

Research Article - Peer reviewed

Short-term international mobility and its potential to develop students' soft skills: A case-study of a Blended Intensive Programme

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Abstract

The Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme is a short-term, academic internationalisation opportunity of 5-30 days, integrated as part of the participating students' home curriculum. Erasmus+ encourages transformative, challenge-based and work-integrated learning designs, with the goal to strengthen students' employability and their global competence. This includes developing soft skills such as intercultural understanding, empathy and critical thinking. The goal of this article is to determine what soft skills students develop during a Blended Intensive Programme and what is an effective learning design for that development. An in-depth single-case study with students from four European universities and mixed methods was performed. The qualitative data, which consists of 70 reflective reports, and the quantitative data, which consists of a survey with 32 respondents, were compared and contrasted. The results demonstrate that students developed 25 soft skills, pertaining to the categories being, thinking, relating, collaborating and acting. Five factors with implications for the effectiveness of the learning design were identified: student role, variation, cultural immersion, real-world experiences and time. The visiting students described a higher motivation to pursue an international career and a higher perceived increase in employability. They also described more experiences as transformative and identified a higher number of soft skills than the host students. The experience of cultural immersion associated with cross-border internationalisation is a plausible explanation. Recommendations for improvement are to give host students increased responsibility as "buddies" for visiting students, strengthen the contact with industry through work-integrated learning activities and prioritise student-active and collaborative activities in multicultural groups.

Keywords: Blended Intensive Programme, Employability, Soft skills, Transformative learning, Work-integrated learning.

How to cite

Stavelie, H. (2026). Short-term international mobility and its potential to develop students' soft skills: A case-study of a Blended Intensive Programme. *Current Issues in Work-Integrated Learning*, 2(2) 1-19. [DOI.10.64775/ciwil.2026.64010](https://doi.org/10.64775/ciwil.2026.64010)

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Received: 23 February 2026; Revised: 5 June 2026; Accepted: 8 June 2026; Published: 11 August 2026

Introduction

Since their launch in 1987, Erasmus' study abroad programmes have become associated with a series of positive outcomes pertaining to lifelong learning, training and employability (Engel, 2010). These are also specific goals of work-integrated learning (WIL) (McRae et al., 2019). The 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme aims to educate active European citizens with the necessary skills and knowledge to address a wide array of challenges such as climate change, rising inequality, globalisation, digitalisation, economic and post-conflict migration (European Commission, 2025). These goals reflect international initiatives to develop so-called 21st century skills (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2009; 2018), including creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, communication, collaboration, life and career skills, intercultural skills, diversity awareness, self-awareness, empathy and adaptability (Binkley et al., 2012; World Economic Forum, 2016). Erasmus+ impact studies confirm that international mobilities increase students' acquisition of such soft skills, and that both perceived employability and actual employment rates are higher among students who have participated in an international mobility when compared to those who have not (European Commission, 2014; 2018).

In 2021 Erasmus+ introduced the short-term Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), which permits students and staff to undertake brief study, trainee or teaching periods abroad. BIP is intended to provide internationalisation opportunities to students who are unable to participate in the traditional longer-term mobilities. Core objectives are to educate students to become effective global citizens with the ability to contribute to sustainable development, inclusion and diversity, and to strengthen their employability (European Commission/DG EAC, 2022). This includes developing "transversal skills such as communication skills, language skills, critical thinking, problem solving, intercultural skills, research skills, forward-looking skills, such as digital and green skills that will enable them to tackle challenges of today and tomorrow", and "facilitate personal development such as the ability to adapt to new situations, and self-confidence." (European Commission, 2025, p. 43).

A BIP requires minimum three participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and includes at least one virtual activity and a physical mobility of between 5 and 30 days. It gives 3 ECTS and is included either as part of another course or as a stand-alone course in the student's curriculum. The experiential and work-integrated approach in BIP places it in the context of WIL, which is both a pedagogical approach and a field of research (Thon & Brekke Hauglid, 2025). WIL programmes include and integrate work-focused activities as an intentional part of the curriculum, developed in collaboration with a third party from the professional field, and may include both placement activities, such as internships, and non-placement activities, such as cases or simulations (Kaider et al., 2017). Learning takes place when students connect theory to practice and reflect actively on their learning process, and in doing so challenge their existing knowledge and understandings (McRae et al., 2018; Zegwaard et al., 2023).

Previous research on learning in international mobilities has typically focused on tangible, knowledge-based outcomes rather than the more intangible soft skills (Cushing et al., 2019). Still, it is the soft skills developed during international mobilities that have been found to inflict the most on students' future employment decisions (Nada & Legutko, 2022). As the research on BIP is limited, it is necessary to develop more knowledge of its potential to develop students' soft skills through learning designs which promote inclusivity and sustainability (Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026). When developing such learning designs, it is necessary to consider the unique context of the BIP: First, its short and compact format allows intensive collaboration between culturally diverse students, teachers and local industry actors, but could also create challenges. Second, the required inclusion of visiting students (who travel abroad) and host students (who stay at home), have implications for learning which should be considered when designing the programme (Jager, 2025). To fill the needs for the practical field and the research gaps, this article aims to develop knowledge of how soft skills are developed in a BIP by asking:

What soft skills do students develop during a BIP, and what is an effective learning design for that development?

To answer this question a single case study with mixed methods was performed. The study compares host and visiting students' learning experiences and their perceived development of soft skills following a BIP as an empirical event. The learning design included a variety of experiential learning activities, some of which comply with the definition of non-placement WIL. A transformative approach to learning was applied (Mezirow, 1997), including student reflections both during the course and in the final assessment. The data consists of mainly qualitative and some quantitative data. The article

is organised as follows: First, the theoretical foundation, then, the case description, the research methods, results and discussion. Finally, a conclusion.

Theoretical foundation

Soft skills for the global workplace

Research finds that participation in BIP helps students develop professional and transversal skills demanded by employers, and that BIP can promote sustainable and inclusive practices and intercultural competence (Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026; Jager, 2025). In the European context, soft skills are commonly understood as intangible social, personal, emotional and cognitive skills, attitudes or behaviours. They are transferable to different contexts and practices and are associated with increased employability (Cinque, 2016). They are often referred to as 21st century skills, which according to Blinkley et al. (2012) largely pertain to 4 areas; *ways of thinking* (creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, learning to learn, metacognition), *ways of working* (communication, collaboration), *tools for working* (information literacy, ICT literacy), and *living in the world* (global and local citizenship, life and career skills, personal and social responsibility, cultural awareness and cultural competence). Similar soft skills are identified as desired learning outcomes from WIL activities, as presented by McRae et al., (2019):

Table 1: The Waterloo Future-Ready Talent Framework (McRae et al., 2019)

