



## Erasmus in undergraduate nursing students: A scoping review of mobility experiences

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Erasmus  
Undergraduate nursing students  
Study abroad  
Erasmus mobility  
Nursing education

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The Erasmus Mobility programme offers university students opportunities for academic development, professional training, and intercultural exchange. However, research exploring the impact and implications of Erasmus Mobility among undergraduate nursing students remains fragmented, methodologically heterogeneous, and lacking a comprehensive synthesis specifically focused on nursing education contexts.

**Aim:** To systematically map and synthesise the existing research on Erasmus Mobility among undergraduate nursing students within the European context, with a particular focus on students' personal, academic, professional, and intercultural experiences, as well as the methodological approaches, challenges, and research gaps related to mobility programmes in nursing education.

**Design:** A scoping review.

**Data source:** A systematic search across seven databases included primary studies published in English, Italian, or Spanish between 2014 and 2025 was conducted.

**Review methods:** Arksey and O'Malley's framework.

**Results:** The eight included studies conducted in seven European countries. Mobility durations ranged from one to three months and destinations included the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Northern Europe with activities (study or clinical placements). Reported outcomes included language improvement, cultural adaptation, and autonomy development, alongside language barriers and disparities in clinical assessment methods.

**Conclusion:** Erasmus Mobility fosters cultural competence and professional development among undergraduate nursing students. Future research should prioritise investigating post-Erasmus Mobility reintegration challenges and participation barriers.

### 1. Introduction

The internationalisation of undergraduate education through Erasmus programmes (European Regional Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) has become an increasingly prominent phenomenon in Europe (Matić et al., 2022). Established by the European Union in 1987, the Erasmus programme provides university students with opportunities for academic development, professional training, and cultural exchange (Demir Demir Avci et al., 2022). In 2014, the Erasmus

programme was renamed and expanded to include all areas of lifelong learning, including schools, universities, adult education, and youth projects.

The current phase of the programme started in 2021 and will continue until 2027, representing an evolution from its previous version from 2014 to 2020 (European Commission, 2021a, 2021b). The updated Erasmus+ programme is open to more people. It now includes students, teachers, university staff, and other professionals working in education, training, youth, and sport (European Education and Culture Executive

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2026.107224>

Received 6 September 2025; Received in revised form 1 June 2026; Accepted 4 June 2026

Available online 11 June 2026

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Agency, 2021). The aim of this expansion is to support international cooperation and help participants grow professionally and personally. The programme includes both European Union (EU) countries and non-EU countries, such as North Macedonia, Liechtenstein, Norway, Iceland, Turkey, and Serbia. It focuses on important goals such as inclusion, digital development, sustainability, and democratic engagement (European Parliament, 2023).

Erasmus plays a crucial role in promoting international student mobility, fostering global citizenship, and improving higher education through university collaboration. It enhances the quality of education systems by encouraging creativity and intercultural competence (Lesjak et al., 2015). The programme is designed to strengthen students' academic, professional, linguistic, and intercultural communication skills, while also increasing self-confidence, broadening perspectives on European citizenship, and increasing employability (Iriondo, 2020). Recognised as a fundamental tool for professional and personal development, the Erasmus programme contributes to students' linguistic, cultural, and social growth within the EU (Milne and Cowie, 2013; Yücelin-Tas, 2013).

### 1.1. Background

Studying abroad within the context of nursing education is a relatively recent phenomenon (De Oliveira and Tuohy, 2015) even though internationalisation has been promoted as a core strategy in nursing curricula since the 1980s (Myhre, 2011). From the start of the Erasmus program until May 2018, nursing students from 94 universities went abroad (Council of Higher Education, 2019). The Erasmus exchange programme has provided the opportunities for professional practice as well as theoretical knowledge for the nursing department. It also has enabled nursing department students to gain information about the care of people in different cultures by strengthening their communication with their colleagues in other countries (Bohman and Borglin, 2014) and to create a vision and mission related to their profession. (Demir Avci et al., 2022).

For undergraduate nursing students, participating in Erasmus mobility represents a valuable learning opportunity (Tommasini et al., 2017), as it not only enhances their professional competencies but also improves the student's chances, (Cavalcante et al., 2018) and their communication skills and cross-cultural understanding (Matić and Jureša, 2016; Austin, 2001). Moreover, a study conducted by McComb et al. (2019) on nursing and engineering students demonstrated that students, after participating in a short-term experience abroad, gain respect for colleagues from another culture and/or professional discipline, the capacity to work collaboratively and deal with cultural and professional differences to achieve a common goal, and an appreciation of how intercultural and interprofessional involvement can benefit experiences and outcomes.

Although this experience offers numerous advantages, it also presents certain challenges. Several authors (Brown et al., 2016; Kelleher et al., 2016; Marshall, 2017) believe the main reasons which may deter nursing students from undertaking a student placement abroad are related to personal safety and access to quality health care, difficulties associated with leaving their family behind, financial challenges and language barriers. Furthermore, when referring to undergraduate nursing programmes, Kelleher et al. (2016) further highlight that undergraduate nursing programmes are academically demanding, often leaving students with limited flexibility to engage in study abroad opportunities. Additionally, students frequently report homesickness, difficulties with integration during the initial stages of the Erasmus mobility (EM), and significant challenges when reintegrating into their home environment upon return (Keogh and Russel-Roberts, 2009).

