Article

Why Students Choose the European Project Semester Program for Academic Mobility: A Case Study at an Engineering School

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Abstract: European Mobility Programmes promoted by the European Commission have propelled a significant change in students' mobility across Europe in the last few decades. The European Project Semester (EPS) is one of those programmes. Research has mainly focused on understanding the factors that shape students' decision to engage in mobility experiences but has not tackled the motivation(s) leading them to opt for that programme in a particular country at a specific institution. This paper aims to understand EPS students' motivation to elect this programme for their mobility at a particular country/city/institution and hence contribute to help institutions define policies and practices to attract more students to this specific programme. Carried out at the Polytechnic School of Engineering in Porto, a mixed research methodology was followed, considering qualitative and quantitative data equally, and a theoretical framework was devised based on the push–pull factors model. Seventy-seven students participated in the study by filling in a closed-question questionnaire and engaging in focus group sessions. The findings sustained previous research and highlighted that students' motivation is supported by a combination of factors (personal, professional, academic), among which the personal category was the highest rated. These results show that the motivations for choosing the EPS programme do not differ considerably from those leading students to undertake regular mobility.

Keywords: European project semester; higher education; mixed research methodology; motivation; push–pull model; student mobility

1. Introduction

The international dimension in higher education is frequently associated with students' mobility, as this is the most visible facet of internationalisation activities [1]. The last few decades have witnessed a significant change in students' mobility across Europe, which was a result of the several European Mobility Programmes promoted by the European Commission especially since the late 1980s and reinforced with the Bologna Declaration in 1999, which highlights the need to promote mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement [2].

Recently, the mobility landscape in higher education systems has changed significantly as a result of the emergence of new statement strategies in policy-makers' interventions and new approaches adopted by higher education institutions [3]. Initially, mobility programmes were focused on improving European cooperation, contributing to peace, and on increasing the recognition of students' skills and qualifications. However, the profound variations in the labour market features have led to settling new aims, such as acquiring the current skills that give students competitive advantages in the labour market [4]. In addition to granting technical and professional skills (hard skills), higher education

curricula should also provide students with the possibility of developing transversal skills, such as communication, organisation, time management, teamwork, critical thinking [5], and conflict management [6]. In this context, regular syllabuses have been renewed, and their contents become even more ambitious. The mobility programme known as the European Project Semester (EPS) is an example of that [7–10]. The EPS is a specific initiative of the Erasmus programme, standing as a parallel option to regular mobility. To ensure an increasingly significant attendance of the programme, the decision-makers in this field must be aware of the motivations that drive students to enrol in EPS instead of joining regular mobility. Lately, the amount of studies focusing on students' mobility has increased considerably, which reflects the scientific community's interest in contributing to establishing a sustained knowledge covering students' motivations [11].

Despite the numerous studies dedicated to understanding the factors that shape students' decisions in selecting mobility experiences [12–15], none directly tackles the rationale that leads students to enrol in this specific Erasmus programme, the EPS. Furthermore, most of the current studies focus on identifying individual and institutional factors. Therefore, further research scaffolding the national level is crucial to pinpoint and better understand the motivation behind a student's choice for a specific programme at a particular institution in a given country [16].

The EPS has been subject of research [10,17,18] however, this has been focusing on the programme's approach, its interrelation with the business market, and on how the EPS concept enriches students' learning and fosters their development both as individuals and professionals, underlining the programme assets to prepare students for an international and multidisciplinary work reality. The EPS programme is a valuable instrument for applying and testing best practices in engineering education, enhancing the employability of its graduates, and fostering internationalisation [7,18].

Students' international mobility has three European countries as prior destinations (The United Kingdom, Germany, and France), and only a limited number of higher education institutions host a significant number of mobility students [19]. The EPS programme under study in this research is implemented in a country with low international student enrolment [20], which makes it more interesting to understand whether an Erasmus programme like EPS is a factor in attracting mobility students.

This study has two objectives. The main objective is to understand EPS students' motivation to choose this programme for their mobility period at a particular institution (School of Engineering, Polytechnic of Porto—ISEP) in a specific country (Portugal). The second purpose is to contribute to help institutions define policies and practices that will enable attracting more students to this specific programme, once it favours the development of a set of fundamental skills for the current job market, along with the skills considered in regular mobility. In this context, this study contributes to increasing the comprehension about higher education students' mobility process, which is crucial information for fostering mobility.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The European Project Semester (EPS)

The EPS is an engineering project-based programme conceived in Denmark [10]. The programme is held throughout a semester, involving students from diverse study backgrounds and nationalities who come together to work on a multidisciplinary project in an international teamwork setting [8–10].

