

# Challenges Encountered by International Students in Europe

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**Abstract**—This paper investigates the innumerable challenges faced by international students in contemporary Europe. Academic voyages in Europe are often represented as exhilarating adventures rich with opportunities for cultural immersion and academic enhancement. However, this appealing depiction conceals a substantial narrative that warrants attention, highlighting the diverse obstacles encountered throughout this educational experience. Despite these many challenges, faced by international students demonstrate remarkable resilience in overcoming language barriers, cultural disparities, and bureaucratic complexities that significantly challenge their European experiences. This paper further highlights the current trends in mobility and the regional administrative obstacles that affect these students. It also discusses the various aspects of Europe, the challenges these students encounter, and their responses. Recent scholarly literature has meticulously analyzed the mobility of international students and the intricate issues of visas and residency, and it will be referenced as necessary.

**Keywords**— Europe, Immigration, International students, Mobility, Policy and Education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A thoughtful deliberation apprehension of prior educational experience, as Naidoo (2007) underlined that individuals pursuing international higher education typically have completed their mandatory pre-higher education. Furthermore, as society evolves, educational attainment generally experiences an upward trend. According to Barro and Lee, far-reaching discussion has emerged regarding global disparities in the duration of schooling that individuals receive. Thus, it is reasonable to anticipate that more students will gain access to higher education as development grows. This phenomenon, in turn, equips young individuals with enriched prospects, making pursuing a foreign degree increasingly achievable (Barro & Lee, 2013).

This phenomenon is illustrated in a study by Perkins and Neumayer (2014), which demonstrated that ranking has a more substantial impact on students from developed nations than their counterparts in developing nations. This inconsistency may be partially explained by countries with highly ranked institutions frequently imposing higher tuition fees and elevated living costs, making them less accessible to a significant portion of international students.

As De Haas (2021) articulated, migration is primarily driven by two principal categories of aspirations: instrumental and intrinsic. Instrumental aspirations encompass pursuing specific objectives through migration, such as enhancing income or obtaining superior educational and career opportunities for students. Conversely, intrinsic ambitions

focus on the inherent advantages of the migration experience, including immersion in diverse cultures or perceiving migration as a significant life dream.

For instance, students from East Asia often opt to study abroad, as obtaining a foreign degree is perceived to possess greater prestige or due to the difficulties encountered in gaining admission to domestic institutions (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Similarly, (Kondakci, 2011) identified that among international students in Turkey, those hailing from Western nations expressed a keen interest in engaging with Turkish culture and enhancing their intercultural awareness, while students from Eastern European and developing countries emphasized economic and academic motivations more.

In a contrasting study, Wei (2013) revealed that students from developed nations attribute more significance to academic factors when selecting a developed country as their study destination. In contrast, their counterparts from developing countries prioritize economic considerations more highly.

Conventional destination countries must consider the evolving demographics and increasing numbers of international students they accommodate. Considering the continuous advancement of China's economy and educational system, a decline in the outflow of students from China is anticipated. Concurrently, nations such as Vietnam, India, and Nigeria are expected to rise as significant contributors to the international student population (Choudaha, 2017).

Many European countries have recently highlighted the importance of internationalization in higher education, especially in attracting international students (UK Government, 2019; Ireland Government, 2018). Brooks and Waters (2011, 22-44) note that providing diverse degree options, short-term programs, and facilitating credit transfers promotes campus diversity. This combination enhances local and international students' intercultural experiences and skills. Additionally, it fosters the financial stability of higher education institutions by generating tuition revenue from international students.

Mobility has become vital, primarily through short-term credit programs in countries like the United Kingdom and Ireland that seek to attract international students. Additionally, outgoing mobility allows students to develop intercultural skills, which enhances their employability in relevant positions (Courtois 2020, 237-257). A recent report by Jeffery's BBC News (2024) reveals that, despite rising tuition fees at most UK universities, these institutions struggle

financially to cover their ongoing expenses, potentially jeopardizing their financial stability.

Nevertheless, having faced numerous financial challenges, many universities in the European Union continue to emphasize the goals of the Erasmus mobility program (Courtois 2018, 99-114). Like many other regions worldwide, Europe prioritizes international student mobility to boost revenue, enhance its reputation, and celebrate cultural diversity. Countries like Australia and the United States have implemented strategies to attract exchange students (Thomas 2024, 5-15). Furthermore, nations including Japan, China, Brazil, South Africa, and Morocco have adopted similar policies (Waters and Brooks 2021, 3-7)

Europe uniquely excels in student mobility, making it an intriguing and vital area of investigation, and the continent implements various strategies to foster a robust European identity, enhance job prospects, and offer support for higher education that extends well beyond its borders (King 2003, 155-179). Since its inauguration in 1987, the Erasmus Program has facilitated short-term student exchanges throughout Europe, providing exceptional opportunities for students to broaden their learning experiences beyond the continent. This mobility represents more than just a temporary trend; it is an essential element of higher education that must continue to be championed and upheld.