Among these barriers, financial constraints remain one of the most frequently reported concerns. As indicated by the European Commission (2021a, 2021b), Erasmus students receive financial support intended as a contribution toward travel and daily living expenses, with additional

funding available for students' undertaking internships, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those coming from outermost regions. Despite these measures, studies such as the research by Kent-Wilkinson et al. (2015), continue to report that the economic burden can represent a significant obstacle for many students, who often find the financial support insufficient to fully cover the cost of living abroad. While international student experiences are essential in a globalised world (Turale et al., 2020), research on the implications of EM for undergraduate nursing students remains fragmented and methodologically diverse (Trapani and Cassar, 2020). Concurrently, a comprehensive synthesis dedicated exclusively to this group is still lacking.

This gap limits the ability of educators, policymakers, and researchers to derive meaningful insights into the effectiveness, challenges, and broader implications of such mobility experiences. Moreover, a critical examination of the research methodologies employed in previous studies is warranted to identify prevailing approaches, assess their appropriateness, and guide future investigations. Given the growing emphasis on internationalisation in nursing education and the need to prepare future nurses for increasingly globalised healthcare environments, a comprehensive understanding of the impact of EM is essential. To address this gap, this scoping review aims to systematically map the existing literature on EM among undergraduate nursing students. Specifically, it seeks to identify prevailing themes, methodological approaches, and existing research gaps. The findings are intended to inform educators, policymakers, and programme designers, thereby contributing to the optimisation of Erasmus mobility initiatives in nursing education.

## 2. The review

This scoping review comprehensively charts the corpus of research concerning Erasmus Mobility in the context of European undergraduate nursing students. This methodological approach is considered suitable for outlining the range of extant evidence, where the need is to (1) identify predominant methodological frameworks and lacunae, and (2) guide prospective pathways in educational and policy-related spheres.

### 2.1. Aim of study

The aim of this scoping review was to systematically map and synthesise the existing research on Erasmus Mobility (EM) among undergraduate nursing students within the European context, contributing to a deeper understanding of mobility experiences in nursing education. Specifically, the review aimed to: (1) explore students' personal, academic, professional, and intercultural experiences related to EM; (2) identify methodological and conceptual gaps within the existing literature; and (3) provide evidence to support the development of more effective, equitable, and evidence-informed mobility programmes in undergraduate nursing education.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Design

A scoping review was conducted following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage framework, which includes (1) identifying the research question based on the population (P), concept (C), and context (C), (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting the studies, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). In developing this study, researchers also consulted the Joanna Briggs Institute manual (Peters et al., 2015, 2020).

### 3.2. Identifying research questions

In accordance with the aim of this scoping review, the following

research questions were formulated:

What is currently known from the existing literature about Erasmus Mobility (EM) experiences among undergraduate nursing students within the European context?

What personal, academic, professional, intercultural, and organisational aspects of EM require further investigation?

Which methodological approaches have been used to investigate EM experiences in undergraduate nursing education, and what methodological directions should future research prioritise?

The research questions were developed based on essential components in line with the Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) framework approach (Peters et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2020). The Population includes all undergraduate and baccalaureate nursing students who have participated in an Erasmus exchange programme during their bachelor's degree, with no exclusions based on age, gender, or nationality. The Concept focuses on Erasmus experiences undertaken during undergraduate nursing education, examining their impact on students' academic, professional, and personal development. The Context is confined to European nations participating in the Erasmus exchange programme, concentrating on the higher education environments where these mobility experiences occur.

### 3.3. Search methods

Four authors independently conducted the article search in three consecutive stages. In the first stage, the researchers reviewed existing studies on EM among undergraduate nursing students to identify relevant subject headings and keywords for refining the search strategy. In the second stage, under the guidance of a senior researcher, the team reached a consensus on the selection of databases and search terms. The online databases searched included MEDLINE (via PubMed), Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), PsycInfo, and Google Scholar.

The search terms included combination of words as "Nursing Students", "Nursing Education", "Undergraduate Nursing Student\*", "International Educational Exchange", "International Student Mobility", "Studying Abroad", and "Erasmus", combined using Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" (see search strategy supplementary material). In the third and final stage, the reference lists of all selected studies were manually screened to identify additional relevant publications.

### 3.4. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The included literature comprised: (a) primary studies employing various research designs, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods; (b) studies addressing EM among undergraduate nursing students enrolled in any nursing degree programmes; (c) studies conducted within the European context and/or in countries participating in the Erasmus programme; (d) studies published in peer-reviewed journals between 2014 and 2025; (e) studies written in English, Italian, or Spanish to maximize the selection of literature based on the linguistic knowledge of the research group.

Excluded were letters, comments, conference abstracts, editorials, books, any form of review, and doctoral theses to ensure that all included studies met a high standard of methodological quality and rigorous quality assessment. Additionally, studies conducted outside the European Union, or those focusing on international study experiences other than the Erasmus program were not included.

In cases where sample details lacked clarity, researchers meticulously examined the full text to ensure the inclusion of material relevant to the Erasmus experiences of nursing students and capable of providing useful data. No further time-frame limitations were imposed on the selection process.

### 3.5. Selection of sources of evidence

Following the inclusion and exclusion criteria, two researchers initially conducted independent screenings of titles and abstracts to determine adherence to the inclusion criteria, followed by a review of full texts. In cases where full texts were unavailable, researchers reached out to the authors for access. Disagreements regarding the inclusion of a study were resolved through independent assessment by the senior researcher. The number of records removed and the reasons for their exclusion were documented in accordance with the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018; see Fig. 1).

### 3.6. Charting the data

After selecting the final set of studies, one researcher extracted and charted data for the studies. Subsequently, the team convened to discuss the findings, addressing any issues related to the process and identifying additional data to extract. Following this discussion, researchers proceeded to chart the data independently, with a final meeting scheduled to share their results. In cases of disagreement, an independent assessment was conducted by a fourth author to resolve any discrepancies.