In 2020, 19 higher education Institutions in thirteen European countries were registered as EPS providers. This European family of universities has been working to provide future professionals in the engineering-related fields with not only the development of essential hard skills but also intercultural competences and sensitivity to the diverse countries' organisational and business cultures [8].

Addressed mainly to students attending the 3rd year of engineering-related degrees, the EPS is grounded in a common syllabus sustained by a project and a set of accompa-

nying intensive modules devised to relate to the core of the projects and to support their specificities [18]. The syllabus also comprises a language module addressing the official language and culture of the hosting country, i.e., where the institution is located. Aiming at the design of a new product, and at building up its prototype, students work in multidisciplinary and international teams of 3 to 6 students for at least 15 weeks, learning to take responsibility for their learning and their project work while developing their intercultural competences as well as their interpersonal and communication skills [7,18]. Although the EPS is European-based, students from non-European countries are also encouraged to apply.

The EPS programme at the institution under study—EPS-ISEP—is available at the undergraduate level and is totally conducted in English. It is offered in the Spring semester, which occurs from mid-February until the end of June, comprising a 42 h Portuguese course and five short intensive modules—Team Building and Project Management, Marketing and Communication, Energy and Sustainable Development, Ethics and Deontology—directly related to the core project. The diagram in Figure 1 presents the workload/number of contact hours of each module, providing an overview of their interconnection with the project.
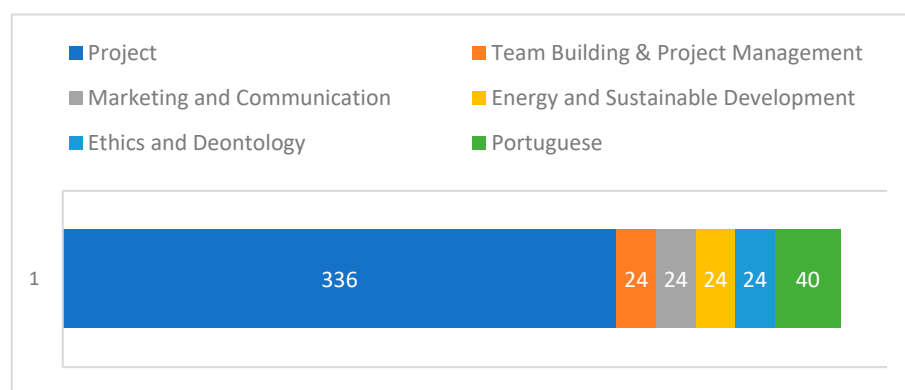

Figure 1. EPS subjects' workload overview.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Push–Pull Factors of International Academic Mobility

Institutions continue to perceive academic mobility as a valuable contribution to the cultural and academic improvement of their members. Together with governmental entities, they encourage the mobility of students, professors, and researchers, recognising mobility's contribution to improving scientific research quality, renewing teaching methods, as well as fostering mutual respect and understanding among European countries not only in matters related to higher education but also in regional and national cultural activities in general [13,19,21].

Nevertheless, it is essential to distinguish that academic mobility does not apply to migration from one country to another [19,22]. Within the academic field, mobility consists of a period of study, teaching, and/or research in a country other than the student's or academic staff member's country, implying a limited (but variable) duration, and the return of the student or staff member to his or her home country after completing the designated period.

From a governmental and political perspective, the Erasmus programme promotes two undeniable benefits: acquiring or improving a foreign language knowledge together with intercultural conscience and the improvement of skills which widen the possibilities of aspiring to more qualified jobs [13]. The last few decades have witnessed a progressive rise in the number of programmes, involved people, and amount of financing [20]. The amount of money provided by the education policy-makers to the diverse European mobility programs has probably been the most important economical help to unify the European education systems and to promote mobility. The abolition of tuition fees for

European Erasmus students and the establishment of scholarships have been crucial in fostering mobility.

Once the motivation of governmental entities and higher education institutions to participate in the academic mobility programmes is understood, it is relevant to also understand the participating students' motivations, which is the focus of this research.

Overall, mobility enables students to acquire key competences essential to build global networks and to widen innovative thinking, giving them tools they will need to stand out in a progressively more competitive world [23]. The rationale that leads to choosing a particular country and a particular hosting institution involves a vast array of characteristics. Regarding the country, factors such as the perception of safety, cost of living, spoken language, or even political and cultural freedom may come into play. In the choice of the hosting institution, influencing factors may include academic reputation, campus quality, courses offered, or the institution's position in global rankings. [15,16,24,25].

One of the most commonly used models referred to in the literature to study motivations for mobility—the push–pull model—was developed to establish a framework that allowed the identification of factors influencing people's migration [26]. This model was later applied to study students' mobility [27] and has become one of the most used tools to help examine and explain international students' motivations and decisions [15,16,28,29]. The push–pull model allows evaluating the process characteristics that lead to the mobility decision, combining push factors and pull factors. This combination determines a student's decision to study abroad and then their choice of destination.