The European University Initiative (EUI) has vigorously advocated for increased student mobility among higher education institutions, promoting cultural exploration across different nations (Brooks and Rensimer, 2023: 3-6).

The European Union's free movement agreement has notably enhanced Europe's appeal to international students. Nonetheless, the European region is currently facing numerous considerable challenges. The political landscape has experienced significant transformations recently, particularly in the aftermath of Brexit and evolving immigration policies (Mayhew 2017, 155-161). Research indicates that China's growing global prominence has rendered it a more attractive destination for traveling students (Jiani 2017, 563-579).

Each country's migration policies significantly influence the experiences of international students. For instance, restrictions in Denmark and the United Kingdom have directly affected immigration trends, opportunities for domestic students, and the global COVID-19 health crisis (Facer 2019, 1-2).

## II. CHALLENGES

Scholars have highlighted several significant challenges, particularly regarding the geopolitical aspects of the post-Brexit UK Touring Scheme. This innovative initiative, introduced to replace the European Union's Erasmus program, represents a government effort to enhance international partnerships and student mobility following Brexit. Brook and Waters, in their study, suggest that this initiative aims to improve Britain's global reputation by forming new international collaborations. They observe that the term 'global' frequently appears on UK university websites, which showcase and share information about student mobility opportunities worldwide. Additionally, they point out that

wealthier students often have better access to a broader range of high-quality opportunities, exacerbating existing inequalities. (Waters and Brooks 2021, 3-7).

Shields and Lu further include in their investigation the challenges posed by climate crises, particularly emphasizing the complexity of reconciling higher education mobilities with the urgent climate emergency. This issue is especially pertinent, given that international student mobility largely relies on cross-border travel. While universities are eager to boost international student enrollments, this growth often conflicts with their sustainability goals (Shields 2019, 594-602).

Another layer of equity challenges emerges when examining the social backgrounds of students involved in international mobility programs. Many studies reveal that mobility opportunities vary significantly between institutions, meaning some students have substantial advantages while others encounter challenging obstacles in their quest to travel abroad. Thankfully, recent research shows a positive trend: students from various social backgrounds increasingly participate in global student mobility (Yang 2018, 722-738).

In their scholarly article, Brooks and Lee examine the construct of 'spatial imaginaries' to underscore the various stakeholders participating in the policymaking process of the European Union's Erasmus program. This construct proves significant for analyzing educational processes (Brooks and Lee, 2023, 3-5).

The discussion surrounding European higher education is significantly shaped by differing viewpoints on the prioritization of excellence in both teaching and research. This situation risks overshadowing other crucial issues. Both interviews and policy documents clarify this division. The analysis identifies two central positions: the first supports inclusivity, highlighting the significance of diverse institutions and student populations, while the second argues that achieving excellence should be the primary goal of policy, even when broader geographic implications are considered. These perspectives reveal substantial disparities in the spatial viewpoints of policymakers (Brooks and Lee, 2023, 3-5).

The authors highlight that many documents regarding the geographical limits of European education tackle the concept both implicitly and explicitly. Their examination focuses on the European University Institutes (EUI), mainly available to countries involved in the Erasmus+ program. At first, this stage included only the 27 member states of the European Union. The early policy documents disclose that the European Commission aimed to expand participation in the mobility program to include more EU nations (Brooks and Lee, 2023, 3-5).

The ESU emphasizes improving student inclusivity and well-being by focusing on participation and the social aspects of higher education, especially equity in higher education institutions (EUIs). These institutions need to strengthen support for underprivileged student communities, who face more significant obstacles to accessing opportunities for upward mobility within EUI (Brooks and Lee 2023, 3-5).

In his study, Ekstedt points out that the European Union Agency for Asylum has broadened its role in handling asylum

applications, notably changing the conditions for frontline staff regarding their discretionary decision-making authority. His hands-on experience in the field highlights a lack of evidence concerning instances of *creative policy* or discretionary actions by EUAA caseworkers. Additionally, he urges migration studies scholars to explore the evolution of bureaucracies within European migration frameworks (Ekstedt 2023, 2-4).

Ekstedt further highlights another major challenge: the ethical dilemmas encountered by agency employees with restricted discretionary authority. When faced with these moral issues, they strive to express their concerns to management. If management fails to address these concerns, resigning their positions often becomes their most straightforward option (Ekstedt 2023, 2-4).

