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Erasmus student mobility and the construction of European citizenship

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Abstract

The Erasmus student mobility programme allocates three explicit objectives to the experience of spending a few months studying in another European country: to benefit educationally, linguistically and culturally; to promote co-operation between institutions; and to contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded and internationally experienced future professionals (European Commission,1996). However, although not stated as one explicit objective, the programme has sometimes been referred to as one of the most powerful tools of European integration. However, little research has been done so far on how this may alter students' attitudes towards aspects of identity and feelings of citizenship. In this light, our study intends to cover this area of research by means of a set of quantitative and qualitative measures to determine the extent to which the Erasmus experience affected the sense of self as European citizens among a cohort of students from the University of Lleida (Catalonia, Spain), their position towards the notion of European citizenship and how this relates with the development of their plurilingual competence. Quantitative measures are based on the results of two questionnaires, one before and the other after the study abroad experience, whereas qualitative data were obtained through the analysis of discussion groups focusing on aspects of European vs. national identity and citizenship.

Keywords: European citizenship, identity, student mobility, study abroad, Erasmus

1. Introduction

The Erasmus student mobility programme allocates three explicit objectives to the experience of spending a few months studying in another European country: to benefit educationally, linguistically and culturally; to promote co-operation between institutions; and to contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded and internationally experienced future professionals (European Commission,1996). However, although not stated as one explicit objective, the programme has sometimes been referred to as one of the most powerful tools of European integration. In her speech of acceptance of the 2004 Principe de Asturias Award for International Cooperation, the European Commissioner for Education and Culture, Viviane Reding, declared that “Erasmus enables them (students) to discover sometimes for the first time a different kind of citizenship founded on roots common to all Europeans, respecting historical, cultural and linguistic diversity. However, little research has been done so far on how this may alter students’ attitudes towards aspects of identity and feelings of European citizenship.

In this paper we aim at investigating the impact of the Erasmus experience on students’ construction (or lack of) a European identity and citizenship. To do so, we need to start by first exploring some of the concepts that constitute the core of our study, namely ‘European citizenship and identity’ and its connection with ‘plurilingual competence’.

1.1. European Citizenship and identity

Defining Europe and European identity is difficult and a matter of ongoing discussion, as it can be seen in the debate over the origins of Europe. While some argue that Europe’s foundations are based on Christian roots, others completely disagree with this and emphasize a secular vision of the continent. The European Union as a supranational entity is said to embody some of the values that many Europeans celebrate as their identifying traits, but if defining the traits that characterise the members of a single country is rather difficult, defining them for the European Union (EU) is next to impossible. This can be observed if we focus on the notion of citizenship. Both identity and citizenship are rather connected but at the same time differentiated concepts. Whereas identity relates to the individual and their positioning towards a culture or group of people, citizenship relates to formally established bonds linking an individual to a given national society, by means of establishing some kind of mutual allegiance that may involve feelings of

identity but emphasise the rights and obligations of citizens with regard to their respective national state. This may involve some degree of conflict with the notion of 'European citizenship' established by European institutions.

The concept 'Citizenship of the Union' was established in article 8.1 of the Maastricht Treaty: "Every person holding the nationality of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union." Article 8.2 declares that these citizens will enjoy rights and be subject to duties, although no duties are listed. In the Amsterdam Treaty one line was added to article 8.1 of the Maastricht Treaty: "Citizenship of the Union shall complement and not replace national citizenship." This addition seems to suggest a certain fear from member-states that an expansion of the status of Union citizenship may be detrimental to national identities (Mancini, 1998: 32).

The report of the results of Flash Eurobarometer 365 (European Commission, 2013) indicates that although 81% of the respondents claim they are familiar with the term "citizen of the European Union", only 46% say they are both familiar with it and know what it means. People know the expressions "citizenship" and "European Union", so most say they are familiar with the concept, but when it comes to telling what this actually means, less than half claim they could do that. Citizenship is about rights and duties, but it is also about feeling part of a given political entity. Shore (2004: 29) argues that 'citizenship' is "a socio-cultural category that necessarily includes *both* legal and political as well as subjective, emotional and cultural dimensions". These different components are connected, since the benefits and rights derived from being a citizen (the legal and political component) make people identify with this entity (the emotional element). The question is, however, whether an entity like the European Union, with its complex and non-state structure can generate the kind of complicity generally achieved at the local and state levels; whether meaningful citizenship can be created beyond the state. Scholars like Weiler (1999) argue that in the case of the European Union, a decoupling of the above mentioned components of citizenship has taken place. The author (*ibid.*) claims that in the current globalized stage people can identify with different collectives (*demos*) based on different factors of identification, and that all these identifications are compatible. One can be German and Catholic at the same time, so one can feel German and European just the same. Weiler (1998) presents two visions derived from the introduction of the European citizenship construct into the treaties: the 'unity' vision, where European citizenship would be a step towards further

integration and the demise of national states within it; and the 'community' or 'supranational' vision, where the national and supranational levels are decoupled, and because they appeal to different aspects of the human being (the national to the irrational, and the supranational to the rational), they can coexist.

Contrary to this view, Shore (2004) claims that the legal and political component cannot be simply decoupled from the emotional component. Not only would this be “empirically untenable”; it would result in a “disembodied, legalistic, and a-cultural view of citizens that simply does not correspond to lived reality” (Shore, 2004: 29). The case of the USA is used as a counter-example. One might want to consider that citizens of the USA feel what Habermas (1992) called “constitutional patriotism”. However, love for the constitution is neither better nor worse than love for the nation, and in fact the same amount of irrational behaviour can be generated in both cases. In the USA, there appears to be an emotional component coupled with the legal and political component. Smith and Kim (2006) report how the US moved from being ranked second in the 1995 on national pride and patriotism carried out by the International Social Survey Program, to being ranked first in its second round, in 2003. In the EU, the legitimacy is in the local, in the regional/national, and in the state/national, but so far there are no elements to suggest it is also felt at the supra-national level. There have been efforts to create this European identification from the top, but the very way it is being created shows the great difficulties the process is encountering. Whereas locating the demos at the state/national level in the USA presents no doubts, one might wonder where the European demos is. Is it one demos or different ones, as mottoes like “unity in diversity” or “peoples of Europe” suggest?

These problems are in fact also present at the state level, like in the case of Spain. A great number of Spanish citizens display a nationalist discourse following Billig's (1995) idea of 'banal nationalism', and their feeling of allegiance to the Spanish nation is treated as simple patriotism rather than nationalism. However, in regions like Catalonia, where the data presented in this study were collected, the dominant discourse conceives Catalonia as a nation integrated in a pluri-national state. This clash of discourses is present in everyday life, in the way people construct their identities in interaction (Martin-Rubio, 2011) and constitutes a salient factor for Catalan university students, also when they go on an Erasmus stay.