Push factors represent the motivations or internal factors that lead students to seek activities that satisfy their needs (the reason(s) for deciding to undertake a mobility program), while pull factors are the motivations or external factors referring to the destination country that contribute to their choice of mobility destination (the reason(s) for deciding to undertake the mobility program in a particular country/institution) [24].

The research studies addressing the motivations for student mobility have identified a wide range of factors that can explain students' motivations to undertake part of their studies in a foreign country, as is the case in mobility programs [13,15,30–32]. Examples of those motivations include improving academic knowledge, studying in a different educational system, learning foreign languages, enlarging cultural knowledge, meeting new people, having fun, attending a reputable institution, immigration intentions, and social connections, among others.

Students engaged in short-term mobility, however, may find more appealing interesting tourist destinations for sightseeing/travel [33] or better known/convenient urban locations [34–36].

It is worth highlighting the importance of parents', relatives', friends', or colleagues' influence on the decision to undertake mobility and on the choice of the higher education institution and host country, typically through the so-called word-of-mouth effect (WOM) [11].

Kirloskar and Inamdar [25] add more global facts such as the rankings held by the institutions or the attitude and political atmosphere of the involved countries toward student mobility.

A possible structuring of these factors in a push dimension is one that groups them into three categories: personal, academic, and professional [4,16]. This model enables analysing the push–pull factors that are most important to students and the respective category. The pull factors can be grouped into the three main aspects that influence attractiveness: the destination country, the hosting city, and the academic institution [15]. Figure 2 presents the theoretical framework devised for this study, which is based on the push–pull factors model.

Based on the developed theoretical framework, this study aims to answer the following question regarding a Portuguese HEI and Portugal as a host country: What motivates international students to pursue an EPS program?
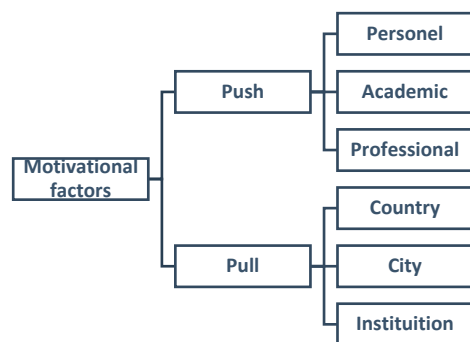
Figure 2. Theoretical framework based on the push–pull factors model.

2.3. Research Methodology

The study was carried out at the Polytechnic School of Engineering in Porto in the Spring semester at this higher education institution. The students involved in this study were enrolled in the European Project Semester at the School of Engineering throughout the Spring Semester. Due to the low number of students in each course edition, the years 2020, 2022, and 2023 were analysed. The year 2021 was not considered since, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was conducted entirely online without physical mobility.

A mixed research methodology was adopted, giving equal priority to qualitative and quantitative data. Given the complexity of the concept of motivation, quantitative results may be insufficient to draw conclusions. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis allows for exploring the meaning of the quantitative results considering the qualitative findings. The main advantage of mixed methodology is its complementarity, which enables a greater understanding and depth in interpreting the results [37].

The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, a questionnaire consisting of demographic characterisation questions and questions referring to motivational factors identified in the literature review was administered. The objectives and the questionnaire were explained to all students involved in the study, who participated voluntarily and with consent. Data collection was conducted using Google Forms at the beginning of each course edition. A sample of 34 students was obtained in 2020, 23 students in 2022, and 20 students in 2023, totalling a sample of 77 students.

The scale used for the questions referring to motivational factors ranges from 5 to 1, where 5—very important, 4—important, 3—moderately important, 2—slightly important, and 1—not important.

After data collection and validation, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.0 for Windows was used to process it. Descriptive statistics, means and standard deviation were calculated for the questions.

The following stage of the study implied preparing a focus group, following the general guidelines for conducting this technique, as stated: defining the research design, gathering data, analysing and reporting the results [38]. As the moderator, the researcher facilitates the exchange of ideas among the participants and moderates the discussion, favouring an open dialogue environment and a space of communication for interconnecting and discussing relevant issues [39].

Two focus groups were conducted in each edition of the EPS programme under study (2020, 2022, and 2023), totalling six sessions, to facilitate interaction and discussion. The sessions took place in the middle of the semester; students were at ease with each other and cooperative; they dynamically exchanged, compared, and discussed the issues at hand, which dealt with the official teaching language versus the local language, the motivation to enrol in the EPS in Portugal, and the skills expected to be developed. The prepared questions to propel discussion derived from the students' answers to the survey. Those related to language, choice of location for mobility, and skills development were considered too vague to provide the consistent and sustained results aimed for in this study. At the

end of the sessions, a last global question was asked, concerning the students' decision to specifically choose the EPS programme.

