



*Journal of International Students*  
Volume 15, Issue 12 (2025), pp. 61-76  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
jistudents.org  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/nejtje06>



## **Short-Term Mobility in Higher Education: The case of the Manuel Andrés Sánchez Grants from the University of Salamanca**

Paula Gonzalo  
*University of Salamanca, Spain*

Alonso Escamilla  
*Catholic University of Ávila, Spain*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*Since the Bologna Declaration and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), international mobility has become a strategic pillar of universities in recent decades. In this context, the focus in both practice and academia has been mainly on long-term mobility. For this reason, the present research focuses on analyzing whether the Manuel Andrés Sánchez Grants (MAS Grants) of the University of Salamanca are a model of success in the implementation of short-term mobility programs within the EHEA, especially in cultural exchange and the development of both technical and soft skills among beneficiary students at the international level. A qualitative methodological approach based on in-depth interviews with the University of Salamanca, NGOs on the ground, and beneficiary students is applied. MAS Grants are a unique initiative in Spain that can be considered a good practice in the field of short-term mobility programs within the EHEA.*

**Keywords:** MAS Grants, Higher Education, Short-Term Mobility, University of Salamanca, Best Practices in Mobility

---

International mobility has become a strategic pillar of European higher education in recent decades. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025), “internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin”. Additionally, in the context of international student mobility, the country of origin of the tertiary student is defined as “the country in which they gained their upper secondary

qualifications” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). Nevertheless, although the UNESCO definition helps put forward the concept of mobility at the tertiary level in general, the present study delves deeper into the implications of short-term mobility in particular.

Undoubtedly, the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have changed the vision of university education, giving greater weight to internationalization as a necessary value for training future professionals in the global world (Baena-González et al., 2023). For this reason, the Erasmus program throughout the European Union (EU), as well as the SICUE program within Spain, have become established as the most renowned initiatives for long-term mobility within university studies. Therefore, in 2022, 1.66 million students from abroad were undertaking tertiary-level studies across the EU (Eurostat, 2024).

Historically, European and Spanish universities have been more committed to long-term mobility (from four months to one year). This is because this type of experience reinforces students' knowledge acquisition and skills development while accelerating their pathway to adulthood (Mastora et al., 2020). Moreover, if we focus on the Erasmus program, these mobilities also allow university students to discover new cultures, improve their knowledge of other languages, increase their soft skills and gain a more comprehensive view of the diversity that exists in the EU (Amendola and Restaino, 2017). Moreover, this type of experience also strengthens students' sense of belonging to the EU, increases their chances of entering the labor market (Lendvai and Huszár, 2021) and thus contributes to the consolidation of the EU project (Llurda et al., 2016).

As a consequence, short-term mobilities (those of less than four months) have been overlooked or not taken into account as much as long-term mobilities. Although there is still little research on this subject, there is growing evidence to suggest that short-term mobility experiences (even weeks) can also play a key role in providing university students with learning opportunities that enable them to acquire competencies (Escamilla, 2020) and motivate them to move on to longer-term mobility (Antonova et al., 2020).

For this reason, this article focuses on analyzing the Manuel Andrés Sánchez Grants (MAS Grants) of the University of Salamanca as a successful example of short-term mobility in higher education. To do so, a triple perspective will be used to understand the vision of the university itself (as the sending entity), of the NGOs in the field (as the receiving entities) and of the university students (as the direct beneficiaries).

The present study is composed of the following sections. First, a review of the literature on short-term mobility in European and Spanish higher education is presented. Second, the method used to analyze the MAS Grants of the University of Salamanca is explained. Third, the main findings of the research are presented. Fourth, and finally, it discusses why MAS Grants are a good practice at the Spanish and European levels.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Defining the internationalization of higher education, as described by Teichler (2017), is a rather complex task. However, one of the most widely accepted definitions is ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education’ (Knight, 2008; De Wit and Hunter, 2015). The difficulty in conceptualizing what internationalization of higher education means is

because, among many issues, there are too many strands to exemplify internationalization. That is, when we discuss cross-border experiences, we must consider the following modalities: (1) ‘mobility’ of students versus ‘foreign students’ and ‘study abroad’; (2) incoming mobility versus outgoing mobility; (3) short-term mobility versus mobility for a whole study program; (4) ‘vertical’ mobility versus ‘horizontal’ mobility; (5) mobility for study purposes versus mobility for ‘study-related’ purposes; (6) the threshold of a period that deserves to be called mobility; and (7) mobility at a certain point in time versus mobility during the course of studies (Teichler, 2017).