### 3.7. Quality appraisal

In line with the methodology of scoping reviews, no formal critical appraisal of the included studies was conducted, as the aim of this review was to map the available evidence regardless of study quality.

### 3.8. Data extraction

One researcher extracted data, including information on authors, year of publication, country of origin, aim, study design, sample characteristics, and details related to the Erasmus mobility experience. The recorded data included the type and duration of mobility, as well as participant characteristics such as gender, year of study, age, and nationality. For qualitative studies, key themes were identified, analysed, and synthesized. The extracted data were then validated in collaboration with the other researchers during a meeting. In cases of disagreement regarding study inclusion, an independent assessment was conducted by the senior researcher to resolve any discrepancies. (see Table 1).

### 3.9. Synthesis and presentation of results

The results were presented in alignment with the research questions. Both quantitative and qualitative findings were detailed in the main text and summarized in accompanying tables. Qualitative results were synthesized using the content analysis method (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008), ensuring a systematic and objective approach to describing and interpreting the EM among undergraduate nursing students. The results section was structured into two parts: the first part outlined the outcomes of the search strategy and selection process, including a PRISMA flow diagram; the second part provided key details about the selected studies, including country of origin, year of publication, sample characteristics, study design, instruments, methods and main findings.

### 3.10. Ethical issues

This scoping review is part of a broader project aimed at exploring the EM of undergraduate nursing students to enhance educational strategies in nursing curricula. As this study does not involve direct participation of patients, students, or the public, it does not require approval from an ethics committee.

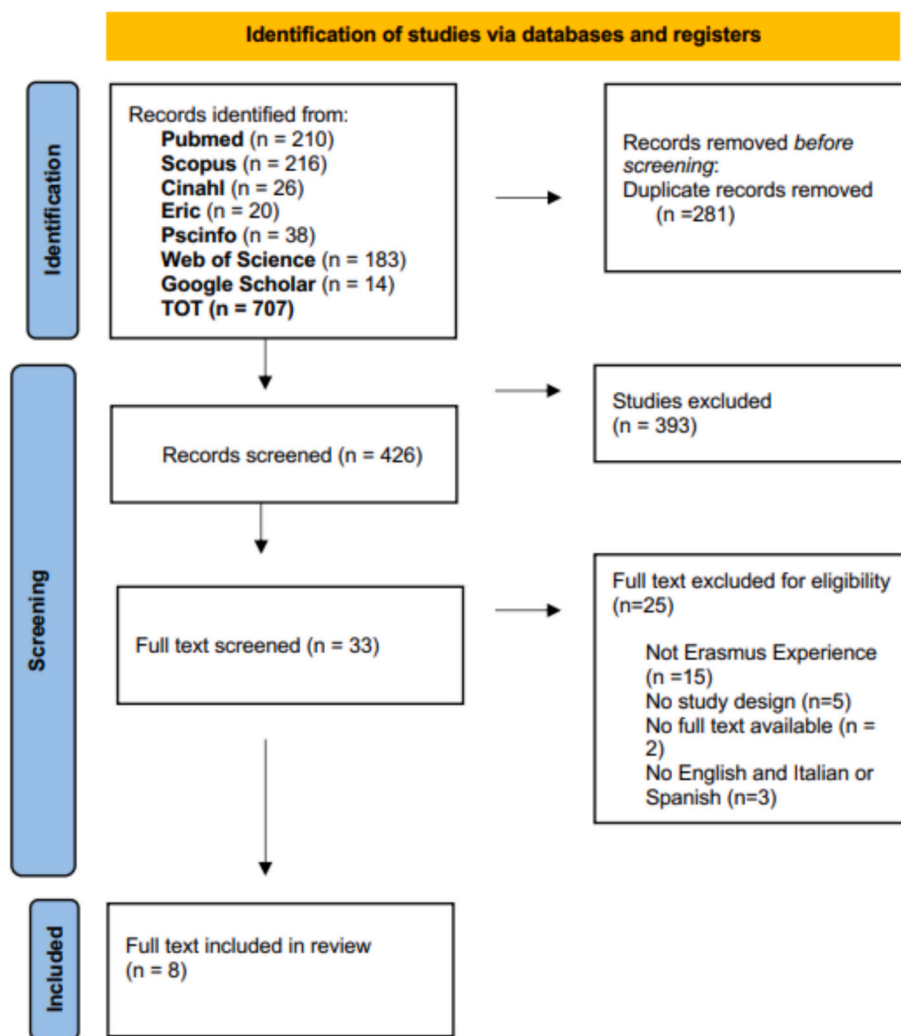


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of study selection process.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Selection of sources of evidence

A total of 707 articles were initially identified. After the removal of duplicates ( $n = 281$ ), 426 studies were retained for initial screening based on title and abstract. Of these, 393 studies were excluded because they constituted secondary literature, did not focus on nursing students, did not address the research questions or lacked abstracts.

Therefore, 33 studies remained for full-text evaluation. Subsequently, 25 studies were excluded for the following reasons: they did not specifically focus on the Erasmus experience or on the European context ( $n = 15$ ), had no study design criteria ( $n = 2$ ), had no full texts available ( $n = 2$ ), or were published in languages other than English, Italian, or Spanish ( $n = 3$ ).

According to the PRISMA flow diagram (Fig. 1), 8 studies were ultimately selected for inclusion in the analysis.

### 4.2. Characteristics of sources of evidence

The studies included ( $n = 8$ ) in this review were conducted in several European and non-European participating countries involved in Erasmus Mobility (EM) (for a complete list of participating non-EU countries, see the Introduction section). Specifically, two studies were carried out in Turkey (Demir Avci et al., 2022; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021;), while

others were conducted in Slovenia (Karnjuš et al., 2020), Croatia (Matić et al., 2022), Malta (Trapani and Cassar, 2020), and the United Kingdom prior to Brexit (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Morgan, 2019) respectively. One study adopted a multicentre approach, encompassing universities from Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Italy (Tommasini et al., 2017).