Expand Expertise	Develop Self	Build Relationships	Design & Deliver Solutions
information & data literacy	self-assessment	communication	critical thinking
technological literacy	self-management	collaboration	innovation mindset
context specific knowledge & skills	continuous learning & career development	cross-cultural agility	implementation

Another useful framework is presented in the Inner Development Goals (IDG) initiative (Inner Development Goals, 2025), which is a research-based framework defining the necessary skills to progress towards the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). The IDG framework currently identifies 25 soft skills within the dimensions *being, thinking, relating, collaborating* and *acting*:

Table 2: The Inner Development Goals framework (Inner Development Goals, 2025)

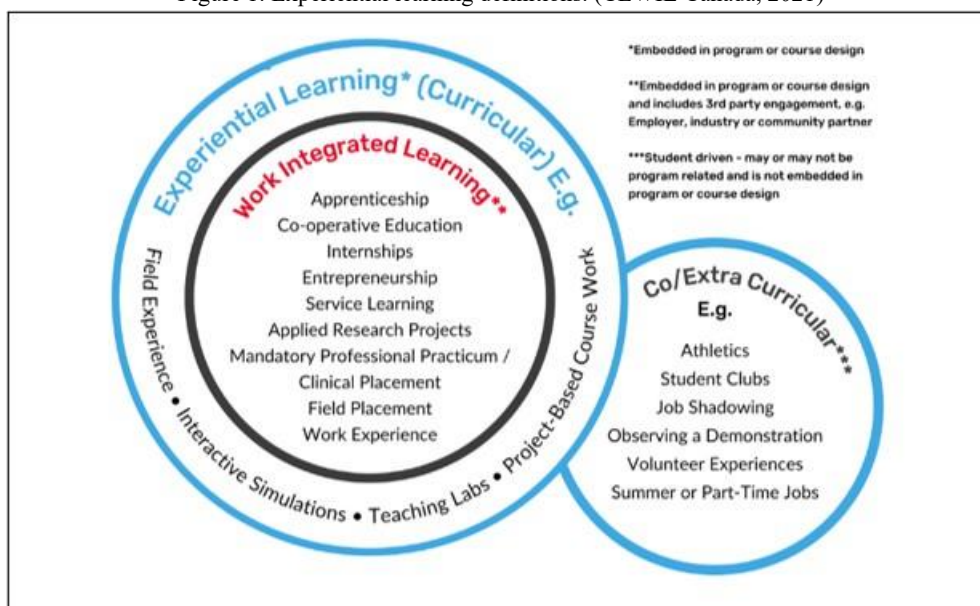
Being	Thinking	Relating	Collaborating	Acting
Inner compass	Critical thinking	Appreciation	Relationship-building skills	Courage
Integrity & Authenticity	Perspective skills	Connectedness	Inclusive mindset & Intercultural competence	Hope & Optimism
Openness & Learning mindset	Systems thinking	Humility	Co-creation skills	Conscious use of resources
Self-awareness	Long-term orientation & Visioning	Empathy & Compassion	Communication skills	Proactivity
Presence	Creativity	Forgiveness	Mobilization skills	Resilience

Research demonstrates that participating in international mobility programmes promotes the development of many soft skills which match the IDG framework, including intercultural understanding, empathy, self-awareness, critical thinking, confidence, adaptability, perspective-taking, problem-solving, curiosity and resilience, an interest global issues and in pursuing a global career (Cushing et al., 2019; Nada & Legutko, 2022; Cvitan et al., 2024). The IDG framework will be used as an analytical frame when identifying the soft skills described by the participants in this study.

Learning design and transformative learning

Billett (2024) distinguishes between work-integrated education (WIE), which is the *provision* of experiences and educational interventions, and work-integrated learning (WIL), which constitutes the individual student's actual learning process. To achieve the desired learning outcomes, students should be assisted to integrate practical experiences with educational goals, to challenge their existing knowledge, and to develop their skills. In this article, an effective *learning design* is understood as a successful integration of WIE and WIL. It provides both WIL and non-WIL activities, combining a variety of educational experiences which are both academic, professional, social and cultural. In accordance with CEWIL Canada's framework of experience-based learning in figure 1 below, these are defined as non-placement WIL experiences, curricular, problem-based experiences and extra-curricular, student-driven experiences. The broad approach is intended to utilize the diversity of actors (students, teachers, industry professionals), cultures (in the host country and of the various participants) and experiences (social, academic, cultural) that are available in BIP.

Figure 1: Experiential learning definitions. (CEWIL Canada, 2021)



Billett's (2024) understanding of learning is closely related to the concept of *transformative learning* (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011). Transformative learning takes place when students are challenged through real-world experiences, become aware of their existing assumptions, beliefs and value judgments, critically reflect on these through self-examination, and take on board the perspectives of others. This process leads to a change in the students' world view and is triggered by an experience that challenges their long-held beliefs, a so-called "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011, p. 19). Since dealing with disorienting dilemmas usually involves discomfort, teachers should support students by creating an open learning environment, avoid imposing their own views and permit students to interact on equal terms. Learning activities are "learner-centered, participatory and interactive", involve "group deliberation and group problem solving" and "reflect the real-life experiences of the students" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). A transformative learning design, which may include both WIL and non-WIL activities, has been found to influence students' career plans, the development of their life-long learning habits, and their soft skills (Purg et al., 2018; Nada & Legutko, 2022). As Cushing et al. (2019) point out, transformative learning often takes place outside of the classroom, and often during activities that are beyond the teachers' control, such as student-initiated social events. Consequently, a BIP which includes experiential

learning activities that are both WIL, non-WIL and extra-curricular is likely to provide a variety of contexts for real-world experiences which promote the development of desired soft skills and employability.

In international mobility programmes, a trigger for transformative learning is *cultural immersion*, which means to engage deeply and actively with a new culture (Chwialkowska, 2020). Cultural immersion has the potential to provide the students with disorienting dilemmas, or novel experiences which challenge their existing world view and force them to examine and potentially alter their assumptions, beliefs and value judgements (Oghenebruphiyo, 2020). A BIP includes both host students and visiting students. While visiting students experience internationalisation through “cross-border education”, the host students experience “internationalisation at home” (Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, 2020, p. 8). While Erasmus+ encourages a culturally immersive learning design where participants work in transnational and transdisciplinary teams (European Commission, 2025) it says little about how to manage the different internationalisation contexts of host and visiting students. Cultural distance between home and host country triggers curiosity (Asoodar et al., 2017), and it is to be expected that visiting students have a more culturally immersive experience than host students. On the other hand, the natural diversity of the BIP group is an advantage and has potential to encourage culturally immersive experiences also for the host students. According to Perfözl and López-Varela (2022), students who participate in short-term mobilities at their home institution can be highly motivated by the international learning and foreign language opportunities offered in the course itself and through the interaction with the visiting participants. Hepple et al.’s (2017) study of a short-term, work-integrated learning mobility between Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers provides a good example of how cultural immersion may be facilitated by actively involving the host students as “buddies” who accompanied the visiting students on school visits and introduced them to Malaysian culture. Regardless of student role, it is essential that both visiting and host students are prepared for cultural differences and are guided actively in the learning process. Research shows that students who are unaware of potential cultural differences and are not supported through guided reflection, may have their negative stereotypes confirmed rather than contradicted (Hepple et al., 2017; Asoodar et al., 2017).

