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Giovanni Nicola Nardella

**The role of Erasmus+ programme
in fostering European identity
during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Relações Internacionais

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Professora Doutora Sandrina F. Antunes

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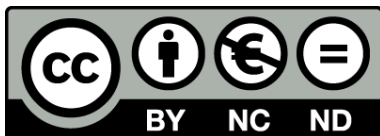
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Abstract

Over the last decades, ERASMUS Programme has been often described as one of the symbols of the construction of European identity. With this in mind, many studies (Sigalas, 2010; Oborune, 2015; Van Mol, 2018; Tsoulakas, 2019) have dedicated their attention to the relationship that can be established between Erasmus mobility and European identity formation. Despite this effort, scholarship remains largely divided on the contribution of Erasmus to strengthen students' European identity (Van Mol, 2009a and 2009b; Sigalas, 2006, 2009 and 2010; Mitchell, 2015). Against this backdrop, COVID-19 pandemic is challenging that possibility even further.

Hence, drawing on a transactionalist approach (Deutsch, 1953; Fligstein, 2008) and applying a process tracing method (George and Bennet, 2005; Beach and Pedersen, 2010; Beach, 2019) supported by the qualitative testimony of 18 Portuguese EEG Erasmus participants in pandemic times, this research shows that the contribution of Erasmus+ programme to European identity formation can only be assessed by means of two intertwined factors: first, by considering the level of European identity felt by each student before Erasmus mobility and second, by looking at the impact on the impact of socialization processes - taking place both in university and non-university environments – on that previous level of European identity, thus contributing to enhance, maintain or constrain it.

In addition to this, this research also demonstrates that COVID-19 pandemic has indeed affected the ability of students to socialize, thus limiting social interaction leading to European identity formation. In sum, the findings of this research show that the Erasmus mobility predominantly contributes to enhance (average value of 61%) a prior sense of European identity via socialization, although it also leads to a null impact (average value of 39%). Having said that, it should be noted that in this research no constraining effect has been identified, yet this possibility should not be discarded as unpleasant socialization experiences may generate this outcome.

Nevertheless, despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 pandemic, the Erasmus programme has contributed to reinforce a sense of European identity in 61% of the students as socialization processes have predominantly occurred in non-university environments (with an average value of 3.75 out of 5), namely in dormitories (scaled 4 out of 5). In this respect, it is interesting to note that Erasmus+ students in pandemic times have socialized the most with Erasmus+ students (with an average value of 4 out of 5) and lived the most with Erasmus students (67 %). Ultimately, we could conclude that the Erasmus+ programme has been self-fulfilling in the sense that it has contributed to reinforce a sense of European identity irrespectively of the restrictions imposed to socialization.

Overall, with this research, we were able to solve the many contradictions found in previous research. In similar vein, we were able to explain how COVID-19 has affected the ability of students to socialize and why Erasmus students have still predominantly reinforced or maintained their previous sense of European identity.

Keywords: European identity, Erasmus+, COVID-19, causal mechanism.

Resumo

Ao longo das últimas décadas, o Programa ERASMUS tem sido frequentemente apresentado como um dos símbolos da construção da identidade europeia. Com base nesse pressuposto, muitos estudos (Sigalas, 2010; Oborune, 2015; Van Mol, 2018; Tsoulakas, 2019) têm procurado perceber o contributo do programa Erasmus para o reforço da identidade europeia. Apesar desse esforço, os resultados destes estudos são bastante inconclusivos e até contraditórios (Van Mol, 2009a e 2009b; Sigalas, 2006, 2009 e 2010; Mitchell, 2015). Nesse contexto particular, a pandemia COVID-19 parece ter vindo acicatar este desafio intelectual, já de si complexo e de difícil resolução. Assim, atendendo às lacunas teóricas identificadas na literatura e à pouca atenção prestada ao impacto do pandemia no funcionamento do Programa Erasmus, o contributo desta investigação é simultaneamente teórico e empírico: em primeiro lugar, este estudo oferece um mecanismo causal que permite melhorar a explicação teórica para o contributo da mobilidade Erasmus no reforço da identidade europeia; em segundo lugar, este estudo irá identificar o impacto da pandemia COVID-19 nesse mecanismo causal.

Assim, partindo de uma abordagem transacional (Deutsch, 1953; Fligstein, 2008) e utilizando 'o process tracing' como escolha metodológica (George e Bennet, 2005; Beach and Pedersen, 2010; Beach, 2019), apoiada no testemunho qualitativo de 18 participantes Erasmus da Escola de Economia e Gestão (EEG) em tempos de pandemia, esta investigação mostra que o contributo do programa Erasmus+ para a formação da identidade europeia só poderá ser avaliada mediante a avaliação de dois fatores essenciais: primeiro, atendendo ao nível de identidade europeia sentido por cada aluno antes de realizar a mobilidade e, segundo, atendendo ao impacto que o processo de socialização - ocorridos em ambientes universitários e não universitários – exerce sobre esse sentimento de pertença anterior, contribuindo assim para aumentar, manter ou restringir este último.

Em suma, os resultados desta investigação comprovam que a mobilidade Erasmus contribui para aumentar o sentimento de pertença europeia na grande maioria dos alunos, em 61%, embora 39% tenham mantido o seu nível de pertença europeia. Por outro lado, esta investigação permitiu-nos demonstrar que a pandemia COVID-19 afetou a capacidade dos alunos socializarem, limitando, portanto, a possibilidade de desenvolverem um sentimento de pertença europeia. Mesmo assim, pesa embora as restrições impostas à socialização pela situação pandémica, o programa Erasmus contribuiu para fortalecer um sentimento de pertença europeia na grande maioria dos alunos, uma vez que os processos de socialização ocorreram predominantemente em ambientes não universitários (com um valor médio de 3,75 em 5), nomeadamente em apartamentos privados/dormitórios privados (com um valor médio de 4 em 5).

De igual modo, foi-nos possível verificar que os alunos Erasmus + socializaram mais com os alunos Erasmus + (com um valor médio de 4,25 em 5) e viveram mais com os alunos Erasmus (67%), pelo que o programa Erasmus + sustentou-se a si próprio, na medida em que a socialização dos alunos Erasmus com alunos Erasmus permitiu assegurar o reforço ou manutenção da pertença identitária nos alunos Erasmus, especialmente em tempos de pandemia.

Em jeito de conclusão, poderemos afirmar que esta investigação ajudou-nos a resolver as múltiplas contradições presentes em investigações anteriores. De igual modo, este estudo permitiu-nos explicar como é que a pandemia COVID-19 afetou a possibilidade dos alunos socializarem entre si e sustenta, com clareza, como é que a socialização, mesmo limitada, resultou no reforço ou manutenção do sentimento de pertença europeia nos alunos que realizaram o período de mobilidade Erasmus em tempos de pandemia.

Palavras chave: Identidade Europeia, Erasmus +, COVID-19, mecanismo causal.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
ESN	Erasmus Students Network
EP	European Parliament
JSP	Joint Study Programmes
LLP	Lifelong Learning Programme
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 19
UMinho	University of Minho
PT	Process tracing
EEG	School of Economics and Management from the University of Minho

INTRODUCTION

RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Since its creation, the Erasmus programme has increasingly established itself as the most used tool by European institutions to promote the transnational mobility. In fact, nowadays the Erasmus+ is considered as the most important programme of the European Commission for the mobility of students and university staff and cooperation between universities and research institutes. Regarding the practical and operational level, the Erasmus+ - intended as a policy - has implemented and continues to implement the European Higher Education Area, the main objective of the Bologna Process (EC, 1999). The mobility of students and university staff is a continuous laboratory of comparison between teaching methods and teaching experiences, which are very important for students and professionals who work in an increasingly homogeneous and interconnected institutional framework. What is still the subject of debate, however, is whether the Erasmus+ influences in some way to form or strengthen the European identity and, more specifically, how the processes of European identification works among its participants.

The social life of Europeans is increasingly influenced by political, economic, social and cultural dynamics that go beyond the national context. The processes of globalization and Europeanization push towards a transnational condition which affects the daily life of Europeans and the way they feel perceived, but they also stimulate inverse processes of rooting in the national and local dimension, as it happened in Scotland or Catalonia for example. Within these reflections on the Europeanization process, one of the most present and significant issue that has emerged is that of European identity. Social scientists ask themselves whether economic, political and monetary integration is also accompanied by a process of building a common identity in Europe. More specifically, linking to a new kind "involvement" of European citizens on a supranational plan and the development of new social ties and solidarity among them. It is also needed the awareness of a sense of belonging to the entity called European Union.

In this research we define European identity a sense of an affective belonging to the European Union, as mentioned by Deutsch: *"identifying with such a community means developing an individual feeling of, belongingness to such a collective unit. Likewise, European identity can be conceptualized as a basic, affective orientation towards a political community"* (Deutsch, 2006:157). Despite the great scientific debate on the subject, a general difficulty emerges in grasping the social mechanisms that determine the way in which Europeans tend to identify themselves This difficulty certainly follows from the complexity of an articulated phenomenon such as that of belonging, but it is also linked to the fact

that in the discourse on European identity this is often still conceived in its essentialist definition, as a unique and immutable entity, and included within symbolic and physical boundaries.

The new and sudden reality that university students are experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic is fluid and full of questions. The infection started in China at the end of 2019 and it has spread all over the world, influencing inevitably every aspects of our lives and our society. By the time of writing this thesis, the pandemic is still going and national governments have responded to this crisis with different approaches over the time such as: hard lockdowns, soft lockdowns, vaccination campaigns, hiring more health workers and upgrading hospitals. As far as the university context, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed a lot the didactic and the way students are living their experience, both at an educational and personal level. International students were more affected than those who remained in their own countries, both because of the distance from their families and the complicated situation in which they found themselves living in another country. Among them there are those who have decided to return home to face the lockdown in their country and those who have continued to live abroad during the mobility period. Although universities all over Europe tried somehow to continue teaching activities while protecting students and school staff, the difficulties that international students have experienced, especially during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, made that their participation in the Erasmus+ programme was inevitably upset. On one hand the Erasmus+ programme has, among its objectives, the approach and sharing of experiences among young Europeans to develop a sense of European identity, on the other hand the recent pandemic may have had effects negative regarding the latter manner.

The analysis developed in this thesis is the result of a reflection that takes place within the debate on social changes in Europe related to the process of European integration and how mobility programmes can influence the latter. It arises from the author's interest in the topic of the processes that influence the construction of a collective identity within a community. In this case, European Identity has been one of the most present and significant issues in the scientific, public and political debate that has been developed since the late nineties on the integration process. The sense of belonging to Europe has often been questioned in the face of many contradictions that have emerged over time. These contradictions mainly derive from what is considered the European cultural heritage, in a context characterized by an extraordinary ethno-linguistic and institutional variety, and what respect the integration programme itself.

Regarding the later, although there have been some of the advantages deriving from EU policies and programmes, such as freedom of movement and various educational mobility programmes, some

issues have also emerged, especially during the last decade, that have led to political and economic instability of the EU. On one hand these problems have led citizens to have less trust in European institutions, and on the other hand they have led to a greater closure of the various member states among themselves, as happened, for example, on the issue of immigration and the management of the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

The University and the school system in general was one of the first institutions to have to take preventive measures to tackle the spread of COVID-19. The suspension of face-to-face teaching activities has not only required rethinking teaching and the redefinition of distance teaching and learning methods, but it has also suddenly interrupted participation in a fundamental socio-educational context for students, changing functional routines for the paths of growth everyone. In addition to this, it is important to consider the psychological stress that Erasmus students have suffered due to the closure of the borders and the isolation they have been forced to live away from their families.

Regarding the topic of the Erasmus mobility, many studies have already analyzed and have provided contradictory evidences regarding its role towards the European identity formation. Whereas some scholars have claimed that Erasmus indeed strengthens European identity (King and Ruis-Gelices, 2003; Van Mol, 2011), others have argued that it does not (Sigalas, 2010; Wilson, 2011) and still others that it depends where the students come from (Oborune, 2013). Considering the recent situation of pandemic crisis in which the European Union is often challenged on several fronts by the governments of its own member states, it seemed interesting and useful to start from the base, from the identity, and trying to study it in relation to a mobility programme that, quoting Italian author Umberto Eco, created the “the first generation of young Europeans”.

With the aim of making a contribution to the debate on the development of European identity through the social mechanisms that Erasmus+ participants experience, this master thesis will discuss the results of an analysis made both on a theoretical and empirical approach. The choice of this research theme originated from the author’s intention to deepen, from a more empirical perspective, the process of creation and development of a common European identity among the people of the EU member states during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason why we decided to choose specifically the Erasmus+ was because it is the most popular mobility programme financed by the European Commission and it can offer more ideas for analysis and reflection also for further researches. For this reason, we decided to link the Erasmus+ with the COVID-19 pandemic because my intention is to analyze how the effects of

the pandemic may have influenced the Erasmus+ experience in the context of identification processes with Europe of its participants.

STATE OF THE ART AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE

The Erasmus is the subject of various speeches that question the real effects at the societal and individual levels of such mobility experience. On the one hand, official researches report on quantitative developments linked to the implementation of the programme; on the other hand, scientific surveys, following a more qualitative approach, look at the impacts of the Erasmus experience as a form of mobility on the personal development of the individual. Regarding the experience of studying abroad, the institutional surveys mainly focus on the academic and linguistic progress of the students and, in general, they promote an easier access to employment for those who participated in this kind of mobility programme.

While the interpretation of Erasmus participation as a civic experience has significant theoretical grounding, it has been only weakly verified by empirical evidence. Most of the empirical studies have been surveys exploring the relationship between Erasmus participation and European identity or attachment to the EU, although the findings are not in agreement. Some studies find a correlation between Erasmus study and European identity while others dispute this claim." (Mitchell, 2012:495). Furthermore, what is really missing in current literature is a research that explains what are the social mechanisms through which the participation in the Erasmus+ programme could strengthen the formation of the European identity. In fact the purpose of this thesis is not just to analyse them but also to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic have affected these kind of mechanism.

We decided to structure this part about the state of the art by starting from the analysis of the studies on the formation of European identity and researches on the influence that European mobility programmes can have in this sense. We will also explain what they have tried to demonstrate and their limits. In the end we will explain why, in my opinion, is important to study the effects of the COVID-19 in the Erasmus+ programme and finally we will insert my research into the current literature, explaining its relevance and its novelty elements.

Considering the extreme novelty of the topic, at the moment of writing this document, there are no articles or scientific researches that analyze it from an international relations theory perspective. However, some official surveys were carried out to analyze how students faced the difficulties of the pandemic and their assessment of the measures taken by various governments and institutions (Schüller

and Colus, 2020; European Parliament, 2020; Pieptea, 2020). In particular we would like to focus on the survey made by the ESN (Erasmus Students Network), that is the most important student organisation when it comes to Erasmus mobility programme and also they were the first one to conduct such kind of survey during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic throughout the Erasmus students population (Gabriels and Benke-Aberg, 2020). According to the survey, the majority of the students (65%) decided to continue their mobility, while the others decided to interrupt it. For those who have remained, host universities tried to offer them different kinds of support, such as: psychological, medical, linguistic and logistical support. *“Throughout the time that the survey was open, the proportion of students who stayed in their exchange destination slowly decreased, and the proportion of students who decided to go home slowly increased. The number of undecided respondents also decreased, indicating that more students came to a decision, meaning that the longer the crisis lasted, the more students decided to leave their host country.” (Ibidem, 2020).*

The study of European identity is made up by an interdisciplinary approach and by understanding different theoretical orientations: historical, cultural and political-institutional readings help to clarify how these different dimensions influence the construction of identity over time. At the same time, the analysis of the sense of belonging referred to Europe leads the researchers to seek an approach that questions concepts linked to models and categories of the national dimension, to develop a conceptualization capable of analysing this theme in a transnational reality. *“The question of European identity is handled and answered very differently in the literature of the social sciences. This is mainly due to a difference of opinion concerning the proper meaning of the term (European) identity” (Deutsch, 2006:152).*

Among the theoretical approaches used for this type of analysis, the cross-national ones have a certain importance, since the most used by both scholars and European institutions. In these kind of studies, the sense of belonging of EU citizens is traced back to a series of indicators on individual and collective attitudes towards the EU, in particular: the perceptions of the advantages or disadvantages of integration, the feelings of pride and attachment to Europe, the trust in EU institutions, the single currency and the various areas of Community policies. These attitudes are analysed from a diachronic perspective on the basis of socio-economic variables such as the level of education, class, religious, political affiliation.

It should be noted that these surveys, aimed at verifying the degree of adhesion to the European programme, do not go further the national level. Significant differences, on the other hand, are internal to national realities and between the different categories of citizens. The re-elaborations that have been made by some scholars of Eurobarometer data show the decisive role of socio-economic and cultural

variables on attitudinal differences within the same member countries. In all countries, the positive attitude grows with the increase in education levels, among the youngest and among those who live in urban contexts, who support leftist parties and have a deeper knowledge of the EU. In general, these kinds of surveys show that the interaction and communication between certain categories of Europeans has grown. The youngest, those with high educational levels, professionals, university students and researchers, those who have the opportunity to work for meeting their counterparts in other countries, but for the majority of the community population it is still rare to have social relations across national borders (Fligstein, 2009).

Among the studies realised on this topic, there is a general lack of qualitative research, which is something that was called out by authors Ambrosi (2013) and Van Mol (2011, 2013). The first one mentioned that the qualitative research regarding this matter is scarce and *“urges that interviews rather than surveys are the best method in order to gain a better understanding of the subject.”* (Ambrosi, 2013:149). The second one also argued that it is important to focus more on qualitative analysis in order to understand the influence of such kind of experience abroad may have in the process of European identity formation. He also stated that the studies done by researchers in this field *“rarely ground their assumptions empirically and that there is a need for more extensive research.”* (Van Mol, 2011:30). So, if we consider these authors said about the lack of qualitative analysis on this specific topic, we could argue that the relevance of our thesis is quite clear. In fact, our contribution is both theoretical and empirical. Furthermore, we will respond to those previous criticism that called out for the lack of qualitative analysis and, by the use of process tracing, we will be able to give a more detailed research on this specific topic.

Continuing our analysis on the current literature, we would like to quote the work made by Emanuel Sigalas, which is the author of one interesting text on this topic entitled *“Does ERASMUS student mobility promote a European identity?”* (Sigalas, 2009). The results of his research contradict the generally shared idea that the Erasmus experience itself is useful for strengthening European identity.

Table 1: Nationality perception based on the “Does ERASMUS student mobility promote a European identity?”

In the Near Future Do You See Yourself As...?						
%	Control		Outgoing		Incoming	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Nationality only (1)	39.3	35.7	18.9	17.5	2.5	3.7
Nationality and European (2)	39.3	37.5	53.8	55.2	64.7	63.5
European and nationality (3)	12.5	17.9	18.2	19.6	29.5	30.7
European only (4)	3.6	5.4	6.3	5.6	2.1	1.2
Missing	5.4	3.6	2.8	2.1	1.2	.8
Primarily European (3+4)	16.1	23.3	24.5	25.2	31.6	31.9
Primarily Nationality (1+2)	78.6	73.2	72.7	72.7	67.2	67.2
MH Test Sig. (two-tailed)	.223		.677		.638	
N	56		143		241	

Notes: MH= Marginal Homogeneity.

Source: Sigalas (2009:14)

By studying Erasmus students both in relation to those who have not yet participated in the programme with the intention of doing so, and with those who have no intention of participating, Oborune demonstrates that the programme itself still plays a role in strengthening the European identity of the students taking part, thus denying the positions of Sigalas. Oborune also notes a difference of departure between sedentary and mobile (or potentially mobile) students: those who have participated in the programme or could do so have already had experiences abroad and already know one or more foreign languages, which is presented as a barrier for those who do not participate.

As noted by Oborune (2013:195): “*Former and future ERASMUS students adopt more political European identity and community feeling than non-ERASMUS students contrary to previous research studies (Sigalas 2006, 2009; Van Mol 2009b). After exchange programme students become more loyal to EU. But on the other hand, Van Mol is right arguing that the programme acts as a catalyst for European identity because feeling of European identity is already present in students before exchange (2009b). Moreover, it does not mean that if someone has a strong national identity he/she cannot have strong European identity*”. In sum, Oborune denied Sigalas’ hypotheses, according to which the Erasmus programme has negligible effects on attitudes towards European integration (*Ibidem*, 2013). Although this research offers more elements compared to the Sigalas’s one, none of them have deepened the social interactions and the social mechanisms that can influence the process of European identity formation.

In other words, none of the researches have questioned the influence that the socialization process in the university or in the non-university environment may had on the final outcomes of the students. Regarding this manner, we would like to point out two researches that will help us in explaining the socialization mechanism through which identity is formed during the Erasmus mobility, in particular they discuss the importance of university and non-university environments in this process.

The first one is from an article written by professor Weidman in 2006 in which he explains the socialization of students in the school environment while the second one is from a dissertation written by PhD researcher Tsoukalas in 2019 in which he focuses on the socialization of Erasmus students in non-university context. Both contribution will be further analysed in chapter 3 of this thesis, so in this part of the text we will just resume shortly their contribution to the current literature. In order to explain the mechanism of socialization, Weidman uses an I-E-O (input-environment-outcome) structure. Inputs are student's family background, beliefs and values while outcome are the results of the changes that happen in student's values and beliefs. The environment represents *"the organizational structures and the institutional culture in which the students interact"* (Weidman, 2006:256) and it plays a fundamental in this process. Tsoukalas, on the other hand, explains the social mechanisms influence the non-university environment, in fact Erasmus students *"have a very rich social life as evidenced by the multitude of curricular and extracurricular activities they engage in. These activities give them ample opportunity to experiment with various forms of sociality, reconsider their extant loyalties and established commitments and expand the borders of their mutual solidarity and belonging."* (Tsoukalas, 2019:62).

These two contributions have an important role for the purpose of this thesis, as we will see in chapter 3, however they both present some limitations. The first one, although it is very exhaustive in its explanation of the social mechanism, it does not consider international students and it lacks of some variables that affect the latters, for example difficulty in understanding the local language. The second one instead, since it is focused on the experience of Erasmus students, provides interesting data, as we previously said, on the non-university mechanism of socialization. However it does not provide enough material to understand whether this mechanism may strengthen or not the European identity formation of the students.

The contribution of this research in the currently state of the art is mainly related to its novelty and its approach. This work develops an original theoretical perspective, trying to make an innovative contribution on an analytical level to the scientific debate on European identity and processes of

socialization that influenced it. As we can see, there are several researches on the effects that European mobility programmes have in strengthening the sense of belonging to Europe. However the approach of this thesis will be different compared to what has already been written. First of all, we will use two different approaches: constructivism for the epistemological part and transnationalism for theoretical part. Secondly, the element of novelty of this document makes it relevant for the current literature. At the moment of writing, none of the official researches have tackled the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the social mechanisms that influence the formation of European identity and sense of belonging to the EU. Finally, we will be able to explain how COVID-19, that is context, has impacted on the mechanism of socialization in both university and non-university environments. Considering the fact that the pandemic is still undergoing and it will probably affect in some manners future participants on this programme, this thesis could be an interesting source of analysis for further researches.