The publication dates of the included studies range from 2016 to early 2022. Notably, all eight studies were published within the last decade (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tommasini et al., 2017; Morgan, 2019; Trapani and Cassar, 2020; Karnjuš et al., 2020; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021; Demir Avci et al., 2022; Matić et al., 2022).

Methodologically, the corpus comprised four qualitative studies (Demir Avci et al., 2022; Morgan, 2019; Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021), a case study (Tommasini et al., 2017), a quantitative secondary analysis (Karnjuš et al., 2020), a longitudinal cohort study with mixed quantitative and qualitative data collection (Matić et al., 2022), and one study with an online quantitative survey and a focus group data collection (Trapani and Cassar, 2020).

Two studies (Tommasini et al., 2017; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021), were incorporated despite not adhering strictly to the criteria due to their significant insights: Tuncer Unver et al. (2021), which, while including registered nurses, offers a retrospective insight from practicing nurses on the Erasmus program during their undergraduate years; Tommasini et al. (2017), given important information about assessment process of clinical competence.

**Table 1**  
Description of the studies included in the scoping review.

Authors, years, country	Aim	Study design	Sampling	Data collection	Sample	Characteristics of Erasmus mobility	Findings
Demir Avci et al., 2022 Turkey	To understand and interpret the experiences of the nursing department students who went abroad with the Erasmus exchange program	Qualitative phenomenological	Purposive	Interviews semi-structured with 7 open-ended questions: Face to face and Video phone interviews	Type: undergraduate nursing students Number: 10 Data: mean age 26.9, 90% female Year of course: 10% 2nd 30% 3rd 60% 4th	Erasmus Program Country of destination: Finland (N = 4), Romania (N = 2), Portugal (2), the Netherlands (N = 1), and Greece (N = 1) Duration: NR Type of activity: NR Structure of Erasmus mobility: NR	Five main themes: (1) The definition of the Erasmus internship, (2) The reasons for choosing the Erasmus internship, (3) The positive aspects of the Erasmus internship, (4) The negative aspects of the Erasmus internship, and (5) The contributions of the Erasmus internship
Matić et al., 2022 Croatia	To explore how the participation of students in international mobility affects their sense of coherence, subjective well-being, and school success and whether it can contribute to changes in the students' attitudes regarding their future nursing profession and certain important life domains	Longitudinal Mixed system to data collection	selected through a merit-based application process, considering motivation letters, academic records, language proficiency, and attendance	Quantitative data: Orientation to Life Questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987), Personal Wellbeing Index (Lipovcan et al., 2007). Qualitative data: open-ended questions	Number: 99 Data: mean age 18.57, 76% female, 24% male Year of course: NR	Erasmus+ program. Country of destination: Portugal (N = 21), Germany (N = 22), Ireland (N = 36), Malta (N = 20); Duration: 1 month Type of activity: NR Structure of Erasmus mobility: NR	Student mobility did not significantly alter their sense of coherence or subjective well-being. A significant positive correlation before and after mobility occurred between the sense of coherence, subjective well-being, and school success. According to the qualitative analysis, the students' experiences were overall positive and stimulating, with many of them noticing better working conditions abroad
Tuncer Unver et al., 2021 Turkey	To explore the lived experiences of nurses studying abroad with the Erasmus program during their undergraduate education	Qualitative descriptive phenomenological	Snowball	Semi-structured, face to face in-depth interviews	Type: nurses Number: 12 Data: age range 23–34(27.92 ± 3.82), 100% female Year of course: NR	Erasmus Program. Country of destination: Norway, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Netherlands, and Lithuania; Duration: NR Type of activity: NR Structure of Erasmus mobility: NR	Five main themes: (1) Adaptation process, (2) Sources of support, (3) Differences, (4) Difficulties, and (5) Benefits.
Karnjuš et al., 2020 Slovenia	To examine the impact of international exchange programmes on the personal and professional development of undergraduate nursing students comparing who have participated in a student mobility exchange and those who have not	Quantitative secondary analysis	Convenience	Handmade questionnaire based on literature	Type: undergraduate nursing students Number: 73 Data: age range: Up to 22: 47.9%, 23–26: 41.1%, 27 or more 11.0%, 67,1% female 32,9% male Years of course: 13,70% 1st; 26,03% 2nd; 50,68% 3rd; 9,59% Absolvent	Erasmus Program Country of destination: NR Duration: NR Type of activity: NR Structure of Erasmus mobility: NR	Mobility can improve the student's self-confidence (Z = -2.088, p = 0.037) and acceptance of other cultures (Z = -3.116, p = 0.002). The students highlight the need to upgrade students' professional competencies (Z = -3.116, p = 0.002), particularly in the field of culturally competent nursing care (Z = -2.391, p = 0.017).
Trapani and Cassar, 2020 Malta	To explore the motivations for, and outcomes of, Maltese nursing students' Erasmus+ exchanges against the program's intended outcomes	Mixed system to data collection	nursing students from a Maltese university who participated in Erasmus+ mobility between 2009 and 2016	Online questionnaire and focus group	Type: nursing students Number: 65 nursing students (online surveys) and 16 participated (2-h focus group) Data: age range	Erasmus+ program. Country of destination: United Kingdom (N = 26), Finland (N = 12), Ireland (N = 8) and seven other countries N	Participants overwhelmingly agreed that intended outcomes of the Erasmus+ program were achieved. Five main themes: (1) Enhanced

