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Eastern Switzerland
University of Applied Sciences

“I’ve changed. As a person.”

Intercultural youth exchange and its impact on democratic engagement

Prof. Dr. Stefan Kammhuber

EMPOWERING EXPERTISE.

Intercultural Exchange in Greece - back in the 80ies





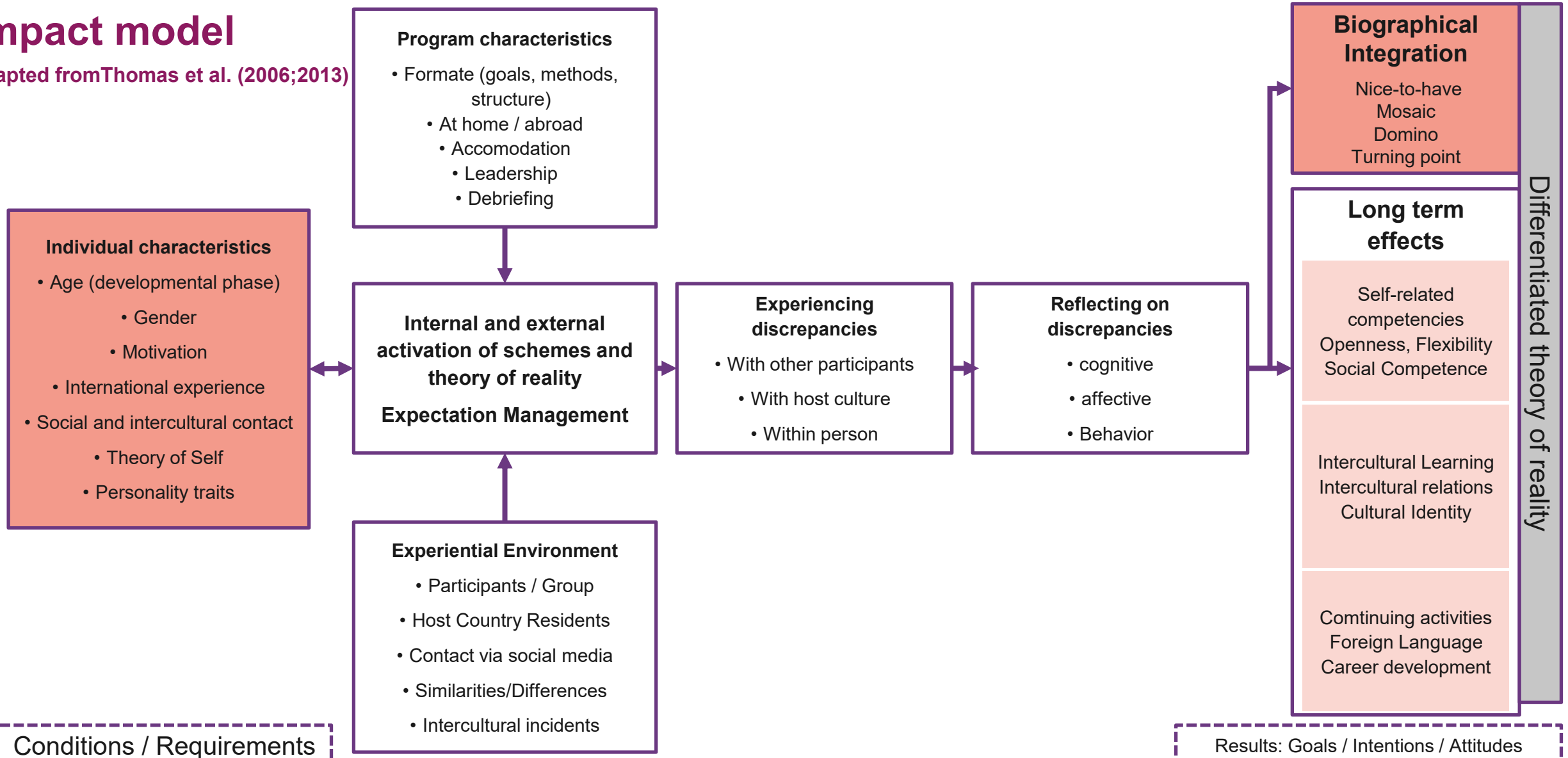
Impact on democratic engagement?