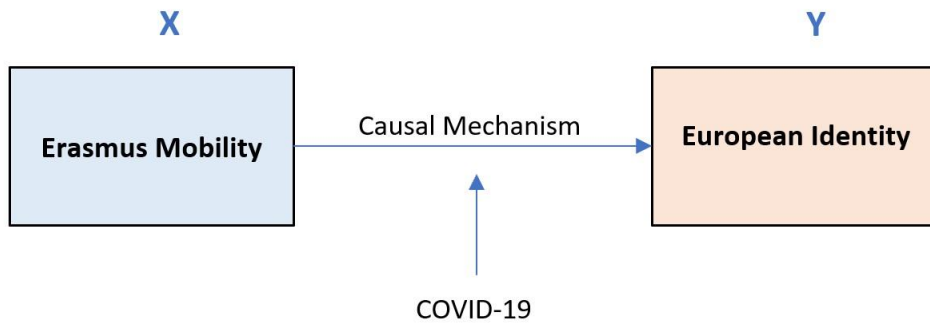
RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

According to Blaikie (2010:58) *“Research questions are needed to define the nature and scope of the research. By selecting questions, and paying attention to their wording, it is possible to determine what is to be studied, and, to some extent, how it will be studied. The way a particular research question is worded can have a significant influence on how much and what kind of research activity will be required”*. Based on these assertions, we will build some hypotheses in order to try to give already some possible answers to the research questions.

Having in mind the theoretical shortcomings found in the literature and the little attention devoted to the impact of COVID-19 on student exchanges in Europe, the purpose of this research is two-fold: first, it will unpack the causal mechanism which will provide a more robust theoretical explanation to the contribution of Erasmus mobility to reinforce a sense of European Identity in its participants; second, it will assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on that causal mechanism.

As we can see from **figure 1** below, we will use Erasmus Mobility (X) as the cause or independent variable and the sense of European Identity after Erasmus (Y) as the outcome or dependent variable. The COVID-19 represents the contextual factor that may influence the causal mechanism (socialization), thus leading to modify the outcome, i.e., the contribution of the Erasmus programme to European identity formation.

Figure 1: Research questions



Therefore, in this research we have identified two research questions that can be put as it follows:

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: Which causal mechanism explains the contribution of Erasmus programme to the construction of a European Identity? In other words, which explanatory factors explain why the Erasmus programme can either enhance, constrain or have a null impact on European identity formation?

H 1: The contribution of Erasmus programme to European identity formation can only be assessed by means of a causal mechanism based on two intertwined factors: first, by considering the level of European identity felt by each student before the Erasmus mobility experience (step 1 of the causal mechanism) and second, on the impact of the socialization process (step 2 of the causal mechanism) - taking place both in university and non-university environments – on that level of European identity, thus contributing to enhance, maintain or constrain it.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How has COVID-19 affected the contribution of Erasmus in fostering a sense of European identity in young people?

H 2: The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on both university and non-university contexts of socialization identified in the causal mechanism through which European identity can be fostered, thus, the impact of COVID-19 on the process of European identity formation has varied according to the level of the security measures imposed to students in both environments of socialization.

H 2.1: The higher the level of safety measures imposed to both university and non-university contexts of socialization, the higher the constraining impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the

possibility to socialize with others, thus leading students to maintain their prior sense of European identity (null impact);

H 2.2: The lower the level of safety measures imposed to university and non-university context of socialization, the lower the constraining impact of COVID-19 pandemic on European identity formation during the Erasmus mobility programme, thus allowing students to socialize more with others in order to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity.

H 3: In addition to this, in year two, institutional learning, i.e., the ability of university and non-university institutional environments to adapt to COVID-19 pandemic, thus allowing students to socialize more with others in order to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHOD

Case Study Research

According to Gerring (2004:342), a case study research can be understood as *“an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. A unit connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon observed at a single time or over some delimited period of time.”* Furthermore *“Case studies are generally strong precisely where statistical methods and formal models are weak. We identify four strong advantages of case methods that make them valuable in testing hypotheses and particularly useful for theory development: their potential for achieving high conceptual validity; their strong procedures for fostering new hypotheses; their value as a useful means to closely examine the hypothesized role of causal mechanisms in the context of individual cases; and their capacity for addressing causal complexity.”* (George et Bennett, 2005:25).

Thus, in this particular research, the case study method will allow us to address a particular phenomenon, which is the European identity formation during the Erasmus+ mobility programme, in a particular context, which is the COVID-19 pandemic. *“The case study is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated”* (Yin, 2009:8).

Having said that, we decided to embark on the field of qualitative research for various reasons. This research framework offers techniques and designs that help are helpful, on the one hand, to situate the analysis in a specific socio-historical context in which the educational action of the programme takes

place. On the other, it allows me to get closer to the meanings and different perceptions that those involved in the programme may have. Since the main element of this research is the Erasmus+ programme, which is a tool that aims to empower its participants both from a professional and academic perspective, it is possible to locate it not only within the researches related to International Relations but also to the ones related to a more pedagogical and human science perspective. Regarding the theoretical approach, we decided to use the transnationalism because it is the most suitable for this kind of research.

Finally, based on the research question of this thesis we will try to understand how the participants of this mobility programme perceive the effects of it and what kind of role have had the COVID-19 pandemic in this manner. This analysis will allow me to know, on the one hand, aspects related to the social construction of the European identity and, on the other, it will allow me to get closer to the reality of its effects through the perception of the people involved.

Method: process tracing

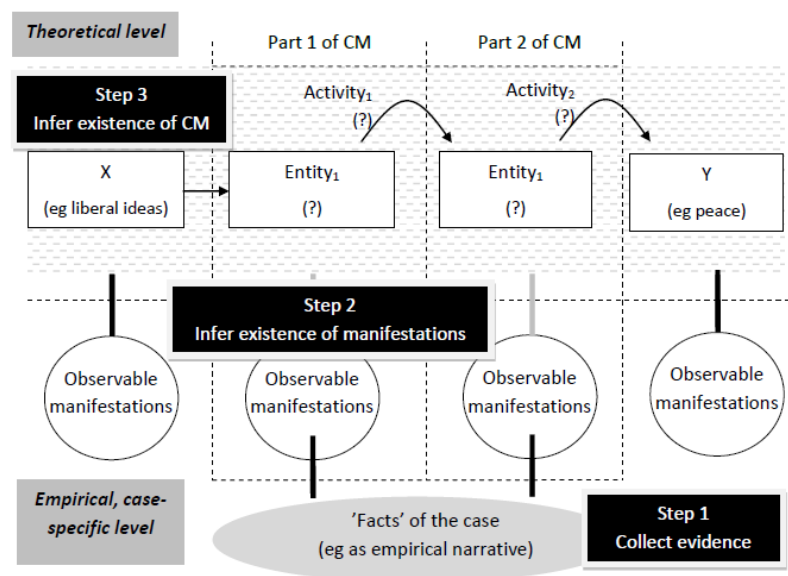
For the purpose of this research, we decided to use the process tracing method from political science. It is the most suitable for the study of causal mechanisms, in particular in studying qualitative in-depth single case study. In fact, it enables the researcher to *“make strong within-case inferences about how outcomes come about, updating the level of confidence we have in the validity of theorized causal mechanism.”* (Beach and Pedersen, 2011:4). The process tracing method is used in researches to study cases in which mechanisms should have worked, but they were broken down during the process. In our case, we study the strengthening effect of the Erasmus+ mobility programme on European identity which was influenced negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic context. For this reason, it did not allow students to socialize freely in both university and non-university context, depriving them from the opportunity to interact with both Erasmus students and host native people.

In a nutshell, we could argue that the objective of process tracing is to increase the rigor of the research process in case studies and increase the degree of confidence in the results of the analysis. However, it is important to note that process tracing is not just a single and unique method of analysis but it exists three different variants of process tracing analysis.

According to authors Beach and Pedersen these variants can be distinguished as it follows: *“1) theory-testing PT that deduces a theory from the existing literature and then tests whether there is*

evidence that a hypothesized causal mechanism is actually present in a given case; 2) theory-building PT that has the ambition is to build a theoretical explanation from the empirical evidence of a particular case and 3) explaining outcome PT, which is a case-centric method that attempts to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of an outcome using an eclectic combination of theoretical mechanisms and/or non-systematic.” (Ibidem, 2011:6-7). In the case of our research, we use the first method which can be represented graphically represented as it follows:

Figure 2: Theory-testing PT



Source: Beach and Pedersen (2011:18)

Theory-testing is a process through which we are able to test a theory, in our case we test the theory of causal mechanism. Working with this theory is different that working simply by using $X \rightarrow Y$ traditional causal theories. Firstly, “outcomes need to be defined as something that can be produced or influenced by the preceding mechanism. Secondly, the mechanism linking causes and outcomes together needs to be unpacked.” (Ibidem, 2019:1). By unpacking the mechanism, we divide it into its constituent parts, so that we are able to see better how the process between causes and outcomes works. In order to do so, we need to trace its operation in a positive case where it can be present, at least in theory.

This analysis method revolves around tracing of causal mechanisms in a singles case and then building what is expected to be a more general causal mechanism based on the empirical evidence of

that case. It can be used either “1) when we know that an X:Y correlation exists, but where we are in the dark regarding potential mechanisms that link the two, or 2) when we know the outcome but where we are unsure about what caused it, i.e. we have a deviant case.” (*Ibidem*, 2011:21).

In our research we know theoretically both X and Y observable manifestations that are Erasmus mobility and European identity formation. However the causal mechanisms between the two variables, that are the socialization processes, have been influenced negatively by the context of COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, we trace the theoretical causal mechanism that is expected to be present across the Erasmus+ student population. “*The interaction between mechanism and context is what determines the outcome. Given an initial set of conditions, the same mechanism operating in different contexts may lead to different outcomes. In other words, the indeterminacy of the outcome resides not in the mechanism but in the context.*” (Falleti and Lynch, 2009:1151). It is possible to argue that the final outcomes are not determined by the causal mechanisms alone but instead they are determined by the interaction between causal mechanisms and context. In fact, causal mechanisms “*are distinct from both inputs and outputs; they are portable and so may operate in different contexts. But depending on the nature and attributes of those contexts, the same causal mechanism could result in different outcomes.*” (*Ibidem*, 2009:1161).

We have decided to apply this method to our research for two main reasons. Firstly, it allows us to link several variables in a chain reaction whereas other scholars just isolated variables, and that is why they came to different outcomes. Sometimes Erasmus enhanced the sense of European identity, in other cases it had no impact. In this research we will solve this situation by linking the different variables in a chain reaction. In this case, causal mechanisms will allow us to do that, as we will see further in this thesis. Secondly, process tracing allows us to distinguish between the mechanism and the impact of context on the mechanism. In this case, COVID-19 pandemic will be the context that may impact on the functions of the mechanism. After having discussed the process tracing method, we will then see its application in Chapter 3, where we will apply this method to the analysis of the two different academic years in which students have been influenced by the pandemic.

Case selection

The population is made up by European Bachelor’s students from the School of Economics and Management (EEG) of the University of Minho who have undergone the Erasmus+ mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic. We decided to include only European students because we will be able to evaluate their level of European identity pre-Erasmus in order to answer to our first research question. As we can

see in **table 2** below, they are divided into two groups: year one, which correspond to the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020 (4 students) and year two, which is divided into two sub-groups - those who have undergone just one semester and those who have undergone two semesters in 2020/2021 - (14 students), in a total of **18 students**.

Table 2: Number of EEG Mobility Students during the pandemic

Bachelor Degrees	Second Semester Year 2019/20	First & Second Semester Year 2020/21		
		1st semester	2nd semester	annual
International Relations	1	1	3	3
Economics	2	2	0	0
Management	0	1	0	0
Political Science	1	0	1	1
Marketing	0	2	0	0
SUB-TOTAL	4	6	4	4
TOTAL	18 students			

Source: International Service from EEG (2021)

The table above represents only the Erasmus+ students who decided to participate in the survey of this thesis. The total number of Erasmus+ students is 42, 11 year one and 31 year two. For those of year two, they are divided into three groups: first semester only (17 students), second semester only (8 students) and annual (6 students). To put in comparison the two periods pre and post-COVID, during the first semester 2019/2020 there was a total of 55 Erasmus+ students, while during the whole academic year 2020/2021 there was a total of 40 students, 23 in the first semester and 17 in the second one.

Table 3 represents the different countries of destination of year one and year two students.

Table 3: EEG Mobility Students Incoming Countries during the pandemic

COUNTRY	HOST INSTITUTION
Croatia	University of Split, Zagreb School of Economics
France	Université Bordeaux Montaigne

Germany	Philips-Universität Marburg,
Netherlands	Maastricht University
Italy	Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza” Università di Bologna “Alma Mater Studiorum” Università degli Studi di Firenze
Lithuania	Vytautas Magnus University
Poland	Uniwersytet Lodzki
Slovenia	University of Maribor
Slovakia	Comenius University in Bratislava
Spain	Universidad Autónoma de Madrid Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid

Source: International Service from EEG (2021)

Technique to collect data

As far as the technique used to collect the data, we will use a questionnaire with both open and closed questions. *“A questionnaire is the main means of collecting quantitative primary data. A questionnaire enables quantitative data to be collected in a standardized way so that the data are internally consistent and coherent for analysis. Questionnaires should always have a definite purpose that is related to the objectives of the research and it needs to be clear from the outset how the findings will be used”* (Roopa et Rani, 2012:273).

The questionnaire will be divided into two sections: the first one is related to the personal information (age, sex, nationality and so forth) while the second one is related to the COVID-19 effects on the Erasmus+ experience and European identity. Sometimes a questionnaire is used as the basis for an interview so there is some interaction between the respondent and the researcher (or at least an interviewer). This may be face to face, over the phone or via email. In other situations the questionnaire is designed as a self-completion questionnaire for the respondent to complete themselves without the researcher present. The respondent may be given the questionnaire by the researcher, or sent the questionnaire via the post or email, or may access the questionnaire on the internet. However, in

whatever situation the respondent answers the questions, the questions and the choice of answers will be the same (Matthews et Ross, 2010:203).

We would like to point out the reason why we decided to contact them by email and why we decided to use a questionnaire instead of conducting, for example, a direct interview. Firstly, the preventive measures to contain the pandemic have discouraged any type of group meeting. This makes it almost impossible to bring these people together or find them to conduct a personal interview. Secondly, there was the difficulty of accessing the personal data of these participants, which makes it difficult to find people of certain profiles and contact them, for example, by phone. Thirdly, online communication via email allows me to enter into dialogue with the participants to clarify the questionnaire itself, so it is not a question of a blind collection of information. In addition, the fact of completing this questionnaire from home has allowed the participants to do it at the time they consider most appropriate, facilitating the process of reflection that the different questions imply and avoiding factors that could have limited the discourse, such as lack of time.

Timeframe of research

We have selected students that have done that mobility programme in the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020 (4 students) and during the year 2020/2021, that is, 6 in the first semester, 4 in the second semester and 4 in both semesters (14 in total). The sample was made of 42 students, but only 18 agreed to participate in the study, that is, 43% of the whole population.

Outline of the thesis

The remainder of this thesis is divided in **four chapters**. We will start with an **introduction** where we will explain the relevance of the topic and the methods used for this research. We will then move to the **first chapter** where we will expand on the historical analysis of the evolution of the European mobility programmes, starting from the origins with the first ERASMUS until the most recent Erasmus+.

In the **second chapter**, we will unpack the idea European identity and defining the different approaches. We will especially focus on the theme of the “imagined communities” theorised by Benedict Anderson (1983). In **the third chapter**, we will present our theoretical arguments related to constructivism in International Relations and the importance of the processes of socializations to the formation of a common European feeling.

In the **fourth chapter**, we will present and discuss the results of the findings obtained through the questionnaire, which will be sent to the UMinho students that participate in this research project. Finally, in the **conclusion**, we will highlight the main tenets of our argument and suggest future avenues of research.

CHAPTER I: THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME: FEELING EUROPEAN BY ‘DOING EUROPE’

In this chapter we will address the importance of the programme for the young generations and then the historical evolution of the European mobility programmes. After a brief introduction about the roots of the Erasmus, we will analyse in chronological order every step of the historical evolution of the mobility programme. In fact, as we will see, the Erasmus programme has evolved a lot during more than three decades, having more and more participants and popularity over the years. During our historical analysis we will mainly focus on data regarding the participants and the funding used for each programme, in order to better understand how both popularity and importance of this mobility programmes have grown during the time.

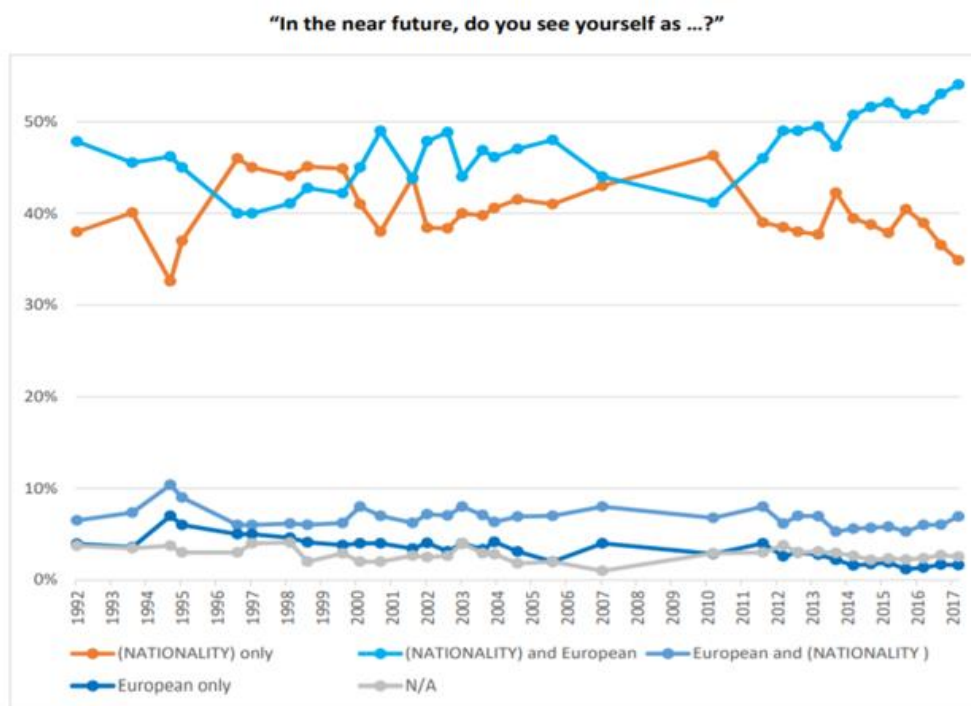
1.1. Erasmus Programme: young people is the future of Europe

The institutional objectives of Erasmus, beyond the creation of a common European university area, were linked to the economic development of the Union and to the construction of a European society and more specifically “*to strengthen the interaction between citizens in different Member States with a view to consolidating the concept of a People’s Europe*” (EC, 1997:7). In addition to this it is important to remember that the main receivers of this programme are university students. We are talking about young people, usually between the ages of 19 and 25, who decide to spend a semester or even more in another country. Therefore, the Erasmus is not only a programme that helps students to learn and improve academic and linguistic knowledge, but it is also used by the EU to inculcate its values and increase the engagement of young generations within the European society.

Nowadays we can argue that both national and European can co-exist at the same, although the way they are perceived by the people can differ from one to another. The **figure 3** below represents the so called “Moreno question”, which is an indicator that measures the degree of identification with a supranational entity. It was theorised by Spanish professor Luis Moreno and it was first used to understand the self-identification of Scottish people during the 1985. This indicator was used, in fact, to explain the social mobilisation of Scottish people in quest for political autonomy. “*The central idea of the ‘Moreno question’ has been geared towards the selection by the emphasizes respondents of one of the five main categories in the following scale: (1) I am Scottish, not British; (2) I am more Scottish than British; (3) I am equally Scottish and British; (4) I am more British than Scottish; and (5) I am British, not Scottish.*” (Moreno, 1986). However, it can be used also to understand in what degree people tend

to identify themselves with Europe. We can see how the degree of identification with Europe has increased during the last decades has increased, while the identification with the nationality only has decreased.

Figure 3: 'Moreno' question measuring European identity (1992-2017)



Source: Eurobarometer 1992-2017, Moreno question, weighted average according to Eurobarometer data for the 'European Union' total. Own illustration, combination of data from Eurobarometer interactive and Eurobarometer 40 years report¹⁴.

Source: Ciaglia, Fuest and Heinemann (2018:16)

Subsequently, surveys usually show that the socio-demographic profile of citizens, in particular their level of education, influences their degree of identification with Europe (Medrano, 2010:52). People with higher level of education, in fact, tend to be more attracted by the international social context and develop a stronger attachment to the European identity. Secondly, the low rates of mobility and proficiency in a second and third language in a multilingual Europe would constitute major obstacles to European identification. Precisely for this reason a mobility programme such as Erasmus can be used to fill these gaps and improve both personal skills and political participations of its participants. *"It has been shown that taking part in the Erasmus programme can increase employability and make its participants more active citizens. [...] Erasmus students have shown to seek to expand their rights as EU citizens actively and they also have high levels of turnout in EU elections."* (Consonni, 2020:24).

The Erasmus+ mobility programme aim also to train the new generations to think in a European way, and not just in a national one. The programme improves the professional prospects of students also because it enhances the personality traits that 92% of employers look for in candidates, in particular tolerance, self-confidence, problem solving skills, curiosity, awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses and resolve (European Commission, 2014). The collaboration between Universities of different states enriches and improves the quality of the skills that students acquire during their study course. For this reason, Erasmus students have a more international life and are more likely to live abroad. In fact, *“40% of Erasmus alumni have moved to another country after graduation compared to 23% of non-mobile alumni. 93% of mobile students can easily imagine living abroad in the future, compared to 73% of their stay-at-home counterparts.”* (Ibidem, 2014:14). Furthermore, according to a research realised in Poland in which have participated more than 14,000 Polish *alumni*, *“Erasmus mobility contributes to the acquisition of multiple skills and competencies, which are highly valued by future employers, but also constitutes a valuable social and cultural experience. The utility of international student mobility in the university education process is hard to overestimate, not only from the perspective of subsequent transition to work.”* (Bryla, 2015:640). With that being said, we can see how having a generation of young people who have acquired such experiences and skills can have a positive effect not only in the labour market, but more also within European society itself.

1.2. Erasmus Programme: an historical perspective

The Erasmus programme (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), named after the Dutch philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam, was officially created in 1987. However its creation is rooted to previous pilot mobility programmes. The first prototypes of the Erasmus programme were the JSP (Joint Study Programmes), introduced in the academic year 1976/1977. They were inter-university cooperation actions, financed by the European Council between 1976 and 1986, with the objective to create stable links between European university institutions. *“Students and parents already accept the idea of mobility at national level. If the Community is to become a meaningful catchment area for all institutions of higher learning, measures will be required to reinforce what has already been done. Proper recognition of courses undertaken, credit transfer and all similar provisions will be indispensable to ensure that study and qualifications gained abroad are a valid alternative to courses followed at home.”* (Sutherland, 1985:1).