For this article, as described in the introduction, we focus on short-term mobility. First, this modality of internationalization is one of the least studied, for which there is still little evidence. Second, in recent years, this modality has expanded substantially as one of the options within higher education to offer added educational value, as highlighted by the opportunities within the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). In this manner, short-term mobility is increasingly gaining ground in the internationalization of higher education.

In recent years, short-term mobility has been associated with academic success in higher education, lending greater recognition to university students who benefit from these experiences. According to Cavalli and Teichler (2015), short-term placements have been gaining importance because they allow students who benefit from these experiences to gain international understanding, build reflective thinking and, of course, increase their academic competencies. Similarly, Asoodar et al. (2017) reported that one of the most valued outcomes of short-term mobility is that it allows university students to gain more independence and increase their self-confidence to carry out any academic or professional activity.

At the same time, short-term mobility has also been gaining the prestige of both higher education institutions and university students. In the case of the former, universities have shown that by offering this type of experience, they gain prestige and position themselves better than others do, attract more students and can offer added value to the canonical structure of university degrees (Henderson, 2022). In the latter case, students no longer choose their tertiary education solely for its vocation or subject matter but increasingly for the extracurricular experiences offered by universities to acquire skills outside the syllabus, the possibility of having international experiences and complementing their curriculum with other activities beyond the classroom (Kerr, 2017).

Nevertheless, short-term mobilities have received certain reticence within internationalization, especially compared to their long-term counterparts. In this sense, according to several research studies (Hannam, 2014; Handayani and Wienanda, 2020; Nada and Legutko, 2022), students who participate in short-term mobility emphasize that they acquire more personal than academic learning. In other words, although the beneficiaries describe these experiences with enthusiasm, as they allow them to gain self-confidence and get to know different cultures, they recognize that the academic part of their university syllabus is left aside.

On the basis of all of the above, the present research aims to delve deeper into MAS Grants at the University of Salamanca. That is, what are the strengths of this short-term mobility experience within higher education, not only to maintain them but also to enhance them so that this scholarship continues to consolidate as an opportunity within the University of Salamanca? On the other hand, the aim is also to identify the points of

improvement that need to be adjusted to strengthen this program so that it does not die of success.

**METHOD**

The aim of this study is to analyze whether MAS Grants are a successful model for the implementation of short-term mobility programs inside the EHEA, especially in terms of cultural exchange and the development of both technical and soft skills among beneficiaries at an international level. In this sense, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: How can MAS Grants at the University of Salamanca serve as a benchmark for best practices within mobility programs in the Spanish and European university systems?

To achieve the above, first, a review of the MAS Grants was carried out to obtain an overview of them. That is, under what frameworks is this scholarship offered, what objectives it pursues, what requirements are asked of students, what projects are offered, the duration of the stay, the financial amount, what prior preparation is offered and what are the follow-up phases once the experience is over. In addition, this information was key to the preparation of the interview guide discussed below. Second, it was decided to apply a qualitative methodological approach on the basis of in-depth interviews. In this sense, nonprobabilistic sampling was used, especially intentionally and by convenience, to obtain a sample composed of the University of Salamanca, the participating NGOs and the beneficiary students (see Table 1). Therefore, 10 interviews were held virtually (through Meets) between March and May 2025 with two technicians from the University of Salamanca, three coordinators from the NGOs and 7 beneficiary students.

**Table 1**

*Sample of people interviewed (together with the country or region where the institutions and beneficiaries are based and where the volunteering took place) (N = 12)*

Code	Profile	Country/Region of origin	Country of Destination
S1	Sending organization	Spain	NA
S2	Sending organization	Spain	NA
H1	Host organization	Latin America	NA
H2	Host organization	Africa	NA
H3	Host organization	Latin America	NA
B1	Beneficiary student	Spain	Costa Rica
B2	Beneficiary student	Spain	Costa Rica
B3	Beneficiary student	Spain	El Salvador
B4	Beneficiary student	Spain	Zambia
B5	Beneficiary student	Spain	Guatemala
B6	Beneficiary student	Spain	El Salvador
B7	Beneficiary student	Spain	Bolivia

The interview guide was developed considering the following themes. First, to understand the reasons why students apply to MAS Grants and what benefits they receive after having gone through this experience. Second, to determine what activities they carried out in the field, what competences (both technical and soft) they acquired and what intercultural learning they took away. Third, we delve into the barriers faced by students applying to MAS Grants (before, during and after the experience). Fourth, there is space to provide recommendations and final comments.

