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Diary as a Means for a Student to Discover a Country

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Abstract: This paper aims to present a diary as a multifaceted means for incoming international students to become familiar with the host country (in this case, Lithuania), discover it through the ways of immersion and exploration, and reflect upon it on the diary pages. Every year the course of 'Intercultural Communication' taught at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Philology, Vilnius University, welcomes a large number of incoming students from different parts of the world. Further to the subject syllabus, these students are given a special research task: to delve into the context of the host country, focus on a number of socio-cultural aspects, compare and contrast them to the similar ones in their native countries and reflect upon them in their diaries. The paper provides an overview of the accumulated empirical evidence on the attitudinal discoveries of 84 students representing 21 countries. The employed *Interpretive content analysis* proved to be a flexible and helpful research method to reveal the informants' existing cultural capital (Bourdieu 1994), to follow the flow of their interpretations consequently leading to the shifts in their attitudes, and thus, contribute to the development of the students' intercultural communicative competence. This paper sheds light on the informants' attitudes towards Lithuania as the destination country for their *Erasmus+* exchange, as well as their impressions of the academic environment of Vilnius University.

JEL Code: G35

Keywords: Intercultural education, the diary method, reflection, host country, incoming students, discovery, Vilnius University, academic environment.

Introduction

Every year the course on ‘Intercultural Communication’ run at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Philology, Vilnius University, welcomes a large number of incoming students from different parts of the world. This elective course is taught in English, and, as an ECTS subject, is offered for international students taking partial studies at Vilnius University under different mobility programmes, the *Erasmus+* programme being one of them. Despite the complexity of the classroom management of this course, the presence of international students brings benefit to the course since the participants of the study process — both local and incoming students — can analyse similarities and differences of their cultures, as well as differing communication styles on the spur of the moment during class discussions. Further to the subject syllabus, incoming students are given a special research task — to observe some socio-cultural aspects of the host country by exploring them and then reflecting upon them in their diaries. The evidence provided by incoming students in writing, i.e., their reflections, shared in diaries, is an excellent example for the local students to understand that the same cultural aspects can be seen and interpreted from different perspectives due to the observers’ diverse cultural backgrounds. In this way, the local students broaden their worldviews and become more flexible. On the other hand, for educators, the reflections of incoming students on the host country and its people during the period of their stay demonstrate the development and manifestation of the intercultural communicative competence of these students.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the multi-dimensional role of keeping a diary in the process of intercultural education through the following objectives:

- to substantiate diaries as a means of education from a theoretical perspective;
- to review the attitudes of incoming students towards Lithuania — the destination country for their exchange programme.
- to describe the academic environment of Vilnius University as revealed in the reflections of incoming students in their diaries.

To support the discussion, the paper focuses on the ideas shared in 84 diaries by the incoming students (informants) representing 21 countries. 84 diaries embrace the reflections of students on multiple socio-cultural phenomena of the host country; this article sheds light on the attitudes of informants towards Lithuania as their *Erasmus*. destination, as well as their impressions of the academic environment of Vilnius University.

Mobility is considered one of the most effective means for self-discovery and determining the extent of one’s adaptation skills for adjusting to different cultural contexts. Therefore, the contribution

of various mobility programmes, including *Erasmus+*, to the students' intercultural education is immense and deserves to be discussed in detail.

Due to the EU's *Erasmus+* programme, mobility becomes 'a reality'^[1]. Its benefits provide representatives of the academic world — students, lecturers, researchers, and administrative staff — with a real opportunity 'to feel the taste' of studies, academic traditions and life at a foreign institution, and to compare them with those established at their home institutions. Mobility programmes also facilitate the sharing of best practices, and enable participants to search for new ways to upgrade their own academic performance. The programme, which has already celebrated its 32nd anniversary (its launch dates back to 1987), has allowed nearly four million people to enjoy the experience of mobility. The institutions of higher education of the Republic of Lithuania are active participants of this programme: 63,000 university students, lecturers, and staff members have already taken part in mobility schemes within the 20-year lifespan of the *Erasmus+* programme. A number of reports have observed the enthusiastic openness of Lithuanians to otherness and stress their willingness to explore different academic contexts; "mobility between Programme countries and Partner countries (KA107) was so highly in demand that the need for funds exceeded the budget by seven times (2017, p. 8)^[2]. However, when reviewing the statistical data on the popularity of *Erasmus+* destinations, Lithuania and its universities still do not enjoy equivalent partnerships, and, in many cases, happen to be at the bottom of the students' choices for mobility. The latest available *Erasmus+ statistics 2014*^[3] provide evidence that the total number of outgoing Lithuanian students for studies and traineeship in 2013/2014 academic year reached as many as 3,423 students, while the total number of incoming students that the country welcomed amounted to 2,463 people. The difference of approximately 1,000 students indicates an imbalance in reciprocal mobility. Consequently, it leads to the assumption that the name of Lithuania might not be among the top *Erasmus+* destinations and prompts us to look for possible reasons why the academic world of the country still lacks attractiveness to embrace a numerous multicultural student body in its higher educational institutions. To answer this question, as well as many others, the idea of keeping a diary was suggested to those who dared to choose a country 'in the middle of nowhere' (rather than a long planned spot for studies and exploration^[4]) and take partial studies at Vilnius University. The insights of the diarists proved to be a valuable instrument for data collection, and provided the background for the research that is going to be described in the subsequent subchapters of this paper.

