A Blended Intensive Programme Behind the Scenes: Organisational and Methodological Effectiveness

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This study examines the effectiveness of a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) to assess the degree of satisfaction among participating students with the methodological and organisational framework, as well as identify the strengths and weaknesses observed by all participants in the programme. The methodology is based on an interpretative approach using qualitative techniques (interviews, discussion groups) and a satisfaction questionnaire, triangulating the instruments and participants. The sample consisted of 31 students, 3 coordinators, 3 managers, 3 observers from the three participating universities, and 2 professors. The findings revealed a high level of student satisfaction, which was justified mainly by the blended structure of the programme, its intensive nature, the active methodologies used, multicultural teamwork, and the emotional component derived from the friendly, supportive atmosphere and team cohesion. Among the difficulties, the simultaneous activities at the home university, the demanding BIP tasks, and some aspects of the virtual component constituted a challenge for participants. Likewise, students had different motivation levels depending on the mobility opportunities. The described BIP proved to constitute a suitable framework to complement students' training, giving them the financial and intensive opportunity for an international, intercultural experience with all its associated benefits.

Keywords: blended intensive programmes, blended learning, virtual mobility, intercultural teamwork, internationalisation at home

INTRODUCTION

Following Erasmus + objectives towards promoting high-quality learning and equal opportunities for exchange, Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) were introduced in

the current Erasmus + programme 2021-2027 as a new form of mobility, blended mobility, in higher education institutions. Their primary objectives are to enhance and diversify international mobility for students and staff, increase participation rates, motivate hesitant or less confident students to study abroad, establish a more structured and inclusive mobility framework, foster new connections and networks, and promote internationalisation at home (European Commission, 2022). Specifically, BIPs refer to the creation, development, and implementation of international courses involving institutions from at least three countries. These courses combine online collaborative activities with short-term periods of mobility in one of the participating countries. These programmes are becoming an important strategic type of mobility at European universities as, in addition to promoting international experiences for a wide range of students, they make it possible to complement their training and competence development through collaborative learning (European Commission, 2023). Including a virtual component to the traditional physical mobility structure of these programmes contributes to aligning with another Erasmus + priority, that of digital transformation, supporting participants in acquiring the digital skills and competences they need today (European Commission, 2024). Another highly significant aspect of BIPs that deserves to be highlighted is the fact that, in addition to combining a blended component, virtual and physical, it conveys the co-occurrence of two types of internationalisation experiences: internationalisation at home and short-term mobility. With this interplay, these programmes can obtain all the benefits that both actions entail. Internationalisation at home (IaH) refers to the incorporation of global and cross-cultural dimensions within local learning settings, offering students the chance to experience the advantages of internationalisation without needing to go abroad (Beelen & Jones, 2015), promoting equitable opportunities in terms of developing intercultural skills through an enriching interaction between local and international students (Rauer et al., 2021).

Regarding short-term mobilities, it is worth noting that they also encompass multiple benefits, particularly those associated with enhancing overall skills, fostering international understanding, and promoting critical thinking (Teichler, 2017). In the specific case of BIP projects, their intensive character can facilitate the successful acquisition of content (Scott, 2003) due to their highly focused and controlled structure. In line with the trend observed in short-term mobilities (Lokkesmoe et al., 2016), BIPs have been increasing their popularity over the past editions, with a consistent rise in the number of applicants and programmes. Considering European university alliances as a relevant and informative testing ground for new actions (European Commission, 2022), the last call 2024-2025 illustrates this growing tendency: some alliances have doubled the number of courses on offer (Eu Green, 2025), while others advertise as many as 106 BIPs (Civic, 2025). Nonetheless, despite the number of experiences and the user guidelines provided by the European Commission (2022), numerous challenges can emerge throughout the implementation of programmes. Awareness of them is crucial not only for understanding the potential efficacy of the programme across all its domains but also for acquiring insights into how this type of programme may be readily adapted to different situations. This aspect is especially relevant taking into account that BIPs allow for a certain degree of autonomy regarding their organisation, framework,

teaching techniques, and implementation, so measuring the organisation of the programme is crucial for obtaining valuable insights into its efficiency, ultimately ensuring the attainment of objectives. This study will specifically examine the evaluation of its adequacy, meaning its capacity to accomplish objectives under controlled and planned conditions. More specifically, its aim is to find out the degree of satisfaction of the participants with the methodological and organisational structure of the program and to identify its strengths and weaknesses based on the perceptions of all the parties involved: students, external observers, managers, and teachers.

Previous research, quite limited to date considering the enormous potential of these programmes, has focused on specific parts, offering a comprehensive but limited understanding of the entire process. This study aims to fill this gap by offering a detailed description of the BIP under analysis and triangulating diverse data sources from the perspectives of all the agents involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The subsequent literature review was selected with two primary goals in mind: first, to contextualise the current study within the existing research by examining key contributions and gaps; and second, to develop the resulting BIP, the subject of our analysis, following the most pertinent findings.

Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) structure

BIPs allow for new and flexible mobility formats that combine physical mobility with a virtual component, with the aim of reaching all types of students from all backgrounds, fields of study, and cycles. During these BIPs, groups of students will engage in short-term physical mobility abroad, combined with a compulsory virtual component that fosters collaborative online learning and teamwork. The resulting blended learning integrates elements of web-based learning, video streaming, and both synchronous and asynchronous audio communication alongside traditional face-to-face instruction (Anupan, 2024; Komalasari & Indrawadi, 2023). Within this blended mobility format, BIPs aim to develop and implement innovative teaching and learning practices in participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (European Commission, 2022).

