

Academic and Cultural Experiences in Türkiye and Europe through the Erasmus + Program

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Submitted: 12 Jul 2026; Accepted: 19 Jul 2026; Published: 8 Aug 2026

Citation: Ahmadi, A. W. et al., (2026). Academic and Cultural Experiences in Türkiye and Europe through the Erasmus+ Program. *J Business & Eco Insights*, 2(3):1-5. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.47485/3143-5807.1026>

Abstract

From February to July 2025, I completed a five-month research fellowship at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, an experience that combined academic development with meaningful cultural exchange. In addition to advancing my research activities, the fellowship allowed me to visit several European countries and observe different educational systems, social values, and everyday practices. Since moving to Türkiye in 2021, I have considered it my second home because of its welcoming people, supportive academic environment, and strong sense of community. In the Netherlands, I was inspired by the emphasis on sustainability, innovation, and public trust, reflected in cycling culture and shared public resources. Germany demonstrated the importance of discipline and efficiency through its organized systems and respect for time and environmental responsibility. France deepened my appreciation for art, history, and intellectual traditions, while Spain stood out for its vibrant culture, warm atmosphere, and strong community spirit. Beyond sightseeing, the most valuable aspect of this journey was the opportunity to engage with researchers, attend international academic events, and exchange ideas with people from diverse backgrounds. These interactions broadened my perspective and highlighted the importance of collaboration across borders. Although the fellowship involved challenges such as a limited timeframe and frequent travel, the overall experience was highly rewarding. It strengthened my research capabilities, improved my intercultural communication skills, and expanded my professional network. More importantly, it reinforced my belief that international academic mobility promotes innovation, mutual understanding, and lifelong learning. I hope that sharing these experiences will encourage other students and researchers to pursue similar opportunities and contribute to stronger global academic partnerships.

Keywords: International Research Experience, Intercultural Learning, Academic Mobility, Scientific Collaboration

Introduction

Türkiye has now truly become a second home for me, and I will always remember the help and cooperation of their government and people. I began my academic journey in Türkiye in 2021 when I received a prestigious Türkiye Scholarship (YTB) for my PhD studies. I spent the initial two years of my doctorate in Konya Technical University but then transferred to İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa. During this period, I was able to travel around many different cities, including İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Konya, Antalya, Mersin, Van, Bursa, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa. Every experience in all of these cities was different, with their own rich culture, hospitality, and memories. The support infrastructure for foreign students in Türkiye, which offered cheap hostels, free transport cards for the initial years, and a secure environment, has been a major factor for my pleasant experience. Türkiye has a rich Islamic heritage and history. I managed to visit many spiritual and historical landmarks when I was abroad, including the mausoleums of Mevlana, Shams Tabrizi, and Nasreddin Hodja in Konya, Cave of Seven

Sleepers (Aşhab Al-Kahf) in İzmir, the grand Hagia Sophia in İstanbul, and holy places of Prophet Abraham in Şanlıurfa. The generosity, respect, and moral values of the people of Turkey, especially when iftar tables for thousands of people are set in mosques during Ramadan, have been engraved in my memory. My experiences in Türkiye are too rich to be contained in a text, and hopefully, I will dedicate a book in the future to share memories and thoughts about this beautiful country (Şahin, 2020).

Europe is a continent sculpted in centuries of cultural development, artistic expression, and the environment. Among others, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Spain are remarkable for their social values, climate features, natural beauty, and traditions of openness toward others. With their distinct lifestyles and cultural identities, these countries attract millions of students, researchers, and visitors every year (De Ceunynck et al., 2023). The Netherlands is usually referred

to as a model of harmony between nature, innovation, and community culture. One interesting example of Dutch social life is the small street libraries placed in front of houses where anyone can exchange books freely. It reflects high social trust and strong national interest in reading. Cycling is another part of daily life; every city has safe and extensive bicycle lanes, and in some regions bicycles outnumber people. Respect for nature, reduced car use, and sustainable living are core ingredients of Dutch identity (Kouhihabibi & Mohammadi, 2023).