No direct impact on my democratic engagement, but a strong influence on comparing the living conditions in Greece and Germany (housing, schools etc.), and a source of inspiration for intercultural learning in many ways…

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Impact model

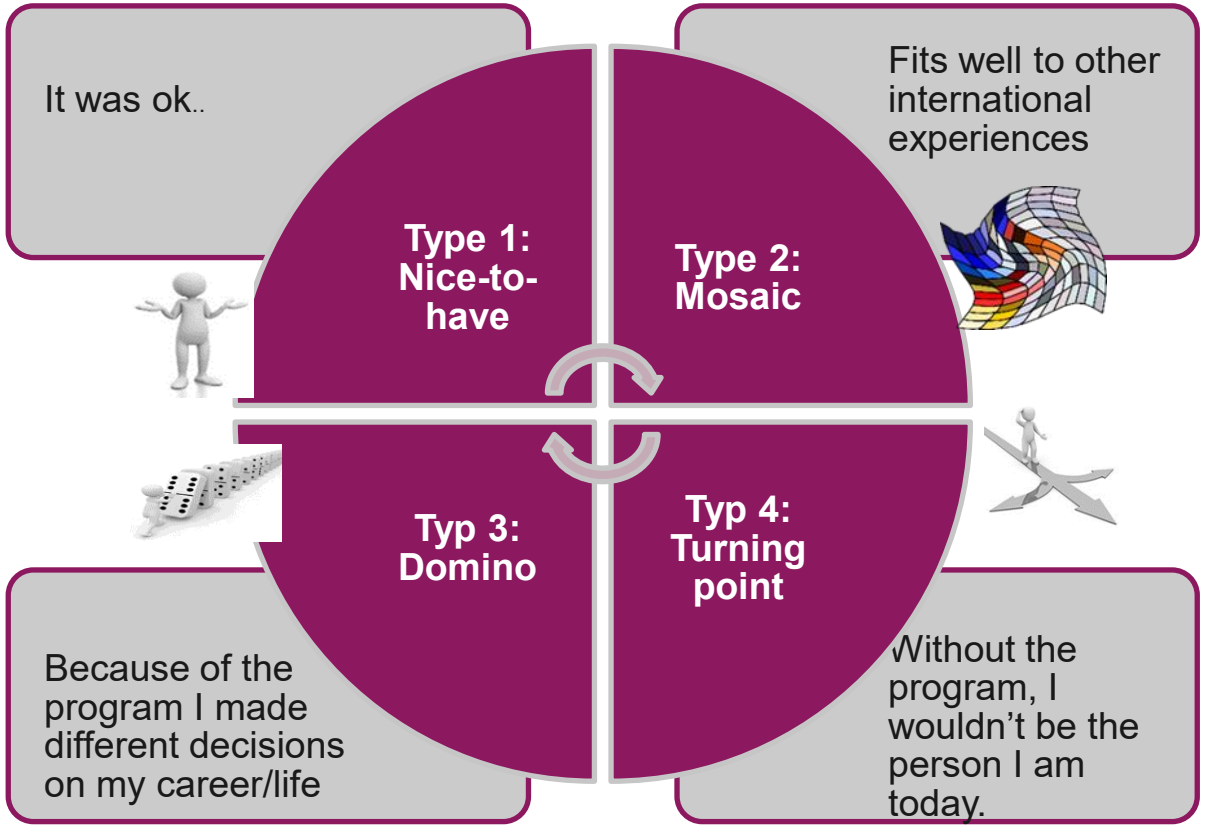
adapted fromThomas et al. (2006;2013)



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Research on the long-term impacts of IYE?

