

## PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON STUDENT REFLECTIONS

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**Abstract:** *In response to the evolving demands of globalised labour markets, higher education institutions are integrating international and intercultural perspectives into the curriculum to foster students' professional growth by developing core employability skills. This study explores the development of soft and transferable competences through students' participation in a one-week, project-based international mobility programme. Using a structured reflection framework and qualitative content analysis, the article examines 29 student reflections guided by a set of thematically aligned prompts and reflective questions. The findings indicate that even short-term international collaboration can lead to meaningful development of key professional competences, including intercultural communication, adaptability, teamwork, and digital literacy, as shaped by the designed pedagogical activities. Students also reported increased global awareness, clearer career orientation, and enhanced goal clarity in relation to future professional pathways, alongside the practical application of skills in authentic contexts. The results underscore reflective writing as an effective pedagogical strategy in international learning environments, helping students to recognise and articulate otherwise hidden competences. While the study's small sample size presents limitations, the findings support the integration of short, intensive, and internationally diverse learning formats into higher education curriculum to foster employability-relevant skills.*

**Keywords:** *professional growth, intercultural competence, short-term mobility, international project collaboration, student reflections, employability skills*

### INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, the digital transformation of economies, and other contemporary trends require higher education institutions to move beyond the mere transmission of academic knowledge and instead foster the development of competencies essential for professional growth, employability, international engagement, and responsiveness to rapidly changing real-world conditions. In addition to disciplinary expertise, today's graduates must acquire adaptability, flexibility, critical and analytical thinking, technological proficiency, sustainability awareness, and the capacity to clearly communicate and present ideas and innovations (World Economic Forum, 2025). These capabilities are vital for navigating complex, uncertain, and rapidly evolving environments. As a result, higher education institutions are increasingly called upon to adopt flexible, inclusive, and interculturally responsive teaching and learning approaches that support the comprehensive development of students. International learning experiences—regardless of their duration or modality—

provide a critical role in students' professional growth, enhancing their preparedness for effective participation in globally interconnected professional and societal environments.

The objective of this article is to analyse the dimensions of professional growth perceived by students following their participation in a one-week international project-based mobility abroad. This short-term mobility experience was embedded in an innovative teaching and learning framework, where international student teams collaboratively developed project ideas, identified solutions under time constraints, and presented their outcomes. Structured, question-guided student reflections—submitted upon completion of the mobility—were systematically and qualitatively analysed to explore the development of students' experiences, skills, and competencies. The analysis aims to provide insights into how international project collaboration fosters professional growth in a short-term, high-impact learning environment.

### **The Demand for Trend-Responsive Teaching Methods in International Learning Settings**

Innovative, trend-responsive teaching methodologies have proven effective in fostering interactive and student-centered learning environments. These approaches enhance student engagement, performance, and the development of relevant competencies (Al Mamun & Lawrie, 2023; Herodotou et al., 2019; Malekigorji & Hatahet, 2020; Mustafa, 2024; Safapour & Kermanshachi, 2018; Zettinig et al., 2021). In contrast, although traditional teaching methods may deliver content efficiently, they often lack the capacity to promote dynamic engagement and the cultivation of essential higher-order skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Puranik, 2020). Contemporary education increasingly prioritizes the development of transversal and soft skills—competencies crucial for both societal progress and professional success in today's complex and interconnected world.

Competence-based education reorients learning toward the demonstrable acquisition of skills, moving beyond rote memorization and time-based metrics. Unlike traditional systems that emphasize standardized testing, competence-based education prioritizes mastery of specific competencies—such as problem-solving and technical expertise—while allowing learners the flexibility to progress at an individualized pace (Catacutan et al., 2024; Klein-Collins, 2013). Competence development has emerged as a cornerstone of contemporary pedagogy, aligning educational outcomes with the evolving demands of society and the global labor market. Within this framework, internationally composed classrooms play a critical role in advancing competence development by purposefully integrating global and intercultural dimensions into both formal and informal curriculum. This includes embedding international and intercultural perspectives into the curriculum, such as internationalised learning outcomes, inclusive teaching approaches, culturally diverse study materials, and assessment strategies (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015) that support the development of intercultural competence and other employability skills (Aškerc Zadavec, 2024, 2025). When combined with innovative and trend-responsive teaching methods, such learning environments provide a powerful platform for fostering essential soft skills needed for students' professional growth in international and intercultural settings.