France is widely regarded as the cultural heart of Europe, owing to its centuries-old tradition in literature, art, philosophy, and, of course, gastronomy. French society holds public involvement in cultural activities in high esteem. One good example is free or nominal access for students and youths under 26 years in all national museums, including the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay. Book fairs, literary cafes, art festivals, and cultural debates form a part of everyday life in French cities. The country's diverse climate—from the Mediterranean coast to the Alpine regions—adds to its cultural richness. Germany represents a country where history and innovation go together. One of the strongest examples of environmental thoughtfulness in Germany is its exacting waste separation system and the deposit program, in which people return plastic or glass bottles to special machines and get money because of that. Such an approach makes Germany one of the most successful countries in the world in terms of recycling. Germans are well-known for their punctuality and discipline; arriving some minutes earlier is considered a rule and a sign of respect. Together with green landscapes, forests, and historic cities, Germany offers a dynamic and well-organized environment (Teichler, 2009, Sierra-Huedo & Foucart, 2022).

Spain is famous for its warm, social, and expressive culture. One such famous tradition is Tapas, whereby many cafés and restaurants serve a small complimentary dish with drinks to encourage conversation and social interaction. National celebrations like Las Fallas in Valencia, which includes music, dancing, fireworks, and public participation,

portray the vibrant colors of Spanish society. Because of the Mediterranean climate, long coastlines, and relaxed lifestyle, Spain is an extremely attractive cultural and tourist destination. In the end, it is these four European countries that show how cultural diversity, awareness of the environment, and social openness can coexist in harmony. From the biking culture of environmentally conscious Netherlands to the artistic character of France, the sustainable system of Germany and to the festive spirit of Spain, Europe still stands tall as an example for coexistence, diversity, and beauty of mankind (Tarchi & Surian, 2022).

My academic journey to Europe, from February 1 to July 31, 2025, stands as one of the most transformative and meaningful experiences in my professional and personal life. During this period, I was invited by Professor Sean Vrielink to join the University of Twente in the Netherlands as a research fellow. This invitation provided me with a valuable opportunity to engage in international scientific collaboration, contribute to ongoing research projects, and gain new insights into the European academic environment. Beyond the research activities, this five-month stay allowed me to explore diverse cultures, meet inspiring people, and develop a deeper understanding of global academic cooperation.

Research Experience at the University of Twente

The University of Twente is one of Europe's leading research institutions, renowned for its interdisciplinary approach and innovative academic environment. As a member of Professor Sean Vrielink's research group, I actively participated in several scientific projects and academic meetings. Working at Twente exposed me to new methodologies, modern research infrastructures, and a vibrant multicultural academic community. It was an enriching experience that not only enhanced my technical and analytical skills but also taught me the importance of teamwork, intercultural communication, and scientific responsibility in an international context. This period significantly broadened my academic horizons and helped bridge the gap between theoretical research and its practical applications on a global scale.



Figure 1: My five-month research stay at the University of Twente in the Netherlands was a valuable and inspiring academic experience that opened new horizons in my scientific journey- Enschede- Netherlands (De Jong & Teekens, 2003).

Participation in International Conferences

During my academic journey in Europe, I had the opportunity to spend five months as a visiting researcher at the University of Twente in Enschede, the Netherlands. This research stay played a significant role in strengthening my scientific background and expanding my international research network. In addition to my research activities, I attended and presented my work at several international academic events in different European countries, including conferences in Berlin, Germany;

Madrid, Spain; Paris, France; and Leipzig, Germany. These events provided valuable platforms for academic exchange and intellectual growth, allowing me to share my research findings, engage in meaningful discussions with distinguished scholars, and establish professional collaborations. These experiences reinforced my belief that science transcends borders and that international cooperation among researchers is essential for innovation, knowledge creation, and the advancement of global research.



Figure 2: During my research stay in the Netherlands, I visited the city of Rotterdam and saw the famous Cube Houses near Blaak Square, which are an example of modern Dutch architecture (Brooks et al., 2024).



