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## UNLOCKING THE WORLD: EXPERT INSIGHTS ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDY ABROAD – EXAMINING AFS INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMS AS AN EXAMPLE ORGANISATION

High School Study Abroad (HSSA), a form of mobility providing temporary physical mobility for adolescents, has been facilitated by various organisations for more than 80 years. Participation in such programs have grown steadily in recent decades, with growing interest in participation. Despite this growth, scholarly attention to HSSA remains limited compared to the extensive research on similar programs at the tertiary level. This exploratory qualitative study aimed to gather perspectives on HSSA through interviews with six experts identified with the support of AFS Intercultural Programs. The expert testimonies are complemented by data from comprehensive desk research. Although the results presented in the article are preliminary, they provide a detailed characterisation of the HSSA sector, its structure, and the historical context in which the phenomenon has developed. The analysis highlights the interplay of macro- and mezzo-level factors shaping program design and operations, as well as those potentially influencing the experiences of individual participants. The findings provide a valuable foundation for future research in the field.

Key words: High School Study Abroad, Individual Pupil Mobility, adolescents, expert interviews, mobility sector

### INTRODUCTION

“Being physically mobile has become [...] ‘a way of life’ across the globe.” (Urry, 2009, p. 478). Urry’s concept of the “mobile turn” captures various aspects of modern life, with physical mobility constituting a significant component of this shift. One specific manifestation of this trend is High School Study Abroad (HSSA), a specific form of educational mobility. Although the body of literature in this field is growing, it remains focused on tertiary education, leaving adolescent mobility understudied.

The primary objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive overview of HSSA by synthesising key contextual information necessary to understand the phenomenon. I have

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explored several key areas of HSSA programs including the historical origins of HSSA programs, their structure and educational components, the goals which organisations responsible for such programs aim to achieve, the values they promote, and the observed impact on program participants.

This article places an emphasis on understanding the structure of HSSA programs and the broader sector in which they operate, as this phenomenon remains relatively unknown in Poland and beyond, both among scholars and the general public. The presented analysis is based on six expert interviews with specialists affiliated with or working in collaboration with one of the leading non-profit organisations present in the field: AFS Intercultural Programs.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

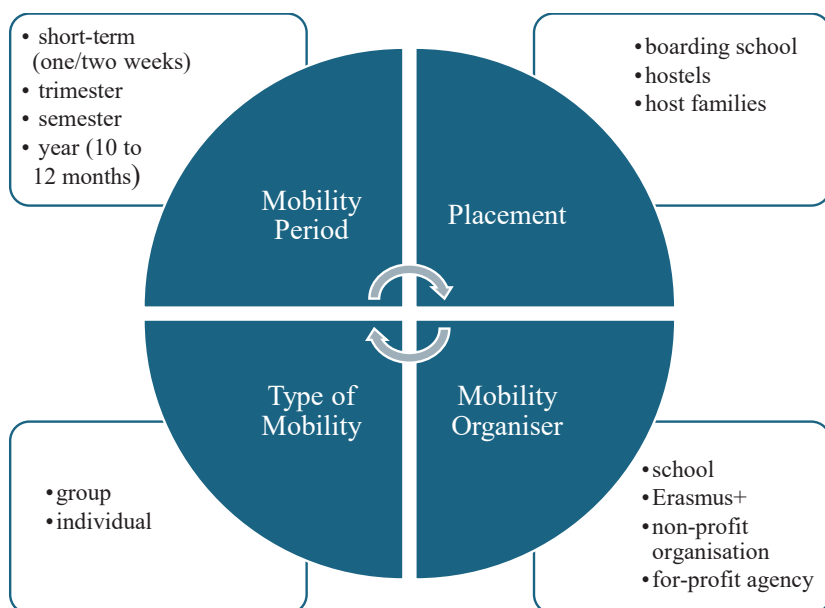
Educational mobility resists any easy definition. Some scholars emphasise its temporary nature (Kinger, 2009), while others adopt a broader perspective, suggesting that any form of mobility that involves an educational purpose qualifies as educational mobility and such endeavours might involve students' decisions to permanently settle in a destination country after obtaining their degree (Benson et al., 2013). In his work, Kinginer (2009) identified three main types of educational mobility: pursuing a full degree abroad, studying abroad as part of joint degree or institutional partnership, and participating in shorter exchange programs.