International learning environments—whether facilitated through physical mobility programs, international collaborative projects, virtual mobility (O'Dowd, 2021), or other formats, both short- and long-term—encourage students to step outside their comfort zones. These experiences enable them to navigate unfamiliar contexts, communicate across cultures, and approach challenges from multiple perspectives. In doing so, students develop key competencies such as adaptability, critical thinking, teamwork, digital literacy, and intercultural communication. One of the most prominent European programmes supporting a wide range of international mobility formats is the Erasmus programme, which offers numerous benefits and exerts long-term impacts at the international, national, institutional, and

individual levels, often surpassing the scope of national or regional initiatives (Braček Lalić, 2024). Students participating in Erasmus exchanges consistently report enhanced intercultural openness, personal growth, social engagement, and the development of academic and employability-related skills. Furthermore, they frequently indicate increased European identity, improved communication abilities, strengthened intercultural competence, and a greater capacity to act effectively in unfamiliar situations. These students also describe becoming more open-minded, resilient, and curious (Dolga et al., 2015; European Commission, 2019; Hossain et al., 2022; Rai et al., 2022). The competencies and experiences acquired through such international engagements have also been shown to positively influence students' future employability prospects and career aspirations (Alamo-Vera et al., 2019).

Universities are increasingly skilled in managing internationalisation and providing structured support for the implementation of an *internationalised home curriculum* (Aškerc Zadavec, 2023). This approach plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of students' international and intercultural experiences, enabling them to engage with diverse teaching methodologies and learning practices comparable to those encountered during physical study abroad (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015; Aškerc Zadavec, 2024, 2025). In a global context where labour markets are becoming more international, interdisciplinary, and dynamic, universities are compelled to adapt their curricula to ensure that graduates are capable of applying their knowledge in diverse, real-world contexts—including international and intercultural settings (European Commission, 2019; Franzenburg, 2017; Marinoni, Bartolomé, & Cardona, 2024; Rumbley & Hoekstra-Selten, 2024).

However, the development of soft skills—and, more importantly, learners' awareness of those skills—often presents a challenge not only for educators but also for students themselves. Learners frequently struggle to recognize the soft skills they have acquired, particularly when such competencies emerge spontaneously or informally. This issue is especially pronounced in intercultural and international learning environments, where competencies developed through cross-cultural collaboration and engagement are often unacknowledged or undervalued by the learners. As a result, these are frequently referred to as “hidden competences” (Finnish National Agency, 2019).

### **Evidencing Professional Growth Through Student Reflections on International Project Collaboration**

Graduates who participate in international exchange programmes often become more confident in competing in the labour market and functioning effectively in everyday life, as such experiences play a significant role in the development of soft skills (Hossain et al., 2022). However, it is essential to raise students' awareness of the specific soft competences they have acquired. Facilitators and lecturers teaching in international or intercultural classrooms should recognise the soft skills students develop in these environments—beyond the acquisition of academic content. Educators can adopt a variety of strategies to enhance students' self-awareness regarding their soft skill development, thereby reinforcing the long-term value of international learning experiences.

Tools for assessing the development of soft skills and professional competences often rely on qualitative methods, such as open-ended survey responses, interviews, or reflective journals. These approaches offer deeper insights into how communication strategies and leadership practices are applied and perceived within academic settings. In particular, the ability to lead and engage students in discussions, collaborative projects, and cross-cultural teamwork requires a nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics in diverse learning environments (Deardorff, 2006). Reflective instruments can be used to evaluate leadership development, not only from the perspective of students but also in terms of how academics

*PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY: A  
QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON STUDENT REFLECTIONS*

perceive their own growth and apply leadership practices in both classroom and extracurricular contexts (Mestenhauser & Ellingboe, 2011). Pedagogical tools such as teaching or learning portfolios and reflective assessments allow individuals to systematically track their development over time, offering valuable evidence of how their instructional practices adapt to meet the needs of diverse student populations and align with international learning-teaching standards (Marginson, 2011).