Figure 3: My academic visit to Rotterdam, I also had the opportunity to observe the Erasmus Bridge, an architectural and engineering landmark that symbolizes the city's dynamic connection between innovation and urban development (Weber et al., 2024).

Cultural and Social Experiences

Beyond the academic dimension, my time in Europe was a rich cultural and social experience. Living in the Netherlands and traveling to Germany, Spain, and France allowed me to immerse myself in diverse European lifestyles, traditions, and perspectives on education, research, and daily life. Meeting new friends, reconnecting with old ones, and sharing experiences with people from different backgrounds were among the most rewarding aspects of this journey. Through conversations, cultural events, and city visits—from Berlin to Madrid and Paris—I learned that diversity is not a barrier but a bridge that brings people closer together.



Figure 4: shows the Louvre Museum in Paris, once a royal castle and now a world-famous art museum with a glass pyramid, and the Monument to the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig, built in 1913 to honor the victory over Napoleon and also the Eiffel Tower, located in the heart of Paris, France, is recognized as a remarkable symbol of innovative engineering and cultural inspiration worldwide, and its main structure is built from approximately 7,300 tons of iron (Robinson et al., 2016).



Figure 5: Shows our visit to universities and scientific resources in Spain and Germany together with my friends.

Limitations and Challenges

Despite the many positive academic and cultural experiences, my journey also included different challenges and limitations. However, one of the main difficulties was adapting to different languages, administrative systems, and academic procedures across European countries. Thus, in some cases, communication barriers and cultural differences created misunderstandings in daily life and institutional processes. Furthermore, the high cost of living in countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Germany was another significant challenge for international students and researchers, especially regarding accommodation and transportation. In addition, unpredictable weather conditions, particularly the long rainy and cold seasons in Northern Europe, sometimes affected social activities and personal comfort. In contrast, Türkiye provided a more familiar cultural and religious environment for me, adapting to life in large and crowded cities like İstanbul also required patience and adjustment. Furthermore, balancing intensive research activities, conference participation, and travel schedules occasionally created physical and mental pressure. Although, these challenges became valuable learning experiences that strengthened my resilience, adaptability, and intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

My five-month academic journey across Europe, from February to July 2025, was far more than a research mission—it was a transformative experience that combined scientific development, cultural understanding, and personal growth. During this period, I had the opportunity to explore and appreciate the diverse cultural values that define each nation I visited. In France, particularly in Paris, I witnessed the nation's deep appreciation for art, literature, and café culture—an environment where intellectual conversation and creativity flourish naturally. In Germany, I was impressed by the people's discipline, precision, and strong environmental consciousness, which together foster a culture of responsibility and sustainability. In Spain, I experienced the warmth and passion of its people, beautifully expressed through music, cuisine, and festivals that celebrate life and unity. In the Netherlands, I admired the spirit of openness and trust within communities—reflected in the charming tradition of small public libraries placed outside homes, where everyone is welcome to read freely. This journey significantly strengthened my dedication to international collaboration, academic excellence, and the conviction that science and friendship can bridge cultural and national divides. As a PhD student in Istanbul and a research

fellow at the University of Twente, I consider this experience a cornerstone of my scholarly career and a meaningful step toward contributing to global scientific progress and intercultural.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere thankfulness to Prof. Dr. Nilgün Balkaya from İstanbul University–Cerrahpaşa for her priceless academic teachings, continued support, and encouragement during my Erasmus mobility period. Her insightful feedback and mentorship meant a lot to the development of my research skills and academic growth. I am also indebted to Prof. Dr. Sean Vrielink of the University of Twente, the Netherlands, for the great supervision, constructive remarks, and stimulating research environment during my five months of research stay. Without his professional guidance on research matters and scientific inputs toward this thesis, my work would not have been complete. I also appreciate the Erasmus+ Program and İstanbul University for offering me the opportunity to gain both academic and cultural experience in Europe. This period enriched my research capabilities and broadened my international perspective.

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