High School Study Abroad, which is the focus here, is a clear example of educational mobility. It was broadly defined by as "a set of educational programs that provide temporary international physical mobility for one or more pupils" (Baiutti, 2019, p. 33 in: Baiutti, 2021). His conceptualisation reflects and identifies key variables that distinguish various forms of mobility which fall under this umbrella term, presented visually in Figure 1.

Two key features differentiate High School Study Abroad from tertiary-level educational mobility. First, as Baiutti notes, HSSA programs are explicitly designed as temporary and students are expected to return to their home countries upon the program's completion. Second, these programs target secondary school students, a group not typically associated with long-term educational mobility. This distinction is particularly important as adolescence, unlike early adulthood, is not usually associated with physical separation from the family. Additionally, adolescence is widely recognised as a critical developmental stage, especially in terms of identity formation (Erikson, 1968), meaning that participation in such programs has tremendous potential to be transformative. Indeed, research supports this claim, showing that HSSA experiences can have a long-term impact on its participants. Studies have found that alumni of such programs not only demonstrated improved language skills and an inclination to pursue careers abroad but also report greater intercultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, and empathy (Fondazione Intercultura, 2016; Hansel, 2008). Moreover, scholars also note that intercultural values are often transmitted intergenerationally, as former exchange students are likely to encourage similar experiences in their own children.

The scholarly focus on this phenomenon remains limited compared to the extensive attention given to similar experiences in higher education. For example, a Google Scholar search for "study abroad at the tertiary level," including programs like Erasmus+, returns over four

million results, whereas terms like “high school study abroad” and “individual pupil mobility” together generate just over 200 articles (as of January 20th, 2025). This highlights the predominant association of the term “study abroad” with university-level mobility.



**Figure 1.** Variables distinguishing mobilities covered by Baiutti’s definition (2019; 2021)

While short-term study abroad initiatives have received some scholarly attention (Angwenyi, 2014), one particular expression of mobility remains significantly unexplored: individual adolescent mobility for periods exceeding three months but shorter than a year. Several studies in education (Baiutti, 2019; 2021), cultural studies (Taniguchi, 2010), and psychology (Martin, 1986; Greischel et al., 2018; 2019; Bardi et al., 2024) have addressed different dimensions of this form of mobility. Their focus ranges from developing tools assessing the competencies students gain during such mobility (Baiutti, 2019; 2021), to examining identity development trajectories (Greischel et al., 2018; 2019), and investigating shifts in personal values (Bardi et al., 2024).

While existing research tends to focus on specific aspects of adolescent mobility, this article aims to offer deeper insights into the complex landscape of HSSA and its dynamics. Mobility of this kind has been facilitated by various organisations for around 80 years. However, estimating the number of adolescents participating in HSSA programs globally is a complex task. Despite the availability of such opportunities, no public body collects statistical data to track the scope of this phenomenon. An analysis of UNESCO and OECD resources reveals data focused exclusively on educational mobility at the tertiary level (UNESCO, n.d.; OECD, n.d.). However, data published by several non-profit organisations involved in providing these

opportunities, including AFS Intercultural Programs, YFU, and Experiment in International Living (EIL), suggest that these institutions have collectively facilitated the mobility of over 800,000 students worldwide (AFS, 2022; *Alumni Connect*, n.d.; *Our Story*, n.d.). AFS, one of the leading organisations in the field with a network of over 500,000 alumni (AFS, 2022), reported that more than 80,000 adolescents participated in mobility programs in 2019 alone (data obtained directly from the organisation).

**Table 1.** Number of students hosted and sent in exchanges organised by AFS Poland, 2015–2024

| Hosting |     |     |     | Sending |     |     |     |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|---------|-----|-----|-----|
| Year    | YP  | TRI | SM  | Year    | YP  | TRI | SM  |
| 2024    | 35  | 12  | 2   | 2024    | 33  | 7   | 5   |
| 2023    | 26  | 3   | 0   | 2023    | 30  | 5   | 2   |
| 2022    | 27  | 2   | 2   | 2022    | 43  | 7   | 5   |
| 2021    | 33  | 3   | 1   | 2021    | 23  | 3   | 1   |
| 2020    | 18  | 3   | 0   | 2020    | 14  | 2   | 3   |
| 2019    | 31  | 7   | 0   | 2019    | 21  | 4   | 0   |
| 2018    | 31  | 5   | 3   | 2018    | 41  | 4   | 0   |
| 2017    | 28  | 5   | 2   | 2017    | 38  | 4   | 0   |
| 2016    | 20  | 7   | 0   | 2016    | 26  | 4   | 0   |
| 2015    | 26  | 5   | 0   | 2015    | 28  | 2   | 0   |
| Total   | 275 | 52  | 10  | Total   | 297 | 42  | 16  |
| Hosted  |     |     | 337 | Sent    |     |     | 355 |