According to Daff, Tame, and Sands (2024), reflective practice skills represent a valuable tool for students and graduates in enhancing their self-awareness regarding improved performance and professional development, particularly in relation to critical thinking and the skills and habits acquired through various academic courses. The Oxford English Dictionary (2012) defines reflection as “the action or process of thinking carefully or deeply about a particular subject, typically involving influence from one’s past life and experiences.” Reflecting on past experiences fosters both personal growth and deeper learning by enabling individuals to extract meaningful lessons and apply them in future contexts. While oral reflection can be insightful, reflective writing offers a more structured and enduring form, allowing individuals to organise their thoughts and explicitly connect personal experiences with academic theory. This process contributes to deeper understanding and supports the development of transferable and professional competences (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015).

The use of reflection significantly influences and supports learning in higher education by emphasizing student-centred and experiential learning approaches and fostering the development of self-directed learners (Chen, Jones, & Xu, 2018). As a pedagogical strategy, reflection enables students to become aware of the competencies they have acquired through engagement with various experiences, emotions, and actions. Experiences alone do not necessarily result in learning or competence development; rather, it is the learner’s response—through processes of thinking, evaluating, and making meaning of those experiences—that leads to growth, including planning for future actions (Chan & Lee, 2021; Loughran, 2002). Multiple forms of reflection can be implemented as learning or assessment tools, including blogs, journals, videos, and both in-class and out-of-class reflective assignments. These approaches help students better understand themselves by allowing them to express thoughts, experiences, and knowledge in a structured manner. Through this process, students connect new knowledge with prior understanding, enhancing self-awareness of their actions, strengths, and areas for improvement (Chan & Lee, 2021).

Reflective writing is a valuable pedagogical tool for fostering the development of intercultural competence, as it enables students to critically examine their experiences abroad or in international classrooms and articulate the outcomes of those experiences. This process allows learners not only to gain intercultural awareness but also to demonstrate it through specific instances and examples. Providing students with multiple modes of reflection supports diverse learning styles and facilitates deeper engagement with their study abroad experiences (Nardon, 2019). Furthermore, Matthews (2020) emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in understanding intercultural communication, particularly in enhancing individuals’ ability to interpret and adapt to new cultural contexts. Reflexivity serves as a mediating mechanism between intercultural experiences and individual behaviour, supporting the transition from awareness to action. To assist students in recognising and articulating these often-overlooked competences, the Finnish National Agency developed A Toolkit for Recognizing International Competences for Students in Higher Education (2019). This resource provides guiding questions and examples that help students describe the competences developed through international experiences, making them more visible and applicable in the context of employability—where such skills often remain hidden during the job application process.

## **The Framework of the Research**

The significance of developing soft competences through participation in international and intercultural settings has been emphasized in the theoretical framework of this article. Carefully structured student reflections, guided by systematically developed prompts, can play a crucial role in enhancing students' awareness of the soft or hidden competences they acquire in such environments. Despite numerous studies in this field, a *research gap* persists in the analysis of student reflections that are elicited through specifically designed guiding questions. In this study, international students were asked to reflect—using a structured format—on the soft competences they developed during a one-week international mobility experience, which involved intensive, project-based collaboration in diverse student teams.

To address the identified research gap, the following research question is posed:

- What types of soft skills, competences, and impacts are identified in students' reflection essays following their one-week stay abroad and intensive participation in International Project Week activities within internationally diverse student teams?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Context of the Short-Term Mobility Abroad**

The reflections analysed in this study were written by international students—most during their Erasmus semester abroad—following their participation in a one-week, intensive, international project-based mobility abroad (with one domestic student included). The programme was preceded by an initial online meeting held one week prior to the on-site activities. This preparatory session introduced the structure and goals of the International Project Week and covered the basics of intercultural communication. The mobility initiative was organised through a collaboration between B2 Ljubljana School of Business (Slovenia) and NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands), although it was not formally implemented as a Blended Intensive Programme under the Erasmus+ framework. The project week took place in spring 2024 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and was structured as an innovative teaching and learning model based on experiential, project-based methodology.