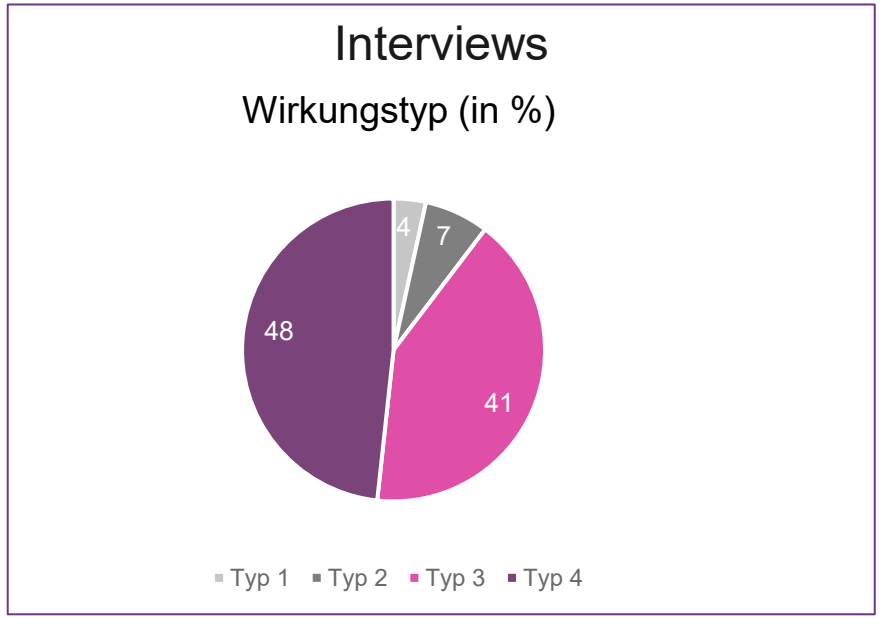
Self-related & Social Competencies	**K1:** Self-confidence – Self-efficacy
	K2: self-awareness
	K3: Openness, flexibility, composure
	K4: Social competencies
Intercultural Competencies	**K5:** Awareness for cultural differences
	K6: Reflecting on cultural identity
	K7: Intercultural relations
Continuing Acitivities & Action-oriented Competencies	**K8:** Continuing activities
	K9: Career-related development of competencies
	K10: Foreign language competencies



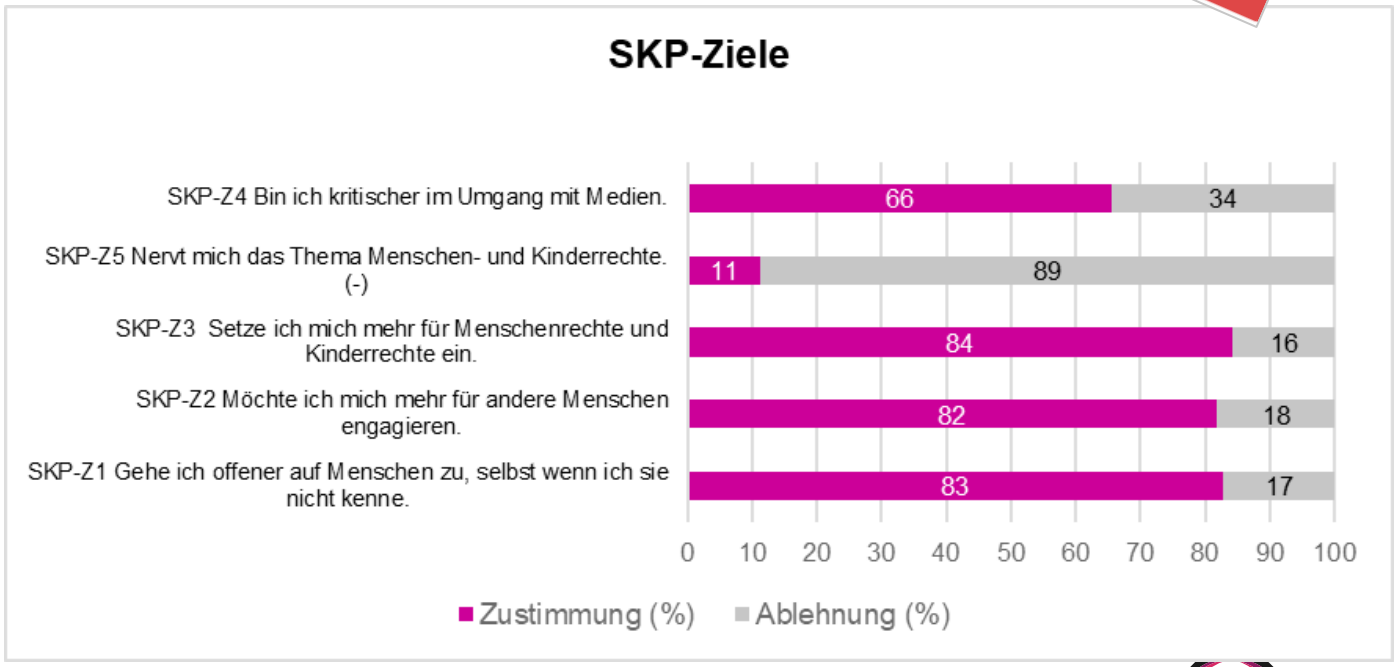
The better the participants in the program are able to cope with their age-related developmental tasks, the more lasting the effects will be (Havighurst, 1972; Kammhuber, 2017)