Afterward, a documentary and content analysis were carried out (using MAXQDA software). The objective was to categorize and systematize the information from each of the interviews held to identify trends and gaps within the MAS Grants between the University of Salamanca, the participating NGOs and the beneficiary students. This step was fundamental not only to be able to know what the common points were within the topics addressed in the interviews among all the people and institutions that make the development of this initiative possible, but also to analyze whether the MAS Grants were truly good practices.

Notably, all the interviewees participated voluntarily in this research and gave their consent for the information collected in the interviews to be used for this study (including the use of their quotes in an anonymous form). In addition, as required by the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the information was collected and classified under the current data protection parameters, ensuring all ethical considerations for this research.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Manuel Andrés Sánchez Grants***

The Social Affairs Service is a department of the University of Salamanca whose main objective is to provide support, information, and assistance for all students and administrative and teaching staff with respect to ensuring equal opportunities, personal and social well-being, and responsible social engagement. Their fields of work include, but are not limited to, support for the university community with disabilities, psychological and psychiatric care, sexual and gender identity diversity, volunteering, and international development cooperation. In the framework of the latter two categories, the Manuel Andrés Sánchez Grants, commonly referred to as MAS Grants, were created in 2008 to promote the participation of bachelor's, master's, or doctoral students at the University of Salamanca in cooperation projects in developing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Thus, beneficiaries will be able to work hand in hand with local NGOs and engage in their daily activities for up to three months in their own area of study or expertise.

Similarly, another key motivation behind MAS Grants lies in the opportunity they offer students to experience a genuine cultural exchange. Rather than learning about the host country through second-hand accounts, students get to experience for themselves the work of the organizations and the countries' people, customs, and daily realities. By working closely with local organizations and communities, they build relationships, learn from others, and often come away with new perspectives on the world. These encounters tend to spark reflection, reshape perspectives, and create a kind of shared understanding that sets the groundwork for active, participative, and responsible global citizenship.

MAS Grants have sparked considerable interest in the student community throughout their 17 calls. According to the Grant Coordinators, interest in the program has grown steadily over the years, with an increasing number of students applying annually. Proof of this is that, by 2025, the number of applicants had doubled compared with the previous edition. Nevertheless, the Grants' budget is limited. The scholarships are financed mainly from university funds, with an annual allocation of 20,000€, and since 2024, they also rely on financial aid from the Regional Government of Castilla y León. This budget is meant to cover the students' travel to the destination, as well as insurance, and a part of the basic costs of accommodation and meals in the form of a travel allowance, which varies depending on the cost of living in the host country. Thus, in the last editions, the budget allowed approximately 10 participants to qualify for the Grants.

What I have seen with some of these types of scholarships is that they are not as financially complete as this grant, and I think this is very important because many people truly cannot afford to pay their own expenses. The whole part of the trip would be unfeasible for some people to be able to travel just because they would have to face other economic expenditures that could happen during the whole course of the trip (B1).

In fact, this year, we have had twice as many people interested as last year. Therefore, if last year there were people who were left out because we did not have more budget, then this year, when we start the selection process, I cannot imagine the number of people who will not be able to travel.

To be eligible to apply for Grants, it is necessary to be a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral student enrolled at the University of Salamanca during the current academic year. Undergraduate applicants must have completed at least 50% of their degree credits. There are vacancies for students from all five fields of knowledge of the University: Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Health Sciences, Social Sciences and Law, and Engineering and Architecture. To apply, students must submit a digital application via the university platform, including personal documentation, academic transcripts, proof of enrollment, a curriculum vitae with certified volunteering or cooperation experience, and a one-page motivation letter stating their country of preference. Although project vacancies may change from one year to another, over recent years, the list of countries included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Bangladesh. Applications are assessed in two phases. The first is based on academic merit (60%), formal training in cooperation and volunteering (10%), relevant experience (20%), and a motivation letter (10%).