There are no specific requirements regarding the order of the two components of BIPs, although in the majority of cases, the virtual part takes place before the onsite component with the aim of facilitating connections, introducing the academic content, becoming acquainted with the specifics of the programme, handling potential challenges and encouraging student mobility (Griggio, 2018; Grindei et al., 2024; Laine et al., 2024). Establishing which elements and objectives of the BIP will be developed in the virtual or physical context will constitute a highly relevant decision that involves careful thought and planning. Likewise, the intensive character of the programme requires the maximum efficiency in content selection, methodologies, scheduling and planning to reach the intended objectives. In what follows the most relevant elements related to the organisation and implementation of the programme will be analysed in detail.

Virtual Component

The virtual component of BIPs is an essential part of their framework, so it is crucial to integrate it into the course structure. Previous research supports the significant potential of virtual learning, including multiple academic publications and projects providing evidence of its efficacy in various situations (Sabzalieva et al., 2022; Alcón et al., 2023). In the case of BIPs, it is imperative to carefully analyse the role, function, and place the virtual component should play in the programme. While virtual collaboration offers significant benefits for students and institutions in terms of internationalisation and intercultural opportunities, it is essential to acknowledge that virtual approaches require significant collaboration, support and commitment from organisers to offer a high-quality programme (Enkhtur et al., 2024). They also lack the obvious advantages associated with physical mobility, such as the natural acquisition of intercultural competencies (Amendola & Restaino, 2017), facilitated by the immersive academic, social, and cultural experience along with the motivating interactive aspect it involves. Accordingly, complementing virtual collaboration with physical mobility can be fruitfully employed to prepare and enrich physical mobility, establish solid working connections with partners before meeting them, effectively trigger motivation, and promote the acquisition of those skills related to intercultural awareness (Op et al., 2007; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). The BIP presented here used a virtual framework at the initial stages of the programme as an introductory and preparatory component.

Onsite component

The onsite component of BIPs normally occurs after the virtual part, although other scenarios with the reverse order are possible depending on the specific objectives and requirements of each programme. It takes place at one of the participating institutions during an established minimum period of 5 days (European Commission, 2022). Most research on the topic has highlighted the efficacy of the onsite component of BIPs. Although students acknowledge the effectiveness of the blended format, they especially emphasise the significance of the onsite experience (Laine et al., 2024), for which students feel especially motivated after having met each other in the virtual part of the programme. Most participants in diverse BIPs especially highlight the opportunity of visiting other countries, engaging with other cultures, and experiencing university life in other European institutions (Grindei et al., 2024). This perception applies not only to the students who travel to the appointed destination but also to the host students, who express their willingness to meet their virtual counterparts in person (Griggio, 2018), reinforcing the value of the internationalisation-at-home benefits of BIPs.

Intensive format

Research has demonstrated that well-organised intensive courses are extremely suitable (Dwyer, 2004; De Prada, 2023) and often more successful than other models (Scott, 2003), enabling greater interactivity and constructive learning approaches (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010). There is no empirical support suggesting that intensive courses may be less effective when implemented correctly (Davies, 2006). The intensive character of BIPs aligns with this type of training, offering a contextual immersive opportunity to assimilate the contents and establish the necessary interactive connection with all

participants. Recently organised BIPs have concluded that this intensive format is highly adequate for content assimilation and the acquisition of specific skills, such as intercultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, teamwork, problem-solving, or digital competencies (Grindei et al., 2024; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022; Laine et al., 2024).

Teaching methodology

Within this intensive format, innovative and active methodologies, in the form of research and challenge-based projects through multidisciplinary and multicultural teamwork, play an essential role in BIPs and should constitute the basis of the planned actions (European Commission, 2025). The incorporation of collaborative and active methodologies in university teaching-learning processes is based on several reasons (Chick & Hasselman, 2017; Pino-Juste, 2019): the requirement for active and responsible student involvement, the development of critical and creative thinking, the ability to solve problems and make decisions in an original and innovative manner, and the improvement of cross-cutting competencies such as teamwork, communication, and interpersonal skills. Additionally, the integration of projects (Prihatmojo et al., 2023), a combination of active methodologies (Ortega-Ruipérez & Correa-Gorospe, 2024) and the complementation of virtual collaborative scenarios (Reiffenrath & Thielsch, 2023) have been associated with successful learning achievement and obtaining valuable insights about other academic approaches. These approaches should be enhanced by an interdisciplinary method combining knowledge from various subjects and addressing problems from multiple perspectives, promoting creativity and innovation (Repko, 2012, Grindei et al., 2024; Laine et al., 2024).

Regarding the emotional component associated with mobility, BIPs are considered to be suitable experiences to enhance students' motivation and affective development (Grindei et al., 2024; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022). It is worth mentioning that some aspects, such as students' motivation and institutional support, have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the experience (Stronkhorst, 2005). Moreover, the integration of virtual and physical interaction can offer supplementary advantages in terms of intercultural communication and emotional comfort. Both kinds of communication serve distinct functional roles, highlighting that virtual contact can be particularly efficient in situations where physical contact is restricted or insufficient (Meng & Zhang, 2022). It should be noted that digital competencies, empathy, and understanding do not naturally develop during online intercultural collaboration. Instead, they need to be deliberately incorporated into the activity planning (Helm & O'Dowd, 2020).