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The Pestalozzi Children's Village study (2024)







- Even short-term programs can have a massive impact on young people when designed carefully

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Quotes

K8: *«I found out what my rights are and I try to teach people and children here about their human rights and what discrimination. (…) After that I got more confidence to be part of other projects I was well, I was a part of the in Erasmus project in Holland, also in Turkey and many other countries, yes." (Int_3)*

K2: "But now, after five years, yeah, five years passed by and I and I think about it I'm like this is such a big part in my life that changed the way I am and the things I do now and how I do it and most of it was like that moment, that freeing moment, that moment where, you know, you, you are just the way you are and people appreciate that for you." (Int_9)

«So, there is this one girl that was very, let's say, shy and didn't have any friends […]. She gained quite a lot of self esteem during the program. When she came back to XY, she was very active in leading the workshops both, in our organization and in the school she attended, and after that she decided to enroll the political studies and she was, for example, one of the students that was the leader of the students protest in spring this year in XY.» (Int 2_BP_20231214, Pos. 55-56)

«My «Kosovo-kids» learnt a lot about Serbian worldviews during the program with the group from Serbia. That reduced their prejudices, and were able to cooperate with the Serbian-Swiss at home better» (Int 1_BP_KAST)

K8: "But I was one of the one of the few that realized it I organized the same project firstly in my elementary school I was then the 9th grade I made the students Parliament, it was my first thing." (Int_7)