3. Results

3.1. Sample

Figure 3 shows the sample distribution in the three course editions, considering the students' country of origin.
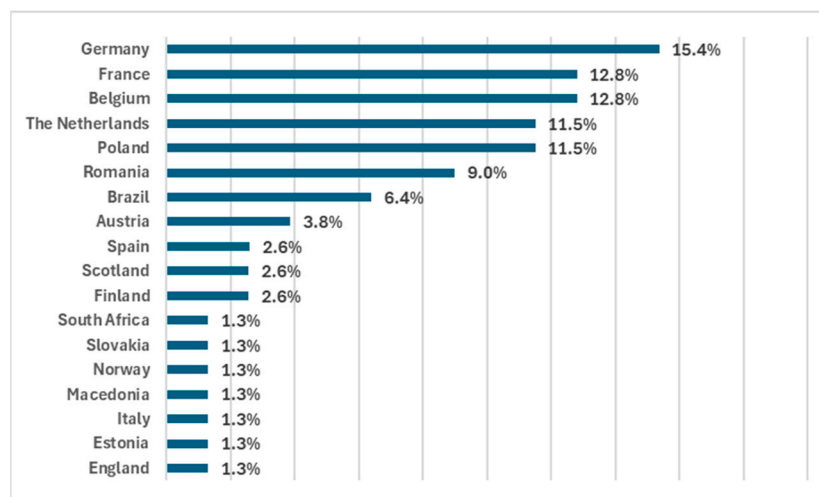

Figure 3. Students' country of origin (n = 77).

Analysing the data on the figure, the considerable dispersion of the EPS students' country of origin is clear. This variety does not allow identifying a pattern; on the contrary, it seems to indicate that the EPS programme is well spread throughout Europe. As for the courses that students attend in their home countries, these are mainly from various engineering areas, as expected, since the host institution is a school of engineering.

Table 1 displays the sample's demographic profile. Based on the findings, it can be inferred that the sample predominantly consists of students aged between 18 and 25, which are evenly distributed across gender. These results align with the overall composition of ERASMUS students concerning age and gender [40].

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 77).

	%
Age	
18–21	39.7
22–25	51.3
26–29	7.7
More than 30	1.3
Gender	
Male	51.3
Female	47.4
Another	1.3

Still regarding the sample characterisation, the results from Table 2 show that students mainly undertake mobility for the first cycle, although a considerable percentage are enrolled in the second cycle. As for the length of their stay, only a residual minority (2.9%) undergoes mobility to complete their entire course. Erasmus+ is the program supporting the mobility of nearly all participants in the study.

Table 2. Mobility characteristics of the sample (n = 77).

	%
Cycle of studies	
First cycle (Bachelor or equivalent)	75.6
Second cycle (Master or equivalent)	24.4
Stay in Oporto	
3 months	25.6
6 months	66.7
Full Bachelor study	6.4
Mobility programme	
Erasmus+	88.5
Erasmus Mundus	5.1
Other	6.4

Regarding the barriers to student mobility, one of the many difficulties reported in the published literature [41] is economic constraints, making it crucial to characterise the sources of funding students use for their mobility experience. Although the results confirm that the main source of funding is Erasmus scholarships, families' contribution and the home country support are significant and clear drivers to mobility (Table 3), thus representing the second source of funding. It is noteworthy that few students appear to work to help finance their stay.

Table 3. Sources of funding for the study abroad period of the sample (n = 77).

	Mean	SD
EU study grants	3.62	1.57
Contribution from parents/family	3.38	1.37
Own income from previous job	3.32	1.24
Study grants/loans from host country	2.77	1.57
Support by home state grant (non-repayable)	2.40	1.64
Support by home state loan (repayable)	1.85	1.38
By working during my studies abroad	1.72	1.23

A final question referring to student characterisation, relevant to mobility, was included in the questionnaire. A student's decision to engage in mobility may also be related to the assessment of their language skills [42], in particular English language skills, as English has become the main language in higher education [43]. If proficiency levels in using languages other than the native language are not acceptable, it is expected that students feel reluctant to engage in the mobility process. For this question (due to its specificity), other scale items were used, which were different from the remaining questions: 5—very good, 4—good, 3—acceptable, 2—poor, and 1—very poor.