Alongside new policies and strategies from European higher education institutions, many countries still face internal challenges requiring clear solutions. The necessity for progress in the convergence of structures and systems among European nations remains essential. Discussions on convergence outlined in the Bologna Declaration are much more advanced than the actual execution, negatively impacting several action lines, including promoting and managing international student mobility. This situation is a key obstacle to the broader expansion of the higher education system (Duarte et al. 2021, 7-10).

Inconsistencies in educational calendars, language requirements, and academic standards across different universities and countries can challenge student mobility and hinder the effective integration of academic programs. Therefore, enhancing administrative coordination is essential to support short-term and long-term degree programs and facilitate improved student mobility at local and international levels (Duarte et al. 2021, 7-10).

International students often face various challenges that are common across Europe and beyond. In many places, they may encounter racism and discrimination based on their skin color, ethnicity, or political views. However, despite these hurdles, Europe remains a sought-after destination for international students looking for higher education, mainly due to its countries' strong emphasis on student mobility initiatives (Duarte et al. 2021, 7-10).

International students often encounter challenges such as discrimination and culture shock, which can be surprising and difficult to navigate. For many, this may be their first experience away from home, where they are familiar with a particular way of life. However, adjusting to the culture of their host country is a crucial step. These students frequently navigate significant differences in values, attitudes, behaviors, and thought processes between their home and host cultures (Poedjiastutie, 2015). For example, in Western cultures, opening gifts immediately and expressing appreciation is customary. In contrast, in Eastern and African cultures, gifts are typically opened only when the giver is absent (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Such cultural differences can lead to awkward moments during social interactions for everyone involved.

Research has indicated that English poses a significant challenge for international students, particularly non-native speakers. Many individuals must pass an English proficiency examination to secure admission and obtain the necessary visas. Nevertheless, Burdett and Crossman (2012) have noted that even after completing these assessments before their arrival, international students in the United States encounter substantial difficulties with academic language. A crucial aspect of this challenge involves adapting to the local accent.

The UNICA 2024, 4-8 report highlights accommodation as a key challenge in reaching this ambitious goal. It highlights the delicate balance of supply and demand. When accommodation options are limited, higher education institutions (HEIs) must restrict the number of available positions. This situation only intensifies worries about how internationalization affects local housing markets, particularly in vibrant cities like Amsterdam and Dublin.

Meeting the mobility target presents ongoing challenges for student housing, and resetting this goal will require significant time and energy, especially if accommodation issues continue to arise. To tackle these obstacles head-on and create a more inclusive and supportive, encouraging environment for international students, Unica focuses on student housing, enhancing their educational experiences, and promoting cross-cultural understanding. By focusing on student housing and collaboration among universities, policymakers, and student organizations to address this essential part of international education (UNICA 2024, 4-8).

The report emphasizes that it is not enough to acknowledge these challenges; understanding their underlying causes is key to crafting effective solutions. By identifying these fundamental issues and fostering a welcoming environment where international students can easily find quality, affordable accommodation—free from the significant hurdles they have encountered—this strategic plan beautifully reflects UNICA's dedication to nurturing an inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere. This inventiveness also plays a crucial role in advancing the internationalization goals and mobility objectives set by the European Community (UNICA 2024, 4-8).

No matter where students come from, they can all encounter academic challenges (Perry, 2016). (However, international students often experience more significant hurdles than their domestic peers. These challenges arise from different educational systems and can significantly affect their academic success. For example, international students might find it challenging to adapt to varying teaching methods, university coursework, and even the accents used by their instructors (Alavi & Mansor, 2011). This adjustment can feel overwhelming during their first year as they transition into a new educational environment while trying to create a new life. Consequently, being in an unfamiliar country and trying to fit into a new university setting can heighten feelings of loneliness for international students (Burdett & Crossman, 2012).

There is a notable difference between the psychological challenges faced by domestic and international students. Previous research on the mental health of international

students indicates a consistent presence of psychological difficulties. For instance, Furnham and Trezise (1983) found that international students in the UK experienced higher levels of psychological distress compared to their British peers. Additionally, Lu (1990) noted that homesickness presented a more enduring challenge for international students than other psychological issues, which often diminish over time. Furthermore, Sam and Eide's (1991) global study of this group revealed that they suffered from anxiety, paranoia, depression, and various physical symptoms while studying abroad. Likewise, Ryan and Twibell (2000) supported these findings, indicating that such symptoms adversely affect the activities of international students.