1.2. Study abroad and European citizenship

Since the launch of the first Erasmus programme in 1987, student mobility in Europe has increased significantly. The programme was named after the Dutch humanist and theologian Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466-1536), but also served as an acronym for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. In 1995, Erasmus became part of the broader Socrates programme, which incorporated not only student mobility but also teaching staff mobility and international cooperation among universities, thus placing more emphasis on collaboration in higher education. In 2007, the Lifelong Learning Programme replaced the Socrates/Erasmus as an integrated EU action project for education and training. The current Erasmus+ programme, which started in January 2014, brings together all the existing EU schemes for education, training, youth and sport. Nevertheless, student mobility still remains at the heart of the programme, making it the most popular student exchange scheme in Europe.

One of the main objectives of this successful EU student mobility policy is to serve “the purpose of economic cooperation, since the Erasmus programme aims at the training of European-minded professionals” (Papatsiba, 2005: 175). Thus, sojourners are envisaged as a pool of future graduates with experience of living in other member states, that is, with a better knowledge of other countries' economic and social life. This will make them more prone to create supranational networks in their professional careers, in consonance with the single market requirements. In keeping with this, the European Commission also stresses this link between education and work on its Erasmus+ homepage by stating that this programme “will support transnational partnerships among Education, Training, and Youth institutions and organisations to foster cooperation and bridge the worlds of education and work in order to tackle the skills gaps we are facing in Europe” (European Commission, 2015). In addition, the fact that this programme is supported by a grant system strengthens the idea of investment in the European Higher Education Area with a view to promoting competitiveness, innovation and economic growth and cooperation among member states.

Despite the prevalence of this professional and economic vision of student mobility, the notion of European citizenship is not neglected. Papatsiba (2005) observes the reinforcement of this notion in the European Commission's *White Paper on Education and Training: Towards the Learning Society*, which emphasises that “education and training will increasingly become the

main vehicle for self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfilment” (European Commission, 1995: 2) and that “education lays the foundations of awareness and of European citizenship” (*ibid*: 10). Likewise, “with this increasing freedom of movement should come a growing European consciousness instilled through greater awareness of others as a result to exposure to new cultures and societies” (European Commission, 1996: 1). However, it has not been sufficiently demonstrated that European identity may stem directly from mobility and exposure to other cultures.

Scholars like Papatsiba (2006:109) argue that “without a specific systematic action to support intercultural learning, acquiring a feeling of belonging in an enlarged Europe, enriching national identities with the desired European dimension, seems to be a random outcome of individual experiential learning”. In line with this, Byram (2008) proposes a framework of education for intercultural citizenship in order to prepare younger generations for globalisation and help them acquire a sense of belonging to international communities, with ties to their country of origin. More specifically, regarding the European situation, he suggests that the policy for citizenship education is underdeveloped as the Council of Europe has not proposed any particular action that reveals concern with the promotion of citizenship education nor has articulated the concept of transnational civil society, both key aspects for the evolution of a European identity. Similarly, Davies (1997:105) points out to “a lack of consistency in the way the word *citizenship* is used and at times it is ignored altogether in favour of terms which seem to imply that a somehow neutral collection of data or movement of people for vocational purposes is all that is required”.

Concerning students’ perceptions, Erasmus mobility is, in general, deemed a challenging experience providing many benefits. For example, it is widely accepted that a stay abroad results in personal development and improved capacities to adapt to a changing environment (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Cash, 1993; King & Young, 1994; Kauffmann et al., 1992; Milstein, 2005). More specifically, with respect to students’ perception of citizenship, their participation in the programme seems to widen their feelings of belonging to Europe. However, this seldom constitutes an explicit awareness of European identity at the end of their stay abroad. As Papatsiba (2005: 184) concludes in her study on political and individual rationales on student mobility, the gains of cultural transmission and development of the European identity “seem to take a second place, welcomed as we can see, yet fragile”, which reveals that fostering student

mobility is not enough for the acquisition of a European citizenship.

1.3. From plurilingual competence to the development of European citizenship

Language, similarly to geographical boundaries, is commonly considered to be one of the main resources that states have at their disposal to construct the identity of its citizenry and situate and delimit people living within their political boundaries. Linguistic homogenization of a citizenry is pursued not so much for communicative purposes but for the purpose of identification (Hobsbawm, 1990). Indeed, Billig (1995: 14) argues that those nations in which different linguistic groups co-exist are fragile and might break into pieces in periods of crisis. The assumption that there is a natural link between a language and its speakers is a fairly recent phenomenon (Blackledge, 2000). In Medieval Europe, boundaries were not constructed based on linguistic differences. In fact, linguistic homogenisation became possible thanks to the printing industry, since it enabled the mass circulation and spread of one variety of language. The language variety that triumphed over others usually coincided with that of the ruling elite of a nationalistic movement. Two extremely well-known cases are those of France (Billig, 1995) and Italy (Hobsbawm, 1990) whose current official national languages were only known to a small elite when they gained their current status. These examples reflect that in the construction of a nation, having a common language has little to do with allowing communication but is instead related with issues of power (Hobsbawm, 1990). Gramsci (1971) proposed that the control of the state could not endure without the agreement of the subordinated groups. Such an agreement is achieved through ideological persuasion, which often consists of a process of linguistic normalisation, after which people become convinced that the domination of one variety over others is the natural state of things.

For this reason, multilingualism is often perceived as a threat to national unity. And yet, despite the attempts of governments to maintain linguistic homogeneity within its boundaries, multilingualism represents the distinguishing feature of an increasing number of globalised, hybrid and multicultural societies, like the European. The states that make up the EU have traditionally constructed their national identity on the basis of monolingualism, which raises questions about what counts as a language in Europe and who has the power to make that decision.

The case of Europe is interesting because, even if in general terms some may claim that there is a

shared set of beliefs, values, behaviour, history or geography, plus a common flag and a shared anthem, it is “obviously not possible to create a language comparable to a national language to symbolise the European identity or embody the shared beliefs and values in the way that a national language does” (Byram, 2008: 140). For this reason, Byram excludes the possibility of European identity being constructed analogously to national identity.