Based on the results (Table 4), it is possible to assume that students in the sample feel almost as comfortable using English as they do using their mother tongue. However, their proficiency in the host country language (Portuguese) is very limited. From the analysis of the countries of origin, whose languages are very different from Portuguese, it can be inferred that the lack of proficiency in the language of the host country is not considered a significant obstacle. This may be explained by the fact that the EPS programme is provided in English.

Table 4. Language skills level of the sample (n = 77).

	Mean	SD
Country of origin official language	4.96	0.19
English	4.26	0.67
Portuguese	1.63	1.23

3.2. Survey Study

The questionnaire was organised into two sets of questions. The first set evaluated the push factors structured into personal, academic, and professional categories. To assess the personal category, questions Q1, Q3, Q4, and Q5 were included. For the academic category, questions Q2, Q6, Q11, and Q12 were considered. For the professional category, questions Q7, Q8, Q9, and Q10 were incorporated.

Table 5 displays the outcomes of the various questions students answered, which are sorted by the average value of each response option.

Table 5. Motivations of the sample to undertake international mobility (n = 77).

	Mean	SD
Q1—For leisure/fun/travel	4.40	0.79
Q4—Make new friends, create an international social network	4.37	0.87
Q6—Learn a different culture and tradition	4.23	0.84
Q5—Be challenged	4.10	1.01
Q2—Acquire more knowledge and develop skills	4.09	0.91
Q3—Improve foreign language skills	4.01	1.23
Q7—Improve the CV	3.81	1.21
Q8—Have an international career	3.71	1.03
Q9—Seek better job opportunities	3.46	1.20
Q10—Facilitate inclusion in the labour market	3.27	1.04
Q11—Study at a recognised engineering school	2.83	1.33
Q12—Have less workload concluding the course units	2.60	1.13

When evaluated individually, the three main motivations for students to engage in mobility are 'Q1—For leisure/fun/travel', 'Q4—Make new friends, create an international social network', and 'Q6—Learn a different culture and tradition'. For analysing the categories, the respective questions were grouped, and the findings are placed in Table 6.

Table 6. Dimensions of motivations of the sample to undertake an international mobility (n = 77).

	Mean	SD
Personal motivations	4.22	0.98
Professional motivations	3.56	1.12
Academic motivations	3.44	1.05

The data in Table 6 reveal that personal motivations are the most relevant for students when deciding to engage in international mobility, followed by professional motivations, and finally academic-related motivations.

To analyse the pull factors, Q13 and Q25 were devised. Questions Q13 and Q18 aimed at better understanding the motivations that propel students to choose the host country. Table 7 presents the results in this item.

Table 7. Referring to students' choice concerning the host country (n = 77).

	Mean	SD
Q14—Environment (good climate, political and economic environment)	3.99	1.01
Q13—Financial issues (lower travel cost, lower cost of living)	3.42	1.32
Q16—Overall level of knowledge and awareness (available information on country, quality of education)	3.35	1.07
Q17—Personal recommendations (friends and family that have been to the host country)	3.10	1.39
Q15—Geographical proximity (distance from home country)	2.50	1.42
Q18—Social links (friends and family that live in the host country)	2.24	1.51

Analysing the data in Table 7 allows understanding that a country's characteristics, its climate, and the contextual atmosphere strongly influence students' decision to engage in mobility, which is followed by the perception of the cost of living in the host country.

Questions Q19 to Q25 are related to the motivation leading to the choice of city and institution. Table 8 shows those results.

Table 8. Referring to students' choice concerning the city and the higher education institution (n = 77).

	Mean	SD
Q21—International learning environment	3.96	1.10
Q19—Attractive and historical city	3.86	1.07
Q20—Favourable geographical location	3.85	1.07
Q25—The city has a low cost of living	3.24	1.25
Q22—Qualifications of the institution are internationally recognised	2.94	1.21
Q24—The institution has a good reputation	2.82	1.30
Q23—Personal recommendations (friends who studied in the institution)	2.12	1.41

Analysing the data from Table 8 reveals that students value the experience of learning in an international environment. The geographical location and its appeal as a city with a rich history appear to be a significant factor in the decision making. Moreover, the city's affordability is also a notable point students consider in their decision.

3.3. Focus Group Study

Six focus group sessions were conducted, two in each edition of the programme, gathering an average of 12 students per session. The focus group sessions were led in English and aimed to clarify students' answers to the survey. Similarly to the survey/questionnaire, the focus group questions intended to promote discussion about the language used in the EPS programme and the local language, the students' motivations and expectations for the length of the EPS programme, and finally about the location of the host country and city. Table 9 summarises the questions and the answers gathered during the focus group sessions.