The short and intensive format of BIP, which typically applies interactive, multicultural teamwork and a focused atmosphere, has been positively associated with the development of soft skills such as intercultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, teamwork, problem-solving, and digital competencies (Prada et al., 2025). In longer-term programmes, usually not designed specifically to encourage cultural integration, students have been found to stick to their own in-group rather than mixing with local students (Chwialkowska, 2020). However, the brevity of the BIP can also be a challenge for intercultural learning, because there is less time for in-depth exploration. In longer-term programmes students are also more likely to experience intercultural challenges. These could be useful as triggers for transformative learning, especially if the students are encouraged to reflect on these experiences. As Lysgaard (1955, p. 50) demonstrates, the first meeting with a new culture is typically characterised by a “honeymoon” feeling of overwhelming positivity, “gratified by the adventure of being abroad”, while the challenges of adapting to a new culture normally occur in later stages. Short-term mobilities may also especially encourage transformative learning because they are organised by actively engaged teachers who typically include real-world and WIL experiences (Cushing et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2012). This format allows the collaborating teacher team to support the students’ learning actively, in accordance with transformative learning theory. While increased efforts are required in terms of the planning and coordination of such “tandem teaching”, a culturally and academically diverse teacher team has been found to enhance BIP students’ learning outcomes (Perfözl & López-Varela, 2022, p.7; Jager, 2025).

The case

The selected case is the BIP “Diversity and Sustainability in Global Business” with 73 students, hosted in Oslo by Kristiania University of Applied Sciences in February and March 2024, with collaborating HEIs from Ireland, Spain and Belgium. The BIP comprised one virtual activity and a five-day academic programme in February - March 2024. 73 business students from Norway, Belgium, Ireland and Spain participated. The learning activities were designed with a student-centred, challenge-based and instructor-guided approach to learning, in accordance with BIP objectives (European Commission, 2025) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997). To provide both host students and visiting students with a culturally immersive environment during the physical mobility, learning activities were largely experiential, including both non-placement WIL activities, experiential and academic learning activities and extra-curricular activities.

In the virtual session, which was held two weeks prior to the physical mobility, students were introduced to the topics of cultural understanding and sustainability and participated in break-out room activities to prepare them for potential cultural differences and to “break the ice”. The physical programme included case discussions, problem-based classroom sessions, group work in multicultural groups, sessions with local experts and industry, and cultural and social excursions. The students also socialised during meals and arranged an evening activity with a quiz.

WIL activities included sessions with industry professionals both in the classroom and during company visits. This was intended to increase the students’ networking opportunities, to inspire them to seek employment in global organisations with sustainable impact, and to develop soft skills for the global workplace. The company visits included an energy company, a wine and spirits retailer and an international architect firm. In the classroom, students also connected with speakers from a large international furniture retailer, a diversity consultancy firm and a diversity recruiter from a public institution. Students were given insight into the dilemmas and opportunities of sustainable business and participated in deliberation and problem solving.

Cultural excursions included visits to museums providing insights into Norwegian history, nature, art, democracy and role in international peace processes. Some host students were given roles as guides for the visiting students during excursions. These learning activities, as well as the social activities, were intended to provide real-world experiences relevant for the course topics and a context for cultural immersion and the development of social, communicative and intercultural skills.

Class sessions addressed ethical dilemmas, real-life business cases and practical situations which students were invited to discuss and solve in multicultural groups. The activities were organised with active teacher guidance, such as managing plenary discussions and turn-taking, dividing and rotating multicultural groups, and monitoring group processes. The goals of these sessions were both to develop knowledge within the fields of sustainability and diversity, and to develop soft skills such as increased self-awareness, empathy, intercultural understanding, critical thinking and perspective skills.

The course assessment included a group project and the submission of an individual reflective report one week after the mobility. This assessment was chosen to make students reflect freely on their learning and their evaluation of the programme rather than to test facts-based knowledge. The assessments were not graded, but all students who completed them received a BIP diploma.

Research methods

The study was designed as single case study, combining qualitative and quantitative methods with direct participation and observation. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to strengthen the study’s validity. While the qualitative data allowed in-depth analysis of the case and the participants’ experiences, the quantitative sample served to corroborate the qualitative findings. The research project was approved by Sikt¹ and conducted in accordance with their ethical guidelines. The participants in the study provided informed consent prior to the study. The letter of consent stated that participation was voluntary, that personal data were protected and the participants’ rights and access to insight and withdrawal.

The qualitative data material included 70 individual reflective reports, which were part of the course assessment. The reflective reports were guided by the following open questions: What did you learn?; What activities contributed most to your learning?; Has the BIP extended or challenged your previous knowledge or perspectives?; In what ways, if at all, did you develop competencies relevant for building an inclusive and sustainable society?; How do you evaluate the organisation and delivery of the BIP in terms of stimulating your learning?; Do you see this experience as potentially having an impact on your life or career? Do you have any recommendations for improvement or other constructive feedback? The reflective reports served to identify and categorise the development of soft skills and factors in the learning design which the students identified as important for the acquisition of these skills. The open questions were chosen to encourage detailed, nuanced narratives and to uncover unexpected insights. Since the reports were part of the assessment, it was also important that the students did not feel obliged to please the teacher. Therefore, the students were encouraged to give honest feedback to help improve the course, and the reports were not graded. Planning documents such as the course programme and the academic course description were also part of the qualitative data materials. Both these and the

¹ Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

observations derived from the researcher's direct participation served to contextualise the analysis.

To analyse the reflective reports, a thematic approach was adopted, based on Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework. First, all the reflective reports were reviewed to become familiarised with the content. As the review uncovered that the host and visiting students' responses demonstrated systematic differences, it was decided to analyse them separately. Second, relevant text segments which described 1) soft skills developed and 2) factors impacting students' learning were selected and coded for each group. Third, the codes were developed and labelled. 25 soft skills were labelled using appropriate names and were categorized within the 5 skill areas of the IDG framework. Five factors in the learning design were labelled by synthesising the codes and selecting suitable names. Finally, key findings were compared and contrasted in relation to the two groups, the research question and relevant literature. For example, specific learning activities (such as group discussions and excursions) were evaluated in terms of their ability to promote a transformative learning environment, and as triggers for developing soft skills.