After these years of pilot studies conducted by the European Commission, it was proposed to establish the programme in 1986 but the reactions of the member states were not at all homogeneous. In particular, countries that already had their own exchange programmes, UK and Germany in particular, were generally hostile to the establishment of a single programme involving all EU states. *“During the negotiation process, Germany and the UK had even expressed their general reservations against the ERASMUS proposal as such. While the UK has traditionally been the most critical Member State when it comes to the transfer of sovereign power at supranational level, the German position was influenced by its federal education system. In Germany, the Bundesländer are in charge of education – it is one of only a few policies for which they are solely responsible. Thus, representatives of the German Bundesländer reacted quite sensitively to the ERASMUS proposal that, in their eyes, would restrict their own competences.”* (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013:30). After ten months of consultations, a compromise was later reached and the majority of member states voted to officially establish the programme in June 1987 (EC, 1988). The 1987-1988 academic year was the first in which European university students took advantage of the programme. In the first year alone, 3,244 students from 11 countries participated (EC, 2017:4).

1.2.1 ERASMUS 1987 – 1993

The first phase of ERASMUS corresponds to the period between 1987 and 1990. These were the years in which the first students participate in the programme. While not denying the limitations presented by a programme as innovative as it is immature, in the Report on Experience Acquired in the Application of the Erasmus 1987-1989 programme (1989), the European Commission expresses all its enthusiasm for the newborn programme: *“ERASMUS has received an exceptionally warm welcome in university circles. This enthusiasm has expressed itself in a massive demand to participate, a response way above the programme’s resources. There has been a substantial increase in student mobility (4.000 students the first year, 28.000 in the third year). Most students consider that their stay abroad period has opened up wider professional possibilities especially with regard to their host Member State”* (EC, 1989:1).

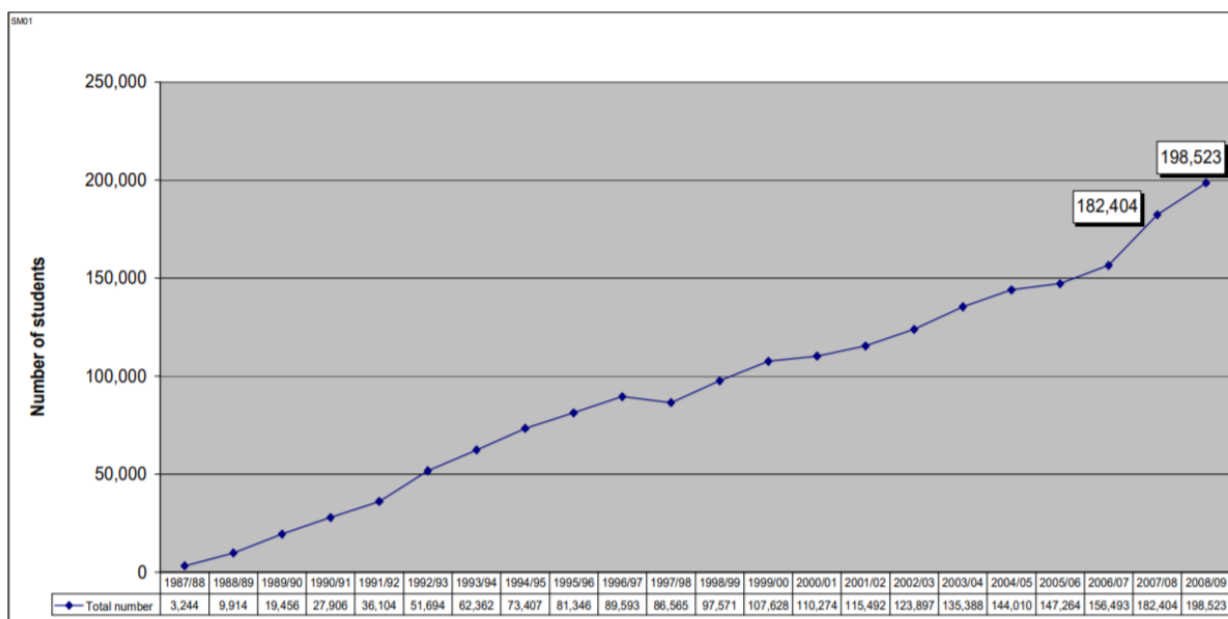
The problems encountered are related to financial coverage: it was clear from the start that the programme needed continuity in its financial support. The budget initially earmarked for the programme proved to be insufficient because of the excessive demand from university institutions and students. Consider that in 1987-88, the academic year in which the programme was inaugurated, compared to the 34 million ECU (European Currency Unit) requested, the original budget provided only 11.2 (EC,

1988). In the following academic year, the budget of 30 million covered just the 25% of the requested 103 million. Only in 1989-1990 a considerable increase in the budget (52.5 million) managed to cover the 37% of the 129 million requested (EC, 1990). The request to participate in the programme increased and it was not easy to satisfy the unexpected demand that it had created.

The second phase of the first ERASMUS project corresponds to the period between 1990 and 1994. The Project began to spread more and more into the European higher education environments and, for this reason, more and more institutions wanted to participate in it. *“The Commission received a total of 900 proposals for inter-university cooperation programmes involving more than 3 000 departments representing all areas of study. The groundwork has thus been laid for a considerable increase in student mobility throughout the Community. In addition to the European inter-university network created under the Erasmus programme, there are also 950 higher educational establishments which have asked to participate in the Comett programme which promotes cooperation between universities and industry in education and training for technology”* (EC, 1994).

In general terms, the number of participants in this project has increased every year more and more, thanks to the exchange of information, the participation of a greater number of institutions and an increase in funding. Below you can find a table (Fig. 6) summarizing the increases concerning these early phases of the Project until the 2008/2009 period. Apart from the period between 1996/1997 and 1997/98, the number of participants has always been increasing, reaching almost 200.000 participants in 2009.

Figure 4: Participative growth during the period between 1987/88 – 2008/2009.



Source: Erasmus Statistical Report 2008/09 (EC, 2010)

1.2.2. SOCRATES I: 1994 – 1999

In the period between the 1st January 1995 and the 31th December 1999 the Erasmus was incorporated into the wider SOCRATES programme. Between 1995 and 1997 Socrates was applied in the 15 Member States of the Union and also in those signatories of the agreement on the European Economic Area (Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway). From 1997 and 1998 it was also applied to citizens and institutions of Cyprus and some countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Romania, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) with special conditions established thanks to the association agreement signed by these countries (Teichler, 2002).

The European Commission had a positive view towards the outcomes of the SOCRATES programme, recognizing the substantial progress in the increase of quality education and internships on the one hand and, on the other hand, in the establishment of an open European area for collaboration in the field of instruction. The initial budget of 850 ECU millions has quickly proved insufficient to cover all the loans and, for this reason, it has been increased by 933 ECU millions (EC, 2002:8). This was an important critical element of the SOCRATES programme that the Commission considered to determine, in the following years, an adjustment of the budget for the second phase of the programme.

The first two years of the SOCRATES programme have been analysed and summarized in the official report of the European Commission entitled “Final Report From The Commission On The

Implementation Of The Socrates Programme 1995 – 1999”, published in 2001. Still concerning the implementation of the programme, the report criticized the complexity of the bureaucratic and financial procedures, furthermore it indicates that in the second phase of the programme it would have been of vital importance to make SOCRATES more accessible to the individuals and to the institutions. *“It is also important for the SOCRATES programme, beyond the individuals and institutions actively involved within it, to be able to be more strongly linked than before with the whole of the policy debate taking place at the European level in the area of education. [...] Spread over a longer period (seven years), the management of its actions 23 decentralised to a greater extent, and underpinned by a more active monitoring and evaluation policy, the new phase of the programme should strengthen the impact of SOCRATES, particularly in the most recent areas of cooperation at European level, e.g. school education and lifelong learning”* (EC, 2001:22-23).

1.2.3. SOCRATES II: 2000 – 2006

In the year 2000, with the provision n. 253/2000 / EC of the 24th January 2000, the European Parliament and the Council established the second phase of the SOCRATES programme. The objectives of the programme are declared in the article 2:

“(a) to strengthen the European dimension in education at all levels and to facilitate wide transnational access to educational resources in Europe while promoting equal opportunities throughout all fields of education;

(b) to promote a quantitative and qualitative improvement of the knowledge of the languages of the European Union, in particular those languages which are less widely used and less widely taught, so as to lead to greater understanding and solidarity between the peoples of the European Union and promote the intercultural dimension of education;

(c) to promote cooperation and mobility in the field of education, in particular by:

- encouraging exchanges between educational institutions,*
- promoting open and distance learning,*
- encouraging improvements in the recognition of diplomas and periods of study,*
- developing the exchange of information, and to help remove the obstacles in this regard;*

(d) to encourage innovation in the development of educational practices and materials including, where appropriate, the use of new technologies, and to explore matters of common policy interest in the field of education” (European Parliament, 2000).

In the last point, it is important to highlight the reference to policies: the realization of these objectives also depended largely on the policies adopted by individual Member States. The Commission, for its part, assumed the task of ensuring that the measures of the programme were consistent with the other measures and policies of the Community (*Ibidem*, 2000).

The SOCRATES II included five targeted measures: Comenius, dedicated to school education in all its levels (kindergarten, primary and secondary school); Erasmus, dedicated to university and post-university education; Grundtvig, addressed to adult education and alternative educational paths; Language, entirely dedicated to language learning; Minerva, dedicated to the use of ICT in schools and universities. Other more transversal measures were envisaged to better coordinate the individual parts of the programme and at the same time, making it more flexible and efficient. The second phase of the SOCRATES programme coincided with the entry into force of the single European currency, the EURO. The Commission responded to the huge demand for educational institutions to participate in the programme by setting a budget of 1,850 billion euros, of which 950 million was allocated to ERASMUS (European Parliament, 2000).

1.2.4. Lifelong Learning Programme: 2007 – 2013

The Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) is the successor of the SOCRATES programme, which aims to support learning opportunities from childhood to adulthood, passing through university education and in every situation of everyday life. The LLP consisted of four sub-programmes: Comenius, for schools; Erasmus for the university; Leonardo da Vinci for vocational training and apprenticeship; Grundtvig for adult education. A novelty of the programme are the “Jean Monnet” actions, established to stimulate teaching, reflection and debate on European integration (to be translated into specific conferences, events or courses) (European Commission, 2007).

The budget allocated to the programme in the period corresponding to the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013) was 3.1 billion euros. In the 2012-2013 academic year, twenty-five years since the birth of ERASMUS, the students who have benefited from the programme to study or carry out an internship abroad have been nearly 270,000 (European Commission, 2014). Noticing that in 1987, at its first edition, the Erasmus had just over 3,000 students, it is clear that growth, popularity and above all the importance of the project at European level has increased very much.

1.2.5. ERASMUS+: 2014- 2020

The ERASMUS+ programme is the last stage in the process of evolution of all European programmes related to education and cooperation in the field of research. It is indicative that the name “Erasmus” has been chosen for the project. In fact it is the one that over the years enjoyed greater popularity and visibility and it is the better one to represent the entire cluster of actions, which is something that goes beyond the simple mobility of university students. The programme is divided into three sections, called “Key Actions”. The first one concerns individual mobility for learning purposes and includes the mobility of students, school and university staff, joint masters, youth exchanges and the European Voluntary Service (EVS). The second Key Action concerns cooperation for innovation and good practices, and is aimed at fostering large-scale partnerships between education and training institutions and the world of work, and between the same bodies in the education or research sector . In the third Key Action, ERASMUS Plus intends to carry out a task of supporting the EU agenda in education, training and youth issues (EC, 2020).

The budget allocated to the entire ERASMUS+ programme shows a 40% increase compared to its predecessors. “Erasmus+ and its predecessors are among the most successful EU programmes. Since 1987, they have been offering young people in particular opportunities to gain new experiences by going abroad. The current Erasmus+ programme, running from 2014 to 2020, has a budget of €14.7 billion and will provide opportunities for 3.7% of young people in the EU to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad. The geographical scope of the programme has expanded from 11 countries in 1987 to 33 currently (all 28 EU Member States as well as Turkey, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein). The programme is also open to partner countries across the world.” (EC, 2017).

According to the most recent document for the statistical analysis, which is the “Erasmus+ annual report 2019”, “the Erasmus+ programme reached out to a record number of participants and beneficiaries:

1. Around 111,000 organisations benefited from funding to carry out around 25,000 projects.
2. In the field of higher education, more than 444,000 students, trainees and staff spent a learning period abroad during the 2018/2019 academic year.
3. More than 192,000 vocational education and training learners and staff were able to spend a learning period abroad thanks to 2019 funding.

4. More than 174,000 young people and youth workers benefited from Erasmus+ funding, either in the form of youth exchanges or opportunities for youth workers.
5. The European Week of Sport reached a new record with the participation of over 15.3 million Europeans from 42 European countries.” (EC, 2020).

1.3. Conclusion

After having historically analyzed the birth and evolution of the Erasmus programme, as previously mentioned, we can easily notice it has grown a lot both in terms of participants and funding. From the student perspective, studying abroad is certainly an interesting experience, which allows students to know and live in a new context and consequently, allows them to acquire new experiences. From a social perspective, having so many people that travel every year to a new country and have contacts with both local and foreign colleagues is something that can have a positive impact on people's lives and on our society.

The more we get to know different people and different places, the more experience we have. The more experience we have, the more we are able to improve both personally and professionally. Using this knowledge acquired abroad during our life allows us to have a society that is more open to change and with more awareness of what surrounds us. This explains why the Erasmus programme is so important not only for students but also for the European Union itself.

CHAPTER II: CONCEPTUALIZING EUROPEAN IDENTITY: EUROPE AS A ‘SENSE OF POLITICAL COMMUNITY’

Researches on the processes of identification and support for Europe recognize the problematic nature of the notion of European identity and try to explain the difficulty of this identification with various factors. Firstly, Europe would too often be seen as "*a community defined by the European Union, with vague and fluctuating outlines*" (Duchesne, 2010:12), whose political significance and role remain not much perceived among the population. Secondly, European identity can be conceptualized as a sense of belonging (citizen) and/or as a cultural one (sharing values and beliefs). However, before conceptualizing the European identity, we need to understand what is the meaning of "identity". The identity is a concept that determines what we are. Identity also provides symbolic meaning to people's life, by enhancing their "self" definition and their feelings of belonging (Castells, 2001). It involves also a sense of distinctiveness and it is constantly transformed through communication with others (Kostakopoulou, 2001:11). "*In other words, it distinguishes the Self from the Other, the 'in-group' from the 'out-group': it defines their relationship. From this logic, self and other are twos dies of the same coin.*" (Kap, 2006:9).

Having in mind this definition of the terms "identity", we can start conceptualizing the concept of European identity. First of all, in historical terms, there is not only a single European identity, but there are many. They have been developed over the history of European peoples and have been formally recognized and nurtured in the nation building processes of European states, interacting with a wide range of other sub-national and transnational identities. This multiplicity of cultures has been a source of conflicts and controversies over the time but it has also shown a remarkable ability to assimilate, integrate and create extraordinary opportunities for scientific and technical progress, economic growth and social and cultural innovation. Furthermore, as we previously mentioned, the social category of European identity can be studied by looking at the configurations it assumes as a result of the changes in the organizational structure of society due to the process of European integration. In fact, we will investigate the construction of European identity, both in its individual and collective dimension, by looking at social practices in the transnational dimension, and at the meanings through which individuals refer to the concept of Europe. This concept is then built through inter-subjectivity and shared in networks of social relations, practices that give meaning to the bond with Europe itself. In this research we assume that the sense of belonging to Europe is linked not only to individual characteristics but more importantly to context and social interactions. In fact, it is in everyday social mechanisms and in interactions with others

that mobility students realise more the sense of European identity. For this reason, understanding European identity means placing it in its social, physical, historical and cultural context.

As far as the academic literature related to the European identity, we can find different theories and approaches that have been studied and analysed through the years. According to Kap, the debate on the concerning the nature of identity formation revolves around essentialist and constructivist approach (*Ibidem*, 2006:12). The first is supported by the author Anthony D. Smith (1992) and “*it revolves the relative fixity of identity. He argues that collective identities are unmoved by global processes because they are based upon ethnic or blood ties. Thus, collective identities are well established and cannot be deconstructed.*” (Kap, 2006:12). The approach that we are going to use in this research is the second one and it will be deepened in the last part of this chapter where we will talk about the post-national approach linked to the theme of the “imagined communities” theorised by Anderson (1983).

The two theories that we have briefly analysed in the first part of this chapter are not the only ones that exist in current literature. For this reason, and in order to have a better understanding of the various approaches to this topic, we will now deepen the different forms of European identity that have been theorized over the years and we will divide them into six main categories, with a particular focus on the last one:

1. Euro-nationalist identity is outlined in those theories that analyse Europe using categories based on the model of national community and that refer identity to the ethno-cultural bond (Smith, 1991). These categories have been readjusted, in the light of the European integration process, to the supranational context, in an attempt to identify a European community founded on primordial bonds between individuals and a common destiny. The sense of European belonging is linked to the sharing of myths, symbols, values and common memories belonging to the different nations and ethnic groups of the continent, which, although deeply rooted in regional and national contexts, slowly become a single heritage of the continent, that is the product of the aggregation of different families and ethnic traditions into a single cultural and political community.

2. European identity founded on constitutional patriotism, based on Habermas’s researches (Habermas, 1996, 1998; Müller and Scheppele, 2008) defines the European people mainly in a political sense, based on citizenship and a feeling of civic solidarity. Political identity is linked to the sharing of a common political culture, based on the guarantee of norms, on the separation of powers, on the values of democracy and on respect for human rights, principles that guarantee the coexistence,

in Europe, of different cultural and of equally legitimate life. This second type allows the development of a European political identity shared by all citizens, beyond their own national and cultural identities.

3. A mixed option between the previous two, which adopts the idea of constitutional patriotism and at the same time it considers the particularistic elements deriving from the ethno-cultural traditions of the member states, is achievable from the point of view of an identification process that is structured on multiple levels. The first is the national level, which recalls the projects of authenticity and intergenerational collective immortality of the ethno-cultural community while the second is the supranational level, which refers to civic values, universal principles of law and justice and Enlightenment ideals. The two levels form a double belonging that coexists in a cosmopolitan communitarianism, in which involvement at the community level and the different territorial identities coexist with a cosmopolitan gaze oriented to universal civil and democratic principles (Beck, 2006).

4. The European contractual identity refers to those theories that tend to interpret the European project on the basis of the intergovernmental utilitarian approach (Aiello, Reverberi and Brasili, 2019), as an integration based on economic exchange and diplomacy between the member states without any reference to the political union and social involvement of citizens, who are rooted in national cultures. It is a weak and subtle European identity, which only covers the consolidated and rooted national identities. The particular national dimension maintains its hegemony with respect to the supranational union.

5. The fifth option of European identity refers to the neofunctionalism approach, according to which the development of cooperation practices between elites at a supranational level makes the EU's performance more effective in solving problems and obtaining results, if compared to the national level (Kuhn, 2019). This leads to a change in the values and expectations of European citizens towards the two territorial levels of governance, up to the shift of belonging from the traditional state level to the supranational one, which now responds and satisfies the needs of European citizens. The emphasis is placed, according to a technocratic logic, on the greater functional efficiency of the European administrative authority in the complex global context. This functional European identity is founded on a calculation of interests on the part of citizens. Identity belonging is linked to an economic rationality and disconnected from any political, social and cultural involvement.

6. Finally, there is the type of identity defined in the literature as post-national, which is inspired by the constructivist approach (Zürn and Checkel, 2005; Eder, 2009). They refer to a conception of the EU as a political-social design and interpret European identity as a belonging that

emerges from the complex intertwining of institutionalized social practices of cooperation and participation. This type of European identity is understood both as a process, with a cultural and political dimension, and as a project, it is not finished but is in constant evolution, through construction and reconstruction dynamics that arise from social, relational and interactive practices that develop in a transnational context and that lead the actors to learn, evaluate and readjust their own cognitive structures, behaviours and value systems.

According to Cram (2012:4), we can distinguish between two types of European identification: identification as European and identification with Europe. In this case, one can identify as a European without identifying with Europe and vice versa. This identity is associated with a critical and reflective attitude, but it is also strengthened by sharing a mythology that is formed through the sharing of narratives and symbols that characterize the post-national context, linked to supranational institutions, to the reinterpretation of the European past and to stories of the everyday life of EU citizens, a manifestation of how national differences, social conflicts and contact with otherness can also give rise to a European people and a multinational, multi-cultural and polyglot community.

In fact people who are part of this community, in order to coexist and to have a common sense of identity belonging, cannot just identify themselves by blood ties or ethnicity but they have to literally “imagine” themselves as a part of that community. This kind of imagination derives from the social imaginary made up by symbols, concepts and values that are shared among them and in which people imagine their social whole (Anderson, 1983). *“Nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.” (Ibidem, 1983:4).*

Another distinction that we can do in this regard is between a “civic” or political and a cultural sense of European identity. This kind of distinction was theorised by Van Mol, in fact he argues that for both kinds of European identification, there are two subcomponents that refer to cognitions of being member of a group, although these groups are differently defined (Van Mol, 2018). The civic or political subcomponent refers to the degree individuals feel they are citizens of a political system, while the cultural subcomponent refers *“to self-identification as a European as well as the identification of individuals with other Europeans, regardless of the nature of the political system. It hence points to identification with an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) beyond the European Union.” (Ibidem,*

2018:451). In this case, it is possible to argue that participating in an international mobility programme, such as the Erasmus+, could stimulate this sense of identification with Europe since European students might also meet international students coming from other continents.

One more important author for post-national identity is sociologist Klaus Eder, who gives an interesting contribution on the scientific debate on European identity, noting the lack of attention to the systematic link between the dynamics of identity construction and the networks of social relations in which this process is rooted (Eder, 2009). European society is considered by Eder to be an ideal ground for studying the link between the increase of social complexity and the creation of narrative bonds. At the basis of his approach, in fact, there is the assumption that the sharing of narratives and meanings is necessary to live in a transnational and multicultural context such as the European one and it can be considered as one of the key elements that contribute to the development of the feeling of identity. The multiplicity of networks of social relations that emerge in Europe, stimulated by the processes of Europeanization and globalization, promoting the dissemination of more narratives that circulate within the social networks.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL APPROACH AND MODEL

3.1. Transactionalist approach: feeling European through social interaction

The main argument of our thesis is that it is the transnational contact among individuals that leads to European identity formation during the student mobility. In fact transactionalism, also known as “communication theory”, urges that *“these types of student mobility programmes can foster processes of social assimilation, which will lead to integration. This social assimilation occurs on an individual-level where personal contact and interactions will diminish the social distances between people of different nationalities and thus help to create a common identity.”* (Büttner, 2010:539). This theory focuses more on the social aspect of integration, instead of the political and economic one. Transactionalism views integration as a part of cultural assimilation, leading to the formation of international ‘security communities’ in which people are linked to bonds of mutual trust and identification (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2013). At the basis of the development of this kind of communities, there is the idea that transactional interactions, for example migration, tourism and military collaboration, can produce common identities and trust among the actors.