Candidates shortlisted for the second phase are required to attend a 20-hour in-person training course on development cooperation. This course covers key topics such as the fundamentals of the 2030 Agenda, the design and implementation of international cooperation projects, and strategies for adapting to new environments, both physically and emotionally. It also addresses challenges related to cultural shock and promotes intercultural awareness (Gebregergis and Csukonyi, 2025). Throughout the sessions, the students must demonstrate problem analysis and solving, initiative and autonomy, flexibility and innovation, leadership, organizational and planning skills, interpersonal communication, and teamwork by developing individual and group activities and passing a final test to consolidate acquired knowledge. Moreover, candidates are required to

research their intended destination, and they also talk with the representatives of all the NGOs and former beneficiaries of the grants. With this preparatory training course, the Social Affairs Service aims to ensure that those participants who are selected for the Grants are as prepared as possible for this new experience. Moreover, all of the shortlisted candidates who participate in the training, regardless of whether they travel or not, receive an official certificate of completion.

Once the training course is completed, selected candidates choose the project they wish to participate in, following the final ranking on the basis of their overall score from both phases of the selection process. The choice must align with their academic background and relevant experience. The dates on which the volunteering will take place are subject to the availability of the student and the host organization. After all the parties have reached an agreement in this regard, the social affairs service issues plane tickets, hires insurance, and sends travel allowances to beneficiaries.

Throughout the mobility period, the Social Affairs Service maintains regular contact with grant recipients to ensure appropriate monitoring of their activities at the host destination. Beneficiaries are expected to keep the SAS informed of any relevant changes, incidents, or issues that may arise during their stay. Once the mobility experience concludes, students must submit a written report within thirty calendar days, reflecting on their work and overall experience. Additionally, selected students may be invited to participate in awareness-raising sessions, workshops, or talks organized by the university, where they are encouraged to share their insights and contribute to broader learning within the university community.

### ***An international cooperation program that escapes from volunteering***

The interviews conducted with former beneficiaries, host organizations, and the SAS revealed that the primary motivation for students to apply for the Grants is the opportunity to leave their comfort zone and experience different realities abroad, where they can apply their field of study in a new environment. For many students, participating in projects translate into several first experiences. For some, it is their first time traveling outside of their countries. For others, it might not be their first time going abroad, but outside of Europe. For some, it might also be their first contact with volunteering and solidarity projects. All three target groups highlighted the uniqueness of the scholarship, primarily due to its immersive nature. Unlike so-called volunteer tourism, which is a highly commodified experience often shaped by a ‘volunteer tourist gaze’ that reinforces neo-colonial differences and limits genuine cultural exchange (Godfrey et al., 2019), MAS Grants are grounded in a more authentic and reciprocal encounter with host organisations, where beneficiaries can provide their knowledge of their field of expertise, which has been shown to have a positive impact on host communities throughout all editions of Grants.

For the benefits, one of the key aspects is that students get to see how an NGO works from the inside and actively takes part in its projects—both within the organization and directly in the field. Very few organizations offer this kind of opportunity, especially for recent graduates or Master’s students. It’s a valuable chance. Currently, learning happens through doing, and in our case, being able to offer hands-on experience within our organization is something we see as highly meaningful (H2).

Following this line, the participants expressed their eagerness to get to know the countries and communities firsthand. Instead of shaping their perspective of a country or community by other people's perspectives, media, or mere theory, they would rather get to know the people and the culture of the host country by themselves. This genuine connection and effort to give back to the communities also strengthen the bonds between Spain and the host countries. The respondents mentioned a feeling of shared responsibility to build collaborative relationships, especially with Latin American countries, for historical reasons.

The opportunity the university provides for young people to visit the country is, in fact, a true exchange and a chance to truly get to know another way of life. It's not the same as reading about it. I imagine the students received documents with an analysis of the country's context, but actually living it here is completely different. We've talked about this with many of the volunteers, and they often say, "One thing is the theory, and another is the reality." I believe the university has a clear vision to strengthen these ties of solidarity and brotherhood between Europe and Central America (H1).

### ***Creating a safe environment for putting knowledge into practice***

As mentioned above, scholars have gained increased attention and interest in recent years. On the basis of the feedback from former students who received the grants, many of whom reported that participating in the cooperation projects had a positive impact on their professional paths and actively shared the benefits of the program during the training course and on other platforms, current members of the university community increasingly view the MAS Grants as a great opportunity.

Owing to the current challenging youth unemployment situation in Spain<sup>1</sup>, experiences such as MAS Grants are increasingly appreciated by employers. Participation in international cooperation projects is seen as a sign of initiative, adaptability, and commitment to social engagement. According to the OECD, in the working paper written by Gagliardi et al. (2024), structured volunteering and civic service programs not only foster civic engagement but also strengthen young people's skills and improve their employment prospects (Xu et al., 2025). These programs are particularly effective when they include opportunities for training, reflection, and hands-on involvement in meaningful community work. Moreover, several of the participants' study programs do not include an internship period. In this sense, the MAS Grants fill that void by giving the students the opportunity to practice all the knowledge they acquire during their academic career for the first time or in a different environment.