During the project week, students were assigned to internationally mixed teams and tasked with developing original project ideas related to international trade, with a specific focus on the Slovenian market context. They engaged in intensive group work, conducted field research and interviews in public spaces and organisations, studied relevant literature, attended facilitators' sessions, and gradually refined their project solutions. Each team presented their progress through daily pitches, guided by clear instructions and mentorship from three experienced international facilitators. The final outcomes were presented to an external panel of professional evaluators and showcased at the International Student Business Fair. There, teams prepared and presented their business stands to an external audience comprising students, faculty, institutional staff, and representatives from industry and the labour market. The event culminated in the selection of a winning team, based on the quality and innovation of their project. The international project week was formally recognised as part of the regular or elective curriculum, integrated within an existing course structure. Upon completion of the programme, students were required to submit structured, question-guided reflections. These reflections were thoughtfully structured to capture evidence of hidden competencies, soft skills, and to highlight students' professional growth and development pathways gained through the intensive, facilitated teamwork experience in an international setting.

### **Structure of the Population and Data Collection Toolkit**

The international student project week involved 33 participants, primarily undergraduate (first-cycle) students, with one student from the second-cycle level. The group

## *PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON STUDENT REFLECTIONS*

represented 13 different nationalities—Albanian, American, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Dutch, Georgian, Moldovan, Serbian, Slovenian, South African, Syrian, Italian, and Ukrainian. Upon completion of the international project week, all students were required to submit individual reflections. For the purpose of this study, 29 reflections were analysed, provided by students who consented to the use of their reflections for research purposes in an anonymous way. Each reflection was approximately 1,250 words in length and written in essay format.

The reflection form consisted of three main sections. The first section collected basic demographic information, including the student's name, home university, country of the home institution, and nationality. The second section focused on competence development and guided students through structured reflection using specific prompts across the following thematic areas: General and networking skills; Communication and interpersonal skills; Teamwork, leadership, and project-related skills; Field-specific competences; and Digital skills.

The third section of the form included appendices with guidelines for reflective writing. These materials provided students with a brief theoretical background on reflection, sample reflections, writing instructions, and an overview of transferable skills and personal qualities valued by employers. These guidelines were also introduced to students during a plenary session.

The reflection form was adapted from the Toolkit for Recognising International Competences (Finnish National Agency, 2019) and was tailored to the specific structure and pedagogical objectives of the International Student Project Week.

### **Method Used – Qualitative Content Analysis Approach**

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine students' reflective writings, drawing on the methodological frameworks of Elo and Kyngäs (2008) and Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), with adaptations to suit the specific objectives of this study. The data were inductively coded using a modified interpretative approach based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Kordeš & Smrdu, 2015, p. 53; see also Mayring, 2014). Coding units—ranging from individual words and short phrases to complete statements—were identified to capture key ideas and underlying meanings. These units were then grouped into lower-level categories, which were subsequently abstracted into higher-order conceptual themes.

To support the categorisation process, the AI language model ChatGPT was employed as a supplementary analytical tool. Its use facilitated the initial organisation of content into thematic clusters, which was then refined through manual coding and validation. This hybrid approach enabled more efficient pattern recognition while ensuring that analytical rigor and authors' judgment remained central to the interpretative process.

The analytic process involved both segmentation and synthesis of the reflection texts, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the empirical material. Through iterative linking of coded content to broader conceptual abstractions, the analysis facilitated the identification of semantic patterns and trajectories of intercultural and professional learning emerging from authentic student reflections. Illustrative excerpts from the students' texts were included to support the interpretation of key findings.

### **RESULTS**

Students' reflections were analysed ranging from individual words and word combinations to partial and complete statements in order to identify key ideas, competences, and perceived impacts. In this section, the identified high-level categories are supported by concrete examples drawn from the data, thereby illustrating the core findings and addressing the research question.

It is acknowledged that the categorisation of reflections could be further refined or articulated with greater specificity. Given the complexity and richness of the open-ended essay responses, the statements could have been organised using alternative frameworks or more nuanced structural layers. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study and in response to the research question, the current structure is considered sufficiently robust to offer meaningful insights. Furthermore, to ensure participant anonymity, individual excerpts have not been attributed to specific students, nationalities, or home institutions.