1. The Role of Diaries in Intercultural Education

The history of the diary “from a literary device to a research tool” encompasses quite a long pathway, taking into account its evolution from survivalist origins to the privileged pens of the aristocracy, and on to become a part of popular culture. (Hyers 2018, p. 1-2). Hyers compares the diary to a treasure trove, containing the riches of the first-hand testimony on a wealth of subjects: from the adventures of travel to the despairs of prison, from the mundane ruminations of adolescence to the horrors of the battlefield. Langford and West (1999, as cited in Hyers 2018) put emphasis on the fact that the diary resides in the personal life space of the writer, uniquely balancing “between the spontaneity of reportage and reflectiveness of crafted text, between selfhood and events, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the private and the public” (p. 8). Current advances in technology and the abundance of social media platforms have changed people’s communication styles. They have become more open and eager to share their personal experience with the rest of the world. According to Hyers (2018), writing has become a display of the self, “a screening moment” of “scrolling life”. Thus, the boundaries of once secret and private matters have been stepped over and become open to the wider public.

While discussing the application of the diary method in the context of social research, Bartlett and Milligan emphasise the distinction between unsolicited and solicited types of diaries (2015). According to the researchers, those diaries that people choose to keep voluntarily belong to the unsolicited type, while solicited diaries are those that the diarists have been asked to keep for a certain reason. The diary has adopted a role of a data collection instrument “in which a participant records his or her thoughts, feelings and/or behaviours under the direction of an individual researcher<...> since the 1930s” (Bartlett & Milligan 2015). Since then, the application of the diary approach for research purposes has become well known in the fields of literature, history, geography, the humanities, sociology, psychology, sports, and medical sciences. The forms of the diary have developed as well. Among the most popular ones identified by the researchers are: *the time diary*, involving participants recording events at a specified time or between a particular time frame; *the travel diary*, eliciting data regarding travel behaviour; *the food diary*, investigating the eating and drinking patterns of healthy and unhealthy subjects.

There have been numerous cases of the application of the diary method for educational purposes. This method has been used to assist teachers in understanding the learning process, for learners to ‘vent’ their frustrations and to develop self-awareness of their own learning, as well as for communication between teachers and learners, thereby providing teachers with the evidence of the students’ learning, while enabling teachers to use the diary as a means to give their students feedback (Bassot 2016, p. 93-104). While teaching foreign languages, diaries have been of fundamental value (Pearson-Evans 2006, p. 56) to develop and follow the progress of students’ writing skills (Bailey & Ochsner 1983). Ellis and Bochner (2000) acknowledge the method of auto-ethnography as an autobiographical genre of writing and

research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. These layers connect the personal to the cultural when there is an interplay of a wide-angle lens (the exposure of cultural, social, and other meaningful contexts) and a “vulnerable self” (p. 739, as cited in Chenail, 2005, p. 199). The scientists admit the value of the diary method in intercultural education. It becomes a powerful means for students to disclose their own cultural background and, on the other hand, to describe their process of adaptation to a totally different culture. Their own experienced practices revealed via reflection become valuable lessons for cultural discoveries: “reflection is necessary for one's captured experience to be evaluated by one's heart” (Zlataravičienė *et al.* 2008, p. 88). According to Hyers (2018, p. 9), while in the hands of others, the written diary becomes a window into a psychological moment, providing an opportunity to understand another's perspective and to reflect on our common humanity.