In my case, since I had just finished studying my Master's, this experience truly helped strengthen my CV. Before taking part, I did not think I wanted to work in the field of cooperation. However, owing to this experience, I realized it actually is a path that

---

<sup>1</sup> Spain has the highest rate of youth unemployment of the European Union. At the time of writing, 26.6% of people under 25 did not have a job (Eurostat, 2025)

interests me and one I would like to explore further. Most NGOs require at least two years of field experience to work with them. I don't have that yet, but now I can prove I have three or four months of on-the-ground experience. I was also lucky enough to work in the office, which, although sometimes seen as less exciting than being in the field, still adds value to your CV. Therefore, I'd say that, professionally, it's something that definitely carries weight and adds value (B4).

Moreover, respondents reported that because the whole volunteering experience (before, during, and after) is overseen by the University of Salamanca, they feel safer and more motivated to participate. According to some interviewees, they would have never participated in a similar initiative if they had not had the certainty that a solid organization such as the University of Salamanca was confident about the work of the host organizations and the safety guarantees of the host country.

I think that the motivation is to help, to get out of your environment and go to a place that, perhaps, without the university, you wouldn't feel so relaxed going to, because there are many entities that are maybe not so reliable. Through the university, you can rest assured that you're going to a reliable place, with an agreement, and that you're backed by the university. In other words, I think there are many people who would like to go on cooperation projects, but if it's not through something like these university grants, where they give you backing and a guarantee, you might not dare to go, right? (S1).

And then there's also the fact that you are totally protected, right? If something happens to you, the university is there during that period to look after you (B5).

### ***Threefold competency: Resilience, empowerment, and transformative engagement***

Despite the clear benefits that participating in the MAS Grants has in enhancing the students' skills in their field of expertise, all three target groups interviewed noted that the experience had the greatest positive impact on the soft or noncognitive skills of the participants. This is not surprising, as previous studies, such as that of Gagliardi et al. (2024), have mentioned that volunteering can help young people develop key soft skills, including leadership, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and self-confidence. Nevertheless, when asked about those soft skills that were the most developed during their experience in the MAS Grants, the interviewees mentioned resilience as the main aptitude obtained. Because students face unfamiliar situations in regard to, for instance, social and cultural norms, new gastronomic habits, or economic conditions, they learn how to navigate through stress, uncertainty, and even loneliness. In turn, this builds their resilience, emotional strength, and flexibility.

Resilience was key. We were literally in the jungle, in a remote village two hours from the nearest town, with very limited leisure options. I spent three months living in a cabin with seven other people, sharing bunk beds. Managing my time, space, and emotions in that environment taught me a lot about adapting and staying grounded (B2).

Similarly, the second most highlighted soft competence was autonomy. This is because although the students are assigned a specific project and key responsibilities before arriving at the destination, there are certain situations where they must have initiative for the activity to succeed. For example, a student mentioned that at the time of her volunteering, she was the only person with her professional profile; therefore, with the support of the host organization, she took the lead in organizing activities, fixing problems, and creating a roadmap for future actions of the organization. Through this process, students gain confidence in their own capacity to act and make decisions, which many interviewees identified as a turning point in their academic and personal growth.

Finally, because they participated in the cooperation projects, the students were aware of the socioeconomic and political situations of their host countries. They did not see themselves as mere viewers but as active agents of change in local problematics. Thus, some of the participants of the MAS Grants identified issues that needed to be further addressed in their host communities, and after returning to Spain, they developed their own project in the call for cooperation projects created by students, which the SAS organizes annually. Although being a beneficiary of the MAS Grants is not a requirement to present a project in this call, having previous experience with one of the organizations with which the University already has an agreement of cooperation, i.e., the host organizations of the MAS Grants, is an added value. In this way, those students who originally went to provide their skills and learn about the situation of the receiving community later have the opportunity to come back and take action on the gaps in the cooperation aid that they encountered during their stay and acquire an even greater commitment to act locally with a global perspective.

During my three-month stay in Sucre, I quickly realized that beyond my initial project on digital technologies, there were more basic needs that were not met, especially with respect to children's nutrition. Therefore, I decided to develop a project for the SAS called "Creating a School Vegetable Garden" (B7).