If we consider the European case, it is possible to note how the intra-European borders removal and the improvement of the mobility programmes, especially for young people, have facilitated the social interactions among Europeans. The facilitation of these social interactions have improved, as we mentioned in the beginning of chapter 1, the skills that European students develop, with a positive effect on their lives both on a personal and on a professional level. In particular, according to Theresa Khun, *“Europeans with higher levels of education and high-status occupations tend to be significantly more transnational than the rest of the population. [...] Parental socioeconomic background influences the extent to which school children are transnationally active and children of well-off, cosmopolitan parents self-select into higher education where they are exposed to liberal and cosmopolitan ideas.”* (Khun, 2019:1223). The importance of the transnational contacts among individuals was already theorised in the 1950s by Deutsch (Deutsch, 1953; *Ibidem* and *al.*, 1957).

This idea was also retained by Fligstein when he argued that the most ‘Europeans’ people are those who have the most opportunities to interact with people from other European countries. In other words, individuals who tend to identify with Europe are generally people who have acquired the resources that allow them to move easily in a Europe of diversity (Fligstein, 2008:249). We can see how the social background component can be important to facilitate that kind of interactions but this does not mean

that, for example, students with different background cannot experience the same interactions and consequently develop a certain sense of belonging to Europe, in terms of identity. As we previously mentioned, at the basis of the transactional theory applied to the mobility programmes context, there is the idea of the social assimilation that leads to integration. The more people socialise, the more they will feel a common “connection” among them. This kind of connection can be represented by the idea of a common shared identity, in which they share values, beliefs and behaviours.

The reason why we decided that transnationalism was the best theory for the thesis relies on the fact that, according to this theory, identity emerges out social interaction. In fact in this thesis we will analyse both inputs and outcomes of the Erasmus+ students. In this case, we will ask them from where they start, that is to say what was their sense of European identity before they went for the mobility abroad. So, depending on the social interactions on both school and non-school context, we will then see different outcomes based on this. And of course we have to consider also the interference that COVID-19 pandemic had in both contexts of socialization and how these contexts can interfere with the causal mechanism. *“Student mobility programmes are perfect illustrations of how people of different nationalities connect and interact with each other on equal conditions. Interactions that according to the theory of transactionalism will create a fertile soil on which a common European identity can grow.”* (Elofsson, 2020:6.7).

3.2. European identity formation during Erasmus: opening the black box

The world of everyday life is the setting and background for the study of European identity in this thesis. It represents those preconditions shared at a social level that allow people to interact with others, allow mutual recognition and nourish a sense of belonging. On the basis of some key principles of sociology, such as the importance attributed to experience and intersubjectivity as elements for the construction of everyday life, it is assumed that daily experiences affect the formation of identity (Ghisleni, 2004). The everyday circumscribes the space of individual and collective experiences in society and the study of the world of life is functional to the analysis of the European narrative identity because it allows to focus on the micro-dimension of interpersonal relationships, on rules, beliefs, values, attitudes and knowledge of society.

In order to explain the socialization process in this chapter, we will use the causal mechanism process of social explanation. Causal mechanism can be conceptualized and explained as a correlation between inputs (independent variables) and outcomes (dependent variables). In fact they serve *“to open*

the black box of lawlike probability statements that simply state the concurrence or correlation of certain phenomena or events. Statements of the type 'If I, then O' ($I \rightarrow O$) become 'If I, through M, then O' ($I \rightarrow M \rightarrow O$).' (Falleti and Lynch, 2009:1146). Furthermore, causal mechanism have a distinct ontological status from these variables and this is important for our analysis on the relationship between contexts, mechanism and causation, as we will further see in this chapter. According to authors George and Bennett, causal mechanism can be defines as the "ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities,' thereby changing the latter entities' 'characteristics, capacities, or propensities in ways that persist until subsequent causal mechanisms act upon it." (George and Bennet, 2005:137).

By using causal mechanism, we are able to link the different arguments as a chain reaction. With that being said, it is also possible to argue that causal mechanism is different from a theory. Causal mechanisms, in fact, are not fixed in the time and space and *"any one mechanism may interact with those of many other mechanism."* (Bennet, 2013:466). With that being said, the use of causal mechanism will also help us to improve the argument of previous scholars on this theme. In fact, as we previously seen in the state of the art, there were several researches that have analysed the theme of European identity formation linked to the Erasmus mobility programme, but none of them have applied this method in order to deepen the role that socialization processes during the Erasmus have in the European identity formation. In this manner, we can also include the interpretative constructivism theorised by author Jeffrey Checkel in 2007. This kind of constructivism revolves around asking the 'how possible' questions instead of just explaining that A cause B. *"Instead of examining what factors caused what aspects of a state's identity to change, interpretative constructivists would explore the background conditions that made any such change possible in the first place."* (Checkel, 2007:58). For this reason, the analytical task is not to focus on the effects of a variable (X) towards the final outcome (Y), but instead it is committed to a more deeply inductive research, focusing on the role of the context and external factors.

3.2.1. Causal mechanism of European identity formation during Erasmus

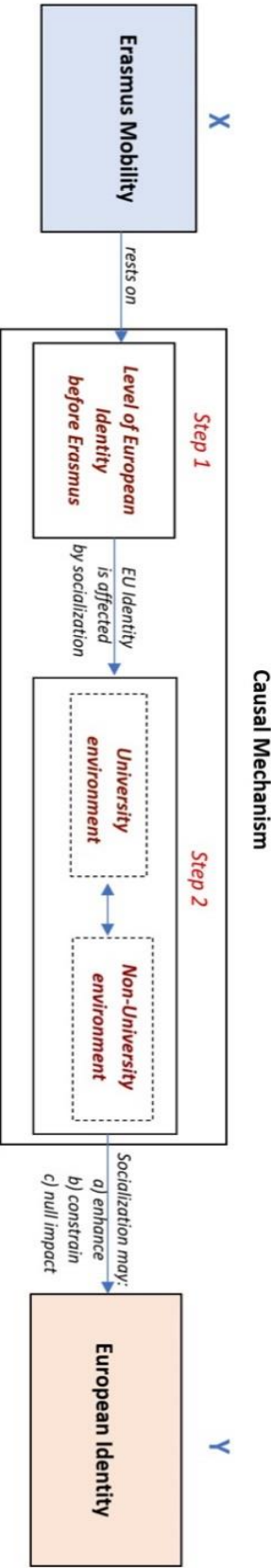
Cause (X)

The Erasmus+ mobility allows students to interact at the European level. Thus, enabling them to socialize with European counterpart and enhancing their sense of European identity. **Figure 5** shows the application of the causal mechanism to the Erasmus mobility in a normal context that we will call

“pre-COVID”. The model that we use is made up by Tsoukalas and Weidman’s contributions that we have analysed in the introduction. We use the first one’s contribution for the model of socialization in the non-school environment while we use the second one for the model of socialization in the school environment.

As we can see, the “Erasmus Mobility” represents the independent variable (X) while the “Sense of European Identity” represent the dependent variable (Y). In this pre-COVID context, students experience normally the socialization mechanisms in both institutional and non-institutional environments which, depending on the singular case, influence in a certain way their sense of European throughout their stay abroad. We argue that the process of socialization during the mobility reinforce this sense of identity, however what we would like to understand is how this process works within the two environments and how the COVID-19 pandemic have affected it.

Figure 5: Mechanism of European identity formation during Erasmus
(pre-COVID)



Step 1: Level of European Identity before Erasmus

Before they engage on social interaction, students already possess a sense of European identity. The reason why students do not start from zero can be deducted by some elements related to the Erasmus+ itself. First of all, the participation in the programme is not mandatory, which means that only students who are willing to study and live abroad for at least one semester are able to send their application. Secondly, all the students who decide to send the application for the programme must be assessed by to evaluate whether they are fit or no for participating. This means that they will be evaluated based on elements such as: background experience, language skills and personal motivation. This also means that students who do not have interests in travelling, socialising with other people and are not open-minded cannot pass the selection process. With that being said, the socialization process during their experience abroad will be built upon that sense of identity that already exists. This is the theoretical base upon which they will build the socialization that will contribute, constrain or have no impact at all on their previous sense of European identity.

Step 2: Socialization Process

Students engage in socialization which will be responsible for strengthening their previous sense of European identity. This will take place in university and non-university context.

Curricular activities in university context. They represent the activities of learning, studying and researching that happen with teachers and colleagues in the school environment. We have identified three different environments: classroom, library and study room. In all of these spaces, students carry out curricular activities which involve learn, study, research and they also socialize with their colleagues.

Non-curricular activities in non-university context: They represent the activities in which students are able to socialise with other people outside the university environments. We have identified three different environments: public squares, pubs and private apartments/dormitories. In these spaces students usually meet and socialise with each other.

In order to explain the socialization in curricular activities in **university context**, we will adapt the theoretical model theorised by Weidman (2006) that he used to conceptualize organizational socialization of students in Higher Education (Figure 8). *“The model suggests that socialization occurs through processes of interpersonal interaction, learning, and social integration that link students with salient normative environments in higher education. Socialization outcomes are the resultant changes*

(values, beliefs, and knowledge) that occur in students." (Weidman, 2006:257). He also quoted that the study *"describes the feelings reported by students about their experiences with peers and others in the college environment that are perceived to have influenced the students' perceptions of themselves in the intellectual and occupational domains."* (Ibidem, 2006:260).

As far as the socialization models related to the **non-university context**, we will use as model the anthropological research made by Professor Ioannis Tsoukalas in 2019. He analyzes the daily life from the point of view of an Erasmus+ student and then he traces some recurring social interactions. He says that after students get used to the new city environments and the university scheduled activities, they start to travel and start to build relationship with both Erasmus colleagues and local people (Tsoukalas, 2019). *"However, it is not until the students have spent some time in their new quarters, when the fluster of the first weeks has settled and an air of normality arrives, that they venture outside the limited perimeter of their residential areas to see what is on offer in the new land. Only then do the students go beyond appearances and start a more thorough and personal exploration."* (Ibidem, 2019:61).

Outcome (Y) : predominantly enhancing, yet constraining or null effect may occur

As we have seen with the several researches on this topic in the state of the art, the final outcome of this process may differ. Some of those researches argued that participating in the Erasmus influence positively the sense of belonging to Europe (Van Mol, 2012; Oborune, 2013; Mitchell, 2012, 2014) others state that it has no effect (Sigalas 2009; Wilson, 2011) or even constraining it (Sigalas, 2010). In general terms, we could argue that living abroad inevitably forces students to socialize with others, native and other Erasmus European students, thus allowing students to either maintain, enhance or in extreme cases to constrain their previous sense of European identity. In sum, socialization processes are key in the contribution of Erasmus mobility to strengthen or not what was the European feeling in every student before they have the experience. Therefore, it is important to stress that every student lives a unique experience which differs from the one of his/her colleagues which explains why outcomes may differ.

3.2.2. COVID-19 and European identity formation during Erasmus: the relevance of contextual factors

Although the causal mechanism offers a more robust explanation for the contribution of Erasmus Programme to European identity formation, contextual factors cannot be discarded from the big picture as they may interfere with constituent parts of the causal mechanism, thus leading to different outcomes. As noted by Falletti and Lynch (2009: 1152), context can be described as *"the relevant aspects of a*

setting (analytical, temporal, spatial, or institutional) in which a set of initial conditions leads to an outcome of a defined scope and meaning via a specified causal mechanism or set of causal mechanisms’.

Having in mind the impact of COVID-19, on the one hand, and of institutional learning, on the other, in our causal mechanism, we believe that a causal explanation requires to be analysed considering both causal mechanism and context since it is the latter that allows the mechanism to produce the outcome. Indeed, according to Falleti and Lynch (*Ibidem*, 1161) causal mechanisms are “*distinct from both inputs and outputs; they are portable and so may operate in different contexts. But depending on the nature and attributes of those contexts, the same causal mechanism could result in different outcomes.*”

In sum, contextual factors affect the causal mechanism, and thus they will influence the outcome. In our case study, we have identified two contextual factors that may affect the causal mechanism: COVID-19 in year one, COVID-19 and institutional learning in year two. Whereas ‘COVID-19’ will be understood as a major sanitarian international contextual factor that will prevent students from socializing, ‘institutional learning’ will be understood as a second contextual factor that will try to restore normality to socialization processes by means of accumulated experience of administrators and experts that will promote change in both university and non-university contexts of socialization (*Ibidem*, 1149).

Hence, in our research, we will expect contextual factors to play a prominent role in our explanation: whereas ‘COVID-19’ will affect the possibility of students to socialize in year one, ‘institutional learning’ will tend to uplift the restrictions imposed to socialization in year two, thus restoring the possibility of students to socialize.

3.2.2.1. The impact of COVID-19 in year one (2019/2020)

Contextual factor: the impact of COVID-19 on the socialization process

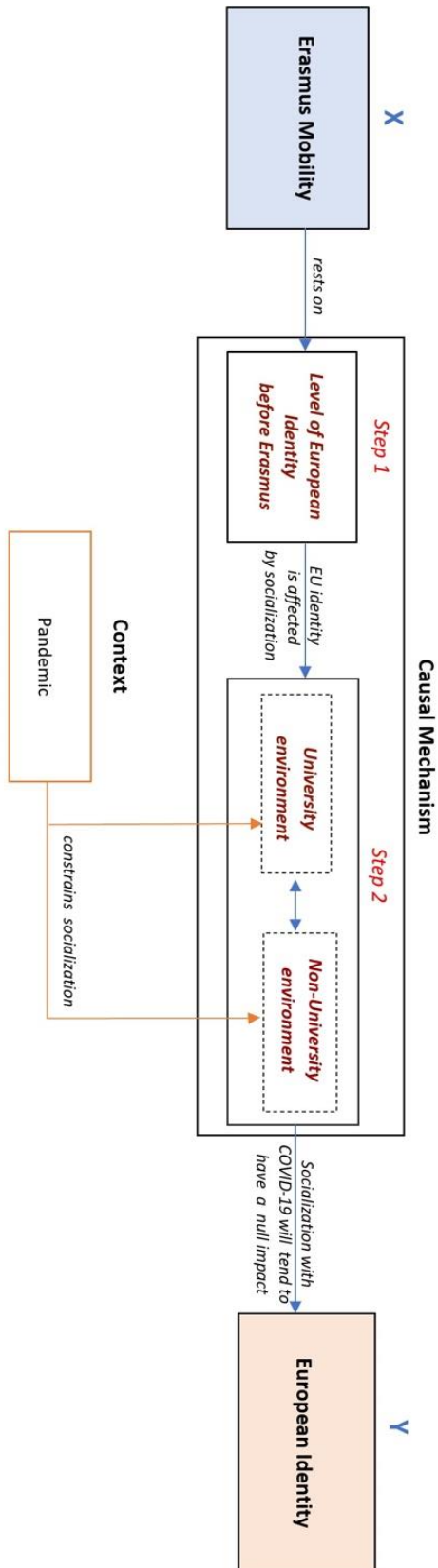
During year one, Erasmus students have lived the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Starting in February 2020, the pandemic spread all over Europe while the member states decided to close the borders and to limit the circulation of people. Not all of them decided to operate the same anti-pandemic measures, however all of them, in order to prevent the virus to spread more and more, decided

to close schools and universities. The pandemic has affected the possibility to socialize in both university (classroom, library and study room) and non-university environments (public square, pubs and private homes). As far as non-university environments are concerned, the limitations were also applied to all the public and private places where people use to gather in groups. Concerts and open-air live events were cancelled. Non-essential shops were also closed, together with cinemas, theatres and museums. The circulation in the public spaces was also limited, allowing people to go out alone or in very small groups with social distancing. The only exception may go for socialization occurred at the private apartments/dormitories.

Outcome (Y): predominantly null impact

In **figure 6** below we can see the application of the causal mechanism to the Erasmus mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic year one. The contextual conditions of the pandemic have affected both environments of socialization. For those students who decided to continue their mobility despite the pandemic, they have found themselves deprived from the possibility of having normal interactions with other colleagues and people in general. This does not mean that they have not been able to socialise at all, but they were certainly really limited in doing so. Since universities and non-universities environments in general were closed, students did not have the possibility to socialize directly with their colleagues at the university. Similarly, in non-university contexts, non-essential shops were closed and the public circulation was strictly limited, depriving them by the interactions with both Erasmus students and local people. With that being said, we can argue that maybe only those lived in apartments with other people had the possibility to still keeping interact with them.

Figure 6: Mechanism of European identity formation during Erasmus with COVID-19 (year one)



The relevance of 'context' in causal mechanisms is very clear in this phase of our analysis. The pandemic context has inevitably affected and constrained the possibility for students to socialize in both university and non-university environments. Hence, we will expect the outcome (Y) to be inevitably affected by the new context. Since processes of socialization have been largely constrained, we will expect the pandemic context to have a null effect on the prior sense of European identity. However, we cannot discard the possibility of socialization experiences, even if limited, to contribute to enhance or constrain prior European identity belonging.

3.2.2.2. The impact of COVID-19 in year two (2020/2021)

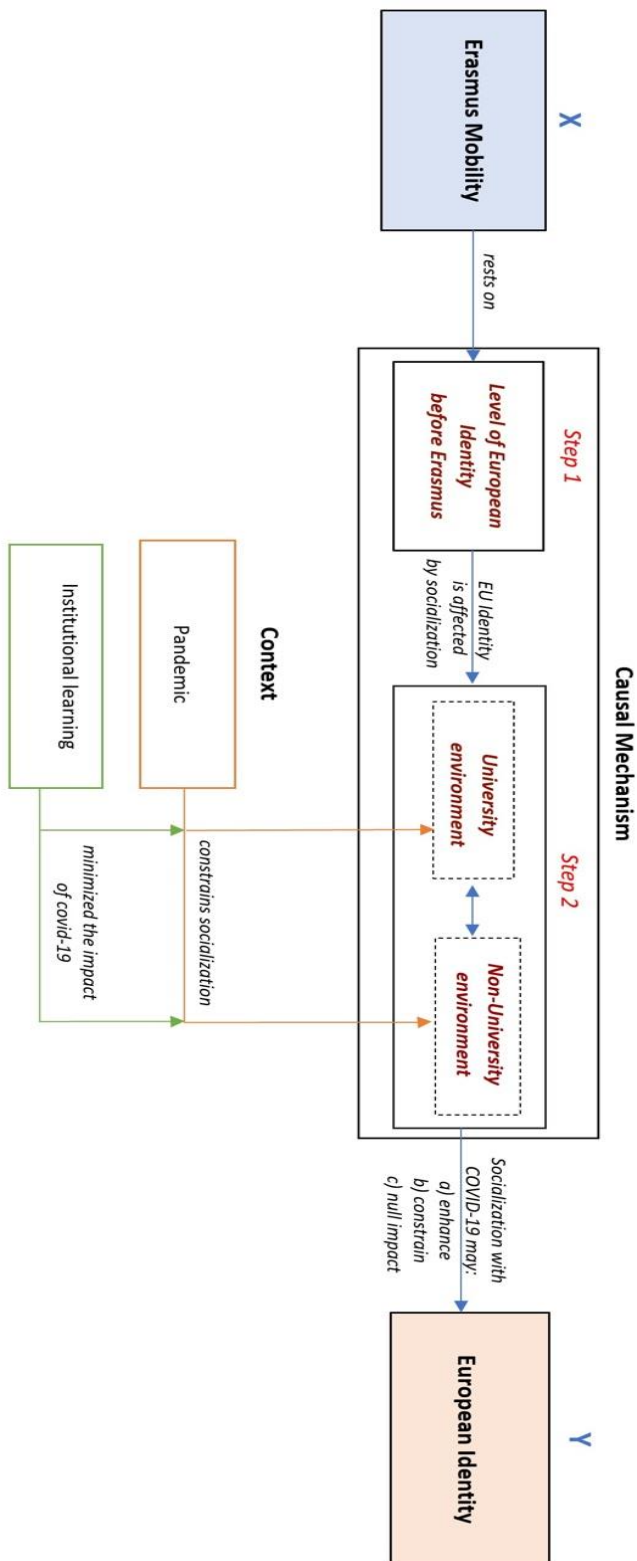
Contextual factors: the impact of COVID-19 and institutional learning on socialization

In **figure 7** below we can see the application of the causal mechanism to the Erasmus mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic year two. Compared to year one, we will expect that this year presents some improvement within the environments of socialization.

In fact both university and non-university environments spaces have started to cope with the new phase of the pandemic. The universities were already prepared to receive students and help them, whether in person or through online platforms. With the use of online classes and support, year two Erasmus+ students have undoubtedly lived a better experience if compared to their previous colleagues. Similarly, when it comes to non-university environments, some spaces were opened again although with some limitations in terms of opening hours (bars, pubs and restaurants). In addition to this, students that have undergone the mobility during 2020/2021 were already aware of the anti-pandemic measures used by the host countries and host universities.

However, it should be noted that this second phase of pandemic was not uniform. By the end of 2020 national governments started to increase the limitations due to the increase of COVID-19. At the beginning of 2021 the vaccination campaign started and it is still ongoing nowadays. During these months that were some increase in the limitations, followed by a decrease that was dependent by the sanitarian situation of the state. Given this, we can argue that students of year two had less problems in terms of coping with the pandemic and socialising with others.

Figure 7: Mechanism of European identity formation during Erasmus with COVID-19 (year two)



Having said that, despite nuanced capacities to adapt to COVID-19, overall, we will expect that institutional learning, i.e, the adaptation of institutions, university and other institutions where socialization takes place, might minimise the impact of the effects of the pandemic in both institutional and non-institutional environments, allowing students to socialize more, thus allowing students to socialize more with others in order to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity.

Outcome (Y): predominantly enhancing, yet null or constraining effect might occur

As we have previously seen, institutional learning minimised the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the socialization process. This means that, if compared to year one, we will expect the Erasmus+ mobility programme during 2020/2021 to allow students to socialize more with others, with native and non-native European people, thus allowing students to socialize more with others in order to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity. Generally speaking, it is possible to say that, although with the pandemic still going, Erasmus+ students of year two were more psychologically prepared to live abroad within such kind of context. Moreover, the use of institutional learning, that minimised the effects of COVID-19 pandemic, helped them to live a less stressful and more enjoyable experience overall.

All these elements together resulted in an easier adaptation to the mobility experience by the Erasmus students. Furthermore, despite some periods of hard lockdowns (for example during Christmas and the first months of 2021), in general national governments have adopted a different strategy to contain the pandemic compared to year one. In fact, throughout 2020/2021 students had more access to both university and non-university spaces, although with social limitations. This may have resulted in an improvement in terms of social interactions, since students were freer to go to spaces of interactions such as: pubs, private houses, public squares and study rooms.

Compared to year one, we will expect that the outcome (Y) will not just be influenced by the contextual conditions of COVID-19, itself but also by the contextual institutional capacity to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, we will expect socialization processes to occur more easily, in both socialization environments, thus allowing students to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity.