In addition to the ideas discussed above, the diary has been used as one the main tools to develop and assess learners' intercultural communicative competence (Deardorff 2009, p. 477-491)). In the ‘Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence’, Deardorff distinguishes two types of outcomes – internal and external ones (2006, 241-266). The scholar attributes the external outcome to the overall outcome of intercultural competence and defines it as “the effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations” (2009, p. 479). Stated from Fantini's (2009, p. 456-476) standpoint, “*effectively* reflects the view of one's own performance in the target language-culture (i.e., an outsider's or “etic” view), while *appropriate* reflects how natives perceive such a performance (i.e., an insider's or “etic” view). Fantini stresses the fact that it is always a challenge for intercultural learners to uncover the emic viewpoint of their hosts. However, the diary method could be a tool to reveal learners' internal outcomes, which, according to Deardorff (2006), encompass one's ability to adjust to new cultural environments, be flexible, hold an ethno-relative view and establish a feeling of empathy.

Thus, the diary as a means in intercultural education, first, gives the reader evidence of the informants' unique skills to discover a country. Consequently, the presented evidence might serve as an educational tool for the local residents to develop a multi-attitudinal perspective towards the very same socio-cultural phenomenon. Second, the diary reveals the worldviews of the informants, allowing the reader to follow the attitudinal shifts of the diarists, which, subsequently, demonstrate the changes occurring in the informants' internal outcomes of their intercultural competence. Third, despite the dynamic character of culture, it stops time for a while and lets one feel the existing cultural realia recorded at the captured moment.

2. The Role of Management in Intercultural Education

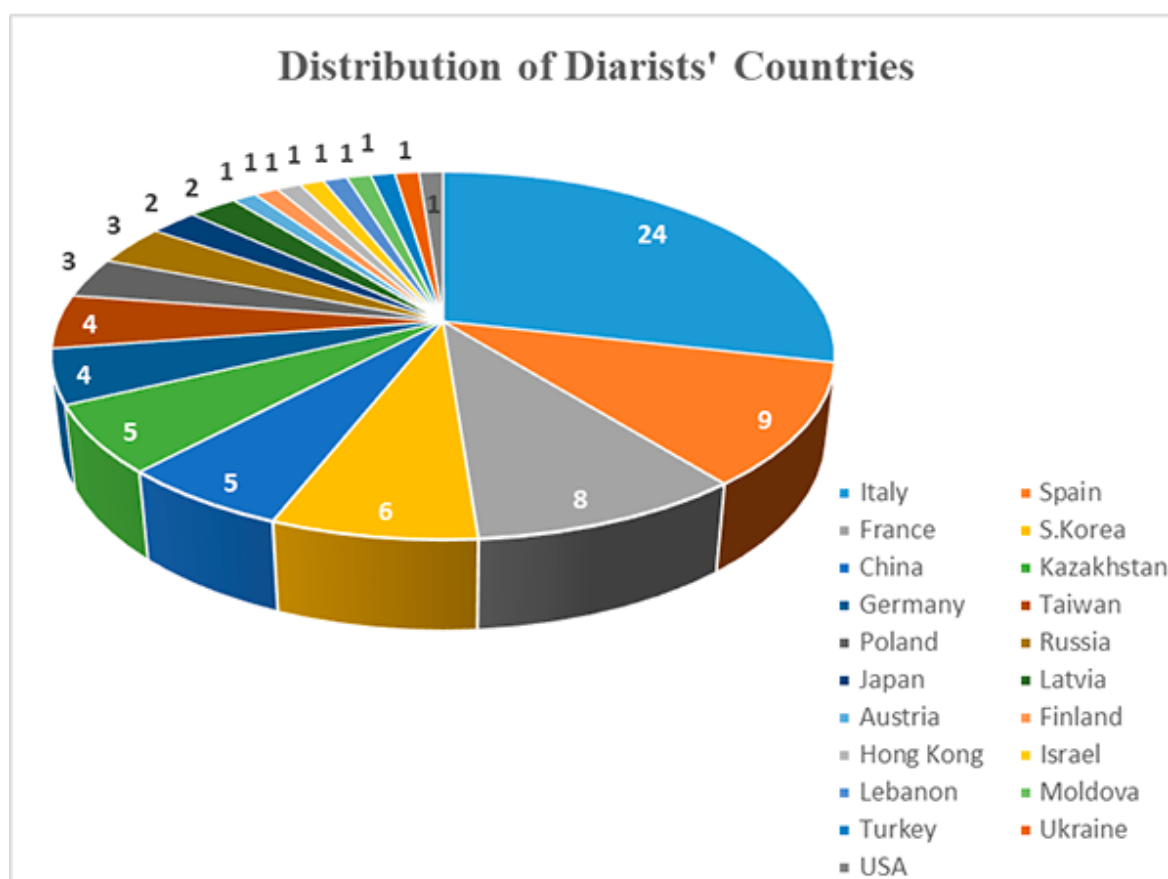
Intercultural education is considered meaningful when studies abroad are student-orientated and guided by experienced professional educators (Paige *et al.* 2004; Vande Berg *et al.* 2004; Vande Berg 2007; Vande Berg & Paige 2009) responsible for ensuring “that students would derive as much benefit as possible from time abroad” (Savicki & Selby 2008, p. 349). Cushner (2009, p. 151-169) proposes that study programmes should be classified “according to the degree of immersion into the host culture that the experience provides”. He advises to rely on the assumption by L. Engle and J. Engle stating that “the more integrated a student is in the host culture, the better the programme is assisting the student to develop intercultural competence” (2009). The latter insight provides a picture of any ideal study period abroad meant for mastering students’ competences both in the field of the subject studied and personal development. It encompasses crossing the boundaries of a personal comfort zone, acquaintance with the country’s education system, its philosophy and prevailing teaching methods, expanding one’s knowledge of the culture of the host country and the local people’s worldviews.