The quantitative data consisted of 32 responses to a mixed-format survey. The survey served to complement the primary qualitative data. The survey combined open-ended questions with Likert-type questions and multiple-response questions, to make it possible to capture nuanced participant perspectives and to identify broader patterns. The multi-response questions asked students to tick off their perceived development of specific soft skills as a result of their participation in BIP. These questions were largely added from the Erasmus Participant Survey form (European Commission, 2021). As the BIP in question did not focus on developing ICT and media literacy skills, these were not included in the survey. The Likert-scale questions asked the students to evaluate the quality of the learning activities and the practical organisation of the BIP. This format made it possible to compare the degree of satisfaction with the perceived learning outcomes for each group. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey data. The purpose was to identify the number and frequency of perceived soft skills developed, to measure the perceived quality of the learning design and to compare the results of the two groups. The results were compared by generating separate summaries for each group, by describing the results and by generating comparative diagrams, as exemplified in the results section below. Table 3 presents the participant distribution of the qualitative and quantitative data across cohorts.

Table 3: Participant distribution across cohorts and data types

Data type	Cohort	n
Qualitative data	Visiting students (V)	20
	Host students (H)	50
Quantitative data	Visiting students (V)	9
	Host students (H)	23

The research methods have some strengths and weaknesses. The strengths include rich qualitative data with thick descriptions and high response rate, 96% for the reflective reports and 44% for the survey. The thick narratives from the reflective reports provided useful insights into the development of soft skills and the identification of the factors in the learning design. The author was a participating teacher in the BIP, which posed a risk of bias in the analysis. However, this active participation also provided deep insights and a contextual understanding which strengthened the internal validity of the case study (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Furthermore, the systematic and thorough thematic analysis, and the transparency achieved by including direct quotes from the reflective reports, are considered a strength. The application of the quantitative survey also served to strengthen the validity, although the size was too small to allow statistical generalisation. The participative observation and the planning documents were primarily used in the case description and for context. Another weakness is that the data was collected shortly after the BIP, preventing the inclusion of long-term evaluations of the learning outcomes. Furthermore, insights from organisers and teachers, apart from the author herself, are lacking.

Results

Reflective reports: soft skills

25 soft skills were identified and labelled through thematic coding of the reflective reports, and categorised using the five IDG dimensions:

Table 4: Soft skills identified in reflective reports.

Being	Thinking	Relating	Collaborating	Acting
Self-scrutiny	Critical thinking	Fellowship	Inclusivity	Courage
Self-awareness	Perspective skills	Empathy	Listening skills	Initiative
Open-mindedness	Complexity awareness	Tolerance	Communicating skills	Problem-solving
Moral compass	Broadened understanding	Supportiveness	Adaptability	Decision-making
		Sensitivity	Cultural literacy	Empowerment
		Appreciation for diversity	Team-working	

The most frequent skills identified were critical thinking, perspective skills, inclusivity, self-scrutiny, cultural literacy, appreciation for diversity and open-mindedness. When describing their development of the soft skills, students particularly emphasised activities which had challenged them, put them out of their comfort zone or made them question their previous assumptions or attitudes, characteristics which indicate transformative learning experiences (Mezirow, 1997). This is illustrated in table 5:

Table 5: Soft skill development in challenge-based and social activities. (Author's elaboration based on thematic analysis)

Soft skills	Quotes from reflective reports
Self-scrutiny, Self-awareness	I learned about microaggressions in this workshop. Without attending this workshop, I would not have realized that my behaviour could be seen as aggression towards other cultures. (V5)
Perspective skills, Self-scrutiny	Through the interactive sessions during the lectures, I was able to see other people's point of view and challenge my own ideas. (V7)
Cultural literacy, Inclusivity	I was really glad that the Norwegian students made a little effort to get out of their comfort zone and get to know us because it made this experience better. I could talk to lots of them and learn the differences about the way we live. (V17)
Critical thinking, Perspective skills, Appreciation for diversity	Interacting with students and professors with diverse backgrounds pushed me to think critically and approach issues from multiple angles. (V18)
Open-mindedness, Perspective skills, Appreciation for diversity	Debating complex issues with classmates from diverse backgrounds pushed me to articulate my own viewpoints while remaining open to different perspectives. (H4)
Complexity awareness, Cultural literacy, Self-scrutiny	Before the BIP, I held certain assumptions based on limited [cultural] exposure. After meaningful interactions and experiences, I realized the complexity and nuance of cultural identities. (H37)
Listening, Team-working, Empathy, Appreciation for diversity, Inclusivity	Working in diverse teams taught me a lot about empathy and understanding. I learned to really listen to people who had different opinions or ways of doing things because of their cultural backgrounds. (H9)
Moral compass, Decision-making, Empowerment	Explorations of ethical dilemmas empowered me to approach decision-making through lenses of social and environmental responsibility. (V1)
Decision-making, Initiative, Empowerment	I intend to integrate the principles of diversity and sustainability into my decision-making processes and actively contribute to building a more inclusive and sustainable society. (H28)

Although both groups reported development of the identified soft skills, the visiting students typically gave more examples and described more experiences as profoundly transformative than the host students. They also particularly emphasised the novelty of experiencing Norway and Norwegians as a trigger for their transformation. As two visiting students wrote:

This experience has profoundly transformed me. From the diverse range of topics covered, as well as the distinct character of the country itself and the warm (in a typically Norwegian manner) reception from the students. (V2)

Throughout the week, the point of view I had before has dramatically evolved. The main reason is directly related to the possibility of meeting native Norwegians. Meetings arranged through the programme, and encounters with students on our own to have dinner or hang out in pubs have facilitated a deep approach to the patterns and ways of living of Norwegians. (V3)

In their descriptions, the visiting students also used a more enthusiastic language than the host students, for example describing the BIP as “incredibly enriching” (V6), “a week of self-discovery” (V2), “tremendous” (V13), or “amazing” (V4). Host students were typically less excited but also described having challenged themselves and developed their soft skills. This was mostly associated with the opportunity to engage with the international students. A host student wrote:

The opportunity to work in small groups and engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds makes ground for the development of better communication and adaptability. And I think these qualities are highly valued and beneficial for both my life and future career. (H18)

