborative spirit encouraged by Erasmus+ supports knowledge transfer and cross-sector innovation. Alumni often spearhead initiatives in fields such as climate resilience, digital transformation, and sustainable urban development. These dynamic exchanges contribute to resilience against regional labor market fluctuations by fostering adaptable skillsets that transcend national boundaries.

4.4 International Tuition Fees and Earnings Potential

To enhance the financial sustainability of European universities, a differentiated tuition model for non-EU students could be a viable strategy. Institutions in Australia and the U.S. charge between €20,000–€50,000 per year for international degrees. If leading EU universities—such as KU Leuven, LMU Munich, or Utrecht University—were to adopt similar tuition models, they could significantly increase their budgets without additional public funding.

Such a model would bolster institutional autonomy and enable reinvestment in research, infrastructure, and academic services. Countries like the Netherlands and Sweden have already implemented differential tuition policies, suggesting feasibility for broader adoption across the EU. Nonetheless, equity safeguards must be in place. Scholarship programs and income-contingent loan schemes could ensure that high-potential students from low-income backgrounds remain eligible regardless of their country of origin.

4.5 Limitations of Credit Mobility

Despite its many successes, Erasmus+ faces structural limitations—particularly concerning the short-term nature of credit mobility. These programs are typically limited to a semester or academic year, which can constrain the depth of cultural and academic immersion necessary for lasting impact.

Short-term exchanges often yield initial enthusiasm—the so-called “honeymoon phase”—but may not foster sustained intercultural understanding. Likewise, condensed academic schedules can limit opportunities for deep intellectual engagement or meaningful reflection.

To overcome these constraints, some institutions are piloting extended mobility programs and “sandwich” courses that combine academic study with long-term internships or research projects. While promising, these models require further development and institutional investment to fully realize their potential.

4.6 Equity Gaps: Underrepresentation of Low-Income Students

Another persistent limitation is the underrepresentation of students from low-income backgrounds. Although Erasmus+ offers financial grants, participation remains skewed toward students from more affluent families.

Key barriers include:

Financial limitations: Grants may not cover the full cost of travel, housing, or living expenses. Students who rely on part-time work at home may lose income while abroad.

Informational barriers: Access to knowledge about Erasmus+ opportunities is uneven. Students from privileged backgrounds often benefit from stronger support systems and networks.

Institutional disparities: Not all universities have the same capacity to assist underrepresented students. Institutions with fewer resources may lack dedicated staff to help with mobility logistics.

To address these equity gaps, targeted policy measures are necessary. These could include increased funding for need-based grants, pre-mobility preparatory programs, and mentorship networks that connect underrepresented students with alumni. Making the program more inclusive would not only improve fairness but also enrich the Erasmus+ experience by incorporating a broader spectrum of perspectives and experiences.

4.7 Student Mobility as a Catalyst for Academic Innovation and Excellence

Student mobility also serves as a powerful driver of academic innovation. Vertical mobility, in which students seek institutions with higher academic standing, motivates universities to elevate teaching and research quality. Horizontal mobility between peer institutions fosters curricular experimentation and pedagogical exchange.

As Ritzen (2010) argues, innovation—not bureaucracy—must be the core priority of European universities. Erasmus+ supports this by introducing diverse perspectives that challenge entrenched academic norms. For example, Unity Environmental University’s alignment with sustainability and career-oriented programs demonstrates how mobility can influence institutional focus areas. Latvia’s national policy to internationalize its faculty and curriculum further illustrates how mobility strengthens academic quality.

University rankings increasingly prioritize internationalization indicators, such as the proportion of foreign students and staff. Draghi’s 2024 proposals align with this trend, advocating for policies that position European institutions as global centers of talent and excellence.

However, rankings often fail to capture qualitative outcomes. Erasmus+ is widely recognized for nurturing soft skills like critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and reflective learning—especially among students from Central and Eastern Europe. These competencies enhance employability and academic distinction, even if they are not always captured by conventional metrics.

National policies, such as Latvia’s Development Plan 2014–2020, show how governments can align local goals with broader European ambitions. By targeting increased graduate mobility and faculty internationalization, such plans support both institutional excellence and geopolitical positioning within the global knowledge economy.

Gregersen (2016) emphasizes the importance of the “international classroom”—a pedagogical model that integrates international perspectives into course content and student interaction. This approach ensures that mobility translates into meaningful learning, with students not only studying abroad but also engaging deeply with diverse viewpoints.

5. Policy Recommendations and Roadmap to 2035

5.1 Toward 50% Intra-European Student Mobility by 2035

The social cohesion and economic benefits of increasing intra-European student mobility have been well established. However, it is equally clear that the distribution of these benefits and costs remains uneven. Additionally, challenges surrounding national language preservation and student housing must be addressed.

In countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, the fiscal costs of accommodating foreign European students have sparked domestic debate. A fair approach could be to finance these costs through the EU budget. This would reflect the shared benefits of mobility while mitigating the fiscal burden on receiving countries.

At the same time, the brain drain experienced by sending countries presents a serious challenge. This issue, first discussed extensively by Bhagwati (1976), remains relevant today. The loss of highly skilled graduates can undermine long-term development in countries of origin, even as host countries enjoy the gains.

To strike a fairer and more sustainable balance, the EU should consider the following policy measures:

EU-Funded Student Mobility: Fund intra-European student mobility through the EU, using a tiered model that adjusts support based on migration patterns—offering lower funding rates to countries receiving higher levels of student immigration.

Upgrading Universities in Underserved Regions: Allocate more structural funds to improve universities in Southern and Eastern Europe, making them more attractive to students from across the continent.

A Unified Language Policy: Introduce an EU-wide language policy making English a compulsory second language in higher education. This would facilitate academic exchange and cross-border communication (Ritzen, Neeleman, & Teixeira, 2017).

Graduation Retention Contributions: Require countries retaining over 30% of international graduates (e.g., Denmark, Germany) to contribute 0.1% of their annual GDP to a pan-European fund supporting sending institutions.

Public-Private Partnerships: Promote collaboration between universities and private industry in underfunded regions—such as Lithuania’s partnerships with fintech firms—to co-finance mobility programs (Kessels, 2024).

Student Housing Expansion: Invest in large-scale student housing initiatives in net-receiving countries to ease the burden on local housing markets and ensure a positive experience for international students.

Support for National Languages: Encourage universities to offer instruction in English without undermining national languages. There is no need to restrict the use of English in higher education; simultaneously, foreign students should be encouraged to acquire at least basic proficiency in the host country’s language.

Ensure the “International Classroom”: Permit universities to enroll international students only if they can ensure meaningful interaction between students from different countries, fostering true intercultural exchange.

Joint Capacity Agreements: Since many students study abroad due to capacity constraints at home, countries should negotiate joint capacity strategies to manage this issue collaboratively.

The road to achieving 50% intra-European student mobility by 2035 is undoubtedly challenging. Yet the strategic and social importance of a more integrated, innovative, and equitable Europe makes this a goal worth pursuing—despite the obstacles.

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