The acquisition of a European identity is based on the acquisition of plurilingual competence, a fact that may alter the taken-for-granted reality of nation building. Byram (2008) holds that linguistic diversity appears in the language education policy of the Council of Europe (2006) as one of the *sine qua non* conditions for the success of particular aspects of social policy, such as the exercise of democracy and social inclusion, accessing economic and employment opportunities, or the evolution of a European identity. Similarly, Beacco and Byram (2007: 9) argue that, since Europe is a multilingual territory (as a whole and in every part), the sense of belonging to Europe and the acceptance of a European identity depends on the ability to interact and communicate with other Europeans using the full range of one’s linguistic repertoire. In this light, individuals are encouraged to become plurilingual or, in other words, to acquire linguistic competence in different languages at different stages and experience in different cultures (Council of Europe, 2001: 168). In this regard, Beacco (2005: 20; as cited in Byram, 2008) suggests that cultural and linguistic tolerance and respect needs to be instructed in order to develop “pluricultural and plurilingual capability” because even if plurilingualism may become a factor of people’s everyday life, they need to become aware of their own linguistic diversity and value it.

The sense of belonging to a national group is acquired and maintained in social interaction through language (Byram, 2008: 138). This fact emphasizes that language is not just a symbol of national identity but also embodies it. Byram (2008) discusses the implications of this for the construction of European identity and makes three points. Firstly, individuals may have many social identities and different degrees of attachment to them, such as in the cases of Andalusia and Catalonia in Spain, or Scotland in Great Britain. In the case of European identity, Byram holds that it may not appear to compete with national identity but it is an additional identity, comparable to the notion of ‘Asian identity’ that emerges in South and East Asia as a counter-balance to ‘Westernization’. In second place, only in cases where people may adopt two social

identities of the same nature, tensions may arise because the values and beliefs associated with those groups may seem incompatible. This would be the case of an individual who claims to have two national identities, especially if these two identities appear to be in conflict. Finally, Byram's third point is that for the construction of European identity, as well as for the construction of national identities in general, schools can represent a valuable tool. Therefore, the introduction of a European dimension into the curricula of schools across Europe would set off this process. One way of introducing the European dimension is by fostering multilingualism in schools.

2. Data and methodology

The research discussed here is part of a larger project investigating the impact of Catalan university students' international mobility experiences within Europe on their English skills, intercultural competence and on their assumption of an enhanced European identity and awareness of the concept of European citizenship. In this particular study, we aimed to focus on the latter aspect and thus explored, through a survey and focus group discussions, students' engagement with the notions of European identity and citizenship. In recent years, research in the context of internationalization of higher education has already examined the language attitudes of students, teaching and administrative staff in the context of Catalonia (see, for instance, Garrett and Gallego-Balsà, 2014; Lasagabaster et al. 2013; Llurda et al., 2013, 2014). However, none of them has yet explored the evolution of these attitudes or how the notion of European identity evolves after a stay abroad.

2.1. Survey data

The survey data was obtained from a group of 46 Erasmus students from the Universitat de Lleida (henceforth, UdL) who participated in the Erasmus European student mobility programme during the academic year 2013-2014. Students were enrolled in different academic programmes, including humanities, social sciences, medicine and nursing, and engineering. The questionnaire was developed after reading the literature on aspects of citizenship and European identity. It mainly consisted of a set of Likert-scale questions reflecting some of the ideas found in the literature relating to European citizenship and identity. The questionnaire was drafted and then piloted for clarity among a group of six people before being implemented.

The same questionnaire was distributed on two occasions: once during a general meeting organized by the Office of International Relations of the UdL prior to the point of departure (PRE-Q), with the participation of 109 students, and on a second occasion after they had returned back home (POST-Q). For the POST-Q, students were individually contacted after their return and were asked to complete again the same questionnaire. Only the responses of students who had completed both the PRE-Q and the POST-Q were included in a spreadsheet and then transferred to a SPSS file for statistical analysis. The number of completed questionnaires on this second occasion was 46. These 46 students constitute the final sample used to measure the impact of the Erasmus mobility experience on their responses to the categories represented in the questionnaire. Apart from descriptive statistics, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was applied in order to determine if any significant changes might have appeared after the Erasmus experience.

2.2. Focus group data

The focus group discussions were organised with students who enrolled in an Erasmus programme in the academic year 2013-2014 in three different contexts: the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Italy. For each of these destinations, one focus group was conducted before the students' stay and another one afterwards, thus summing up a total of six focus groups (see annex 1 for the codes employed). Students came from four different areas of study: law, engineering, languages and education. For the purpose of this study, the analysis looks at whether the experience abroad affected the students' sense of self as European citizens, their position towards the notion of European citizenship and how this related with the development of their plurilingual competence.

The analysis of the focus groups was developed through a discourse-analytical orientation. Following Wood and Kroger (2000), the first step consisted of identifying patterns in the content and the structure of the discourses, which were activated by the students (i.e. adopting an emic perspective). This step led to the location of thematic units, which include recurring sets of beliefs that shed light on the students' positions towards the development of a European identity and language learning before and after their stay abroad. According to Block (2015: 330) thematic analysis puts "primarily a focus on the content of what is said", leaving to the side other aspects such as how it is produced. The analysis in this work also pays attention to other such features of spoken speech as gesture, which contribute to construct the meaning of what is being

said. In short, the analysis of the focus group sessions is presented in a systematic way using the themes emerging in connection with multilingualism and European citizenship as the bridge among them.

The analysis is organised in three sections, which correspond to three recurring themes emerging in the six focus group sessions. For each of the sections we offer examples that illustrate the points that we make.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1 Languages in Europe: English is useful, but is it enough?

This section presents the analysis of the students' attitudes towards Europe and languages. The issue of language diversity and the debate around the potential value of all Europeans sharing a common language has been part of the European debate. European institutions have consistently declared that language diversity is one of the important elements of Europe, which should be protected and promoted (Bliesener, 2003; Lever, 2003; Vlaeminck, 2003). In the survey data, eight items were identified dealing with aspects of language use and language policy in a multilingual setting. Two of them had high mean results ($x > 4$) whereas two others had rather low results ($x < 2.5$). The four items with the high and low responses are listed in Table 1. As it can be appreciated, the high and low results do not depend on the language or languages identified as necessary or required, but rather on whether languages are mentioned as a complementary useful knowledge or as an imposed requirement. We can see that students do appreciate the advantages of knowing English to communicate in other European countries, but do not have any desire for either English alone or in combination with French and German being established as official language(s). When applying the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test, no significant differences were found between the PRE-Q and POST-Q, thus suggesting that their vision of the role and need for languages in Europe was not affected by their prolonged experience in a different European country.

Table 1. Language related Likert-scale items.

Item	PRE-Q	POST-Q
3 - When I have to travel on my own, knowing that I will meet many people who speak English whenever I go to any European country makes me feel better	x = 4.24	x = 4.13
6 - I think that speaking two or three foreign languages is important to gain a European identity	x = 4.02	x = 4.18
20 - I think that English should be the only official European language	x = 2.22	x = 2.17
21 - I think that Europe should have 3 official languages: English, French and German	x = 2.22	x = 2.26

Across the six focus group discussion sessions, this was one of the most prominent themes. Thus, Europe emerges as a linguistically and culturally diverse space, where knowing English is useful but not enough. However, and as we will see next, differences appear in the discourses that underpin the need of knowing different languages in each of the three groups of students.

