



LIFESTYLE IN *MOBILITY*

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Key findings and recommendations

- This report presents findings from *Lifestyle in Mobility*, the first large scale study that assessed the effect of the study abroad experience on risk behaviours (alcohol consumption and related negative consequences, drug use, and unprotected casual sex) among European university study abroad students.
- A mixed methods approach was used. Fifteen volunteers from an international student association and 12 study abroad students in different countries across Europe were interviewed. A large sample of 909 study abroad students from 42 different European countries travelling to more than 30 different countries completed a survey on their risk behaviours prior to their departure, while abroad, and following their return.
- Overall, students increased the volume of alcohol consumed as they transitioned abroad and returned to pre-departure levels upon return to their home countries. A similar increasing and decreasing pattern in alcohol use and misuse was found for both male and female students.
- A “bounce back” effect followed the study abroad period when students showed drinking levels that were considerably lower even when compared to pre-departure levels.
- The proportion of students’ engaging in unprotected casual sex increased during the study abroad experience, though students’ illicit drug use, such as marijuana, cocaine, and other drugs, did not change significantly.
- Other lifestyle changes included an increase in attending nightlife venues (e.g., bars and pubs) and in participating in parties at a friend’s house during the study abroad experience.
- The data gathered from students and volunteers’ interviews indicated that increases in alcohol use and misuse are related to a general attitude of “making the most out of” the time spent abroad, which in turn is connected to a more relaxed academic schedule and fewer parental restrictions and peer social control.
- This *making the most out of* attitude included a marked increase in the frequency of participating in social activities, with alcohol being intentionally used to increase disinhibition and facilitate socialisation.
- While socialisation with study abroad peers was rather easy, socialising with host country local students was more challenging due to language and cultural barriers as well as differences in lifestyle.
- Pre-departure interventions to reduce students’ expectation that the study abroad experience will be a period of increased drinking and interventions to promote greater social and cultural engagement with local students are promising approaches to protect health and well-being of study abroad students.

1. Introduction

Studying abroad has become a common experience for young Europeans. A growing number of study abroad students participate in exchange programmes, such as inter-university exchanges or study abroad programs. The single most successful mobility programme worldwide, the Erasmus Student Mobility for Studies Action, has seen a dramatic increase in participants, from a few thousand in 1987 to over 270,000 in 2012/2013) [1].

While the benefits of studying abroad for young people, including increases in foreign language proficiency and intercultural awareness [2], are well known, concerns have been raised over the health of travelling students. In fact, significant lifestyle changes occur when moving abroad, and health problems are observed in study abroad students, especially concerning alcohol consumption, illicit drug use, and unsafe sexual behaviour [3, 4].

Young people (aged 15 to 24 years) suffer the burden of alcohol-related harm, with more than 25% of young male mortality and approximately 10% of young female mortality attributable to alcohol [5, 6]. Unsafe sexual behaviour and use of drugs, such as marijuana, stimulants and ecstasy, also incur social costs [7-9]. Young adulthood is

recognised as a critical life period for health because health behaviours developed during this transitional life phase can affect adult lifestyle habits and therefore have a long-term implications for health, well-being and healthcare costs [10].

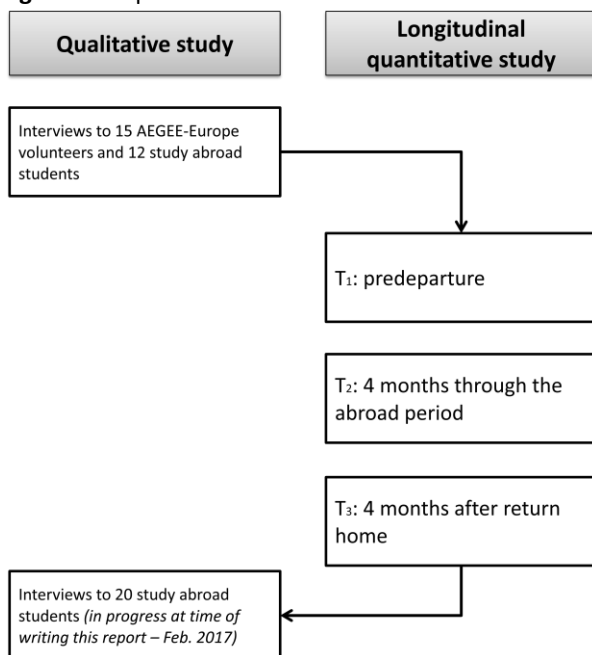
This report presents findings from *Lifestyle in Mobility*, the first large EU study in this area. This research study was a research project conducted collaboratively by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy), Cardiff University (UK) and the international student association AEGEE-Europe. The European Foundation for Alcohol Research (ERAB; EA 14 11) funded the study for two years (March 2015-February 2017).

The primary aim of the research project was to understand the effect of the study abroad experience on risk behaviours (alcohol consumption and related negative consequences, drug use, and unprotected casual sex) among European university study abroad students before they departure to a foreign country, while abroad, and after they return to their home countries.

2. Methods

Lifestyle in Mobility study used a mixed methods approach (Figure 1). A qualitative study based on interview data was followed by a survey aimed to collect the quantitative data on students' behaviour at three time points.

Figure 1. Sequence of data collection



Inclusion criteria

Respondents' eligibility for inclusion in the study was based on (1) current participation in a study abroad, internship or language training programme; (2) intention to stay abroad for at least four months; and (3) travelling from and to a European country.