Administrative and Financial features

Engaging in international experiences during university education has been widely acknowledged as highly beneficial for students due to various factors, such as fostering personal growth, enhancing employability, and increasing incomes (Di Pietro, 2020). However, it has been observed that international mobility reveals social discrimination (Netz & Finger, 2016), as students from more privileged backgrounds tend to participate more (Castiello & Lee, 2018) and obtain more advantages (Di Pietro, 2020). It is crucial to provide equal opportunities to all students, irrespective of their social background, allowing them not only to gain valuable skills associated with international

mobility but also to ensure their successful integration into the job market in the future. This advantage is particularly noteworthy for students with fewer resources since it allows them to develop skills, highly valued by employers, which would otherwise be challenging for them to acquire (Di Pietro, 2020). Concerning the financial features of BIP projects, it is relevant to mention that, typically, they intend to fund the travel and accommodation costs for students entirely. This feature is different from conventional exchange programmes, where students are not provided with full financial coverage for a semester or complete course. However, this is not always the case in many situations, as there are substantial differences in funding depending on the countries involved (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024).

The presented BIP design followed the enumerated principles and the guidelines for this type of programme (European Commission, 2022) (Table 1).

Table 1
Guiding principles and programme design

EC guiding principles	BIP: Intercultural Competencies for Global Citizenship and UN Sustainable Development Goals Aims.
Intensive format	Online: 6 sessions; Onsite: 7 sessions.
Blended structure	Virtual + onsite learning.
Collaborative online learning	Monitored online teamwork projects.
Transdisciplinary topic	Global citizenship. Intercultural awareness.
Connection research and practice	Research findings applied to contents and practice.
Accessible to all students	Financial accessibility. Transparent selection.
Innovative methodologies	Active methodologies.
Teamwork	Multicultural teams in both parts.
Competence development	Teamwork & intercultural skills.

Description of the programme: Intercultural Competencies for Global Citizenship and UN Sustainable Development Goals Aims.

In order to develop a programme that contemplated the research findings and principles described above, the coordination among the different partners constituted a fundamental part of the organisation from the outset. Clear and continuous communication between partners was crucial during the organisation process. It involved regular meetings, progress updates, and the use of common platforms to ensure alignment among all participants. Partners shared relevant details and ensured that all participants received substantial guidance and orientation for the online and in-person phases, emphasising inclusivity and accessibility.

Regarding the academic part, this coordination involved establishing clear objectives and outcomes in line with the different institutions' curricula, as well as designing collaboratively a coherent programme that effectively integrated the virtual and onsite activities. An important aspect was aligning academic calendars, schedules, and the availability of resources and instructors for both the synchronous online sessions and the in-person period. Regarding the virtual phase, the partners needed to reach a consensus on digital platforms and tools to guarantee access and support. In terms of

assessment, the three institutions agreed to use common grading criteria and provide consistent feedback mechanisms through rubrics.

The logistic arrangements for the in-person component required seamless coordination concerning relevant documents, travel, accommodation, and health and safety protocols. Likewise, financial coordination was essential, as the participating institutions needed to collaborate in the fund distribution and guarantee the availability of financial aid and grants to all participants.

The resulting BIP, "Intercultural Competencies for Global Citizenship and UN Sustainable Development Goals Aims", described here had the specific purpose of achieving intercultural excellence through international teamwork with a focus on the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The course was structured in two stages: the first part, in virtual format and the second one took place through in-person sessions at ISCET, Porto (Portugal).

Design and implementation

Virtual sessions

The BIP began with the virtual component of the project and involved personalised presentations by all program members, including students, coordinators, instructors, and administrators. The methodology employed involved the development of introduction worksheets that were distributed on the work platform (Moodle) and afterwards commented on interactively within the virtual environment. Members were requested to provide a concise self-description, including biographical details, educational background, and interests, with the aim of establishing a networking group. The purpose of this task was twofold: firstly, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' most distinctive characteristics, and secondly, to get acquainted with the different options available in the virtual environment where the remaining part of the course would occur. Another aim of the course was to improve participants' skills in working with multicultural teams. Therefore, from the very start, the structure and organisation of the sessions were consistently implemented using intercultural groups. The components were randomly selected by alternating students from the three universities. Under this criterion of maximal diversity, multicultural work teams were established, which was crucial for the programme's goals.

Onsite sessions

Following the completion of the virtual component of the course, an intensive onsite session was conducted in Porto, Portugal, involving a pre-existing cohesive group of students, teachers, organisers, and collaborators. The five-day program consisted of seven sessions in which instructors incorporated presentations and activities that effectively engaged the students. Explanations, examples, and demonstrations through role-playing were consistently incorporated into the presentations to contextualise the theoretical proposals. After the content presentation and comprehension assessment, the multicultural groups received task instructions and worked together to complete the assignments. Finally, the participants presented their projects, engaged in a discussion, and received comprehensive feedback. From the onset, students had the opportunity to

feel immersed in the academic and cultural features of the host university. They adapted to different schedules, time management, gastronomy, city life, cultural heritage, social conventions, or leisure activities. The participants' previous familiarity with the virtual part of the experience facilitated their relationships and collaboration, hence improving the dynamics of the onsite component of the programme.