The integration of incoming students into the study process of the host university might be problematic, as sometimes they seem to form a separate body of their own within the university context, and many of them tend to lead a traveller’s lifestyle where the host country serves the function of a springboard for their new travel destinations. Therefore, the design of the syllabus of the subject of ‘Intercultural Communication’ is rendered in such a way that it would involve the incoming students’ immersion into the local context. The one-semester course on ‘Intercultural Communication’ introduces the students to a number of topics typical of the subject, among which are: the concept of culture, taxonomies of cultures, the language-culture-thought bond, identity and its impact on discovering new cultures, as well as culture shock and stereotypes. The influence of context when discovering a new country is also emphasised. The students become familiar with J. W. Neuliep’s contextual model (2006) and its compositional layers: cultural, micro-cultural, environmental, socio-relational and perceptual contexts, which later on become the background for their ethnographic survey, as well as a framework for their solicited diaries. The task encourages the students to explore some aspects of the socio-cultural context of Lithuania and describe them in their diaries. While applying the ethnographic method, there is no intention of turning the students into ethnographers in any full sense of the term (Roberts *et al.* 2001). The aim is to develop their keen interest in the host country, equipping them “with the ethnographic skills and knowledge” to carry out their own research (Byram 2001), i.e., inspire enough ethnographic imagination to describe, interpret, explain, and construct the socio-cultural reality of the country (Bitinas 2006). The applied reflection method helps the informants to uncover some particular phenomena and situations *here and now* (Zlataravičienė *et al.* 2008), and also identify the correlation between the similarities

and differences of the native and host country cultures by raising their self-awareness of their own identity and its impact on discovering and interpreting other cultures. To sum up, the target skills that the reflection method encompasses prove to be beneficial for the development of the incoming students' internal outcomes of intercultural communicative competence.

3. The Sample Size and Research Methodology

The data discussed in this article was collected from 84 diaries kept by incoming international students, representing twenty-one countries during the period of the academic years between 2015-2020. The distribution of the diarists according to the countries of their citizenship is presented in Picture 1:



Picture 1
Distribution of the Diarists' Countries

Picture 1 indicates that the majority of the survey participants come from Italy (24 students). Quite a substantial number of diarists indicate that they are from Spain (9 students), France (8 students), South Korea (6 students), China (5 students), Kazakhstan (5 students), Germany (4 students), Taiwan (4 students). Poland (3 students), Russia (3 students), Japan (2 students), Latvia (2 students) are represented just by a few students. It should be noted that there are just single cases of one diarist from the following countries:

Austria, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel, Lebanon, Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine, USA.

As mentioned before, the students were participants of the course on 'Intercultural Communication' (5 ECTS). They increased their familiarity with the content of the subject, explored the host country, and recorded their insights in diaries. The diary was chosen as a data collection instrument for accumulating the students' reflections on the socio-cultural context of the host country and identifying the manifestation of the internal outcomes of their intercultural communicative competence. The employed *Interpretive content analysis* (Ginger 2006, as cited in Drisco & Masch 2016; Alaszewski 2006.) proved to be a flexible and helpful research method to reveal the informants' existing cultural capital (Bourdieu 1994), which served by providing the background for constructing and interpreting the socio-cultural realia of the new country, i.e. Lithuania. The author of this paper was given the diarists' permission to share their ideas for educational purposes. All the diarists, as informants, were pinned to the codes of the countries of their citizenship. Bearing in mind the limitations of the scope of this article, out of the abundance of information, the further subchapters reveal the informants' attitudes towards Lithuania as a destination country for *Erasmus+* studies, as well as their insights on the academic environment of Vilnius University.