Abbreviations: YP – year program, TRI – trimester program, SM – semester program. Source: AFS Intercultural Programs

According to some data, the interest of adolescents in participating in such programs is growing (Briga, 2018), although more recent data obtained directly from AFS Intercultural Programs shows that the upward trend was slightly halted in 2020. As this article targets predominantly Polish readers, I believe it is also important to provide insights into the scale of this phenomenon within Poland. The data presented in Table 1, also sourced from AFS, reflects participation in programs managed by this organisation. It is important to highlight, however, that AFS is not the only organisation offering such programs in Poland. Other notable entities in the sector include Youth For Understanding (YFU), Education First (EF), World Exchange Programs (WEP), and Rotary. Additionally, the Erasmus+ program offers further opportunities for individual mobility during secondary education.

There is a limited understanding of the overall operations of organisations that facilitate individual mobility. Much of the knowledge available comes from websites of institutions and companies responsible for sending young people abroad. While informative, such content is often limited and primarily promotional in nature. To gain a more comprehensive insight into the complex landscape of HSSA programs, I conducted a series of expert interviews with professionals directly involved in this field. These interviews were part of a bigger research

project investigating the developmental outcomes of HSSA participation, with a particular focus on identity formation – a central developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Crocetti, 2023). I believe it is important to acknowledge that a comprehensive understanding of developmental processes requires examining the systemic context in which these experiences unfold (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Therefore, my aim here is to present synthesised key information about the relevant socio-historical factors that may be significant in understanding the context and the environment in which program participants experience their development.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study is a part of larger research project which extends beyond the presented results. Its main objective is to study the experienced identity development of High School Study Abroad participants. The findings presented in this manuscript are the preliminary results of the analysis of expert interviews which aimed to collect data that would allow me to understand the environment in which these developmental processes occur. As stated in the introduction, this part of the project aims to provide synthesised information about the socio-historical context in which adolescents participate.

Expert participants were recruited with the support of AFS Intercultural, one of the established organisations in this field. Representatives from AFS played a crucial role in identifying individuals with significant expertise in the field and assisted in the outreach process. In the end, I was able to interview six experts who collaborate with AFS at various levels and engage with the broader sector in their roles as researchers and consultants. Their expertise, therefore, extends beyond the knowledge of one single organisation.

An overview of participants and general information about their background is provided in Table 2. The group was heterogeneous, comprising former and current staff members at both national and international levels, researchers specialising in the phenomenon, and research consultants who are not directly involved in the operations of the organisation. All experts represent Western countries, with the majority based in Europe.

**Table 2.** An overview of participants

| Pseudonym      | General Information about the Expert   |
|----------------|--|
| Staff-I        | Program alumnus, former staff member at AFS in Italy, researcher of the phenomenon based in Italy                        |
| Researcher-I   | Researcher of the phenomenon based in Italy  |
| Staff-EU       | Staff member at the European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL), researcher of the phenomenon based in Belgium |
| Management-Int | Management staff member at AFS Intercultural based in the USA  |
| Researcher-U   | Former staff member at AFS Intercultural, researcher of the phenomenon based in the USA                                  |
| Professor-E    | Professor of psychology working as a consultant for AFS based in the UK  |

Source: own elaboration based on details provided by the experts

While some participants agreed to be identified by name, others preferred to remain anonymous. To ensure consistency and maintain ethical standards, I opted to keep all participants' identities confidential.

The study was conducted within a qualitative framework, employing a semi-structured interview protocol as the research instrument. The interview questions were developed specifically for this study, with each question designed to address one of the research objectives. These covered a range of topics, including the historical roots of HSSA programs; their structure, characteristic features, and educational components; the goals and values promoted by organisations involved in the phenomenon; and the observed impact on program participants. Additionally, thorough desk research was conducted to contextualise the expert testimonies and to draw meaningful connections between the interview data and existing literature.