Structure of the sessions and assessment

The online cooperative learning component and the onsite sessions were organised through introductory activities that presented the key concepts and theories, followed by controlled interactive tasks to assess the correct assimilation of the contents. As previously outlined, the scheduled projects were arranged through multicultural groups. The evaluation of content assimilation and its practical application was assessed through group project presentations, both virtually and onsite, using a rubric. Furthermore, each participant completed a test to evaluate the content individually. The successful completion of the course was recognised with 4 ECTS credits. Taking into account the aforementioned considerations, the objective of this study is to assess the adequacy of the organisational structure of the BIP described above, with the aim of contributing to filling the existing gap regarding the absence of research on this topic (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). The research questions were the following:

RQ1. How effective were the structural components of the programme, including its blended format, the integration of the virtual and onsite elements and its intensive character?

RQ2. To what extent were the teaching elements of the programme, such as the applied methodologies, and emotional atmosphere, perceived as satisfactory?

RQ3. How satisfactory were the administrative and financial aspects of the BIP from the perspective of participants and organisers?

RQ4. To what degree did the Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) achieve its intended objectives, as measured by participant outcomes and feedback?

METHOD

Study design

Given the research questions, an interpretative approach was adopted, employing qualitative techniques (structured interviews, discussion groups) and a satisfaction questionnaire, triangulating the instruments and the participants in the programme (Flick, 2022, Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The provided quantitative and qualitative data were used to validate each other, offer complementary insights, show different perspectives, detect weaknesses, provide context, and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the variables. The data were analysed using the SPSS 25 statistical program. The qualitative data were analysed manually.

Participants

The BIP was developed with the partnership of three universities: the University of Bremerhaven-Germany (general coordinator), Instituto Superior de Ciências Empresariais e do Turismo de Porto (ISCET)-Portugal (host university) and Universidade de Vigo-Spain. A total of 34 students initially enrolled in the programme: 12 from the University of Vigo, 11 from HS Bremerhaven, and 11 from ISCET. Before the beginning of the program, three Portuguese students dropped out, resulting in a total of 31 students participating. If we take into account the intercultural family background, different countries were represented: Spain, Portugal, Germany, Turkey, Kurdistan, Italy, Cameroon, Angola, South Africa, Venezuela and China. The mean age was 23.35 (Min=19, Max=56; SD=6.47). Participant descriptions are included in Table 2.

Table 2
Participant descriptions

		Nº	%
Gender	Man	13	41.94%
	Woman	18	58.06%
University	Spain	12	38.71%
	Germany	11	35.48%
	Portugal	8	25.81%
Country of origin	Spain	11	35.48%
	Germany	7	22.58%
	Portugal	9	29.03%
	Other	4	12.90%
Knowledge area	Social Sciences and Law	22	70.97%
	Engineering	7	22.58%
	Humanities	2	6.45%
Course	1º & 2º	10	32.26%
	2º to 5º	21	67.74%

N=31

The course instructors, from different cultural backgrounds, were authors and experts in methodological approaches to intercultural skills. In addition, there were three programme coordinators, three international relations managers, and three external teacher-observer participants, one from each partner institution. The components of this group added four additional countries: The Netherlands, Colombia, Indonesia, and Poland, making a total of 14 diverse cultural perspectives involved in the programme.

Instruments

Based on the BIP principles described above and the study design, the qualitative and quantitative instruments employed were intended to elicit all the relevant information to assess the adequacy of the programme's organisational structure and detect potential areas for improvement. The questionnaire included 11 items to test participants' degree of satisfaction regarding the key aspects using a 5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neither agree nor disagree; 4: Agree, 5: Strongly agree). Interviews and discussion groups were organised, as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3
Triangulation process of instruments and participants

Participants	Instruments	Data collection	Objective
Students	Questionnaire	End of the onsite program	Test the degree of satisfaction with the methodological and organisational structure.
Students	Discussion groups	End of the onsite program	Obtain additional information and identify the advantages and weaknesses during the implementation of the programme.
Teachers Observers Managers	Discussion groups	During the onsite sessions	
Coordinators	Interviews	During the onsite sessions	

Procedure

The documentation concerning the various instruments was gathered at various stages. The satisfaction questionnaire was conducted upon the conclusion of the in-person programme. Interviews and discussion groups aimed to investigate participants' subjective experiences and impressions of the BIP (Gao, 2006). The interview included questions to identify participants' viewpoints regarding the different areas previously addressed in the questionnaires, as well as their personal subjective evaluations. A content analysis was chosen for the systematic interpretation and categorisation of the qualitative data collected. This approach involved the identification of thematic patterns, recurrent concepts, and underlying meanings in the participants' responses. Analysis was carried out inductively, facilitating the natural emergence of themes. Specifically, the following steps were followed: the sessions started with open-ended questions based on the research questions and the described questionnaire to guide the discussion and comments with the aim of eliciting detailed answers. Follow-up questions were posed to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses. To facilitate comparability, this structure was consistent in all discussion groups and interviews. As specified in Table 3, data were collected during and after the onsite part of the BIP in a relaxed and inviting atmosphere. The sessions were recorded with participants' consent, and then, the data were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Once the transcripts were thoroughly examined, the recurring ideas, observations, and impressions were identified for posterior coding. Two types of coding were introduced: 1. The ones derived from the research questions and designed questionnaire (for example, teaching methodologies), and 2. Those that emerged from the data, for example, technical issues. The coding framework was applied to the transcripts, and the specific codes were assigned to the corresponding text fragment in a consistent way to ensure reliability. Next, patterns were identified, generating themes and sub-themes, such as motivation and sense of belonging. To ensure reliability, two additional researchers coded a subset of the data. Comparisons and discrepancies were established until a consensus was reached. Finally, in order to validate the findings, the results were shared with participants to confirm the correct interpretation and gain additional perspectives (Flick, 2022; Neuendorf, 2002). As previously indicated, the data were analysed manually. The reason for this choice was guided by the research objectives,

methodology, and the manageable dataset size, facilitating a more flexible, detailed, contextual, and interpretative approach (Flick, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, identification keys were used, which are detailed below (Table 4).