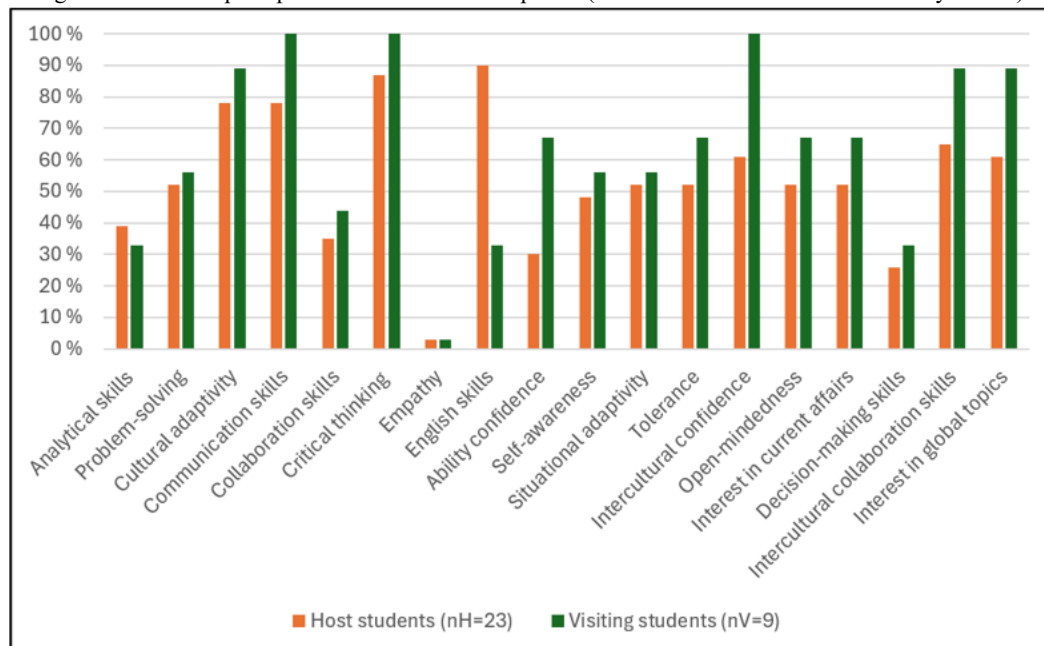
In general, the visiting students said they felt welcomed by the Norwegian host students, but some noted that they could have been more engaged if they had been made to assume a greater responsibility:

A few of the host students from Kristiania could have been more supportive or involved when grouping up with visiting students. My recommendation is to train host students to be more committed to group work. (V4)

Survey: soft skills and employability

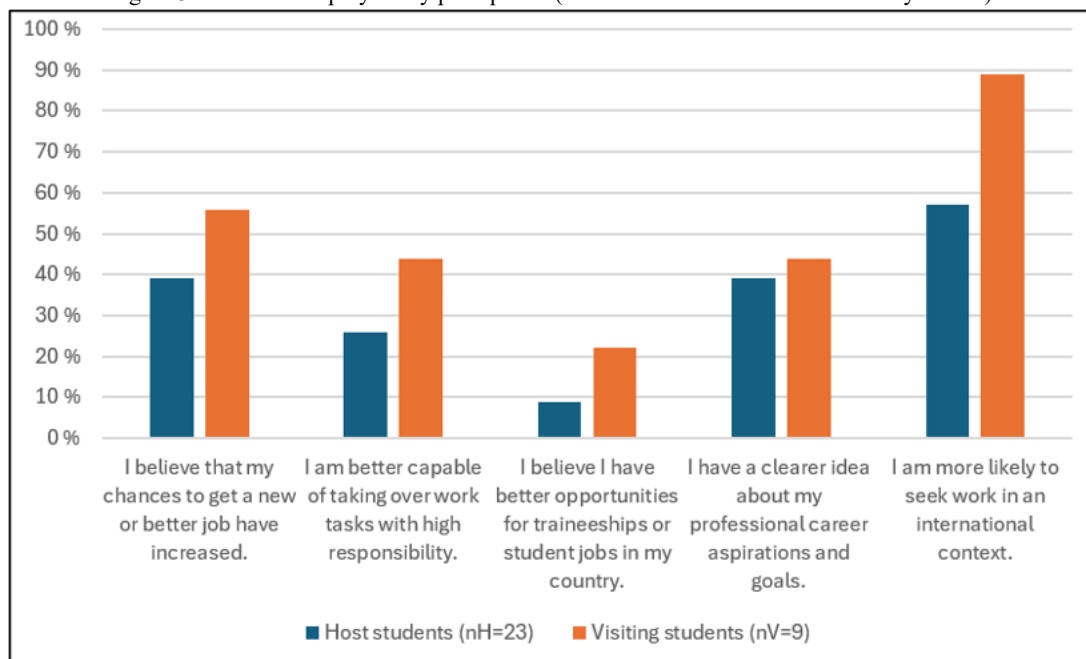
The survey questions measured the students’ perceived improvement of a range of pre-defined soft skills, their perception of increased employability, and their general satisfaction and motivation. Between 86% and 100% of the respondents were either very satisfied or rather satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning, academic content, cultural attractions, contact with industry, learning support and organisation. The soft skills identified in the survey (displayed in figure 2) largely matched the soft skills described in the reflective reports and served both to corroborate and nuance these findings. A slightly higher percentage of visiting students than host students felt they had developed their soft skills, with only two exceptions: 90% of host students reported improvement in English skills to only 33% of visiting students. Also, a slightly higher percentage of host students (39%) felt they had improved their analytical skills than the visiting students (33%). The highest scores were found on critical thinking (100% visiting; 87% host) and cultural adaptivity (100% visiting; 78% host). Surprisingly, few students reported development of empathy (3% for both groups), while many mentioned having developed empathy in their reflective reports. When asked to elaborate on their motivation for joining BIP, the visiting students emphasised an interest in Norway, a desire to challenge themselves, improve skills and knowledge, travel and meet new people and a general interest in the BIP topics. Some host students said that they were motivated by the opportunity to develop their intercultural skills and engage with industry professionals. Others simply stated that participation in the BIP was compulsory for them.

Figure 2: Students' perceptions of soft skill development (author's elaboration based on survey results).



The visiting students also reported a higher perceived increase in employability than the host students and a considerably higher probability that they would seek work internationally as a result of participating in the BIP, as illustrated in figure 3. Several visiting students also expanded on this in the comment sections, stating that the programme had made them want to integrate diversity in teams and workplaces and think about sustainability in work processes.

Figure 3: Students' employability perceptions (author's elaboration based on survey results).



Reflective reports: factors in the learning design

Five themes emerged from the analysis as important for the effectiveness of the learning design: *Student role, variation, cultural immersion, real-world experiences* and *time*.

Student role

As we have seen, host and visiting students evaluated the BIP differently. The visiting students evaluated the organisation, the different learning activities and their own learning outcome higher than the host students. This was particularly visible in the evaluation of the cultural excursions, which the visiting students commonly described as arenas for profound learning and opportunities to understand the spirit of Norwegian culture. A visiting student wrote:

On the very first day of this workshop, I got to visit the Fram Museum. I must say it was such a fantastic experience that exceeded my expectations. I learned that being optimistic and believing in oneself can lead to achieving anything, even if it involves taking risks. (V4)

The host students described these excursions as nice breaks from the classroom routine, but seldom as transformative learning opportunities. Some, particularly those who had been given the role as student guides during excursions, expressed pride in showing their culture to the visitors. Naturally, cultural excursions in Norway presented an opportunity to learn about a new culture for visiting students, while the experience did not represent a novelty for the Norwegian students. The fact that the BIP was a compulsory part of the host students' course, while the visiting students had actively chosen, applied and been selected for the BIP, may also explain differences in motivation.