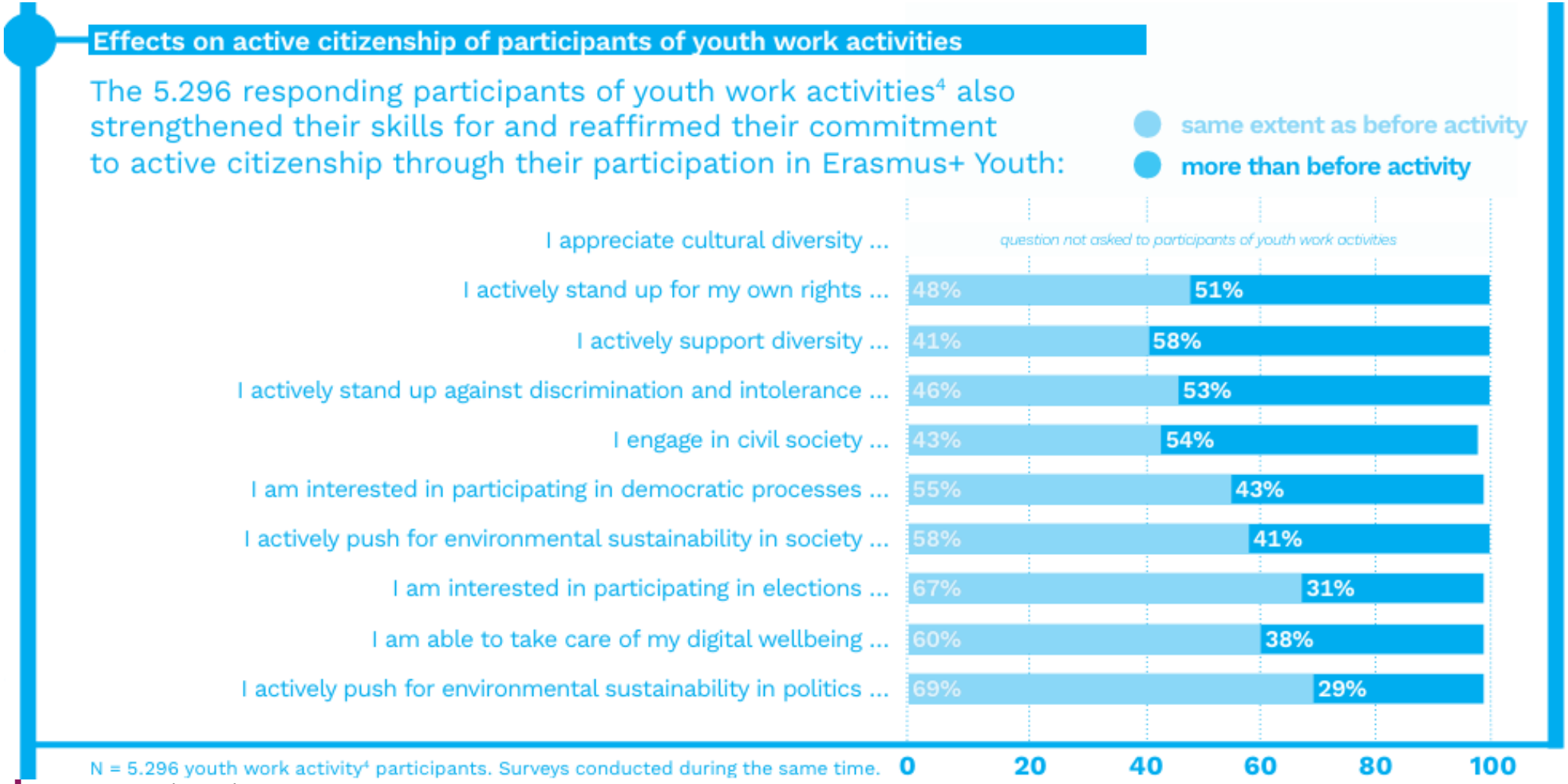
K9: "And that was one of the like, I guess beginnings of what I wanna do as a job. It was like, oh, I figured out I love meeting people I love, learning about their languages, I love learning about their culture. I want to be a diplomat, an ambassador, so that was a big thing." (Int_18)

Erasmus+ and democratic engagement? (Horta et al, 2024)



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Impacts on democratic engagement?



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«Democracy and Foreign Education» (Spilimbergo, 2009)

- **Objective:** Examine whether international higher education contributes to democratic development in students' countries of origin.
- **Data:** UNESCO bilateral student-mobility data covering tertiary education flows from **1950-2003**.
- **Sample: 183 countries** and **1,379 observations** in an unbalanced country panel.
- **Period analyzed: 1960-2005** using five-year intervals.
- **Main finding:** Countries sending more students to **democratic host countries** subsequently exhibited significantly higher levels of democracy

«Democracy and Foreign Education» (Spilimbergo, 2009)

- Students educated abroad, especially in democratic host countries, were associated with **higher levels of democracy in their home countries over time**.
- The positive relationship was strongest when students studied in countries with. **well-established democratic institutions and political freedoms**
- **International education appears to facilitate the transfer** of democratic values, political norms, and governance practices across borders.
- The findings suggest that foreign-educated graduates can act as **agents of change** by introducing new ideas and influencing political and civic development upon their return home.
- The study **provides quantitative evidence that international student mobility contributes not only to human capital development but also to long-term democratic progress at the national level**.