International students bring various economic benefits to their host countries. However, few studies acknowledge the financial challenges these students encounter. Tuition fees represent the most significant financial hurdle for international students. Typically, domestic students benefit from lower fees than their global counterparts. Even in European countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Poland, international students still incur costs despite free education being available for EU and EEA students. In contrast, countries such as Norway, Germany, and Iceland offer free education to all public institutions (Lungu, 2022), while the Czech Republic provides tuition-free education only to international students who wish to learn the Czech language (Taylor, 2022).

### III. RESPONSE

In addition to the significant barriers affecting international student mobility in Europe, it is crucial to explore the potential responses from policymakers, practitioners, and social stakeholders. Significant policy initiatives have emerged in this field; for instance, the European Commission is working to modify the Erasmus program to tackle inequalities in social participation. Nonetheless, researchers argue that additional efforts from regional and international organizations, national entities, and specific higher education institutions are necessary (Shields 2019, 594-602)

Shields and Lu contend that the nation-state needs to take greater responsibility in supporting students grappling with financial challenges and managing living expenses while moving. This issue is critical, as international students incur much higher costs than their local counterparts. Furthermore, they call on all stakeholders to embrace a more humanistic approach that champions the rights of all students. (Shields *ibid*)

Sereke examines the intricacies of emotional entanglements, social disparities, and the perspectives of 'insider others.' She deeply contemplates the emotional nuances and complex relational dynamics that may arise between researchers and participants. Furthermore, she asserts that scholars should advocate critically and constructively addressing uncomfortable emotions, as this approach can generate insights that improve the outcomes of these studies. Discomfort surfaced as participants narrated their emotional experiences related to lost opportunities, misunderstandings, failures, and instances of exploitation (Sereke 2023, 1-2).

Additionally, she points out that emotional narratives and connections can provide more valid research insights. She emphasizes the importance of reflective practices in migration studies, using emotional entanglements as valuable perspectives while contemplating her research related to migrants. This approach fosters meaningful, rich, and nuanced interpretations, leading to deeper insights (Sereke 2023, 1-2).

Furthermore, these nations reportedly exhibited a greater willingness than others to endorse the European Commission's call for an increase in the number of HEIs involved in existing EUIs. This scenario accentuates the national differences highlighted by the Bologna Process, where different nations have interpreted core concepts uniquely (Sin and Neave, 2016). This, in turn, affects how Bologna policies are applied according to their national frameworks, standards, and stakeholders (Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015).

Alongside diverse support for EUIs across different countries and the ongoing effort to expand membership among current EUIs, it is essential to recognize that various stakeholder groups—beyond just nation-states—play a crucial role in shaping the future vision for EUIs. Their unique perspectives offer valuable insights into this initiative and help us better understand the evolving landscape of European higher education, which can be referred to as 'European spatial imaginaries' (Watkins, 2015).

Although there is widespread support for EUIs, as previously noted, the data shows considerable disagreement about the features of the (ideal) European higher education space and its overall significance. These varying spatial perceptions are frequently linked to broader political viewpoints. For example, nations such as France and Germany exhibit a much stronger dedication to the 'European project' and deeper European integration than others (Kundnani, 2014).

Additionally, as one interviewee noted, the European Union's engagement with smaller member states through the European University Initiatives (EUIs) can be interpreted as a strategic operation to garner support for the policy among EU member nations. This observation is consistent with previous research, which suggests that national-level European policymakers frequently reflect the positions of their respective countries on European matters (Brooks & Lee, 2023).

Researchers have observed that political factors shape perspectives in other crucial areas. Stakeholders' views on the European higher education landscape—particularly whether it should prioritize inclusion or excellence—often mirror the interests of their respective groups. Proponents of students and vocational institutions highlight the importance of inclusion, whereas those representing research-focused universities advocate for excellence. In this scenario, the influence of European politics is less significant compared to the perspectives and effects of individual higher education stakeholders (Brooks & Lee, 2023).

The challenges faced by international students require a thorough approach to resolution. It is essential to recognize these challenges and adopt a practical strategy that focuses on identifying their root causes. Thus, it suggests investigating

the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties. Additionally, past and present studies reveal no significant differences in the challenges reported. Continued research is necessary to understand the actions taken by host countries and universities to improve the experiences of international students (Brooks & Lee, 2023).

The principal challenges encountered encompass academic and socio-cultural dimensions; nevertheless, future research should investigate international students' economic and environmental issues, which remain significantly under-explored. While the tuition fees paid by international students contribute positively to the host country's economy, it may be prudent for these countries to implement policies to provide financial assistance to such students throughout their stay. Initiatives such as accessible healthcare, subsidized housing, scholarships, and employment support represent potential avenues for economic aid. The absence of these policies perpetuates the perception articulated by Cantwell (2019) that international students function merely as "cash cows" for their host countries.