Variation

Activity variation was identified by both groups as important for learning. The mix of lectures, contact with industry, group work and out-of-class excursions helped students bridge theory with practice, explore course topics with professionals and peers, and enabled them to handle authentic, real-world experiences with the potential to change their world view.

A visiting student described how an excursion to a major energy company – which was cancelled when a political protest hindered the group from entering the building – fundamentally changed his perspective on the responsibilities of business and the unpredictability of day-to-day practices. This experience provided background for the same student's reflections on the importance of variation for the learning outcome:

Learning is most effective when we back theories with practical work. The organisation and delivery of the BIP was a huge success in my opinion mainly because they found a way to blend theory and practical experiences and made sure not to overwhelm the students with too much information. The inclusion of group work made things really interesting. (V16)

The opportunity to exit the classroom was emphasised by most students as important both socially and academically. A host student wrote:

I liked the combination of different professors who had different topics and views, and the expeditions to different cultural museums and the company visit. (H37)

However, while the visiting students seemed to appreciate cultural excursions and company visits equally, the host students emphasised the company visits as superior learning opportunities compared to the cultural ones.

The virtual session, which was given two weeks prior to the physical mobility, received more varied feedback. Some said it was a nice introduction to the programme and appreciated the opportunity to see the teachers and meet some of the other students. However, the limitations of the virtual space for developing relations across cultures were also emphasised, and some felt awkward being put into digital break-out rooms with strangers. During these activities the participating teachers visited some of the break-out rooms to provide guidance. They found that the most useful tasks were the simple ice-breaking exercises, and that students at this stage found it hard to engage in knowledge-based topics.

Cultural immersion

Both student groups emphasised experiences of cultural immersion associated with discussions in small, multicultural groups as positive for learning. A visiting student wrote:

One of the activities that I enjoyed was where we had to split into groups at different times with different people. With this I was able to get more knowledge and views from the other people which means that we could learn a lot from other people in the class. (V14)

Many suggested to allow more time for discussion in these groups, because they perceived them as having an impact on both their soft skill development and their employability.

Industry contact, company excursions and social events were also associated with culturally immersive experiences. A host student wrote:

The activities that contributed most to the social aspect of learning cultural differences and understanding of others were the excursions. It was nice to share experiences with the visiting students and learn from each other socially. (H39)

Many of the visiting students described the cultural excursions as culturally immersive and transformative experiences, while the host students generally did not. Students from both groups appreciated the varied perspectives from the cross-cultural teacher team. However, some students were critical of one of the teachers, whose teaching style they perceived as confrontational. Other students particularly praised this teacher for challenging them. Both personal and cultural differences could explain these conflicting views.

Real-world experiences

Almost all the students emphasised the WIL activities, such as company visits and interaction with industry professionals as authentic real-world experiences which were crucial learning arenas. A visiting student wrote:

The programme's emphasis on experiential learning is among its most significant aspects. I got to meet the company's Head of Corporate Social Responsibility, through the workplace visit. This has altered my perception of how eager businesses in this sector are to enhance their sustainable practices. (V13)

Real-world experiences also included social activities, and some students commented that including more social activities could improve learning. The interactive group exercises, case studies and teacher-led discussions were also emphasised as important arenas for exploring real-world challenges. However, some students felt that there was a pressure to be "politically correct" in teacher-led classroom discussions on diversity and sustainability topics. This suggests that teachers should be particularly aware of their role when monitoring discussions to allow for diverse perspectives to be voiced. A host student wrote:

I think it may be hard for everyone to speak their mind in a setting like this, because many topics can be sensitive to different people, also being afraid of saying something 'wrong', because of what the majority think is the 'politically correct' opinion. (H41)

Time

Sufficient time for exploring the learning activities – and sufficient time for breaks – was also identified as important for an effective learning design, as the interaction between students was seen as crucial for learning. While many students expressed satisfaction with having learnt a lot during the intense week of the BIP, others noted that some teachers cut time for questions and discussion due to time constraints, causing students to miss out on useful learning. There were two long days spent entirely in the classroom, and several students pointed out that learning during these days became challenging towards the end. A visiting student wrote:

I must acknowledge that the intensity of consecutive classes posed a challenge for some students, including myself. Despite the captivating nature of the topics, the sheer weightiness of the content made it difficult for individuals to fully engage with each session. (V2)

More time for meals and social activities was also suggested, as these provided spaces for developing important social skills, trust and perceptions of fellowship.

Discussion

Soft skills

The 25 soft skills identified from the reflective reports matched the five dimensions of the IDG framework (*being, thinking, relating, collaborating, acting*). The students associated the development of their soft skills with learning activities that challenged them, put them out of their comfort zone and made them question their existing assumptions and attitudes. This confirms that challenge-based, transformative learning designs are effective for developing desired soft skills in BIP, in accordance with international mobility research (e.g. Nada & Legutko, 2022; Chwialkowska, 2020; Oghenebruphiyo, 2020). The skills that were most frequently described by students pertained to the first four IDG dimensions: self-scrutiny and open-mindedness (*being*), critical thinking and perspective skills (*thinking*), appreciation for diversity (*relating*), inclusivity and cultural literacy (*collaborating*). These soft skills are also associated with increased employability, which is a goal of BIP (European Commission, 2025). *Acting* skills (for example problem-solving) were also identified by many students, but were not mentioned as often as the personal, interpersonal, communicative and cognitive skills. The skills identified also matched three of the 21st century skills categories: *ways of thinking*, *ways of working* and *living in the world* (Blinkley et al., 2012), which include critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, life and career skills, cultural awareness and cultural competence. These skills are also desired by Erasmus+ (European Commission, 2025, p. 43). However, students did not report having developed skills pertaining to Blinkley's fourth category, *tools for working*, which comprise digital and media literacy skills (also desired by Erasmus+). This is natural considering the BIP did not focus on building digital skills and did not include professional training. The skills identified also fit into three of the categories in the Waterloo Future-Ready Talent Framework (McRae et al., 2019); *develop self* (e.g. self-assessment, self-management), *build relationships* (e.g. communication, collaboration, cross-cultural agility), and *design & deliver solutions* (e.g. critical thinking, innovation mindset).