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International exchange and world development (Chankelian et al. 2025)

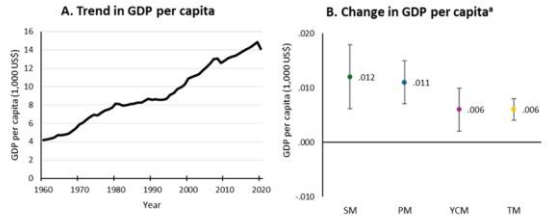
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA): Alumni

Method: Mixed-methods study combining longitudinal data **from 263 programs** in **134 countries (1960–2020, N= 704’800)** with **704 interviews across 70 countries**. Quantitative analyses assessed systemic impacts, while qualitative interviews explored the mechanisms through which international exchange drives societal change.

Dependent variables:

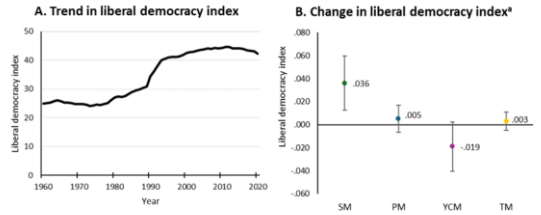
- **Economy**: Measured by real GDP per capita (constant 2015 U.S. dollars), reflecting economic growth and prosperity.
- **Gender**: Assessed via the female gross tertiary enrollment ratio, indicating the proportion of female students enrolled in tertiary education. This measure not only captures gender parity in education but also suggests broader societal shifts towards gender equality, as evidenced by its strong correlation with the Historical Gender Equality Index (r=.624 across 105 countries from 1975 to 2003).
- **Justice and Freedoms**: Evaluated using the Liberal Democracy Index from the V-Dem dataset, which considers the existence of electoral democracy and the protection of individual and minority rights.
- **Health**: Represented by life expectancy at birth, measuring the average lifespan of a newborn.
- **Education**: Measured by the gross enrollment ratio for primary and secondary education, reflecting the extent of basic education provision.

Figure 7. Trend and Change in Economy (134 Countries)



a—Unstandardized coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Each model includes one mobility covariate (SM, PM, YCM, and TM) at a time. Controls for the following variables are included in all models: gross tertiary enrollment ratio$_{t-5}$, international trade$_{t}$, year$_{t}$, year squared$_{t}$, and dummy variables for regions. The dot with error bars crossing the x-axis indicates a statistically non-significant correlation at the p < .05 level (two-tailed tests).

Figure 9. Trend and Change in Justice/Freedom (134 Countries)



a—Unstandardized coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Each model includes one mobility covariate (SM, PM, YCM, and TM) at a time. Controls for the following variables are included in all models: gross tertiary enrollment ratio$_{t-5}$, GDP per capita$_{t-5}$, international trade$_{t}$, year$_{t}$, year squared$_{t}$, and dummy variables for regions. The dot with error bars crossing the x-axis indicates a statistically non-significant correlation at the p < .05 level (two-tailed tests).

Results

Figure 14. ECA Alumni Contributions, by Level (N=419)