4. Lithuania as a Destination Country for the *Erasmus+* Mobility Programme

Any applicant wishing to spend a semester or even a full academic year abroad under the *Erasmus+* programme has the right to choose an institution for their partial studies from the list of Partner institutions available at their home universities. The International Relations Office of Vilnius University announces the names of 1,539 institutions of higher education^[5] with whom the University has signed inter-institutional agreements^[6]. It means that Vilnius University offers its matching study programmes to the students studying at 1,539 institutions that hold a valid Erasmus Charter for higher education.

One of the objectives of this paper was to learn whether Vilnius University could be among the most popular study destinations for students of the institutions mentioned above. Having reviewed the informants' reflections, to our greatest disappointment, priority was given to the country and the city where the university is established, rather than the university *per se*. Further research aimed at identifying the popularity of Lithuania as a host country, yet once again, its name was not among the top destinations. Assumptions accounting for the country's poor popularity as an *Erasmus+* destination could be the complicated climatic conditions of the region, which might not be as attractive as those in the Mediterranean countries. Furthermore, 50 years of Soviet occupation might have deleted Lithuania's name from the world map, and its

existence as a young independent country with a long and complicated history might not be enough to attract students to come here for their studies. While indicating the reason why Lithuania was chosen as an *Erasmus+* destination, the majority of the informants claim that it had become an outcome of their spontaneous decision “to go to the middle country in nowhere” (IT, FR, ES) rather than a long-planned spot for studies and exploration^[7]. The decisions taken on a study destination are evidently intertwined with the informants’ internal outcomes of their intercultural competence, namely, their ethno-centric/ethno-relative attitudes towards the southernmost Baltic state. The collected data allows us to present the following divisions in the informants’ attitudes towards Lithuania as an *Erasmus+* destination.

1. Lithuania might be interesting because of its geographical proximity to Russia. Despite the fact that Lithuania has been independent from the Soviet occupation for 30 years, and it has been a member of the European Union for the last 17 years, the majority of the diarists quite honestly admit that the name of the country meant nothing to them. *“In France, when we think about Lithuania, we relate it to the USSR. We do not really know where it is, how it is and what it looks like. Geographically, it is close to Russia, so people often think, that its [Lithuanian] culture is very close to Russian, too”* (FR-2). A very similar opinion is held by a Lebanese student currently studying at a university in Germany and, at the same time, taking partial studies at Vilnius University: *“To be honest, it was not my first choice country. I had two options: Lithuania or Slovakia? Actually, they were both unknown to me. I never really got interested in them. Why? What for? I felt more attracted by Lithuania because it was close to Russia”* (LB-1). The fact that the Republic of Lithuania and the Russian Federation share a joint border was one of the criteria that made incoming students decide upon choosing Lithuania as a country for their partial studies.

2. Lithuania offers a pleasant and secure environment for studying foreign languages, Russian among them. The majority of the informants are students of philology. English and Russian are the target languages of their studies. Naturally, they look for places where these languages are spoken that are *“safer and securer places than Russia”* (IT-16). Here they refer to the former countries of the Soviet Union, forgetting the fact that the citizens of those countries speak their native languages as well having been forced to speak the language of the occupants. *“One of my goals was to improve my Russian. I had an opportunity to choose between the three cities: Poznan(Poland), Bucharest (Romania) and Vilnius (Lithuania). Among these names, I did not know Vilnius at all: I had never heard anything about it! The first thing I did was to search for photos and general information about the city on Google. The photos were inviting. This was the way I’d found Vilnius”* (IT-7). Life in Vilnius and the quality of the studies here do not violate the informants’ expectations, and later on it is the students themselves who encourage other *Erasmus+* applicants (in our case, - Milanese students) to go

and discover Lithuania on their own. The foreign language knowledge and skills of Lithuanian people seem to have attracted worldwide attention. Further to the favourable environment for learning Russian, the informants from Japan and China maintain that Lithuania is a good country to learn English: *“Before coming to Lithuania, I had heard that Lithuanian young people speak English very well, and it was true. I was overwhelmed how fluently my mentors, my colleagues and even the waiters in the restaurant spoke English. It is a good springboard for my English to improve”* (JP-1, CN-4, CN-5). There are many things the informants from Asian countries are charmed by during their stay in Lithuania, but our people’s multilingual skills astonish them most, and their assumption about Lithuania as a good country for learning foreign languages is verified.