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Table 1 (continued)

Authors, years, country	Aim	Study design	Sampling	Data collection	Sample	Characteristics of Erasmus mobility	Findings
					20–25: 89.2%; 26–30: 7.7%; >30: 3.1%. 83,08% female, 16,92% male. Year of course: NR	(= 19). Duration: from a minimum of 60 days to a maximum 90 days; Type of activity: NR Structure of Erasmus mobility: NR	Employability as a Nurse, (2) Exposure to Nursing Beyond the National Shores, (3) Personal Growth, (4) Context-Sensitivity of Nursing Care Delivery, (5) Language and Citizenship
Morgan, 2019 UK	To investigate student nurse experiences of learning during a study abroad journey to explore the phenomenon of learning and the processes of learning throughout this journey	Qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological	Purposive	two audio-recorded semi-structured interviews	Type: Nursing Student Number: 20 UK and EU; Data: age: NR Years of course: NR	Erasmus Program Country of destination: UK university; Duration: 3 months for ERASMUS students; 1 month for clinical placements; Type of activity: study and clinical placement; Structure of Erasmus mobility: NR	Four main themes: (1) experiencing a different reality, (2) active sensemaking, (3) being with others, (4) being changed and transformed
Tommasini et al., 2017 Europe: Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Italy	To compare the clinical competence assessment processes and instruments adopted for nursing students during their clinical placement abroad	Case study	Purposive	N.A.	Type: Bachelor of Nursing Science students Number: 8 nursing programmes of seven countries (Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Italy).	N.A.	Evaluations used English tools with mandatory final assessments (only 4 interim). 196 items grouped into 12 competence categories prioritized: Technical Skills, Self-Learning/Critical Thinking, and Nursing Care Process (25). Less focus on Self-adaptation, Inter-professional Skills, Documentation, Care Management, Communication, and Theory-Practice Integration.
Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016 UK	To examine the experiences of nursing students on international exchange programs	Qualitative	Convenience	Clinical practices diaries	Type: Nursing Student Number: 7, Spanish Data: mean age 20.8; 57,14% female; 42,86% male; Year of course: 100% 3rd	Erasmus Program. Country of destination: United Kingdom; Duration: ten-week placement. Type of activity: clinical placement Structure of Erasmus mobility: hospitals located in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Newcastle	Four main Themes: (1) Adaptation issue, (2) Differences in the educational system, (3) Structural differences in nursing organisational schemes, (4) Enriching overall experience

Legend. N.A. = Not available.

Detailed characteristics of the included studies—including participants, EM features, and methods—are provided in Table 1.

#### 4.3. Aims of included studies on EM in undergraduate nursing students

Qualitative research captured the lived experiences of undergraduate nursing students during EM (Demir Avci et al., 2022; Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021) and examined the educational impact of their study abroad programmes (Morgan, 2019).

Shifting the focus to quantitative, mixed-methods, and case study designs, the remainder of the corpus addressed broader systemic and psychosocial outcomes. Specifically, the study by Karnjuš et al. (2020) examined the impact of international exchange programmes on personal

and professional development, comparing students who participated in EM and those who did not. Extending this focus, Matić et al. (2022) investigated how the participation of students in EM affected their sense of coherence, subjective well-being and academic success, as well as whether it could contribute to changes in students' attitudes regarding their future nursing profession and key life domains. Regarding programme evaluation, Trapani and Cassar (2020) explored students' motivations and the outcomes of the Erasmus+ exchange against the intended objectives of the programme. Finally, Tommasini et al. (2017) compared the clinical competence assessment processes and tools across different countries for Erasmus nursing students.

#### 4.4. Sample characteristics

In qualitative studies, the sample sizes ranged from 7 (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016) to 20 (Morgan, 2019) participants. These samples mainly consisted of female students ranging from 57% (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016) to 100% (Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). The mean age, when reported, ranged from 20.8 years (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016) to 27.92 years (Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). Demir Avci et al. (2022) provided a detailed distribution year of the course (1 in second year, 3 in third year, and 6 in fourth year), whereas other studies such as Morgan (2019) and Tuncer Unver et al. (2021) did not report this information.

The other studies included between 65 (Trapani and Cassar, 2020) and 99 students (Matić et al., 2022), ranging in age from 18 to 30 years or older. In the study by Karnjuš et al. (2020), students from all years of the course were included, whereas the other authors did not specify this information. The samples were predominantly female, ranging from 67.1% (Karnjuš et al., 2020) to 83.1% (Trapani and Cassar, 2020).

#### 4.5. Characteristics of Erasmus mobility experiences

The selected literature offered an overview of EM features, such as destination countries, duration, and activity type including clinical placements or study periods. Clinical placements involved supervised practice in hospital settings within the host country's health system, guided by local mentors and encompassing direct patient care, observation, and adaptation to different organisational protocols (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016). Study periods, instead, comprised participation in formal educational activities such as lectures, seminars, and skills-based learning sessions at the host institution (Morgan, 2019).

Regarding to the diverse destination countries, Tuncer Unver et al. (2021) listed placements in eight countries, including Norway and Germany; Demir Avci et al. (2022) mentioned Finland, Romania, and Portugal; Siles Gonzalez et al. (2016) focused on UK hospital placements (Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Newcastle); and Morgan (2019) referred to a UK university. Matić et al. (2022) reported placements in Portugal, Germany, Ireland, and Malta, while Trapani and Cassar (2020) included the UK and Finland. The study of Karnjuš et al. (2020) did not report destinations. Tommasini et al. (2017) consider internship tools of Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Italy.