The role of English as a lingua franca across Europe is questioned by the students in the three contexts. The students project a vision of Europe as a linguistically heterogeneous space where English is useful, but not enough. In the UK pre-focus group, a consensus appears among the students on the importance of keeping all languages in Europe as a sign of identity of the different nationalities. English appears as a lingua franca that enables communication all over Europe but when it comes to achieving cultural integration in a particular country, speaking the local language is presented as essential.

Extract 1. Speaking the local language for integration (pre-UK)

1	ST1	amb l'anglès et pots moure per Europa tranquil.lament\	with English you can move around Europe easily\
2			
3	ST2	si penses anar per exemple de turisme un temps de vacances de sobres\ si	if you want to go for example sightseeing some time on holidays
4		durant un temps llarg pos sí més val	more than enough\ if it's for a long
5		parlar l'anglès	time it's better to speak English
6	ST3	potser per molt que tothom sàpigui	maybe no matter everybody speaks
7		l'anglès tu te'n vas a Alemanà i te vols integrar a la societat alemana	English you go to Germany and you
8		encara que parli anglès tu has de	want to integrate into the German
9		parlar alemà\	society although they speak English you must speak German\

Similarly, in the pre-stay focus group with students travelling to Denmark, English appears as a language that can compensate for the lack of knowledge of the local language, but only to some extent. A sense of insecurity emerges, as we can see in extract 2, when referring to the use English in the host context.

Extract 2. Insecurity in using English (pre-Denmark)

1	ST4	pots plantar-te allà (...) i serà el meu	you can get there (...) and will my English
2		nivell d'anglès suficient que poguem	level be enough to use it at a restaurant or
3		utilitzar o al restaurant o un altre lloc/	somewhere else/ you will really be on
4		estaràs realment sol (0.5) i damunt no	your own (0.5) and on top of it you don't
5		parles l'idioma que toca no/ però	speak the language that corresponds right/
6		bueno si tu marxassis a una altra ciutat	well if you go to another city within Spain
7		d'Espanya dius val\ estic sol però	you say ok\ I am alone but
8		m'espavilo\ però en un altre lloc pos no	I can manage\ but somewhere else you
9		sabràs com podràs fer entendre't o no\	won't know if they understand you\

8	JMC	perquè quantes llengües parles tu/	how many languages do you speak/
9	ST4	no molt\ català castellà i (0.7) [rotating	not many\ Catalan Spanish and (0.7)
10		hand movement] anglès\	[rotating hand movement] English\
11	JMC	què vol dir_ [rotating hand movement]	what does it mean [rotating hand
12		així\ què vol dir així/	movement] like this\ what does this mean/ yes\
13	SMA	sí\	well very bad (.) only three\ [laughs]
14	ST5	home molt malament (.) només tres\	I don't know normal\ I think\ but it's true
15	ELL	[laughs]	that one has been studying for a long long
16	ST5	no sé normal\ jo penso\ l'únic que clar	time but when it comes to speaking it well
17		sí que has estat estudiant durant molt molt temps però a l'hora de parlar-lo pues no estàs tampoc tan acostumat	you're not really used to it

ST4 compares two hypothetical scenarios. In the first one, the Erasmus student imagines himself in a “restaurant or somewhere else” (lines 3-4) abroad on his own, unsure of whether his level of English will be enough to manage that situation. The same student compares this to a second hypothetical scenario in which he is in a Spanish city. In that situation, he pictures himself being perfectly understood in Spanish. When asked about his linguistic repertoire (line 10), ST4 includes three languages: Catalan, Spanish and English. However, he evaluates his own multilingual repertoire as being rather poor (line 11) probably because he perceives his level of English as being not so good. This is indicated by a rotating hand movement (lines 11-12) while he mentions “English” (line 13). This fact triggers two interventions. On the one hand, ST5, one of the other students, teases ST4 and tells him it is bad that he can only speak three languages (line 16-17), which is interpreted by ELL as a joke (line 18). On the other hand, JMC, one of the researchers, asks the student to explain what he means by the rotating hand movement (lines 13 - 14). ST4 argues that although he studied English for several years, he is not used to speaking it, and being able to speak English appears to be crucial in the Danish context to compensate for the

lack of knowledge of the local language (lines 19-22). The level of oral competence in English appears as one of the main concerns of the students before their stay in Denmark. This refers not only to the general use of English but also, and more specifically, to the varieties of English that the students may encounter abroad and the fact they might not be easy to understand. It should be noted that lack of knowledge of the local language is never mentioned as a limitation.

Interestingly enough, the feelings of insecurity which emerged in the pre-Denmark focus group, disappeared in the post-stay focus group. In the following extract, we can see how ELL, one of the researchers, asks the students whether they would move abroad again after their experience in Denmark and whether the local language would stop them. The students reply that the local language would not represent a problem because they could rely on English.

Extract 3. Empowerment through English (Post-Denmark)

1	ELL	per Europa\ però qualsevol lloc	within Europe\ but anywhere in
2		d'Europa\ és igual\ és igual	Europe\ it doesn't matter\ it's the
3		Lituània que la República Txeca	same Lithuania or the Czech Republic
4		que França	or France
5	ST6	sí\ (1.2) sí\ ara sí\	yes\ (1.2) yes\ now yes\
6	ELL	i si us sortís feina a un altre lloc ja	and if you found a job somewhere else
7		aprendries la llengua d'allà\	you'd learn the local language\
8	ST7	primer que em motivés la feina\	first the job should motivate me\
9	ELL	que et motivés la feina i la	the job should motivate you and the
10		llengua no us faria por\ encara que	language wouldn't scare you\ even if
11		fos lituà que és més petit que el	it was Lithuanian which is smaller
12		danès\ (...)	than Danish\ (...)
13	ST6	no\ si saben tant anglès\ i	no\ if they know so much English\
		tu veus que et pots comunicar en	and you see you can communicate
		pla:n	li:ke
			no\

	ST7 no\	
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In extract 3 the presence of a local language in a foreign land does not appear as an obstacle for students to work abroad. The stay in Denmark appears to have contributed to their empowerment (line 4), making the intrinsic interest in a potential job more important than the fact that it may be necessary to learn the local language (line 7). ELL, one of the researchers, pushes the students a bit further by asking them whether they would be scared about encountering a language, e.g. Lithuanian (line 9-10), with even fewer speakers than Danish. Faced with this question, ST6 and ST7, categorically deny so (lines 11-13). ST6 adds that if people in the foreign country can communicate in English, then, it would not be a problem to move abroad, which highlights a sense of empowerment after having lived in a context where English works as a lingua franca.