Table 1 presents the range of competences developed by students through international project collaboration, with particular emphasis on intercultural, communication, and global awareness competencies. The higher-order categories include Developing Intercultural Communication and Teamwork Skills, which is further subdivided into the first-order categories: Flexible Communication Across Cultures, Developing Intercultural Teamwork Skills, and Adapting to Cultural Differences. Another higher-order category, Expanding Global and Regional Perspectives, comprises the subcategories: Exploring Diverse Regional Perspectives and Staying Ahead with Global Trends in the Discipline. Each category is illustrated with representative examples drawn from students' reflective responses, offering insight into the perceived outcomes and professional growth experienced during the short-term mobility programme.

**Table 1.** *Development of Intercultural, Communication, and Global Awareness Competences*

Higher-Order Category	First-Order Categories	Respondents' Statements – Representative Examples
Developing Intercultural Communication and Teamwork Skills	Flexible Communication Across Cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Through projects and teamwork, I honed my ability to adapt my communication to different cultural contexts, fostering understanding.’</li> <li>• ‘The bootcamp experience taught me the importance of flexibility in communication, [...] and understand non-verbal cues in a dynamic international environment.’</li> <li>• ‘Through the bootcamp, I learned to [adapt communication], enhancing my ability to [...] collaborate harmoniously across diverse teams.’</li> <li>• ‘[I gained] valuable skills in cross-lingual communication.’</li> <li>• ‘I focused on improving my real-life communication [...], project presentation skills [...].’</li> <li>• ‘I needed to communicate in a different way than I normally would [...] due to the different levels of English and the different ways of communication.’</li> <li>• ‘[I am] able to listen carefully, to be patient and to be able to find a common language even when there are language or cultural barriers.’</li> </ul>
	Developing Intercultural Teamwork Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘[International collaboration] enabled me to develop the ability for effective teamwork [...].’</li> <li>• ‘If there are problems, I know that we can solve them as a team. [Group work] helped me improve my communication and interpersonal skills cross cultures [...].’</li> <li>• ‘Communication was the key to a nicely done group project [...]. We all had to practice it through this international project [...].’</li> <li>• ‘We had to collaborate as a group to solve the problem [...]. I see I am able to work effectively in international group.’</li> <li>• ‘Working with new team members from different nationalities and being able to work together [...] is already a skill.’</li> </ul>
	Adapting to Cultural Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘I feel that this experience has led me to really adapt to other cultures when it comes to being direct [...].’</li> <li>• ‘My groupmates were shocked at first by my directness, but they didn’t think it was a problem and enjoyed [directness].’</li> </ul>

*PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON STUDENT REFLECTIONS*

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘[I] enhanced my adaptability, allowing me to better engage with diverse people and perspectives [...]’</li> <li>• ‘I learned what it feels like to work in a [foreign environment]. But if I want to learn and explore new experiences then I must [feel] uncomfortable.’</li> <li>• ‘[I] enhanced my cultural proficiency and [now have] more inclusive and empathetic approach when working with people from diverse backgrounds.’</li> </ul>
Expanding Global and Regional Perspectives	Exploring Diverse Regional Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘I strongly feel that my experience during this project has helped me establish very strong connections within the Balkan region and the Caucasus region.’</li> <li>• ‘[The bootcamp] truly opened my eyes to a completely different Europe than I was used to.’</li> <li>• ‘Looking for specialist inspiration in different nations and their markets, this project made me look at everything from a different point of view.’</li> <li>• ‘[I] gained insights into global markets and trends in different countries.’</li> </ul>
	Staying Ahead with Global Trends in the Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Now that I made such a diverse group of friends that I can call my friends, following global trends and markets is going to be much easier.’</li> <li>• ‘I consulted with my peers on which channels could be useful for staying informed on future global trends, [...] ensuring I can adapt to and leverage these trends for professional growth.’</li> <li>• ‘Keeping up with global trends [...] helps me anticipate market shifts in various regions, identify opportunities, and mitigate risks.’</li> </ul>

Table 2 presents an overview of the career-related skills, goal clarity, and applied learning outcomes that students reported gaining through international project-based collaboration. The higher-order category Shaping Professional Identity and Career Direction is further subdivided into the following subcategories: Boosting Career Opportunities, Clarifying Goals, and Building Essential Transferable Skills. The second higher-order category, Applying Practical Skills for the Workplace, includes the subcategories Applying Skills to Real Work and Advancing Digital and Tech Skills. Each category is supported by representative excerpts from students’ written reflections, providing qualitative justification for the identified competence areas.