The discussion started with the language-related questions (Q1 and Q2), which aimed to clarify students' interest in learning Portuguese. Then, the purpose was to explain the primary expectations based on the main motivations inferred in the answers to the questionnaire. The questions that followed were targeted at detailing students' choices referring to their answers in the personal category. Q3 was meant to better understand the reasons behind students identifying leisure, fun or travel, make new friends, or be challenged as primary motivations for engaging in mobility. With Q4, the purpose was to clarify the choice of the most scored motivation for mobility in the academic category: acquire more knowledge and develop skills. Finally, the question referring to improve foreign languages was handled to understand which languages the students intended to improve: English as a universal language or the language of the host country.

The last question, Q6, was about the host country. Most students pointed out in the questionnaire that the host country is well placed geographically, so it was considered relevant to understand the meaning of that statement and how much the country's location influenced their mobility decision.

From the focus group results, it was possible to deduce that students choose the EPS programme because it is provided in English and that they do not intend to learn the language of the host country (Portuguese) besides the basics. The knowledge of the language of the host country students are willing to learn is for basic communication interactions like greeting and asking for simple day-to-day things. They consider it polite to greet and thank in Portuguese. They also perceive Portuguese as a difficult language, making it less attractive to be learnt during the EPS. Another reason presented for not being interested in learning Portuguese is the notion that in general, the Portuguese understand

English, making it possible to communicate despite not mastering the language of the host country. Students also view the EPS as an opportunity to improve their English skills, which reinforces the importance of language when choosing the programme.

Table 9. Focus group questions and results.

Q1. English is the official language in EPS. How relevant was this fact for your decision to apply?	
"It was extremely important." "…was essential"	15
"I would have applied anyway. If it wasn't in English…it would be a huge challenge."	1
"I only understand basic words in Portuguese…."	4
"Portuguese is a very complex language. We wouldn't learn enough …Portuguese."	1
Q2. Being the EPS entirely in English, are you interested in learning Portuguese? **What are your aims, what is its usefulness for you?**	
"…for greeting when entering the room. I really love to say, good morning!"	18
"It's useful to communicate in the grocery, to ask for a coffee, it's nice to ask in Portuguese."	7
"I like understanding the local slang."	3
"learning new languages"	4
Q3. What were you expecting or planning to do while in Porto?	
"Just be in Porto." "Definitely, enjoy the city centre."	8
"Friends told me how nice and friendly Portuguese people are."	4
"I wanted to know the country." "…a nice place with sun…"	3
"I didn't plan…I just wanted to go with the flow"	2
4. Which were the skills you expected to improve by attending the EPS Programme?	
"Working in team—so…teamwork, cooperation."	18
"Being able to interact with other cultures."	18
"…learn by doing, a practical course, get more than theory…"	18
"I was looking forward to developing communication skills in a large team."	16
"acquire programming skills…"	2
5. Which were the foreign languages you expected to improve? Portuguese?	
"Improve my English-speaking skills." "Not really, Portuguese."	18
"Learn Portuguese, the basics."	2
"And learn a few words in the other EPS students' languages, for example. Not the language."	1
6. What exactly do you consider a favourable geographical location to be? **What were the characteristics of the city of Porto and Portugal that influenced your decision?**	
"Being close to the ocean." "Good weather with no snow…"	18
"A strategic place to travel from, it has an airport with good flight connections.""…Ryanair…"	17
"My girlfriend was also in Porto." "My boyfriend also…" "Some of my friends…"	5
"I've heard great things about Porto."	5
"…almost everyone speaks English."	5
"A place where the cost is lower: cheaper to live in, and to travel to."	3
"I had already been in Porto and really wanted to get back."	1
"For me, it's also the landscapes and architecture."	1

The focus group sessions also revealed the relevance given to soft skills and practical knowledge improvement and development as well as helped unveil which skills students value the most. Generally, students highlighted teamwork and oral communication skills as well as developing their ability to communicate in an intercultural environment within a large team.

The responses to the question about the choice of the host country allowed us to clarify which characteristics are most valued by the students. Being close to the sea and the temperate climate are the most mentioned aspects, which is a finding consistent with the intentions of taking advantage of mobility to engage in some tourist activities. Students also highlight the various touristic attractions in the city and the several entertainment programs. Moreover, they view the host country as a starting point for travelling, considering a great

advantage the fact that the airport in the city outskirts includes a low-cost company. Finally, they mention the importance of the relatively low living cost.

A more global final question was asked to the students: "Why have you chosen to apply for the EPS instead of regular or semester mobility?"

A few students stated that after deciding to engage in mobility, the EPS programme was the only possible choice: "*In my school, we just choose the country where we want to go so we didn't directly choose to do an EPS*"; "*it was the only program that was validated for my courses*"; "*I did not get the chance to choose for the regular semester mobility*".