Qualitative study

The qualitative data was collected by interviewing (via Skype) 15 AEGEE-Europe volunteers and 12 study abroad students in different countries across Europe. This

preliminary qualitative study was run in the Spring 2015 to generate the hypotheses, to better capture the complexity of study abroad students' personal experience, and to enrich the interpretation of the overall project results.

Students were asked about their experiences as study abroad students. Volunteers were asked about their experiences with study abroad students visiting their hometown. All volunteers had extensive experiences with study abroad students (e.g., organizing social meetings or running peer programs for incoming Erasmus students). In the result section students' quotes are identified through a numeric id, gender, abbreviations of country of origin, and destination. A numeric id, country of residence and the letter V identifies volunteers' quotes.

Interviews with 20 students who completed the quantitative study are being conducted at the time of writing this research report to better understand post-return behaviours, and the results will be published in future publications.

Longitudinal quantitative study

AEGEE-Europe volunteers provided support to recruit a sample of study abroad students from different European countries. Students completed a survey at pre-departure (T_1),

while abroad (T_2) and post-return (T_3). At T_1 participants were asked to respond to online survey questions for the month prior to their departure and to provide a valid e-mail address so they could be invited to complete the T_2 survey. Four months after their arrival to their host country, participants were emailed a link to a second survey. They were sent a final survey approximately four months after returning home. The survey was developed in English and then translated into Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Participants provided information on the patterns of alcohol use (number of standard drinks drunk weekly, binge drinking and drunkenness frequency), number of negative alcohol-related consequences in the last 30 days, frequency of drug use (cannabis and other drugs), and frequency of unprotected casual sex. Recreational habits at night, physical activity, and diet were used as additional lifestyle indicators (see Appendix 2 for more information on measures used).

Survey sample characteristics

Overall, 1,145 students completed the T_1 survey (pre-departure), 800 completed the T_2 survey (during the study abroad experience), and 443 completed the T_3 survey (post-return). Participants who completed at least two waves were included ($N = 909$).

Participants had a mean age of 22.19 years ($SD = 2.28$) and 72.7% were female. The mean number of years in formal tertiary education was 3.10 ($SD = 1.37$). Areas of study varied, with most participants majoring in Social Science, Business and Law (37.7%), followed by Humanities and the Arts (e.g., Literature, Languages) (20.3%), Science, Mathematics and Computing (12.9%), and other less prevalent study areas.

Students originated from 42 countries, with most students coming from Spain (14%), Germany (10.1%), Italy (9.8%), France (6.9%), the United Kingdom (6.4%) and the Netherlands (4.7%) (Figure 2). Participants travelled to 33 different countries, mostly Spain (12.8%), Italy (9.1%), the United Kingdom (8.7%), France (7.8%), Germany (7.4%), Belgium (5.6%) and the Netherlands (5.4%) (Figure 3). Most students (67.5%) planned to spend up to a semester abroad while the remainder planned to spend the entire academic year in the host country. In comparison with the available data on Erasmus students [1], the sample was over-represented in terms of female gender (60.5% of the entire Erasmus programme are women) but comparable in terms of mean age and areas of study.

[illegible]

A map of Europe where each country is labeled with a number representing the count of its neighboring countries. The numbers are as follows:

- Iceland: 6
- Ireland: 19
- United Kingdom: 79
- Denmark: 49
- Norway: 29
- Sweden: 33
- Finland: 30
- Poland: 21
- Czech Republic: 24
- Slovakia: 21
- Hungary: 17
- Austria: 29
- Germany: 7
- France: 71
- Spain: 34
- Portugal: 116
- Greece: 9
- Turkey: 20
- Russia: 1
- Ukraine: 2
- Romania: 6
- Bulgaria: 1
- Serbia: 1
- Croatia: 1
- Slovenia: 1
- Italy: 83
- Malta: 4
- Switzerland: 7
- Liechtenstein: 3
- San Marino: 3
- Vatican City: 27
- Monaco: 51
- Andorra: 19
- Belgium: 67
- Netherlands: 27
- Luxembourg: 4
- Poland: 21
- Czech Republic: 24
- Slovakia: 21
- Hungary: 17
- Austria: 29
- Germany: 7
- France: 71
- Spain: 34
- Portugal: 116
- Greece: 9
- Turkey: 20
- Russia: 1
- Ukraine: 2
- Romania: 6
- Bulgaria: 1
- Serbia: 1
- Croatia: 1
- Slovenia: 1
- Italy: 83
- Malta: 4
- Switzerland: 7
- Liechtenstein: 3
- San Marino: 3
- Vatican City: 27
- Monaco: 51
- Andorra: 19
- Belgium: 67
- Netherlands: 27
- Luxembourg: 4

3. Qualitative study findings

Motivations to study abroad

Study abroad students' motivations to participate in exchange programmes varied. All students were motivated by the desire to have intercultural encounters and have a life experience, although some reported motivation to experience a higher academic level. A German volunteer from Aachen, for example, stated that Engineering students *"first choose Germany as a country and then they [...] choose Aachen because it's a really good University for Engineering"* (DE1_V). In other cases, especially when the university faculty is not prestigious or internationally known, students may enjoy a more relaxed period free of the usual social and academic obligations. A Spanish volunteer said, *"Madrid is known abroad for its fiesta (i.e., partying) [...], and for Erasmus students, it is important to take a year off because the Erasmus, you know, is not all that about formal (academic) stuff"* (ES1_V).