### ***Language and funding as main barriers***

While the MAS Grants offer an enriching experience, the respondents noted some challenges that affected their overall experience. One of the most recurrently mentioned barriers was the language barrier. In those cases where Spanish was not the working language, some participants struggled to fully understand and communicate when carrying out their tasks. On the other hand, in those countries where the language of the host country was the same as that of the sending country, participants were not exempt from communication issues. Some of them shared their experiences with other international volunteers who did not speak Spanish, leading to feelings of loneliness. Even when everyone spoke Spanish, there were also cases of misunderstanding due to vocabulary and dialect differences.

Well, the first challenge was the language, because they speak English, but it is English with a very different accent from the English I was used to (B4).

Furthermore, students, administrative staff, and host organizations discussed economic issues as one of the obstacles that undermined the experience. First, the SAS highlights how the allocated budget for the Grants is not enough to cover all (or most) of the candidates who apply. Therefore, they reported being in search of new initiatives to foster international cooperation, possibly in aspects such as research or teacher training. Second, the organizations noted that they noticed how some beneficiaries struggled to cover some essential expenses, as in certain countries, the cost of living was higher than expected. According to the students, this occasionally required additional personal resources, which not all of them could afford.

I did notice that the financial aspect can be a challenge, especially in regard to food, which is quite expensive locally. I believe this becomes a barrier in some cases. Students come with a set budget that might seem sufficient at first, but once they arrive, they realize that the cost of living is much higher than expected compared with that of back home (H1).

### ***Mismatch between expectations and reality***

Another challenge mentioned in the interviews was the struggle that the students faced when the reality they encountered in the field did not match the expectations they had created for the experience. In this context, the information received prior to their trip acts as a type of double-edged sword: on the one hand, the inputs they receive about the country and the project may shape the students' perspective of the destination, forming potentially unattainable expectations. On the other hand, the information presented to the students may not be enough, as many underlined that they would have liked to hear more from the host organization and that even if they did, listening to guidelines and testimonies is not the same as experiencing daily life in a different context. This gap is particularly evident in the daily routines of the volunteering experience. For example, lacking privacy if beneficiaries share a room in the allocated accommodation or missing certain facilities, services, or appliances to which participants are used in their countries can hinder the process of adaptation.

I don't know if it was the same for everyone or if it was just me, but I think there was also a lack of information beforehand. When I arrived, they gave me a general idea of the project, but what I was told I would be doing and what I actually ended up doing were worlds apart (B6).

Building on this idea, the respondents admitted that some of the main barriers did not come from the outside but rather from the inside. In other words, their fears, lack of knowledge, insecurities and frustration arising from unmatched expectations became one more deterrent to overcome to fully enjoy and make the most of the experience.

I was surprised because I think my biggest obstacle was myself and my own prejudices. I thought I was going to find a very closed-off environment where I wouldn't be accepted—but it was the opposite (B6).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this analysis mirror those in the literature. For example, Bartel-Radic & Cucchi (2025) reported that short-term mobility in higher education not only enhanced intercultural competences in a way that could not be possible under different circumstances but also that the learning achieved derives from conflict and adaptation challenges as much as it does from the students' personality traits and previous experiences abroad. In regard to the skills obtained during the mobility program, the study shows that the participants of MAS Grants improved their attitudinal skills (such as intercultural communication, resilience, and openness) and more technical skills, such as those related to their field of study and transversal abilities, which include conflict management or organization abilities. These outcomes align with those mentioned by Przytuła et al. (2024).

Another positive feature of MAS Grants is their funding. This is because, as mentioned by the participants, the amount of money provided covers all (or almost all) travel, accommodations and meals during the volunteering stay. Research by Żebryk et al. (2021) revealed that students who did not have funds for short- or long-term mobility during their time at university did not even consider this possibility. Similarly, other studies (Otero, 2008; Brown et al., 2016) have shown that a lack of resources is one of the most significant factors in determining whether to participate in international exchange or mobility programs.

On the basis of all that has been described, found and discussed in the previous sections, it is worth highlighting that MAS Grants can be considered a good practice in the field of short-term mobility programs within the EHEA. According to the perspectives of the target groups, it is a unique opportunity that adds value to them at the personal, academic and institutional levels. This is because, first, it is a unique initiative in Spain (and one of the few in Europe) that allows for a real experience not only of volunteering but also of development cooperation within university education, from undergraduate to master's degrees and including PhDs.