Other students highlighted the logistic issues involved in selecting the EPS programme: "*I thought it would be easier to get 30 ECTS in the EPS*"; "*at my home university the EPS can be accepted as the bachelor thesis*"; "*it was the only program that offered 24 ECTS credits for my final project*"; "*I need 30 credits to succeed at my university*"; "*convalidates my bachelor thesis*".

Although skills acquisition was not the most highly scored question in the survey (Table 5), most students demonstrated awareness of the programme particularities, which constitutes a motivational factor: "*learn more about the soft skills*"; "*develop soft skills and work with people from all over Europe*"; "*work in a group of different backgrounds and knowledge*"; "*I [want] to have shared responsibility and I [want] to learn how to work with people from different fields and cultures*"; "*I also like working in a team and the idea of producing my own product as part of a team*".

The least scored question was "have less workload concluding the course units" (Table 5); nonetheless, several students mentioned that "*The course is compared to home not so difficult*"; "*was the fact that there were no exams*"; "*They said it would be easy, no exams and a lot of free time*".

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Motivation is a complex, multidisciplinary concept that arises intricately from the interplay of individuals' diverse attributes (e.g., personality, needs), interacting within their contextual environment [15].

This study results show that students' motivation for choosing an academic mobility programme cannot be explained by a single factor but rather by a combination of factors. This finding had already been evidenced by several authors [22,40,44,45].

As far as the push factors are concerned, this observation is supported by the close connection between the appreciation of various factors. These factors encompass the intention to engage in a programme that facilitates travelling, having fun, making new friends, or experiencing new challenges but also acquiring more knowledge or enhancing language skills.

However, the factor that students value the most is "for leisure/fun/travel". This result is consistent with studies approaching regular mobility [35,46,47], which is an aspect that has even led some authors to refer to the exchange programme as academic tourism [48] and others to study its impact on the tourism industry [49,50]. Ricolfe and García-Pinto [51] argue that mobility can represent an escape from the study routine, allowing students to have new life experiences.

The second most scored motivation is "make new friends, create an international social network", which is a statement already pointed out in the literature [45,52–54].

From the analysis of the categories—personal, professional, and academic—it is possible to conclude that the personal category is the highest rated, which is followed by the professional and academic categories with similar values.

Ewa Krzaklewska and Krupnik [55] classified Erasmus mobility students' motivations into two main groups: students whose main motivations include building up a career (career-oriented) and students who value new life experiences more (experience-oriented students).

Considering the distinguishing characteristics of the EPS programme compared to regular mobility, it was expected that the strongest motivation would be the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of transversal skills—more career-oriented students—

which is not the case. This option ranked fifth in the motivations ranking, while the overall improvement of the CV was placed seventh, and having an international career was in eighth place.

Nonetheless, exploring these quantitative findings alongside the qualitative data from the focus group revealed that a significant number of students highlight teamwork and oral communication skills, as well as the ability to communicate in an intercultural environment within a large international team, as skills they intend to develop or improve. A few students also pointed out writing skills in a professional setting and knowledge acquisition regarding some of the program-related contents provided at EPS, such as ethics and sustainability. It is worth noting that most students have a clear understanding of the transversal skills they aim to develop.

This finding regarding the push factors is reinforced by the pull factors analysis referring to the host country choice. The most emphasised factors are related to the geographical location, climate, the city tourist attractions, and the low living cost. These are aspects that typically influence the decision concerning a tourist destination. Previous research has suggested that these factors might hold more significance than the perceived quality or prestige of the institution when selecting the host country [51,56].

The qualitative study confirmed that the host country features greatly influence students' decisions. The host country under study is renowned for tourism, for holding strong attractions such as history and culture, gastronomy and wines, beaches, surfing, the variety of landscapes, and, above all, the friendly characteristics of the Portuguese people, as affirmed by students in the focus group. The relatively low cost of living in the host country compared to several other European countries also seems to influence the choice, revealing the importance of the previously analysed financial constraints. Even though the main financial contribution is the Erasmus grant, a considerable number of students stated needing financial assistance from their families and used income from previous jobs to enable their mobility.

Another factor that may influence the decision is language [4,32]. The option "improve foreign language skills" is the sixth in the ranking but still has a high score. In a previous study [57], improving language skills was identified as the main driver to engaging in mobility. Jacobone and Moro [58] state that side by side with the will to experience a new cultural challenge, there is the motivation to learn or improve proficiency in foreign languages. The qualitative study disclosed that the foreign language students aim to improve is English, having no intention of learning the language of the host country beyond the basics. In fact, most students state that if the programme was not in English, they would not have chosen it.

Recommendations of friends and family who have been to the host country are also referred to as an influencing factor when choosing the country but not as much in selecting the city and institution. Family influence had already been reported as potentially decisive in selecting the host country [34].