The learning design's ability to offer transformative internationalisation experiences to both visiting and host students was crucial for their learning outcomes. Even if both groups reported good-quality learning outcomes, the survey results demonstrated that visiting students perceived to have developed more soft skills than the host students, and that a larger proportion of the visiting students perceived an increase in employability and the motivation to seek work internationally. As both Erasmus impact studies and research demonstrate, students who experience cross-border internationalisation perceive a higher increased employability and soft skill development than students who experience internationalisation at home (European Commission, 2014; Engel, 2010; Nada & Legutko, 2022). However, even though a higher proportion of visiting students reported this improvement, the host students' scores were also significant, indicating a very good learning outcome for this group too. For example, 87% of host students reported improvement in critical thinking and 78% in intercultural communication skills while 100% of the visiting students felt they had developed the same skills. 39% of host students also reported improvement in perceived employability, compared to 56% of visiting students. Only when evaluating their improvement of English skills did the host students score considerably higher than the visiting students (90% host students; 33% visiting students). Improvement of foreign language skills has also previously been identified as a key take-away for non-mobile students in short-term, blended mobilities (Perföls & López-Varela, 2022). The lack of improvement reported by the visiting students may be explained by them already having a high language proficiency, which some of them also commented.

Learning design

Most of the students (85% of host students and 100% of visiting students) were very or rather satisfied with the learning activities, which is an indication of an effective learning design. The learning activities were designed in accordance with

transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), including participative, problem-based activities both in the virtual session, in the classroom sessions and during WIL activities (field trips and contact with industry). In accordance with Erasmus+ recommendations, students also worked in transdisciplinary and multicultural teams. They were encouraged to engage actively with each other and critically reflect on their experiences both in discussions, in group projects and during excursions. The writing of the individual reflective report, submitted 1-2 weeks after the BIP, was also part of the learning design intended to develop critical reflection skills and self-awareness. The qualitative analysis of the reflective reports identified five factors in the learning design with implications for learning: *Student role, variation, cultural immersion, real-world experiences and time*.

Student role

The student role – as host or visiting student – influenced both the motivation and the evaluation of the learning outcome associated with the different learning activities. For example, visiting students generally described cultural excursions as important for developing their soft skills, while the host students saw these more as opportunities to socialise. However, many host students also said that they enjoyed the cultural excursions, and some were proud to guide the visitors during Norwegian cultural excursions. A visiting student also suggested giving the host students more responsibility. This suggests that a useful addition in the learning design could be to make host students “buddies” with responsibility for cultural inclusion, as was done in Hepple et al.’s (2017) case study of Australian pre-service teachers in Malaysia. Some visiting students were particularly enthusiastic, describing their experiences with superlatives such as “tremendous”, or “amazing”. As research shows, cross-border internationalisation is a trigger for curiosity and learning, while internationalisation at home is dependent on the integration of intercultural experiences in the learning environment itself (Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, 2020; Perfözl & López-Varela, 2022; Jager, 2025). While the visiting students experienced both, the host students only experienced the latter. However, the levitated enthusiasm of the visiting students may also have been triggered by the short-term aspect of the BIP. As Lysgaard (1955) explains, the early phase of contact with a new culture may be described as a “honeymoon” experience. The fact that the BIP was mandatory for the host students is also likely to have affected their engagement.

Variation

Variation, both in the learning activities and in the use of space was also identified as key for developing soft skills in the BIP. In accordance with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), students emphasised the advantage of combining a variety of learning activities which helped them bridge theory with practice in authentic, real-world scenarios or experiences which challenged their previous assumptions. The opportunities to engage in deliberation with their diverse peers, being able to experience different lecturers’ teaching styles and leaving the classroom to interact with industry representatives or experience cultural attractions were described as effective for developing soft skills, both because they provided students with different perspectives and because they made them take an active role in collaborating, reflecting and applying theory to practice. The combination of both in-class and out-of-class activities during a day was emphasised as particularly inspiring, while entire days spent in the classroom were described as less effective for learning. Students also emphasised the value of extra-curricular learning experiences that were unstructured and/or outside of the teachers’ control, such as socialising over lunch, in breaks or during after-class activities, such as a quiz night arranged by the students themselves. Previous research also confirms that a combination of academic and authentic real-world- and/or WIL experiences are effective for developing soft skills (e.g. Hepple et al., 2017; Kaider et al., 2017). Blended mobilities also include the variation between virtual and physical sessions. This BIP only included one virtual activity, two weeks prior to the physical mobility. Most students described the virtual activity as useful, but it was not seen as important for developing soft skills. This is not surprising; even if the students were put into break-out rooms to reflect on cultural differences and to break the ice, building relationships is more challenging in the virtual space than in the physical. An online collaborative project between students from the different institutions could perhaps be implemented to promote better learning opportunities in the virtual part. Another suggestion, as some of the students also made, is having virtual follow-up sessions after the physical mobility. The teachers’ role as active guides could also be better utilised.

Cultural immersion

Culturally immersive experiences were also emphasised as key for learning. Cultural immersion takes place when students engage deeply and actively with a new culture (Chwialkowska, 2020). Since host students do not engage in cross-border internationalisation, it may be argued that they do not experience cultural immersion. However, an advantage of the BIP format is that it includes a naturally multicultural student group comprised of students from minimum three countries (in this case four) and an actively engaged multicultural teacher team. According to Erdei and Káplár-Kodácsy (2020), the integration of cross-cultural learning is crucial for non-mobile students' internationalisation opportunities, and the format of the BIP is particularly well suited for this. Both student groups described the multicultural groups which were organised by the teachers as effective in making them challenge their perspectives and reassess their assumptions. Cultural immersion was also, particularly by the visiting students, associated with the WIL experiences, cultural excursions and social events. The students described transformative learning outcomes resulting from these learning activities, such as being able to "share experiences with the visiting students and learn from each other socially" (H39) and being "able to see other people's point of view and challenge my own ideas" (V7). These findings confirm recommendations to create an inclusive learning environment which encourages interaction between the diverse cultures represented in students, teachers and guest speakers, as well as the cultural and professional context outside of the classroom (Chwialkowska, 2020; Hepple et al., 2017).

An interesting finding from the analysis was the students' conflicting evaluation of the teaching style of one of the teachers, who challenged the students' perceptions on the topic of diversity. While several students emphasised this session as particularly useful for developing soft skills such as self-scrutiny and self-awareness, others complained that they felt pressured to be "politically correct", or that the teacher imposed undue authority. Students and teachers with different cultural backgrounds naturally also have different expectations to teacher-student role relationships, and misunderstandings may occur due to cultural differences (Weltzer et al., 2020). Such experiences may also become important sources for learning; as Mezirow emphasises, transformative learning typically involves experiences of discomfort when a student is confronted with a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011). Knapp et al. (2024) also note that the experience of stress related to an unfamiliar learning experience may inspire personal growth in the longer term, even if not appreciated there and then. To help students learn from such experiences, the teachers should provide close guidance without imposing their own views on the students. If not, such incidents may negatively influence learning, making students react with resentment or withdrawal (Jager, 2025). Several studies also demonstrate that psychological safety and learning support is particularly important in an intercultural environment (Asoodar et al., 2017; Chwialkowska, 2020; Hepple et al., 2017). In conclusion, the BIP context gives several opportunities for culturally immersive experiences both for host and visiting students, which if handled appropriately encourage the development of soft skills.