My analytical focus centred on the expertise and knowledge of the interlocutors regarding the programs, as well as their perspectives on aspects such as the potential impact this type of mobility might have on participants. To analyse the data collected from the participants, I utilised Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a method that acknowledges the significance of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity throughout the analytical process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). RTA involves six phases: data familiarisation (1), coding (2), generating initial themes (3), developing and reviewing themes (4), refining themes (5), and producing the final report (6) (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022). The findings presented here reflect preliminary stages of analysis, as the themes are still being developed and refined (4). Nonetheless, the insights gathered thus far offer valuable contributions, particularly in the context of this article's objectives.

## SUBJECTIVITY AND POSITIONING

The emphasis RTA places on the researcher's reflexivity regarding their subjectivity is one of the primary reasons I chose to employ this analytical method. I have always recognised that my own positioning – as a former exchange student, a volunteer, and a researcher with over a decade of engagement with the High School Study Abroad phenomenon – would require ongoing reflection throughout the research process, as my own background is closely tied to the studied phenomenon. However, as a psychologist trained predominantly in the neo-positivist tradition, my own subjectivity seemed to be more of an obstacle than an asset. I only came to truly appreciate the importance of subjectivity after engaging with Braun and Clarke's method (2006; 2022). While this article does not delve deeply into the reflective nature of the study, my in-depth engagement with the data allowed me to identify elements of the study that were shaped by my own subjectivity and positioning, which – I believe – should be briefly acknowledged.

Given that the experts were aware of my background, there were instances where they assumed certain topics required less detailed explanation. They also occasionally made direct references to my pre-existing knowledge, often using relational phrases such as “you know” or “as you well know.” This posed a challenge at times, as my goal was to gather as much information as possible. I had to ask several follow-up questions, which occasionally felt awkward due to these implicit assumptions.

Another key aspect of my positioning that became apparent during the familiarisation phase was the emphasis I placed on my academic background during the interviews. I believe that this expression of my positioning might have influenced the responses provided by the experts, as many of them referred to various studies in their testimonies. This also happened in instances where I specifically asked for insights into their personal opinions and experiences. I suspect that these references were a result of my implicit framing of my academic position at the beginning of interviews.

## INSIGHTS FROM THE DATA

The data collected from six interviews, supplemented by the results of desk research, offers rich insights into the defining characteristics of the High School Study Abroad phenomenon. I have structured the following section around three focal areas:<sup>1</sup> characterising the phenomenon, characterising the broader sector in which such programs are operated, and providing a historical perspective on HSSA.

### HIGH SCHOOL STUDY ABROAD: CHARACTERISING THE PHENOMENON

The analysis begins by revisiting Baiutti's definition of the phenomenon (2019, p. 33 in: Baiutti, 2021), introduced in the opening paragraphs of this article, which states that HSSA mobility might be categorised among "[...] educational programs that provide temporary international physical mobility for one or more pupils." Several interlocutors directly referenced this definition as it captures the core characteristics of the programs in a concise manner, making it a valuable foundation for describing the phenomenon.

While the international dimension of this form of mobility requires little elaboration, two other aspects of the definition are crucial for understanding its defining features. First, the physical nature of HSSA programs has been emphasised by several experts. Although several ongoing studies, mentioned by Professor of Psychology and Researcher-U, explore the potential and outcomes of so-called virtual mobility, some experts remain sceptical about whether such initiatives can offer adolescents benefits comparable to those gained through physical mobility. As Researcher-I observes:

I am not so far convinced [towards virtual exchange], I think there is not enough robust research done in terms of what they call virtual mobility. Because in the learning process – as you know from psychology – the body plays a crucial role. And if you are in your room and if you are in your familiar weather, [...], your body is in the context where you're already familiar – is it the same learning as if you go, your body is immersed in some context that is not familiar? [...] If a student comes from Sicily and they go in the north of Norway, the fact that there is no light during the day – it's impacting learning.

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<sup>1</sup> I intentionally refer to these areas as "topics" rather than "themes" since, within the Reflective Thematic Analysis, themes represent developed patterns of "shared meaning organised around a central concept" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 77) and are generated at a later stage of the analytical process. As the study progresses, the presented topics might evolve into more intricate and fully developed themes.

According to Researcher-I, it appears that one of the core features of HSSA programs lies in the physical immersion into various aspects of life within a different culture, such as climate or food. Students participating in physical mobility programs are fully immersed in a foreign culture, unlike virtual mobility participants who do not experience cultural differences as regularly, as these programs often consist primarily of asynchronous courses designed to foster intercultural competence and online meetings (Hansel et al., 2024).