In a nutshell, a set of factors considered as primary motivations for students to engage in mobility were identified: for leisure/fun/travel, make new friends, create an international social network, and learn a different culture and tradition. This result suggests, in line with several previous studies, that personal motivations are prioritised over academic and professional motivations. The students involved in the EPS mobility programme are more life experience-oriented than career building-oriented. The choice of the host country aligns with this result, as it is primarily the country's tourist characteristics that attracted the students, in parallel with the perception of a relatively low living cost. However, students have shown awareness of the benefits mobility offers in acquiring and improving transversal skills, such as teamwork and communication in multicultural environments, while also positively contributing to the transition to the job market.

After analysing the decision to undertake mobility and the choice of host country/city/institution, the results of the motivations for attending the EPS programme instead of a regular mobility programme are somewhat surprising. For a subset of students, the

choice of the EPS programme was the only option offered by their home institutions. The ECTS credits awarded by the program and the equivalence to graduation projects or theses by the home institutions are also determining factors in students' choices. The fact that this programme does not imply traditional exams and that students have more free time for complementary activities are other motivational factors. Yet students acknowledge the importance of the specific features of this mobility programme, particularly for acquiring and enhancing transversal skills, which are significantly different from the design of regular mobility programs. Finally, the full teaching of the programme in English supplemented with an introductory module to the language of the host country were also identified as motivating features because it allows for the development of the universally considered language while acquiring basic knowledge of the local language.

This study presents two significant contributions. Firstly, although a substantial amount of published work focuses on understanding the students' motivations for undertaking regular mobility programmes, no study was found investigating this issue in the EPS mobility programmes. Hence, the present paper, supported by previous research studies, contributes to understanding the factors that lead students to choose the EPS programme in a specific country/city/host institution's context. These findings may assist higher education institutions, especially those in countries less chosen by students, to outline appropriate policies to attract more students to a programme whose complementary benefits to regular mobility have been described in the literature.

Secondly, the current study's results contribute to help decision-makers in institutions design policies and practices leading to the necessary restructurings to make the EPS programme more attractive and, thus, facilitate greater student access to this opportunity to engage in studying in a foreign country.

4.1. Implications for Practice

This study's findings are particularly relevant for institutions in countries that students usually do not select for their mobility and that want to increase the number of incoming students. The policies for awarding ECTS credits and the mechanisms for granting equivalence to projects or theses at the end of the course must be closely evaluated by the decision-makers, as they are determining factors in students' choices. The evaluation methodology, supported in project-based evaluation as opposed to traditional exams, should be maintained, because it adapts better to mobility programmes. In dissemination practices, besides including the policies that guide the programme, institutions should highlight the skills that students can acquire in addition to those usually offered by regular mobility. The students involved in this study indicate the fundamental skills they need for the transition to the labour market, spotlighting teamwork and communication skills (especially in multicultural teams). Developing and improving these skills are undeniable at EPS. Moreover, for dissemination, it should be included that the teaching of the programme is fully in English and complemented with an introductory module to the host country's language. The characteristics of the host country, such as its geographical location, climate, tourist attractions, and the low cost of living, should not be neglected, as they are important factors in the students' decision.

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

As an empirical study, this paper has several limitations that should be identified. The first relates to the data collection methods, which included a self-report survey. Although this data collection technique is common and valuable in social science research, it possible that respondents may not fully understand the questions and tend to overestimate their assessment. To minimise these limitations, the survey was administrated in the classroom with the support of the teacher, who clarified the questions. The second is related to the sample size. Considering that only a small number of students can enrol in each EPS edition, the sample size is limited. Repeating the survey in three different EPS editions was the solution found to minimise this limitation. Having conducted focus groups also

minimised the limitation resulting from the sample size and the use of surveys for data collection. Additionally, the study was developed in a single engineering school and in a country only, which limits the extent of the conclusions.

In the coming years, more research should be carried out in this area to compare the results and conclusions reached by this work. It would be very interesting to repeat this study in other engineering schools and in other countries to confirm the findings. Another line of research that may be followed to be used by the decision-makers of the institutions is the evaluation of students' expectations when they enter the programme and the evaluation of their satisfaction at the end. These results would not only provide information for a more effective dissemination of the programme but also the implementation of improvement measures.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.S.; methodology, M.S.; software, M.S. and A.B.; validation, M.S., E.F. and A.B.; formal analysis, M.S.; investigation, M.S., E.F. and A.B.; resources, M.S., E.F. and A.B.; data curation, M.S., E.F. and A.B.; writing—original draft preparation, M.S. and E.F.; writing—review and editing, M.S., E.F. and A.B.; supervision, M.S.; project administration, M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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