Moreover, established destination countries should brace themselves for heightened competition from emerging destination countries. Furthermore, as the demographic arrangement of the international student body transforms, academic institutions should prioritize the support of international students, acknowledging that diverse cultural backgrounds require various approaches to managing the challenges of studying abroad (Akhtar et al., 2019).

Additionally, as many scholars have noted above, further research is needed on international students' challenges in non-English-speaking countries. The number of studies on this subject in those countries should exceed that of English-speaking nations. Language barriers may play a role, as researchers might have published their results in the host country's official language. However, English is widely recognized as the primary medium of instruction for international students. Therefore, research articles discussing the challenges these students face in such countries should be available in English and the local language.

#### IV. POSITIONALITY

The researcher's positionality in qualitative research is widely acknowledged and discussed within the scholarly community. The positionality of the researcher can suggestively influence various facets of the research process, encompassing study design, research questions, data collection, and analysis (Wilson et al., 2022). Qualitative research is characterized by the dialectical method of interviewing participants, revealing specific phenomena, disclosing the researchers' identities, and cultivating their relationships with the participants. This dialectical process can substantially shape the research outcomes and the trustworthiness of the research findings (Pezalla et al., 2012; Berger, 2015).

Positionality represents a researcher's perspective and position during the research process (Rowe, 2014). Broader social and political contexts shape interpersonal relationships and qualitative research methods (Savin-Baden & Major,

2013). It also reveals the researcher's stance regarding their participants and role in the study (Savin-Baden and Major 2013, 71). The researcher's perspective and connection with the group influence their investigative approach, the execution of research, and the resulting findings (Rowe, 2014). Furthermore, it pertains to how researchers view themselves and how others perceive them: as insiders or outsiders, as powerful or powerless individuals, or as coming from a privileged or underprivileged background (Ozano and Khatri 2018, 191).

Several features of positionality, such as race, are frequently seen as fixed. In contrast, other elements, including political beliefs, can change (Holmes 2020, 2). Positionality arises from the researcher's self-perception and how others perceive them. Thus, positionality significantly impacts the research process (Bourke, 2014).

My positionality has significantly influenced the development, execution, and evaluation of this study. As an international student facing challenges like those outlined in the literature review, biases related to gender, race, and language. Moreover, the dynamics of privileged and underprivileged national and passport identities of students play a vital role in the visa application process for Europe, especially for those from developing countries.

Additionally, the short audio/ chat interview with two other international students in this paper underscores the similar and significant challenges that international students face at nearly every European university and various countries. These challenges are essential and substantially impact student groups' progress and mental health in developing nations.

#### *Questions:*

1. What are the challenges faced by an international student during visa processing?
2. What challenges are faced after arriving in a destination country (Austria)?
3. What is (was) your response to those challenges?

*Answer: 1.* Significantly, more documentation is required than what our colleagues from privileged passports or countries need, along with increased scrutiny regarding criminal background checks and education credentials. The application process takes over a year, and this waiting period has become stressful for me and my family. Moreover, deposited funds are considered only for the first year of stay.

*Answer: 2.* In the first year, COVID-19 occurred, and in the second year, the war between Russia and Ukraine began, leading to increasing prices for housing and daily supplies. I was not prepared for these unexpected situations. Another significant challenge was the language barrier, as German was required everywhere. Even at the magistrate's office, a note was posted stating that to apply for a residence permit, one should speak German; if not, a translator should be brought.

*Answer: 3.* I struggled to find a part-time job to support myself, and the department or faculty did not help me with relocating to Salzburg. Consequently, I recommend that international students receive proper orientation and guidance when facing unexpected situations.

V. CONCLUSION

Researchers specializing in migration and social sciences conducted a comprehensive literature review, revealing that international students mainly encounter socio-cultural and academic challenges. Notably, the peak in published articles occurred in 2022, while the lowest publication rate was observed in 2002.

A significant increase in scholarly publications began around 2015. Furthermore, the findings indicate a growing awareness of mental health issues, racial identity, privileged students, and economic matters, as evidenced by a more significant number of articles addressing psychological concerns published in 2013 compared to previous years.

The findings indicate that international students encounter comparable challenges irrespective of their global location, although variations emerge based on the host country. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to examine these challenges and explore potential enhancements. Moreover, it strongly encourages governments and academic institutions in host countries to amend their policies and practices to provide more effective support for international students in higher education. Furthermore, it advocates for establishing and applying more inclusive policies to ensure that every incoming international student feels comfortable and respected as they pursue their educational objectives in a foreign environment.

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