The second key aspect of the definition provided is the temporality of the mobility under investigation. This is further emphasised by Researcher-I, who asserts that it is this temporal element that distinguishes HSSA programs from other forms of adolescent and, more broadly, educational mobility.

It's clear that this mobility is temporary, and I guess this is something that is different from how student mobility is understood at the university level. [...] In order to be within the framework of pupil mobility [HSSA], you may stay abroad for maximum one school year, so that's why it's temporary.

Referring back to Baiutti's definition and the four variables he identified, it is important to note that the programs examined in this analysis can be classified as short-term migration, according to the UN definition (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, 2021), as they typically last between three and ten months (AFS Intercultural Programs, n.d.). Regarding the second variable mentioned by Baiutti – the type of mobility – the definition includes both group and individual mobility. The programs examined in the current study fall into the latter category. As Staff-EU emphasises, they are often seen as “an individual choice of the student and the family.”

Participants in HSSA programs might experience various living arrangements, as presented in Graph 1, but most experts emphasise that the type of mobility under discussion is typically associated with placements in host families, which provide an opportunity for full cultural immersion. In fact, the issue of placement emerges as a significant topic among the experts, with Researcher-U referencing various studies conducted by AFS to explore the relationship between placements and experiences of both students and host families. Placement also appears to present a key challenge for organisations, as Staff-EU points out the current difficulties in recruiting host families. Overall, experts emphasise the importance of host families as a defining feature of these programs.

When I ask the interviewed experts how they would characterise the phenomenon of HSSA, three key features emerge as defining aspects: the immersive nature of the experience, continuous volunteer support and care, and the educational curriculum embedded within this type of mobility.

The immersive nature of the experience is best illustrated by Staff-I, who reflects on his own mobility experience to illustrate this:

For the first few days, I understood almost nothing, and I was moving as a zombie. [...] I managed to stay alive. [...] Day by day, I got to know people, teachers, and understand more and more English and so started to take part in the activity of the school. [...] And then by the time that Christmas came, I was perfectly settled. And from that time on everything was much easier.



The same expert further reinforces this idea, summarising the programs as “human immersion with assistance.” Notably, the term “immersion” is among the most frequently mentioned by all experts when discussing this phenomenon.

Volunteer support, along with what I would describe as “positive peer pressure,” also stand out as significant aspects of HSSA programs. Experts highlight that participants have ongoing access to volunteers, many of whom share similar mobility experiences and can empathise with the challenges adolescents face when adapting to a foreign culture. Additionally, several experts note that volunteers often embody the core values promoted by the organisations, making them vital role models and sources of guidance throughout the experiences. As Management-Int states:

The fact that you engage so much with the volunteers around you. You can witness the product that we hope to create, right? Basically, we want you to become like one of these wonderful volunteers that you are meeting. And so, there is something about communicating our values and our mission through our people that, I think, is really amazing.

Lastly, all experts underscore the importance of the educational journey integrated into the program. Management-Int specifically notes:

It’s not enough to just go abroad and have the experience. You need some facilitated, intentional learning. And that has evolved over the years – of what type of content we have.

The educational journey described by the experts consists of multiple orientations conducted at key stages: one meeting before departure, four camps during the exchange, and one after participants return to their home countries. Additionally, according to Staff-EU and Management-Int, AFS currently offers an online curriculum designed to further enhance students’ intercultural competence and equip them with skills necessary to become “global active citizens” (Management-Int). Intercultural competence, defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardoff, 2004, p. 194 in: Deardoff, 2006), along with active global citizenship, are central concepts in this curriculum.

Several experts emphasise that while participants engage with the structured educational framework, one of the most critical phases of the learning journey occurs after they return home, as they reflect on their experiences and continue developing skills acquired during mobility.

A lot of learning was also in coming home. You know, when you reflect on what has happened and you re-think your position. I think that sort of is the biggest aspect of learning. (Researcher-U)

Staff-I also emphasises the importance of opportunities offered by AFS for further skill development after program completion, particularly through volunteering with the organisation and continuing educational activities.

The combination of a structured learning curriculum and dedicated volunteer support is widely regarded by the experts as a distinguishing feature of HSSA programs offered by non-profit organisations, as opposed to those provided by private “agencies.” This distinction within the sector will be explored in detail in the following section.