3.3. Conclusion

After having analysed how the process of socialization works for Erasmus+ students, we can clearly see how students who have undergone the mobility programme during the pandemic have inevitably been affected by it. Since it is through socialization that students can enhance their sense of belonging to Europe, depriving them from it will inevitably affect the final outcome of the programme. In a normal context we could say that participating in the Erasmus+ programme reinforces the sense of European identity, whether in a small or in a great way. Talking personally about our previous experience, we can say without a doubt that being able to share experiences with other colleagues and native people made me more aware of what exists around me. We felt that my sense of belonging to Europe was strengthened after this experience and it was something that led me to the decision of continuing studying in Portugal. However we do not know if that would have happened in the same way if we were in Erasmus during the pandemic. Every student comes from a different background and has a different way to interact with others. Moreover every student has its own way to live the Erasmus experience. Some of them tend to be more friendly and outgoing while others tend to be more closed. Every research that has analysed this topic presents different outcomes because every study group is unique and different from others.

Analysing the results of the questionnaire in the next chapter will provide us with some data that we will use not just to answer to our research question but we will also understand what students went through during their experiences. Choosing to move abroad during the pandemic period in which we are living is not an easy choice as it was in the past. Students who have decided to continue the mobility experience (year one) or students who have decided to study abroad despite the pandemic still ongoing (year two) have a greater responsibility if compared to the pre-COVID Erasmus students. Living in another country far from home and far from our family, with the constant risk of being infected, is something that not all the people are able to do. Having interests in studying abroad is not enough, we have to consider not just the risks but also the limitations that students live. With that being said, we will see in the next chapter how effectively or not students have coped with the new pandemic context and we will try to obtain some answers that could help us understand what they went through and how all this experience may have impacted on their sense of identification with Europe.

CHAPTER IV: DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Data Presentation

In this part of the thesis we will present the data that we have collected through the questionnaires and we will divide it into two parts: year one and year two. In order to make our research clearer, we will then split our analysis into semesters. We will start from second semester 2019/2020 (year one), then first and second semester 2020/2021 and annual 2020/2021 (year two). Dividing the analysis into various timeframes is important because students may have been affected in different ways by the COVID-19 pandemic depending on their period abroad. For example, students who went during the second semester of 2020/2021 may have experienced different social limitations if compared to their colleagues from the previous semester. At the same time, annual Erasmus+ students, who have been exposed to this context for more time, may have lived dissimilar socialization experiences. With that being said, in the first part of this chapter, we will present the results of the two questionnaire. Then, in the second part, we will discuss our findings and we will see if they correspond to our hypotheses or if we have had a different outcome.

4.1.1. The impact of COVID-19 in year one (2019/2020)

4.1.1.1. Second semester students

As we previously said, the Erasmus+ mobility allows students to interact at the European level, enabling them to socialize with European counterpart and enhancing their sense of European identity. However during the second semester 2019/2020, the COVID-19 pandemic have already spread all over Europe and it had inevitably affected the life of the Erasmus students. Since it was the first pandemic period, it was probably the hardest to live with. At that time, European governments were not prepared to confront this pandemic situation. Many of them imposed hard lockdowns and the closing of all the physical borders, increasing the difficulties for international students of going back home. During this semester, students experience deprived from the socialization mechanisms in both institutional and non-institutional environments. This may had resulted in a weaker effect of the mobility programme to reach its objective of building a common European sense of belonging among its participants.

Step 1: Level of European identity before Erasmus

The students who went abroad during this semester were all third year students, between 21 and 23 years old, 50% of the from Economics, 25% from International Relations and 25% from Political Science. They had already a good sense of European identity before taking part into the mobility programme, in

fact the **50% scaled their sense of European identity in 4 out of 5**, the **25% in 3 out of 5** and the **remaining 25% in 2 out of 5**.

Step 2: Socialization process

During this semester, the **75% students have lived with other people**, while **the 25% did not**. Among the ones who lived with other people, **66% lived with Erasmus students** and the **33% lived with local students**. In terms of socialization, **“Erasmus students” reported the highest value, with an average value of 4.75 out of 5**, while both **“local non-students people”** and **“international non-students people”** reported the equally **the lowest value of 1.25 out of 5**.

As far as the environments in which they socialized the most, we can find the very different values. On average, the most used spaces for socialization were **“private apartments/dormitories”** and **“pubs or cafes”** with an average value of **4 out of 5 for the first one and 3.25 out of 5 for the second one**. The least used were “libraries” and “study rooms”, reporting equally **1 out of 5**.

Finally, to the question *“to what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native or/and foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European Identity?”* **50% answered by giving a value of 4 out of 5** and the remaining part by giving **5 out of 5**, resulting in an average value of **4.5 out of 5**.

Contextual factor: the impact of COVID-19 on socialization

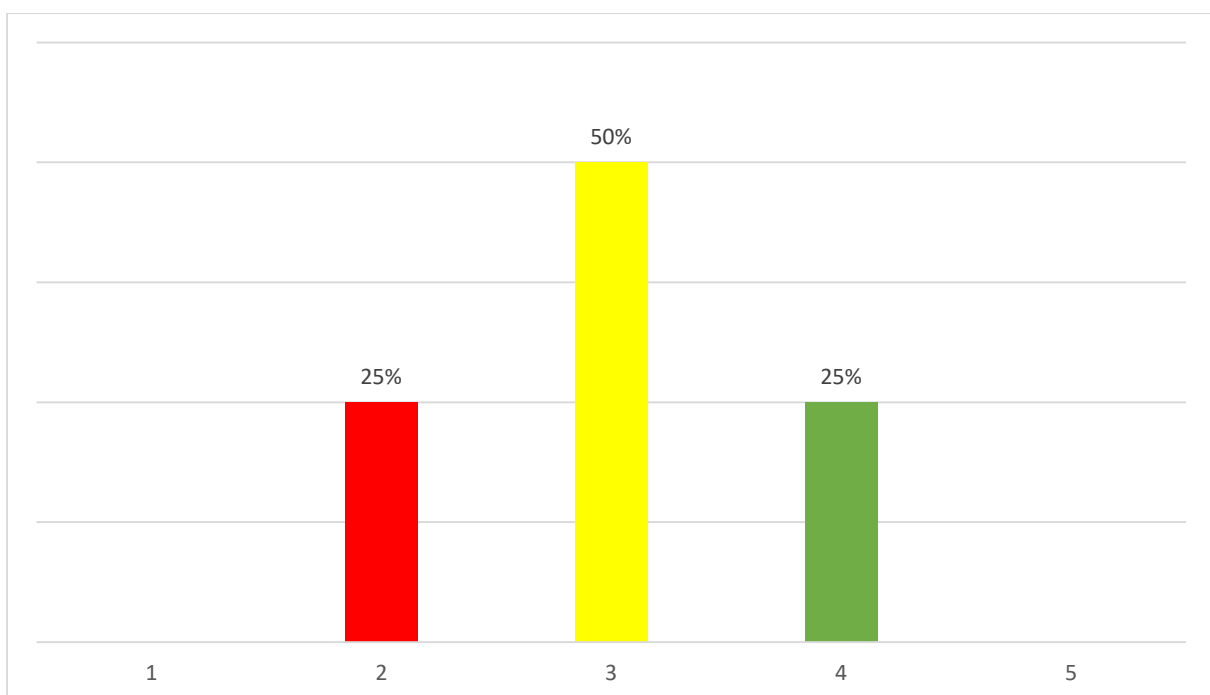
When it comes to the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of students to socialize, **100% of the students agreed that the security measures imposed by the governments and universities prevented them from socializing**. Regarding the pandemic impact in university and non-university contexts of socialization, we have a clear situation on the first one while on the second one it is not so straightforward. Overall, in all the three university spaces that we have identified in our research, the COVID-19 impacted very negatively, with average value of **4.75 out of 5** in **“study rooms”** and **“libraries”** and **4.5 out of 5 in “classrooms”**, contrasting with non-university context, the impact was less negatively felt but still severe on non-university environments, except for dormitories. **“Pubs or cafes”** were the most negatively impacted by the pandemic, reporting an average value of **4.25 out of 5**, followed by **“public squares”** with **4 out of 5** and **“private apartments/dormitories”** with **2.5 out of 5**.

Outcome (Y) : enhancing effect

Despite COVID-19 pandemic context, the outcome of the Erasmus+ students of this semester was positive. First of all, in all the cases there was an improvement in the European identity formation if we

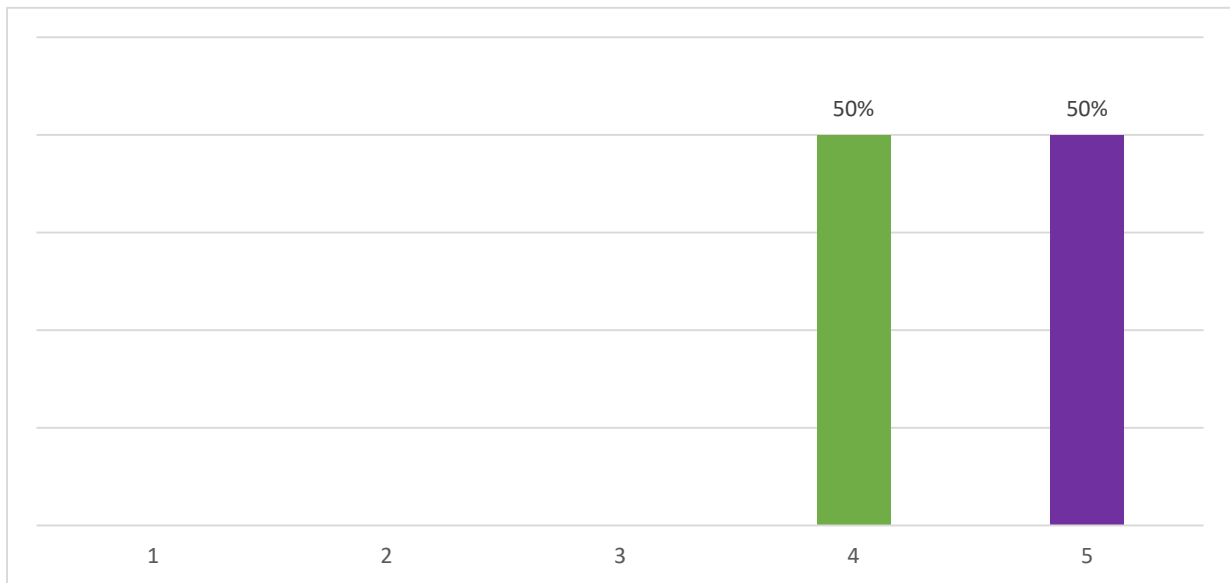
compare the pre and post-Erasmus experience. **50% of the group increased by 1 value their sense of European identity** by the end of the mobility programme while **the other 50% by 2 values**. Among the first group, 100% of the students have lived with other Erasmus people and have socialized more with Erasmus people. Among the second group, 50% have lived with “local students” and socialized the most with “Erasmus students” while the remaining 50% lived with “Erasmus students” and socialized the most with other Erasmus students. More specifically, we can see the comparative values of European Identity belonging before and after Erasmus in **Figure 8** and **Figure 9** below.

Figure 8: Sense of European identity of year one (%) (pre-Erasmus)



Source: author's own

Figure 9: Sense of European identity of year one (%) (post-Erasmus)



Source: author's own

The same goes for the question *“How much do you feel a citizen of Europe after Erasmus?”*, with 100% of the students improving their sense of belonging, though in different degrees with 75% increasing from “much” to “very much” and 25% from “not much” to “much”. Furthermore, all the students see the added values of being European. Regarding this matter, students commented that *“being able to share the same values but with different people”* and *“travelling easily”* are the most useful things that they find in the added values of being European.

4.1.2. The impact of COVID-19 in year two (2020/2021)

4.1.2.1. First semester students

In year two, university students, and more generally European people, have already get used to the pandemic context. Throughout 2020 people experienced hard lockdowns with social limitations, with the latters that were quite lifted during the summer period in order to promote tourism. This lifting of security measured remained until December 2020, when more severe measures were introduced again to limit the circulation of people during Christmas. The measures remained throughout the whole first semester 2020/2021 and also during the first part of the second semester. At the same time, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign started in Europe during the first months of 2021 and it is still going. The particularity of this academic year is that all the Erasmus+ participants were already aware of the pandemic context when they decided to apply for the mobility programme. European universities were prepared to receive Erasmus students and by the use of online classes and anti-COVID measures within

the university environments (hand sanitizers, masks and social distancing) they tried to make students feel as comfortable as possible. In any case, as for year one, the process of socialization was inevitably affected by the pandemic. The only difference is that it was minimised by the institutional learning and we will see how the latter has influenced the context.

Step 1: Level of European identity before Erasmus

Students who went abroad during this semester were all third year students. The same percentage division goes for the study course, with 50% coming from International Relations, 33% from Marketing and 17% from Economics. On average they had already a good sense of European identity before taking part into the mobility programme. **33% of them registered a 4 out 5 value** during the pre-Erasmus period, **33% registered a 3 out of 5** and the remaining part registered **a 2 out of 5**.

Step 2: Socialization process

When it comes to socialization processes, we can identify a clear distinction between university and non-university environments. First of all, they reported a total **average value of 4.25 out of 5 for university environments** and **2.75 out of 5 for non-university environments**. Within the first group environments “classrooms” and “libraries” reported **the lowest value with 1.75 out of 5** in both spaces. On the other hand, non-university environments, in particular “pubs or cafes” and “private apartments/dormitories” were the places in which they socialized the most, with the latter **valued 4.75 out of 5** by the students while the other one reported an average value of **4.25 out of 5**. **66% lived with Erasmus students and 34% with local students**.

They have also socialized the most with **“Erasmus students”, with a value of 4.75 out of 5**, followed by “local students”, **with a value of 3.75 out of 5**. Regarding this data on “Erasmus students”, **83% evaluated it with a 5 out of 5** while the remaining **17% with a 4 out of 5**. There was almost no socialization at all with local and international non-students people, with the first group reporting a value of 2.5 out of 5 and the second one 1.75 out of 5.

Finally, to the question *“to what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native or/and foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European Identity?”* **33% answered by giving a value of 5 out of 5**, another **33% by giving a 3 out of 5**, 16,5% by giving a 4 out of 5 and the remaining percentage by giving a 2 out of 5 and the remaining part by giving 5 out of 5. The total average data is **3.6 out of 5**.

Contextual factors: the impact of COVID-19 and institutional learning on socialization

After this period of lockdown European countries decided to keep some of the previous security measures, for example the closing of gyms, theatres and cinemas. In sum, **83% of them agreed that the security measures imposed by the governments and universities to cope with the pandemic prevented them from socializing**, while the remaining percentage did not agree with it. Indeed, this was a general trend that was used all across the EU member states since there was an increase number of COVID-19 infections during the beginning of 2021. Hence, despite some minor differences, all the Erasmus students have experienced the same security measures during this semester.

87% of students evaluated positively both host country and university adaptation to cope with the pandemic, while the remaining evaluated it negatively. However, in 17% of the cases the security measures imposed remained the same, while in the other cases they changed and become more severe. As far as the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic, it has equally influenced the ability to socialize with “host country natives” and “non-European people”, reporting in both cases a **value of 3.75 out of 5**, while **“other European people”** reported an average value of **3 out of 5**.

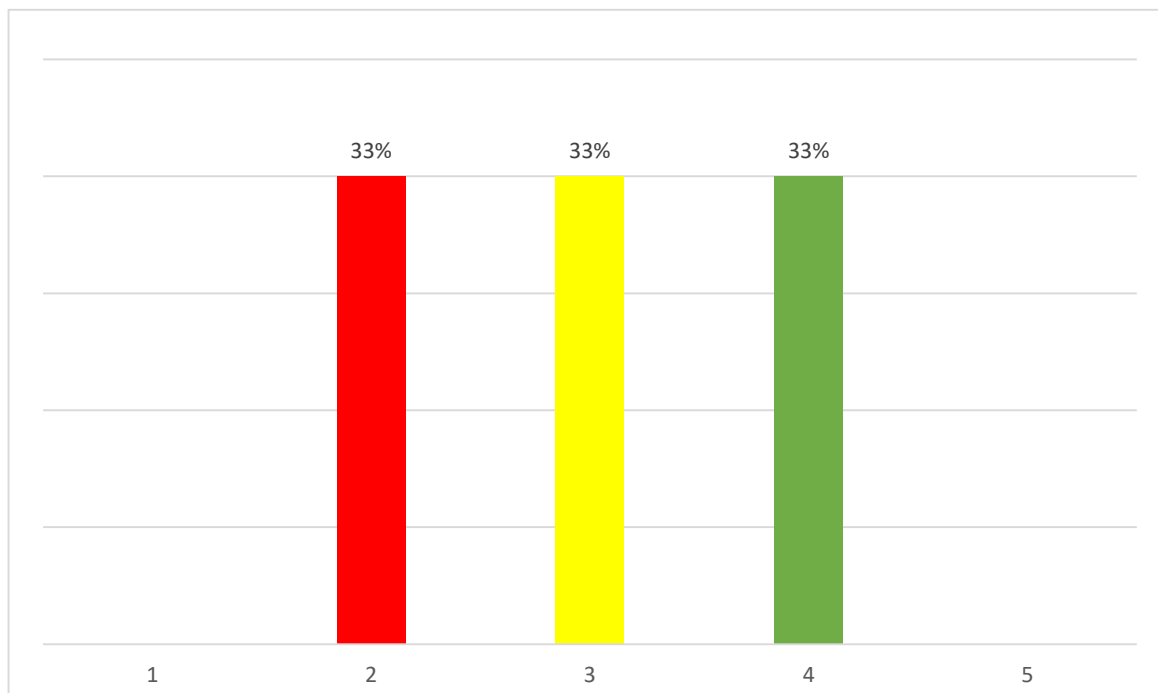
Regarding the pandemic impact on university and non-university spaces for socialization, we have a similar situation to year one regarding the university environments. In fact the pandemic impacted very negatively in all the three spaces, with values between, in particular “classrooms” with an average value of 4.75 out of 5 followed by “study rooms” and “libraries” with a value of 4.25 out of 5. On the other hand, non-university environments were less affected if compared to the previous year. The less affected were “private apartments/dormitories” which reported a value of **1.75 out of 5**, then **“pubs or cafes” with an average value of 2.5 out of 5**, while **“public squares” 3 out of 5**.

Outcome (Y) : null effect and enhancing effect

In general, the outcome in terms of European identity formation during this semester was positive. **50% of the students remained with the same value also after the mobility programme, while for the other 50% it has increased of 1 value for 33% of them, 2 values for the 33% and even 3 values for the remaining percentage**. More specifically, among the group of students which remained with the same value, 67% lived with other Erasmus students while the remaining part with local students. 100% of them socialized the most with other Erasmus students.

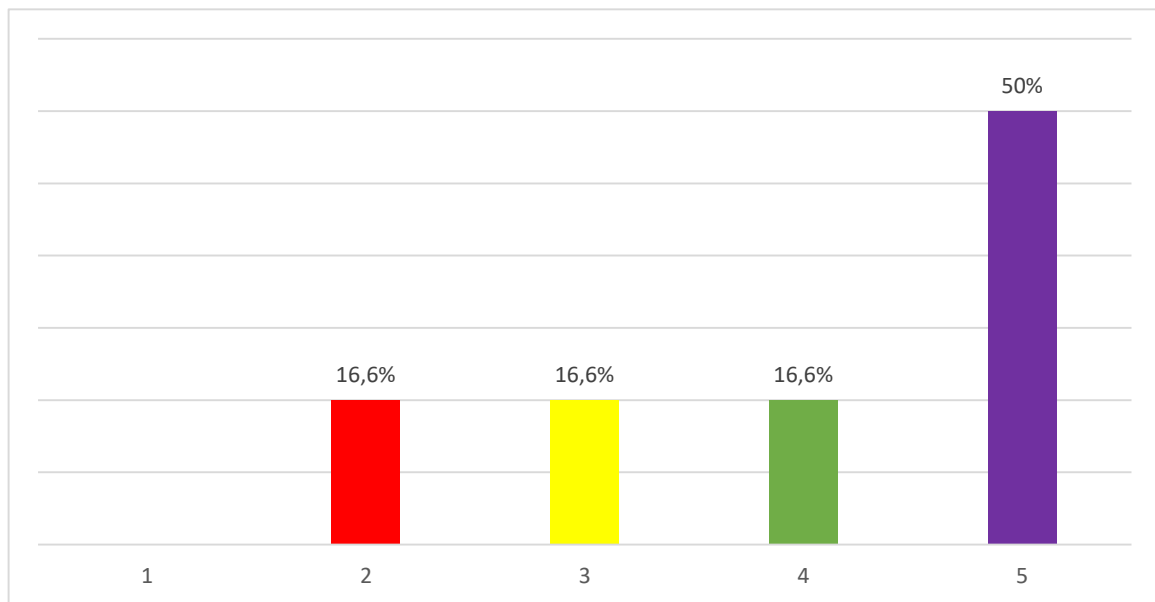
Among the group of students which increased by 2 its European identity value, 100% lived with local students and socialized the most with Erasmus students. As far as the two remaining groups, in both cases 100% of the students lived with other Erasmus students and socialized the most with Erasmus students. **83% of the students of this semester see the added value of being European**, while the remaining part does not. Regarding this matter, students commented similarly to the students of previous year, mentioning also “freedom of movement” and “equal rights regarding health care and education”.

Figure 10: Sense of European identity of first semester year two (pre-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

Figure 11: Sense of European identity of first semester year two (post-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

4.1.2.2. Second semester students (2020/2021)

Step 1: Level of European identity before Erasmus

75% of students who went abroad during this semester were third year students, while the 25% were second year students. In terms of age, we have an equal distribution in terms of percentage among the 4 different options, that is to say 25% for each one. 75% of them came from International Relations, while the remaining part from Political Science. In terms of European identity pre-Erasmus, **25% had a sense of it evaluated 4 out of 5, 25% 5 out of 5, 25% 2 out of 5 and the remaining percentage 1 out of 5.**

Step 2: Socialization process

They socialized in equal terms with “Erasmus students” and “local non-students people” (both **evaluated 3 out of 5**), followed by “local students”, 2.25 out of 5, and no socialization at all with “international non-students people” (evaluated 1 out of 5). Regarding the level of interactions with “Erasmus students”, 50% of second semester students evaluated it as 4 out of 5 while the other half, it was equally evaluated in 1 out of 5 for the 25% and 3 out 5 for the remaining part.

As far as the environments in which they socialized the most, those reported a **total average value of 2.4 for university environments** and **3.25 for non-university** ones. University environments like **“classrooms”** and **“libraries”** had an increased value if compared to the previous semester (**both evaluated 3 out of 5**), while non-university environments like **“pubs or cafes”** and **“private apartments/dormitories”** had a decrease value, with an evaluation of **4 out of 5 for the first one** and **3 out of 5 for the second one**. **“Study rooms”** was the environment in which they socialized the least, with a **value of 1.25 out of 5**.

Finally, to the question *“to what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native or/and foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European Identity?”* **50%** answered by giving a **value of 4 out of 5**, **25%** by giving a **2 out of 5** and the remaining part by giving a **1 out of 5** for a total average value of 2.75 out of 5. In the end, 100% of them agreed that the security measures imposed by the governments and universities to cope with the pandemic prevented them from socializing.