3. The destination of Lithuania is an exciting challenge to everybody who wants to test their staying power. The diarists’ lines reveal that some of them do not find Lithuania a safe country; far from it, for them Lithuania is an unknown ‘developing’ (IT, FR, ES) land full of mysteries and crime. On the day of their arrival they feel *“half-scared and half-excited”* (ES; FR; IT). The high level of uncertainty about what their life will look like in the chosen destination makes them flustered. Their decisions to study in Lithuania had caused much fuss at home; they did not receive any appreciation either from their parents, or friends and instead had to constantly justify why they had selected such a destination: *“People had been asking me the same questions for the last few months: “Why Lithuania?”, “Where is Vilnius?”, “Why didn’t you choose a warmer place (degree wise)? I could have chosen some other destinations like Madrid, Barcelona, or Paris like most of my friends did. I really felt driven to discover something new. In the west we know relatively little about Lithuania. We are aware that it is somewhere in the Baltics, that it was part of the Soviet Union, and that its climate is rather freezing during winter months. In fact, it was a bubble of uncertainty that surrounds the Baltic States that attracted me towards this East European country – I wanted to get to know a new culture and live a different life from the one that I am living right now in Italy”* (IT-22). The collected evidence also shows that many informants are experienced travellers, and to choose Lithuania for their partial studies was just the reason to put a new country’s name on the list of the visited countries. *“I have been travelling since I was 14, I’ve visited many countries, so for me it is normal to discover a new culture, live in a different country, share ideas and opinions, meet new people from all over the world”* (IT-5). To the great surprise of many incoming students, the Lithuania they discovered did not meet any negative stereotypes they had heard about the country. They find an attractive fast-internet country with beautiful nature and its friendly people. The students here are more chilled and less stressed; there is no feeling of competition in the air, it is so easy to get to know people and make friends. Thus, there is no chance nor need to test your staying power.

4. Lithuania has a reputation as a highly advanced and beautiful country. This group comprises just a minority of the informants whose attitudes towards the host country seem to be highly positive; their ‘positivity’ has a diverse background, therefore, they are be grouped into:

1. those whose parents were citizens of the former USSR,
2. those who think that Lithuania is a well-developed country,
3. those whose friends have already appreciated “the quality of the country” (IT-17) during their Erasmus+ partial studies.

This research encompasses a relatively small number of the respondents whose parents lived in the former Soviet countries (Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan). It is impossible to draw conclusions from the attitudes of single representatives; nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the fame of Lithuania has always been in those people’s minds: *“My father has always pronounced Lithuania’s name with some respect and admiration”*. (KAZ-3). It was the informants’ parents who encouraged their children to choose Lithuania as a destination country for their partial studies: *“I didn’t know what to expect of the chosen country, and I did very little research about Lithuania, but my dad calmed me down saying that I would love it because it would remind me of my home-city [Almaty]”* (KAZ-1). The students from Poland represent the second group of informants who were certain about their decisions: *“I decided to study as an Erasmus student at Vilnius University in Lithuania. I knew that it is a prestigious university with high educational standards. I heard that the Department of English Philology is really good, so I wanted to take a chance which was given to me and check my skills and knowledge”* (PL-1). The latter reflection gives us a clue how hard we all must work in order to promote our university, our city, and our country. Fortunately, the first signs of recognition have already started appearing: they are related to the third group of the informants, the former Erasmus+ students who have already tasted the quality of studies at Vilnius University and now keep promoting our university to the students of younger generations. Some informants from Italy of the 2018-2020 period claim that their colleagues have already been to Vilnius for their Erasmus+ experience and did everything to convince them to choose this city. *“I’m here thanks to a friend of mine who came here a couple of years ago <...> and who really enjoyed her time here. Then, just to be sure I watched many videos on YouTube to learn more about this country”* (IT-17). The latter ideas support the hope and contribution of those who work in the field of internalisation of higher education to help Lithuania become one of the most attractive study destinations.