## FROM PEACE PROMOTERS TO ACTIVE CITIZENS: CHARACTERISING THE SECTOR

To understand the complexity of this phenomenon and the associated sector, it is important to consider its historical roots. These programs originated from the efforts of what experts refer to as “civic society organisations” (e.g. Staff-EU), which sought to promote peace by fostering connections among young people from diverse countries. In this article I will focus on describing the key historical developments of AFS as most of the experts are associated with this organisation. While my account will focus on events starting in 1946, the history of AFS (known back then as American Field Service) extends further back to the efforts of American ambulance drivers who voluntarily served alongside European allied armies during both World Wars, providing aid to wounded soldiers (AFS Norge Internasjonal Utveksling, 1997). These transformative wartime experiences inspired them to continue their mission during peacetime, eventually establishing AFS as a permanent organisation. During a pivotal meeting held in September 1946, about 250 American Field Service alumni decided to continue their mission by organising international exchanges (AFS Norge Internasjonal Utveksling, 1997). In 1947, the first cohort of the students – primarily adolescents attending secondary schools – arrived in the United States from ten countries: Czechoslovakia, Estonia, France, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and Syria (AFS Norge Internasjonal Utveksling, 1997). During the initial years of AFS operations, student exchanges were conducted bilaterally. Non-American students were hosted exclusively in the United States, while American students had the opportunity to experience mobility in various other countries. Several experts reflect on the early years of the organisation, suggesting that its initial focus seemed implicitly aimed at showcasing the positive aspects of American culture:

I think the goal had been and sort of continues to be peacebuilding. From ambulance drivers. And the idea, sometimes, it's not taken in the right way. For example, a lot of hosting in the early days was to show young people from other countries how nice we are in the US. You know? To get them to understand that we're good people. And that's not untrue in a way. But to have that as an attitude is probably not helpful. (Researcher-U)

Archival records and expert accounts reveal that non-American students participating in mobility programs in the United States not only experienced American life and culture but also travelled across the country to explore it further and promote the opportunities provided by AFS. Notably, during the early years of these exchanges, students were even received by U.S. presidents at the White House (AFS Norge Internasjonal Utveksling, p. 51, 1997; AFS Intercultural Programs, 2008). While the post-World War II era was marked by widespread enthusiasm for the United States, subsequent historical events led some European volunteers to feel “*disillusioned*” with the US. Staff-I recalls:

[The internationalisation of the exchanges] happened in 1970/1971. It was... [laughs] an uprising of the Europeans who couldn't cope with the United States anymore. It was after the Vietnam War. You know, when I went to the United States, the image of the United States was very glorious. They had won the war; they were a leading nation in the world. And then with the Vietnam War and other events, the image of the United States went down and down. And in the late 60s, many of us, volunteers in Europe, started to say that if we want peace and understanding, we cannot get it by going to the United States alone.

Such initiatives among AFS volunteers inspired the U.S. headquarters to introduce what are now referred to as “multilateral programs,” enabling students from all over the world to explore destinations outside of the United States, significantly broadening the scope of exchange opportunities.

I would say these important milestones in terms of the actual program development [was going] from purely an American organisation into a global, multilateral organisation. [...] we were a centralised US organisation and then became decentralised network organisation where every AFS national organisation is its own locally lead and locally governed non-profit organisation in a country. Which means you are more embedded in a local community. [Management-Int]

AFS currently operates in 55 countries through a network of localised partner organisations. Additionally, according to Management-Int, the organisation collaborates with around ten global affiliates, partnering with other entities in countries where establishing a dedicated AFS partner organisation is not viable.

The story of AFS mirrors that of other non-profit organisations in the field. YFU also originated in the USA as a grassroots initiative aimed at fostering international connections in the aftermath of World War II (YFU, n.d.). Similarly, EIL traces its origins to an American professor who created a program offering an opportunity for students to foster peace with their European peers (EIL, n.d.). Interestingly, EIL’s exchange programs began in 1932, making it one of the oldest programs still operating in the field. All these civic society organisations share the goal of promoting mutual understanding between cultures, with the hope that this will eventually lead to more peaceful and just societies. Indeed, this objective is clearly articulated in the mission statements of each of the organisations. According to the experts, the organisations often collaborate with each other to achieve their shared goals. Collectively, they form a key segment of the sector known as non-profit organisations.