Changes in lifestyle

The lifestyles of study abroad students were quite dissimilar from those that they led in their home country. Students enjoyed reduced academic duties far from one's usual environment, *"the difference is that back in Italy, I needed to study way longer compared to when I'm in here (on Erasmus), and so I have more free time"* (F_IT_DE_1). A

volunteer commented that, *"They say to themselves that it is the time to be crazy and go to as many parties as they can without really worrying, for example, to what their mom would say if they come back home at five in the morning (laughing)"* (FR3_V). In general, being a *typical Erasmus student* includes going out a lot and have fun, *"Most people are told that when you are on Erasmus, the only thing you'll do is going out every single night"* (F_ES_UK_1). *"These two guys I know, they definitely confirm the Erasmus student stereotype: These people didn't drink that much in their hometown, but when they went abroad, they drank way more!"* (F_IT_AU_1).

Students and volunteers considered drinking alcohol as an important part of nightlife and leisure activities while abroad: *"It's true, [alcohol] is really important...because there are a lot of parties to go to and people to meet, and alcohol helps you party, it helps to create the Erasmus atmosphere"* (M_PT_NL_2).

Adjustment and friendship network abroad

Students usually did not find it too difficult to adapt to the host country, though they struggled to expand their friendship network comprising other foreign students. Some students barely met local students, *"I met*

people in my classes that were English, but I didn't do that much with them" (F_ES_UK_1).

Grouping with other international students was natural, and difficulties in making acquaintances with local students were thought to be related to language barriers as well as to differences in lifestyles, *"As a local student you cannot always follow the Erasmus life or the Erasmus rhythm because study abroad students [...] have a different schedule, they go to more trips and party more"* (ES4_V). According to one volunteer, study abroad students differed in that those who manage to integrate more into the host country environment are also less likely to *"party every week-end, they're a little bit more concentrated on studying [...]. They are often more interested in knowing German people and the German culture. Compared to these students, you have party students who normally have Erasmus friends and not that many friends from Germany, and I think that*

they drink more alcohol and they are used to go out more often" (DE1_V).

The "making the most out of it" attitude

When describing the attitude of the majority of study abroad students, several volunteers agreed on a *"making the most out of it"* attitude. This appears to be related to being away from home and the new routine in a new interesting place, *"It's like a unique experience and you want to enjoy it as much as you can. It's more of a once in a lifetime opportunity, so I would like to use it as much as I can, to travel, go out, have fun"* (M_CZ_NL_1). This includes going out more often, as *"The Erasmus is an extreme experience. With extreme I mean that you arrive in a different country, you are often by yourself at first. You are there and you want to experience an extreme life, and this includes drinking a lot more, going out every night [...]. Because it's all new and you are doing stuff you have never done before"* (IT1_V).

4. Quantitative study findings

Drinking behaviours

Overall, 42 students (13.2%) did not drink alcohol at all waves; therefore, they can be considered abstainers. Regarding those who were drinkers, the number of drinks drunk weekly increased significantly from pre-departure (T_1) to during the study abroad experience (T_2) and subsequently returned to baseline levels upon their return home (T_3). A similar increasing and decreasing pattern was found for both male and female students (Figure 4). A “bounce back” effect followed the study abroad period when students showed drinking levels that were

considerably lower even when compared to pre-departure levels. A similar pattern was found for both heavy episodic drinking (HED) (i.e., 4+ or 5+ drinks in a single session) and drunkenness frequency (Figure 5 and Figure 6) but not for the number of alcohol-related negative consequences experienced (Figure 7). For example, the proportion of students engaging in heavy episodic drinking more than three times a week increased from 37% at T_1 to 47% during the study abroad experience and consequently dropped to 24% at post-return.

Figure 4. Mean number of alcoholic drinks consumed weekly by gender at three time points

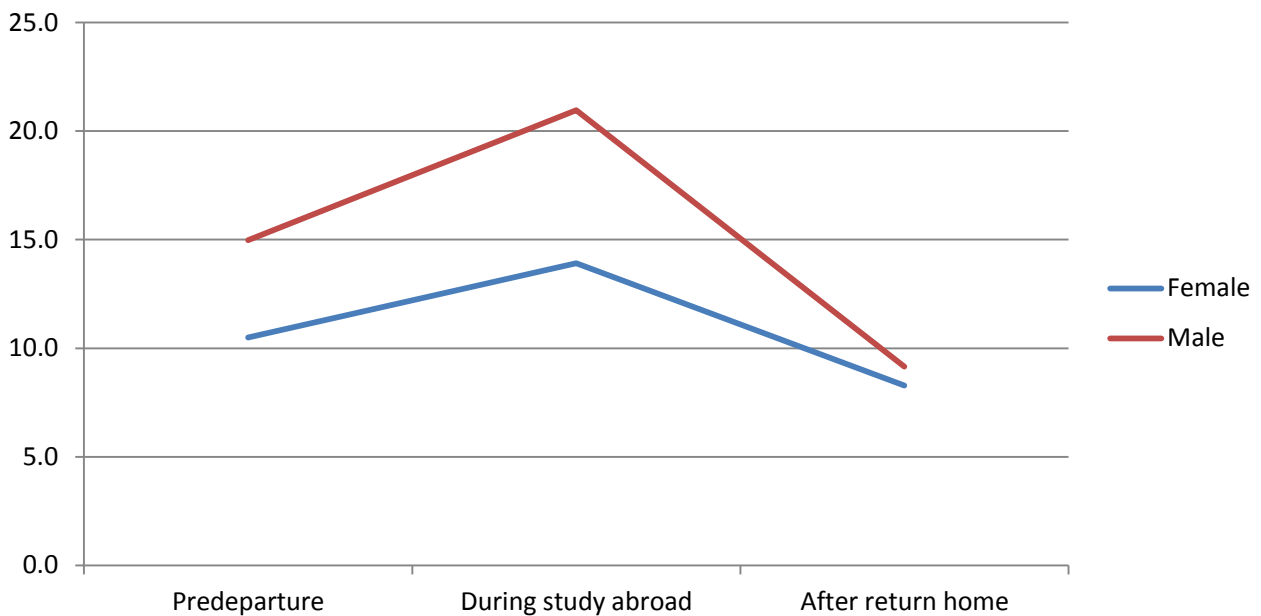


Figure 5. Heavy episodic drinking (HED) frequency in a week at three time points

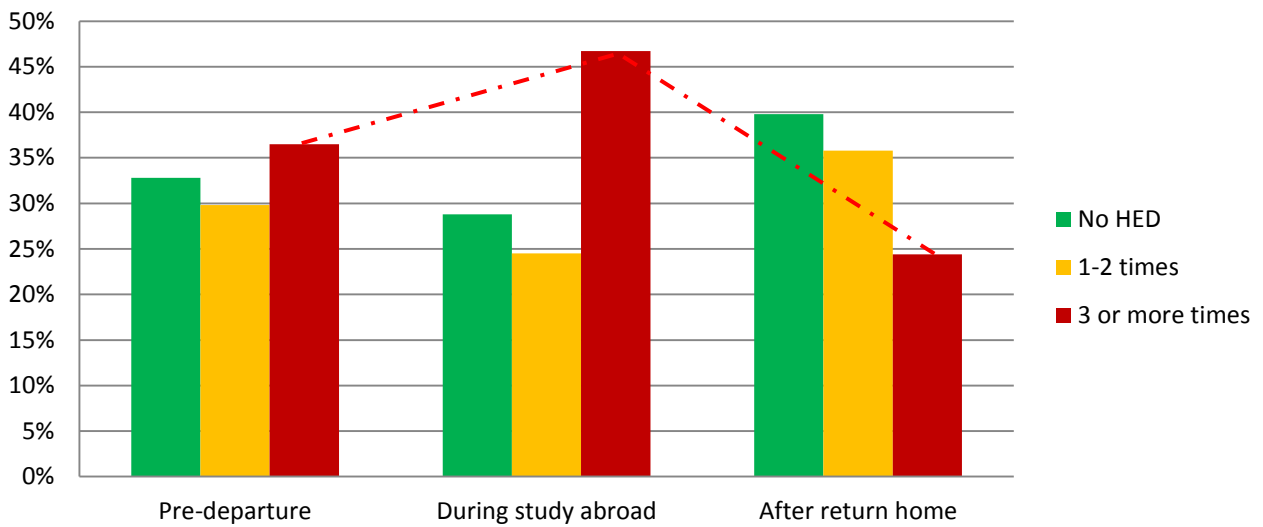


Figure 6. Drunkenness frequency in a week at three time points

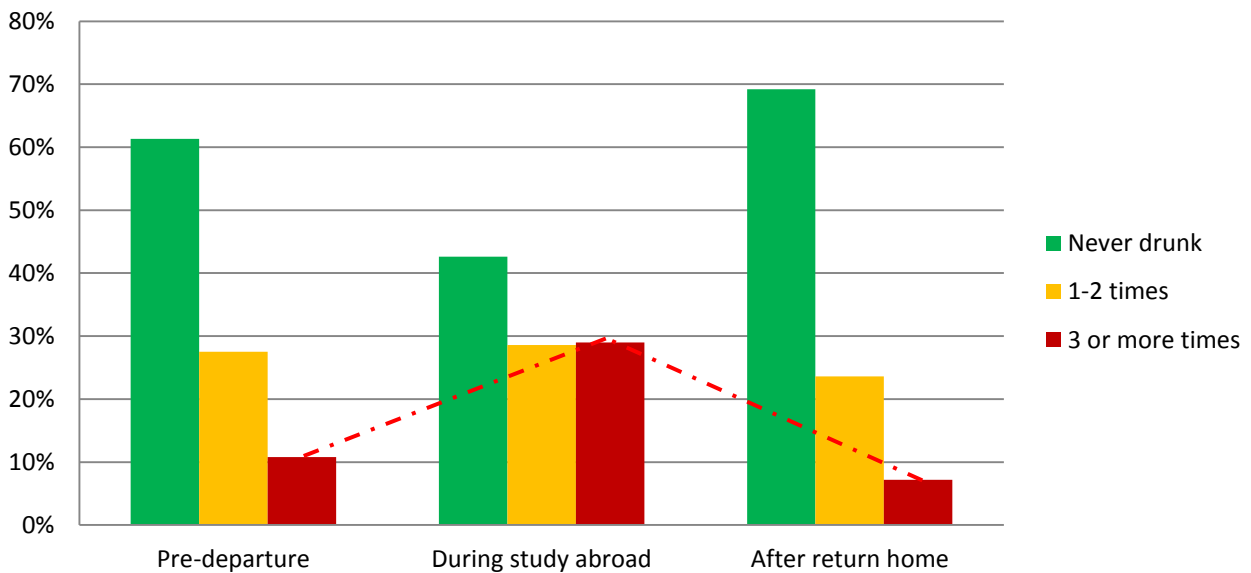
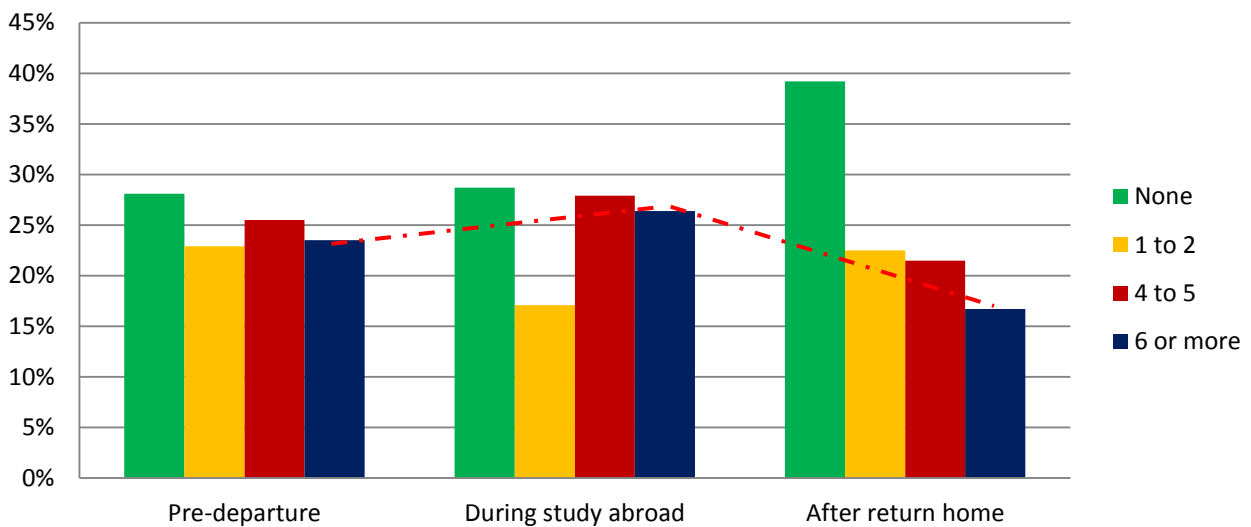


Figure 7. Number of alcohol-related negative consequences suffered in a month at three time points

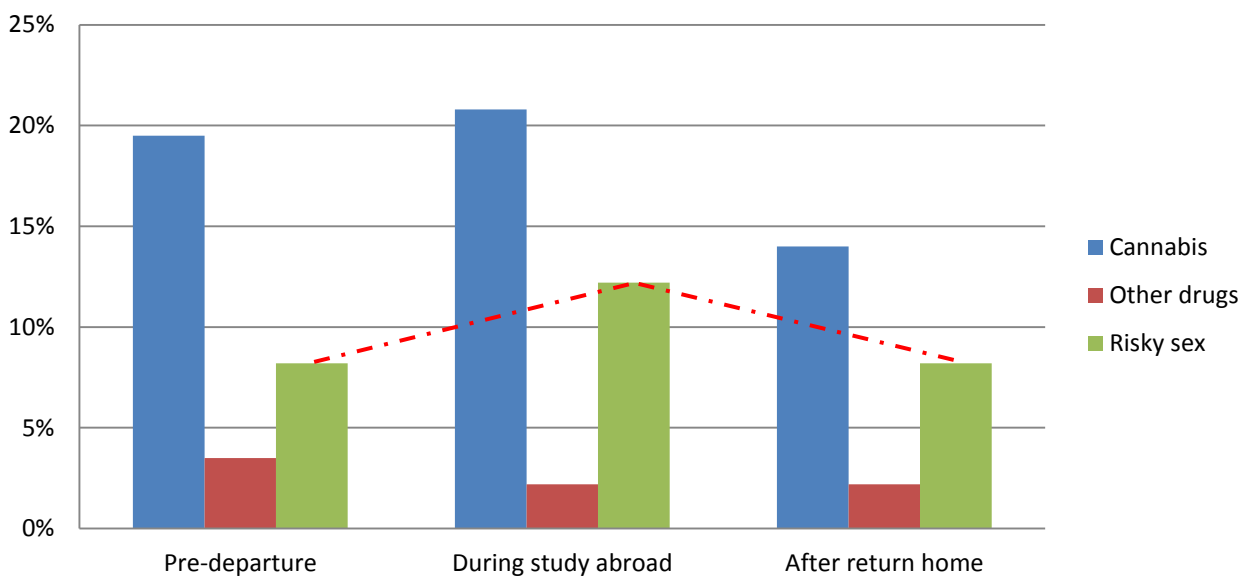


Drug use and risky sexual behaviour

Proportion of cannabis users slightly increased from pre-departure (19.5%) to during the study abroad experience (20.8%) and consequently dropped at T₃ (14%). The proportion of users of other drugs, such as cocaine, remained low and stable at all time

points, whereas the number of students who had risky sex (i.e., unprotected casual sex) increased from 8.2% at T₁ to 12.2% during the study abroad experience and finally returned back to 8.2% at post-return (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Proportion of drug users and students engaging in risky sex at two time points



Other health and lifestyle behaviours

The frequency of practising intense physical exercise and consuming soft drinks (e.g., coke) was fairly stable across the three assessment points, whereas slight reductions were observed in daily consumption of fruit,

vegetables, and sweets (candy or chocolate) (Figure 9 and Figure 10). Nightlife habits followed a different pattern, with increased activities during the study abroad experience compared to pre-departure at post-return (Figure 11).

Figure 9. Number of hours of intense physical exercise in a week at three time points

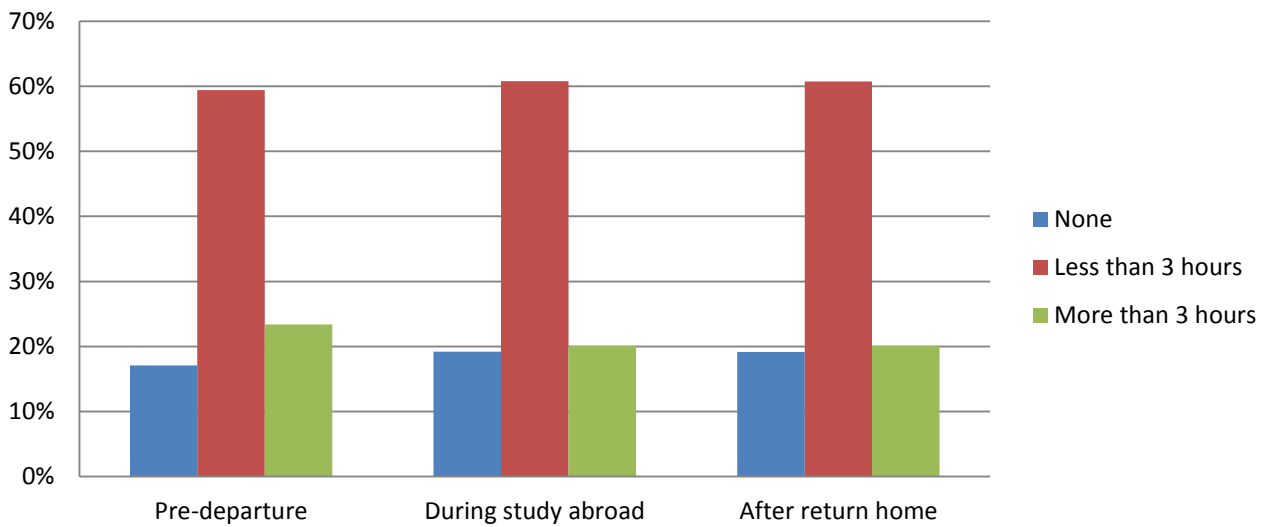


Figure 10. Proportion of daily consumers by food and drink types at three time points

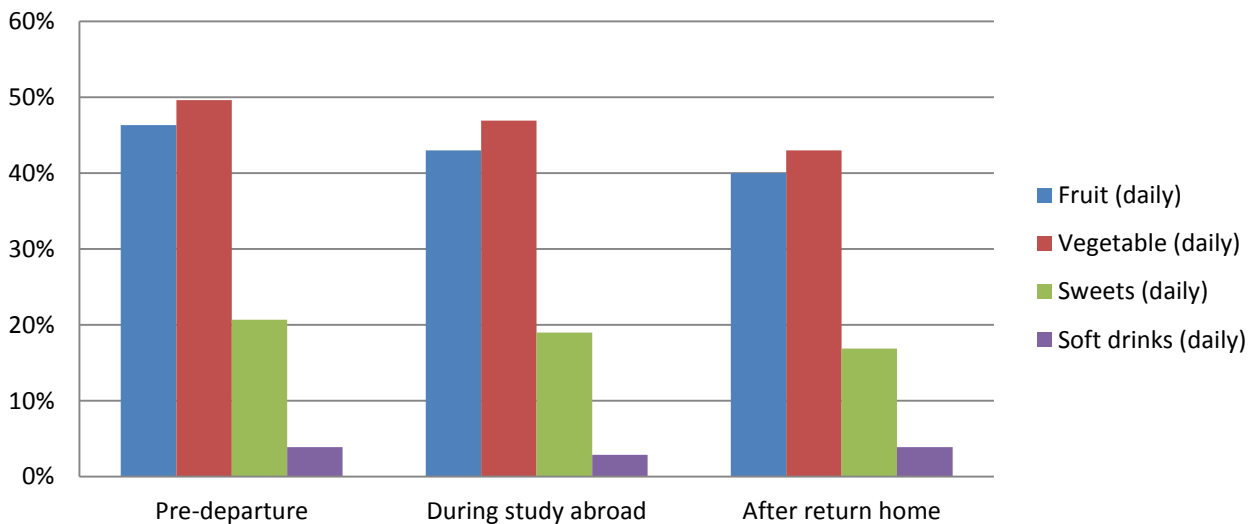
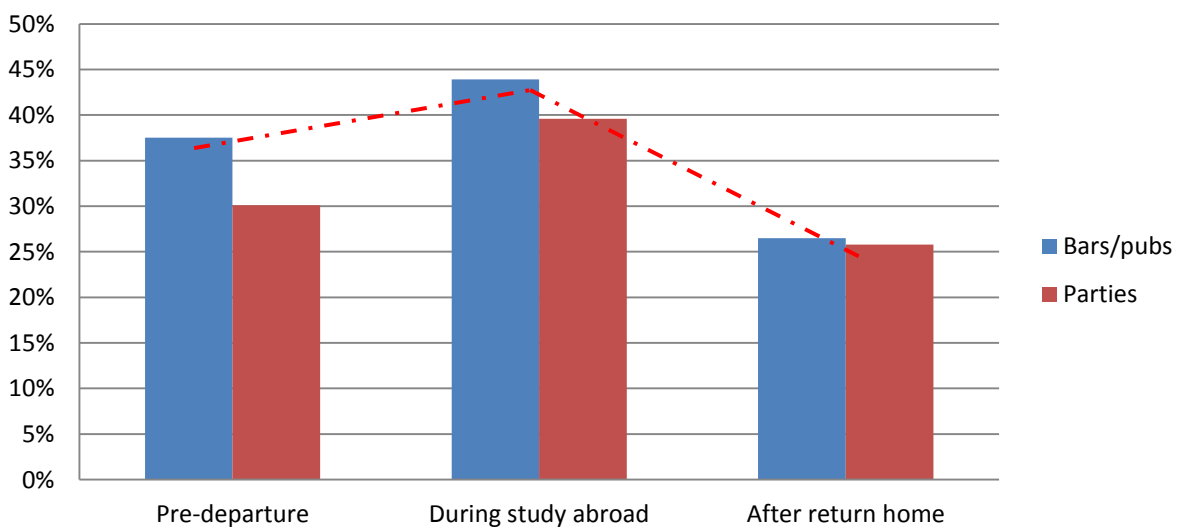


Figure 11. Proportion of participants going out to different nightlife settings at least twice a week at three time points



5. Discussion

This report presents findings of *Lifestyle in Mobility*, the first large EU research study that aimed at understanding the effect of the study abroad experience on risk behaviours (alcohol consumption and related negative consequences, drug use, and unprotected casual sex) among European university study abroad students.

Consistent with results of previous studies [3, 4], this study observed relevant lifestyle changes when moving abroad. Overall, students increased the volume of alcohol consumed and the frequency of alcohol misuse behaviours as they transitioned abroad. These behaviours returned to pre-departure levels upon students' return home. A similar increasing and decreasing pattern of alcohol use was found for both male and female students. Consistent with these changes, students' experienced alcohol-related health problems, such as suffering the effects on hangovers or skipping class the next day.

Students were more likely to engage in unprotected casual sex during the period abroad, thus exposing themselves to greater risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases [11]. On the contrary, studying abroad seems to have little effect on students' illicit drug use, such as marijuana,

cocaine and other drugs. Little changes took place regarding physical exercise and diet habits.

Increases in alcohol use and misuse appear to be related to a general attitude of "making the most" out of the time spent abroad [12]. On the one hand, students felt pressured by the limited time they spend abroad (usually a semester) while on the other hand, they enjoyed a more relaxed academic schedule as well as fewer parental restrictions and peer social control.

This *making the most of* attitude included a marked increase in the frequency of participating in social activities, such as going out to nightlife venues (e.g., bars and pubs) or to parties at a friend's house, with alcohol being intentionally used to increase disinhibition and facilitate socialisation.

While socialisation with study abroad peers was fairly easy, socialising with host country students was constrained by language barriers due to language and cultural barriers [13] as well as by differences in lifestyles, such as the frequency of going out with friends and a lighter academic schedule.

Although the study abroad students' lifestyles involve an increase in alcohol consumption due to greater social and leisure opportunities and reduced social

control, most students were motivated to study abroad by the desire to have an intercultural encounter and live an experience that allowed them to grow as persons and mature toward their adult life [14-16].

Given the growing number of study abroad students participating in exchange programmes, the promotion of study abroad students' health and well-being is a relevant public health concern at the European and global levels.

Apart from providing information on the changes in European study abroad students' risk behaviours, the findings from this study indicate directions to intervene and better protect students' health during exchange programmes. Different entities (e.g., health professionals, counselling services, student associations) in the international higher education field may play a role in delivering targeted interventions.

For example, students may benefit from pre-departure interventions to reduce their expectation that the study abroad experience will be a period of increased drinking. Evaluation studies of interventions on American study abroad students have been found successful in changing students' beliefs and attitudes [17].

Additionally, since socialisation is critical for Erasmus students, receiving institutions might consider adopting interventions to promote greater social and cultural engagement with local students [18], thus avoiding the segregation from local students experienced by many study abroad students. This would allow students to have a more culturally formative experience and in turn normalise the study abroad student's life, making it more similar to the lives of local students.

6. Competing interests and funding.

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

The present research study is funded by the European Foundation for Alcohol Research (ERAB; EA 14 11). Although supported by The Brewers of Europe, ERAB is an independent research foundation and grantees conduct their researches independently and free of any obligation other than reporting their progresses to ERAB.

7. Publications and presentations arising from the project

The *Lifestyle in Mobility* research project final dissemination and action event was held in Brussels on 15 February, 2017, at the time this report was released. Stakeholders from the international higher education and the public health sector participated in the event. Below outputs of the project are listed:

Articles submitted or in preparation

Aresi, G., Moore, S., Berridge, D., & Marta, E. (manuscript in preparation). European credit mobility students' use of alcohol and drugs and risky sexual behaviour. A mixed methods longitudinal study.

Aresi, G., Alfieri, S., Lanz, M., Marta, E., Moore, S. (submitted for publication). Development and validation in five languages of a Multidimensional Motivations to Study Abroad Scale (MMSAS) among European Credit Mobility Students.

Article published

Aresi, G., Fattori, F., Pozzi, M. & Moore, S. (2016). I am going to make the most out of it! Italian university Credit Mobility Students' Social Representations of alcohol use during study abroad experiences, *Journal of Health Psychology*, doi: 10.1177/1359105316666658

Aresi, G., Moore, S., & Marta, E. (2016). Italian credit mobility students significantly increase their alcohol intake, risky drinking and related consequences during the study abroad experience. *Alcohol and Alcoholism*. doi: 10.1093/alcalc/agw028

Aresi, G., Moore, S., & Marta, E. (2016). Drinking, drug use and related consequences among university students completing study abroad experiences: A systematic review. *Substance use & Misuse*. Doi: 10.1080/10826084.2016.1201116

Presentations

Aresi, G. (2016). "Lifestyle in Mobility: preliminary results on the impact of normative perceptions regarding peers' drinking behaviour among European study abroad students' risk behaviours". Invited presentation at DECIPHer, Cardiff (UK), October the 10th, 2016.

Aresi, G. (2016). Lifestyle in Mobility. Preliminary results of a research study on European study abroad students' health behaviours. Invited presentation at AEGEE-Europe AGORA, Bergamo (Italy), May 18-20th, 2016

Aresi, G. (2016). Lifestyle in Mobility. Preliminary results of a longitudinal mixed methods study on European study abroad students' risk behaviours. Invited presentation at DECIPHer, Cardiff (UK), January the 26th, 2016.

Aresi, G. (2016). "Let's get the most out of it!" a study on Italian Erasmus students' alcohol use while abroad. Presented at the European Association of International Education (EAIE), 13-16 September 2016, Liverpool, UK.

Aresi, G, Moore, S., Berridge, D.M. & Marta, E. (2016). Lifestyle in Mobility: preliminary results of a longitudinal mixed methods study on European study abroad students' risk behaviours. Oral presentation at the 41st Annual Alcohol Epidemiology Symposium of the Kettil Bruun Society, Stockholm (Sweden) May 30 - June 3 2016.

Aresi, G, Moore, S., & Marta, E. (2015). Drinking, drug use and related consequences among university students completing study abroad experiences: A systematic review. Oral presentation at the 1st European Conference on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies, Lisbon (Portugal) September 23-25th 2015.

Aresi, G, Moore, S., & Marta, E. (2015). Understanding study abroad students' drinking and drug taking behaviour: A qualitative study. Poster presentation at the 1st European Conference on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies, Lisbon (Portugal) September 23-25th 2015.

Aresi, G, Moore, S., & Marta, E. (2015). Drinking, drug use and related consequences among university students completing study abroad experiences: A systematic review. Oral presentation at the 41st Annual Alcohol Epidemiology Symposium of the Kettil Bruun Society, Munich (Germany) June 1-5th 2015.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1. Research ethics

Approval for both qualitative and quantitative study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy). All research participants were informed of the purpose of the research and assured of confidentiality.

Appendix 2. Outcome measures

Alcohol consumption Number of standard drinks drunk a typical week of a given 30-day period (depending on the wave of the survey) was measured using a beverage-specific quantity measure [19]. A standard drink definition was used for all measures and included validated images of standard drinks (containing 10g of alcohol presented as, e.g., beer, wine or spirits) [20]. Respondents were asked about the frequency they engaged in heavy episodic drinking, which is defined as at least four standard drinks for women and five for men consumed in one session, and the number of times they became drunk, which was defined as staggering when walking, not being able to speak properly, vomiting or an inability to recall events during the drinking session. Number of alcohol-related negative consequences was measured using the Brief Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (BYAACQ) [21]. Respondents were asked to indicate which items on a list of 24 outcomes (e.g. hangover) they had experienced during a given 30-day period.

Drug use and risky sexual behaviour Respondents were asked whether or not they used cannabis, any other psychoactive drugs (e.g., cocaine), and had unprotected casual sex during a given 30-day period. In the case of an affirmative answer, they were asked about the frequency they engaged in each behaviour.

Other health and lifestyle behaviours To assess students' diet and physical activity habits, we used respectively questions MQ15 "how many times a week do you usually eat or drink" fruits, vegetables, sweets, coke or other soft drinks that contain sugar (from 1 "Never" to 7 "Every day more than once"), and MQ6 "how many hours a week do you usually exercise in your free time so much that you get out of breath or sweat" (from 1 "None" to 6 "About seven hours or more") used in the HBSC survey. Permission to use such items was obtained from HBSC's principal investigator. Students' recreational habits at night was assessed by the frequency of going out with friends in the following places: bars/pubs, discos/nightclubs, parties/meeting in a private house; at the open air (e.g., a street, a square, or a park); and at raves (from 1 "Never" to 5 "Every day"). The measure was adapted from [Calafat, Gomez \[22\]](#).

Appendix 3. Limitations of the study

Limitations of the present study include the use of a convenience sample that may not be representative of the European study abroad student population. Also, participants were surveyed at arrival abroad and not before their study abroad experience had begun, possibly contaminating pre-departure measures. Even if data were collected during the first days upon arrival, they might have been already exposed to other study abroad peers' drinking behaviour and this may potentially have influenced their perceptions. Finally, all information was self-reported and results may have been influenced by several biases including a recall bias and/or fear of disclosing sensible information on one's behaviour (e.g., heavy drinking, drug use).

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