Table 4

Identification keys for interviews and discussion groups

Participants	Code
Professor Program 1	P1
Professor Program 2	P2
Coordinator Germany	C1
Coordinator Spain	C2
Coordinator Portugal	C3
Manager RI Germany	M1
Manager RI Spain	M2
Manager RI Portugal	M3
Observer Germany	O1
Observer Spain	O2
Observer Portugal	O3
Students	ST

The validation of the satisfaction questionnaire started with the evaluation of the content, designed according to the objectives of the programme. This task was conducted by experts in the field (two professors specialised in research methods and three programme lecturers) who reviewed the relevance and clarity of the items. A pilot test was then administered to a sample of international students who were not enrolled in the BIP programme, in order to identify possible comprehension problems or ambiguities. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the scale, obtaining a value of $\alpha=.742$, thus confirming a high reliability (Sijtsma, 2009). Finally, the questionnaire was reviewed and adjusted based on the feedback obtained, ensuring that it is a reliable and valid tool for measuring satisfaction with this specific programme.

All the analysed data, quantitative and qualitative, were compared through triangulation. The variety of perspectives used aimed at expanding the limitations of one particular method, thereby strengthening the validity, reliability, and depth of the presented findings.

This study adheres to ethical standards prioritising integrity, confidentiality, and respect for all participants and stakeholders. Specifically, it follows the AERA standards and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) recommendations.

FINDINGS

Results will be presented combining the quantitative data from the questionnaire and the opinions and comments generated from the group discussions and interviews following the order of the research questions. Regarding the questionnaire, participants assessed the organisational and curricular aspects of the programme, as well as their level of satisfaction. The data indicates that student satisfaction is generally high across all

measured aspects, with a lower evaluation of the virtual parts of the programme (Table 5).

Table 5

Level of student satisfaction with the BIP programme

RQ		Question	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
RQ1	1.	The blended structure of the programme (virtual/onsite) allowed me to make adequate progress in learning.	4	5	4.74	0.445
	2.	The programme's virtual component helped me to facilitate the onsite contact with the rest of the participants.	1	5	3.84	1.214
	3.	The previous course taught virtually (part I of the program) has favoured my learning.	2	5	3.94	1.093
	4.	The required intensive work volume is consistent with the number of credits in the programme (4 ECTS).	2	5	4.52	0.724
RQ2	5.	The teaching methodology has favoured my learning.	4	5	4.68	0.475
	6.	The programme activities have helped me to understand the concepts.	3	5	4.77	0.497
	7.	The contents and units of the BIP have been accessible and useful.	4	5	4.87	0.341
	8.	The didactic resources have been adequate to achieve the objectives of the program.	2	5	4.61	0.715
	9.	Working with projects in intercultural groups has been a motivating and enriching experience.	3	5	4.77	0.497
RQ3	10.	Satisfaction with the programme (administrative process and financial matters).	4	5	4.68	0.475
RQ4	11.	I recommend continuing to organise activities of this type.	4	5	4.94	0.250
		Total satisfaction	1	5	4.58	0.360

N=31

Blended structure of the programme (virtual-onsite).

Regarding research question number 1 (RQ1: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, Table 5), participants indicated that the blended structure of the programme contributed positively to their learning, all of them showing to agree or strongly agree. Referring specifically to the virtual component, prior to the onsite part, we can observe that it was the aspect that received the lowest scores attending to students' perceptions of learning ($\bar{x}$=3.94) and subsequent onsite contacts ($\bar{x}$=3.84). This section of the program featured a more significant number of participant comments and suggestions for improvement, emphasising the challenges of online interaction and proposing potential solutions: "*Online engagement can be challenging due to the lack of familiarity among participants. It could be convenient to adjust the order of the sessions*" (OBS1); "*Some ice-breaking activities or games before the course might help*" (ST2).

Part of the difficulties perceived were due to technical issues. Some participants highlighted the difficulties they encountered when they joined the session late due to academic demands and the groups were already working in separate virtual classrooms: "*On one occasion, when we wanted to join the programme, we were not able to because our classmates were already in the group classrooms, and we were stuck in the general classroom. We had to wait until they came back, and we were quite angry*" (ST4). They also added that "*the dynamics of the virtual part were a bit overwhelming, having to change rooms. Sometimes we got lost*" (ST9). In some other cases, the virtual component was particularly productive because it allowed them to combine it with their academic obligations. Several students noted this versatility: "*The great advantage of the virtual part is that we integrated it with the classes, and we worked at our own pace because there was room to hand in the assignments*" (ST1). However, since their home universities had different timetables, they had trouble getting together to pursue their work outside the BIP schedule. "*It was difficult to agree on a time to meet and share the work fairly* (ST29). "*We ended up working individually or in pairs. Teamwork increased in Porto because we were all together without other duties*" (ST7). Nevertheless, this general perception was modulated by some participants, who considered that being involved in the described BIP from home was an excellent opportunity to enjoy all the benefits of intercultural immersion in their own institution: "*We especially appreciated the added value of being able to cooperate in the organisation and follow-up of this event, particularly in terms of engaging with colleagues from different institutions and addressing the challenges posed by an initiative of great responsibility*" (C3; M3).