Contextual factors: the impact of COVID-19 and institutional learning on socialization

As far as the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic, it has influenced the most the ability to socialize with “host country natives” (4 out of 5), followed by “other European people” and “non-European people”, both with a value of 2.25 out of 5.

Regarding the pandemic impact on university and non-university spaces for socialization, we have a **general negative impact in all of these spaces**. In the university environments, we have the lowest value for “libraries” which registered a 4.75 out of 5, while “classrooms” and “study rooms” were both of them evaluated 4 out of 5.

As far as the non-university environments, the most negatively influence by the pandemic context was “pubs or cafes” with a value of 4 out 5, **followed by “private apartments/dormitories” with a value of 3.25 out of 5** and **“public squares” with a value of 3 out 5**.

Finally, when it comes to institutional learning, all students evaluated positively both host country and university adaptation to cope with the pandemic. However, in all the cases the security measures imposed at the host universities **did not change throughout the semester**.

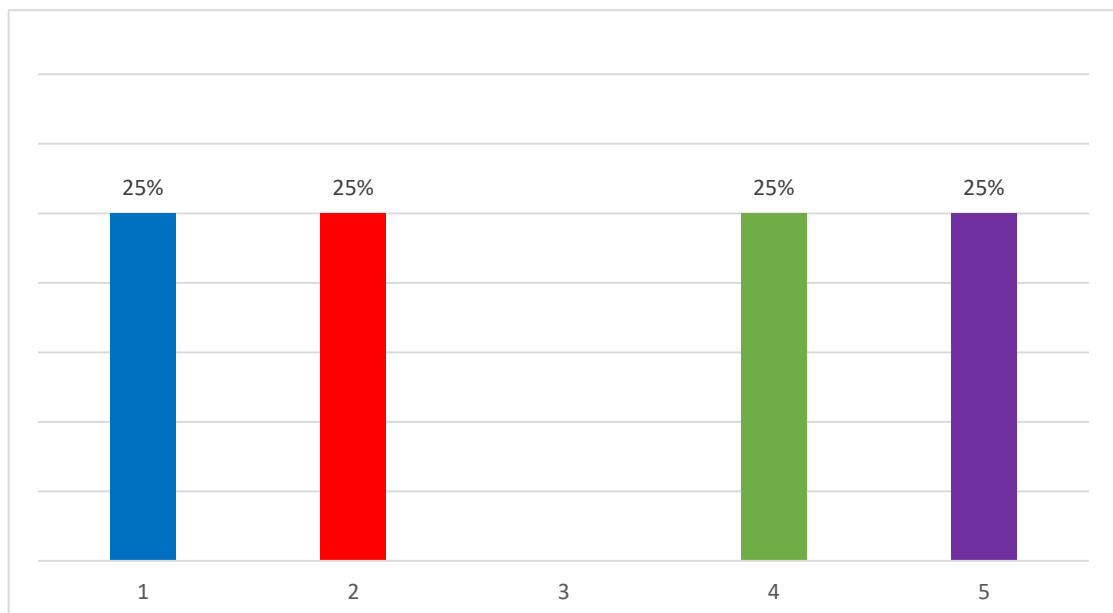
Outcome (Y): null impact

For the 100% of the students of this semester the feeling of European identity remained the same throughout the mobility programme. We have a similar situation also for the question

“How much do you feel a citizen of Europe after Erasmus?”, with the totality of the answers that remained the same as the ones given for the pre-Erasmus period. However, all the students see the added value of being European. Regarding this matter, students mentioned the importance of “*political, cultural and economic exchanges*” and having “a set of shared values and similarities that make a great community, while keeping national characteristics”.

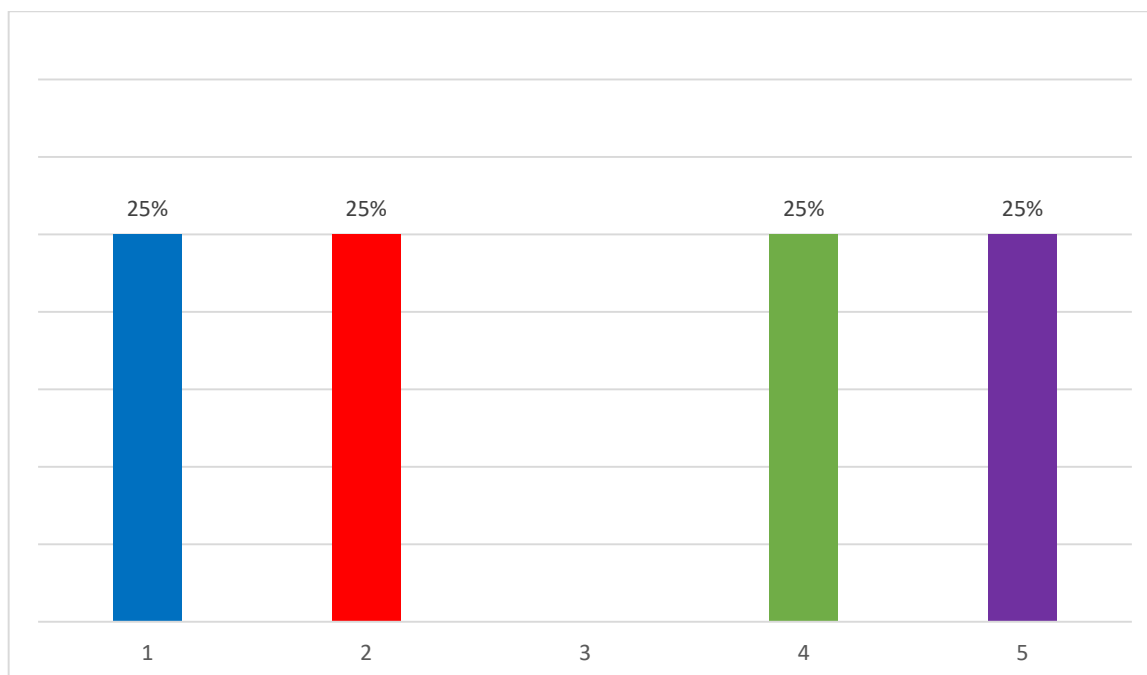
However, we should note that the group of students of this semester was the one that socialized the least with other Erasmus students. 25% did not live with others and socialized the most with “local non-students people”, 25% of them the lived with “international non-students people” socialized the most with “local non-students people”, another 25% of them lived with “Erasmus students” and socialized the most with other Erasmus people while the remaining 25% did not move to the host country and did not socialize at all with any of the categories of people.

Figure 12: Sense of European identity of second semester year two students
(pre-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

Figure 13: Sense of European identity of second semester year two students
(post-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

4.1.2.3. Annual students

Step 1: Level of European identity before Erasmus

75% of the students who went abroad for the annual mobility were third year, while the 25% were second year. The same percentage goes for the study course, with a 75% coming from International Relations and the 25% from Political Science. On average they had all a good sense of European identity before taking part into the Erasmus+, with the **50% evaluated this sense of identity 2 out of 5** and the other **50% evaluated it 4 out of 5**.

Step 2: Socialization process

In all the cases students stayed abroad for the whole academic year. **66% lived with "Erasmus students"**, followed by "local students" with 34%. The category of people with **whom the** socialized the most was **"Erasmus students"** with an average value of **4.25 out of 5** followed by "local non-students people" and "international non-students people", both reporting an average value of 2 out of 5.

Regarding the environments in which they socialized the most, **university** reported a **total average value of 1.5 out of 5** and **non-university** reported a value of **4.5 out of 5**. In particular **"private**

apartments/dormitories” and **“public squares”** received both the highest value, reporting **4.75 out of 5**. University environments, as we mentioned, were instead negatively evaluated, with only **“classrooms”** reporting an average **2 out of 5** while the remaining spaces reported a 1.25 out of 5.

Finally, to the question *“to what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native or/and foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European Identity?”* **50% answered by giving a value of 4 out of 5, 25% by giving a 5 out of 5** and the remaining percentage by giving a **3 out of 5**, resulting in an **average value of 4 out of 5**.

Contextual factors: the impact of COVID-19 and institutional learning on socialization

All the students evaluated positively host university adaptation to cope with the pandemic while, for the host country adaptation, 50% evaluated it as “bad” and the other 50% evaluated it as “good”. In half of the cases the security measures imposed by the host university changed during their stay, becoming more severe, while for the other half they did not change. As far as the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic, it has negatively influenced all the three kinds of socialization group, with a score of **5 out of 5 for the “host natives” group, 4 out of 5** for “other European people” and 3.5 out of 5 for “non-European people”.

Regarding the pandemic impact on university and non-university spaces for socialization, we can see a very negative impact on the university spaces, reporting **an average of 4.6 out of 5** in all the three different spaces. “Classrooms” and “libraries” were both evaluated with a 5 out of 5, while “study rooms” with a 4 out of 5. Regarding the non-university environments, the total average reported was 2.9 out of 5, with the least influenced space by the pandemic was “private apartments/dormitories”, which reported a value of 2 out of 5, while **“pubs of cafes” was the most influenced with a value of 3.75 out of 5**.

As we previously mentioned, the role of institutional learning was to reduce the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic context in terms of socialization. During year two, university and non-university environments were already prepared to cope with the pandemic situation, and so the Erasmus students. This resulted in a slight increase in terms of social interactions if compared to the results that we got from year one. On the other hand, we have also seen that the security measures were not relieved over time, thus, the positive impact of institutional learning was limited because students still spent most of their time at home and they still had online classes, thus not allowing them to socialize within university environments.

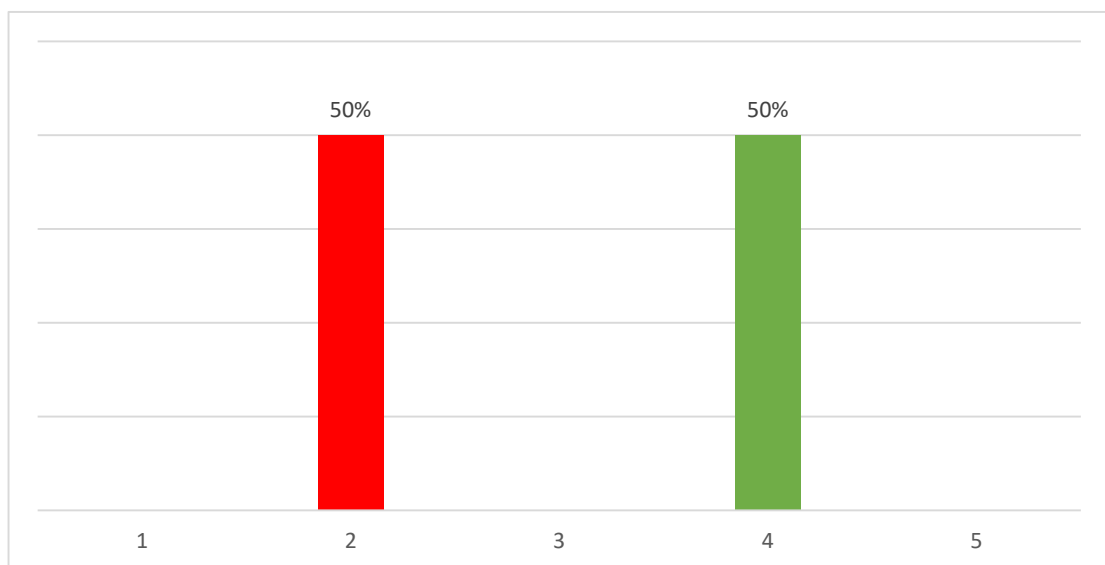
Outcome (Y): enhancing effect

As we can see in **figure 14** and **15** below, the sense of European identity of the **100% of the students has increased by 1 value** with 50% passing from **2 to 3** and **50% from 4 to 5**.

For those who had a pre-Erasmus European identity value of 2, 50% lived with “local students” and socialized the most with “local students”, while the remaining 50% lived with “Erasmus students” and socialized the most with “Erasmus students”. For those who had a pre-Erasmus European identity value of 4 out of 5, 50% did not live with other people and socialized the most with “local students”, while the remaining part lived with “Erasmus students” and socialized the most with “Erasmus students”.

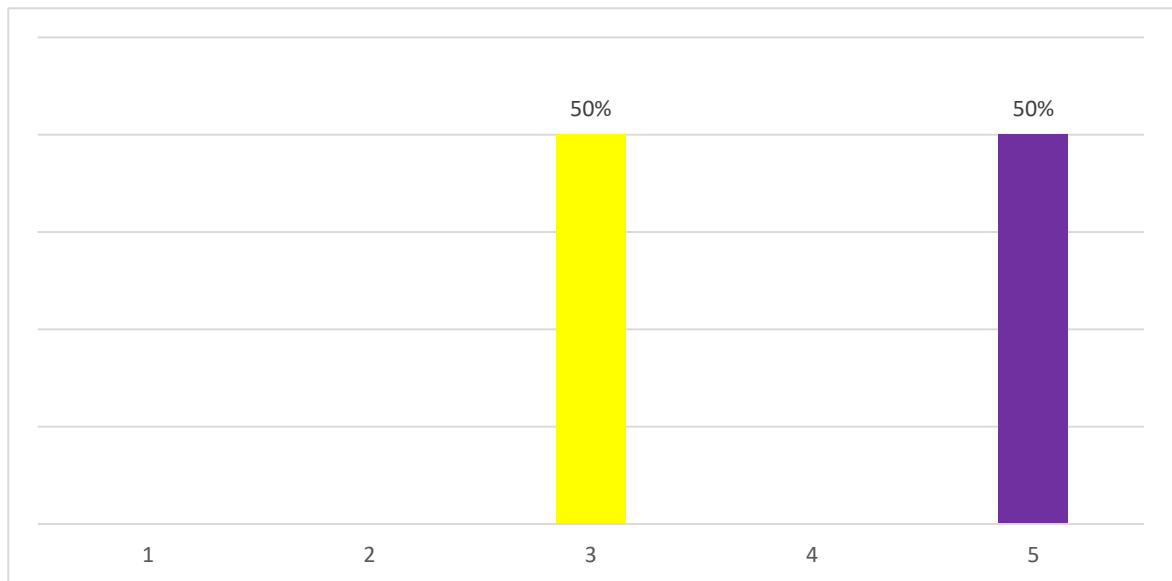
Furthermore, 100% of them agreed with the sentence “*The more time I have spent abroad during the Erasmus+, the more I feel closer to the European identity*”. Furthermore, all the students see the added value of being European, commenting that the annual Erasmus+ experience was an “amazing and unique experience in spite of all the challenges (COVID-19 related or not)”.

Figure 14: Sense of European identity of annual year two students (pre-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

Figure 15: Sense of European identity of annual year two students (post-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

4.2. Data discussion

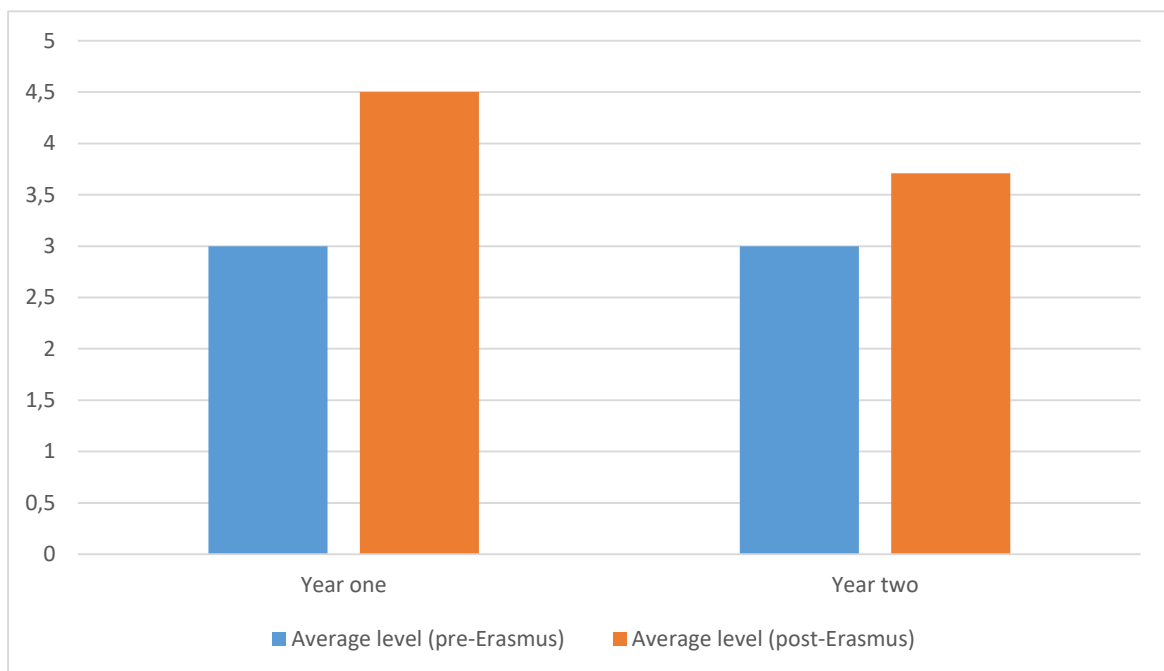
Based on the data that we have collected through the two questionnaires, we will now discuss our findings. The data discussion will be focused on the main aspects of our research that are the causal mechanisms that may enhance the sense of European identity and the impact that COVID-19 pandemic had on the socialization aspects among the Erasmus population. Another important aspects will be the analysis of the context and, for year two, also the analysis of the institutional learning.

In sum, by means of comparison of the findings in year one and year two, we will shed light on the explanatory power of the causal mechanism suggested in this research to assess if COVID-19 has affected (or not) the contribution of Erasmus programme (X) to European identity formation (Y). For the sake of clarity, in this part of the data discussion we will use some a figure for each element of our analysis. This will allow us to better explain and discuss our findings.

We start with **figure 16**, which shows the average level of European identity in both pre and post-Erasmus period. As we can see, both year one and two students already possessed a good level of European identity before taking part into the mobility programme. This is an important element that must be defined in every research about this specific topic because it is not possible to understand how the Erasmus programme may impact on the European identity formation without knowing what was its value during the pre-Erasmus period. In our case, we can clearly show how the participation in this mobility

programme, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been able to enhance the average sense of European identity of its participants. In fact, the final outcome was generally positive. If we look at **figure 16**, we can see that the average value pre-Erasmus of both year one and two students was 3 out of 5. After the mobility period, the average level increased, reaching a value of 4.5 out of for year one students, and 3.7 out of 5 for year two students.

Figure 16: Identity scale before and after Erasmus (total average)



Source: author's own

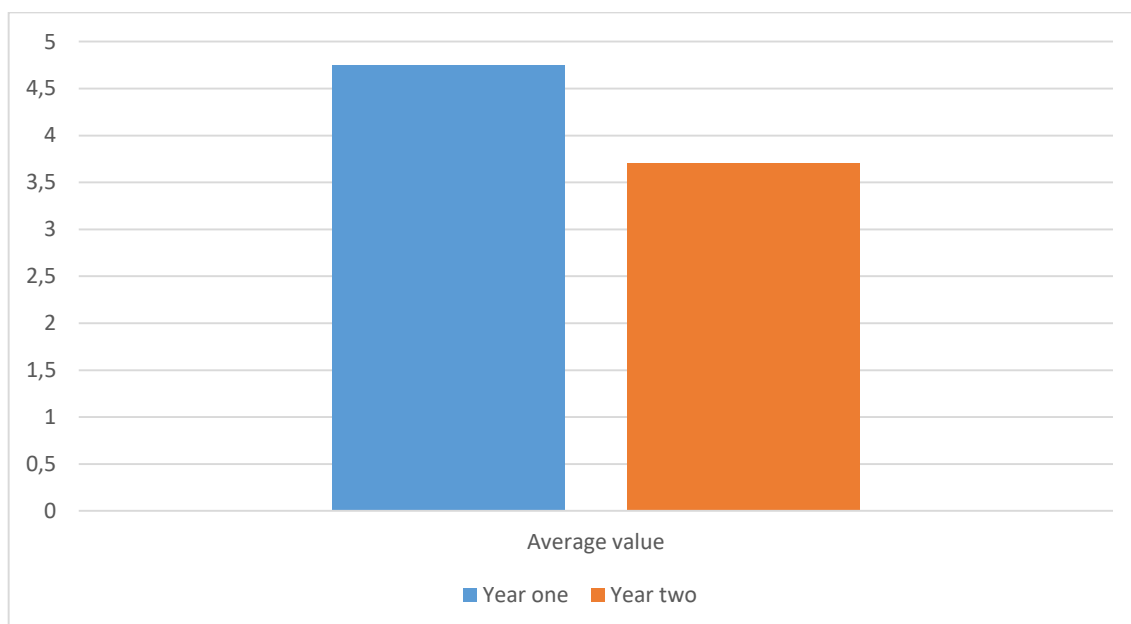
In **figure 17** we can see what role plays the socialization process in the European identity formation during the Erasmus+ mobility programme. Thanks to this mobility programme, students from different European countries get in touch with each other. Although coming from different countries and cultures, they live for a certain period in the same place within the same context. During the time spent abroad, students generally create groups of friends with both Erasmus and local people in which they share experiences. Through the process of socialization, they may realize that there is a common “link” that bond them together despite coming from different countries and cultures. Depending on how strong a student think this link is, it will results on his/her feeling of a common identity that exists among the different European students, which is what we call European identity. Since every Erasmus student lives

a unique experience during the mobility programme, there will be some students who feel more this identity formation process, while others may not feel it at all.

With that being said, we can see that the results from the questionnaire confirm the importance of the process of socialization for the process of European identity formation. This element (step 2), along with the previous sense of European identity (step 1), composes the causal mechanism which determine the final outcome (Y).

However, as we previously mentioned in the thesis, the final outcome is not determined by the causal mechanisms alone but instead it is determined by the interaction between causal mechanisms and context (COVID-19 pandemic). According to our data, both year one and year two students agreed with the fact that the ability to socialize with other people, native and/or foreign, has reinforced their sense of European identity, reporting an average value of **4.75 out of 5** for the first group and **3.7 out of 5** for the second group of students.

Figure 17: To what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native or/and foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European Identity (scale 1 to 5, being 1 “not at all” and 5 “a lot”)?