Reported durations ranged from one (Matić et al., 2022) to three months (Morgan, 2019), aligning with short- to mid-term mobility. Siles Gonzalez et al. (2016) described a 10-week clinical placement, and Morgan (2019) noted a three-month study period followed by a one-month clinical placement. Trapani and Cassar (2020) reported durations of 60–90 days, and Matić et al. (2022) documented one-month mobilities. However, studies such as those by Tuncer Unver et al. (2021), Demir Avci et al. (2022), Karnjuš et al. (2020), and Tommasini et al. (2017) omitted duration details.

#### 4.6. Findings from the included studies

The analysis of the selected literature revealed that international mobility programmes represent a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted experience for undergraduate nursing students. Specifically, the analysis of the corpus generated five interrelated themes that captured students' experiences and reflections on Erasmus mobility: (1) *Psychological impact and initial difficulties*; (2) *Positive aspects and personal growth*; (3) *Impact on future professional career*; (4) *Organisational limitations and structural challenges*; and (5) *Contrasts in pedagogical approaches*.

##### 4.6.1. Theme: psychological impact and initial difficulties

During the initial stages of mobility, many participants experienced significant psychological challenges, reporting feelings of fear, stress, and loneliness (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). As described by Turkish students (Tuncer Unver et al., 2021), arriving in a new country was often accompanied by tears and a deep sense of

isolation stemming from separation from family and culture shock. Similarly, students undertaking placements in Finland described language-related difficulties that made clinical activities challenging, generating frustration and feelings of exclusion within clinical settings (Demir Avci et al., 2022). Additionally, common psychosocial and external constraints emerged, including financial burdens and, in some cases, lower levels of intercultural sensitivity among students from less multicultural backgrounds (Karnjuš et al., 2020).

##### 4.6.2. Theme: positive aspects and personal growth

Despite these initial difficulties, students progressively developed effective adaptation strategies, demonstrating increasing autonomy, self-confidence, resilience, and intercultural competence (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). Participation fostered greater student responsibility for learning, which was often accompanied by personal transformation and reflective growth (Morgan, 2019). This development was further evidenced by significant increases in self-esteem and cultural acceptance among participants (Karnjuš et al., 2020). Furthermore, students underwent a socio-cultural shift, beginning to perceive themselves as "cultural ambassadors" capable of fostering intercultural understanding through everyday relational interactions, such as sharing cultural traditions and practices with international peers (Demir Avci et al., 2022).

##### 4.6.3. Theme: impact on future professional career

The mobility experience represented a transformative milestone for students' future professional development. Participation appeared to strengthen students' confidence as future healthcare professionals, increase cultural openness, and enhance awareness of the diversity characterising European healthcare systems and nursing education contexts (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). Furthermore, exposure to diverse clinical environments served as a career catalyst, encouraging several participants to pursue new clinical interests and specialisations, such as geriatrics and public health, which they had not previously considered (Trapani and Cassar, 2020).

##### 4.6.4. Theme: organisational limitations and structural challenges

Concurrently, the reviewed literature highlighted important structural and organisational limitations within existing mobility programmes (Tommasini et al., 2017; Matić et al., 2022). A multicentre analysis of eight Erasmus nursing programmes across seven countries demonstrated that while technical and clinical competencies were consistently evaluated, dimensions such as intercultural adaptation, reflective learning, and personal development were often underrepresented (Tommasini et al., 2017). Specific structural shortcomings included the total absence of interim assessments in four of the evaluated programmes, alongside a widespread lack of self-evaluation tools, with only two programmes incorporating student self-assessment procedures (Tommasini et al., 2017). Furthermore, a potential decline in academic performance after mobility was documented, frequently attributed to heavy workloads abroad and limited institutional support upon return (Matić et al., 2022).

##### 4.6.5. Theme: contrasts in pedagogical approaches

Finally, students noted marked contrasts in pedagogical approaches across different countries. These variations included a more extensive and integrated use of technology in nursing education, as well as the curricular integration of humanistic subjects alongside core biomedical content such as anatomy and physiology (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021).

Overall, despite the emotional, academic, and organisational challenges associated with mobility experiences, the vast majority of students ultimately described their international exchange as a highly meaningful and rewarding journey (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021).

#### 4.7. Methods of included studies on EM

Tuncer Unver et al. (2021) employed a descriptive phenomenological approach based on Husserl's framework; both Demir Avci et al. (2022) and Siles Gonzalez et al. (2016) used general phenomenological designs, while Morgan (2019) adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology.

Karnjuš et al. (2020) conducted a descriptive secondary analysis, using data from a previous cross-sectional survey. Matić et al. (2022) employed a longitudinal cohort design to assess psychological and academic outcomes over time, while Trapani and Cassar (2020) integrated survey data with qualitative interviews within a convergent mixed system of data collection framework.

Regarding sample selection, the studies used various approaches. The purpose sampling is used by Demir Avci et al. (2022) and Morgan (2019); the snowball sampling by Tuncer Unver et al. (2021); Karnjuš et al. (2020) and Siles Gonzalez et al. (2016) preferred Convenience sampling. Trapani and Cassar (2020) included all eligible Erasmus+ participants from 2009 to 2016; while Matić et al. (2022) included all students with the highest number of points (merit selection evaluated motivation letters, academic records, language skills, and attendance).

The selected studies employed varied data collection approaches to examine EM experiences. Qualitative studies primarily utilized semi-structured interviews, conducted either face-to-face or remotely, to gather in-depth accounts from participants. Specifically, Tuncer Unver et al. (2021) conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews; Demir Avci et al. (2022) administered semi-structured interviews with 7 open-ended questions (5 face-to-face and 5 via video call); Morgan (2019) implemented audio-recorded semi-structured interviews, and Siles Gonzalez et al. (2016) employed clinical practice diaries as reflective tools. Karnjuš et al. (2020) distributed questionnaires in both English and Slovene versions.