In general, students indicated they preferred face-to-face contact over virtual. They stated that "*not being able to have direct, physical contact with our classmates in the virtual part is not as pleasant as the face-to-face part*" (ST15), considering that "*the virtual part was more impersonal*" (ST4). Despite its intensity, they enjoyed the five days of face-to-face work but suggested it should last longer to work more slowly, get to know the participants, and experience the city: "*Although we had interesting events, we were more focused on the work we had to present the following day, so we didn't have enough time to enjoy the complementary activities*" (ST11).

Intensive format

Regarding the intensive format, students considered that the volume of work required was consistent with the 4 ECTS recognised ($\bar{x}$=4.52). They confirmed this perception by stating that this structure helped them to optimise their learning and maximise their time. "*We've learned a lot. The contents were easy to assimilate because we had to apply the explanations' contents to the proposed activities immediately*" (ST19). They also highlight that the course "*was very intense, much more than any other course I have taken, but I liked it a lot because I felt I made the most of my time*" (ST23). This perception was shared by the teachers, coordinators and observers, who could confirm the rapid progressions and successful assimilation of contents: "*I was surprised by participants' fast and effective acquisition of contents and their capacity to create meaningful examples in a very short time*" (C2); "*Students showed a great capacity to interpret relevant intercultural situations and prepare high-quality materials at very*

short notice. They were highly concentrated and focused" (O3). Participants also expressed that the intense structure contributed to a feeling of total immersion in the host country and great group cohesion with all participants: "*As it was so intense, we felt fully integrated into the host university and the BIP community*" (ST16). However, they also considered that the intense rhythm and the activities and tasks that they had to prepare for the following sessions made they could not enjoy their leisure time as much as they would have liked: "*It was a great experience, but we did not have many opportunities for leisure or sightseeing. Most of our time outside the university was spent preparing the projects*" (ST28).

Concerning research question number 2 (RQ2: Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, Table 5), which addresses the methodologies used, and the affective atmosphere generated, participants reported the following:

Regarding the teaching methodology, based on active methodologies and projects developed through multicultural teamwork, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that it was highly beneficial for their learning ($\bar{x}$=4.68). In addition, they agreed that all the educational materials used were suitable for achieving the programme's objectives ($\bar{x}$=4.61), with a special emphasis on their accessibility and effectiveness ($\bar{x}$=4.87). The interviews and discussion groups corroborated this appreciation. All participants especially valued the accessibility, content and clarity of the materials: "*The course was very well organised, and the materials were highly focused and challenging*" (ST22); "*We were always given clear instructions about how to access and use the materials both virtually and in Porto*" (ST24). A lot of participants highlighted the fact that they were given a course book written by the teachers: "*I appreciate that we could keep the book. Thanks to it, I can use it as a reference on the topic*" (ST7).

The use of diverse, active, student-centred methodologies was also highly valued: "*The projects we had to prepare were very interesting, and we had the opportunity to present our results in innovative ways. We were given much freedom*" (ST18). It also generated high engagement: "*The students have been strongly involved in the onsite training with an active participation in all the programmed activities*" (OBS2). The organisation in intercultural groups was highly valued, as it immediately introduced fresh perspectives and approaches to the assigned tasks. All interviewees expressed that they gained knowledge and skills from their peers: "*Teamwork inspired me. Good thing we were divided into mixed intercultural groups. We learnt a lot from each other's task approaches, especially to be serious and professional*" (ST6). Additionally, they appreciated the ability to remain calm when faced with problems and the constructive approach taken in finding solutions: "*Since we came from diverse degrees and countries, we learnt content, work organisation, and work attitude. For instance, to take it easy and try to solve the problems helping each other*" (ST5).

Affective component

The blended intensive structure was reflected in the affective component of the programme. Participants had a sense of integration from the beginning, which contributed to facilitating their relationships and feeling at ease: "*I felt connected from beginning to end. It was incredibly rewarding*" (ST4). Furthermore, it was observed

that the inherent design of BIPs facilitates students' integration more effectively than conventional exchange programmes: *"I got adapted to the new university and classmates effortlessly. My Erasmus exchange last year was far more challenging. Here, in a week, I felt wonderful. Too bad it didn't last longer"*. It is important to mention that several participants highly appreciated the emotional aspect of the group activity. A student emphasised the role of other team members in addressing challenges with serenity and avoiding stress: "*I was hysterical, but one of my classmates told me not to worry, and in the end, we came up with an alternative plan for the presentation that worked perfectly*" (ST9). "*It also helped me realise that I do my work very stressed out and I get overwhelmed very quickly. I'll take things easier from now on*" (ST12). This positive affective atmosphere was a common feature shared by all participants and highlighted by the teachers of the programme: *"One seldom encounters a group of students who are as actively engaged and motivated"* (P1). Equally, the small group size allowed for personalised and individualised attention from the teachers, coordinators, and supervisors, which fostered a sense of security and satisfaction in them. *"I felt at ease and with a nice sense of belonging"* (ST13).