Another branch consists of governmental initiatives aimed at strengthening bilateral relations between countries. Examples include the Youth Exchange Study (YES) and Future Leader Exchange Program (FLEX), both organised by the U.S. Department of State. The first program targets youth from predominantly Muslim countries (YES, n.d.), while the latter is designed for young people from Europe and Eurasia (FLEX, n.d.). The final group of organisations within the sector, as identified by the experts, consists of for-profit entities, often referred to as agencies. This category attracts some explicit and implicit criticism from the experts I consulted:

My impression [of these organisations] looking sometimes at the website... this is the only thing I can see is that they sell a trip and they sell a language course. But it’s not the same in terms of you know, a whole approach, a whole-person approach. [Researcher-I]

[They] are similar superficially or similar in content because they do the same thing. Superficially, they take a student, bring him to another place, put him in the family, in the school, and then they take him home. [...] The preparation is just not there. You know, the way we prepare them. And in most cases, but this changes from one to the other, the counselling process, the assistance to the students is really what makes our strength. More commercial travel agencies simply limit themselves to copying the model, you know. Take one, send him to another country, to a family, he comes back. But the content is very different. [Staff-I]

The key difference emphasised by the experts is that these organisations often do not provide any form of structured educational journey throughout the mobility. Unlike non-profit organisations like AFS, these agencies are often centralised and lack extensive networks of volunteers. As noted by Staff-I, this absence results in minimal to no direct support during their mobility experience. Moreover, the presence of such agencies in the sector creates challenges for non-profit organisations, which face difficulties in clearly articulating the unique value of their programs to potential stakeholders, including schools, students, and their families (Staff-EU, Staff-I). It is important to acknowledge, however, that the sample of experts consulted may reflect a certain bias given their direct and indirect involvement with the non-profit branch of the sector. As such, the critical perspectives presented in this article should ideally be balanced in the future research with testimonies from experts associated with those for-profit organisations.

HSSA programs are also organised by humanitarian organisations such as Rotary International. While some experts, including Staff-EU and Researcher-I, acknowledge these institutions as active contributors to the sector, they find it difficult to categorise them within the existing three branches of organisations, as HSSA represent only a minor part of their broader initiatives.

Another significant initiative that holds potential influence in the sector, especially in Europe, is student mobility through the Erasmus+ program. Interestingly, Staff-EU with expertise in advocacy at the European Union level notes the role of AFS organisations, united under European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL), in the early development of this program.

So, first of all, we have to say that Erasmus+ in general as a program was born thanks to the cooperation with AFS. In the sense that in the 70s and 80s, AFS was identified by the European Commission as one of the experts to discuss with for setting up mobility programs. [Staff-EU]

While I was unable to locate historical records verifying EFIL's involvement in the archives of European Commission and European Council, I did identify documentation confirming federation's ongoing collaboration with European institutions. For instance, EFIL has been actively involved in projects like "Recognition of learning periods abroad in general secondary education," which aims to promote automatic mutual recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad both at the upper secondary and tertiary education level (European Commission, n.d.). Additionally, European experts highlighted that Erasmus+ also provides various opportunities for students interested in HSSA programs.

Experts highlight a key distinction between the Erasmus+ funded mobility at the secondary education level and HSSA programs offered by non-profit and for-profit organisations: the former involves bilateral cooperation between sending and hosting schools (Staff-EU, Staff-I). While this arrangement promotes efforts toward school internationalisation, it also presents several challenges. One such challenge, raised by Staff-I, is determining who assumes responsibility for underage students during weekends when school is not in session – a situation that is clearly addressed in mobilities organised by entities such as AFS. However, Staff-EU points out that Erasmus+ offers schools the opportunity to collaborate with organisations that specialise in this field, and such collaborations are already occurring in several European countries.

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections, I have sought to highlight the key themes that emerged from the interviews I conducted with experts, providing a comprehensive characterisation of the HSSA phenomenon and the sector in which these programs are situated. The initial analysis has allowed me to offer insights into the features and objectives of these programs. Furthermore, I was able to present a historical perspective on these organisations, map out the mobility sector and identify some tensions that seem to exist between different organisations.