Next, faced with this reply, SMA, another researcher, insists on whether, after their stay, the students consider that English is enough to move around Europe (extract 4), to which a student responds that not knowing the local language may be a source of trouble.

Extract 4. English is not enough (Post-Denmark)

1	SMA	abans de marxar us vam fer una	before leaving we asked you a
2		pregunta que era que no necessiteu	question which was that you didn't
3		cap altra llengua per voltar per	need any other language to move
4		Europa\ amb l'anglès en tinc més	around Europe\ with English it is
5	ST4	que suficient\ (...)	more than enough\ (...)
6			
7			
8	SMA	o sigui que l'anglès no és suficient	so English is not enough to move
9		per voltar per Europa\	around Europe\
10	ST6	una amiga meva a Lituània va estar	a friend of mine lived in Lithuania

10	vivint tres mesos i tenia anglès	for three months and her English was
11	bastant bo i va dir que allí ningú parlava anglès\ ningú\ i que per comunicar-se ho va passar fatal\	pretty good and she said that there no one spoke English\ no one\ and she struggled to communicate

Similarly to the focus group session before the students' stay in Denmark, there is a prevailing vision of Europe as a linguistically heterogeneous territory also as regards the knowledge of English as a foreign language (lines 6-8). The researcher, SMA, pushes the students to position themselves towards whether English is enough to move around Europe or not (lines 9-10) to what ST6, who previously stated that she is not scared of moving abroad without knowing the local language (extract 3), supports her argument that English is not enough in Europe by using a personal anecdote (lines 11-15). The preservation of a linguistically heterogeneous view of Europe together with the lack of fear of encountering local languages abroad reinforces the idea that the stay in Denmark may have provided students with a sense of empowerment to move abroad through English but also stresses the need to learn local languages. This sensitivity towards local languages, which is shared by the three groups of students, might be greatly influenced by the fact that they all come from a Catalan-speaking background and they are particularly aware of the need to use and protect languages with lesser international value.

The students who carried out their stay in Italy express similar views towards the role of English as a means to communicate around Europe. However, compared to the other two groups of students (UK and Denmark), knowing only English is presented as a personal limitation, thus emphasizing the importance of learning the local language, i.e. Italian. Furthermore, we can observe a critical stance towards the 'obligatory nature' of English today.

Extract 5. One language is never enough (pre-Italy)

1	ST8 no t'estanquis només en l'anglès	do not stagnate only in English
2	perquè potser ara potser està ehm suficient entre cometes però d'aquí	because it may be ehm\

3	un temps no bueno	enough now so to speak but
4	(...)	not in the future
5	SMA no creus que la majoria	(...)
6	saben anglès ara/	don't you think the majority of
7	ST9 perquè és lo que volen inculcar\	people knows English now/
8	(0.5) com que manen els de dalt i	this is what they want to inculcate\
9	volen ficar això (...)	(0.5) as the people in charge want to
10	ST10 jo crec que no ens hem de tancar sols	establish this (...)
11	en en parlar l'anglès\ sí que l'anglès et	I think we shouldn't limit ourselves
12	pot ajudar (0.3) a que si estàs en	to speaking English\ English can be
13	algun lloc i no saps ben bé com dir a	useful (0.3) for instance if you are in
14	que si no saps ben bé parlar aquell	a place and you don't know how to
	idioma que et puguis defensar en	speak that language you can defend
	anglès i que t'entenguin\ o sinó doncs	yourself in English so they can
	mira a gestos\ (0.4)	understand you\ otherwise you can
		use gesture\ (0.4)

Speaking English as the only foreign language emerges as a personal limitation because the relevance of English may be transitory (lines 1-4). This could be interpreted as a way in which the students, who may expect learning Italian while abroad, emphasize the need to speak languages other than English and legitimate their own linguistic repertoires. Furthermore, a disaffiliation with the dominant role of English emerges in the interaction (lines 8-10). ST9 adopts a critical stance and states that the majority of people speak English as a result of the top-down policies that “the people in charge” (line 9) are trying to implement.

3.2 Conflicting categories: Europe vs. comfort languages

One of the items in the questionnaire that students had to rank from 1 to 5 (according to how

much they agreed or disagreed to it) was: “In the future, I would like to work in another European country”. While this does not specifically address the European identity construct, it clearly shows how present the idea of moving to a different country is in the students’ minds, thus signalling the size of the mental barrier that may or may not prevent them from considering a job opportunity in a European country, different from their own. The mean result of this item was rather high before the mobility experience (PRE-Q: $x = 4.27$) and clearly lower in the *after* condition (POST-Q: $x = 3.93$). The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test showed that the results were significantly different ($p < .05$). What is more striking, though, is the fact that the variation is in the negative direction, that is students appear to be less willing to work in another European country after having spent some months abroad. It is as though instead of promoting European integration and a higher sense of proximity, the mobility experience had slightly promoted a vision of distance and separation. And yet, this must be contrasted with the outcome of another section in which students were asked to indicate (also from 1 to 5) how willing they would be to move to a list of different settings for work (see Table 2). The results point to a clear preference for some places over others. For instance, it is striking to observe how the most favoured option is an English-speaking country within Europe closely followed by Catalonia, Northern/Central Europe and North America. Other countries that in principle seem to be culturally closer to the students receive lower scores. Such is the case of Spain (not counting Catalonia) and European countries where the official languages are a Romance languages. Finally Latin American countries clearly trail behind the rest as potential places to work. Overall, this question seems to point to English as an important element in deciding how likely it is for somebody to consider working outside their hometown.

Table 2: Rate From 1 to 5 what places you would be willing to go to work and live in the future

	PRE-Q	POST-Q
out of my city but within Catalonia	3.87	4.22
out of Catalonia but within Spain	3.52	3.85

to any Roman-language-speaking European country	3.59	3.96
to any English-speaking European country	4.20	4.24
to any Northern or Central European country	3.91	4.09
to Latin America	2.70	2.96
to the USA and Canada	4.00	3.89
to Asia	2.60	2.65
I've never considered the possibility of living abroad	1.48	1.48

When we look at this issue in the focus group sessions, we find that students moving to the UK and Denmark show no explicit preference for EU-countries despite the different attempts by researchers to elicit that kind of response through references to the practical advantages of belonging to the EU. The presence of English in the host country emerges as a determining factor regardless of whether such country is within the EU or not. When students show a preference to move within Europe, it is either because there is less red-tape required in the process of moving abroad, or because European countries are perceived as being safer than places in South-America, for instance. Extract 6 is a clear example of the role of English and safety in the selection process.