The favourable assessment given by all participants in the survey confirms the general consensus that the organisation and methodology, which centres on project-based intercultural teamwork, were motivating and enriching ($\bar{x}$=4.77). Organisers highlighted that *"the advantages of hosting this edition of BIP were widely recognised, particularly in terms of its intercultural nature and the sharing of knowledge and experiences"* (O3). It is also important to note that, regarding motivation, some students from the host university mentioned that they would have liked to enjoy the mobility component as well: *"I would like to visit some of the involved universities, experience the academic life there and meet my new classmates"* (ST26).

Regarding research question number 3 (RQ3: Question 10, Table 5), about the administrative and financial matters, students showed a high degree of satisfaction ($\bar{x}$=4.68), despite the diverse procedures that they had to follow and the required documents: *"We had to do a lot of paperwork and it was a bit stressing"* (ST6); *"It was troublesome but we had a lot of support"* (ST13). The organisation also required close contact with international office staff, which frequently had different norms and procedures in the different countries involved: *"The selection process and all the paperwork prior to the celebration were rather troublesome and time-consuming"* (C1); *"Sometimes norms were interpreted in a different way, which was the cause of misunderstandings and extra workload"* (M1). Concerning the programme's funding, it is important to highlight that in this specific case, the received funding was enough to cover the expenses of students and teachers. The extraordinary organisation and support of the host country, helping to find convenient and affordable accommodation and catering, were decisive: *"It was great that all expenses were covered. This is not possible with a conventional Erasmus exchange, which I cannot afford"* (ST5).

All these elements were reflected in the students' general degree of satisfaction and their willingness to recommend organising Blended Intensive Programmes as the one described ($\bar{x}$=4.94). This perception was shared by students, teachers, organisers and observers, who considered that it was due to the combination of the academic quality of

the course, taught by highly experienced teachers, the suitable organisation and management, and the hospitality of the host institution. *"Everything was incredibly well-organised and balanced, and the atmosphere was very stimulating"* (O1); *"The host university was great. We felt like part of the family, looked after and pampered"* (ST8). *"The teachers knew a lot about the topic, but they always welcomed and respected our opinions. That was very nice"* (ST1).

From the organisational point of view, the three institutions' administration staff considered it highly valuable to organise and coordinate the BIP, especially from the perspective of cooperation with colleagues from different countries and institutions. They also noted the challenging situation they had to face, as it was a new programme for them, and intense collaboration for the correct organisation was a must: "*It was a challenging experience. There were many elements to consider, and the collaboration with the other partners helped us a lot*" (MG); "*It was very interesting to fulfil the challenges of an initiative that conveys a great responsibility for all the partners*" (I3). This cooperation context was the first step in observing the intercultural differences to anticipate and solve problems: "*The previous steps of the organisation and the problem-solving strategies during the event were a good example of intercultural differences, the topic of the course. We learnt a lot from each other*" (C1).

Regarding research question number 4 (RQ4: Question 11 + Total satisfaction, Table 5), the results confirm that the presented BIP organisation structure achieved its objectives. The participants' recommendation to continue organising BIPs obtained the highest rate (4.94/5), with no student scoring below 4. The overall satisfaction with the programme in all the elements measured (4.58/5) suggests that participants valued the experience highly favourably. The low standard deviation in both cases (0.250 and 0.360, respectively) indicates that most of the collected information tends to cluster around the mean (4.98 and 4.58), with only a small degree of variation, strengthening the consistency of the results obtained. The level of satisfaction is further supported by the overall feedback obtained from all agents involved, as described in the qualitative data presented above. Nevertheless, alongside the identified good practices from the BIP, the areas requiring improvement warrant significant attention in future programs. The subsequent section will address all these considerations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

With respect to the formulated research questions, it can be confirmed that BIPs constitute an excellent framework for developing all the potential benefits associated with international mobility. The blended intensive format and active methodologies, developed through interactive and cooperative multicultural teamwork, revealed a generally high degree of satisfaction.

Regarding its blended character, the BIP presented has demonstrated that integrating virtual and physical mobility can effectively engage learners, provide satisfactory learning experiences, and optimise the benefits of both approaches to student and teacher mobility (Laine et al., 2024; Op et al., 2007). However, it also suggests the necessity of improving the virtual component to maximise the benefits of the blended format, introducing more engaging and interactive elements (Grindei et al., 2024).

Organising and implementing an efficient virtual component presents significant challenges, especially regarding students' active interaction and their integration into dynamic groups that can fully develop their potential during the onsite part of the programme (Carthy, 2022). Coordinating schedules and reconciling home university obligations with the BIP virtual requirements can be complex, inflicting a significant additional strain on students (Gögele & Kletzenbauer, 2023). Although the presented programme followed the BIP handbook recommendations of using online collaborative learning, the virtual part of the course revealed areas for improvement, which could be channelled by refining methodological and technical aspects and providing students and BIP organisers with special training (Fernández-Gutiérrez et al., 2022; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). The onsite part of the programme was specially valued, corroborating participants' level of satisfaction with face-to-face interaction, the organised lessons and activities, the acquired intercultural competencies, and the rich experiences lived in the host university and country, both for host and visiting students (Griggio, 2018; Grindei et al., 2024; Laine et al., 2024).