Two studies enhanced their qualitative data through supplementary instruments: Matić et al. (2022) combined quantitative questionnaires with qualitative focus group interviews, while Trapani and Cassar (2020) adopted a mixed system of data collection using online surveys followed by focus group discussions.

## 5. Discussion

The present scoping review aimed to map the existing evidence on EM among undergraduate nursing students within the European context and to identify areas requiring further investigation. To the best of our knowledge, this review represents the first attempt to comprehensively synthesise the literature specifically focused on Erasmus Mobility experiences in undergraduate nursing education across Europe. By consolidating current evidence, the review contributes to a deeper understanding of how international mobility experiences shape students' personal, academic, and professional development, while also highlighting important methodological and conceptual gaps within the existing literature.

Overall, while taking into account the methodological and contextual heterogeneity of the included evidence, the included studies consistently portray EM as a transformative educational experience that promotes personal growth, professional development, and intercultural competence—skills that are essential in today's diverse healthcare environments and for which students must be adequately prepared to address emerging challenges within the system. Nursing students reported enhanced autonomy, resilience, critical thinking skills, and a stronger professional identity following their experiences abroad (Demir Avci et al., 2022; Morgan, 2019; Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). These findings are consistent with Edmonds (2012), who emphasised that studying abroad offers a valuable educational experience that promotes key outcomes such as increased self-efficacy, the cultivation of a global perspective in nursing, and a deeper understanding of cultural competence. Additional advantages for nursing students include the

enhancement of critical thinking, real-time problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to effectively communicate and adapt within unfamiliar settings (Edmonds, 2012).

EM prompted students to reconsider career aspirations, encouraging interest in new specialisations and international healthcare roles (Matić et al., 2022; Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2017). Furthermore, as demonstrated by Theofanidis and Fountouki (2017) mobility experiences foster cooperative learning: educators benefit from new teaching and motivational strategies, while students gain from cross-cultural stimulation and novel problem-solving approaches. However, translating these documented benefits into effective, equitable, and evidence-based mobility programmes requires a careful examination of the systemic challenges identified in the literature.

Therefore, educators should consistently prioritise Erasmus Mobility within nursing curricula and adopt comprehensive strategies to facilitate participation, ensuring that students can fully benefit from the academic, professional, and intercultural opportunities it provides.

Despite these benefits, the included studies also identified several challenges. Students frequently reported emotional stress, loneliness, and language barriers during initial adaptation phases (Demir Avci et al., 2022; Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016). These difficulties were often exacerbated by inadequate institutional support structures, such as unclear clinical expectations and insufficient mentorship. Moreover, significant inconsistencies were found in how EM experiences were structured, supervised, and assessed across institutions, undermining the comparability and equity of outcomes (Tommasini et al., 2017). On the other hand, as noted by several authors (e.g., Hsiao et al., 2021; Huffman et al., 2020; Morgan, 2019), these challenges can serve as valuable opportunities for growth, enhancing students' critical thinking skills, intrapersonal confidence, communication abilities, self-awareness, and their confidence in adapting to unfamiliar situations.

The selected literature also highlights important areas for future research, particularly the need to better understand the post-mobility reintegration phase. Students often experience reverse culture shock, academic misalignment, or emotional fatigue upon returning to their home institutions (Sobel, 2020). None of the included studies investigated the presence or effectiveness of re-entry support structures, such as debriefing sessions, mentoring, or reflective activities. Secondly, the perspectives of non-participating students were completely absent. The barriers (financial, fear of failure, lack of language skills, or rigid academic calendars), though frequently hypothesised in the literature (Brown et al., 2016; Kelleher et al., 2016), were not fully explored in the included studies. Understanding why some eligible students choose not to apply for EM would provide critical insight and help improve future experiences.

In addition, studies focused primarily on students' self-reported experiences without capturing the perspectives of educators, clinical mentors, or receiving institutions. Understanding how staff and supervisors perceive and manage mobility programmes offers a more comprehensive understanding of EM and may improve students' experiences. As highlighted by Theofanidis and Fountouki (2017), incorporating the views of staff and supervisors offers a more comprehensive understanding of how Erasmus programmes are managed and sustained. Future research should actively integrate the perspectives of educators, clinical tutors/mentors, and host institutions to provide a holistic framework for evaluating and improving the overall mobility experience.

#### 5.1. The research about EM among undergraduate nursing students: methodological issues

From a methodological perspective, the available evidence remains limited. Most included studies primarily adopted qualitative phenomenological approaches and relied on relatively small convenience samples, thereby restricting the generalisability of findings. Quantitative studies were scarce and frequently based on self-reported outcomes.

Moreover, only one longitudinal study was identified, limiting understanding of the long-term impact of EM on professional practice and career development. The reviewed studies reflect a broad geographical distribution across Europe and were published between 2016 and 2022. Notably, no additional empirical studies have emerged in recent years, suggesting a potential stagnation in research activity on this topic. Despite the geographical diversity, several countries—including Italy—lack dedicated, national-level research on EM in nursing education. In fact, the only Italian contribution (Tommasini et al., 2017) was part of a multicentre initiative, underscoring the need for more focused investigations.

Sample characteristics varied across studies, with sizes ranging from 7 (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016) to 99 (Matić et al., 2022) students and ages spanning from early 20s (Siles Gonzalez et al., 2016) to nearly 28 years (Tuncer Unver et al., 2021). Such variability, combined with the frequent use of convenience sampling, further compromises the robustness, transferability, and comparability of findings. Key demographic data—like course year and clinical placement experience—were often missing, despite their relevance in shaping students' readiness and perception of EM, and complicating outcome interpretations.