An important analytical insight from the presented data is the emerging complexity of this phenomenon and the broader sector. A particularly notable observation is the interplay of macro- and mezzo-level factors shaping how organisations design and operate their programs. The historical origins of these programs, rooted in the post-World War efforts to build peaceful and just societies, remain central at the macro level. These foundational values continue to underpin the educational objectives of non-profit organisations. These macro factors directly influence participants' experiences by exposing them to content which encourages fostering intercultural relationships, enhancing intercultural competence, and encouraging active citizenship. While some experts questioned whether goals such as peacebuilding can be fully achieved through mobility alone, organisations like AFS invest significant efforts in pursuing this mission (AFS, 2019; 2022). Policy frameworks are also critical at the macro level, a perspective strongly emphasised by experts based in Europe. They highlighted the European Union's initiatives, such as advancing school internationalisation and establishing the European Education Area by 2025 (European Commission, n.d.a), as significant influences on the sector's operations. This impact is particularly evident in the advocacy efforts of organisations such as EFIL. Several experts, including those based in the US, emphasised the critical role of policies related to recognition of HSSA programs. These policies not only shape students' experiences but may also play a pivotal role in the decision-making process as to whether to participate in such mobility programs. The significance of recognition is further reflected in an initiative lead by EFIL, alongside other organisations, to develop a framework that encourages EU member states to formally acknowledge student mobility as a part of their school curricula (European Commission, n.d.). Societal changes are also influencing the sector and experts highlighted demographic shifts, evolving cultural norms, and economic pressures – exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – as critical factors. These shifts have posed challenges in recruiting host families, a core mezzo-level component of most of the programs. At the mezzo level, factors such as host family placement, the educational content of the programs, school relations, and the volunteer support provided by non-profit organisations have been identified as potentially pivotal to participants' experiences. These elements might have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the programs and their capacity to achieve educational goals, foster intercultural connections, and possibly impact adolescents' development.

The identification of this phenomenon's multilayered nature and diverse actors involved in the sector not only underscores the complexity of HSSA programs but also provides an interesting analytical framework which aligns with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1996). This psychological model highlights the importance of examining developmental

processes within broader systematic and contextual frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). This perspective is particularly relevant for analysing the developmental impact of these programs on adolescents, which is certainly a research area worth exploring.

This study offers a valuable foundation for various research endeavours. Future investigations could explore educational dimensions of these programs, examining how organisations define and integrate concepts like intercultural competence (Deardoff, 2006) and active citizenship in their curricula. Another interesting direction for future studies would be research investigating whether learning outcomes align with the program's objectives. The psychological dimensions of mobility programs also warrant future study, particularly given the challenges participants might face during the cultural immersion. The challenging nature of the experience was emphasised by several experts, and existing research in the literature indicates that participants in mobility programs at the tertiary education level encounter psychological struggles after they return home (McLeod and Wainwright, 2009). Adolescents participating in these programs, often at critical stages of their development (Erikson, 1968), may also face cultural factors that affect their well-being. Investigating these dynamics would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of such programs.

It is my hope that this study provides valuable socio-historical information on High School Study Abroad in a synthesised manner, introducing the phenomenon to a broader audience and inspiring further scholarly inquiry. Advancing our understanding of these programs can ultimately lead to improvements in their design and operations, enhancing their impact on participants and societies.

## LIMITATIONS

I recognise that my study has certain limitations. First and foremost, all the experts consulted are affiliated with a single organisation, which may introduce a degree of bias in the findings. Although I was aware of the presence of other organisations in the field, however my attempts to contact representatives of two additional institutions active in Poland (YFU and Rotary) were unsuccessful. Consequently, the scope of the analysis relies solely on the insights of experts linked to AFS Intercultural Programs, an organisation widely regarded as a market leader due to its historical significance and extensive global reach, as supported by the data referenced earlier. While the focus limits the study to phenomena specific to AFS, the findings may have broader applicability to other non-profit organisations in the sector, as several experts emphasised structural and operational similarities among NGOs in the field. Nonetheless, this extrapolation remains tentative, and future research should strive to include voices from other organisations. Specifically, the criticisms raised by the experts I consulted regarding for-profit organisations need to be balanced by insights from individuals working within these agencies or cooperating with them to address potential biases.

Another limitation of this study is that most of the experts I interviewed do not work directly with program participants. Although some have prior experience interacting with students, many acknowledged that their current roles limit their engagement with the youth.



As a result, their perspective may not fully capture participants' experiences or challenges. This is reflected in the absence of an in-depth analysis of micro-level factors in the current article. To mitigate this, I plan to include the perspectives of volunteers as suggested several experts. Future studies should also adopt multi-perspective approach by including a broader range of stakeholders, such as school representatives or participants' families. Such an approach addresses gaps in the existing literature and might provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field which considers all of its complexities.

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