Following this line, secondly, the immersion within the receiving organization and the activities to be developed is such that the beneficiary students actually perceive not only personal growth but also that they truly acquire professional skills that, in other contexts, would be impossible to develop and put into practice. In addition, when students who benefit from MAS Grants return from their volunteering experience, they increase their social engagement and have a broader international perspective. These results are also consistent with those of Lesjak et al. (2015) and Bentall (2022).

Third, MAS Grants provide a direct response to the greatest barrier that students at the University of Salamanca may encounter in gaining access to this program: the financial barrier. The amount of the grant allows the beneficiaries to cover all (or almost all) of the basic expenses of this experience: travel, accommodation, food, insurance, and pocket money. This means that anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can enjoy this short-term mobility.

Furthermore, beyond the value of this study as merely a good practice within mobility programs in both the Spanish and European university systems, the insights of this study have more significant implications in the context of the internationalization of higher education. The fact that short-term mobility is able to provide significant personal, academic, and professional benefits to students indicates that the traditional approach of

universities to internationalization based on long-term exchanges can be expanded. Specifically, MAS Grants demonstrate how, by integrating collaboration with NGOs and emphasizing community-based interactions, such programs contribute to moving the paradigm of internationalization beyond academic mobility into more socially responsible types of engagement.

Nevertheless, it is also necessary to note the limitations of this study. The first is that the sample is not representative of all the participating NGOs that receive students from the University of Salamanca. Second, in the same vein, it has not been possible to include all the students who have benefited from MAS Grants since they were created in the sample. Third, there may be a certain ‘social desirability’ bias in the answers given by the interviewees. In this sense, although all findings point to MAS Grants as a good practice within short-term mobility programs in the EHEA, these limitations need to be taken into account. At the same time, for future lines of research, it will be essential to further expand the sample of NGOs and beneficiaries to obtain more evidence to support this assertion.

In conclusion, MAS Grants constitute a valuable roadmap for how universities can approach short-term mobility for reasons of international cooperation in a fruitful, committed, and fair manner. As higher education institutions across Europe seek to increase inclusivity in mobility opportunities, programs such as this offer a feasible reference point. For that reason, it is paramount that the challenges mentioned above receive the necessary attention to consolidate the positive impact. In this way, students and society in general will continue to benefit from an exemplary program that reminds us that when mobility is framed not only as movement but also as meaningful exchange, it can become a powerful catalyst for learning, transformation, and solidarity.

**AI acknowledgment:** *In the preparation of this manuscript, we did not use artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.*

**Ethics Acknowledgment:** *This article adheres to established ethical standards for social science research, and all necessary measures have been taken to ensure data protection throughout the interview and data collection processes.*

## REFERENCES

- Amendola, A., & Restaino, M. (2017). An evaluation study on students' international mobility experience. *Quality & Quantity*, 51(2), 525–544.
- Antonova, N., Gurarii, A., & Vysotskaia, Y. (2020). Short-term student mobility: Motivation, expectation and barriers. *The New Educational Review*, 59(1), 129–137.
- Asoodar, M., Atai, M. R., & Baten, L. (2017). Successful Erasmus experience: Analyzing perceptions before, during and after Erasmus. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 16(1), 80–97.
- Baena-González, R., García-Parejo, A., De-La-Fuente, R., Fonseca, T. D. J., Heredia-Carroza, J., & Chavarría-Ortiz, C. (2023). Internacionalización de la educación superior: Satisfacción de los universitarios en España y Portugal. *Campus Virtuales*, 12(1), 193–208.
- Bartel-Radic, A., & Cucchi, A. (2025). How do students develop intercultural competence during international mobility? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 105, 102132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102132>
- Bentall, C. (2022). The impact of international volunteering on returned volunteers' engagement with social action in relation to international development. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52(5), 804–821.
- Brown, M., Boateng, E. A., & Evans, C. (2016). Should I stay or should I go? A systematic review of factors that influence healthcare students' decisions around study abroad programs. *Nurse Education Today*, 39, 63–71.
- Cavalli, A., & Teichler, U. (2015). The diverse patterns and the diverse causes of migration and mobility in science. *European Review*, 23(S1), S112–S126.
- De Wit, H., & Hunter, F. (2015). Understanding internationalisation of higher education in the European context. In H. De Wit, F. Hunter, L. Howard, & E. Egron-Polak (Eds.), *Internationalisation of higher education* (pp. 41–58). European Parliament.
- Escamilla, A. (2020). El programa Erasmus+ como mecanismo para promover la ciudadanía en la juventud. *Miscelánea Comillas: Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales*, 78(153), 603–616.
- Eurostat. (2024). *Learning mobility statistics*. Statistics Explained. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Learning\\_mobility\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Learning_mobility_statistics)
- Gagliardi, P., Pérez-Raynaud, O., & Robinson, A. (2024). Promoting youth volunteering and civic service engagement: A stocktake of national programs across OECD countries (OECD Working Papers on Public Governance No. 77). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/39659e6a-en>
- Gebregergis, W. T., & Csukonyi, C. (2025). Unveiling psychological and sociocultural adaptation patterns of international students in Hungary. *Journal of International Students*, 15(4), 97–118.
- Godfrey, J., Wearing, S. L., Schulenkorf, N., & Grabowski, S. (2019). The 'volunteer tourist gaze': commercial volunteer tourists' interactions with, and perceptions of, the host community in Cusco, Peru. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(20), 2555–2571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2019.1657811>