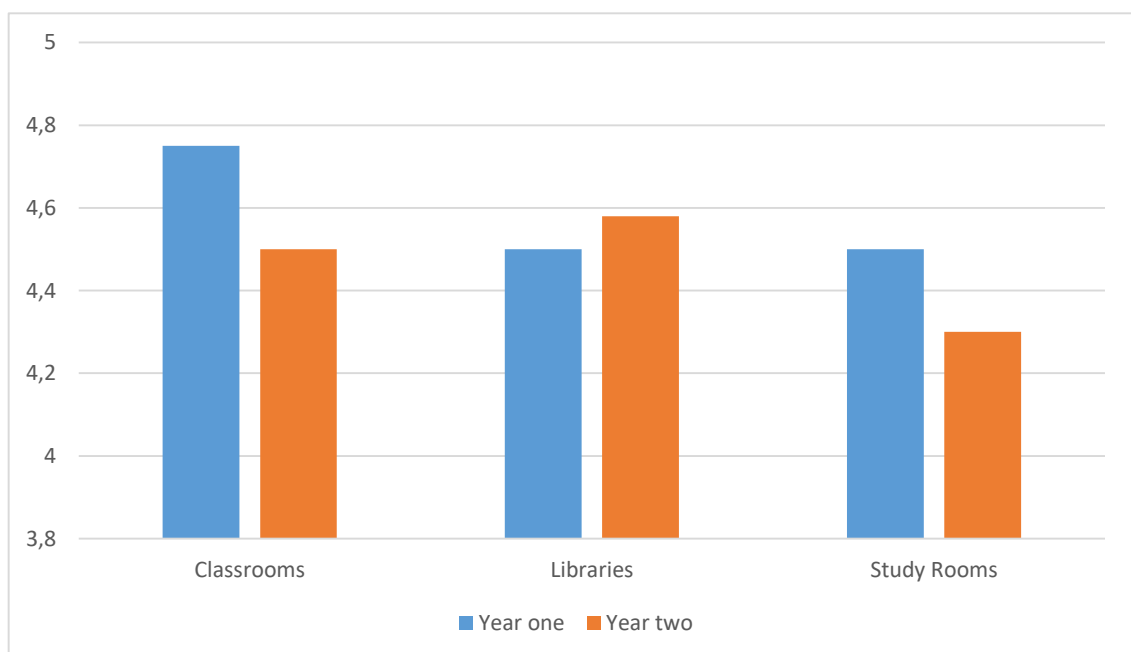


Source: author's own

Figure 18 and **19** show the influence of COVID-19 pandemic in university and non-university environments. In general terms we could argue that, during both year one and two, these environments have been negatively influenced by the pandemic context. In particular, during year one, these environments have been evaluated the lowest, which is understandable since there was no institutional learning during that first pandemic period. If we look at the average value in both spaces, we can see that it was negatively evaluated, reporting a total average of **4.58 out of 5 in university environments and 3.6 out of 5 in non-university environments.**

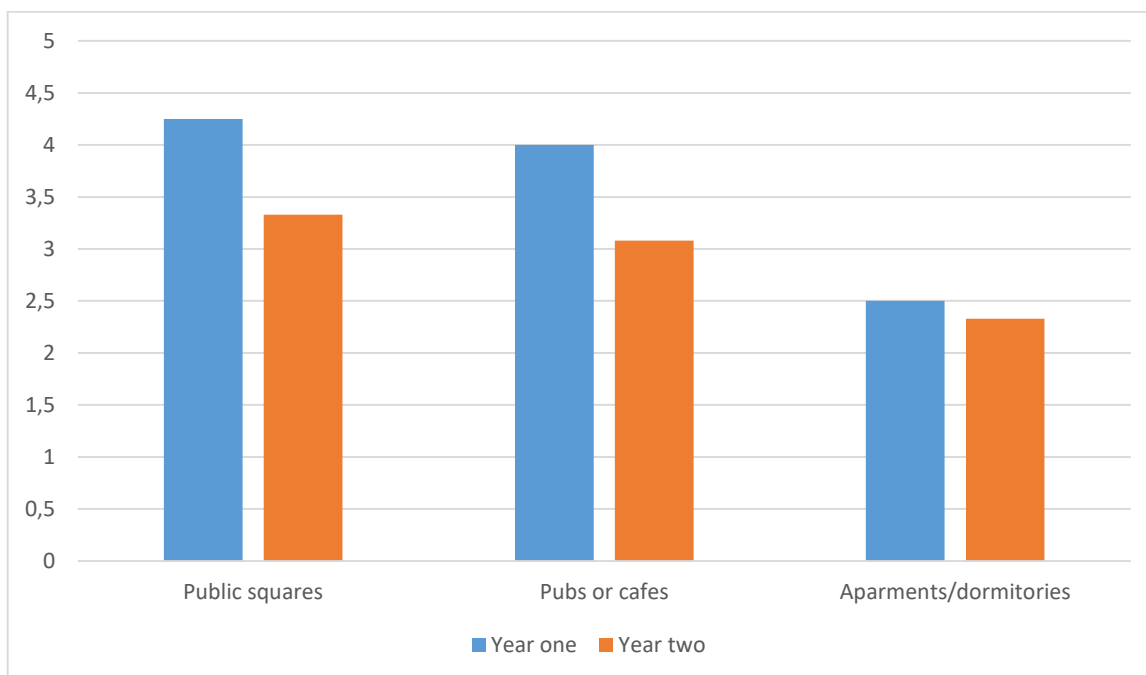
On the other hand during year two, thanks to institutional learning, we can see that the students' evaluation of these environments has improved a little, in particular the non-university ones. The average value of the **three university sub-spaces is 4.5 out of 5** while for the other three **non-university spaces it is 2.8 out of 5**. In this case we could argue that institutional learning had a positive impact on the pandemic context, however we have also to remember that, according to the students, anti-pandemic security measures were not relieved, thus, not completely enabling the positive effects of institutional learning.

Figure 18: How much have the university contexts of socialization been affected by COVID-19 (scale 1 to 5, being 1 “not at all” and 5 “very much”)?



Source: author's own

Figure 19: ‘How much have the non-university contexts of socialization been affected by COVID-19’ (scale 1 to 5, being 1 “not at all” and 5 “very much”)?



Source: author’s own

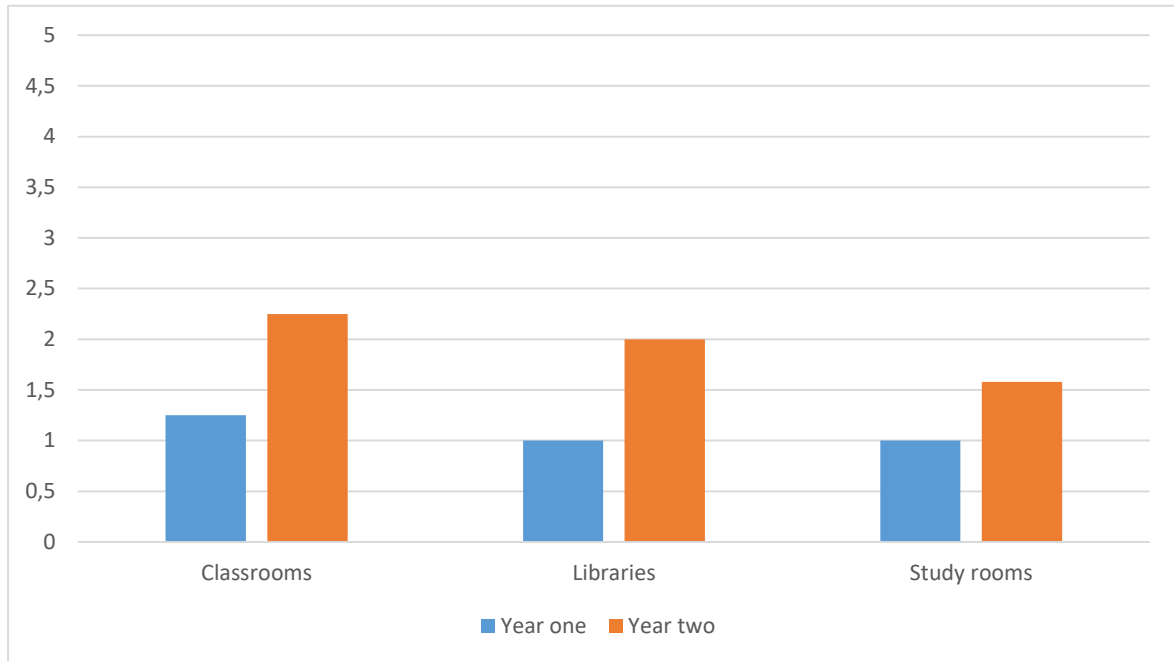
Figures 20 and **21** show what were the most and the least used environments of socialization. As we could imagine, university environments were the least used, since the anti-pandemic restrictions forced universities to close their public and closed spaces during and promoted the use of online classes. Thanks to institutional learning, year two students have been able to socialize more in these university spaces although their social interactions were still heavily limited, as we can see from their evaluations. The average value of university environments during year **one was 1.1 out of 5** while in **year two it was 1.9 out of 5**.

On the other hand, non-university environments were the most used for students to socialize. Especially during year two, we can see that all three sub-spaces that we have identified were equally used by Erasmus students to socialize. The average value of non-**university environments during year one was 2.6 out of 5** while during year two it was 4.1 out of 5. In particular we would like to focus on the **“private apartments/dormitories”**, which reported **a high value of 4 out of 5 during year one and 4.2 out of during year two**. In fact, this sub-space has a particular value, since all the students were inevitably force to stay at home for most of their time, especially during year

one. For this reason we could argue that the majority of social interactions happened within this space, whether with housemates or other invited friends.

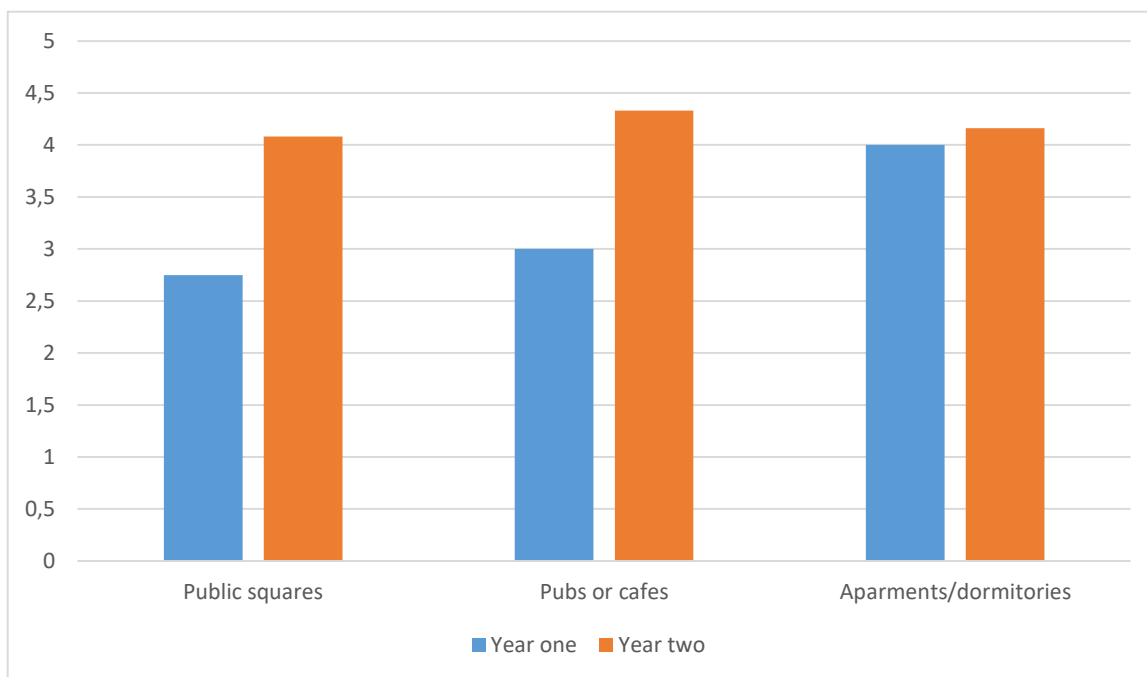
Figure 20: ‘In which university context did you socialize the most?’

(scale 1 to 5, being 1 “very low” and 5 “very high”)



Source: author's own

Figure 21: ‘In which non-university context did you socialize the most?’
(scale 1 to 5, being 1 “very low” and 5 “very high”)

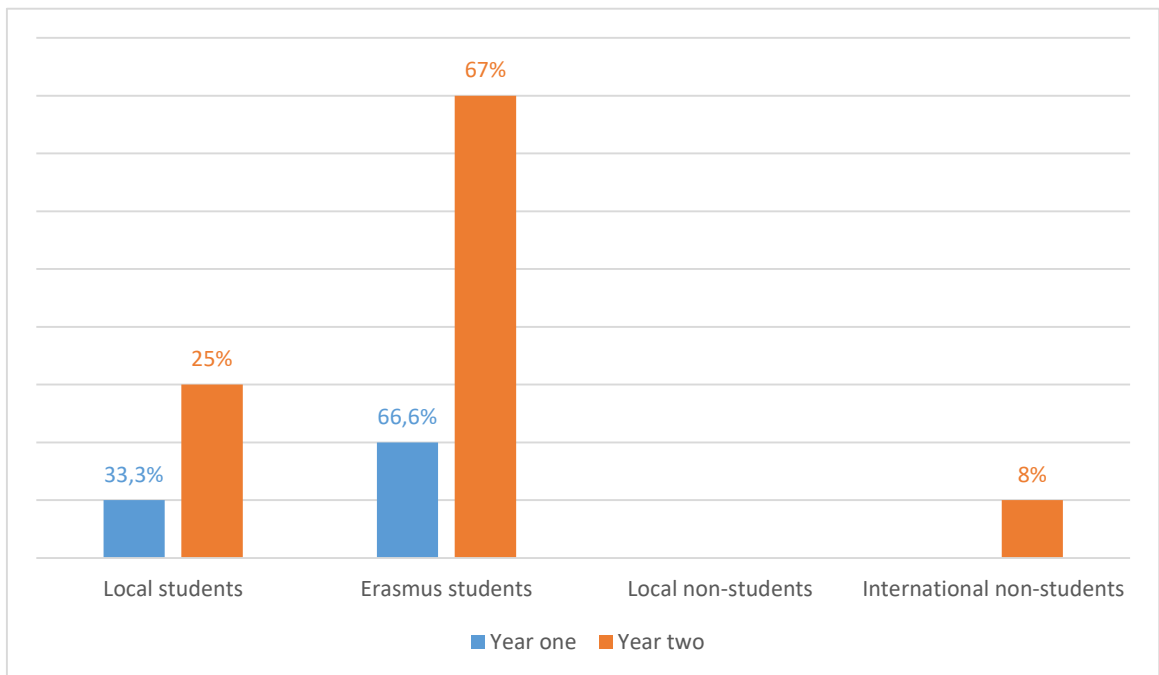


Source: author’s own

Following what we were previously saying on the role of “private apartments/dormitories”, in **figure 22** we can see with what kind of people our group of EEG Erasmus+ students lived with while forced to stay at home. “Erasmus students” reported the highest value during both year one and two with an **average of almost 67% for both years**, followed by “local students” with an average of **29,1% for both years**. Finally, “local non-students people” and ‘international non-students’ came last with **0% in year one and 8% in year two**.

This is an important element for our research because it will allow us to understand how students were still able to enhance their sense of European identity despite being forced to stay at home. In fact, having social interactions with the other Erasmus counterparts allowed our group of students to still be able to create a bond with them, thus, resulting in a positive effect on the process of European identity formation.

Figure 22: ‘With whom did you live?’

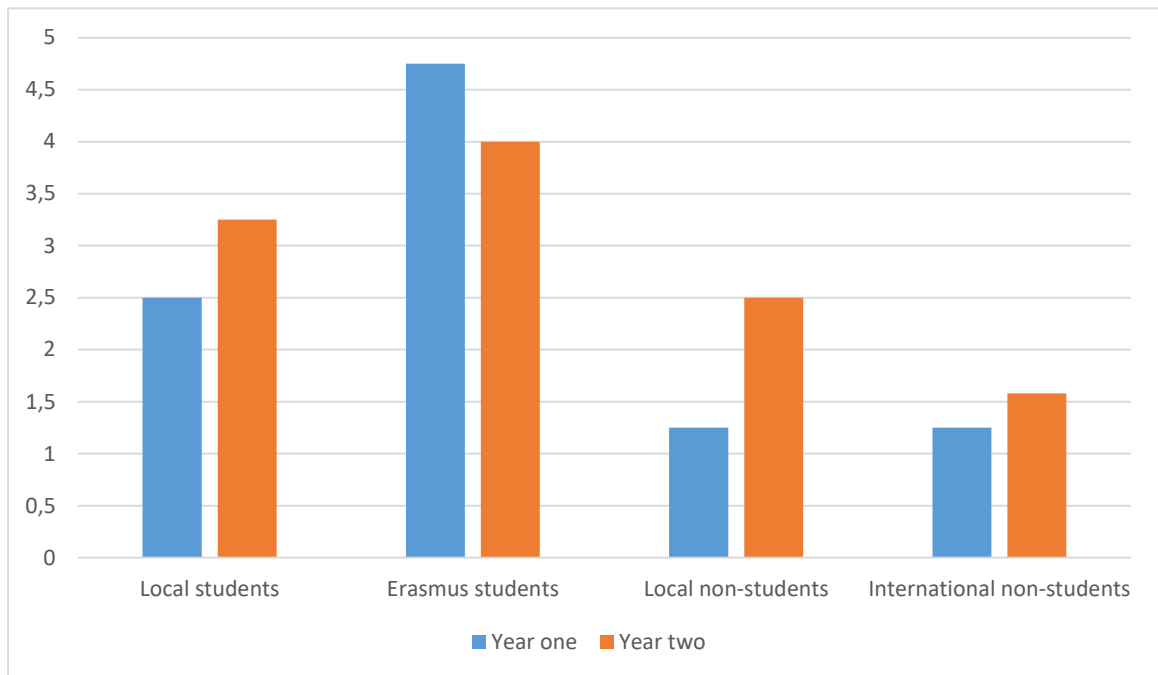


Source: author's own

Figure 23 shows the kind of people with EEG socialized the most and the least during their stay abroad. As we could imagine, based on what we have seen in the precedent figure, “Erasmus students” is the category of people with whom they socialized the most with an average of 4.37 out of 5 for both years. As far as the other categories, we can see a lower but still relevant average value for “Local students”, with an average of 2.8 out of 5, and the lowest values for the non-students categories of people, “local non-students” and “international non-students”, with an average of 1.4 out of 5 for the latter and 1.8 out of 5 for the other one.

An explanation of these data can be due to the fact that the students, being forced to stay at home, have socialized almost exclusively with the people with whom they lived in the same house, thus resulting in a higher level of social interactions with other Erasmus students that was the category of people with the majority of them have lived with.

Figure 23: 'With whom did you socialize the most'?

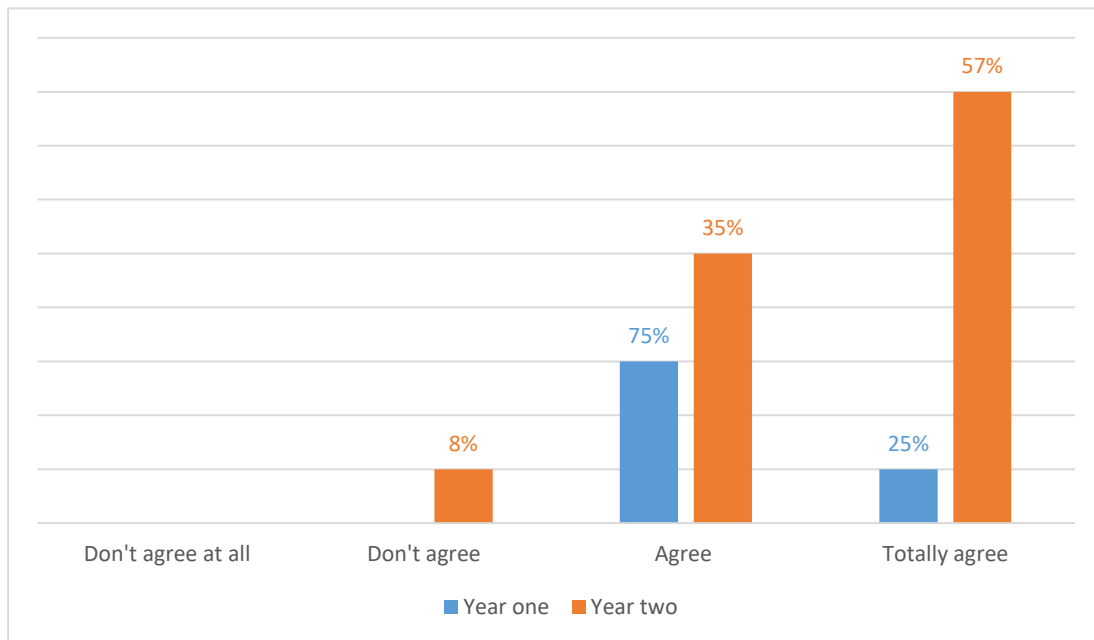


Source: author's own

Finally, the results shown in **figure 24** confirms our hypotheses on the role of COVID-19 in the socialization process of Erasmus+ students. In fact, since the security measures imposed by the various national governments were generally severe, 75% of the students of year one and 35% of year two agreed with the fact that, due to these limitations, they were not able to socialize during their mobility experience, while 25% of the students of year one and 57% of year two totally agreed.

Despite this, we have seen that the average **European identity value post-Erasmus was enhanced for the vast majority of them (61%)**, although for 39% of the students it remained the same, thus resulting in a null effect of the Erasmus+ mobility. In any case, we have confirmed that the Erasmus+ programme was a good “tool” to promote European identity even during the difficult pandemic period and, moreover, students were satisfied by the participation in such kind of experience both in personal and academic terms.

Figure 24: ‘How much do you agree with the following sentence: “The more severe were the security measures imposed by the pandemic, the less I was able to socialize during my Erasmus mobility. The less severe were the severity measures, the more I was able to socialize’?



Source: author's own

4.3. Conclusion

After having analysed and discussed the data collected through the questionnaires, we will now try to give some conclusions based on the objectives of our research and we will try to insert them in the current literature. We will now answer to the research questions by confirming or not the hypotheses that we have mentioned.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: Which causal mechanism explains the contribution of Erasmus programme to the construction of a European Identity? In other words, which explanatory factors explain why the Erasmus programme can either enhance, constrain or have a null impact on European identity formation?

H 1: The contribution of Erasmus programme to European identity formation can only be assessed by means of a causal mechanism based on two intertwined factors: first, by considering the level of European identity felt by each student before the Erasmus mobility experience (step 1 of the causal

mechanism) and second, on the impact of the socialization process (step 2 of the causal mechanism) - taking place both in university and non-university environments – on that level of European identity, thus contributing to enhance, maintain or constrain it.

The hypothesis 1 has proved to be right, even if we do not have found any constraining effect of the mobility experience in group of analysis. The level of European identity felt before the mobility experience is fundamental to understand the final outcome of this kind of process, since, without it, we are not able to understand whether or not the Erasmus had a positive influence on the European identity formation. As far as the socialization process, we have seen that it was generally carried out in non-university environments, in particular in private home spaces. In fact, it is thanks to this sub-space that students were still able to enhance their sense of European identity despite being deprived by the possibility to social interact in other spaces. The fact of having shared this private space with other Erasmus people helped our group of students to have at least a minimum of social interactions with their counterparts, thus resulting in a mutual exchange of experience and cultural information which enabled the socialization process to happen despite the social limitations.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How has COVID-19 affected the contribution of Erasmus in fostering a sense of European identity in young people?