To summarise the reviewed reflections, it could be stressed that the country name has the most significant impact on the students’ choice of destination. It appeared that the name of Lithuania is not on the

list of the most popular destinations, and those who arrive draw a picture of our country on the basis of their attitudinal background, which quite often is tarnished with stereotypes and prejudice.

5. Vilnius University through the Eyes of Incoming Students

The previous subchapter demonstrated that it is the country and its capital city that matter to incoming students when choosing their *Erasmus+* destinations. Yet it was their host institution (i.e., Vilnius University and its staff) that integrated the visiting students into many social spheres and involved them in the study process. Consequently, the latter contributed much to the process of shaping the informants' attitudes towards the host country and its people, i.e., developing internal outcomes of their intercultural communicative competence.

The informants' reflections reveal how diverse their relationship with the hosting country can be. Some of them decide to delve into the history of the country, to learn its language and to find out about its people: *"I chose classes that would teach me things about Lithuania. I felt like it was important to know the history of the hosting country. Now I understand why Lithuanians felt like they had been forgotten or ignored by the rest of the world. When they were still suffering from the wounds of the occupation, other countries had been enjoying their independence for a long time without any awareness of what was happening not so far from them."* (IT-11) The young people feel surprised, and, on the other hand, ashamed of their ignorance and unwillingness to learn more than the field of their personal interests reaches. Heick defines empathy as "an elevated form of understanding", while in learning "it has to do with the flow of information and creativity" (n. d., para one). Having been exposed to the country's history, the incoming students' manifestation of empathy is obvious. Their diary lines refer to the country's citizens who are found very patriotic and protective of their country. The informants start contemplating on the necessity to be or not to be as patriotic as Lithuanians. With reference to their personal value systems, some diarists emphasise the low national or self-esteem of Lithuanian people since we often ask foreigners to express their standpoints on our country. *"When they pose such questions, I often have the feeling that they are very cautious as if expecting to hear something negative. My positive answers make them relieved, though I have always been thinking whether they have such low self-esteem that they are afraid of being criticised? There is no need to worry. Lithuania and Vilnius have to offer a lot. You can live happily without bothering what others might think about you"* (DE-2, AU-1). While expanding the list of qualities of the Lithuanian people they are described as *"organised and punctual"* (IT, ES), *"they respect schedules"* (IT-2), *"are neither a minute early nor late"* (FR-3). In some opinions, *"people are really good looking; they meet their stereotype - are polite, nice, hospitable and wealthy; the girls are*

beautiful. They are good dancers too!"(IT-5); however, a strong sense of commitment and strict observance leaves no room for improvisation. Therefore, Lithuanians from the Italians' point of view seem to "have lost the concept of time" and should recall the secrets of the Italian culture and its old saying as *Carpe diem!* The latter and many other reflections demonstrate that developing one's intercultural competence is a life-long process and it is not so easy to discard one's values, even if they stand for the ethnorelative views.

Delving into the picture of the academic environment, the old campus of Vilnius University is compared to "*Hogwarts from 'Harry Potter'. It is historical and classical, the architecture is so beautiful and exquisite, and I can feel the magic of the buildings. I like the decorations inside the university as well; the hallways, the ceilings, the windows and the chandeliers are all classical and graceful. There are several arches inside the buildings and they make everything even more elegant. However, the structure of Vilnius University is a bit complicated; it was like a maze for me at the beginning*" (TW-4). These insights from a Taiwanese informant into the magic of the University premises can be found reiterated in the majority of the diarists' reflections. Much attention is given to the surroundings of the Faculty of Philology as well as the good atmosphere that permeates the corridors of the university. Both contribute to the incoming students' positive emotional state: "*I attended lectures at the faculty of Philology, University of Vilnius, which was located in the historic Centre. I loved that street (Universiteto g.); every morning it was a pleasure to admire the architectural composition of the University and the nearby Presidential Palace*" (FR-6). The informants from China and South Korea express their sincere admiration for the academic environment, every student could dream about.