**Table 2. Career Skills, Goal Clarity, and Applied Learning**

Higher-Order Category	First-Order Categories	Respondents' Statements – Representative Examples
Shaping Professional Identity and Career Direction	Boosting Career Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘[These skills are] highly valued by employers, [...] a very high competency. [...] I significantly improved my soft and hard skills, which I will not forget to mention in my resume.’</li> <li>• ‘The skills I learned [...] will make me stand out.’</li> <li>• ‘[It] can greatly benefit my future employer by improving overall efficiency and problem-solving capabilities within the organization.’</li> <li>• ‘[This] will be useful not only for me and my future job, but even now, it will make my studies at university a lot easier.’</li> <li>• ‘These networks can provide valuable resources, mentoring opportunities, career connections, and collaborative partnerships.’</li> <li>• ‘I underwent a transformative journey where I realized the critical significance of [international impact]. This awareness extends beyond mere curiosity [...]’</li> <li>• ‘I have created more connections with incredibly talented and experienced people, which can be very useful in the future.’</li> </ul>
	Clarifying Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘This week was instrumental in helping me identify my true passion and what I aspire to become.’</li> <li>• ‘I started to make clearer steps towards my goal, [...] clearly understanding [...] and finding ideas that would help me achieve it.’</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘In a fairly short time, I understood myself better and decided on the profession I want to combine my life with in the future [...].’</li> </ul>
	Building Essential Transferable Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Some specialist skills that I acquired [are] creativity, resilience and complex problem-solving. These skills are easily transferable from/to any job.’</li> <li>• ‘[...] this project made me look at everything from a different point of view, thinking all the time: ‘What would my friend from Georgia say to this?’ or ‘How would [colleague] from Cyprus solve this problem?’</li> <li>• ‘The time pressure that was on this project has taught me that you can still have a result you can be proud of despite having little time.’</li> <li>• ‘Strong attention to detail and problem-solving allows me to tackle challenges creatively and adapt to dynamic environments.’</li> <li>• ‘I learned new best practices [...] such as setting clear communication protocols, establishing deadlines, and utilizing tools effectively.’</li> <li>• ‘Conflict resolution and finding compromises – I am ready to quickly respond to problems and find constructive solutions.’</li> <li>• ‘I learned the importance of quick decision-making and thinking outside the box [...].’</li> <li>• ‘The qualities I developed were the ability to control the project and bring all processes to completion, to write concisely and listen actively, the ability to interview people and speak on the go, I [...] learned to be more emotionally stable.’</li> </ul>
Applying Practical Skills for the Workplace	Applying Skills to Real Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘[...] during the bootcamp, I focused on digital marketing and video editing, successfully applying my skills in product promotion.’</li> <li>• ‘I developed expertise in data analysis, project management, and strategic planning, [...] directly applicable to my desired job.’</li> <li>• ‘[...] specialist competencies in project management, data analysis, and strategic planning, directly applicable to my job application.’</li> <li>• ‘[It] helped in gaining insights, easily look into financial trends, come up with different marketing strategies and investment plans.’</li> </ul>
	Advancing Digital and Tech Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘I have developed a hidden competence in working with text-generative AI models. I have gained high-quality skills in prompting these models [...].’</li> <li>• ‘I enhanced my skills in web development, Canva design, and digital marketing, learning best practices in coding and data visualization.’</li> <li>• ‘I used Microsoft Excel to analyse data and create reports. Advanced PowerPoint for creating presentations and graphic materials.’</li> <li>• ‘I now have knowledge of Adobe Express, Wix, and Excel. I can express my creativity and do projects quicker [...].’</li> </ul>