Extract 6. English and personal safety (pre-Denmark)

1	JMC al vostre passaport no només hi diu	in you passport it doesn't only say Spain
2	Espanya sinó que hi diu Unió Europea/ això a vosaltres us fa sentir especialment	but also European Union/ does it make

3	tranquils no/ e mira ara estic molt bé en	you feel specially at ease/
4	un àmbit de una certa unitat política (...)	like saying look I am fine in
5	ST6 jo ni m'ho plantejo\ vull dir no sé\	an area of a certain political unity (...)
6	JMC perquè anar fora de la Unió Europea hi	I don't give it any thought\ I mean
7	haurieu anat igual/ si no aneu a	outside the European Union would you
8	Dinamarca i diu parlen anglès a	have gone anyway/ if you don't go to
9	Lituània és de la Unió Europea\	Denmark they speak English in
10	(...) si parlessin anglès allà/	Lithuania it's in the European Union\
11	ELL us haguéssiu anat a qualsevol país del	(...) if they spoke English there/
12	món	would you have gone to any country in
13	ST11 sí\	the world
14	ST5 sí\	yes\
15	ST11 bueno bueno tampoc tots	yes\
16	ST6 mentre parlin anglès sí\	well well not any
17	ALL [laughs]	as long as English is spoken there yes\
18	ST6 si hi hagués l'anglès sí\	[laughs]
19	ELL si hi hagués l'anglès sí\ a qualsevol no/	if there is English yes\
20	ST11 jo voldria anar al Japó\ (...) no tinc cap	if there is English yes\ but not to any/
21	problema\ hi ha altres països que tinc	I'd like to go to Japan\ (...) I have no
22	més reticència\	problem\ there are other countries where
23	SMA per exemple/	I'd be more reluctant to go\
24	ST11 Sud-Amèrica Àsia\	such as/
	ELL mhm\	South-America Asia\
		mhm\
		if there was English I'd go no doubt\
		for me Mexico Mexico scares me quite a
		lot\ this is a different thing\ right/

25	ST12 parlés en anglès jo hi aniria de patac\ ST11 jo Mèxic Mèxic me fa bastanta por\ però això ja són altres coses\ no/	
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In extract 6, JMC, one of the researchers, reminds students that their passports include the words ‘European Union’ or that the EU is an area of a certain political unity (lines 1-6). ST6 is the only student to react to this question saying that she has not paid much attention to it (line 7). Faced with this, JMC and ELL reformulate the question and ask whether the students would move to European countries where English is not widely spoken, as Lithuania, or any country in the world (lines 8-13). In the next turns, the students reply that they would move to countries where English is spoken, but whether these countries are within Europe does not really matter. Together with the presence of English, personal safety is mentioned as another important matter of concern (lines 19-29).

However, in the pre-Italy and post-Italy groups, the presence of English is not a prominent feature in determining a future place to live. The typological similarity between languages appears as a factor that conditions the sense of proximity between cultures and, therefore, influences the availability that the students manifest to move abroad. Similarly to the previous focus group sessions the geographical distance or the fact of moving inside or outside the European Union appears mostly in the background. Yet, in the following extract, student ST13 states that she would not live in Germany, because of the difficulty of learning the language rather than the cultural distance, while ST14 emphasizes cultural distance as a reason for not choosing Germany as a likely destination.

Extract 7. You can adapt to the people but not to the language (post-Italy)

1	ELL si haguessis de dir\ ostres ara mira m’he	if you had to say\ well now I had to
2	de buscar la vida\ he de buscar feina fora	find a living\ find a living abroad
3	tu dieu osti podeu anar a qualsevol lloc\ però ara ui segons on quines persones són	would you say we can go to any place \ but now well depending on the people
4	vull dir faríeu distincions/ o no/	you would make distinctions/ or not/

5	ST13 mhm\ home ja saps que (...) són diferents\ però hi pots anar igual\ 6	mhm\ well you already know that (...) they are different but you can still go\ 7
7	ELL bueno\ sí\ vull dir que us buscaríeu	well\ yes\ I mean that you would find a
8	ST14 igual jo a Alemanya no ho triaria perquè no m'agrada gaire com són\ 9	I wouldn't choose Germany because I don't really like how they are
10	ST13 jo potser més per l'idioma\ que és més complicat\ 11	I wouldn't go there rather for the language\ which is more complicated\ (...)
12	ST15 per la gent t'adaptes\ és més 13	you adapt to the people\ it's rather the language
14	ST13 clar\ 14	sure

In this extract both students agree on rejecting a country like Germany, which works as an example of a country that the students perceive as culturally and linguistically distant. We cannot determine which factor is more important, either language or culture, but we could interpret that these students, who had chosen Italy for their Erasmus, express a higher reluctance to moving beyond their comfort zone.

3.3. European allegiance

This section explores the ambivalence in the discourses associated to European identity and citizenship. Whereas sometimes a shared cultural identity is emphasized, on other occasions it is the practical benefits of being a European citizen that constitute the keystone of Europeanness. Another point of analysis is the students' affiliation to Europe in relation to other Western countries and national identities.

The questionnaire included four items that directly enquired about students' own identity in connection to each of the following categories: Catalan, Spanish, European, and global-

cosmopolitan. No significant differences were found between the two moments of measurement, but clear differences that deserve comment were found among the four categories suggested. Thus, the average response to whether they considered their identity to be fully Catalan was around 3.5 on both occasions, whereas the support for the idea of a “fully Spanish identity” was 2.4. Interestingly, when they were asked about ‘European identity’, the support was between Catalan and Spanish ($x = 3.24$ before and $x = 3.07$ after the stay) and “global and cosmopolitan identity” received about the same support as “Catalan identity” (around 3.5). This suggests a clear stigmatization of Spanish identity among Catalan university students, an aspect that may be related to the current political climate of distrust and lack of understanding between Catalonia and the rest of Spain at the political level.

Apart from the above set of four questions, a group of 9 items were identified in the questionnaire as dealing with aspects of European identity. No significant differences between the results before and after the study abroad experience were detected. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used for the comparison with negative results in all cases. Yet, an analysis of the mean results obtained in the different Likert-scale items of the questionnaire at the two times in which it was taken (before and after the mobility experience) reveals a higher agreement to some items than to others. Table 3 shows the items that deserve attention for the remarkably low ratings given by students both before and after the experience of mobility, whereas no item yielded a mean score of above 4. We have arbitrarily established 4 (in a scale of 1 to 5) as the threshold for determining high results, whereas the boundary for identifying a low result has been set at 2.5. The most obvious finding here is the lack of very high results, thus suggesting a general lack of enthusiasm for aspects related to European identification.

Table 3: Variation in European allegiance

Item	PRE-Q	POST-Q	$p < .05$
4 - I think it would be good to get back to establishing controls at the borders between the different UE countries	1.70	1.63	
14 - The European project will eventually fail	2.41	2.74	*

A final set of items dealing with European identity asked students to rate different elements according to whether they could be considered characteristic of European identity (Table 4). Here, it is not surprising to see the importance attached to the mobility factor, which increases significantly after the Erasmus experience. The other factor that also shows significant variation is ‘democratic values’, which brings to mind the idea that the Erasmus mobility has made students more aware of the deep identification of Europe with such values.

Table 4: Rate the extent to which these aspects characterise European identity:

	Before	After	<i>p</i> < .05
Mobility	4.13	4.49	*
Democratic values	3.54	3.96	*
Social welfare	3.67	3.78	
Cultural level	3.78	4.02	
Economic power	3.35	3.54	
Multilingualism	4.07	4.15	

In the analysis of the focus group sessions, two main themes have been detected: first, the difficulty in differentiating European identity from the broader category of Western identity; second, the clash between a European identity and a traditional national identity.

a. European vs. Western identity

Across the three focus group sessions, feelings of cultural proximity and a shared identity among Europeans emerge, particularly in opposition to Asian cultures. The students point to communicative and cultural differences to justify these affinities and dissimilarities. One example of this can be found in extract 8, from the UK pre-stay focus group.

Extract 8. European vis-à-vis Asian and identities (pre-UK)

1	ST18 a part de Xina i Índia que són dos	apart from China and India which are
2	continents també allí\ però són molt	two continents also\ but they're very
3	molt no surten\ es relacionen	very\ they don't go out\ they socialize
4	poc\ [laughs]	little \ [laughs]
5	ST3 molt diferent a l'educació i una altra	very different in education and another
6	cultura	culture
7	ST18 aquesta és una altra\ perquè	this is another question\ because
8	la cultura europea és bastant	European culture is quite
9	homogènia eh a grans trets hi tens	homogeneous eh roughly there are
10	europaus incluint els propis	Europeans including the
11	anglesos que mm alguns no se'n senten	English that mm some don't feel
12	d'europaus però també estan incluíts una	European but they're also included in a
13	manera de ser i i de viure\ i	common way of being and living\ and
	después hi ha Xina Índia els sudafricans i	then there is China India the South
	alguns sudamericans que sí que notes que	Africans and some South Americans
	són diferents\	that you do note they're different

ST18 presents European identity in contrast with Asian identity using China and India as examples (lines 1-3). Europeans appear to be homogeneous, sharing a common way of being and living, which contrasts with the people in China, India, South Africa and South America, which emerge as perceivably different (lines 6-16). In the post-UK group, feelings of European identity appear in stronger terms than before. The issues that characterize this discourse are the perspective of Europe as a common culture and common set of values which are expressed by one of the students through the idea of having a common 'Christian heritage' (extract 9). Even though it is a single student who links the idea of Europe to Christianity, the message echoes a recent debate in the European media regarding whether a European constitution should include a reference to Europe's Christian (or Judeo-Christian) values or not.

Extract 9. European common values (Post-UK)

1	ST17 dins de l'àmbit europeu de la Unió	at European level of the European
2	Europea és que no és pot parlar tampoc	Union we cannot talk either about
3	d'intercultural perquè és la mateixa cultura	interculturality because it is the same
4	vista de diferents punts de vista	culture seen from different viewpoints
5	no/ els francesos ho viuen d'una manera	right/ the French see it one way the
6	els anglesos d'una altra\ però són tots ja	English see it differently\ but they're
7	sé que sona molt malament	all I know it sounds really bad really
8	molt carca dir això però som tots cristians	old-fashioned but we are all Christians
9	JMC no\ per què/	no\ why/
10	ST17 vull dir llavors estem tots hem nascut i ens	I mean then we are all we have been
11	hem criat d'acord amb uns valors més o	born and have been brought up with
	menos semblants no és com si te n'anessis	similar values this is not like going to
	a Turquia o Ucraïna o algun lloc d'aquests	Turkey or Ukraine or any of those
	o a Letònia	places or to Latvia

ST17, the student who adopts the stance that Europe has a common Christian heritage, hedges his statement by recognizing the old-fashioned nature of this perspective. Even so, he claims that “we (Europeans) are all Christians” (line 8). Immediately after saying this, he elaborates, by referring to more or less similar values, which are different from those in places like Turkey, Ukraine and, surprisingly, Latvia. The exclusion of Latvia from European values is somewhat puzzling and may be due to old division between Eastern and Western Europe or simply to a poor command of European history and geography. No explicit mention is made to other Western non-European countries (Canada, Mexico, Australia, USA, etc.), which could be interpreted as an assumption of a set of common (Christian?) values with such countries.

b. European vs. national identity

The Erasmus experience appears to strengthen the students' feelings towards the culture of the

host territory or towards the home country, but not towards Europe as a whole. This is expressed in different ways in the three focus group sessions held after the stay abroad. In the post-UK focus group session, mixed feelings about the British culture emerge. The UK appears as the least European country of all and the students manifest that they would probably get a deeper feeling of Europeanness in countries such as Belgium or Germany (extract 15).

Extract 10. Some places are more European than others (Post-UK)

1	ST17	jo afegia abans la identitat europea i la	before I added European identity and I
2		continuo afegint però a mi a UK	continue to do so but for me the UK
3		ha sigut com com lo contrary o sigui dir	has been the contrary that is it is not
4		no es que em deixi de sentir europeu	that I'm not feeling European anymore
5		però clar és el país menos europeu de	but of course it is the least European
6		tots\ és el país més especial de tots de fet	country of all\ the most special country
7		es el que es el que sobre el qual sempre	of all in fact there has always been a
8		hi hagut algun temor sortirà o no llavors	fear whether they will leave or not then
9	ST16	si es fa el referèndum o no\	whether there is a referendum or not\
10	ST17	i ara al revès\	and now the opposite\
11	ST17	et sents molt més europeu si vas a	you feel much more European if you
		Brusel·les si vas a Berlín trobo llocs més	go to Brussels if you go to Berlin there
		europeus que Cardiff\	are places more European than Cardiff\

ST17, who had previously expressed a view of Europe as culturally homogeneous (i.e. 'Christian values'), suggests that the stay in the UK has made him a bit more sceptical about the European project. This appears to be a consequence of the lack of European allegiance he has sensed in the UK as opposed to what he imagines would be like to develop a stay in places such as Brussels or Berlin (lines 12-13) which, from his own perspective, better represent the idea of Europe. ST16, the other student, aligns with ST17's view by stressing that after being in the UK their affiliation to Europe is going on the opposite direction.

For the Italy and Denmark students, the experience abroad has not affected their European allegiance but has contributed to strengthening national identities. Extract 11, from the Post-Italy focus group, illustrates this point. Students avoid the category ‘Europe’ and point to strengthened national identities (i.e., Catalan and Italian) as a consequence of their stay abroad.

Extract 11. More Italian and more Catalan (Post-Italy)

1	SMA tu diries\ jo sóc catalana\	you’d say\ I’m a Catalan\
2	ST13 (...) sempre preguntes de et sents més	(...) you always ask\ do you feel
3	europèu i tal i pensava jo no\ però si jo	more European and I think I don’t\
4	ara en tot cas em sento més italiana\	but in any case I feel more Italian\
5	perquè he viscut allí\ però dels altres	because I have lived there\ but about
6	pos sí que conec gent de tot arreu però	the others yes I know people from all
7	no	over but I don’t
	ST15 no\ no\ em sento catalana\ (...)	no\ no\ I feel Catalan (...)

In extract 11, ST13 seems to complain about the repeated attempts by the researchers to make her position about her feelings of belonging to Europe (lines 2-3) and she adds that, in any case, her identity is more Italian than before. This clearly sets her experience at the national level, as she emphasizes that she has lived there (line 5). Although she has met people from all over, she still rejects the notion of feeling more European. ST15, in contrast, categorically declares feeling more Catalan. In both cases, it is the national dimension, rather than the supranational/European that is stressed.

4. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the evolution of the perspectives towards European identity of Catalan students who enrolled in an Erasmus stay-abroad experience, with a particular focus on three groups of students who carried out their stay in UK, Denmark and Italy. The results show that, after the experience, the students feel less insecure when using the foreign language (mainly English but also Italian in the case of students who went to Italy) and they have been empowered

as regards feeling capable of moving abroad again in the future.

They also seem to realise that speaking only one foreign language (i.e., English) is not enough. The Erasmus experience appears to bring confidence in foreign language use and an increased desire to continue learning the languages they have developed and used during their stay abroad, thus contributing to one of the pillars in the construction of European identity (Byram 2008). Students in the three contexts appear to be highly sensitive towards the role of the local languages as a sign of identity. They see a need to promote plurilingualism and emphasise that English, the most widely spread lingua franca in Europe and the world, is not enough. They do position themselves against any official status of a limited set of languages that would force all citizens to learn them. English emerges as a bridge and an indispensable element that contributes to establishing a comfort zone, in which students can move without experiencing too much trouble. Yet, they are aware that English might not be enough, given Europe's high degree of diversity. English makes a place more attractive as a prospective working destination, but at the same time it is not enough to fully function in places where other languages are spoken.

The analysis shows that after their stay abroad, some of the students have a higher level of scepticism about the European project (students in UK) and others display a stronger feeling of allegiance with Catalonia (students in Italy and Denmark) or even with the host nation (Italy), but never with the idea of Europe, thus failing to support the premise that living in a different European country would enhance their European identity and citizenship. This seems to be due to the immersion in the hosting context culture, which teaches students more about the specificities of that culture. Even though Europe is the sum of all the cultural and linguistic diversity that it contains, the link between a single culture and a multicultural entity is still far from being a reality. In this regard, the study has also shown that the identification with the European identity emerges when the students present themselves in contrast with other supra-national entities, such as Asia, or countries that would not be included within the block of Western countries. Other than that, students' sense of Europeanness is not increased. For this reason, the students may not see themselves as distinctively Europeans but rather as Westerners, thus bringing us to consider that what is promoted through the Erasmus programme may not so much be a European identity as a more general Western identity. In fact, Europe does not appear in our data as a mental frame of reference for students. Instead, they resort to some general

values and even single out some countries (i.e., Germany, Latvia, Ukraine, Turkey...) as examples of cultural and linguistic distance. Mental frames are less determined by geographical distance or political boundaries than by the language spoken in those countries. Overall, it appears that the simple fact of living some time abroad is not enough to change deeply rooted attitudes and views. This is in line with what had already been stated by Papatsiba (2006), Byram (2008) and Kalocsai (2014) with regard to the need to prepare students prior to their mobility experiences, in order to fully benefit from them.

Another finding is that students also appear to be less inclined to work abroad after the Erasmus experience, which clashes with one of the principles of the Erasmus programme, namely promoting labour mobility. In contrast, a positive value appears when students show statistically significant higher support, after their mobility experience, for the idea that one of the characterizing elements of European identity is democratic values. This would indicate an increased awareness that democratic values are at the core of the European project, thus showing a positive attitude, as students appear to be more aware of the identification of Europe with such values. Overall, this may be interpreted as a potential for increasing the sense of European citizenship among Erasmus students.

As regards the students' sensitivity towards linguistic diversity after their stay abroad, it is worth mentioning that the study has shown that it is just as strong as before their departure, which could be a side effect of the fact that most of the students are Catalan speakers who are highly aware of the role and importance of smaller languages in their local contexts. We could argue that the results of a similar study would be different for students educated in officially monolingual contexts where efforts to preserve minority languages as signs of identity are less present in society. Also, further investigation is needed with respect to the impact of students' networks on their perceived identity. This has already been studied by Kalocsai (2014) but further research is needed. Additionally, the current study has shown that the experience does not encourage the perspective of future professional mobility, but no answers are provided as to the actual reasons for this to happen. The same goes for the reasons why Europe is more highly perceived as a place with democratic values after the stay abroad. This study is centred on students from Catalonia, in the South of Europe. A comparative analysis looking at students' views from different European regions (namely, Northern Europe or Eastern Europe, for instance)

would also contribute to our understanding of the Erasmus experience.

Overall, the current study has brought us a better understanding of how students construct their own identity with regard to the notion of Europe and their sense of having a European citizenship. The interplay between the benefit of having a shared language (i.e., English) and the need to be able to communicate in the relevant language/s in each community appears to be something students grasp during their stay abroad. However, as indicated in previous studies, it appears that more carefully planned preparation would enhance the beneficial effects of the experience. Home institutions should more seriously think about implementing preparatory programmes prior to the students' departure, rather than leaving the impact of the experience to the simple encountering of random experiences by students.

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Annex 1: Data description

Pre-Denmark: Focus group session before the stay in Denmark

Post-Denmark: Focus group session after the stay in Denmark

Pre-UK: Focus group session before the stay in the United Kingdom

PostUK: Focus group session after the stay in the United Kingdom

Pre-Italy: Focus group session before the stay in Italy

Post-Italy: Focus group session after the stay in Italy

Annex 2: Transcription conventions

rising intonation	/
falling intonation	\
pause of 0.5 seconds	(0.5)
text missing	(...)
paralinguistic information	[text]