- Hannam, K., & Guereño-Omil, B. (2014). Educational mobilities: Mobile students, mobile knowledge. In D. Dredge, D. Airey, & M. J. Gross (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of tourism and hospitality education* (pp. 143–154). Routledge.
- Handayani, A., & Wienanda, W. K. (2020). International mobility programs to improve soft skills of Vocational College students and alumni. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 14(3), 377–384.
- Henderson, E. F. (2022). A PhD in motion: Advancing a critical academic mobilities approach (CAMA) to researching short-term mobility schemes for doctoral students. In *Educational mobilities and internationalised higher education* (pp. 92–107). Routledge.
- Kerr, K. G., Tweedy, J., Edwards, K. E., & Kimmel, D. (2017). Shifting to curricular approaches to learning beyond the classroom. *About Campus*, 22(1), 22–31.
- Knight, J. (2008). *Higher education in turmoil: The changing world of internationalization*. Sense.
- Lendvai, E., & Huszár, C. (2021). The Erasmus program and its effect to the labor market. *Analecta Technica Szegedinsia*, 15(1), 45–52.
- Lesjak, M., Juvan, E., Ineson, E. M., Yap, M. H. T., & Axelsson, E. P. (2015). Erasmus student motivation: Why and where to go? *Higher Education*, 70, 845–865.
- Llurda, E., Gallego-Balsà, L., Barahona, C., & Martin-Rubió, X. (2016). Erasmus student mobility and the construction of European citizenship. *The Language Learning Journal*, 44(3), 323–346.
- Mastora, V., Panagopoulou, N., & Raikou, N. (2020). Erasmus student mobility and emerging adulthood: Implications on students' development. *Educational Journal of the University of Patras UNESCO Chair*, 7(2), 87–99.
- Nada, C. I., & Legutko, J. (2022). “Maybe we did not learn that much academically, but we learn more from experience”—Erasmus mobility and its potential for transformative learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 87, 183–192.
- Otero, M. S. (2008). The socioeconomic background of Erasmus students: A trend toward wider inclusion? *International Review of Education*, 54, 135–154.
- Przytuła, S., Barzykowski, K., Tracz-Krupa, K., Cassar, V., & Said, E. (2024). Developing cross-cultural competence of students through short-term international mobility program. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 28(2), 169–188.
- Teichler, U. (2017). Internationalization trends in higher education and the changing role of international student mobility. *Journal of International Mobility*, 5(1), 177–216.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2025). *Internationally mobile students*. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/internationally-mobile-students>
- Xu, S., Mansor, A. N., & Amat, S. (2025). Higher education strategies for enhancing employability of international students: A systematic review in the postpandemic era. *Journal of International Students*, 15(5), 117–138.
- Żebryk, P., Przymuszała, P., Nowak, J. K., Cerbin-Koczorowska, M., Marciniak, R., & Cameron, H. (2021). The impact of ERASMUS exchanges on the professional and personal development of medical students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(24), 13312.

*Author bios*

---

**PAULA GONZALO** is a Student of the master's degree in data science Applied to Social Sciences at the University of Salamanca. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0686-0162>. Email: [gonzalomoreno.paula@usal.es](mailto:gonzalomoreno.paula@usal.es)

**ALONSO ESCAMILLA** is a member of the Research Group “Territory, History and Digital Cultural Heritage” (TEHIPACD) of the Catholic University of Ávila. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0159-3576>. Email: [alonso.escamilla@ucavila.es](mailto:alonso.escamilla@ucavila.es)

---