## DISCUSSIONS

International student collaboration presents numerous opportunities for learners to develop soft and transversal competencies essential for effective participation in today’s unpredictable, fast-changing, and globally interconnected world and labour market. This article investigates how a short-term mobility experience abroad—specifically, an intensive, one-week, project-based collaboration within internationally diverse teams—can meaningfully contribute to students’ professional development. The programme applied interactive, trend-responsive pedagogical approaches, with students intentionally placed in culturally diverse teams. Within this framework, students’ professional growth was assessed through the analysis of their written reflections. The primary aim of this study was to explore the perceived impact of the international project experience and to identify the competencies students reported developing, thereby addressing the research question of what types of soft skills and outcomes are reflected in students’ reflective essays.

## *PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON STUDENT REFLECTIONS*

Although the reflection form toolkit covered a broad range of focus areas—including general and networking skills, communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork, leadership and project-related skills, field-specific competencies, and digital skills—this article deliberately focuses on selected sections of the reflections most relevant to the research objective. Based on the analysis, and supported by illustrative examples, our findings indicate that students demonstrated notable development in intercultural, communication, and global awareness competences, particularly in the areas of flexible communication, adaptation to intercultural settings, and teamwork within diverse environments. Students also broadened their global and regional perspectives, showing an enhanced capacity to engage with global trends within their respective disciplines. Furthermore, they reported greater career orientation and professional goal clarity, reflecting a strengthened sense of professional identity. These findings align with the Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study (European Commission, 2019), which similarly highlights the development of soft skills and career-related benefits—despite the Erasmus study focusing on long-term physical mobility, whereas our findings suggest comparable impacts arising from short-term mobility experiences. These outcomes were frequently linked to applied learning opportunities that supported the development of essential transferable skills applicable across diverse professional contexts. In this regard, it is also relevant to consider the Future of Jobs Report by the World Economic Forum (2025), which identifies international mobility as a key driver in cultivating emerging core skills expected to be in high demand by 2030, including resilience, empathy, social influence, curiosity, flexibility, leadership, etc. Moreover, students described the application of practical skills in real-world settings, with particular emphasis on the advancement of digital and technological competences.

Based on the results obtained from students' reflections, the authors support the view that trend-responsive teaching methods in international learning settings represent a valuable approach for fostering key competences required in today's globalised world—competences that are increasingly sought after by employers. In this regard, various international learning environments, including physical mobility programmes, online international collaborative projects, or virtual mobility, play a critical role in soft and transversal competence development (O'Dowd, 2021). It is equally important to ensure that students become aware of the soft skills and competences they acquire in international and intercultural contexts, as these often remain unrecognised or are referred to as hidden competences. Structured reflective writing, guided by appropriately designed prompts or guiding questions, can enhance students' awareness and articulation of these skills. Our findings align with those of Daff, Tame, and Sands (2024), as well as Beaven and Borghetti (2015), who argue that structured written reflections are an effective means of helping students and graduates become critically self-aware of their professional development and of the skills and habits cultivated through diverse academic experiences, including those in international settings.

Educators facilitating international modules or initiatives should recognise the importance of structured reflective writing as a highly effective pedagogical approach across all forms of international teaching and learning—whether delivered physically or virtually, at home or abroad. This form of reflection enables students to critically process and articulate the international and intercultural perspectives and competences they have acquired, ensuring that these do not remain unrecognised or hidden. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the inherently subjective nature of reflective writing and the potential for bias in students' self-reported experiences.

This study has certain limitations, most notably the relatively small sample size of student reflections analysed (29), which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future research should therefore explore other forms of international collaboration and activities—

whether physical or virtual, conducted abroad or embedded within an internationalised home curriculum. Further investigations could employ alternative qualitative research designs or be complemented by mixed-method approaches. In particular, follow-up studies incorporating quantitative surveys could offer additional empirical support and enable longitudinal tracking of the impact of international learning experiences on students' professional development.

Recognising the added value of even short-term international project-based activities—whether conducted in physical or virtual formats—the integration of brief, diverse, and intensive international projects into the regular higher education curriculum is strongly recommended. Such integration provides students with enriched opportunities to develop competencies that are increasingly valued by employers in today's globally interconnected and rapidly changing world.

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PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY: A  
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