H 2: The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on both university and non-university contexts of socialization identified in the causal mechanism through which European identity can be fostered, thus, the impact of COVID-19 on the process of European identity formation has varied according to the level of the security measures imposed to students in both environments of socialization.

H 2.1: The higher the level of safety measures imposed to both university and non-university contexts of socialization, the higher the constraining impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the possibility to socialize with others, thus leading students to maintain their prior sense of European identity (null impact);

H 2.2: The lower the level of safety measures imposed to university and non-university context of socialization, the lower the constraining impact of COVID-19 pandemic on European identity formation during the Erasmus mobility programme, thus allowing students to socialize more with others in order to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity.

Hypotheses 2 has proven to be partially right. COVID-19 pandemic has indeed prevented students from socializing, especially in the university context, but they were still able to socialize outside the university context, particularly with other Erasmus students because they lived with them. So students have either maintained or even enhanced their sense of European identity by the end of the mobility experience. Furthermore, the level of safety measures did not change throughout their stay abroad and for this reason we cannot test whether or not they could have socialized more if there was a lower level of safety measures.

H 3: In addition to this, in year two, institutional learning, i.e., the ability of university and non-university institutional environments to adapt to COVID-19 pandemic, thus allowing students to socialize more with others in order to enhance, but also to maintain or constrain their prior sense of European identity.

Hypotheses 3 was not completely confirmed. As we previously mentioned, the level of safety measured remained the same and for this reason year two students have lived the same pandemic context of year one students in terms of socialization in both university and non-university environments. However we can say that institutional learning helped a little the process of socialization in non-university environments, since they received a higher average evaluation by the students of year two if compared to the previous year. In sum, we could say that the role of institutional learning was not relevant enough to allow students to socialize more with others and thus enabling them to reinforce their sense of European identity.

When we look at previous research, we believe that our research has brought theoretical, methodological and empirical novelty to the state of the art. **First**, our innovative methodological approach has allowed us to unpack the causal mechanism which has provided us with a more robust explanation for how the Erasmus program leads to European identity formation, thus solving the apparent contradictions prevailing so far in the literature (Oborune, 2013; Mitchell, 2015). **Second**, when it comes to methods, we have provided a qualitative analysis of the phenomena, thus contrasting with the prevalence of quantitative research, as noted by Ambrosi (2013) and Van Mol (2011, 2013). In addition to this, using process tracing has allowed us to address the impact of contextual factors in causal mechanisms, such as COVID-19 and institutional learning. This leads us to the **third innovative contribution of our research**, the empirical one, as this research has allowed us to understand how COVID-19 has affected the contribution of Erasmus mobility to European identity formation.

In addition to the findings directly related to our research goals, we have also found interesting results in respect to what we will term **as 'identity development dynamics'**. First, we realised that students do not need a high level of social interactions to enhance their sense of European identity. If we look at the impact of COVID-19 in the university and non-university environments, it is possible to note how both spaces were heavily affected by it. With the social interactions reduced merely to the private house space and just a little in a few spaces outside of it, the majority of the students were still able to increase their sense of belonging to Europe. This is surprising since 94% of the students agrees that the security measures imposed by the governments and universities prevented them from socializing. These results showed that by only sharing the same house with other Erasmus students (66% of the total), it is possible to see the enabling effects of socialization in terms of European identity formation. Furthermore, for those who have not increased their sense of European identity, it has still remained the same as it was during the pre-Erasmus period. This means that, even during the pandemic context, the Erasmus+ programme had no negative effects on the European identity formation, resulting in the worst case scenario in having a null effect.

Second, we have also found out that students with a lower degree of European identification pre-Erasmus have increased their sense of belonging to Europe in the same way of their colleagues with a higher degree. Based on our data, we have 11 students with a high degree of identification with Europe (values between 3 and 5 out of 5) and 7 with a low degree of identification (values between 1 and 2 out of 5). Among the first group, 64% have increased this value. Considering the percentage of group one students who have increased the sense of belonging to Europe, for the 71% of them it increased by 1 value while for the other part by 2 values. Among the second group, 57% saw this value increasing. Considering the percentage of the latter group, for the 50% it increased by 1 values while the remaining half by 2 values. We can conclude this analysis by saying that the higher the previous sense of European identity, the lower it has increased. On the other hand, the lower it was, the more it has increased.

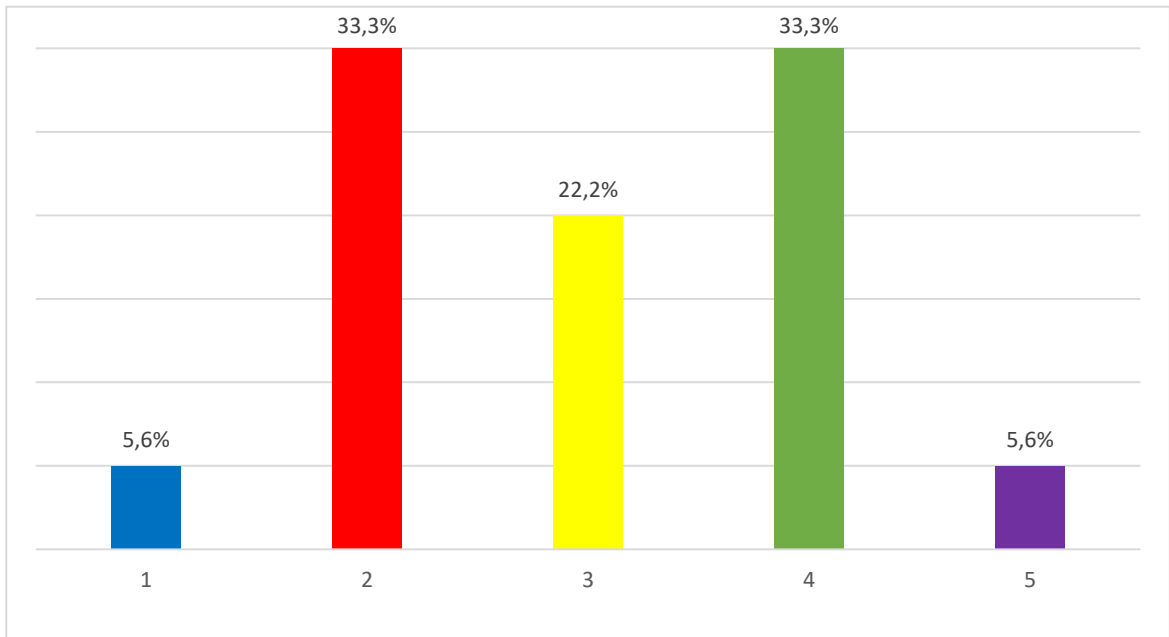
With this in mind, we believe that these findings partially clash with findings of previous research on the topic (Van Mol, 2009b; Medrano, 2010; Oborune, 2013), as the Erasmus mobility programme tend to be perceived as being more 'functional' for students who already have a high level of European identification in the sense that they tend to be more willing to study and to live in other European countries and for this reason they are also more willing to participate in such kind of mobility programme. With our data we can partially deny what these authors said, although it is true that the previous sense of belonging to Europe is an element that still influence the final outcome.

A research with which we would like to confront is the one realised by Sigalas about the effectiveness of intergroup contact during the mobility experience (Sigalas, 2010). By that time in which he wrote his article, he already mentioned the fact that Erasmus students tend to interact more with other Erasmus students instead of local or other international students. We can find the same element also in our analysis. As we have previously seen, the “Erasmus students” category was the one with whom EEG students have socialized the most. However, Sigalas argued that *“the ERASMUS experience did not strengthen most students’ European identity over time. On the contrary, the European identity level of the incoming students deteriorated over the course of the sojourn.”* (Ibidem, 2010). We have to disagree with this statement since our group of analysis showed that not only they did not decrease their sense of European identity but it has even increased in the 66% of the cases while for the remaining part, participating in the mobility programme had a null impact.

One original aspect that we can get from the questionnaires is about the **role of Institutional learning** during year two. It had a positive influence in the pandemic context by reducing its negative effects in university and non-university environments. However, the minimising effect was quite weak. In fact year two students’ evaluations on the impact of COVID-19 in the environments of interactions were still low, with just a slight improvement if compared to year one. In the end, the answers that we have received through the two questionnaires show us how the socialization process was affected by the pandemic and how the students were able to improve their European identity anyway. However, we need to have in mind that every Erasmus student is different and lives a unique experience. Some students may have been less influenced by the context compared to others. Experiences can be more or less intense in a good and in a bad way and that is why previous researches on this topic came out with different answers. Overall, we can say that the Erasmus+ mobility programme tend to enhance or have a null impact on the sense of European identity. It really depends on the previous sense of European identity, on the possibility of socialization and how this socialization is felt by each individual.

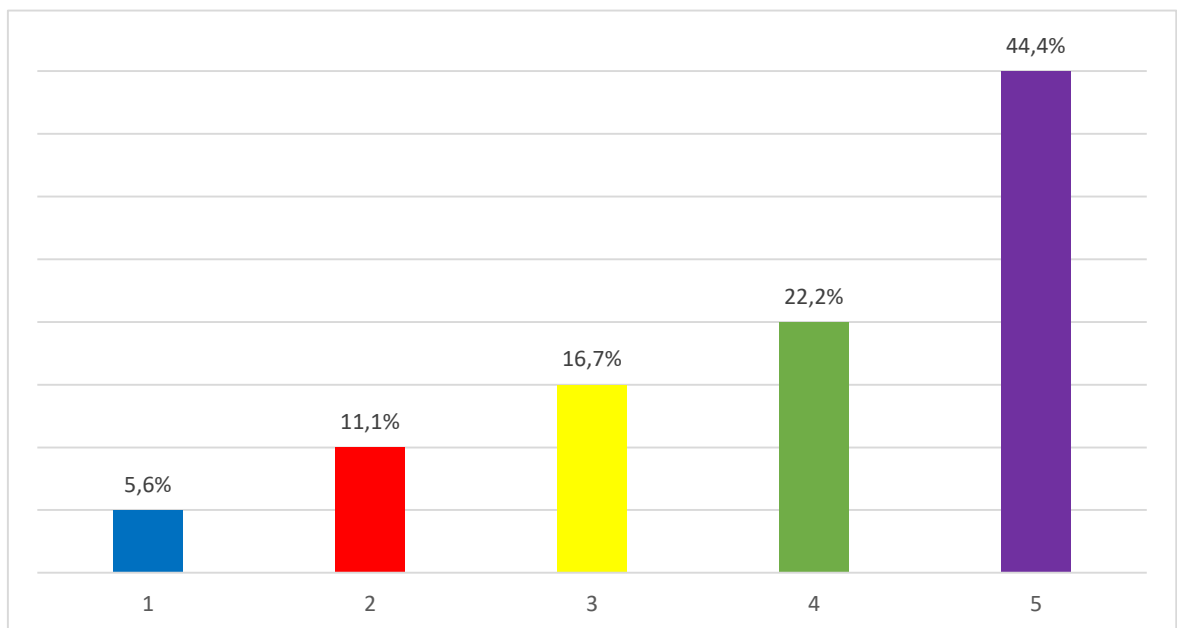
By way of conclusion, we could say that the Erasmus mobility programme was able to enhance the sense of European identity even during **the COVID-19 pandemic context**. As we can see in **figures 25** and **26**, during the pre-Erasmus period, the 39% of the students reported and European identity values between 4 out of 5 and 5 out 5. After the mobility, the percentage has increase to the 66%. If we consider the total number of students, 61% of them that have enhanced their sense of European identity while for the other part it remained the same.

Figure 25: Sense of European identity of year one and year two-students (pre-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

Figure 26: Sense of European identity of year one and year two students (post-Erasmus in %)



Source: author's own

CONCLUSION

The results of this case study come from a circumscribed investigation in a specific context. They have no claim to reach generalizable conclusions, especially if we consider the topic of our research. The methodology used and the material collected provide original information about the process of construction of the European identity through the Erasmus+ mobility programme during the COVID-19 pandemic period. We can consider this case study as an open “window” on the European context that allows to understand how the European identity is formed and transformed and how the socialization process influence it. Collecting the testimonies of people who find themselves in the same situation but in different places, makes it possible to detect the social mechanisms and experiences of the individuals involved. We have also put the accent on the processes and logic of social interactions that have characterized their path and that led them to their new sense of European identity. This kind of identity is connected not only to the subject but to the social environment in which it is built. The network of social relations, therefore, influences the construction of identity. With that being said, we will now conclude draw the major conclusions and we will give an overview for possible future researches based on this thesis.

The overall argument of this research, as the title suggests, is the role of Erasmus+ programme in fostering European identity during the COVID-19 pandemic period. We have demonstrated that the Erasmus+, in fact, played still an important role in this regard even during the pandemic. The data of our research show also that the socialization process is an important part of the process of European identity formation. Thanks to the socialization process students are able to share their experiences and knowledge with other European people, giving them the possibility to interact with other cultures and understand better the context in which they are living. Through this process of socialization students are able to create a link between them and their European colleagues, which will eventually enhance their sense of European identity. At the same time, we have also demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic had a very negative impact in the socialization process, depriving the students from socializing in university and non-university spaces, thus limiting their experience almost totally in the private house sub-space.

As far as the contribution of this thesis to the current literature, we could say that our document analysed a quite recurring and well-known theme, the link between the Erasmus programme and European identity, contextualizing it in a very recent moment. In doing so, we were able to give an analytical and exhaustive point of view about the role that the pandemic context had on this topic. The

contribution of our work can be used for future researches on the role that COVID-19 pandemic had on the process of European identity formation through socialization process. At the moment of writing, this is the only research that have tackled the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the social mechanisms that influence the formation of European identity and sense of belonging to the EU.

The major findings that we can get from this research are different. Firstly, we have understood that, in order to conduct such kind of analysis, it is fundamental to identify how much students felt their sense of European identity before the Erasmus experience. Only with this data it is possible to later understand whether the mobility experience was useful or not in enhancing it. Secondly, we have deepened the important role of socialization in the process of identity formation and we have also discovered that Erasmus students tend to socialize more in non-university context. Finally, the major conclusion that we can get is that the Erasmus+ programme can either enhance or have a null impact and this heavily relies on the quality of personal and individual experiences.

Despite our main contributions, we would like to stress its own limitations as we believe that this research could still be improved. In this regard, we would like to identify two main limitations. **The first one** is related to the number of students that we had in our group of analysis. Compared to the total number of students who went for the Erasmus+ mobility from the EEG, only the 43% of them were able to participate in our research. The reason is because accessing to such kind of data is very difficult due to European rules of protection of data (EC, 2018). In fact we were able to contact these students thanks to the help of the EEG secretary office. However, not all the students were available or willing to participate in our research. **The second limitation** of this thesis is that it needs a counterfactual proof to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the European identity formation process. Ideally, we should compare our findings with other similar research that were conducted in a normal period (pre-COVID). It would be interesting, for example, to see if in normal times with whom Erasmus students socialize the most. If still with other Erasmus people or with others. This could be a future venue of research.

In the end, our thesis showed how, despite the difficulties, young people are still very attached to Europe and are satisfied to belong to this community. In fact, it is important to note that the number of students who underwent the Erasmus+ during 2020/2021 has shown that there is an active will in young people to continue to know new places and cultures and, more generally, to live new experiences. This is not something that we could take for granted, since COVID-19 had and it still has an enormous impact in the daily life of European people. For this reason, if we look at the answers and the comments

of the students to the questionnaires, we Europeans should be delighted of having such young generation of people that, despite all the difficulties, goes on and have not lost the hope for its future. Erasmus+ has proved to be a fundamental tool for the whole European community in financing the study and improvement of the skills of young people. For this reason, the European Commission has recently announced to have double the funds to the programme for the 2021 – 2027 (EC, 2021). Encouraging young students to participate in this mobility program is essential in order to have an open and capable generation of Europeans in the future.

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APPENDIX
QUESTIONNAIRE 1: ONE SEMESTER MOBILITY

Section I: Personal identification

1) Sex

M

F

2) Age

18 - 20

21 - 23

24 - 26

More than 26

3) Could you identify your Bachelor degree?

Accounting

Economics

International Business

International Relations

Management

Marketing

Political Science

Public Administration

4) In what Bachelor's year were you enrolled while participating in the Erasmus+?

2nd year

3rd year

5) In which semester have you undergone the Erasmus+?

First semester 2019/2020

Second semester 2019/2020

First semester 2020/2021

Second semester 2020/2021

6) In total, how many months have you spent during your Erasmus+ stay?

Less than 1 month

1 – 3 months

4 – 6 months

More than 6 months

7) What was your country of destination?

8) What is the name of the city and the university in which you have undertaken your Erasmus+?

Section II: Environments of socialization

9) During your Erasmus+ stay, have you lived with other people (in apartment, dormitory, etc...)?

Yes

No

Other (please specify): _____

10) In case you have answered “yes” to the previous question, with which kind of people have you shared your apartment?

Local students

Erasmus students

Local non-students people

International non-students people

11) With whom did you socialize the most (5) and the least (1)?

Local students (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Erasmus students (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Local non-students people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

International non-students people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

12) How do you evaluate the host country adaptation to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Very bad

Bad

Good

Very good

13) Could you give us some examples of the security measures imposed by the host country nationwide during COVID-19?

14) How do you evaluate the host university adaptation to cope with COVID-19 pandemic?

Very low

Low

High

Very high

15) Could you give us some examples of security measures imposed at University during COVID-19?

16) Have these measured changed through time during your stay?

Yes

No

17) If “yes”, have they become: more sever or less severe?

More severe

Less severe

Section III: The impact of context on socialization (COVID-19 and adaptation)

18) Considering a range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), how do you evaluate the negative impact that COVID-19 pandemic has had during your Erasmus+ programme on:

Your ability to socialize with other European people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Your ability to socialize with host country natives (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Your ability to socialize with non-European people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

19) How do you evaluate the negative impact that COVID-19 pandemic has had on the socialization process of Erasmus students in the following school spaces?

Classrooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Libraries (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Study rooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

20) Could you identify the environments where you have socialized the most and the least during your Erasmus mobility? (1 = environment the least used for socialization and 5 = environment the most used for socialization)

Classrooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Libraries (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Study rooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Public squares (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Pubs or cafes (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Private apartments/dormitories (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

21) How would you evaluate the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on your ability to socialize with other people during Erasmus in the following non-school spaces?

Public squares (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Pubs or cafes (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Private apartments/dormitories (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

22) Since not all the countries have imposed the same kind of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you agree with the following sentence: "The more severe were the security measures imposed by the pandemic, the less I was able to socialize during my Erasmus mobility. The less severe were the severity measures, the more I was able to socialize."?

Don't agree at all

Don't agree

Agree

Totally agree

Section IV: Erasmus and European identity

23) Considering a range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), how would you scale your sense of European identity before your mobility experience?

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

24) How would you scale your sense of European identity after your mobility experience?

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

25) To what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native or/and foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European Identity?

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

26) How much did you feel a citizen of Europe before Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

27) How much do you feel a citizen of Europe after Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

28) To what extent did you believe that you shared values with other Europeans before Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

29) To what extent do you believe that you shared values with other Europeans after Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

30) Do you see the added value of being European?

Yes

No

31) Irrespectively of what you have answered in the previous question, could you explain why?

32) If you could define your Erasmus experience in a few words, how would you describe it:

QUESTIONNAIRE 2: TWO SEMESTERS MOBILITY

Section I: Personal identification

1) Sex

M

F

2) Age

18 - 20

21 – 23

24 – 26

More than 26

3) Could you identify your Bachelor degree?

Accounting

Economics

International Business

International Relations

Management

Marketing

Political Science

Public Administration

4) In what Bachelor's year were you enrolled while participating in the Erasmus+?

2nd year

3rd year

5) In which semester have you undergone the Erasmus+?

First semester 2019/2020

Second semester 2019/2020

Both first and second semester 2019/2020

First semester 2020/2021

Second semester 2020/2021

Both first and second semester 2020/2021

6) In total, how many months have you spent during your Erasmus+ stay?

Less than 1 month

1 – 3 months

4 – 6 months

More than 6 months

7) What was your country of destination?

8) What is the name of the city and the university in which you have undertaken your Erasmus+?

Section II: Environments of socialization

9) During your Erasmus+ stay, have you lived with other people (in apartment, dormitory, etc...)?

Yes

No

Other (please specify): _____

10) In case you have answered “yes” to the previous question, with which kind of people have you shared your apartment?

Local students

Erasmus students

Local non-students people

International non-students people

11) With whom did you socialize the most (5) and the least (1)?

Local students (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Erasmus students (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Local non-students people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

International non-students people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

12) How do you evaluate the host country adaptation to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Very bad
- Bad
- Good
- Very good

13) Could you give us some examples of the security measures imposed by the host country nationwide during COVID-19?

14) How do you evaluate the host university adaptation to cope with COVID-19 pandemic?

- Very low
- Low
- High
- Very high

15) Could you give us some examples of security measures imposed at University during COVID-19?

16) Have these measured changed through time during your stay?

- Yes
- No

17) If “yes”, have they become: more sever or less severe?

More severe

Less severe

Section III: The impact of context on socialization (COVID-19 and adaptation)

18) Considering a range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), how do you evaluate the negative impact that COVID-19 pandemic has had during your Erasmus+ programme on:

Your ability to socialize with other European people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Your ability to socialize with host country natives (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Your ability to socialize with non-European people (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

19) How do you evaluate the negative impact that COVID-19 pandemic has had on the socialization process of Erasmus students in the following school spaces?

Classrooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Libraries (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Study rooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

20) Could you identify the environments where you have socialized the most and the least during your Erasmus mobility? (1 = environment the least used for socialization and 5 = environment the most used for socialization)

Classrooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Libraries (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Study rooms (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Public squares (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Pubs or cafes (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Private apartments/dormitories (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

21) How would you evaluate the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on your ability to socialize with other people during Erasmus in the following non-school spaces?

Public squares (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Pubs or cafes (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Private apartments/dormitories (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

22) Since not all the countries have imposed the same kind of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you agree with the following sentence: "The more severe were the security measures imposed by the pandemic, the less I was able to socialize during my Erasmus mobility. The less severe were the severity measures, the more I was able to socialize."?

Don't agree at all

Don't agree

Agree

Totally agree

Section IV: Erasmus and European identity

23) Considering a range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), how would you scale your sense of European identity before your mobility experience?

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

24) How would you scale your sense of European identity after your mobility experience?

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

25) Since you have undergone for the annual mobility programme, how do you agree with the following sentence: "The more time I spent abroad during the Erasmus+, the more I feel closer to the European identity"?

Totally disagree

Disagree

Agree

Totally agree

26) To what extent do you believe that the ability to socialize with native and/or foreign people during your mobility period in Erasmus has reinforced your sense of European identity?

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

27) How much did you feel a citizen of Europe before Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

28) How much do you feel a citizen of Europe after Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

29) To what extent did you believe that you shared values with other Europeans before Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

30) To what extent do you believe that you shared values with other Europeans after Erasmus?

Not at all

Not much

Much

Very much

31) Do you see the added value of being European?

Yes

No

32) Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, you have decided to participate in the Erasmus+ programme for a whole academic year. Could you explain why, that is, what motivations led you to this decision?

33) If you could define your Erasmus experience in a few words, how would you describe it:
