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Erasmus Students' Engagement with UNESCO Heritage Sites and Consumption of PDO/PGI Products: a Comparative Study of Poland and Slovenia

Abstract: This study explores the cultural engagement of Erasmus students with UNESCO heritage sites and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) products during their academic stays in Poland and Slovenia. Leveraging a survey distributed at the University of Gdańsk and the University of Primorska in Koper, the research examines students' interests, preferences and behaviors related to cultural tourism and local gastronomy. Field studies at key UNESCO sites – including Malbork Castle and Wieliczka Salt Mine in Poland, and Škocjan Caves and Ljubljana in Slovenia – provide qualitative and contextual insights to complement survey data. The findings reveal that Erasmus students are highly motivated to explore cultural heritage and consume local PDO/PGI products, driven by a combination of curiosity, academic mobility and exposure to diverse cultural landscapes. Comparative analysis highlights both shared and unique patterns in student engagement across the two countries. The study concludes with recommendations for heritage site management, tourism marketing and educational institutions to enhance the cultural experiences of international students. By linking academic mobility to heritage tourism, this research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural preservation, regional branding and the role of education in fostering cross-cultural connections.

Keywords: Academic mobility; Cultural tourism; Erasmus students; PDO/PGI products; UNESCO heritage

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism plays a key role in the global tourism industry by allowing travellers to engage with local history, traditions and gastronomy. For Erasmus students, it adds a rich immersive layer to academic mobility, fostering cross-cultural understanding and personal growth. By experiencing local heritage and cuisine (Rakowska, 2020),

international students gain deeper connections to their host country and expand their global outlook. Tourism is one of the main factors that encourages students to participate in the Erasmus programme in Poland (Zubrytska, 2021; Popova, 2019).

Poland and Slovenia, with their rich cultural and natural assets, exemplify destinations that integrate UNESCO heritage with distinctive regional products. Więckowski and Saarinen (2019) highlight how tourism in Central and Eastern Europe has transformed since the 1990s, with EU integration, privatization and heritage commodification reshaping both infrastructure and destination strategies in countries like Poland and Slovenia. Recent research indicates that the UNESCO label in Europe is associated with enhanced sustainable tourism perceptions among travellers (Van der Zee et al., 2024). Poland features iconic sites like Malbork Castle – the world’s largest brick castle – and the Wieliczka Salt Mine, famed for its underground chapels. Slovenia highlights include the Škocjan Caves, a striking karst formation, and Ljubljana, whose urban landscape was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2021 under “The works of Jože Plečnik: Human Centred Urban Design.” Plečnik’s architectural legacy, visible in the city’s bridges, markets and public spaces, reflects a unique blend of tradition and modernity that contributes to Ljubljana’s identity as a vibrant cultural and academic centre. Both countries also offer renowned PDO and PGI products that reflect regional identity and craftsmanship. This integration of heritage and gastronomy aligns with the concept of tourism clusters where local stakeholders collaborate to enhance regional identity and competitiveness. Jackson and Murphy (2002) demonstrate that such clustering can foster innovation, attract targeted visitor segments, and reinforce destination (Petrevska, Mihalič, Andreeski, 2023) branding through shared cultural assets (Tleuberdinova et al., 2023). This study examines Erasmus students’ engagement with UNESCO sites and PDO/PGI products in these two countries, focusing on how such experiences influence their academic journeys. Using a mixed-methods approach – survey data from the University of Gdańsk and the University of Primorska, alongside field visits to key heritage sites – it identifies student motivations, preferences and interactions with local culture.

By linking cultural tourism and academic mobility, this research highlights how heritage and gastronomy can enhance international student experiences while supporting cultural preservation and regional branding. Nostalgia, sensory appeal and local products enhance rural tourism by strengthening ties to place identity and cultural heritage (Kastenholz, Fernández-Ferrín, Rodrigues, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Engagement Among Erasmus Students

Heritage and gastronomy play a vital role in shaping Erasmus students’ academic mobility experiences, with cultural tourism offering meaningful ways to engage with local traditions, history and identity. While academic mobility encourages intercultural exchange and personal growth, limited research has focused on the specific influence of UNESCO sites and PDO/PGI products on students’ cultural experiences. Recent research confirms that international students’ cultural consumption is shaped by destination motivation, adaptation capacity and cultural orientation, which also affect their engagement with heritage tourism and regional identity (Jamaludin, Sam, Sandal, 2018). Visits to heritage

locations and encounters with traditional foods often foster cross-cultural competence and a deeper sense of belonging, yet their impact on perceptions of cultural identity and less-commercialized tourism remains underexplored.

UNESCO sites and regional food products serve as powerful cultural drivers, supporting sustainable tourism and regional development. The foundational framework and early institutional vision that shaped the World Heritage Convention continue to influence how such sites are interpreted and experienced today (Cameron, Rössler, 2013). Poland's Malbork Castle and Wieliczka Salt Mine, and Slovenia's Škocjan Caves and Ljubljana, illustrate the diverse appeal of natural and cultural heritage. Ljubljana's historic core, shaped by Jože Plečnik's human-centred urban design, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2021, reinforcing its role as a model of integrated cultural planning. In line with Slovenia's rich cultural assets, Faganel, Reisman and Tomažič (2023) document how heritage tourism contributes to the revitalization of nearby Koper's medieval city center, further highlighting the potential of cultural tourism in Slovenian coastal and urban regions. Their study shows how heritage-led retail initiatives and cruise-ship visitor flows can reinforce urban identity and promote sustainable local development. Similarly, PDO/PGI products offer authentic culinary experiences that connect visitors with regional identity. Cooper and Wood (2022) map these products across the EU and reveal a strong correlation with regions of cultural, ecological and tourism significance, underscoring their value in regional branding and sustainable rural development. Bessi re (1998) argues that traditional food can drive local development and rural tourism by reinforcing heritage values and supporting collective identity, particularly through its role in territorial branding and the creation of authentic visitor experiences. Joshi et al. (2024) provide a comprehensive systematic review of rural tourism in Europe, highlighting how cultural landscapes and community involvement shape sustainable and identity-rich rural destinations.  iri , Kalenjuk and Jankovi  (2020) examine how protected regional products in Serbia enrich rural tourism offerings and strengthen place identity, indicating the practical application of PDO strategies in heritage-based tourism. Rach o et al. (2019) further highlight how food tourism contributes to regional development by fostering cultural continuity and cross-cultural engagement, which is especially relevant in the context of academic mobility. This connection between gastronomic heritage and territorial branding has been widely recognized in recent scholarship. Fox (2007) illustrates how rural destinations have reinvented their gastronomic identity by aligning traditional food practices with tourism development, creating distinctive culinary brands that reflect both heritage and innovation. Barzallo-Neira and Pulido-Fern andez (2023) provide a comprehensive review of gastronomic tourism literature, identifying sustainability, cultural practices and rural development as core research themes, further supporting the relevance of food heritage in regional tourism strategies. Lin, Marine-Roig and Llonch-Molina (2021) demonstrate through a bibliometric analysis that PDO/PGI products play a central role in promoting cultural identity and sustainable tourism development across European regions. However, there is little understanding of how Erasmus students engage with these assets during short-term academic stays. Evidence from broader European initiatives supports this connection. Srakar and Vecco (2017), analyzing the impact of Maribor's European Capital of Culture 2012, found that cultural tourism events can significantly increase regional tourism inflow and employment, reinforcing the role of heritage-driven strategies in economic development. As noted by Maior (2024), PDO products serve not

only as gastronomic attractions but also as cultural markers, reinforcing authenticity and supporting sustainable development in tourism.

This study addresses these gaps by examining Erasmus students' interest in heritage and gastronomic tourism, analyzing the influence of academic mobility on cultural engagement, and comparing the tourism strategies of Poland and Slovenia. The findings contribute to academic literature and provide actionable insights for heritage management, tourism marketing and mobility program development (Popova, 2019).

Beyond enriching student experiences, cultural and gastronomic tourism can also support local development. In regions with strong heritage and culinary traditions, engaging international visitors – such as Erasmus students – creates opportunities for local producers, artisans and guides. Scheyvens (2007) identifies this link between tourism and poverty reduction as the “tourism–poverty nexus”, arguing that well-managed cultural tourism can foster empowerment, equitable benefit distribution and long-term community resilience.

Traditional foodways and regional culinary practices are increasingly recognized as part of cultural heritage. This perspective aligns with the principles of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 2003, which emphasizes the preservation of traditions, knowledge and practices that form the identity of communities (UNESCO, 2003). Jeczmyk, Kozera-Kowalska and Uglis (2024) underline how intangible cultural heritage – such as language, rituals and traditional tastes – serves as a living source of authenticity that enhances the appeal and depth of tourism products in Poland.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess Erasmus students' engagement with UNESCO heritage sites and PDO/PGI products in Poland and Slovenia, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative field observations. A structured survey was conducted among 120 students – 65 at the University of Gdańsk (October 2024) and 55 at the University of Primorska in Koper (January 2024) – covering demographics, cultural motivations and perceptions of academic impact. The questionnaire included Likert-scale, multiple-choice and open-ended items, distributed via institutional email and online platforms.

To enrich the survey findings, field visits were carried out at four heritage sites: Malbork Castle and Wieliczka Salt Mine in Poland, and Škocjan Caves and Ljubljana in Slovenia. These visits involved on-site observation, informal interviews with staff and the collection of educational materials. Particular attention was given to features that enhance international student engagement, including interactive exhibits, multilingual resources and thematic tours. In Ljubljana, focus was placed on Jože Plečnik's UNESCO-listed architectural works and the city's integration of cultural heritage into public space and student life.

ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES

Data analysis combined quantitative methods, including descriptive and inferential statistics (e.g. chi-square, ANOVA), with qualitative thematic coding of field notes and interviews, triangulated against survey data. A comparative analysis between Poland and

Slovenia identified cross-cultural engagement patterns, while GIS mapping visualized students' interest in specific heritage and gastronomic sites. This integrated approach provided a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of Erasmus students' cultural tourism experiences, offering insights relevant to education, tourism development and heritage management.

STUDY AREAS

This study focuses on four UNESCO heritage sites – two in Poland and two in Slovenia – and key PDO/PGI products from both countries. These sites and products were selected for their cultural, historical and touristic value, as well as their relevance to Erasmus students' experiences during academic mobility. The aim is to explore how these elements foster deeper engagement with local heritage and gastronomy.

POLAND: MALBORK CASTLE

Inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1997 inscription), Malbork Castle is the largest brick fortress in the world and a prominent symbol of Poland's medieval heritage and the Teutonic Order's legacy. Its Gothic architecture, rich museum collections, and interactive exhibits provide Erasmus students with immersive exposure to European medieval history. Multilingual resources and educational programs support accessibility, while medieval festivals, reenactments and workshops offer dynamic cultural experiences that link students to local traditions.

POLAND: WIELICZKA SALT MINE

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1978), the Wieliczka Salt Mine near Kraków is one of the oldest operational salt mines in the world, featuring a vast network of underground chambers and salt-carved chapels. It combines industrial heritage with artistic expression, most notably in the Chapel of St. Kinga, adorned with intricate salt sculptures. Erasmus students benefit from multilingual tours that offer insights into geology, mining history and Polish cultural traditions, making it a popular destination for those interested in history, engineering and natural heritage.

SLOVENIA: ŠKOCJAN CAVES

Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1986), the Škocjan Caves are among the world's most significant karst landscapes, known for their vast chambers and underground rivers. Located in southwestern Slovenia, the site illustrates the connection between geology, biodiversity and conservation. Educational tours focus on karst ecology, sustainable tourism and its Ramsar Wetland designation. With its dramatic scenery and guided learning opportunities, the caves offer a valuable experience for international students, particularly those interested in environmental studies and ecotourism.

SLOVENIA: LJUBLJANA

Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, offers a dynamic setting for cultural and academic tourism. In 2021, several of its iconic landmarks were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List under the title “The works of Jože Plečnik in Ljubljana – Human Centred Urban Design”. These include the Triple Bridge, Central Market and Žale Cemetery, (UNESCO, 2021) which reflect a unique integration of modern urban planning with historical heritage. For Erasmus students, the city provides accessible cultural experiences through open-air markets, architectural tours and student-oriented festivals. Ljubljana’s emphasis on sustainability, walkability and cultural programming make it a key site for immersive learning and intercultural engagement.

POLAND: SELECTED PDO/PGI PRODUCTS

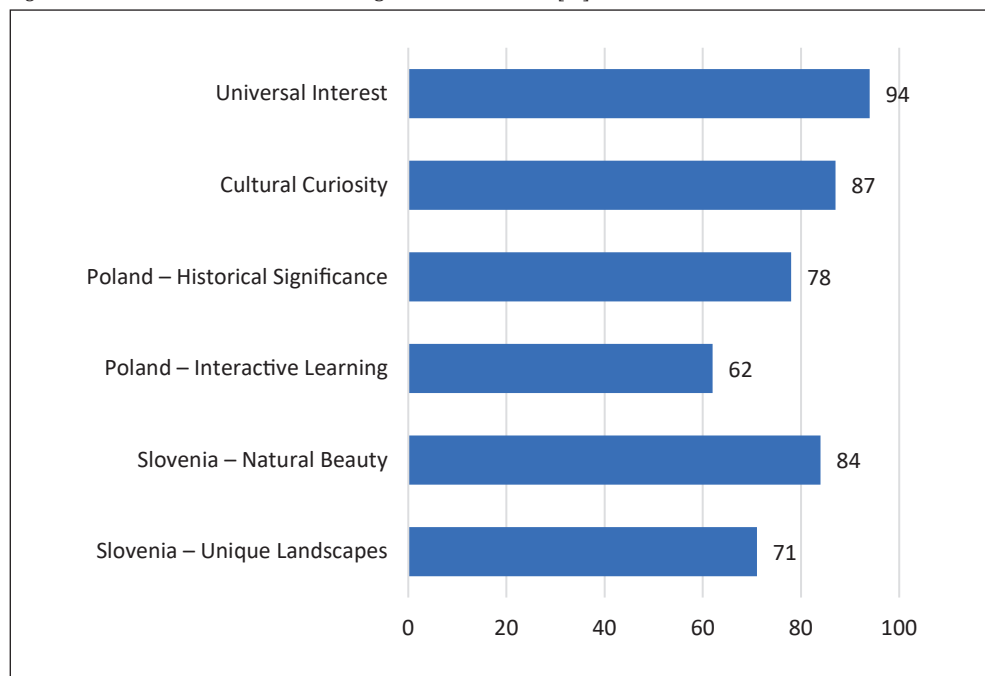
Poland’s regional cuisine is well represented through its certified products. Oscypek, a smoked sheep’s milk cheese from the Tatra Mountains, reflects the country’s pastoral traditions and artisanal food heritage. Kabanosy, thin smoked sausages, are a staple of Polish gastronomy, showcasing time-honored meat preservation and seasoning methods. *Wiśnia Nadwiślańska*, cherries grown along the Vistula River, are valued for their rich flavor and versatility in traditional preserves and liquors, highlighting the agricultural diversity of the region.

SLOVENIA: SELECTED PDO/PGI PRODUCTS

Slovenia’s gastronomic identity is reflected in its certified regional products. Idrija Žlikrofi, traditional potato-filled dumplings from the Idrija region, are a culinary staple often served with local wines. Teran wine, a robust red from the Karst region, is noted for its unique terroir and cultural ties to Slovenian winemaking. Piran salt, harvested from the historic Sečovlje Salt Pans, is valued for its purity and artisanal methods, symbolizing both Slovenia’s culinary heritage and its historical role in the Adriatic salt trade.

RESULTS

This section presents findings from surveys conducted at the University of Gdańsk and the University of Primorska, supplemented by field observations at key UNESCO heritage sites and insights into PDO/PGI product engagement. The results highlight the significant role of cultural tourism in shaping Erasmus students’ academic mobility experiences. A striking 94% of respondents expressed strong interest in visiting UNESCO sites, confirming their importance as both cultural and educational anchors within student exchange programs. In Poland, students were primarily motivated by historical value and interactive learning opportunities, particularly at sites like Malbork Castle and Wieliczka Salt Mine, which exemplify the country’s medieval and industrial heritage. In Slovenia, students were drawn to the natural beauty and unique karst landscapes of the Škocjan Caves, as well as the urban cultural richness of Ljubljana where the works of Jože Plečnik were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2021. Overall, 87% of students reported that these visits deepened their understanding of the host countries, highlighting the educational value of heritage tourism as a meaningful complement to their academic journey.

Figure 1. Interest in UNESCO Sites among Erasmus students [%]

Source: author based on findings

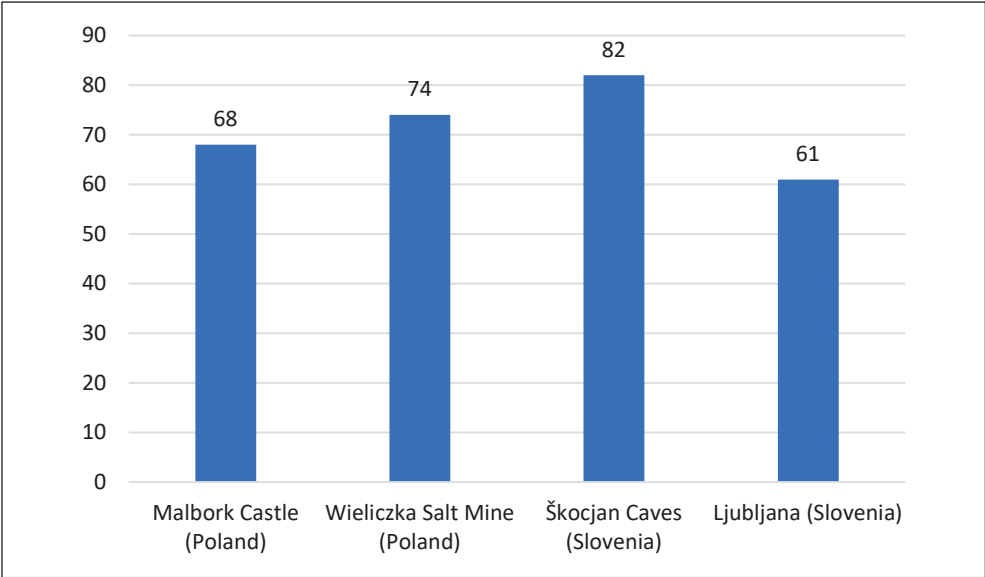
PATTERNS OF SITE VISITS

Visitation patterns revealed strong engagement with key UNESCO sites in both countries. In Poland, 74% of respondents visited the Wieliczka Salt Mine, where the artistic and spiritual features of the underground chapels were especially appreciated. Malbork Castle attracted 68% of students who praised its immersive medieval reenactments and multilingual guided tours. In Slovenia, the Škocjan Caves were the most visited, drawing 82% of participants who were impressed by the dramatic karst landscapes and ecological education. Ljubljana, visited by 61% of respondents, stood out for its blend of cultural heritage and urban accessibility. Students particularly appreciated the UNESCO-listed works of Jože Plečnik, including the Triple Bridge and Central Market, which added architectural and historical depth to their academic stay.

IMPACT ON ACADEMIC MOBILITY

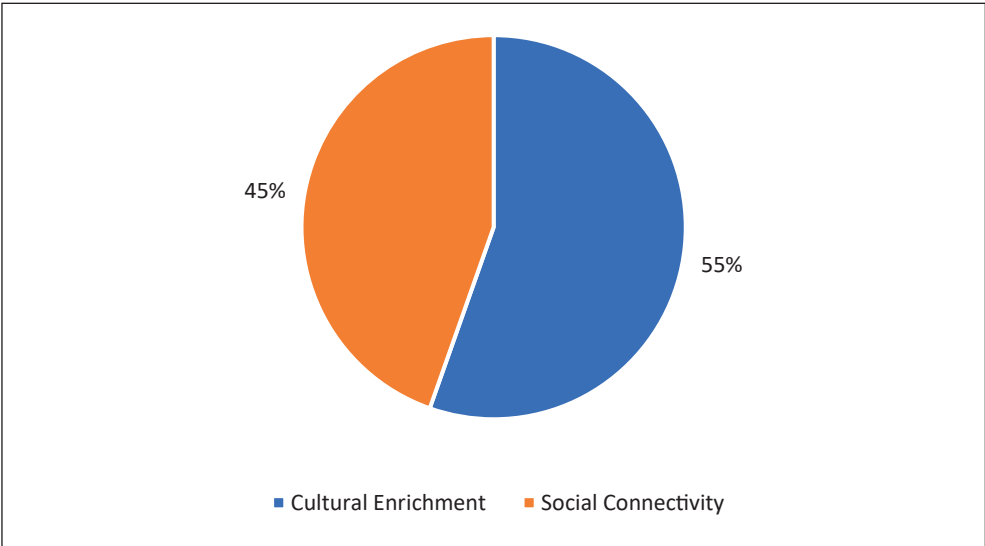
The integration of cultural tourism into academic mobility had a marked impact on students' overall experiences. Over 92% of respondents reported that visiting UNESCO sites significantly enriched their understanding of the host culture, adding meaningful depth to their academic journey. Chhabra (2010) found that "authenticity" was a key motivator for students engaging with heritage tourism, confirming that meaningful cultural interactions drive student satisfaction and learning. This aligns with recent findings by CapellaMoreno, Antón and Whiteoak (2022) who report that Erasmus students

Figure 2. Patterns of Site Visualisation Among Erasmus Students [%]



Source: author based on findings

Figure 3. Impact of Visiting UNESCO Sites on Academic Mobility



Source: author based on findings

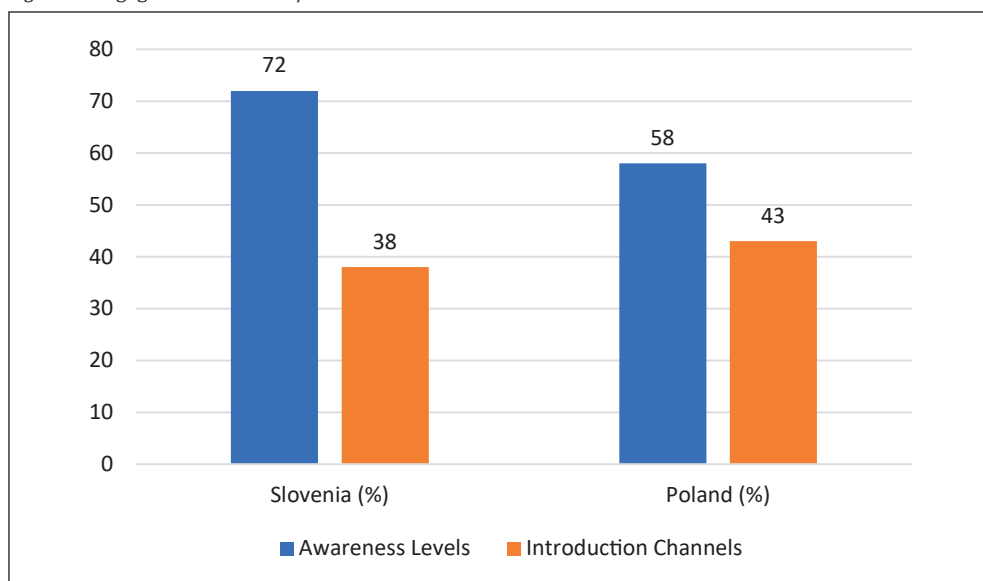
perceive their time in university cities through a cultural tourist lens, shaping both destination image and city identity. These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the educational function of heritage sites. Stolare, Ludvigsson and Trenter (2021) demonstrate that UNESCO World Heritage Sites function as outdoor classrooms where direct interaction with heritage enhances student learning, fosters cultural awareness and deepens engagement with local identity, where interpretive programs enhance

student learning, cultural awareness and engagement with local identity. Additionally, 74% noted that these visits fostered social connectivity, providing opportunities to build intercultural relationships with peers from other countries. These findings underscore the dual role of cultural tourism in supporting both educational and social dimensions of academic mobility.

ENGAGEMENT WITH PDO/PGI PRODUCTS

Student engagement with PDO/PGI products varied across the two countries, reflecting differences in visibility and institutional support. In Slovenia, awareness was relatively high (72%), driven by the strong presence of certified products in local markets and university-organized cultural events. Many students were introduced to items like Idrija Žlikrofi or Piran salt through structured activities such as food tours and campus events, which 38% cited as their first point of contact. In contrast, awareness in Poland was more moderate (58%), with products like Oscypek and Kabanosy typically encountered informally in restaurants, markets or through personal exploration, the latter being the primary introduction channel for 43% of respondents. These patterns suggest that Slovenia's more proactive integration of gastronomy into student life enhances visibility and cultural engagement.

Figure 4. Engagement with PDO/PGI Products: awareness and introduction channels



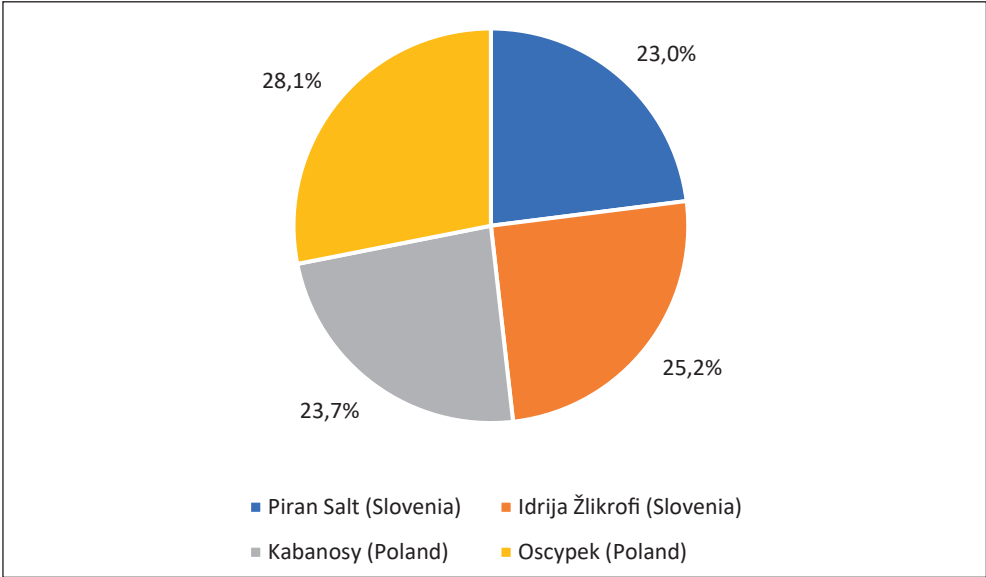
Source: author based on findings

CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

Erasmus students demonstrated strong interest in traditional PDO/PGI products in both countries, though with varying preferences. In Poland, Oscypek was the most frequently consumed product with 76% of respondents highlighting its smoky flavor and cultural link to the Tatra Mountains. Kabanosy sausages were also popular (64%), valued for

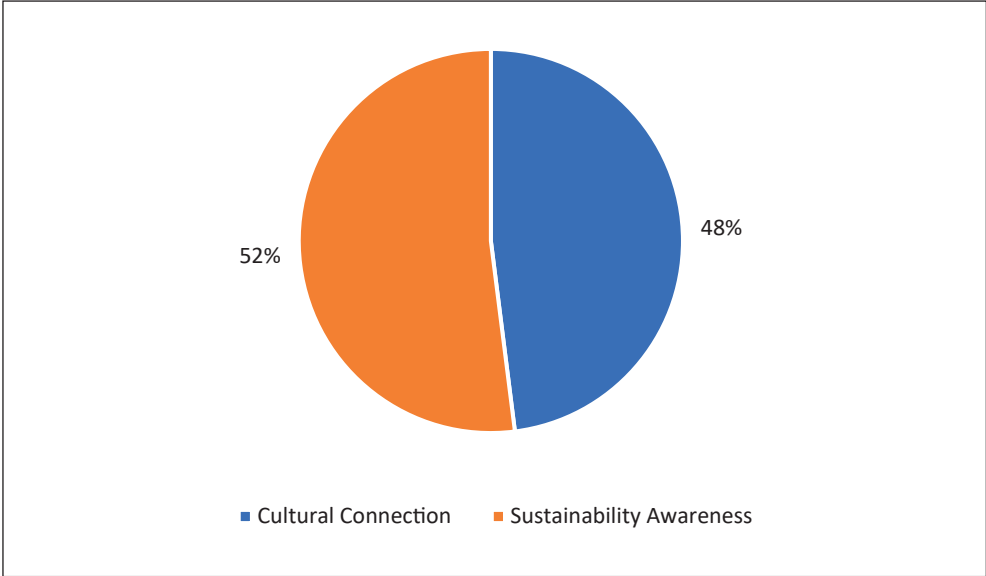
their convenience and taste. In Slovenia, Idrija Žlikrofi was consumed by 68% of students, who praised its artisanal preparation and deep regional roots. Piran salt, enjoyed by 62%, was appreciated for its traditional harvesting methods and integration into local cuisine. These findings suggest that both cultural authenticity and sensory appeal influence student consumption choices.

Figure 5. Consumption Patterns of PDO/PGI Products Among Erasmus Students



Source: author based on findings

Figure 6. Perceived Value of PDO/PGI Products Among Erasmus Students



Source: author based on findings

PERCEIVED VALUE

PDO/PGI products were widely seen as enhancing students' cultural immersion, with many respondents describing them as an authentic expression of regional identity (Figure 6). This connection to place deepened their understanding of local traditions through taste and storytelling. Additionally, around 52% of students recognized the sustainability associated with these products, appreciating traditional production methods and linking their consumption to broader ethical and environmental values. This highlights how gastronomy served not only as a cultural experience but also as a channel for raising awareness about sustainable practices.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: POLAND VS. SLOVENIA

The comparison between Poland and Slovenia reveals key differences in the accessibility, experiential quality, and integration of heritage and gastronomy in the Erasmus student experience. Polish UNESCO sites, such as Malbork Castle and Wieliczka Salt Mine, were praised for their excellent infrastructure, multilingual resources and proximity to urban centers, making them highly accessible and well-integrated into broader tourism networks. In contrast, Slovenia's Škocjan Caves, while more remote, still offered manageable access due to the country's compact size and efficient road system. Despite the added effort required, students felt the natural beauty and ecological uniqueness justified the visit.

In terms of experiential depth, Poland's sites provided more structured, narrative-rich experiences, featuring guided tours, interactive exhibits and historical reenactments. Malbork Castle's immersive medieval atmosphere and Wieliczka's underground chapels illustrated the country's focus on detailed storytelling. Slovenian sites, however, offered a different engagement style, emphasizing ecology, geology and sustainability. The Škocjan Caves provided insight into environmental conservation and karst landscapes, while Ljubljana showcased architectural heritage through the UNESCO-listed works of Jože Plečnik, offering students a model of human-centered urban design and cultural continuity within a modern capital city.

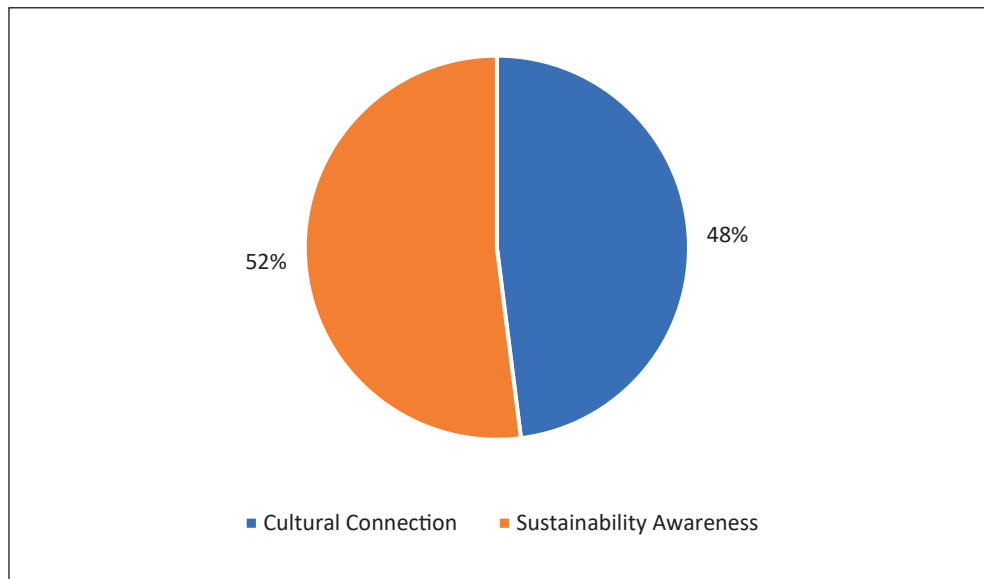
Gastronomic engagement followed a similar pattern. Slovenia effectively integrated PDO/PGI products into the cultural tourism experience, using food festivals, tastings and student events to highlight items like Idrija Žlikrofi, Teran wine and Piran salt. This approach created strong connections between local products and regional identity. In Poland, while PDO/PGI products such as Oscypek and Kabanosy, were widely available, they were mainly encountered in restaurants and markets rather than through curated cultural experiences. Nonetheless, students visiting regions like the Tatra Mountains or the Vistula River Valley reported deeper engagement when exposed to traditional production methods.

Three overarching themes emerged. First, combining heritage sites with local gastronomy enhanced students' overall cultural experience by providing a more holistic understanding of national identity. Second, both UNESCO sites and regional foods were seen as powerful educational tools, bridging formal learning and lived experience. Finally, students reported a heightened appreciation for cultural diversity, with many citing these experiences as pivotal in shaping their global outlook.

These findings suggest that closer integration of heritage and gastronomy, along with targeted marketing and improved accessibility, can greatly enhance the Erasmus

experience. They offer practical guidance for heritage managers, tourism boards and academic institutions aiming to align cultural tourism with international education goals.

Figure 7. Comparative Analysis Engagement in Poland vs Slovenia



Source: author based on comparative data analysis of cultural tourism engagement in Poland and Slovenia

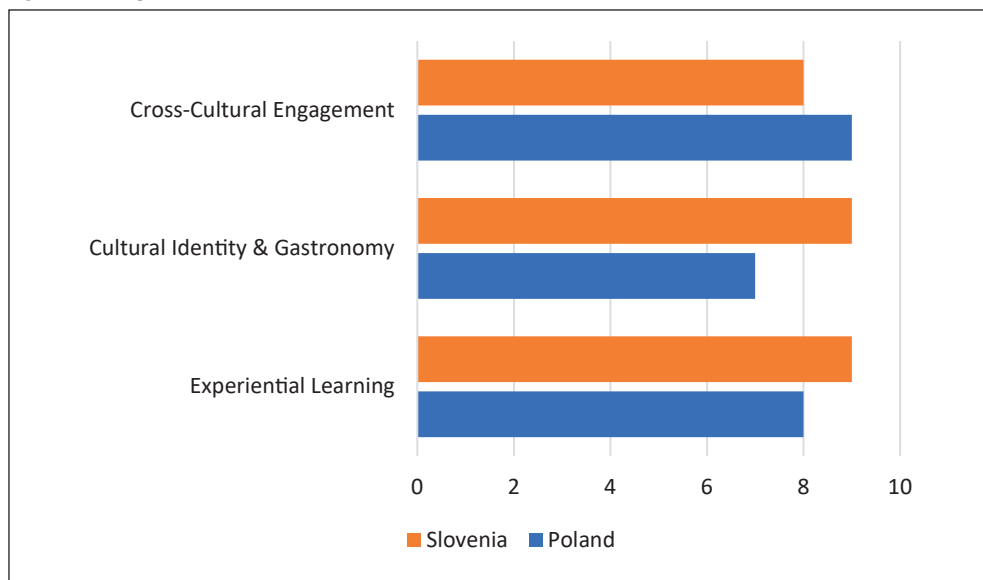
DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly support existing cultural tourism theories, particularly in relation to experiential learning and academic mobility. Erasmus students' engagement with UNESCO heritage sites in Poland and Slovenia reflects Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, where cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions contribute to informal yet impactful educational experiences. Sites like Malbork Castle and the Wieliczka Salt Mine provided Erasmus students with immersive historical narratives, exemplifying Richards' (2011) concept of "deep tourism," where visitors engage meaningfully with the cultural fabric of a destination. In contrast, Slovenia's natural sites, such as the Škocjan Caves and Piran, embodied what Timothy and Boyd (2006) define as "eco-cultural tourism," blending environmental features with cultural interpretation. Fennell and Dowling (2003) emphasize that such approaches align with broader European ecotourism strategies which aim to balance environmental conservation with community participation and educational value, particularly in protected heritage landscapes. Cultural routes unite multiple heritage sites under a unified experience framework, promoting both conservation and regional development (Lin et al., 2024). Recent geo-heritage research highlights the symbolic and tourism value of karst landscapes, supporting their role in cultural identity and place attachment (Herrera-Franco et al., 2022). The students' strong interest in authenticity, sustainability and educational value reflect a clear alignment with current trends in cultural tourism. Gastronomic heritage also emerged as a key driver of cultural identity, as illustrated by the popularity of PDO/PGI products such as Oscypek

and Idrija Žlikrofi. These food items represent “intangible heritage” (Smith, Akagawa, 2009), and students’ engagement with them reflects a broader desire to connect with local culture through everyday traditions (Zhu, 2012). In Slovenia, gastronomic tourism is well-integrated into national branding strategies, with products like Piran salt and Teran wine featured prominently in food festivals and guided tastings, reflecting Everett and Aitchison’s (2008) “gastro-regional branding” approach. In contrast, while Polish PDO/PGI products are highly appreciated, they are mostly encountered in casual settings rather than as part of structured experiences. This highlights a gap and opportunity for Poland to enhance its gastronomic tourism by promoting food trails, tasting sessions and educational workshops, particularly in regions with rich culinary heritage.

Finally, the study emphasizes the role of heritage and gastronomy as tools for cross-cultural engagement. Erasmus students not only consumed cultural experiences but also acted as intermediaries who transferred knowledge across borders. Recent empirical evidence confirms that international mobility enhances students’ multicultural awareness and employability, particularly through sustained engagement with local culture and heritage (Valls-Figuera, Torrado-Fonseca, Borràs, 2023). Their engagement supports theories of intercultural competence and global citizenship, demonstrating how cultural tourism within academic mobility fosters mutual understanding and contributes to the globalization of local heritage.

Figure 8. Interpretation of Results in the Context of Cultural Tourism Studies



Source: author based on interpretations of survey results and cultural tourism theories

IMPLICATIONS FOR HERITAGE SITE MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING STRATEGIES

This study highlights several strategic implications for heritage managers and tourism marketers in Poland and Slovenia. Accessibility and visitor-centric design emerged as critical factors influencing Erasmus students’ engagement. Polish heritage sites generally

benefited from strong infrastructure and communication, whereas Slovenia's more remote destinations, such as the Škocjan Caves, posed logistical challenges. To enhance engagement, Poland should expand on its strengths by incorporating interactive tools like augmented reality and educational workshops, while Slovenia could improve access to remote areas through eco-sensitive transport options, ensuring minimal environmental impact.

Gastronomy also proved to be an underutilized but powerful tool for enriching the heritage tourism experience. PDO and PGI products can serve as cultural bridges, connecting students with regional identity and tradition. Poland could develop partnerships between heritage sites and local producers to offer curated culinary experiences, while Slovenia can build on its existing food festivals and workshops to more actively involve international students.

Erasmus students, combining cultural curiosity with academic motivations, represent a unique audience for heritage engagement. Targeted programming – such as discounted educational tours or university-led events at heritage sites – can reinforce the academic-cultural connection and create lasting impressions. Academic institutions and heritage stakeholders should collaborate to design experiences that merge coursework with cultural immersion.

Beyond immediate engagement, Erasmus students act as informal cultural ambassadors, sharing their experiences and promoting the heritage of their host countries abroad. This dynamic aligns with broader concepts of cultural globalization, where international visitors contribute to the dissemination of local traditions, encouraging students to document and share their experiences through digital platforms can amplify this effect.

Moreover, Erasmus students' interest in authenticity and sustainability reflect a growing alignment between academic mobility and sustainable tourism goals. Their preferences are consistent with the UN's 2030 Agenda, particularly regarding sustainable heritage and urban tourism. Universities and tourism boards can respond to this demand by co-developing programs that highlight responsible travel and consumption practices.

The results emphasize the need to strengthen the academic-cultural nexus by integrating cultural tourism into educational curricula. Interdisciplinary courses, heritage-related events and collaborative excursions could foster deeper student engagement and broaden the educational value of mobility programs.

In sum, this research affirms the potential of cultural tourism as a transformative element of academic mobility. By strategically integrating UNESCO heritage sites and PDO/PGI products into the Erasmus experience, stakeholders in Poland and Slovenia can enhance educational outcomes, preserve cultural assets and advance sustainable tourism. A coordinated effort between universities, heritage institutions and tourism boards will be key to positioning both countries as leaders in aligning cultural tourism with international education and global engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored how Erasmus students engage with UNESCO heritage sites and PDO/PGI products in Poland and Slovenia, emphasizing the role of cultural tourism in enhancing academic mobility, regional branding and heritage preservation. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines surveys and field observations, the research

provided insight into students' motivations, experiences and the perceived value of cultural and gastronomic engagement.

The findings confirm that heritage sites and regional food products play a key role in students' cultural immersion. A large majority expressed strong interest in visiting UNESCO sites, citing historical relevance, experiential learning and social interaction as main drivers. PDO/PGI products similarly offered authentic connections to local traditions, often associated with sustainability, identity and regional pride.

Comparative analysis revealed differences between the two countries. Slovenia offers a more integrated and immersive cultural tourism experience, combining well-promoted heritage sites with gastronomy, strong branding and sustainable practices. In contrast, Poland, despite its rich historical assets, has yet to fully incorporate food heritage into its tourism strategy. Greater emphasis on experiential tourism, including regional food trails and the promotion of traditional products, could enhance its appeal to international students.

To strengthen the role of cultural tourism in academic mobility, both countries should consider linking gastronomy more closely with heritage experiences, improving multilingual resources, promoting sustainable tourism models and fostering collaboration between universities, heritage sites and local producers. By doing so, they can enrich the Erasmus experience, support heritage conservation and reinforce their position as culturally vibrant destinations (Table 1).

Table 1. Recommendations for Stakeholders

Stakeholder Group	Recommendations
Heritage Site Managers	Heritage site managers should improve accessibility, especially to remote sites in Slovenia, while preserving ecological sustainability. Expanding interactive and multilingual offerings at UNESCO sites can better engage international students. Stronger partnerships with local producers and cultural groups can integrate culinary elements through food trails, tastings and workshops. Enhancing digital tools—such as virtual tours and interactive storytelling—will also help broaden international outreach and engagement.
Tourism Boards	Tourism boards and heritage managers should promote Erasmus-friendly tourism through targeted campaigns that highlight the educational and cultural value of UNESCO sites and PDO/PGI products. Cross-border initiatives between Poland and Slovenia could offer joint programs to attract a broader international audience. Introducing student discounts, cultural passes and academic partnerships would incentivize participation in cultural and culinary tourism. Emphasizing sustainability-focused travel and integrating local gastronomy can further align with students' values and expectations.
Universities	Academic mobility programs should integrate cultural tourism into Erasmus curricula by linking coursework with site visits and experiential learning. Universities can collaborate with tourism boards and heritage institutions to involve students in cultural heritage research. Organizing study visits, fieldwork and interdisciplinary courses on heritage, sustainability and gastronomy will enrich learning. Supporting students in documenting their experiences through academic work, storytelling and social media can further promote cultural engagement and visibility.
Local Communities & Producers	To enhance cultural engagement, local communities and producers should create student-focused tourism experiences that showcase regional traditions, artisanal skills and PDO/PGI products. Culinary workshops and tastings offer Erasmus students direct interaction with local food heritage. Collaborating with universities and heritage sites can support festivals, markets and educational events. Emphasizing sustainable production, ethical sourcing and farm-to-table practices aligns with students' interest in environmental responsibility and agro-tourism.

Source: author based on findings / results

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study highlights the transformative role of cultural tourism within academic mobility programs. By integrating UNESCO heritage sites and PDO/PGI products into structured tourism experiences, stakeholders in Poland and Slovenia can enrich the Erasmus student journey while promoting heritage preservation and sustainable tourism.

The findings indicate that immersive, experience-oriented cultural tourism strategies can enhance the international appeal of both countries. For Poland, expanding gastronomic tourism to complement its historical attractions presents a clear opportunity. For Slovenia, the focus should be on improving accessibility to remote sites without compromising its sustainability goals.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study offers meaningful insights, further research is needed to examine the long-term impacts of cultural tourism on Erasmus students. Future studies could explore:

- The influence of cultural tourism on students' long-term travel behavior and heritage appreciation.
- Longitudinal analysis of post-mobility engagement with host country culture and traditions.
- Comparative research across other European countries with similar UNESCO and PDO/PGI assets.
- Continued exploration of the intersection between cultural tourism, academic mobility and heritage policy can contribute to the sustainable development of international student engagement and support Europe's broader efforts in cultural diplomacy.

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