Regarding the intensive format of the programme, it was generally agreed that it gave significant benefits to attain the proposed objectives and created a focused atmosphere to work and strengthen team cohesion. This perception is backed up by research on the topic that underlines the benefits of intensive courses (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010; Grindei et al., 2024; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022; Laine et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it was also noted that the required dedication could be overwhelming, leaving little time for leisure and socialising. This observation aligns with previous work that suggests the need to extend the length of the onsite part of the programme in order to increase participation, cooperation, communication and personal bonds (Perfölz & López-Varela, 2022). Extending the onsite programme would probably require organising BIP initiatives during periods without scheduled lessons to avoid the extra workload or missing important academic commitments at the home university. Some students felt worried about this fact, especially when their home teachers would not facilitate the simultaneity of their assignments and tasks. Given the variation in academic calendars among European universities, identifying appropriate dates for all participants presents a significant challenge (Perfölz & López-Varela, 2022).

The methodologies used, based on cooperative, interactive intercultural teamwork, have been greatly valued by participants, corroborating that organising the course through international group work is an excellent formula to be in the right position to improve their knowledge (Prihatmojo et al., 2023) and acquire the so demanded intercultural skills (Teixeira et al., 2023). These results corroborate previous research emphasising that collaborative methodologies promote intercultural understanding by sharing perspectives, values and experiences that enrich their cultural understanding and foster mutual respect (Barkley et al., 2014; Grindei et al., 2024).

Both the blended intensive format and the employed teaching approaches can greatly influence the programme's affective component. By carefully organising and training the involved parties (Fernández-Gutierrez et al., 2022), the virtual component can enhance the learning process and promote autonomy, thereby increasing motivation and enthusiasm (Bradley, 2021). Concerning mobility, certain host students expressed a

desire to experience the benefits of participating in a different academic institution and country, an observation that aligns with prior research indicating that host students, due to their lack of international mobility, may be less motivated. This unbalance in motivation levels can be also observed in the virtual component of the programme, in which mobility students displayed a higher degree of cooperation and communication (Perfölz & López-Varela, 2022).

The financial and administrative aspects of the programme displayed a high level of satisfaction, as students could enjoy their international experience without being conditioned by economic reasons. This constituted a great advantage, making possible students' participation in international mobility and facilitating the acquisition of all the associated benefits for their academic and future professional lives (Sisavath, 2021). This structure allows students who cannot participate for various reasons (financial, family, etc.) in long-term physical mobility programmes to benefit from an international and multicultural experience. As backed up by research, BIP projects facilitate social cohesion and are an important benefit for economically disadvantaged students (Teixeira et al., 2023) as they cover tuition costs, accommodation and travel expenses.

Concerning the administration process, it is essential to acknowledge, as previously emphasised, that BIPs require substantial work and extensive collaboration with other partners, staff members and students. This periodic collaboration and coordination between faculty members and other staff in international mobility offices from different countries can be challenging, as it can mean dealing with frequently frustrating administration issues and an extra workload (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). Regarding students, an adequate selection process is crucial, as forming a solid multidisciplinary, intercultural group will determine the programme's success and impact (Teixeira et al., 2023). From the attending teachers' perspectives, being actively involved in the programme as both participants and observers, closely interacting with organisers, intercultural professionals, and students facilitated their intercultural awareness and knowledge from various perspectives (Tan et al., 2022).

Finally, based on the findings described above, the following guidelines for designing and developing BIPs can be considered helpful for all stakeholders involved in their organisation and implementation (Table 6). If carefully planned and executed, integrating their successful aspects while addressing the identified limitations, BIPs can serve as an effective framework to enhance students' training and facilitate their engagement in international, intercultural experiences with their associated benefits.

Table 6
Guidelines for a successful BIP based on results and discussion

Results and discussion	Guidelines for a successful BIP.
The blended structure of the programme was highly valued meaning participants are open to virtual experiences and consider them useful and productive. However, their level of satisfaction regarding the virtual component was not as highly valued as the rest.	Pay special attention to the virtual part of the programme, both technically and pedagogically, with a special focus on facilitating interpersonal relationships and a balanced workload. Provide training for all participants about effective virtual exchanges. Onsite: consider carefully the role of the host university and the expectations of the host students to ensure a balanced integration of all members.
Active student-centred methodologies based on projects and intercultural teamwork were highly valued.	Design programmes based on these approaches will contribute to enhancing teamwork and intercultural skills.
Students also acknowledged the effectiveness, focused character and accessibility of the materials.	Elaborate and use high-quality, accessible material.
The intensive format of the programme was generally believed to have contributed to making the most of their learning and time. Although demanding, it was thought to be worthy and effective.	Devise programmes that maximise the immersive atmosphere, combining intensive, reasonable tasks and adequate workload.
The intensiveness and the methodological approaches used, based on intercultural teamwork, contributed to creating a favourable emotional environment which facilitate learning and well-being.	Facilitate from the beginning meaningful interaction and support for all participants, especially in the virtual component. Consider the different motivations for mobile and host participants and contemplate this difference in the selection process.
The administrative and funding aspect of the program yielded mixed results so, it is important to foresee the difficulties and necessary information that students, staff, coordinators and teachers will have to know.	Simplify administrative processes and facilitate fluid communication and information to combine the different activities. Make sure that BIP activities and academic responsibilities at home are compatible. Organise informative sessions for all the agents involved, transparently explaining the process. Establish genuine coordination and collaboration among all parties involved.

Source: Authors' elaboration

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