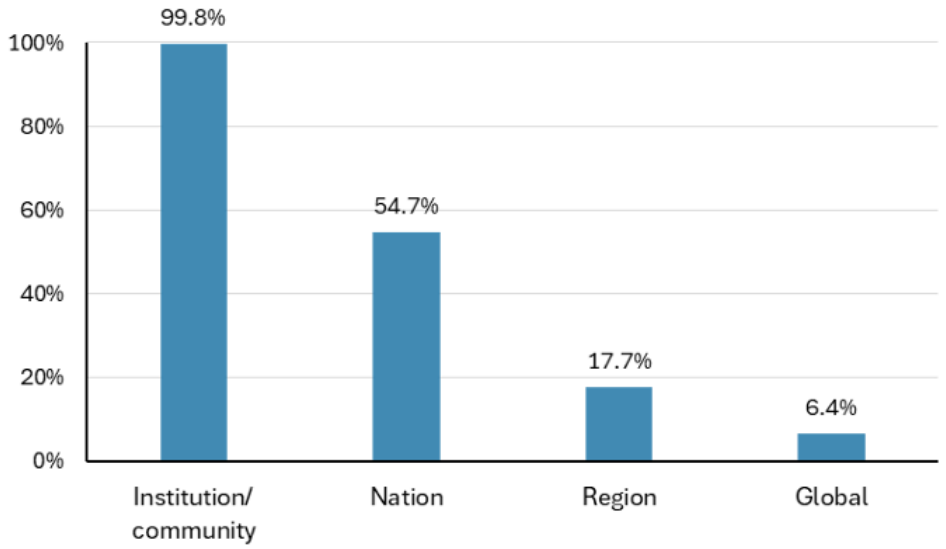
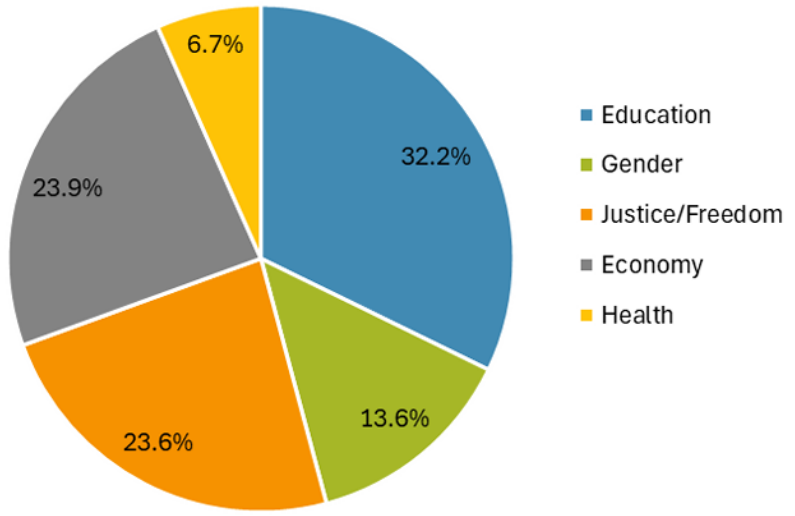


Figure 16. ECA Alumni Contributions, by Area (N=419)



International exchange and world development (Chankelian et al. 2025)

Results:

- **International exchange programmes create measurable societal value beyond individual learning outcomes.** Across 134 countries, a larger stock of ECA alumni was associated with stronger development outcomes in areas such as education, health, gender equality, economic development, and democratic governance

- **The impact of mobility is driven by four key mechanisms:** increased personal agency, enhanced knowledge and professional expertise, stronger intercultural competence, and sustained transnational networks. These mechanisms enable participants to transfer ideas, skills, and practices into their home societies.

- **ECA alumni act as change agents in their home countries.** Many alumni contribute to educational reform, civic engagement, public administration, health initiatives, innovation, and capacity building in government, business, and civil society organisations.

- **International mobility strengthens democratic and civic capacities.** Alumni frequently reported increased civic understanding, openness to diversity, leadership skills, and commitment to public service, supporting broader democratic and social development.

- **Mobility is not an automatic driver of change.** Its long-term impact depends on supportive institutional, political, and social conditions in participants' home countries. International exchange creates opportunities for transformation, but outcomes are shaped by local contexts and enabling environments.

Conclusions

- Intercultural exchange can have profound effects on the personal and social development of young people. Some even experience it as a turning point in their lives.
- The conditions for such outcomes include appropriate expectation management beforehand, professional intercultural preparation, a program design that supports reflection, on-site support, and a qualified debriefing of participants' experiences.
- Its influence on democratic engagement is often indirect. When a program generates strong individual impacts, participants are more likely to assume the role of change agents within their social environments later in life.
- When these individuals encounter a critical mass of like-minded people, social change becomes more likely.



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HAPPY BIRTHDAY



YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING

Thank you for

«empowering citizens of one world»

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