Real-world experiences

Real-world experiences were emphasised by both host and visiting students as crucial for learning. Students who felt they had increased their employability attributed this mainly to the opportunities to interact with real-world stakeholders such as professionals from industry. This supports previous research (e.g. Purg et al., 2018; McRae et al., 2019; Meredith, 2025). However, it was not only these WIL activities that were described as real-world experiences. Social, extra-curricular activities were also emphasised, and several students suggested more time to socialise because they claimed it gave them the most valuable intercultural learning opportunities. Furthermore, other experiential learning activities, such as interactive group exercises, case studies and teacher-led discussions were also described as activities which made the students experience real-world challenges, particularly due to the exposure to different people, both students, teachers and guests. Such experiences are also at the core of transformative learning, which is typically learner-centred and interactive, reflecting the real-life experiences of the students and engaging them in problem-solving (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). To further strengthen the students' employability and confidence as global workplace actors, real-world experiences could also have included placement WIL activities (Thon & Brekke Hauglid, 2025) such as workplace training or initiatives to more specifically develop practical skills such as digital, research and development skills. However, the BIP in question was short, and an important finding was also that the time must be managed well. As social activities also were emphasised as important real-world experiences, these should perhaps be prioritised higher, as they contribute to culturally immersive experiences.

Time

Time and time management was identified as a challenge, but also an opportunity. Some students described being overwhelmed by content, particularly on the two days that were spent entirely in the classroom. Many suggested having a looser schedule with more time for discussion and questions, which they felt would provide better learning opportunities. Time for peer-to-peer communication and in-depth reflection in groups should therefore be prioritised over the quantity of content taught, particularly in short BIPs. While transformative learning typically requires a long-term, in-depth time investment (Mezirow, 1997), an advantage of the short and intensive design is that it challenges the students to interact with a diversity of people and to explore the topics from multiple perspectives and contexts. The option of choosing to stick to one's own in-group rather than engaging with the international students, as has been identified as a problem in longer-term study abroad mobilities (Chwialkowska, 2020), was made difficult due to the intercultural integration facilitated by the learning design. While well-designed learning activities can stimulate deep learning and soft-skill development, it is also important to keep in mind that learning often happens outside the classroom and beyond the control of the teachers (Tucker et al., 2011). The students' suggestions to have more free time for socialising is therefore reasonable. Prioritising time for meals within the programme should also not be underestimated as a valuable investment for building soft skills such as cultural literacy, fellowship, inclusivity and open-mindedness.

Conclusion

The results support previous research suggesting that short-term study abroad mobilities can facilitate transformative learning experiences and the development of soft skills for the global workplace (Purg et al., 2018; Nada & Legutko, 2022; Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026). The topic of the BIP studied – which was “diversity and sustainability in global business” – naturally also impacted the learning design, the choice of learning activities and the soft skills developed by the students. The answer to the first part of the research question ‘*what soft skills do students develop during a BIP?*’ is that students described 25 soft skills pertaining to the categories *being, thinking, relating, collaborating* and *acting*. The most frequent skills reported were critical thinking, perspective skills, inclusivity, self-scrutiny, cultural literacy, appreciation for diversity and open-mindedness. However, the number of skills described were higher for the visiting students than the host students. The visiting students were also more motivated to pursue an international career and perceived a higher increase in employability. The answer to the second part of the research question ‘*what is an effective learning design for that development?*’ is that a transformative, experiential and challenge-based learning design is effective, but that several factors should be taken into consideration when designing the programme: *student role, variation, cultural immersion, real-world experiences* and *time*. Visiting students' higher motivation for the BIP was associated with the novelty of travelling to a new culture. They identified more experiences as culturally immersive than the host students, which is a plausible explanation for their higher perceived learning outcome. To design effective learning designs for BIP, teachers should therefore consider how role differences can be managed in a way that maximises learning for both student groups. Training host students and giving them increased responsibility for the cultural integration of visitors – as “buddies” or mentors - could provide both better internationalisation at home experiences for host students and better cross-border experiences for the visitors. The value of variation in learning activities and the inclusion of real-world WIL experiences such as contact with industry, and other experiential learning activities such as cultural excursions and social activities were described by both groups as essential for developing their soft skills. Among the classroom activities, challenge-based and interactive exercises and peer deliberation in multicultural groups were emphasised as the most valuable for learning. The WIL activities included in the programme were non-placement (Thon & Brekke Hauglid, 2025). Adding placement WIL activities, such as professional training opportunities, could further enhance the development of acting skills and employability. Time was described as both an asset and a challenge; while the students appreciated the intensity in their learning journey and the support of the teachers, they also suggested to allow more time for in-depth discussions, particularly in multicultural groups.

The study contributes with practical knowledge for developing effective short-term mobilities such as BIP. An effective learning design should include a variety of experiential and challenge-based activities (both WIL and non-WIL), prioritise group deliberation in multicultural teams over traditional teaching, provide opportunity and time to explore cultural attractions and for the participants to socialise freely and build relationships. Furthermore, recommendations include

increasing host students' engagement by giving them responsibility as "buddies" for the visiting students, to provide sufficient preparation for cultural differences and actively support students who experience cultural clashes. The theoretical contribution of the study is the identification of 25 soft skills, and five factors with implications for the effectiveness of the learning design, which adds to the fields of work-integrated learning and global education.

The study also has some limitations. It is a single case-study with a limited number of students based on students' self-reported learning experiences. While it does not assess the actual skills or increased employability acquired, it provides knowledge of what motivates students' soft skill development and employment ambitions during a BIP, and the students' recognition of their learning outcome directly afterwards. To provide more generalised knowledge of how BIPs affect students' actual learning outcomes and employability, larger-scale and/or multiple case studies across different institutional contexts and disciplines are recommended. Comparative studies examining different programme designs, e.g. of varying duration, types of cultural immersion and types of work-integrated learning activities would provide more nuanced insights. To further explore the role of WIL in short-term mobility programmes, future studies could compare the effects of placement and non-placement WIL activities on the development of "acting" skills and employability. Other recommendations include analysing observational data from participating teachers and/or industry participants, and to perform longitudinal studies which follow BIP participants' career choices and professional identity development over time. Lastly, the differences identified between host and visiting students should be further explored. This could be done through structured interventions such as assigning host students roles as "buddies" and testing the effect on the groups' learning outcomes, motivation and intercultural engagement.

Acknowledgements

This is a revised and developed paper. An earlier version was presented at the WIL'25 conference and published in the Proceedings.

Declaration of interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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