The organisation of the study process seems to be flawless too, however, this aspect provoked some snide criticism from some representatives of the Romance cultures: "*An .xcellent range of activities: diversity of lectures, keeping the schedules, punctuality. What should I say? A good school for army officers*" (IT-2). In contrast, the majority of the informants appreciate the system of study organisation as well as the prevailing teaching methods: "*<...> the way in which the lectures are given is completely new for me. When in Italy, sometimes I used to attend boring academic lectures — no possibilities to interact with the professor, you had to listen to her or him taking some notes. It is different right now, you can speak with the professor, interact with other students, prepare some presentations, I like this way, I mean, it is more useful than the classical one and it is helpful for you to improve your languages skills*" (IT-12). "*In France, we usually come to class, take notes of what the teacher says and study the given information at home, we do not talk very much in class*" (FR-6). The reflections of the Taiwanese diarists identify the differences existing in the educational processes of both countries: "*The learning conditions in Lithuania are very different from the ones typical of Taiwan. Lithuanian students are more active*

and have more interactions with professors than the students in my country. In general, Lithuanian students feel freer to express their opinions in the class. On the other hand, Taiwanese students are shy to share their attitudes and scared if they say something wrong in front of everyone. I like to study in Lithuania more than in Taiwan, because I would like to know what other students think about the topics explained by the professor explains in class. The similar thing between Taiwan and Lithuania is that most students and professors have friendly relationship and it makes the atmosphere relaxed and sometimes even funny in the class” (TW-2). However, too intense student involvement in class activities receive a pinch of criticism, as Lithuanian students are described not being able to listen to others and not accepting diverse opinions: “Lithuanian students are very competitive and they want to correct you all the time. In Spain it is not the same because if you say something wrong nobody will trample you, everyone waits for the professor to correct. I see that Lithuanian students lack the feeling of companionship” (ES-7). To add insult to injury, the informant from Austria criticises Lithuanian professors for ‘pampering’ students so much: they should be given much more autonomy. The Japanese informants find the local students disrespectful to their professors “the professor comes in but the students continue talking” (JP-1). Among the advantages listed by the majority of the informants, the hard and sincere work of all the University professors is repeatedly mentioned, as is the relatively small group of students in class, which is viewed as the most effective way to achieve the highest quality of studies.

The tradition of Vilnius University to organise a procession of students and professors along Gediminas Avenue to mark the beginning of the academic year deserves special attention and is frequently remarked upon. As the informants have never had such an experience, the procession on the 1st of September is compared to the greatest educational achievement when all society members witness “how Vilnius University and its students matter to the city” (FR-4). Recognition and integration of higher education into city life is identified as the key factor leading towards success.

With reference to the informants’ insights, the system of education of the Republic of Lithuania is rather admirable and their home universities could learn much from Vilnius University. Life in Vilnius has changed their opinions about many things, including lifestyles, food habits, selection of friends and fields of interests. “<...> sometimes it was hard <...> however, if I had a second chance to come to Vilnius, I would choose this destination without thinking” (IT-17). The secret of success is seen in society’s general respectful attitude towards education, the hard work of the teaching staff and people’s constant strive for innovation. The country “in the middle of nowhere” appears to be an example of good practice and provides a memorable mobility experience.

Conclusions

The presented research reveals the case of Intercultural education when the three major factors were integrated into the implementation of its process: first, mobility as a means for incoming students to discover themselves and their adaptation skills as an internal outcome of their intercultural communicative competence; second, student-orientated activities making them become explorers of a new socio-cultural context; third, the applied reflection method in the format of a diary.

1. The conducted research describes the diary as one of the best means in intercultural education. First, it gives the reader evidence on the informants' unique skills to discover a country. Consequently, the presented evidence might be used as an educational tool for the local students. Second, the diary reveals the informants' worldviews and allows the reader to follow the attitudinal shifts of the diarists, which, subsequently, demonstrate changes occurring in the informants' internal outcomes of their intercultural competence. Third, despite the dynamic character of culture, it stops time for a while and lets one feel the existing cultural realia recorded at the captured moment.

2. Based on the attitudes of 84 diarists, it could be stated that Lithuania does not belong to the top Erasmus+ destinations, and in many cases, is described as a country "in the middle of nowhere". The attitudinal reflections of international students revealed that they had chosen Lithuania as a country for their partial studies because of: a) its close geographical position and proximity to Russia; b) its safe and secure environment to learn foreign languages, Russian among them; c) its mysterious and unfamiliar existence in the middle of Europe, providing a challenge to young people; d) its institutions of higher education are of high international repute; e) its fame in the past as one of the leading states of the former USSR.

3. Lithuania is a country with a unique and painful history, forgotten or ignored by many European countries for decades, yet it appears to have a rather admirable system of education supported and respected by members of society. In addition to the appeal of the masterpieces of architecture and their cultural significance, Vilnius University, could also be an attractive example for students and educators alike. Visitors from other universities have recognised the dedication and hard work of the members of the academic community, their professionalism and thoroughness, and their constant search for innovative communicative methods to educate their students as excellent specialists.

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Notes

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