Student Well-being in Higher Education: Insights from International Academic Mobility Experiences

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ABSTRACT. This qualitative study explores how Romanian university students perceive and describe institutional practices that foster student well-being based on their experiences during international academic mobility programs (e.g., Erasmus+).

The study involved interviews with ten participants who completed academic exchanges in various European universities. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurrent features of educational practices and institutional support systems that were perceived to positively impact students' emotional, social, and academic well-being.

The findings highlight several key aspects of effective practice abroad: personalized teacher-student relationships, accessible psychological counseling services, collaborative learning environments, and inclusive campus spaces designed to support mental health. Participants also reported a general culture of care and trust that encouraged autonomy, open communication, and a more human-centered approach to academic life. Many of these elements were either absent or less emphasized in their Romanian university context.

This study offers concrete insights into transferable practices that may guide the development of more emotionally attuned, student-centered approaches in Romanian higher education. The results are relevant for institutional policymakers, educators, and university support services aiming to build a more holistic and evidence-informed approach to student well-being.

Keywords: student well-being, emotional support, social support, international mobility, higher education, educational practices

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1. Literature review

Specialist research indicates that *well-being* is a dynamic equilibrium between an individual's emotional, social, and cognitive resources and the challenges they encounter. Dodge et al. (2012) elucidate this concept clearly, depicting it as a dynamic equilibrium between resources and challenges. Well-being emerges as an unstable equilibrium point between two opposing forces: on the one hand, the individual's psychological, social, and physical resources, and on the other hand, challenges from the exact domains. Furthermore, Diener et al. (2018) define well-being as a composite of life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, maintained in a balanced relationship.

Under university circumstances, multiple elements affecting student well-being emerge through factors like academic stress alongside adjusting to self-direction man, aging time, and establishing new social contacts. According to Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker (2019), well-being development in students includes individual elements like mental health conditions and resilience while also incorporating university resources like staff support and academic relationship quality. The educational space within universities fosters the growth of safety perspectives and feelings of belonging as essential components of good learning outcomes.

The ERASMUS+ international academic mobility programs help improve university environmental well-being among students because maintaining interpersonal relationships remains vital for mental health (Chica et al., 2025). Joining mobility programs requires students to move beyond comfort zones by embracing different academic and cultural settings while potentially creating opportunities for better or worse well-being experiences (Chica et al., 2025). Students gain intercultural competencies along with personal self-confidence and develop interpersonal relationships through their exposure to diverse cultures and the creation of worldwide connections (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Using international mobility packages allows students to develop their identity while gaining psychological strength, intercultural skills and professional advancement (Chen, 2023). Potential adaptation difficulties consisting of homesickness together with culture shock and language barriers result in psychological stress that generates feelings of solitude which temporarily impact the health status of students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). The achievement of these mobility programs is mainly based on both successful integration into the host community and appropriate university support along with student friendships. International students need interpersonal relationships as personal and social development proceeds in parallel with their educational attainment through globally mobile programs.

According to Carol Ryff's theoretical framework of 1989, well-being involves both reaching maximum psychological outcomes and maximising the potential of human beings. Ryff's model of psychological well-being specifies six interconnected aspects which include autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery and personal growth. Factors that play a central role in the worldwide educational movement become essential because students experience situations that test their identities, mandate adaptation, and offer opportunities for personal development and self-discovery.

Additionally, the PERMA model, developed by Martin Seligman (2011) and part of the positive psychology paradigm, provides a broad framework for assessing well-being as a combination of elements contributing to a fulfilling life. Its components positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment allow for the examination of well-being from a psychological perspective and social and experiential viewpoints. This model helps study the experiences of international students, as it enables an investigation of how they experience positive emotions in a new cultural context, how actively they engage in academic and community life, how well they understand their decision to move abroad, and how they capitalize on their academic and personal success.

Various studies conducted throughout the past decade explore how studying abroad transforms student personal development alongside their academic growth since students gain improved cultural understanding combined with better language abilities and enhanced career prospects (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Tran & Vu, 2018). Research exploring student well-being as a result of these overseas experiences has discovered that international study builds mental health yet causes short-term emotional distress during transition (Chen, 2023; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Research has yet to clarify the reasons behind which students benefit better from study abroad experiences while other students struggle under similar educational conditions. Research has not established what enables certain students to derive greater benefits from these experiences, although all these students participate within comparable educational environments. The elements of personal characteristics together with environmental conditions appear to have a significant impact on mobile student well-being.

The study of subjective and contextual well-being requires proper investigation because of educational globalisation and growing international student mobility. Well-being studies adopt two separate approaches that evaluate it either through psychological methods or institutional analysis. Correct evaluation of well-being depends on the combination of multiple academic views. Well-being evaluation needs to integrate perspectives that combine motivation systems

with student resilience and intercultural abilities while also analysing external university policies and cultural settings and social networks. Research on comprehensive explanatory models about intercultural adaptation processes together with their influence on student well-being remains limited, especially when applied to international mobility programmes (Chen, 2023; Tran & Vu, 2018).

2. Research methodology

2.1. The Purpose of the study:

The aim of the research is to determine how Romanian students perceive and describe institutional practices that support student well-being based on their experiences with academic mobility programs, such as Erasmus+. The research seeks to identify effective educational practices and support systems that positively influence social, emotional, and academic well-being so that they can serve as models of good practice for the Romanian higher education system. The objectives of the research are as follows:

O.1 – Identifying Romanian students' perceptions regarding the institutional practices that contributed to supporting their well-being during international academic mobility.

O.2 – Identifying the types of institutional practices (counselling services, social integration, academic support) that students consider to have had a positive impact on their well-being.

O.3 – Formulating recommendations based on institutional best practices, applicable to the Romanian higher education context, to support student-centered education focused on well-being.

2.2. Methodology:

The methodological design focuses on developing a semi-structured interview guide, applied to a sample of 10 Romanian students who have experienced international mobility at universities in various countries (Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, France, and Germany). The research instrument used, the interview guide, contains a series of 7 questions. We informed the respondents about the anonymity of their answers and the strict use of the collected data for research purposes. The instrument was administered both online and in person. The dimensions covered in the interview guide are: personalised teacher-student relationships; accessible psychological counselling services within the university environment; collaborative learning environments;

inclusive spaces on campus and; transferable practices in the Romanian university system. We developed the interview questions around these dimensions, drawing from the reviewed literature. However, the questions were open-ended, allowing room for respondents to elaborate. Respondents had about 3 minutes to answer each question. Thus, an interview lasted approximately 20 minutes.

The option for the semi-structured interview is more potent than other qualitative instruments, mainly because it offers the researcher direct access to information that a quantitative instrument cannot provide, while remaining flexible and adaptable (Ruslin et al., 2022).

3. Results

The research dimensions underwent a thematic analysis, creating the *table 1*. The research identifies the essential topics that Romanian academic mobility participants revealed during their interviews. The data sets out emotional care provision alongside professor-student connection attributes and ways teaching evaluates students alongside cooperative learning areas and university services. Most participants detected substantial differences between the support provided for their well-being at the host universities and the support received in Romania. The students repeatedly mentioned empathetic teaching, scheduling flexibility, psychological counseling access, structured relationships, and relaxation-orientated student activities within their study experience.

Table 1 - Thematic analysis of research dimensions and resulting themes

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
Personalized teacher-student relationships	· Openness and accessibility of teachers · Development of an empathetic relationship · Clarity of requirements and additional explanations · Flexibility and openness to change	- Professors openly encouraged participation, provided clear guidance for exams, responded promptly to emails, and were flexible with project and assignment deadlines. - Clear deadlines and a structured teacher-student relationship encouraged the development of autonomy and personal responsibility.

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
		- Professors and people around embraced changes more flexibly and openly than in other contexts. - All professors were very attentive to the needs and wishes of the students (3 students). - Teachers are generally very understanding and willing to provide support, whether academic or personal. - The teachers were friends, in no way superior to me (3 students).
Accessible psychological counseling services in the university environment	· Easy access to psychological counseling services · Clear role of academic tutors in monitoring well-being · State involvement in supporting students · Personalized support and understanding from teachers	- Students are more supported than in Romania, primarily based on the professors' attitude. At least with us, they were very kind, understanding, and supportive. On the emotional side, students are encouraged to seek help from a psychologist, their counseling needs are acknowledged, etc. Also, the state supports them with job offers, scholarships, and so on. - In the host university, emotional support was much more visibly organized through dedicated psychological counseling services that were accessible and constantly promoted (4 students). - Academic tutors had clear and implicit roles in looking after the general well-being of students (2 students).
Collaborative learning environments (teaching-learning-assessment)	· Interactive and stimulating teaching practices · Flexible assessment · Personalized academic support in the learning process · Active and collaborative learning	- The teaching practices were excellent: many presentations, surprise guest speakers, interactive events, and pitch-type exercises. Although the assessment methods were rigorous, this high standard proved highly beneficial, as the responsibility for managing stress

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
		fell on the student, who was thus encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and develop resilience constantly.
		- The final test in many subjects was replaced by an individual or group project. I found it to be a very good method that did not cause students as much stress or anxiety as an exam (2 students).
		- In one of the seminars, we had to write an academic paper with a colleague, which we were to present at the end of the semester. Until then, we worked closely with the professor, who gave us many suggestions and helped us find resources.
		- The professor answered in great detail every question that arose during the writing of the paper, and this mattered in the end because we knew that the presentation we had worked on was done according to high academic standards. However, we also received a lot of help in preparing it. This played an important role in reducing stress.
		- Many courses had a flexible structure, with an emphasis on active and collaborative learning.
		- Assessments were diversified - not just exams, but also projects or presentations - and feedback was constructive. In addition, there are counseling sessions before exams, which significantly reduces stress (3 students).
Inclusive spaces on campus	· Various services for student well-being	- There were various services for student well-being, such as psychological counselling, tutoring, and a code-accessible quiet room

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
	· Extracurricular activities oriented towards socialization and emotional balance · Mutual support among students · Student involvement in campus life	where the only rule was the prohibition of electronic devices. - The university regularly organizes extracurricular activities, such as Drawing Night, board games, and sports events, which allow students to relax and socialize outside the academic schedule. - A "small gesture" that would make a big difference would be for the teacher to assume a role as a guide and partner, not just as an authority. - We had a participation fee, and those without financial means did not pay it. - What I noticed, however, is that students had much greater flexibility in scheduling exams. This meant that if you were emotionally affected by a personal issue, you could minimise its impact on your academic progress. - More professors in Romania could make a list of general topics around which students could propose specific subjects they are interested in. - A simple gesture, like sincerely asking at the beginning of the class, "How are you feeling?" or "Do you need support?" greatly changes the atmosphere. - Senior students support first-year students or those coming on mobility from foreign countries (2 students).
Transferable practices in the Romanian university system	· Adaptation of study programs and pedagogical relationships · Practical and collective learning	- A curriculum adapted to the present and future demands is essential, as well as a pedagogical approach that moves away from

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
	· Flexibility in assessment · Improvement of the teacher-student relationship	rigid hierarchies. In my international experiences, professors treated students as future colleagues and fostered a collaboration relationship, not one of unilateral authority. - Professors should focus, at least occasionally, on building the student group as a community, not just on the cognitive aspect. - Practical work (we created a website in WordPress, and we worked on a Business Plan). - Flexibility in exam scheduling (i.e., having the option to choose between two or more periods), placing greater emphasis on critical thinking rather than memorization, and discussions based more on practical examples than mere theory. - A more open relationship between students and professors, with greater availability for support and clarifications. - Regular extracurricular activities. Dedicated spaces for relaxation, such as quiet rooms, where students can disconnect from academic stress. - Professors could set aside a few minutes at the beginning or end of the class to answer students' questions without the pressure of formalities. - Offering an option to discuss academic or personal difficulties privately would convey empathy and encourage trust-based relationships (2 students).

A university culture focused on attentiveness and cooperation creates important positive effects on student welfare. This culture manifests itself through formal university code of conduct and operates also through casual interactions between faculty members and their students. This culture exists through a combination of established guidelines, friend-based help, sincere dialogue and various educational along with social activities.

The other universities feature three elements that include individual student assistance alongside flexible examination methods alongside emotional support for students by teaching staff. Student participation remains important to improve both university life activities along with the construction of an academic community that supports student connection. There are many transferable practices that could be implemented in the Romanian university system (see Table 1), which we included under the dimension *Transferable Practices in the Romanian University System*, such as organizing counseling services that are visible and accessible to everyone, expanding assessment options, providing opportunities for informal discussions during classes, and encouraging a more equal relationship between professors and students. These components can have a significant impact on creating more open, compassionate, and student well-being-centered learning environments.

The Romanian university system fails to combine academic development with social requirements and emotional support into a unified and coordinated approach to student well-being. Student support services currently operate in a fragmented manner with insufficient promotion and limited to selected initiatives, plus a general absence of consolidated student need comprehension. The professorial relationship with students typically maintains a professional hierarchy. The educational atmosphere must depend on empathetic relationships because formal hierarchy in these interactions prevents such development. In terms of policy, there are no clear rules or institutional plans that explicitly focus on student well-being. There is a need for institutional and national policies that establish minimum standards for psychological counseling services in universities, training for professors in socio-emotional support, greater flexibility in curricula and assessment methods, and funding for extracurricular activities that help students integrate and find balance. It is possible for universities to become more people-centered rather than focused solely on performance. This could be achieved through the implementation of clear policies and adequate resources to support this goal. It could also help bring Romania's educational system closer to European standards.

4. Discussions

The Romanian university system fails to combine academic development with social requirements and emotional support into a unified and coordinated approach to student well-being. Student support services currently operate in a fragmented manner with insufficient promotion and limited to selected initiatives, plus a general absence of consolidated student need comprehension. The professorial relationship with students typically maintains a professional hierarchy. The educational atmosphere must depend on empathetic relationships because formal hierarchy in these interactions prevents such development.

University policies and institutional policies lack specific frameworks dedicated to student well-being. Institutions and governments in Romania must work together to create nationwide psychological counseling quality standards for universities which should include professor socio-emotional support training alongside curriculum and assessment flexibility and financial support for student extracurricular programs.

Universities have the ability to evolve into people-oriented institutions without losing their performance-oriented focus. A combination of defined policies with sufficient resources will enable the accomplishment of this goal. Such an approach would assist in making Romanian education meet European standards.

5. Conclusions

The study is useful because it shows concrete student requirements about academic well-being. Such policy developments concerning this matter emerge at a time when education policies worldwide prioritize these issues more strongly. The analytical approach revealed practical methods which can optimize university conditions in Romania by adopting institutional transformation measures. This investigation deals with institutional elements together with mental approaches. This research creates an essential basis for exploring strategies to develop an education culture which shows empathy while remaining flexible and placing students at the center.

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