Furthermore, the lack of key aspects of the EM characteristics (destination, duration, organisational structure, mentorship) hinders understanding of how such elements influence adaptation and learning. For instance, while Trapani and Cassar (2020) explicitly referenced clinical placements, other studies failed to specify whether practical training was included. Although Erasmus+ distinguishes between short-term (5–30 days) and long-term mobility (2–12 months), no consensus emerged regarding the optimal duration for fostering personal and professional growth, which may vary depending on context and individual readiness.

Finally, a significant conceptual limitation identified within the reviewed primary literature—which should not be confused with the methodological limitations of the present scoping review—is the widespread absence of explicit theoretical frameworks guiding the interpretation of EM outcomes. This conceptual weakness limits cross-study comparability, reduces interpretative depth, and hinders the development of a coherent body of evidence within nursing education research.

## 5.2. Recommendations for future research

Future research and institutional policies should move beyond simply encouraging participation in EM programmes and instead ensure that mobility experiences are systematically supported through structured, inclusive, and evidence-informed educational strategies. In contemporary nursing education, international experiences are increasingly recognised as essential for preparing healthcare professionals capable of responding effectively to the challenges of culturally diverse and globalised healthcare systems (Maas and Ezeobele, 2014). Consequently, fostering opportunities for nursing students to engage with healthcare practices beyond their national contexts should be considered a strategic priority for higher education institutions worldwide.

From a research perspective, future studies should adopt more rigorous and theoretically informed methodologies, including longitudinal and mixed-method designs, larger representative samples across diverse geographical and institutional settings, and validated outcome measures capable of evaluating both educational and professional dimensions of EM experiences. Greater attention should also be devoted to underexplored areas, such as post-mobility reintegration processes, barriers to participation among non-mobile students, and the long-term impact of mobility experiences on professional identity formation and clinical practice. Furthermore, future investigations should incorporate the perspectives of educators, clinical mentors, and host institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the organisational and educational dynamics underpinning mobility programmes.

At an institutional level, improving EM programmes is not solely a matter of educational innovation, but also a fundamental component of quality assurance and internationalisation within higher education. According to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), student and staff mobility represents a central dimension of institutional quality enhancement (ENQA, 2015). Similarly, within the ESG framework for joint programmes, facilitating mobility is considered an indicator of effective international collaboration and cross-border educational integration (ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), 2015).

To operationalise these principles, universities should implement comprehensive support systems throughout all phases of the mobility experience. As highlighted by Kironji et al. (2018), structured pre-departure programmes focusing on cultural awareness, communication skills, travel safety, leadership, clinical preparedness, and personal well-being may significantly improve students' readiness and positively influence their overall mobility experience. In addition, targeted preparatory initiatives may reduce anxiety, facilitate adaptation processes, and strengthen students' confidence when entering unfamiliar academic and clinical environments.

Higher education institutions should also promote more inclusive and equitable mobility pathways through mentorship and peer-support initiatives involving students who have previously participated in EM programmes. Peer-to-peer support may facilitate emotional reassurance, experiential learning, and practical guidance, thereby improving students' preparedness and fostering more equitable access to international mobility opportunities.

Ultimately, Erasmus Mobility should not be conceptualised as an isolated educational opportunity, but rather as an integrated component of undergraduate nursing curricula aimed at developing culturally competent, adaptable, reflective, and globally responsive healthcare professionals.

## 5.3. Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the significant heterogeneity among the included studies—manifested in the diversity of countries, variations in the duration of nursing education curricula, and differing lengths of Erasmus Mobility (EM) experiences—may have influenced the findings, particularly regarding the evaluated impact and effectiveness of the mobility. Another limitation concerns the inclusion of two studies conducted in Turkey, although located outside the European Union, Turkey is officially designated as a 'third country associated to the Erasmus+ programme,' an institutional status that applies uniformly at a national level across all higher education institutions and encompasses all Erasmus initiatives. Nevertheless, cultural, political, religious, educational, and organisational differences may have influenced students' experiences and could limit the transferability and comparability of findings across the broader European context. However, it is important to note that the primary objective of this scoping review was to map the broader literature across different areas of study rather than to provide an in-depth analysis of specific research findings. Lastly, no protocol was preregistered for this review.

## 6. Conclusions

This scoping review synthesises the current evidence on Erasmus Mobility (EM) within undergraduate nursing education across the European context, demonstrating that EM can significantly promote cultural competence, professional development, personal growth, and intercultural awareness among nursing students. At the same time, the review highlights important methodological, conceptual, and organisational gaps within the existing literature, emphasising the need for further research and programme development. In particular, future investigations should prioritise underexplored areas such as post-mobility

reintegration experiences, participation barriers among non-mobile students, and the long-term impact of EM on professional identity formation and clinical practice. The findings also underline the importance of developing more structured, equitable, and evidence-informed mobility programmes capable of supporting students before, during, and after their international experiences. Ultimately, Erasmus Mobility should no longer be regarded merely as an optional educational enrichment opportunity, but rather as a strategic component of undergraduate nursing education aimed at preparing culturally competent, adaptable, and globally responsive healthcare professionals capable of working effectively within increasingly diverse healthcare systems.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Giuditta Pantaleo:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rocco Mazzotta:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Francesco Scerbo:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rosaria Alvaro:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Ercole Vellone:** Writing – review & editing. **Valentina Bressan:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Giampiera Bulfone:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### Funding

This research was funded by the Center of Excellence for Nursing Culture and Research of the Order of Nursing Professions of Rome.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Acknowledgments

This study was supported by a grant received by Center of Excellence for Nursing Culture and Research, Italy.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2026.107224>.

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